

# Life jackets on shore

## *Anthropology, refugees and the politics of belonging in Europe*

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*Since 2015, media coverage has emphasized the numbers of migrants arriving in Europe, rather than the complexity and diversity of migration journeys they endure. Current increases in anti-immigrant politics across the Global North have perpetuated the narrative of the Muslim refugee as the embodiment of terror and socio-economic instability. In this article, I explore the problems with the narrative of a 'refugee crisis' in Europe on two levels: first, the classification of the displaced and border-crossing bodies into hierarchical categories of the 'unwanted' other; second, the misrepresentation of a 'crisis' of refugees in the political North compared to the rest of the world. I argue that despite the rise in asylum seekers in Europe and North America, the political North continues to be minimally affected by the refugees and dislocated populations. Moreover, from the transnational humanitarian organizations to the governments in the Global North, has come a system of classifying immigrants that privileges some particular 'types' of the displaced over others. Thus, the representation of the 'threat' is misleading, engendering the displaced as 'refugees', and too often, as Muslim refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.*

Keywords: Refugees, migration, Islamophobia, humanitarianism, minority existence, politics of belonging, representation, European identity, xenophobia, the Middle East, North Africa, human flows, ethnicity, citizenship

### **Introduction: an overview**

The contemporary political climate across Europe and North America, more than ever, seems to be saturated by decisions and discourses evolving around the fear of the influx of refugees and displaced immigrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and the larger region of the Middle East and North Africa. However, the dominant political discourse on 'the refugee crisis' rarely takes into account the historical facts that have contributed to the rise in mass displacement we witness today. As a result, much of the public response remains devoid of historical context. In this vein, the writings of

political histories of global displacements is a necessary augmentation to any policy or public debate on the current situation regarding refugees in the political North. 'Refugees were created by violence and governed by regimes of intervention,' writes Peter Gatrell, 'but they gave meaning to their experiences through engaging with the past.' (Elie 2014; Gatrell 2013). Creating an alternative to the dominant discourse in mainstream media and across most policy negotiation, is a perspective that incorporates refugee voices and acknowledges the profound range of contributions by the displaced populations to the makings of contemporary history in Europe and beyond.

Moreover, the fact that today majority of the displaced people from the Middle Eastern and North African countries that are in turmoil remain in the region – in long-term refugee camps, or else exiled across neighboring countries – scarcely gets incorporated in to the mainstream reporting on the 'crisis' discourse, despite the fact that in 2017 the UNHCR reported 84 per cent of the world's refugees live in the Global South (*The UN Refugee Agency Report 2003–16*).

The most recent presidential election in the United States, which rendered the most 'unlikely' candidate to the highest office, was in large part won through a rhetoric of anti-immigration and rejection of refugees into the USA (especially those from Syria). The 2016 US election in November intersects with a series of major political shifts across the global north, especially the 2016 referendum in the UK in favour of Brexit. As such, the growing anti-immigrant rhetoric in the right-wing campaigns in Europe and the USA are often linked to the recent upsurge in the refugees arriving in Europe; and the fear of the economic impact this might have on the host countries and their political economic allies.

From the Netherlands to France, Hungary to Italy, the right-wing politicians have relied on the UK Brexit vote that had opened up deep fissures within the European Union (Foster *et al.* 2016). In the hours immediately following the historic vote, the question of 'what is the EU?' spiked sharply in online searches all across the UK, from Northern Ireland and Wales to England and Scotland (Google Trends, 24 June 2016). Moreover, this report noted that the majority of the UK voters who opted to exit the European Union, expressed a serious concern about the so-called 'crisis of refugees' arriving in Europe, with potential devastating economic consequences to 'their' employment, safety and livelihood. But what exactly is the crisis in Europe? It is not at all clear that there is a causal relationship between European economic and employment stagnation and the arrival of displaced migrants from the political south. While the rhetoric of a 'crisis' of refugees and asylum seekers pouring into Europe has steadily increased in the conservative political discourse since 2015, the economic upheavals of European markets did not emerge in this time frame, and the devastation of mass displacement of refugees is not unique to Europe. The growing and formidable body of scholarship on the topic indicates that by far the majority of

the globe's refugees are located outside Europe (for example, Elie 2014; Fernando and Giordano 2016; Schiocchet 2016).

The history of the twentieth century has been shaped by massive shifts in global political-economic relations that have contributed to the eruption of numerous territorial invasions and civil wars, all of which have led to massive displacements of affected populations and exoduses of refugees across multiple borders (for example, the arrival of the Soviet army in Afghanistan and the numerous wars and mass exodus of the Afghans following; the invasion of Cyprus by the Turkish government; the collapse of Communism and the re-mapping of the Balkans and the eastern Europe, etc.). However, evidential data shows that majority of the refugees then and now are Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs), and comparatively speaking, the overflow into Europe (read Western European centres or the political north) remains comparatively small (Gatrell 2013).

Thus, the clamour regarding a 'crisis' of refugees in Europe today, when taken comparatively, loses plausibility. Middle Eastern and North African displaced people, while more visible in Western media today, largely continue to be spread around the region stretching from Africa to west Asia, often in neighbouring countries to their place of origin. It is therefore relevant to examine the context in which the contemporary angst about migrant seekers and refugees in Europe has come to a peak. Given the unmistakable interest of the socially conservative and the political right in demonization of the migrant other, the examination of potential links between the discourse of 'crisis' to xenophobia and Islamophobia that has remained a vigorous force in the political north seems germane.

Interrogating the connection between Islamophobia and the anxiety over the 'refugee crisis' can begin by an examination of where these refugees are coming from. Or how the figure of the refugees in Europe today (ambiguous and exotic) is being mapped out against the political-economic uncertainties of the nation-states contemplating EU membership. Finally, written from the perspective of my area of specialization, this article explores how anthropology is central to a critique of the growing popular fervour that demonizes the 'refugee-other' as a means for re-drawing the cartographies of political control across Europe. It is not enough for the work of anthropology, to recall the prophetic words of an American anthropologist, to examine the powerless and the marginal. Rather anthropological scholarship and critique must intervene at the thresholds of power, and deploy its intellectual toolkit regarding social structure, network analysis and self-regulation to ask those in power for accountability and responsibility – what she called 'studying up' (Nader 1969). It is in the spirit of studying all levels of socio-political contributions to the discourse of 'refugee crisis in Europe' that the analyses of this article are composed.

Crossing over domains of power distribution in politics, and in scholarship, by studying up, down and sideways, the figure of 'refugees' emerges at the intersection of a polarizing globalization in political-economic regimes, on the one hand, and

formidable articulations of dissent and resistance against them, on the other. Far from helpless, artless and dispossessed, the forced migrants and refugee-seekers in Europe make a complex population of young and old with aspirations for improved conditions in life that are more similar to those of mainstream European values than is often expressed. Like any complex segment of population, the people categorized as undesirable migrants and asylum seekers risking their lives to escape horrors in their homeland to arrive in Europe, actually come with a diverse body of gendered, racial, spiritual, psychological and socio-economic experiences. To deny them diversity and complexity in life experiences, is to deny the displaced their humanity. Yet, the ability to undertake a holistic and all-encompassing examination of voices and lives experienced by the displaced is a far loftier aspiration than can be claimed within the scope of this article. Here, instead, my examination remains focused on the scholarship that enables an unpacking the current political debate about the so called 'refugee crisis' in Europe. To this end, multiple modes of intellectual and political interventions are invoked here, ranging from anthropological scholarship to public art.

### **The Power of art**

Images of catastrophe form part of our everyday surroundings, evoking private and public responses of compassion and solidarity that prove more or less effective prompting the mobilization of human and financial resources that development aid can no longer provide... Political conflicts and their bloody consequences are similarly present in our media landscape, they, too, prompting surges of emotion and strategic calculations and calling for nongovernmental action and for military operations.

(D. Fassin and M. Pandolfi 2010:9)

Art is one of the most effective modes of mobilization against xenophobia, particularly the visual art of protest, which disrupts the mainstream and stereotypical notions of the figure of the 'refugee-other'. In the section that follows, I offer an examination of how art has come to disrupt the structures of power that deny the humanity of the 'refugees' in the name of 'protectionism' and 'sovereignty' of Europe.

In a recent interview on a new art installation protesting against Europe's diminishing interest in im/migration politics and against a general decline in empathy for the political refugees from the Middle East, the contemporary artist-activist Ai Weiwei stressed, 'we are all refugees as humans in some moment in history' (Brown 2015).

Art has long been an effective and potent medium for intervention into socio-political structures of power. From Pablo Picasso's most famous painting *Guernica* (1937), depicting the devastation of war, to arguably one of the most political graffiti

of the twenty-first century, Banksy's *The Walled Off Hotel* in Bethlehem, Palestine, the art of protest has disrupted dominant discourses of the political elite and continues to make an impact on the public's engagement with socio-political events. Contemporary artists such as Bahia Shehab (for example his graffiti art project, *A Thousand Times No* (2010) also known as the *Blue Bra* project, introduced on TED in 2012) and Ai Weiwei (Refugee series) have effectively utilized their power of creativity to disrupt the political hegemony and its public discourse.

In their examinations of power, anthropology and art, though often seen as distinct, perhaps even oppositional, in approaching the world from scientific or creative stances, have much in common and can potentially benefit a great deal from cross-pollination of their methods and perspectives. As Schneider and Wright have suggested, 'art and anthropology are both made up of a range of expectations and constraints... However, despite the fact that one can identify polarizing or centripetal influences at work in each discipline, neither is a static, stable, or unified entity whose borders can be definitively traced.' (2006:2)

One of the most important commonalities between anthropology and art, as articulated in the literature produced by the dialogue between the two since the 1980s, is in the interplay between 'distance and intimacy' (Wynne 2010:53). The translational dance between their audience and the work produced by socially engaged anthropologist and 'artist-activists' may be experimental in terms of methodology. However, it is arguably at such points of rupture from the normative disciplinary practices that innovative and exemplary interventions into the political can emerge. Just as more public protests have turned to creative forms of expression in politics, some aspects of anthropological scholarship can also benefit greatly from recognition of the shared points of interest (not to mention methodologies already in practice such as poetic-ethnographies and, reflexive-political graffiti) when addressing the contemporary global discourse on refugees and displaced migrants.

Visual art (as well as performative, musical and literary interventions) has the potential for engaging a public's imagination and for mobilizing political sentiments on a large scale. From Afghanistan to Syria, from the streets of Tehran to Cairo, new generations of artists are shifting the discourse on refugees and displacement by engaging the public gaze and imagination on the matter. Through acts of graffiti and street art in public spaces, by speaking poetry at rallies, and through performance art displays, artist-protesters have opened new spaces for public discourse that include and emerge from the voices of the migrants and refugees. As the world witnesses an ever increasing scale of displaced people and asylum seekers in the twenty-first century, scholarship on the important role of art intervention on the politics and study of refugees is also on the rise. However, for the purpose of this article, I will discuss just one of the most public displays by an artist-protester vocalizing the human loss and pain endured in the crossing of borders into Europe.

By installing a creative display of lifejackets that were to save lives, yet have come to memorialize lives lost in desperate attempts to escape the impossibility of their homeland, Ai Weiwei humanizes the plight of the refugees and asylum seekers, and highlights the ethical obligation of the silent majority and the privileged to resist the networks of power that narrate the discourses of exodus, migration and crisis.

To me, to be political means you associate your work with a larger number of people's living conditions, and that includes both mental and physical conditions. And you try to use your work to affect the situation.

(Ai Weiwei in Worrall 2009)

Although provocative in public discourse and disruptive to the status quo, art of dissent such as Ai Weiwei's series on refugees, which ruptures the dehumanization of the displaced, will not produce a meaningful change in the treatment of the individual refugees or the xenophobic sentiments regarding the migrant other in Europe unless a collective sense of empathy and self-reflection is aroused.

So, what does it mean to speak of 'empathy' towards the globally displaced? In 2016, when dismantling the infamous 'Jungle' in Calais, the government's plan to relocate the 'refugees' to other towns across the country was met with fierce resistance from local residents driven by xenophobia. In response, President Hollande reportedly 'criticised that resistance and called for more solidarity, noting that neighbouring Germany had taken in one million people, compared with the 9,000 that will be relocated from Calais'.<sup>1</sup> In the face of what appears to be a conservative turn in the political cartography of the Global North, can there be room for notions of 'empathy' and 'solidarity'? Indeed, what does it mean to speak of border crossing, displacement, and forced migration across conflicted geopolitical boundaries and war-stricken topographies as a condition of human life in contemporary times?

Undoubtedly, in this context, the words of Ai Weiwei, must be understood as a call to awaken a sense of empathy and compassion between spectators and the sensational subject that the refugees have become. The unprecedented number of refugees crossing into Europe, which has risen steadily since 2015, has seemingly overwhelmed 'the European psyche'. The stakes are particularly high, given that Europe is already struggling with failed political economies, growing disenchantment among the first-generation immigrants, and deliberate, explosive acts of violence credited to the supporters of ISIS/DAESH. Thus, the exhausted refugees, perhaps 'fortunate enough' to have survived the arduous journey, once in Europe, are faced with growing sentiments of anguish and indignation fuelled by fear and apathy. So

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<sup>1</sup> *AlJazeera*, 24 September, 2016: [www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/france-close-calais-camp-relocate-refugees-weeks-160924194133102.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/france-close-calais-camp-relocate-refugees-weeks-160924194133102.html) (accessed 12 February 2018).

how are connections of compassion and inclusivity to be achieved? What power dynamics inform the relationships between the observing geopolitical north and the refugees from the south?

Among the most powerful roles in narrative formation and the construction of the collective sentiment – often against the refugees and in fear of the migrant other – is that of the media. Since 2015, mainstream media coverage of the influx of asylum seekers in Western Europe has contributed to the growing sense of xenophobia by emphasizing the scale of the so-called crisis, and through conflation of a diverse group of displaced people into the composite category of ‘immigrant-refugees’. By interchangeably using the terms, ‘refugees’, ‘economic migrants’ and ‘undocumented [illegal] immigrants’, they have inflated reports of the rise in refuge-seeking arrivals from the Global South into a crisis for Europe.

As such, the problem of ‘unwanted’ migration into Europe appears to have reached a new height with respect to the numbers of bodies traversing the continental divides. This emphasis on sheer numbers rather than the diversity of mobilized bodies distorts reality. Contrasting legal processes and diverse everyday-life experiences separate the relatively few groups of refugees from those of thousands of ‘unaccepted’ or ‘unofficial’ other migrants. It is thus critical to consider the significant differences in experiences of those marked as ‘refugees’ in Europe from those seeking ‘refuge’ from the violence of poverty, war, and political persecution in their homeland.

This is not to deny the increase in the number of asylum seekers moving towards Europe. However, the current ‘refugee crisis’, as it is often branded, is problematic on two levels: first, the misrepresentation of the population marked as ‘other’; second, the misrepresentation of the scale of the ‘crisis’ of refugees in Europe, compared to the rest of the world, particularly with respect to the number of refugees in the Global South. Data from ethnographic research on refugees in Europe and across the Middle East and North Africa, contrary to the commonly manufactured narrative in the West, prove that majority of the world’s displaced bodies and refugees remain in the South and never make it to Europe.

According to UNHCR, ‘the number of people driven from their homes by conflict and crisis has topped 50 million for the first time since World War II, with Syrians hardest hit’. This is undeniably a major crisis. However, considering that Europe received just over 1.1 million asylum applications in 2016, one must wonder about the ‘European’ component of the term ‘refugee crisis in Europe’.

(Schicchet 2016:233)

As specialists in the art of listening and scholars of social-cultural change, anthropologists are intellectually equipped, and arguably ethically obliged, to contribute actively to the critique of power formations across these contested geopolitical boundaries. That the current ‘crisis’ of refugees arriving in Europe is

tied to the complexity of the convoluted circumstances surrounding and feeding into it, is grounds for refraining from attributing simple causality to the matter. Instead, this article attempts to incite more direct and active engagement between anthropologists, the public, and the growing numbers of immigration industry and refugee ‘managers.’

### **Situating the ‘crisis’ – a contemporary paradox**

A question of European identity vis-à-vis the parsing out of who belongs and who is unworthy of inclusion is at the heart of the current ‘refugee crisis.’ Europe, with its precarious borders, has been conceptualized rather less in terms of racial unity (lessons from the holocaust, perhaps), but more vehemently in terms of a constructed European cultural cohesion, wherein values of modern European citizenship are seen as threatened by the continuous influx of its irreconcilable ‘other’ – those from the Middle East and North African regions of conflict.

This has been evident both in the public reaction to the news of daily arrival of boats loaded with hopeful passengers from across the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in the rise in heated conservative political discourse across the European Union since 2015 in response to the question of refugees. In the last two years, the political myths circulated by right-wing conservatives across Europe (and the world, for that matter) have contributed to a rise in fear of the other and angst about the unknown. These myth-based phobias include a wide range of often contradictory reports and analyses regarding economic and security concerns. For instance, conservative responses to the growing number of people arriving in Europe in search of refuge have generated angst about ‘security’ in the Global North, evident in the rhetoric about asylum seekers’ ties to ISIS/DAESH. In parallel, the fate of European economy, as expressed in questions about the cost of the refugee camps and the rise of unemployment in the face of the influx of people, has become central to the conservative political platforms in both Europe and the USA. In Europe, since 2015, there has been a steady growth of conflated stories depicting newly arrived people from the Global South as a threat, largely been fuelled by fictional narratives of their intentions and consequences.<sup>2</sup> The Trump presidential campaign in the United States was largely remained unwavering about a rejection of (Syrian) refugees into the USA, undermined confidence in the official screening processes, and conflated ‘security’ concerns with the economic priorities for Americans, with his rhetoric of reserving employment opportunities

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2 See, for example, N. Robins-Early, 2015, ‘5 major myths of Europe’s refugee and migrant crisis debunked’, *Huffington Post* (16 September): [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/europe-refugee-migrant-crisis-myths\\_us\\_55f83aa7e4b09ecde1d9b4bc](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/europe-refugee-migrant-crisis-myths_us_55f83aa7e4b09ecde1d9b4bc) (accessed 14 February 2018).



and jobs for American citizens implying that each acceptance of political refugees will mean a job lost to an 'American' worker.<sup>3</sup>

The media coverage regarding the unprecedented increase in asylum seekers in Europe, since 2015, has fluctuated between two contrasting viewpoints. As noted before, the mainstream media has largely focused on the numbers, rather than the diversity among people. This focus on the 'scale' of migration has taken attention away from the complexity of the political map regarding asylum seekers movement into Europe, and has fanned the flames of European fears about the unwelcome other.

On the other hand, the Eurocentric news coverage of the issue tends to highlight a particular narrative of exile, one that privileges the story of the Syrian refugee over all others. While it is quite startling to witness the war-torn country of Syria, and the scale of devastation felt by millions of people displaced by its war, political corruption, famine and death, it is also misleading to assume that all, or the majority, of people arriving at Europe's door are Syrian refugees.

Mainstream-media coverage of the accounts of refugees and the displaced masses from Syria and the neighbouring regions have largely sketched an ambiguous figure of the 'outsider' arriving on shore. Distinguishing between the Afghani, Iraqi and Syrian war refugees, and from the socio-economic migrants, has become unimaginable. Meanwhile, the political right has pushed for exclusionary policies that promote fencing off Europe at its borders – wherever that may be – and shipping asylum seekers back to their places of origin, or at the very least, away from European territory.

Much of the mainstream humanitarian and liberal discourse, on the other hand, has focused on distinguishing political and war refugees as 'deserving' new arrivals, while deeming others as less worthy of inclusion and compassion. Indeed, who could forget the heartbreaking image of the lifeless body of the 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian Kurdish boy, whose attempt to escape the ISIS/DAESH invasion of Kobani failed in 2015? While this story has the power to mobilize human 'empathy' in the face of the obvious tragedy of Aylan and the failure of his surviving family's attempt to gain refugee status or asylum, the absence of multiple narratives of migration and asylum-seeking journeys, some conflicting with others, is both short-sighted and dangerous, for it consolidates the conservative oppositional politics geared against the Muslim other.

To a large degree, the imposed hierarchy among displaced bodies of people in the modern world is by design a juridical distinction – between migrants (often economically based) and the refugees (often politically motivated). In other words, the

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3 See, for example, L. Gambino, 2016, 'Trump and Syrian refugees in the US: separating the facts from fiction', *The Guardian* (2 September): [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/02/donald-trump-syria-refugees-us-immigration-security-terrorism](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/02/donald-trump-syria-refugees-us-immigration-security-terrorism) (accessed 14 February 2018).

very idea of what it means to be a refugee, is a constructed categorical distinction that privileges a particular life story of displacement and exodus over others – particularly in the post-Second World War context of the universal-rights doctrine. However, with respect to what gets covered in the media, the myth of a single story, one of the Middle Eastern refugee (Syrian), overshadows the multitude of other asylum seekers – from the Balkans, South Asia or elsewhere, whose political plight does not currently merit them news coverage. Furthermore, the emphasis on a European crisis provoked by receiving such a large volume of asylum seekers obscures the globally disproportionate distribution of refugees across non-European territories. While Europe is attempting to come to terms with the current shock of over a million new arrivals into its territories since 2014, countries all around the Middle East and North Africa continue to house millions of displaced people and refugees. There seems to be no space in the current mainstream media for their stories.

### **Is it a modern problem?**

So the history of the modern state can also be read as the history of race, bringing together the stories of two kinds of victims of European political modernity, the internal victims of state building and the external victims of imperial expansion.

(Mamdani 2005:5–6)

The twentieth century marked a new age of mass-scale violence around the globe, from colonial invasions and the horrors of the world wars to revolutions and civil wars, independence movements and their counter political forces. The ‘new’ world order seemed to have perpetuated, not eradicated, the ubiquity of social divisions, poverty and racial conflicts around the globe. Yet, the promise of modernity, in contrast, was propelled by visions of equality and liberty for humans of diverse backgrounds. While, historical analysis demonstrates how the reality of modern idealism were far from inclusive, the appeal of its universalist (humanist) utopian vision continues to inform much of the contemporary values associated with modernity (in gender-equality discourse, in racial- and social-justice aspirations, and in economic global politics, for example). The fall of empires, the birth of many nation-states, and the rise of pivotal social-justice movements throughout the century have arguably emerged out of the ideological paradoxes that fractured the monumental vision of modernity as a site for equality, liberty and the good life. The realities have been violence and wars, racism and genocides, and burgeoning new forms of division between people leading to further political and economic polarization of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’.

It is impossible to engage critically with asylum-seeking populations and the notion of the ‘refugee’ without deliberation on the idea of nation-states, as the presumptive basis of the modern. The centrality of the political and cultural powers that have come to define modern nations around the globe for the past few centuries,

inevitably reflects on the meaning of transient people identified as seeking political refuge and/or economic and social asylum outside their homeland. In a relatively short period of human history, we have become so accustomed to the rhetoric of nationhood as the inescapable natural state of the modern world, that the systematic failures of nation-states, from Europe to just about any corner of the globe, seem invisible.

The idea of the refugee emerges out of a particular time in modern history, most immediately in the aftermath of the Second World War and the 1951 Geneva Convention on European refugees, first, followed by the 1967 augmented protocol to address the problem of displacement around the globe. The concept of the refugee, is therefore a modern construction, forever entangled with larger ideas and ideals about urbanity, citizenship and universal rights in the context of the modern values embedded in the idea of the nation-state's political and social inclusivity. It may be helpful to unpack some of the main signifiers associated with the category of refugees, and therefore pertinent to the contemporary political discourse and the measures aimed at the displaced people arriving in Europe today.

One of the commonly viewed qualities of the refugees is their liminality. Refugees are understood as stateless, however temporarily; former citizens of their homelands, forced into traversing the world beyond it. Here, two separate ideas are entwined: the subjectivity of the person vis-à-vis their affiliation with a nation-state, and the notion of suspended 'will power' embedded in the narrative of 'forced' and involuntary escape from persecution.<sup>4</sup>

The city, itself central to the formation of the modern, becomes stereotyped as a romantic haven for the displaced, in what de Certeau calls 'the poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal', in which human actions are linked to social, political, migrational and metaphorical experiences of the city ( de Certeau 1984:94–105). The city, envisioned as the heart of the modern, will always be in a paradoxical relationship with the 'refugee'. The refugee, in one sense, is the very essence of one who is without urbanity, or whose urbanity has been ripped away from them – through war, political persecution or ethnic cleansing.

The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it.

(de Certeau 1984:93)

With a Foucauldian approach to power (where it emerges through relationships rather than in statuses), Paul Rabinow demonstrates how modern urban space

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4 UNHCR: [www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee](http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee).

becomes significant not only because of the multitude of possibilities it grants its citizens, but also on the basis of the radical shift in governance. He shows how Saint-Simon's 1649 prediction that society would be transformed from the 'government of men' to 'administration of things' turned out to be true for the development of the modern city (Rabinow 1989). The formation of the city in the modern era embodies a form of urbanism determined by a grid of intelligibility (evident in the planned city, which is rational and designed with purpose), while the role of the citizens is made meaningful in their ability to perform as pragmatic technicians to exploit the city as an object (ibid.:12). As such, the city is clearly not designed with the 'outsider' figure of the refugee in mind; however, with the individual ingenuity of the 'outsider', a refugee can seek her/his own 'asylum' within the city, based on their mastery of techniques for surviving the urban. Thus, there is room for agency and subjectivity of the 'refugee' in a Foucauldian reading of modern urbanism that goes beyond the violence of freezing the 'refugee' in a state of perpetual victimhood and absence of polity.

What is central to the concept of modernity, on a theoretical level, are discourses of a newly formed subjectivity that sits at the intersection of two distinct dimensions – the juridical (legal-political) and sociocultural (religious, ethnic, and economic) realms of life. The very idea of separating the cultural from the political, often summed up in the rhetoric of the separation of religion and politics, has been argued as central to the conception of the modern. Among a number of criticisms to the equation of modernity with secularity, are the writings of Talal Asad (2003), Saba Mahmood (2005) and Calhoun, Juergensmeyer *et al.* (2011). Peter Berger identifies the mistaken idea within secularization theory that 'Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.' (1999:2).

With respect to the position of the refugees, in particular, it is the suspended affiliation with a nation-state (legal) that defines the category of the displaced subject. However, to borrow from Schiocchet, one can argue that the category 'refugee' has always also been cultural as well as political. Recalling Bruno Latour's poignant observation that, despite all our efforts, we have never been modern (1993), Schiocchet writes:

To be modern in this sense is to be Cartesian and to separate state from church, religion from politics, and other social complexities. The Humanitarian discourse is thus modern in the sense that it tries to isolate humanity from politics. And in so much as sovereigns might have tried to objectify refugees by means of threatening them as *zoe*, in line with humanitarian prescriptions, refugees were always first and foremost a political problem and thus one belonging to the arena of *bios*.

(Schiocchet 2016:219)

Europe, as a singular and uniform geopolitical and sociocultural entity, does not exist and has been not been achieved, but it does feature in the contemporary imagination of the model for modern humanity. Celebrated as the cradle of all that is modern, the norms and values dominant in much of Europe have led to tragic wars over territory and economic power, in which the boundaries of what counts as European have been perpetually redrawn and reconfigured. Centuries of colonialism and imperial domination around the world have not only made for political and economic inequality across the globe, but have also perpetuated the idea of Europe as a 'unified entity', distinct and superior to the rest of the planet. This narrative is factually lacking on two levels: first, the hierarchies of belonging and membership within the supposed 'self-contained' geopolitical Europe are far from natural; second, the presumed superiority of Western civilization over others is no longer a viable presumption, as we live in a post-colonial reality that has fundamentally challenged such claims.

Therefore, supposed geopolitically bounded entities, whether continental Europe, or a nation-state such as the US, are in fact in a constant state of flux, reconstruction and contestation. That is to say, when Europe is imagined as a unified entity, the question remains: on which supposed border might one locate the edges of such a political identity? More specifically, within the discourse of Europe's current politics of immigration, do all countries and regions within the geographical region marked as Europe have a 'crisis' due to their experiences with the refugees? Are migrants (economic, political, ethnic etc.) from the Balkan countries, for example, given the same classification as those from Southern and East European regions? To what degree is the idealized model of Europe, as a superior sociopolitical entity, itself a fabricated fantasy of belonging and uniformity from within?

Hegemonic discourses on history and science have made Europe synonymous with the Enlightenment, modernity, citizenship, democracy and secularism. Modern political and social experience is embodied in the models for citizenship, national belonging and what can be called a 'minoritization' of the population, as Mufti (2007) has argued. In other words, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, to belong to Europe (in national identity), is and has been intertwined with imaginings and ideas central to the political history of 'minority existence', diasporic and exilic identities, and allowing space for new arrivals – e.g. the former colonial subject, the refugees and the displaced. This is particularly visible in the question of belonging to Europe for Jewish immigrants in Europe in the twentieth century and the contemporary angst (read phobia) about a European identity and the Muslim 'other'. The 'failure of the idea of Europe', as Mufti puts it, is and has been intertwined with the intellectual history of defining nationhood in relation to its marginalized counterparts – such as 'the Jewish question' of the past, and the 'Muslim other' in the present (Mufti 2007:15, 97). Recognizing the political implication of such a linkage of 'Jewish marginalization within Europe' and 'colonial and postcolonial forms of alienation', as has emerged

in recent Jewish cultural studies, Mufti writes 'by turning to the fraught histories of European Jews and Indian Muslims, I am attempting to make the history of such struggles available once again as resources for critical practice.' (ibid: 19).

As such, the allure of the idea of European unity and the fantasy of consensus in a post-nation-state era is deemed to be of high priority for conservatives and as one that must be protected at all costs. The influx of refugees from non-European (read 'un-European') Middle East provides a convenient location for the threat to the promise of the EU – which although perceived as the equivalent to Europe, remains separate from it – and the failure of cohesion at its borders.

## Anthropology and Europe

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'

(Fanon 1968:250)

Anthropology, a relatively new social science, has an uncomfortable history. The critique of anthropological productions has come both from inside and outside the discipline. With one foot in the humanities, and another in the social sciences, anthropological discourse is primarily concerned with the core question of what it means to be human.

There is little doubt that anthropology originated at the heart of the European colonial history. From the start, 'the science of mankind' emerged in response to the European imperial encounters at the fringes of their colonies. For centuries, progressive thinkers around Europe had submitted to the Enlightenment doctrine that envisioned improving humanity through rational changes, through science, through democratic governance and the upholding of basic rights. However, the failures of colonial projects, the rampant genocides of indigenous peoples, and the horrors of slavery stood in direct contradiction with that vision. Anthropology, thus, became the humanist attempt to decode, demystify and know the 'other'. Early twentieth-century British social anthropology for the most part was based on fieldwork in faraway isolated cultures and focused on a methodology of holistic functionalism, but avoided examining the role of colonial domination on their research (Asad 1973).

The American school of cultural anthropology, spearheaded by Franz Boas, in contrast, addressed the growing eugenics sentiment within academia head on, by focusing on a historical particularism that embraced differences and sought to salvage disappearing cultures of the world from the invasive and brutal domination of European colonialism. Nonetheless, it was not until after European devastation at home during the Second World War, and the failure of their imperial projects, that

anthropological enquiries began to engage seriously with the role of their science in the face of global power dynamics. By the 1960s, a new generation of anthropologists began to critique their professional stance in the context of rising resistance against imperial domination, civil-rights movements, growing anti-war sentiments, and a reconstructed vision of the modern world as consisting of fragmented and contested geopolitical spaces. Serious questions about authority and authorship in the production of anthropological knowledge began to percolate throughout the academy, and the very notion of a single narrative began to crumble. Nonetheless, the idea of unified nation-states in Europe, and across the world, continues as an important political icon of the post-industrial globe. Connected economies, competing markets, and allied military powers against common 'enemies', continue to inform the political landscape of the contemporary world, where inequalities between geopolitical north and south grow wider and more violent, and the rhetoric of a unified Europe grows more divisive.

### Identifying Europe, a categorical problem

It takes at least two somethings to create a difference... Clearly each alone is – for the mind and perception – a non-entity, a non-being. Not different from being, and not different from non-being. An unknowable, a *Ding an sich*, a sound from one hand clapping.

(Bateson 1978:78)

What does it mean to speak of Europe as a modern construct? Is Europe best described as a continent, a people, an economic market or as a political union in the making? The problem of classifying Europe as a single identifiable geopolitical entity emerged long before the upsurge of 'undesirable' recent arrivals on its shores from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Geographically connected to the massive continent of Asia, European boundaries contain more ambiguity and fluctuation than most continental divides. Classifications of people on the basis of common ancestry, cultural heritage or shared languages may have seemed plausible at the dawn of modernity, but these have long since been demonstrated as erroneous fantasies. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the reassembling of the global political-economy, now fuelled by neoliberal ideology, in the 1980s, the discourse of a united European market to compete with the American and Japanese economies gave birth to the idea of the EU. The contemporary processes making and unmaking an European economic and political front are simultaneously new – as they emerged in response to the current globalized political economic reorganizations – and yet, fantastically modern in their ideas and values, which are legacies of the post-enlightenment vision of nationhood and the formation of a 'majoritarian' model of unity: '[T]he massive transfers of [Jewish] populations ... in European society

to solve its crisis of minority, rests in the will to restructure and reinvent a society that is inherent to them [elsewhere]' (Mufti 2007:99). The residual paradox in the conception of a European identity in the face of Europe's 'unwanted other', or the problems with minorities, become evident.

Europe was a cultural union long before it was anything else. Its name was Christendom. It lasted for centuries. Christianity built on the cultural, social, economic and scientific affinities among the peoples of Europe ... When on the move, people could use Latin as the European common language. Travelers and merchants could pay their way with a single currency in the form of gold and silver coins that were readily acceptable and convertible.

(Leonard and Taylor 2016:251)

Taken from *The Routledge Guide to the European Union*, this quotation demonstrates the relevance of the question of a European Union and its viability in the face of the contemporary political economic conflicts and recent events (e.g. refugee and migrant arrivals from the MENA). Written from the perspective of journalists and public policymakers, at the heart of this volume is a concerted effort to expand the scope of European policy-makers. This is perhaps best evident in what immediately followed the above excerpt, as they went on to alert the reader that, 'Today's EU faces very different challenges. Culture takes a back seat,' in their argument for a 'creative Europe,' in which cultural programmes, ranging from visual media and local heritage sites to tourism, are given centre stage in a vision of a cultural EU (ibid.:252-5).

There are two problems for such a romantic vision of Europe: history and in their notion of 'culture.' While the authors attempt to steer towards a more holistic approach to the EU policy-making, their premise that Europe had its origins in a 'cultural union of Christianity' ignores historical facts about Europe's heterogeneous and contested ethnic, religious and racial identities throughout the modern age. Moreover, by focusing on the political economy of select 'creative sectors, including cinema, television, music, literature, performing arts, heritage and related areas,' they privilege a sense of culture that was called 'civilization' in the nineteenth century in Europe, and one embodied in cultural products rather than people.

### **Circumventing history**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a European habit to distinguish between civilized wars and colonial wars.

(Mamdani 2004:7)



The contemporary 'crisis' in and across Europe is often introduced and discussed with little or no attention to the historical context in which the current rise in asylum seeking has emerged. The neglecting of historical facts enables a focus on the 'crisis' in a mode of 'emergency' that gives urgency to political campaigns across Europe, and distracts attention from the European role in the creation of escalating political strife across the Middle East that has, ultimately, given rise to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of desperate people from their homelands.

Furthermore, by blending the perils of domestic political economies with the so-called threat to the European secularism and 'culture', conservative right-wing politicians have succeeded in covering up the failures of European economic policies and in shifting the focus of the debate to the threat of unwanted and potentially dangerous newcomers impinging on domestic, if not global, economics. The growing xenophobic sentiment that 'they are going to take our jobs' embodies the notion of refugees as an economic burden, rather than a humanitarian responsibility.

In Mallorca [Spain], the terms 'refugee' and 'immigrant' are considered to reflect desperate, backward, dependent, poor, rural, uneducated, unskilled, disoriented, identity-less people who are 'all the same'.

(J. Waldren 2006:137)

Moreover, the systematic deletion of historical narrative in the discourse of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe is built on the armature of the supposed threat to the core of European identity as a political and cultural assemblage of secular modern nation-states. The refugees, whatever their plight, are neither of Europe, nor appreciative of the European ways of life. They do not belong.

These 'outsiders within' simultaneously conjure up the rhetoric of security and erase the historical facts that directly involve Europe in the contemporary fate of the regions of the world from which the majority of the asylum seekers come. Despite the increasing discourse of European integration, ironically perhaps, the question of ethnic and national identity has become more important.

Finally, the representation of 'refugees' in mainstream media since 2015 has, by and in large, escalated the uncertainty surrounding the upsurge in the number of new arrivals in Europe and their suitability for life in Europe. Europe, we are to understand, is under threat. While the narrative of journalistic reportage has fluctuated greatly in a relatively short time (from a more 'empathetic' plea about the plight of the refugees, to humanitarian narratives on rescuing the victims of barbarism abroad, to growing xenophobia and the conservative construction of an Islamic threat within Europe), since 2015 Western discourse on the immigration and refugee influx in Europe has focused on the precarious oscillation between upholding Western ideals of humanism; and the fear of an attack on European values (democracy, secularism etc.). The body of the refugee is the site of that threat, whether in the imagined

figure of the Muslim Middle Eastern irrational militant who could, or would, blow up Europe the first chance he gets. Or, perhaps more enduringly, through his unwelcome arrival that inevitably will burden the economy, political freedom and socio-cultural liberties that have come to 'define' Europe. The underlying narrative in the majority of the mainstream-media content on the European refugee crisis is the same unmistakable message: keep them out!

### **Erasures of people**

In the contemporary xenophobic discourse emerging around the themes of the unity and integrity of Europe in the face of the refugee 'crisis', there are many erasures which exacerbate the violence (physical and structural, discursive and symbolic) against immigrants and minorities across Europe. The first of these erasures occurs at the level of naming, in at least two ways: the erasure of the political and ethnic identity of the refugees; and the conflation of the categories of 'refugees' with 'migrants'.

The generalized branding of 'refugees and immigrants', often used interchangeably, erases the complexity of the human stories of suffering and survival as distinctive to each historical and political context within the larger region of MENA. As such, the 'refugee crisis' is part of a Euro-centric brand terminology that focuses on the 'crises' mode and its potential alarming impact on Europe, rather than the 'refugees' themselves, their stories, their wars, their famine, their journey, their pain. The refugees in the 'refugee crises' are the 'other' to Europe, undesirable, uninvited and unpredictable.

Taken from the European point of view, it remains irrelevant whether 'they' come from Syria, where Europe and the US have been engaged in a not-so-cold war of many decades with Russia and its allies, or, for example, from Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran. The branding of 'the crisis' is sufficient to raise alarm at the arrival of the 'other'. Displaced persons and war refugees from across the Middle East and North Africa were not a true concern for European values or livelihoods, until, that is, 'they' began to 'invade' Europe in large numbers.

It is, however, important not to swing to the other pole of identity politics, in which the problematics of refugees are flattened to a national-racial politics of 'othering'. As illustrated by much scholarship in the field, there is a slippery slope from identity politics to the resurrection of racist doctrines of 'cultural' rigidity and clashes of 'civilizations'. Put simply, while it is dangerously irresponsible to categorize the diverse body of displaced persons arriving into Europe within the singular classification of the 'undesirable other' culpable for the 'crisis' in the continent; it is equally problematic to resort to demonization of the displaced based on their particular national, racial or religious marks of identity. To this end, Michel Agier makes a compelling argument against the allure of identity politics when addressing the complex situation of the refugees. To make identity the ultimate truth about a person or a collective expression of actions, Agier argues, 'is the identity trap'

(2016:134). Instead, through contextualization (Agier 2011 and 2016) and examination of the 'processes' whereby power and responsibility are exercised (Nader 1972), one can understand the current movement of the displaced people without denying the asylum seekers their voices and agency.

Furthermore, the adoption of the language of 'crisis', when referring to the refugees as the unwelcomed other, locates the economic and political failures of recent years in the EU on the bodies of the asylum seekers. Suddenly, we face a constructed image of the new Europe in crisis, not because of failed neoliberal policies that have polarized the population, or the failure of credit economies and the growth of greed, but due to the presumably 'irrational' outpouring of the bodies that wash ashore on European soil.

Moreover, as it is often imagined that belonging to the Middle East and North African region equates with being Muslim, the current 'refugee crisis' evokes an age-old Islamophobia that has cast a long shadow across much of the 'Western' world. Thus, begins a popular doctrine in which, the Middle East is run by Islamists; and Islam, after all, is seen as a violent and irrational religious ideology that was formed in direct opposition to European ways of life, whether Christian or secular.

The conflation of political and war refugees from war-stricken countries such as Syria and Afghanistan with the more generic classification of migrants not only obscures the narrative of intent, it further conceals the political struggle of the journey to Europe. The pervasive political violence, war and military occupations around the globe, has made the massive displacement of people a common occurrence. Most recently, images of a 'sea of people' trekking across Europe towards a utopian destination have become a familiar theme in the media. The visual narrative embedded in the story, of course, is that of a crisis at Europe's front door.

Refugees in terms of belonging to diasporic communities are constructed within networks of human rights discourses that moved between states, communities, organizations, and individuals. Refugees, thus, were specific subjects that indexed the crisis of the nation-state system in particular ways.

(Grewal 2005:158)

Yet, in the context of knowledge production and European nationalisms, it is important to examine the use of refugee discourse in both public policy and mainstream media. In official and policy-making discourse, as in the cases of the United Nations (UNHCR), the EU or the UK referendum, the category 'refugee' is evoked to distinguish, and thus privilege, a type of displaced people as more deserving than the generic immigrant or migrant body. As such, there is a structural hierarchy, built both categorically and discursively, around the term refugee that enables 'parsing out' the deserving from the undesirable newcomers. In the words of Liisa Malkki:

It has become common to observe that the spatial and social displacement of people has been accelerating around the world at a fast pace and that these movements include enormous numbers of people who are legally classifiable as refugees ... Thus the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable 'kind' or 'type' of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations.

(Malkki 1995:495–6)

### **Final words**

The twentieth century saw numerous wars and military actions, leading to a growing body of displaced and forced migrants across the globe. It is not surprising that the downfall of the old empires in many of the earlier decades of that century made way for the rise of new 'nation-states' emerging from the cracks of the fractured global power structures. Modern refugees, initially recognized as displaced persons moving internally or transnationally across Europe, have always been disproportionately located outside European boundaries, despite the normative discourse. However, it was not until late in the twentieth century that debates on liminality and questions of belonging in anthropological scholarship began to focus on the perspectives and experiences of the displaced and the refugees themselves. For decades, 'refugees' were presumed to be destitute individuals forever tied to the problematic place of their origin, thus denying their movement, agency and resilience. Once the seemingly 'inescapable' connection between people and their place of origin broke, ideas about homeland, territoriality, ethnicity and nationalism became meaningfully placed at the intersection of the study of social networks of power and capital, and of gender norms and contrasting values about who belongs and who does not. In a thought-provoking essay on the contribution of anthropological scholarship to the emerging modes of inquiry in the study of forced migration and refugees, Dawn Chatty hails the contemporary anthropological scholarship for breaking the mould since the 1990s:

It took anthropologists with their fundamental interest in human experience and behavior to turn the tide and bring the migration experience, the memory of dispossession and displacement, as well as the lived response to uprooted-ness into the core of a developing field of study.

(Chatty 2016:75)

Indeed, anthropologists equipped with a richly diverse set of intellectual tools from critiques involving self-reflection and interdisciplinary fieldwork are best

situated to examine the crisis in refugees by studying up, down, and every which way necessary.

The question of belonging is not a new interest in anthropology (e.g. Bourgois 2002; Leiken 2012; Low 1999; Ong 1999, 2003, 2006; Puar 2007; Rosaldo 1989, 2003), but as the European demographic make-up continues to change towards a more heterogeneous ethnic and racial life, new anthropological interventions in the zone between the macro-political and everyday humanity is both relevant and necessary. Refugees and displaced populations will continue to challenge assumptions about border passage, national-ethnic identities, global connections and the question of empathy. Moreover, the countries in the broader region of MENA have endured more refugees by far (in the liminality of the camps, as 'assimilated' citizens, and in multi-generational experiences of forced migration) throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The growing anthropological scholarship on forced migration and asylum seeking can offer a profound body of material and a unique perspective on the life experiences of the displaced, because of its human-centred approach to the formation of knowledge. Most notable, is the intersection of anthropological inquiry that examines the network of power relations emerging and surrounding the experiences of the refugees, within the world of protest art. Here, I believe, reside potent possibilities for disruption of the deafening clamour of the mass media and the dominant discourse that demonizes the migrants in the political north, erasing the complexity of human suffering in the MENA.

Returning to his art installation and the politically disrupting sentiments expressed by Ai Weiwei, 'we are all refugees as humans in some moment in history,' a series of important questions arise, each worthy of careful critique. In a world saturated by domestic and transnational displacement, how and why are the terms 'refugee' and 'im/migrant' used? What are the consequences of the erasures of history (European and global) in the discourse of the contemporary 'crisis'? If 'refugees' and asylum seekers are imagined as displaced stateless people around the world, to what narratives of threat to the notion of nation-states (long imagined as the state of the modern world) does this lead? And finally, what does it mean to suggest that at some point in history, one should think of 'all of humanity as refugees' (Weiwei)?

In an era where media pundits ride the waves of sensationalized journalism and deteriorating social accountability to offer sound-bite politics, anthropological interventions enable us to explore new forms of power relations made meaningful against structured distinctions based on ideas about race, gender and religion. As specialists in the art of listening and scholars of social-cultural change, anthropologists are intellectually equipped, and arguably ethically obliged, to contribute actively to critiques of power formations across contested geopolitical boundaries. By tapping into new forms of knowledge acquisition and collaborative knowledge production, the anthropology of the contemporary (Marcus 1998, 2015; Marcus and Fischer 1986) questions old narratives of race and identity in the face of the upsurge in refugees

arriving from the Middle East and North Africa in Europe and the political North. Accordingly, this article has aimed to explore how new bids for citizenship emerge out of the conflicting political claims to imaginaries of belonging and the legacies of nation-states in Europe.

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