

From Calais to Kent, what is wrong with how we are talking about the migrant crisis?

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Popular discourse on the current migration crisis is dangerous, divisive, and inaccurate since it describes migrants as enemies to fear rather than people to help.



The sailors and Royal Marines of HMS Bulwark help migrants ashore. Carl Osmond/Flickr. Some rights reserved.

And so it has happened. Talk of ‘incursions of migrants’, ‘monitoring signs of migrant activity’ and ‘sending in the troops’ is marking the latest transformation of migrants desperately seeking a safe and better life. The present situation – largely described under the rubric ‘the Calais crisis’ – is being reported in language usually reserved for actual conflicts themselves, or surveilling the enemy and awaiting the next infiltration.

But then, the plight of migrants, making rational decisions to risk their lives, has become a key global conflict of the twenty-first century. It appears as a new conflict with no obvious single enemy, but an enemy who appears to be everywhere, a conflict that has resulted from other conflicts, but which are not acknowledged as driving people to desperate measures. It is a conflict that has been moving progressively closer and closer to Europe, from the millions of displaced people on the African continent, to the tragedy of Mediterranean crossings, to the bloody scaling of high razor fences at Calais.

'Swarms' of migrants



When it's time to go... Jey OH/Flickr. Some rights reserved.

The anti-migrant language of the most recent reporting about the present situation of migrant crossings has accelerated at an alarming pace, although perhaps with no great surprise. They have been described as "swarms" by Nigel Farage and David Cameron, only to be condemned by Labour leader hopefuls Yvette Cooper and Andy Burnham, and promptly followed up by social media links to Labour's own managed migration policy, which is hardly any more humane. The language of managed migration is at the heart of the problem, as if it is something that can be turned off like a tap. As if it refers to a homogenous thing, rather than encompassing mixed flows of people seeking family reunifications, economic migrants, unaccompanied minors, and victims of trafficking.

So what has been the political response? So far, it continues to be framed along the pull factors. On 28 October 2014, the British government quietly announced its decision to withdraw support for Mare Nostrum: "we do not support planned search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean," said Foreign Office Minister Baroness Anelay, to avoid "an unintended 'pull factor', encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths." On 30 July 2015, [David Cameron's take](#) on the "swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean seeking a better life" was that they are "wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it's got a growing economy, it's an incredible place to live." For too long this has been used as a justification of increasingly regressive immigration legislation in the UK, which has progressively stripped people claiming asylum of any sense of value, reducing them to fully state dependent shells of their former selves.

For those that make it, Britain is not a great place to claim asylum; it is a tough place, where there are extensive restrictions on movement, consumption, employment, access to education and housing. There is plenty of evidence of the extreme conditions individuals face trying to survive life in Britain ([Oxfam 2011](#); [Scottish Refugee council 2012](#)).

But where is the focus on the push factors? These factors drive and compel individuals to leave their 'home', their families and friends, everything that is familiar, even when it is incredibly hard. Where is the focus on foreign involvement in civil wars across the globe, including the systematic human rights violations that serve as [the major push factors for refugee and migration flows](#) to the EU from countries like Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Somalia, as well as from transit countries like Libya? Where is the global responsibility for creating conditions that have produced the present situation?

Humane solutions



Protest for migrants' rights, Lausanne, 9 May 2015. Gustave Deghilage/Flickr. Some rights reserved.

At least three changes need to take place in how we talk about what is happening, how it is reported and how to respond politically. First, the focus on push factors needs to be foregrounded in policy, media and public debates, with nation states taking responsibility for contributing to the creation of impossible conditions for human beings to survive. In acknowledging our collective roles, European states will then have to also acknowledge their political responsibilities to find acceptable and humane solutions – ones that provide people with the ability to apply for asylum lawfully, and to be able to do that lawfully without having to wait in places for 10 years, as has been the legacy of the UK's asylum policies since 1999.

The second change must be a shift in thinking with regards to mobility – not as something to be feared but as something that requires organisation. As Francois Crepeau, the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, [suggests](#), this means opening up avenues for safer mobility for both refugees and the economic migrants, coming mainly from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, who may also have protection issues, but who are in search of a better life that is not on offer in their own countries. Their journey is often a violent and dangerous one. They too are at risk of exploitation from both people traffickers and exploitative employers.

Thirdly, there needs to be a focus on the moral imperative and a shift in the conceptualisation of migrants – and in particular migrants from Sub Saharan Africa, Syrians, Eritreans, Somalis, Afghani –

from an enemy threat to be feared to people that need help. The human rights perspective must be at the centre of responses to what is happening. As [Kent social services advises](#) it is struggling to cope with children seeking asylum, one thing is clear: the present migrant crisis will not be solved by force, or the reframing of migrants as an enemy threat. Saving lives and supporting safer mobility could and should be integral to more humane solutions to the present migrant crisis.

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