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Global Migration as a Human Rights Issue: Prospects for Global Cooperation or Conflict?

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Every year, millions of people move over very extensive geographical distances, with the aim of temporarily or permanently residing in their new destinations. At the transnational level, this migration phenomenon can be seen in various instances: Mexicans who are crossing the border to the United States; the global Filipino diaspora who are constantly seeking for better economic opportunities anywhere outside the Philippine archipelago; the thousands of refugees trying to move to Europe from conflict-ridden countries in the Middle East; and many North Koreans who are trying to escape totalitarian rule for a better life elsewhere, among many other examples. Notably, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that there are around 232 million people who are residing in territories outside their country of origin. As such, can we fully understand such transnational phenomenon in purely economic or political terms, specifically, peoples from financially poor or politically oppressed societies trying to build a relatively better life in destinations that are supposedly deemed much safer?

In this short essay, I argue that our canonical understanding of global human migration has *to go beyond* the simplistic but an apparently very popular view: that migration is a problem caused by failed or failing states (or factors emanating from within their territories) that are unable to provide political stability and just economic opportunities for its

citizens. By implication, such a simplistic view assumes that 'receiving states', or states that are the intended or actual destinations of migrants, take a passive role (or none at all) in assuming responsibilities for the welfare of the migrants. Such perspective is misguided; instead, we need to construe the issue of global human migration as an issue of universal human rights. If we accept that the right to life of every human individual is paramount and *almost* unconditional whenever possible, then it seems necessary that the individual state is not the sole and end guarantor of such rights. As the political theorist Kieran Oberman argues, countries that are the usual recipients of migrants have to discard 'economistic arguments' and instead 'embrace a human rights-oriented view'. Such a view is consistent with Bohman's conception of 'transnational democracy', particularly relating to the claim that the derivative idea of the appropriate addressee of human rights is not the state, but the 'transnational', broadly conceived – the global publics, institutions, and states.

Such insights are not trivial; indeed, they raise several pertinent but compelling questions that are often discarded in mainstream discussion of global migration: if the original state of migrants is logistically unable to guarantee their rights, but destination states can, should we compel destination states, which are often the rich Western states, to provide such guarantees? If so, should destination states treat their newly arrived migrants in ways that are qualitatively similar to the way in which they treat their own citizens? In other words, should the rights of migrants be nominally the same with the rights of citizens in destination countries? More concretely, for instance, are European governments morally compelled to treat newly arrived refugees from Syria and economic migrants from Africa nominally the same – particularly in terms of the state's human rights guarantees – as they would treat their own European citizens?

These are extremely important questions of contemporary public morality, but more often than not, they are sadly reduced to *mere* instrumentalist questions of economic value or the ability of migrants to integrate in their destination countries. Even worse, some European political elites and citizens even 'welcome' refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers *only* because of their potential economic value amidst the worsening ageing working population of many European countries. Should we just reduce these important questions of public policy of migration into *mere* questions of *economics*? Sadly, even some Germans claim that their country is proud to aspire to 'multiculturalism' only to the extent that foreigners, or more precisely the *Ausländer*, residing in their country have to speak German, to think like a German, and to act like a German. Is this another form of imperializing practices or a very subtle but totalizing form of colonial and cultural control? Is it

not the case that multiculturalism is all about mutual respect of the value of co-existence of radically different cultures even in the context of the idealized nation-state? Perhaps we have to start considering multiculturalism in a way that we celebrate radical cultural differences within a given territory in mutual respect. If such respect is normatively necessary, then migrant-receiving states have to start considering public policies that foster various forms of *differences* within its territory, *instead of imposing uniformity* – couched in the language of 'integration' – on migrants, refugees, minorities, etc.

Considering transnational migrants who tend to gravitate towards rich Western countries, we tend to forget that public policy debate over such issues is not only a question of economics, or about the potential economic output of migrants; not only a question of culture, or about the ability of migrants to adapt to their new cultural environments, and by implication also the adjustment of citizens to the influx of such migrants; not only a question of power, that is the latent fear of citizens in destination countries that migrants will soon 'take over'. Indeed, some, if not many, of these citizens need to realize that the economic prosperity of rich Europe and the rest of the West has persistently been facilitated by the continued exploitation of the Global South – ranging from the cheap labour of Apple products to the luxurious Parisian or Milanese fashion labels. If a German or European worker can take more than a month of paid annual leave, then why not an ordinary Bangladeshi worker, who has continued to be exploited in sweatshop textile factories that are always pressured to manufacture high-end clothes that Europeans wear only for one season? Is this only a problem of states in the Global South, or perhaps can we also think how rich Western states have strategically designed the global political economy in ways that structurally advantages their own Western citizens? Shall we blame the poor Bangladeshi worker for even aspiring to trespass borders and to reach Europe for a better economic life?

To conclude, global migration is also a question of morality; that is, it is about what we *should* do, or what we *ought* to do as human beings facing difficult questions of public policies. By having the courage to face issues of what is right or wrong, we are more likely to craft global and domestic public policies on migration in ways that are more just, effective, and inclusive. By emphasizing the *humanity* that binds the migrant and the citizen with each other *as well as celebrating their differences*, we are able to emphasize inclusion – and not exclusion – and in doing so, we are truly able to say that our policies are one step further towards justice. One prominent and necessary component of such reflective thinking is by framing global migration as a human rights issue – and not

only as an issue of economics, cultural integration, or political control. Emphasizing genuine respect of differences and framing migration as a human rights issue are the only ways in which various states and individuals alike can truly *cooperate* with each other towards a just and sustainable global society.

Migration and the Need to Decolonize (Hegemonic Thought)

Olivia Rutazibwa



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¹ Attributed to the philosopher Heraclitus in Plato's *Cratylus*.

² Ecclesiastes 1: 9.

Looking at the world from and in Europe today, the old continent seems to be grappling with its waning capacity to control its interaction with the rest of the planet. Bodies, ideas, capital, violence and a climate on the move, forcefully knock on the Fortress' walls from the outside and within.

How are we to understand this beyond the fear-mongering tropes engulfing our public debates? *Panta rhei*¹: everything flows. Yet, *sub sole nihil novum*²: there is nothing new under the sun. In all their simplicity and complexity, these two seemingly contradictory insights attributed respectively to Greek and Judeo-Christian – dixit European – traditions, probably best capture how we are to understand contemporary planetary challenges.

Concretely, I would argue that we need to understand them both as the chickens coming home to roost³ as well as urgent invitations to come up with radically new ways of being, acting and thinking with the other sentient beings next door and far away. Efforts towards genuine *glocal* cooperation need to take both the reckoning and invitation seriously.

In the short run, our systems of (western hegemonic) knowledge production seem to operate as roadblocks against both recognizing and accepting the reckoning and invitations for what they are: wake-up calls for creative reinvention – very much like Fortress Europe's (im)material borders standing in the way of peoples' access to shelter, safety and the construction of a better life.

Having Malcolm X's roosting chickens of reckoning join Fanon's call to the wretched of the earth⁴ not to mimic Europe