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Refugee crisis, imperialism and pitiless wars on the poor

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Abstract

According to the UN Refugee Agency, 59.5 million people around the world were forcibly displaced in 2014. The numbers are particularly high in countries which have been subject to a process of ‘redrawing the map’ by imperial powers or their regional allies. The response to the recent developments – a stage which has been dubbed as ‘refugee crisis’ – is as polarising and as problematic as before. On the one hand we have witnessed the heroic acts not only of the refugees themselves who moved collectively and refused to queue ‘orderly’ in the immigration lines, but also the magnificent response of citizens in all over Europe who rushed to feed, clothe, accommodate and welcome them. In contrast the overwhelming institutional response by ‘liberal’ states has been, and remains, depressingly illiberal. The official response to this humanitarian crisis – which is after all the product of ‘humanitarian interventions’ – has nothing to do with whether or not Europe can cope with a ‘swarm of people’ aiming to exploit the ‘host’ countries. It is to do with managing a massive reserve army of labour. Forced migration is not only a product of this staggering inequality but also an important element of how that inequality is produced, maintained and managed.

Keywords

Refugee crisis, forced migration, imperialism, global inequality, racism

Introduction

The concept of imperialism has been pushed to the margins of debate in our field. The level of marginalisation of this crucial debate has been such that the word imperialism was not included as a keyword in Bennett et al.’s (2005) revised and updated Keywords which was published 4 years after the invasion of Afghanistan and 2 years after the

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invasion of Iraq. As Aouragh and Chakravartty have argued in their introduction to this issue, the theory of imperialism has been and remains as central as before to the world and to media and cultural studies. One of the significant myths in much of the scholarship of the previous three decades about global media and culture has been this idea of 'a borderless world where nation states succumb to the (benign) power of technologies freeing the individual and thereby society at large' (Aouragh and Chakravartty). Indeed some even went as far as suggesting that the 'new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models' (Appadurai, 1990: 296). In his widely quoted and much celebrated article, Appadurai listed ethnoscapas as one of the dimensions of this new cultural economy that could not be comprehended with reference to centre-periphery models. One can safely assume that the theory of imperialism belonged to those 'models'. New models of 'ethnoscapas' (and diaspora as one key variant), while offering possibilities of critique against assumptions of national cultural homogeneity, brushed aside significant contradictions and inequalities in this broad attempt of generalisation of a very large and complex phenomenon that is displacement and immigration of millions of people. The fascination with the prospect of 'borderless world' and identity at the expense of power was misplaced. The current refugee crisis clearly shows 'ethnoscapas' do not happen in a vacuum, that nation states can and indeed do restrict flows of media and people and that the refugee crisis (and media coverage of it) has everything to do with place, history, class, capitalism and imperialism.

A refugee crisis in Europe?

Migration is exploding in a number of ways: in numbers, in coverage, in politics and as an area of academic inquiry. According to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, 59.5 million people around the world were forcibly displaced in 2014. This level of displacement is unprecedented. Of those, 19.5 million (around 2.9 million more than 2013) were classed by the UN as refugees. In 2014, an average of 42,500 persons per day were forced to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere. The major source countries of refugees are Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Congo, Myanmar, Central Africa, Iraq and Eritrea. More than half of all refugees in 2014 came from three countries (Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia). Contrary to the 'official' stories and coverage, the overwhelming majority of refugees are hosted in developing countries. The UN Refugee Agency states that developing countries host over 86% of the world's refugees, compared to 70% 10 years ago. The top hosts for refugees in 2014 were Turkey (1.59 million refugees), Pakistan (1.51 million), Lebanon (1.15 million), Iran (982,000), Ethiopia (659,500) and Jordan (654,100). Lebanon hosted the largest number of refugees in relation to its national population – 232 refugees per 1000 inhabitants – while Jordan hosted 87 refugees per 1000 and Nauru 39 per 1000. To that number of refugees we have to add those who have been displaced within their own countries. The numbers are particularly high in countries which have been subject to a process of 'redrawing the map' by imperial powers or their regional allies. There are 7.6 million internally displaced people in Syria, 3.6 million in Iraq, 805,000 in Afghanistan, 1.5 million in South Sudan, around 100,000 in Mali and 85,000 in Yemen (UNHCR, 2015).

The staggering numbers of those who are forcefully displaced within their own countries or those taking refuge in developing countries put the 'refugee crisis' in Europe in perspective. It is important to note that the approximately 200,000 refugees who crossed the Mediterranean in 2014 and the 744,000 migrants who crossed the Mediterranean in smugglers' boats between January and October 2015 represent only a small percentage of refugees globally. These who manage to reach European shores (and who are regularly labelled as 'economic migrants'), unlike the vast majority of refugees, have enough resources to pay for the expensive and dangerous journey towards 'Fortress Europe'. Yet the world as a whole and, in particular, the Mediterranean have turned into massive burial grounds for a large number of refugees who remain nameless. Catriona Jarvis (2015) has suggested that, according to some estimates, since 1988 at least 21,439 people have died in the attempt to escape from Libya, Tunisia and Turkey, to Malta, the Canaries, Spain, Italy and Greece. According to the International Organization for Migration, between January and December 2015, 3671 refugees died while trying to cross the Mediterranean. This includes 2889 on the central route from North Africa to Italy, 684 on the eastern route from Turkey to Greece and 94 on the route from West Africa. To this we should add increased fatalities in the Aegean Sea, the 1790 migrants who were killed while trying to cross the Sahara, and fatalities within European borders as a result of suffocation in lorries and cold weather. Many are also missing. The death figure in the cemetery that is the Mediterranean, however, only represents half of all global fatalities. The International Organization for Migration estimates that since 2000 at least 40,000 refugees have died trying to cross borders, including 6000 deaths along the US–Mexico border (Brian and Laczko, 2014). These deaths, however, are rarely reported or investigated. Jarvis (2015) points out that unlike disasters that involve commercial aircraft or vessels such as the disappearance of the Malaysian Airlines plane or the tragic crash of the Germanwings flight, tragedies involving refugees are not investigated. There is no forensic research, no search and rescue mission, no DNA testing, no post-mortem evaluations, no apologies to bereaved families and no compensation.

Those who make it, however, are far from safe. Earlier this year the Institute of Race Relations published a report which highlights the role that European governments' immigration policies and practices have played in the 160 immigration and asylum-related deaths within European Union (EU) member states between January 2010 and December 2014 (Abu-Hayyeh and Webber, 2015). Increased control, fear of deportation, harsh conditions and poor treatment of refugees in detention and concentration centres are keeping many refugees on the edge and drive many of them to commit suicide. The death toll are rising not by accident but by design. In the rapidly militarised border of a 'borderless Europe', refugees are DNA tested, fingerprinted, medically examined, labelled, and 'processed' as if the history of Europe has not taught us anything. In this process, private firms have emerged as key players in this expanding market, making profits out of the misery of refugees and migrants. The G4S group, the leading global security company that until recently was managing many refugee detention centres in the United Kingdom, operates in 110 countries and employs over 600,000 people. The group's revenue in 2014 was £6.8 billion, and over 60% of its revenue is generated in Europe and North America (G4S PLC, 2015).

Migration nightmares and images of refugees

Despite brutal cuts in public spending on welfare, European states, including cash-strapped Greece, are investing more in closing their borders. This year alone, European states have offered €3 billion to Turkey to stem the flow of refugees from Syria and €1.8 billion to various African states to control the flow of refugees from Africa. Hungary, which infamously refused to accept any refugees (supposedly for ‘cultural’ reasons), has spent €95 million building a 100-mile razor-fence wall at its border with Serbia, three times more than the €27.5 million 2015 budget of the Office for Immigration and Nationality (Webber and Abu-Hayyeh, 2015).

The response to the recent developments – a stage which has been dubbed as ‘refugee crisis’ – is as polarising and as problematic as before. On one hand, we have witnessed the heroic acts not only of the refugees themselves who moved collectively and refused to queue ‘orderly’ in the immigration lines but also the magnificent response of citizens in all over Europe who rushed to feed, clothe, accommodate and welcome them. In contrast, the overwhelming institutional response by ‘liberal’ states has been, and remains, depressingly illiberal. In official responses, and not for the first time in European history, refugees are not regarded as humans with history or biography but as numbers and things and, increasingly in the context of a ‘global war on terror’, as security threats to ‘our way of life’. An important aspect of this tragedy, again not for the first time, is that refugees lack names, voice and agency. Philo et al. (2013) have shown that in addition to the hostile and muddled media accounts of refugees, the absence of the voices of refugees is one of the most important issues in official accounts of refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees’ voices are either ignored or used against them. This is so entrenched that when the body of Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, was identified, the US network National Broadcasting Company (NBC) ran the story with this by-line: ‘The toddler whose lifeless body on a Mediterranean beach sent shock waves around the world has a name: Aylan Kurdi’ (Vinograd and Cheikh Omar, 2015). But all 20,000 people who have died trying to reach Europe have names. The toddler had not only ignored the sacred borders of Europe but also interrupted the official narrative about refugees, for they cannot be anything except undifferentiated things. That particular tragedy shook the non-existent morality of sections of the media and the political establishment and also became yet another tool of propaganda by various states.

Prior to the tragic story of Aylan Kurdi, sections of British press had described refugees with reference to toxic waste, human flotsam, an unstoppable flood and a terrorist threat. In fact one could suggest that the image of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi was precisely what some right-wing commentators had wished for. On 17 April 2015, the *Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins wrote, ‘Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don’t care’. She also had described refugees as cockroaches, thought drilling holes in boats carrying refugees would be a good idea and even suggested using gunboats to stop them. After 3 months, in July 2015, some British newspapers (the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*) even suggested using the army to stop refugees crossing the Channel from France to Britain. Inflammatory remarks, however, are not limited to the media. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in

an interview with ITV News said that ‘you have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it’s got a growing economy, it’s an incredible place to live’ (Buchanan, 2015). ‘Swarm’ was the word which also had been used by Katie Hopkins. The British foreign secretary called African refugees as ‘marauding migrants’ that represent a threat to the quality of life in Britain. He also warned that ‘Europe can’t protect itself, preserve its standard of living and social infrastructure if it has to absorb millions of migrants from Africa’ (Perraudin, 2015).

Such scaremongering and claiming that refugees and migrants are threatening the standard of living of European citizens are ironically happening at a time in which the quality of life is being undermined by cuts made in the name of austerity, and the very institutions that are supposedly threatened by refugees (health services, education, employment, social housing, welfare state, etc.) are being dismantled. Another related paradox is the contrast between attitudes in different states towards ‘capital mobility’ and refugees. Every suggestion for taxing the rich and big corporations or making them share the burden of the current economic crisis, which they have created and benefited from, is brushed aside with a simple explanation that such an act would force these ‘wealth creators’ out of the country. This is hardly unprecedented: capital (imperial or otherwise) always wants ‘a weak nation-state in relation to capital and a strong one in relation to labour’ (Ahmad, 1995: 12).

The response from ‘above’ feeds and fuels the racist reactions in many European countries. The rise of various racist organisations and their electoral gains all over Europe (in particular in France, Austria, Finland and Holland) mean such groups can no longer be regarded as fringe. The language and action used against refugees is of course no longer just about refugees but has spread and indeed is combined with wider attacks on multiculturalism and consolidation of ‘security’ as the most important function of the state (Fekete, 2009). In fact, the hysteria towards refugees, asylum seekers and minority ethnic communities (and in particular European Muslims) promoted by large parts of the media and many politicians not only has legitimised hostilities towards refugees and migrants but has actually gone beyond mere symbolic violence (Philo et al., 2013; Webber, 2012).

Just one crisis?

In the current ignorant ‘numbers’ game about refugees, however, not only the identities but also, as I have suggested, the statistics and reasons for the current crisis are ignored. The refugee crisis is part of a broader crisis of displacement of staggering numbers of people in our world. What is also staggering is the absence of serious discussion of either capitalism or imperialism in much of the mainstream coverage of refugees. Migrants have always been visible as workers in formal and informal sectors of various imperial economies (Berger and Mohr, 2010). It is rather ironic that in official responses to the refugee crisis, irrationalism is always presented as a distinct feature of the ‘other’. Those who can afford to make the dangerous journeys in order to escape wars and poverty are the unreasonable, greedy, marauding mob; on the other hand, capital, the most irrational and aggressive system, is presented as rational, tolerant and yet under siege.

The history of capitalist accumulation, argued Rosa Luxemburg, always has two aspects. The one that is usually highlighted is the narrative of capitalist accumulation defined purely in economic terms, where the exchange between capitalist and wage-labourer is seen as one of equivalence and assessed within the limits of commodity exchange. This, we are always told, is conducted within a system of fair competition, peace and equality – a phenomenon that hides the reality of exploitation. The other aspect is accumulation at the international level. Luxemburg (1951) demonstrates that it is precisely on this stage that accumulation becomes more violent and that aggression against colonies and rivals, not to mention war, genocide and looting, is committed without any attempt at concealment:

Bourgeois liberal theory takes into account only the former aspect: the realm of ‘peaceful competition’, the marvels of technology and pure commodity exchange; it separates it strictly from the other aspect: the realm of capital’s blustering violence which is regarded as more or less incidental to foreign policy and quite independent of the economic sphere of capital. (pp. 452–453)

It is in fact impossible to comprehend the current crisis without taking into account the increasing social inequalities at national and global levels, the financialisation of global capitalism, the rapid environmental degradation, as well as increased imperialist interventions in the Middle East and Africa, as a major source of forced migration and staggering levels of displacement. ‘They’ (refugees) are here because ‘we’ are there. Yet by conflating refugees and asylum seekers with immigrants (many of whom arrive ‘here’ with visas and work permits), not only new arrivals but also those who are already here are labelled as ‘problems’.

After the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015, the French President Francois Hollande promised to wage a ‘pitiless’ war while the intensification of the bombing of Syria by the United States, France, Russia and the United Kingdom will add to the already vicious circle of displacement. Recent imperialist interventions have now added Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria to the rapidly expanding list of countries to which the label of nation-state is no longer applicable. The relevance of imperialism to the massive displacement and migration of people from the global south to Europe becomes even more obvious if we remember that the national/ethnic composition of Muslims in different European countries is determined by the legacy of colonialism (Zubaida, 2003). These are the very communities that are increasingly treated as ‘suspect communities’ and that present a major threat to ‘our way of life’.

The response to this humanitarian crisis – which is after all the product of ‘humanitarian interventions’ – has nothing to do with whether or not Europe can cope with a ‘swarm of people’ aiming to exploit the ‘host’ countries. It is to do with managing a massive reserve army of labour. The refugee crisis is part of a much broader crisis. Some have suggested that the labour force for exploitation has increased from 1.5 to 3.5 billion in the last two decades (Foster et al., 2011). Latest figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2014) also show that the number of unemployed has gone beyond 200 million. The ILO estimates that this number will reach 215 million by 2018 and suggests that almost 48% of total employment in the world is ‘vulnerable’ employment and

that 839 million workers live on less than US\$2 a day. The disparity has reached such a level that a report by Oxfam (Hardoon, 2015) pointed out that in

2014, the richest 1% of people in the world owned 48% of global wealth, leaving just 52% to be shared between the other 99% of adults on the planet. Almost all of that 52% is owned by those included in the richest 20%, leaving just 5.5% for the remaining 80% of people in the world. (p. 2)

Oxfam has predicted that if this trend is not halted, ‘the top 1% will have more wealth than the remaining 99% of people in just two years’. According to the same report, one in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than 1 billion people still live on less than US\$1.25 a day. In 2014, Oxfam reported that the 85 richest people on the planet have the same wealth as the poorest 50% – some 3.5 billion people. That figure is now down to 80 individuals – a dramatic fall from 388 people in 2010. Forced migration is not only a product of this staggering inequality but also an important element of how that inequality is produced, maintained and managed. The prediction of the *Communist Manifesto*, that capitalism ‘is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery’, seems unhappily warranted.

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