

Interview with Blogger Philippe Wannesson from *Passeurs d'Hospitalités*

<https://passeursdhospitalites.wordpress.com>

3. How would you formulate

About the Blog and the Author

The blog "Passeurs d'Hospitalités" documents the situation of exiles in Calais on a daily basis. It delivers information about current incidents, and aims at providing a better understanding of the situation in all its complexity, deconstructing preconceived ideas and clichés spread by the media.

French activist Philippe Wannesson is the author of the blog and lives in Calais.

1. What triggered your commitment to the cause of migrants and refugees?

It's a choice that I made at the end of 2008 when I saw in the media that serious acts of state-led violence had been committed against certain populations, such as the Roma, or exiles in Calais. I wanted to get more involved in resistance movements than just signing petitions and going to demonstrations. After that, it was more a question of opportunity to get involved. I was part of an association of international projects which planned an activity with exiles and organised as a first step a mini-workshop of five days with a Calais organization supporting exiles. After this project, I did some return-trips and then eventually settled in Calais.

2. When and how did the idea about starting this blog arise?

Prior to this blog, another blog existed, called *Vibrations Migratoires*. In the framework of the association "La Marmite aux Idées," that blog aimed to provide tools for exiles (language classes, legal information), to inform and raise awareness, and to challenge the corresponding policies. I didn't create this blog, but the colleagues who launched it, dropped it gradually, as it was too much work to update it regularly. That was, when I became aware of the necessity for an always updated source of information which could counterbalance the news circulated by government

officials or the mainstream media. "Marmite aux Idées" had to stop its activities end of 2013, and the new blog "Passeurs d'Hospitalités" started in early 2014. In recent months, the participation and the publications of the blog tend to become more collective.

the objectives of this blog?

To provide regularly updated information on the situation of the exiles in Calais and on solidarity movements that are mobilizing for their support. It aims at contributing to a better understanding of the situation and at deconstructing the official discourse. The blog has also a warning role in situations that call for an urgent response.

4. What did you expect at the beginning and how would you evaluate the results of the blog or your contributions so far?

The challenge for the government authorities in Calais is in terms of images - they do not aim for a policy that provides a solution to the problems. This does not mean that their policies have no effects in real life, on the contrary they have a violent impact on people. Hence the importance to counter this policy in deconstructing the image given by the authorities and in revealing the reality which is often concealed.

The blog helps fuel the reflection and development of thoughts in the volunteer and activist sector, it is increasingly used by journalists as well as students or researchers. It allows people who are far away to be kept informed.

5. In which ways would you consider your blog a tool of civil resistance, disobedience or a peaceful weapon?

The blog is not neutral, it assumes that the exiles have the legitimacy to be there and to move from one country to another, and that they have a place in our society - in particular a place in the society of Calais, even if they are only there in transit. The blog is backed by an audio-blog, which makes narratives by exiles or actors on the ground more, which are rarely being heard, accessible.

Thus, the blog aims more at providing food for thought and to change representations than at providing answers. It is for everyone to make up his own meaning concerning this issue.

6. Did the Internet expand the possibilities of these kind of resistance movements and make them more accessible to a greater audience?

There are contexts in which books circulate from hand to hand, the newspaper is read collectively, which means that peddling allows written information to spread to the countryside which is then again transmitted verbally. Internet on the other hand is a tool in a society marked by the individual access to information. The blog entries are posted on various social networks, and distributed through various mailing lists according to the topic, allowing for wider dissemination. Sometimes radio shows take up interviews from our audio-blog. Journalists use information from the blog, cite it, meet me or interview me. In this way, a part of the material spreads through other channels.

7. Did the new means of communication, such as Internet, Twitter, Facebook, etc. link social movements, like the fight against anti-migrant measures, at the national and international level? And do you consider yourself part of a larger movement?

Calais is a step on the path of the exiles which reveals a lot about how EU policies and international relations work. Internet is indeed a privileged tool to connect to other people, exchange and share information internationally. But the French language is an obstacle to the dissemination of the blog. This is why an English version is in preparation. But as much as we will soon be able to communicate and access information sources in English, we are still in a similar position with regards to what is happening in Belgium and the Netherlands due to a lack of knowledge of Dutch.

8. Regarding the current situation in Calais, what do you think of the English and French reactions?

Both governments seem unable to do anything else than what they are already doing, which aggravates the situation. The only thing which really changed is the UK's increase in financial means of its policies on the French soil, which can be considered a way of recognising that what happens on this side of the border is also part of the UK's responsibility.

The media coverage of the situation in Calais triggers both an exacerbation of reactions of rejection as well as the development of solidarity movements - first of all on the French territory, but most recently also from the British part, and from other European countries.

9. What are the differences between the camp of Sangatte and the "Jungle" in Calais?

After the opening and closing of several temporary sites, the Sangatte camp was considered as partly recognising the durability of the presence of exiles in

Calais. It was a refugee camp with international standards established inside a hangar. This camp brought together a population away from the city. It was actually a transit camp, in the sense that people continued their journey much faster than today.

However, governmental authorities with the help of the police chased the exiles from their squats and camps to force them to resettle on land further away from the city where they are being "tolerated" (in their own words). It has developed in a gigantic shantytown, which quickly reached several thousand inhabitants. Nearby, a day center offers services, such as one meal a day, showers, electrical outlets, health consultations, information on asylum in France and on assisted return as well as shelters for some women and children. However, in comparison to the number of exiles, the amount of services is absolutely inadequate. The authorities on the ground justify the precarious living conditions by referring to a possible "pull factor" which better conditions would present, hence attracting even more people.

10. What steps can be taken against violent assaults by right-wing groups (such as *Sauvons Calais*) that are becoming more frequent?

There are several kinds of violence. Some seem unorganised consequences of the comments held on the Facebook page of *Sauvons Calais*. People turn the comments made in the virtual space into reality, but those are usually quickly stopped by the police. Inciting racial hatred is punishable under French law, and complaints are being filed against *Sauvons Calais*. However, justice appears to have real difficulties to take into account the racist motivations of these acts. Other assaults are committed by clearly organized individuals, and seem more difficult to combat.

Much more rooted in everyday life, however, is discriminatory behavior in bars, shops, supermarkets, and some public services. Here again, the application of the law should solve the problem, but the police sometimes participates in these discriminatory practices, for example by replacing guards at the entrance of supermarkets to filter out migrants.

A repressive and reactive approach against such assaults is obviously insufficient. What is needed is a genuine policy of welcome and inclusion, which has to be explained to and understood by the population of Calais. And the social and economic difficulties faced by the population in Calais itself has to be taken into account - Calais is one of the poorest cities in France. In the current situation, discrimination and the far-right violence are only prolongations of governmental policies and police violence.

Interview in French by Charline Kopf on 21st August 2015