



The European Legacy

Toward New Paradigms

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

Globalised Capitalism and Its Destitute Masses: Introduction

Pilar Royo-Grasa

To cite this article: Pilar Royo-Grasa (2021): Globalised Capitalism and Its Destitute Masses: Introduction, *The European Legacy*, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2021.1976457](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1976457)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1976457>



Published online: 09 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Globalised Capitalism and Its Destitute Masses: Introduction

Pilar Royo-Grasa 

Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza, Avenida San Juan Bosco 7, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain

Much has been written over the past two decades on globalisation, especially on its political and socioeconomic impacts on Western liberal democracies on the one hand, and on the more vulnerable countries and communities around the world on the other. The victory of “globalised capitalism,” Alain Badiou argues, has resulted from the evolution of old forms of imperialism into new imperialist practices.¹ While nineteenth-century Western imperialism relied on the concept the nation-state, its new forms depend on the weakening of those same states. Imperialist European nation-states used to exert their power, managing and controlling the resources and peoples of the “uncivilised” colonised countries, from their metropolitan centres. In the last decades, by contrast, as Badiou argues, the “areas of non-state pillaging” (29) to which the military interventions of Western countries in Iraq, Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic have given rise, demonstrate that one of the main drives of the new imperialism is to destroy, rather than manage, other states. Today the control exerted by the metropolitan centre has been replaced by the unrestrained power of capitalist firms, which find in the withered state a lawless space where they can freely operate for their own profit (24–30).

The current form of globalised capitalism moves in two apparently contradictory yet interdependent directions: on the one hand, capital moves and expands across nations; on the other, most of the profits obtained by its expansion are concentrated in the hands of a very small number of global companies (19). As a result, the inequality between different groups of the population across the world has increased in an accelerated and uncontrolled way. Attending to the worldwide distribution of the available resources, Badiou distinguishes between three groups: there is “a planetary oligarchy” that owns 86% of global resources (32), “a middle class” that owns 14% (33), and “a destitute mass” that owns nothing despite constituting 50% of the world population (32). Destitute people count for nothing, as lacking any resources prevents them from playing the only two roles available in the market—the role of “employee and consumer” (37). The destitute masses include people belonging to some of the most precarious groups of contemporary society, namely, but not exclusively, Indian Dalits, indigenous peoples, and forcefully displaced people. As Serena Parekh claims in *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*, the third group is subjected to two types of harm—legal and political—entailed by the “loss of their political community and legal identity in the form of citizenship”; and “the ontological deprivation” they suffer as a result of the rejection

and neglect they encounter in the countries in which they seek refuge.² To use Michel Agier's term in *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, they constitute the undesired "remnants" of the Western State.³

According to Badiou, the ever-growing economic inequality between those who belong to the elitist oligarchic group and those belonging to the middle and destitute classes has resulted in the emergence of three types of subjectivity: "Western subjectivity, the subjectivity of desire for the West," and the "nihilist" subjectivity (44). Western subjectivity, as manifested by the middle classes in the most prosperous countries, takes pride in its economic success and welfare state, while also living under the constant threat of losing its privileged position. Badiou is not the only social critic who insists on the "constant fear" among the middle classes (45–46). In *The New Xenophobia*, Tabish Khair, for example, notes the emergence of a new type of xenophobia from high capitalism's tendency to erase difference. While the old forms of xenophobia justified their power over strangers by highlighting their difference, the new forms insist that such differences may be kept unseen: "The feared and detested stranger in our stock-market-linked cities," he writes, "is the man or woman whose body intrudes into and disrupts the smooth circulation and the abstract power of capital."⁴

In other words, it is the stranger whose difference brings to light the covered and unequal ties of power relations on which globalised capitalism depends. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman has noted the fear and anxiety among the middle precariat classes in Western states in response to the waves of refugees and asylum seekers: "the successive tides of fresh immigrants are resented as (to recall Bertolt Brecht) 'harbingers of bad news.' They are embodiments of the collapse of order . . . of an order that lost its binding force."⁵ In this sense, the destitute masses are a reminder of the fragile bedrock on which all the privileges that are taken for granted by the middle-class depend.

The subjectivity of the desire for the West, in Badiou's taxonomy, stems from the stark contrast between the high living standards and quality of life of the upper classes in developed countries and the precarious living conditions of those who live in poverty-stricken countries. It is not surprising that those who live in places where the effects of war, "zoning"—to use his term (28)—and climate change have made life unsustainable, will want to leave their homes and move to the more prosperous Western states (48–49). This desire is intensified by the delusional self-portrayal of capitalist societies as those to which everyone, regardless of their social class, may aspire and belong. The creation and projection of such an image is particularly accentuated by the marketing power of the new digital technologies and social media. As Tipu, the Bangladeshi young man in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* explains: the journey to the West "starts, not by buying a ticket or getting a passport. It starts with a phone and voice recognition technology." It is "from their phones" that "they even get an idea of what a better life is." As Tipu keeps saying, "that's where they see pictures of other countries; that's where they view ads where everything looks fabulous. . . . [A]fter that what d'you think they gonna do? Go back to planting rice?"⁶

However, as Badiou explains, the hostile reality the destitute masses encounter when they set off on their journey or reach their destination is far from what they originally expected. The "bitter frustration" and obstacles they experience on the way may sometimes be transformed into a strong "desire for revenge and destruction," turning their desire for the West into a "nihilist" destructive desire against the culture that rejects them

(48). Fascist and fundamentalist terrorist movements, as both Badiou (52–56) and Bauman (37–45) contend, use this common rage as their main tool of recruitment. Drawing on Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of the Spoiled Identity*, Bauman accuses terrorist groups of "capitalis[ing] on the dynamics of the stigma" (40). In other words, they use the hostility, discrimination and stigmatisation to which European Muslims are exposed, to convince young Muslims of the unbridgeable "gap" (38) that will always separate them from the non-Muslim Europeans, and thus of their need to join their holy-war. As Bauman argues, "being convinced of one's own 'normality' cannot be either a lonely endeavour or an individual identity." Individuals need a group that confirms their "state of 'being convinced'" (43) of their normality and that does not force them to comply with the wider society's norms. Therefore, Bauman concludes, the best way of fighting terrorism is not by promoting stigmatisation but by fighting social exclusion (45–46).

In light of the above, the articles included in this Special Issue—seven of which were originally presented at ISSEI's 16th International Conference, "Aftershocks: Globalism and the Future of Democracy," the University of Zaragoza, July 2-5, 2019—explore different aspects of the realities faced by the destitute, their precarity and stigmatisation. Six of the eight articles focus on recent literary works that address this subject, some of which were written by those who had themselves survived extreme forms of destitution.

The two articles that open the Special Issue discuss the impact of globalised capitalism on India's post-independent social structure by focusing on two distinct social groups—Indian tech-workers, and the Dalit community. In "Precarious Privilege: Globalism, Digital Biopolitics, and Tech-Workers' Movements in India," Rianka Roy discusses these workers' "precarity of liminality"—the ambiguous space they occupy between precarity and privilege—by examining the methods of surveillance digital companies use to avoid securing their workers' labour rights. Based on interviews she conducted in 2018, along with the data she gathered in four major digital hub cities, her findings show that most interviewees refrained from associating themselves with other industrial workers or any movement of labour resistance. Instead, they referred to their relatively well-paid jobs as a way of justifying the tech-companies' methods of production, even if these undermined their rights. Such responses, Roy concludes, expose their fear of losing their assumed privileges and becoming part of the destitute masses. This fear, together with the system of rewards used by their tech companies maintains their "illusion of supremacy" over other workers, while preventing them from uniting in the struggle for basic labour rights. She concludes that these tech-workers' "privilege is a performance and a camouflage for precarity, which brings them neither security nor workers' entitlements."

In her discussion of "Casteism and India's Failing Democracy in Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*," Bianca Cherechés reveals how, despite some improvements in their socioeconomic condition, the Dalits, formerly the "untouchables," who make up 25% of the population, continue to be subjected to various, at times, subtle, forms of discrimination in present-day India. The analysis of these works suggests that, while India is celebrated as the most populous democracy in the world, its democracy is tainted by a remnant of the past: its caste system. Cherechés demonstrates how the social practice of *untouchability* persists under new guises despite being legally abolished by the 1950 Constitution. Yet despite the many obstacles the Dalits still face, a new generation of Dalit writers, such the three

authors whose works she discusses, have discovered the revolutionary power of literature for reclaiming their subjectivity and for resisting the destituteness imposed on their social class by the discriminatory caste system.

The four articles that follow deal with literary representations of the destitute in the South Pacific, with a particular focus on Aborigines and asylum-seekers in search of refuge in Australia. In "Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*: Swansong or Songline?" Cornelis Martin Renes argues that in this dystopian novel, set in the year 2100 in the remote north of Australia, the author rewrites race and ethnicity from a non-European, embodied, holistic indigenous standpoint, which enables her to question the Enlightenment epistemology that enthroned European civilisation. Renes grounds his analysis of the European encounter with the indigenous Other on his interpretation of the uncanny, complex symbolic functions of the black swans in the novel, by drawing on both Kant's concepts of hospitality, cosmopolitanism, and friendship, and Derrida's theory of "hostipitality." As he shows, the black swans in the novel are evidence not only of "indigenous dispossession and dispersal" but also of their millennial presence in Australia. The novel, in other words, is not a swansong of death and resignation but a critical songline about a potentially empowering future for Australia's indigenous communities.

In "Confronting the Joint Legacies of the Holocaust and Colonialism in Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell*," María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro discusses the shared "legacies of perpetration" through the growing friendship between its two main characters, Max Otto, a German professor of history, and Dougald Gnapun, an Aboriginal elder. Both men are burdened by traumatic memories of past atrocities: for Max it is his father's complicity in the crimes of Nazism, while for Dougald it is the 1861 Cullin-la-Ringo massacre of white settlers, allegedly led by his great grandfather. In her analysis Martínez-Alfaro demonstrates how their gift-exchanges in the form of stories open up a new transnational space from which the past can be "remember[ed]" and "negotiat[ed]," without avoiding one's responsibility for it or falling into oversimplifying dichotomies. Thus by linking the Holocaust and colonialism through Max and Dougald's synergistic, empathic and transformative friendship, and by placing their stories/memories in a broader transnational and transhistorical context, Miller's fictional recreation of these historical events suggests that it is not only victimisation but also the burden of perpetration that may block, traumatise, and bring people together, and thus invites reflection on the complex relationship between victimisers and victims, perpetrators and descendants, history and fiction, remembrance and appropriation.

The following two articles offer stark critiques of the cruelty and injustice asylum seekers and refugees are subjected to in the South Pacific as a result of Australia's border-control policies. In "State Crime and Immigration Control in Australia: Jock Serong's *On the Java Ridge*," Dolores Herrero discusses one of the most disturbing effects of globalisation, the unrelenting flow of refugees, which is seen not only as a menace to the rule of law and human rights, but also as a destabilising element that might compromise the comfortable lifestyle of First World countries. The novel reflects the desperate situation of those refugees and asylum-seekers who cross Australian borders illegally by being smuggled in by boats, and the lethal effects the hardening of border measures have often had on their precarious lives. The flow of refugees led the government to take measures to stop them from reaching Australian soil, some of which might be regarded as state crimes. By applying Michael Welch's concept of "crimmigration" to her interpretation of Serong's novel, Herrero examines the strategies

adopted in creating a panic-provoking “wall of noise” through the media’s negative stereotyping of the refugees, and the “wall of governance” the government has created through its “stonewalling,” “offshore detention and processing” and “privatised detention” centres. She concludes that the novel is a powerful wake-up call to the rich countries, Australia included, to take action on one of the most urgent problems plaguing the world today.

In a similar vein, in “Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains: A Call for Dignity and Justice*,” Pilar Royo-Grasa discusses the author’s first-hand testimony of his experience in the offshore detention centres on Manus Island where he was held for six years. The book narrates Boochani’s voyage from Indonesia to Australia, his one-month detention on Christmas Island, and the cruelties he suffered and witnessed on Manus from his arrival on the island till the prison riots in February 2014 and the shutting down of the centre in October 2017. It explores his bitter condemnation of the Kyriarchal system used by the authorities in running the centre, and his embracement of the environment as a form of resistance against it. Contrary to the pejorative stereotyped images often used by governments and some mainstream media to justify their anti-immigration policies, Boochani’s account reminds us that asylum seekers and refugees are not disposable objects, but active agents who should be treated in a more humane and ethical way all around the world.

The last two articles address the destituteness suffered by war victims. In “Transience and Waiting in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*,” Beatriz Pérez Zapata focuses on the complexities of finding oneself placeless and seeking refuge in an unwelcoming global world with porous borders. Drawing on postcolonial and refugee studies and theoretical approaches to vulnerability, time, and being, she discusses Hamid’s portrayal of the shattering of everyday life in an unnamed city by following the lives of Saeed and Nadia, their growing love relationship, and the impact of their subsequent escape through “magic doors” to several places of refuge on their relationship and understanding of the world. She argues that by using magic doors and by accelerating, compressing and conflating events and times—the effect of which universalizes the theme of transience and proximity of death—the novel exposes us to the global history of suffering and invites us to bear witness to the suffering of others and to become aware of our own finitude and the obligations our common vulnerability places on us.

Finally, in “Destituteness Revised: Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*,” José M. Yebra demonstrates the empowering effect of literature—of telling one’s own story—to grant agency to those who, as a result of war, find themselves among the silenced and neglected destitute masses. By drawing on Alain Badiou’s concept of destitution, on Esther Peeren’s notion of “living ghosts” and the spectral, and on Judith Butler’s notion of grievability, among others, he interprets Antoon’s depiction of war-torn Iraq as a liminal space where its inhabitants, like Jawad, the protagonist, are “trapped between two violent forms of neo-fascisms: the war fought by foreign forces and the domestic terrorism waged at home,” which sinks the country into a state of “chronic violence and destituteness.” Jawad is forced to give up his ambition to become an artist and to take over the family business of corpse washing. Living in an economically destitute country, he feels utterly vulnerable and is haunted by the absences and deaths of his closest relatives. And yet, as narrator of his story, Jawad assumes the agency to address destituteness from the side of the destitute, to expose its structural violence, and to plead for the obligation to act against it.

In sum, the eight articles included in this Special Issue highlight not only the plight of the destitute masses—the obstacles, hardships, injustices and traumatic experiences they face—but also the means some of them have found for coping with their hardships. Collectively, they offer an alternative discourse to the current public discourse on individualism, fear, precarity and violence, by refusing to submissively accept the marginalised and silenced position to which globalised capitalism relegates its destitute masses.

Notes

1. Badiou, *Our Wound*, 13. Hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
2. Parekh, *Refugees*, 82, 83.
3. Agier, *Managing the Undesirables*, 4.
4. Khai, *The New Xenophobia*, 147.
5. Bauman, *Strangers*, 15. Hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
6. Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 66 (emphasis in original).

Funding

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO) and the European Regional Development Fund (DGI/ERDF) (code FFI2017-84258-P); and the Government of Aragón and the FSE 2020-2022 programme (code H03_20R), for the writing of this essay.

ORCID

Pilar Royo-Grasa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8132-7248>

Bibliography

- Agier, Michel. *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Translated by David Fernbach. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011.
- Badiou, Alain. *Our Wound Is Not So Recent: Thinking the Paris Killings of 13 November*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Strangers at Our Door*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. London: John Murray, 2019.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of the Spoiled Identity*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968.
- Khair, Tabish. *The New Xenophobia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Parekh, Serena. *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*. New York: Routledge, 2017.