

# How has the 'refugee crisis' changed us?

Ana Aliverti, School of Law, University of Warwick

---

In the small French port town of La Havre, the police and border force intercepted a container that left Gabon three weeks before and was bound for London. When they opened it, the fresh light from outside illuminated the black faces of women, men, old and young, children and babies. One of the kids, Idrissa, managed to escape and ran away. The news quickly hit the local media. Idrissa was fortunate to come across Marcel, an old shoeshine man, who sheltered him in his own home and helped to reunite him with his mother in London. Despite his modest means, Marcel paid a smuggler for Idrissa's trip to England by organising a music concert whose proceeds were topped up by his and his wife's savings. While highlighting the figure of Marcel, his charisma, compassion and generosity, the film, *Le Havre* (released 2011), tells us a story that goes beyond individual characters. It is a story of a small town divided by and ambivalent about what to do about the fugitive Idrissa. While some had no qualms with reporting him to the police, others – including the chief inspector of the local police- came together to hide him in their homes, lie for him, help him to evade the police and conceal him in a vessel. It is a story of resistance, disobedience and subversion. It is also about empathy towards human suffering as a force for social solidarity and for uniting people and communities.

Many of the people who arrived during the last summer – and continue to arrive to European shores, towns and cities - have been less fortunate than Idrissa. They have faced a hostile Europe hardened by fears of Islamophobia and radicalisation, preoccupied by stretched public purses, and the pandering to xenophobic sentiments by several members of its political classes. As the so-called 'refugee crisis' unfolded and the sheer scale of the crisis became apparent, however, groups of people across the continent spontaneously came together in Greece, Croatia, Germany and elsewhere to offer help. The unprecedented move by German Chancellor Angela Merkel last August to dispense with the Dublin Convention and open the German borders to all Syrians met with disquiet by some of its European partners busy putting up fences and inundating border crossing points with police staff. That strong gesture against the will of some sections of her own party was greeted by many ordinary people, and rewarded with a nomination for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.

In this piece, I am interested in looking at our response to this 'crisis' and how it has changed us. I bracket the word in quotation marks to highlight the extent to which the label speaks as much about the construction of that phenomenon as the phenomenon itself. The mass displacement of people by wars, poverty, diseases and persecutions around the world is neither new, nor rare. Indeed, as Betts (2013) argues, vast global inequalities in the distribution of wealth and the incapacity of some states to ensure basic human conditions for their populations are making human exodus less rare. Placing the recent arrival of large number of people from war-torn countries – particularly, Syria, Iraq

and Afghanistan - to European shores against the backdrop of past and current mass human displacements across entire regions, particularly Africa, the Middle-East and South Asia, should temper its qualification as an exceptional phenomenon and alert us as to our own ethnocentrism and geo-political isolation. Indeed, before embarking to Europe, many Syrian people had previously spent some time in refugee camps or living and working in neighbouring countries, including Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Neighbouring countries are the main destinations of Syrian refugees. The UNHCR estimates that more than 4 million Syrian refugees are registered in these countries, while only one tenth of Syrians escaping the five-year civil war have sought safety in Europe (UNHCR, 2015).

Examining the label also prompts questions on the effects its invocation – intended or otherwise - is bound to produce. The rhetoric and images of a human deluge, of a mass invasion, of a sea of strangers entice fear and anxiety. In looking at the construction of the ‘crisis’, it is also worth reflecting on its unfolding. In Britain, Calais was the initial focus point. Its media coverage overwhelmingly emphasised the disruption to businesses and travellers caused by ‘swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean’ (The Guardian, 2015), in the words of Prime Minister David Cameron, and the need to strengthen border security. This rhetoric was only tempered when the extent of human tragedy, desperation and suffering became undeniable. The focus then shifted to Greece and the Balkans. The crisis was no longer only about ‘migrants’; it was also about ‘refugees’. Triggered by the shocking photo of Aylan Kurdi, concrete policy responses from the British government arrived late and were judged by many as pitifully inadequate. The 20,000 Syrian refugees to be flown in from refugee camps to Britain across the next five years arrived in Germany in just one weekend. Placing this response in the context of past British policies towards asylum seekers and refugees during the last three decades or so, politicians should avoid continuing to perpetuate the self-image of Britain as a country which has historically welcomed people fleeing persecution.

In the meantime, Europe failed to reach an agreement on compulsory quotas for processing asylum applications. Instead, in mid-September many countries in the Schengen area, including Germany, Austria, Slovakia and the Netherlands, reintroduced border controls. At the same time, various countries in Latin America -- and more recently Canada - announced more generous admission quotas for Syrians fleeing the civil war. The brief spurt of European solidarity was starting to dry out when it was revealed that one of the ISIS supporters behind last November’s attacks in Paris passed off as a Syrian refugee at various European checkpoints. The tragic events in Paris marked the beginning of the end of the ‘refugee crisis’. Not that people have stopped making the journey to Europe since then. Rather, fears of infiltration of ISIS sympathisers and radicalisation among Middle-Eastern incomers cast doubts on the standing of refugees as victims; instead turning them into suspicious populations. In this climate of fear, the case for admitting refugees is increasingly difficult to defend. Security has trumped any humanitarian and economic arguments. The balance has been tilted towards ‘our’ protection and the protection of ‘our way of life’.

The construction and unfolding of the 'refugee crisis', and the volatility of the public discourse and ambivalent responses to it, reflect our own emotional and moral uneasiness at the suffering of the other. It provokes guilt, from seeing people risking their lives and that of their family to reach where we are, and our impotence for being unable to help. Strong emotions elicited by confrontation to extreme pain and suffering can lead to the adoption of copying mechanisms including denial. Cohen (2001: 5) conceived denial as 'an unconscious defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality'. Denial works through evasion, avoidance, deflection and rationalisation. It discards the other's pain or makes them responsible for it ('They should have stayed and fought for their country'), it parcels out responsibility over situations ('It is their problem, not ours') or it justifies inaction ('We can't do anything'). Denial transcends the personal sphere, once the state makes it a political strategy to deal with specific issues, by distorting the truth, by denying the full scale of the situation, and by choosing to do nothing. Throughout the 'crisis', we witnessed the display of different forms of denial in the collective and public spheres. The Paris attacks and the attendant rise of the hardened, fortress mentality across Europe have reinforced this state of collective denial.

I would like to come back to the story of Idrissa. His arrival into Le Havre profoundly touched its community. His fight became theirs. Despite being a complete stranger, they trusted him, opened their homes to him, and came together to make his dream possible. They related to his pain as fellow human beings. In so doing, they became a more united, stronger community. In reflecting on the 'refugee crisis', we might want to think about how it touched us as a society. My impression is that in trying to defend 'us' – our economy, our culture, our way of life - we have become more impoverished, divided and feeble as a political community. In burying our heads in the sand, we have immunised ourselves towards human suffering and fallen prey to our fears.

## **References**

Betts, A. (2013) *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Cohen, S. (2001) *States of Denial. Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity, 5.

The Guardian (2015) 'Calais crisis: Cameron condemned for 'dehumanising' description of migrants'. The Guardian, 30th July 2015.

UNHCR (2015) Syria Regional Refugee Response. Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php>