

# On Refugee Migrations

## Xenophobia in the Era of Globalisation

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Respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention is extraordinarily patchy, and governments spend much time and ingenuity in dodging them. All the clever tricks to deny refugees their supposed rights have been very much evident in the latest rash of flights to the European Union. While the rulers of the world seem set upon locking up populations in little national prisons, they should be asking themselves: how can the opportunity of new and different citizens be embraced?

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The flight of people across borders is supposedly governed by international law, embodied most substantially in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, in Geneva (Geneva Convention). This stipulates that refugees have a right not to be expelled (Article 3), a right not to be punished for entering a country illegally (Article 31), a right to work (Articles 17 to 19) and rights to housing, education, public relief and assistance (Article 23). Furthermore, the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that people have the right to leave their country (although they have no automatic right to enter another). Of course, unlike “law,” as we normally understand it, there is no authority to enforce these rights, to police implementation and punish transgressions.

Hence, in practice, respect for these rights is extraordinarily patchy, and governments spend much time and ingenuity in dodging them. Many of the rights only come into operation if a refugee succeeds in landing in a country, so governments bend their best efforts to prevent this; as United States (US) coastguards have kept offshore Haitian refugees to make sure they would not be in a position to claim protection of the law (but have allowed Cubans to land and settle as a weapon of foreign policy against Castro’s Cuba).

### European Union

All the clever tricks to deny refugees their supposed rights have been very

much evident in the latest rash of flights. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have been trudging across Europe for many months, monitored daily by the media in excruciating detail. Many have drowned crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece, or the Mediterranean from Libya to Lampedusa, Malta or Sicily. Now, some Afghans have cut across north to Moscow to escape the obstacles in Central Europe, and are cycling through the snow to Norway; come the spring, and thawing corpses will be found in the roadside ditches.

Given all the blather about European values (preservation of life, “especially for women and children,” etc), you would have thought the good burghers of Brussels would have quickly hired cruise ships (now mothballed for the winter) or mobilised idle naval boats to go to the coasts of Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya to pick up the refugees and carry them safely to Europe. Then, the refugees would have escaped the depredations of the people smugglers.<sup>1</sup> They would have avoided shipwreck and drowning, being assaulted by border guards or others in Bulgaria, Macedonia or Croatia, pushed up against the razor wire fences now surrounding a fascist Hungary (it is all very evocative, just like the good old times in the old Soviet Bloc, except, then, people were trying to get out, not in), or being arrested there and interned indefinitely without charge or trial. “European values” are not all they seem.

Most political leaders—with the splendid exception of Angela Merkel—refused point-blank to accept refugees for settlement and some are copying Hungary by building fences. Some give their ban on refugees a weird Islamophobic twist by saying they might take in

Christians only. After the Paris bombings, a dozen or more Republican governors in the us said they would not take in Syrians because they might be terrorists. The centre-right which currently governs much of Europe is terrified of a takeover by the xenophobic right; compassion is watered down by the need to stay in power. As always, the xenophobic right pulls the centre rightwards.

Now, the European governments have turned to bribing Turkey (which, with 2.2 million refugees has the most in the world) not to allow the refugees to leave for Greece, and to various African governments not to allow departures. But, the principle is clear: to hell with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Populations should be locked up where they were born, and not allowed to migrate or flee. Borders exist not to keep people out, but to imprison them.

In sharp contrast to their governments, many thousands of ordinary citizens made collections of clothes and blankets to give the travellers, even offering food and places for them to sleep. A group in Berlin has already set up a free online educational programme to teach the newcomers German and other skills (Kiron University).

### **Australia**

Afghans, Iraqis, Burmese Rohingyas have fled southwards to Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, and thence on to Australia. The Australian government has spent the last decade dodging its supposed obligation under the Geneva Convention to protect those fleeing for their lives by diverting flows to concentration camps on two Pacific islands for indefinite detention. That way the refugees never get to land on Australian territory and so cannot acquire the rights granted under the Geneva Convention. Nor has the government relented, now that the Myanmar government's genocide policy for the Rohingyas is clear.

Conditions in the camps are, by all accounts, appalling (the camps are run by private companies, so the government cuts costs and escapes responsibility). There have been riots, demonstrations and hunger strikes. It is embarrassing to the government, so some ingenuity has

been devoted to how to get rid of these wretched people. Cambodia was bribed and bullied to take some (it amounted to four in all), but there was such an outcry from decent Australians, the scheme was ended. Now Indonesia is being pressured to take them so they can be fed back into the trafficking networks and Thai bonded labour. Of course, the Australian government says it has an asylum policy for orderly entry to those given permission. So, of course, the queue jumpers have to be gaoled (or in an earlier incident, allowed to drown). In late 2015 an Australian naval vessel intercepted a refugee boat in Australian waters, about to land on Christmas Island, turned it round and sent it back to Indonesia (there are accounts that the government has bribed crews on refugee boats to take their cargo back again). Of course, when the Australian government is caught so blatantly and publicly breaking international law, it maintains a discreet silence, admitting nothing; only brave journalists expose the crimes.

Then, there are the thousands hanging on trains rattling north through Mexico, a flow now beginning to revive after the slump. The bodies collected along the Rio Grande or in unmarked graves in the Arizona Desert show it is often no safer making the transition to North America than breaking into Europe. The privatised internment camps (and bent judges) ensure a virtually unending stream of income for those involved.

And, dozens of other cases, too small to be noted in the press, as with the hundreds of Eritrean refugees being deported from Israel to Rwanda, Uganda and Sudan. One assumes the right palms were greased.

### **Creating National Prisons**

Has the world gone insane? Think of the glorious 19th century and the preceding centuries with virtually uncontrolled migration across the Americas or within the British empire. Did open borders then mean the collapse of civilisation? How did Karl Marx spend half his life in London, or Vladimir Lenin secure temporary sanctuary a few years later? Or the 26,000 Communards who fled Paris after the brutal destruction of the Commune? Or the

thousands of Jews fleeing Tsarist Russia in the 1890s, heading for London and New York? Only the extreme authoritarians—Tsarist Russia, Prussia, medieval France, Tokugawa Japan, Nazi Germany—locked up their populations (an approach copied in the old Soviet Union and its satellites as well as China; as also, on occasions, the us—think of Paul Robeson).

Since then, there have been periodic sudden bursting of the borders, and floods of people searching for safety: think of the 12 million people of German extraction expelled from eastern Europe after 1945; of the 12 million or so fleeing as the result of the British botched evacuation of India in 1947; the 8,00,000 boat people fleeing from Vietnam (1978–1990); the six million forced out of Afghanistan as the result of the Soviet invasion—three million to Pakistan, three million to Iran; and the 10 million fleeing from East Pakistan to India in the war to create Bangladesh.

In fact, despite the misery, persecution, and many deaths along the way, when people had the right to settle and work, immense numbers were absorbed and found new lives. Indeed, as is now well known, increased immigration tends to lift economic growth and raise the living standards of the native born. Migration should lead not to the question currently concerning Europe—how can the “burden” of refugees be shared?—but, to the question: how can the opportunity of new and different citizens be embraced?

No wonder, years ago economist J K Galbraith (1979: 7) puzzled that,

Migration is the oldest action against poverty. It selects those who most want help. It is good for the country to which they go; it helps break the equilibrium of poverty in the country from which they come. What is the perversity in the human soul that causes people to resist so obvious a good?

The rank hypocrisy of governments is one thing, but more glaring is the irrationality. All states need people; they can never have enough. In the past, rulers rejoiced when they were able to steal part of the labour force of another ruling class without paying the costs of raising the worker from birth.

But, now, when vastly improved and cheapened means of transport make increasing circulation possible, the rulers of the world seem set upon locking up

populations even more tightly in little national prisons (the walls supposedly set up to keep foreigners out, keep the natives in).

In fact, the need for more workers, especially the young and relatively well-educated Syrian refugees, is becoming ever more urgent as ageing threatens to reduce radically the labour forces of many of the richer countries, most strikingly Japan, Russia, Germany, etc. Demographically, the population of Germany is set to lose 1,500,000 persons a year over the next two decades. Elsewhere, carers, building workers, and agricultural workers, are all scarce even when employment is high.<sup>2</sup> Right at the moment, the us armed forces cannot recruit enough. They may revive the old scheme of granting citizenship to the undocumented if they join up. Or, true to neo-liberalism, the Pentagon might outsource recruitment to competitive international auction. Then, the Gurkhas might win the contract to be us marines.

The apparent irrationality of governments is compounded by the extraordinary costs of maintaining control of movement. The bureaucracy, border controls and policing, internment camps and courts, in sum, is a system of pure state parasitism, with no useful outcomes but heavy costs imposed on anyone who travels. The fantasy rationale is that borders exist to protect citizens from an army of threats, from bugs to jihadists (and the media loyally concentrates on how terrible the abroad is). But, borders do not protect. They are irrelevant in a world of intercontinental and space missiles, of clandestine circulation of narcotics, goods and people. The dramatic pantomimes along borders—from Calais to the Rio Grande—are strictly that, copy for the tabloids and Fox News. In Europe, the majority of undocumented migrants do not cross borders, but enter by air on tourist visas and overstay their validity. And, the tourist trade is far too valuable to risk it with more controls. Similarly, universities will be strangled in global recruitment with more restrictions on movement. A global economy requires all states to maintain open borders as a condition of economic survival. As for stopping jihadists, the current European hysteria,

they do not cross borders. They are born and brought up inside the fortress.

### Global Economy v Xenophobia

The condition of a global economy is the free flow of capital, and of labour. But, workers are also citizens, the supposed building block of political sovereignty. Mass migration, the establishment of the same conditions of movement outside states, as usually pertain within states, seems to pose an existential threat to the old national state: the required mobility of the factors of production seems incompatible with the territorial immobility of the state. Thus, paradoxically, economic globalisation, far from washing away nations, exaggerates nationalism and xenophobia, the defence of the local ruling class's hold on one territory in opposition to the weakening of sovereignty implicit in globalisation.

At present, the national ruling classes are set to hang on to their territorial power even at the cost of wiping out their national populations (as in Syria). When they are not at war—as in Syria—the glue that holds together the national political entity is xenophobia, refuelled by periodic campaigns to hate and even kill foreigners. Putin's little games in Georgia or now in the Ukraine (closely matching his popularity ratings) vividly illustrate the dialectic, as also Beijing's absurd games in the South and East China seas. Far more troublesome is the rise of xenophobic parties in Europe for whom the arrival of Syria's destitute millions is a godsend. All aspire to a new illiberal model of the state: authoritarian, with tight state control of the media, toleration of expanded police powers, prisons, torture, severely limited human and civil rights, tight control of migration, etc. The 19th century model of the bourgeois state is ending.

The combination of the Paris bombings and the flight of refugees has offered a marvellous opportunity to the xenophobic right to expand its power. This is not just Hungary's Viktor Orbán rebuilding the national razor wire border fence. It is the toleration in public life of, more or less, open Islamophobia (the Muslims have become the Jews of the 1930s),<sup>3</sup> and the quiet acceptance that Schengen, and possibly the European Union, will unwind

in order for the old national ruling classes to concentrate their power on survival.

However, the great surges of population movement—as we now see in Europe—that threaten to wash away the boundaries of the states are, along with all the misery and spectacular hardship for hundreds of thousands, also a blow for freedom. The world's inhabitants are reclaiming the world, for so long partitioned and policed by the world's territorial ruling classes.

Will the world finally break out of a political system of warring national prisons or will it destroy itself in war, not the common ruin of the contending classes but contending nations? Or, can a reformist adjustment be achieved without war, creating a world ruling class (its links to particular territories broken), whereby states administer territories but populations move freely between them as they choose, acquiring or giving up residency as they move? Given the present global reach of the Islamic Caliphate, ISIL, the events in Paris and the universal terrors of attack from abroad, the prospects of systemic self-reform are not good.

### NOTES

- 1 The politicians, in fact, love the traffickers as a means, while snarling at them, to divert attention away from the real problem, the refugees. If the people smugglers registered as non-governmental organisations, they would be in line for Nobel prizes for saving lives and helping people along their way (in contrast to governments).
- 2 The Philippines government seems to be the only one that currently recognises the reality by overproducing nurses and merchant naval officers, to export them to the world's hospitals and merchant navies.
- 3 Three days after the new Polish government was sworn in, there was a demonstration in Warsaw under the slogan, "No Islam, no atheists, a Poland for Catholics." More chillingly, one press report recorded a demonstration outside Warsaw where a mock stuffed guy, an ancient caricature of a Jew, was publicly set on fire. Learn lessons from history? Forget it.

### REFERENCE

Galbraith, J K (1979): *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

### Obituaries

The EPW has started a monthly section, "Obituaries", which will note the passing of teachers and researchers in the social sciences and humanities, as also in other areas of work.

The announcements will be in the nature of short notices of approximately a hundred words about the work and careers of those who have passed away.

Readers could send brief obituaries to [edit@epw.in](mailto:edit@epw.in).