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The European refugee crisis: crisis for whom?

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Representations of the European refugee crisis have come to be embedded in a language that sees Europe as a continent under siege. By putting forth the idea that 'we' are being flooded by 'them', an innocent We and a threatening Them are brought into existence – a distinction that appears divorced from historical and contemporary power structures and the many forms of violence that sustain them. We ought to be aware of the distortions produced in the process, for it is precisely through such distortions that some forms of human life are positioned outside of society's frame of reference and sphere of empathy.

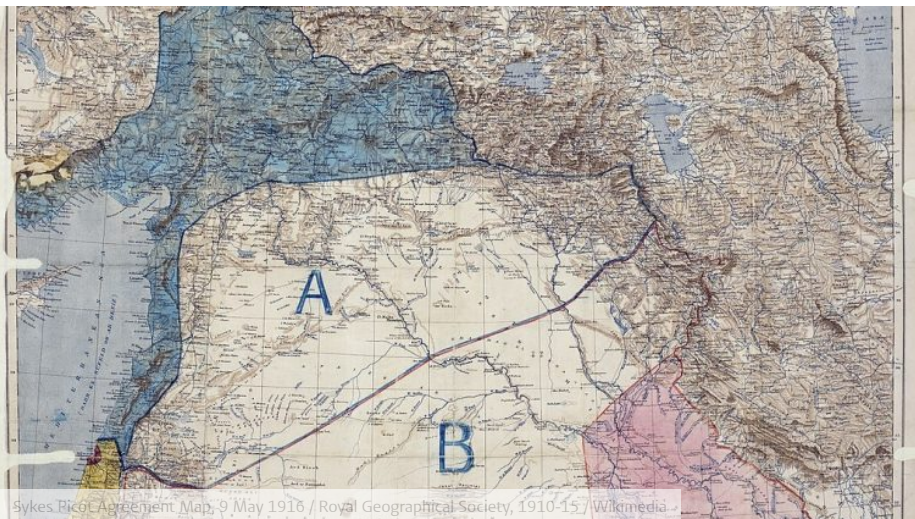
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PROJECTS

The evolution of the German-Austrian
borderland: local perspectives



How might we critically think of the European refugee crisis? For those of us working as social scientists in Europe's internal and external borderlands this question has surely come up. It is a question that knows different varieties: How can we do justice to people's very real experiences with what is known as the refugee crisis whilst at the same time carve out space to reflect upon the ways in which the refugee crisis' narrative elevates some realities whilst obfuscating others? How might we examine the ways in which a particular representation of the crisis is produced and becomes dominant? And how does this depiction tie in with processes of Othering that position some forms of human life at center stage whilst placing others outside of society's frame of reference and sphere of empathy?

'European refugee crisis' – why use scare quotes?

The phrase 'European refugee crisis' became widely used in April 2015, when 5 boats carrying almost 2,000 people sank in the Mediterranean Sea, with an estimated combined death toll of [1,222 people](#). These shipwrecks occurred as the number of refugees and other migrants[1] arriving on European shores increased over the course of 2015 to decline again in November of that year.

Following this numerical trend, the refugee crisis is generally portrayed as starting in the spring of 2015, peaking in the autumn of 2015 and subsiding with the closure of the Balkan route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016.[2]

The phrase 'refugee crisis', however, does more than give words to an out-of-the-ordinary situation. It has come to be embedded in a discourse that sees Europe as a continent under siege ([Hage 2016](#)). Within this discourse, refugees and other migrants are ambivalently, and sometimes interchangeably, portrayed as victims *and* dangerous invaders – posing a threat to 'our' safety, economic well-being, cultural identity, language and values ([Dhaliwal & Kirsten 2015](#); [Gilroy 2012](#)). Through the deployment of metaphors, people are represented as entering in streams, flows, floods, tsunamis, swarms and plagues ([Brouwer et al. 2017](#)). In this context, radical action is called for to curtail an invasion third-world-looking ([Hage 1998](#)) outsiders – actions such as the deployment of [NATO vessels in the Aegean sea](#).

As has been explored elsewhere (see, for example, [Ahmed 2004](#)), it is precisely through the idea of an invading outside that a distinguishable and coherent inside is reaffirmed. Thus, the nation is brought forth as if it were a subject – a subject that must dramatically stage control over its boundaries ([de Genova 2013](#)) in order to remain safe, prosperous and pure. Such control is exerted not only through military means, but also through continuously shifting, yet powerful, distinctions drawn between what are constituted as normal and deviant forms of mobility. Thus, whilst some migrants are understood to be benevolent (most notably expats, who have come to be [virtually disassociated](#) from the word 'migrant' altogether) others are depicted as hostile and dangerous (most notably illegalized migrants). These distinctions – between the good and the bad, the innocent and the dangerous, the genuine and the bogus, the backpacker and the scrounger, the refugee and the migrant, the Syrian and the sub-Saharan African, the victim of trafficking and the potential terrorist – not only naturalize the vantage point from where such distinctions are drawn, but also render invisible *the rules and practices that govern people's differentiated access to wealth, safety and freedom of movement*.

Unpacking the crisis

To unpack how representations of the crisis interact with the processes through which some forms of mobility are facilitated whilst others are criminalized, we must dig deeper into the stuff that crises are made of. Moments of crises are moments of potential rupture, in which prevailing social and power relationships are strained and in which the inner logics of institutions (journalistic, political, civic,...) might be reconfigured. Thus, in times of crisis we can expect a variety of actors to engage in a war of ideas and practices, as each struggles to impose *her or his* view of how we ought to understand what's going on, how we ought to intervene, and who ought to lead such proposed interventions.

In order to examine this productive power, then, it is necessary that we shift perspective from accepting dominant crisis representations to analyzing 1) the ways in which a crisis is represented, 2) the premises underlying dominant crisis representations, 3) what the actors involved in representing a crisis set to gain and lose from specific representations, 4) the silences traversing representations, 5) the solutions proposed, their histories and their anticipated effects, and 6) the ways in which harmful representations can be subverted.[3] Such an analysis has the potential to explore not only how a particular crisis is put forth, but also to shed light on the politics that shape what is considered 'normal' and the forms of violence that sustain this normal state of affairs.

While such an analysis goes beyond the scope of this blog, I hope to illustrate below what I think could be a starting point, namely, bringing to the fore some

of the realities forgotten, omitted or erased when we take dominant representations of the refugee crisis as our point of reference.

Placing such *silences* at center stage is a powerful analytical tool for two reasons. First, they provide anchor points from which we can see forms of violence that we tend to take for granted as acceptable or even natural. Second, they provide a way of reflecting upon the ways in which popular as well as social scientific knowledge about human mobility in the European context tends to be situated in a framework rooted in the "(...) seemingly context-free nature of western social theory and its assumptions about the universality of its knowledge production" ([Aas 2012, p. 6](#)).

Deaths at sea

Ever since the late 1980s, people have sought to cross the EU's external borders clandestinely. Such crossings expose people to risks such as "drowning in shipwrecks, dying of dehydration and hypothermia on boats or in rural or wild areas near land borders" as well as "instances of direct (e.g. shootings) and indirect (e.g. landmines) violence." ([Last et al. 2017, p. 693](#)) Despite knowing about this loss of life, EU Member States do not count border deaths.^[4] Thus, the data we have on such deaths is mainly sourced on news media. This reluctance to register deaths contrasts sharply with the creation of vast databases geared towards surveilling, detaining and deporting illegalized people.

If we compare the estimations we do have of EU border deaths to the refugee crisis' commonly accepted timeframe (April 2015 – March 2016), we immediately notice that the well-being of refugees and other migrants is [not the crisis' reference point](#). Border deaths are not a new phenomenon. From as early as the 1990s onwards, thousands of people have died crossing EU borders. Meanwhile, just as the refugee crisis was deemed to have subsided, border deaths surged: the IOM's [missing migrants project](#)^[5] estimates over 5,000 people died while crossing the Mediterranean in the year 2016 alone – up from an estimated 3,700 deaths in 2015.

To put it differently, despite border deaths permeating the refugee crisis' imagery, the vast majority of such deaths are positioned outside of its frame of reference. From the position of bringing this discrepancy to the fore, it becomes possible to see how the crisis narrative values some forms of human life over others.

Global interconnectivity

As outlined above, the refugee crisis puts forth the idea that 'we' are being flooded by 'them'. Through such imagery, an innocent We and a threatening Them are brought into existence – an odd distinction that appears divorced from actual historical and contemporary power structures.

How is it, for example, that many of us in Europe are able to think of Iraqis crossing European borders in criminal terms without thinking of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by a coalition of US and allied forces (including various EU countries) in criminal terms – a war that left nearly half a million Iraqis dead and millions of others displaced ([Banta 2008](#); [Hagopian et al. 2013](#))?

More fundamentally, as the rich body of literature on colonial and imperial history shows, the processes through which state frontiers have been – and continue to be – produced are deeply entwined with military, economic and political interventions by European powers. To illustrate, it is difficult to understand political as well as economic insecurity in the Middle East today without examining European powers' interventionism and double dealing in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as the British and the French sought to divide present-day Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan

into 'spheres of influence' (Fitzgerald 1994; Renton 2007). The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement is a prime example of the imperial gaze through which colonial borders were arbitrarily drawn, sowing the seeds for contemporary conflicts. By reaffirming Us-Them distinctions, the refugee crisis imagery erases precisely such historical and contemporary relationships of power, relationships that traverse national boundaries and that profoundly shape people's unequal access to wealth, security and mobility.

To conclude

The intention behind this blog is to show that crisis frames have specific reference points in mind. A crisis reveals a particular understanding of how the world ought to ordinarily function. By positioning some forms of instability, violence and suffering outside of its frame of reference, the refugee crisis language and imagery evoke an innocent European Self that is distinguishable from a dangerous third-world-looking Other. We ought to be extremely cautious of the violent distortions produced in the process, for it is precisely through such distortions that some forms of human life are positioned outside of society's sphere of empathy.

As Ghassan Hage (2017) argues, the appearance of visible forms of oppression, exploitation and violence as a crisis is "based on particular conceptions of the relation between 'peaceful civilized reality' and 'violent uncivilized reality'. It is those conceptions that need to be challenged if we are to better understand the relation between violent and non-violent forms of existence in the world today." We must open our eyes, then, not just to the violence rendered visible to most Europeans in moments of crisis, but also to the violence committed in the name of stability. When there is talk of a crisis, we ought immediately to ask: *Crisis for whom?*

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Footnotes

[1] In this blog, I consistently use the phrase 'refugees and other migrants' or the word 'people' to refer to those crossing EU borders without authorization. For a critical discussion on (the politics of) terminology in the field, see: <https://jorgencarling.org/2016/09/20/the-end-of-migrants-as-we-know-them/>

[2] For a critical examination of the often-made assumption that the EU-Turkey deal *caused* the number of refugees and other migrants using the Eastern Mediterranean route to drastically decline, see: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2016/09/fact-check-did-eu>

[3] Here, I am roughly following the 6 questions Carol Bacchi (2009) encourages us to pose when examining policy proposals: the [What's the Problem Represented To Be \(WPR\)](#) approach.

[4] How one measures the number of people who die crossing EU borders, or EU border deaths, depends on how one conceptualizes the EU border. Following Last et al. (2017), I here refer to the physical external borders of the EU, including the high seas between southern EU Member States and North and West Africa. Others interpret the term more expansively. One could, for example, include deaths in immigration detention centres or deaths occurring

as an effect of the EU's externalized border regimes extending into the Middle East and Africa.

[5] The Missing Migrant Project's methodology has been criticized by researchers such as [Tamara Last & Thomas Spijkerboer \(2014\)](#). However, for the purposes of describing broad trends in recent years, the method seems suitable.



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