

The global refugee crisis and the crisis of the European Union

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Never, since the Second World War, have forced population displacements occurred on so great and deadly a scale – so risky and dangerous, forcing so many refugees to endure such inhumane conditions of existence, such appalling suffering. This is a genuine tragedy which lays bare the truth of the new international order installed by capitalist globalization. The evidence is there in the scale and number migratory flows.

Today, attention is focused on the war refugees from the Middle East. But there are many other military conflicts, particularly in Africa, all with their processions of uprooted populations. Not long ago, it was the victims of climate change who were the focus of media attention, affected in their millions in Asia. In 2010 and 2011 more than 42 million people were displaced in Asia and the Pacific [1]. This figure includes people displaced by storms, floods, extremes of temperature, drought and sea-level rise. Some returned to their homes. Many became migrants, usually within their country, but also across national borders.

So called “economic migrations” are also “forced”. They come from the disintegration of the social fabric under the battering of neoliberalism and the violence of regimes supported by the Western powers. So they too are political.

Migrations have a history. In the previous period, we lived in a migration without hope, incarnated by the Filipino teacher who became a clandestine domestic in Italy. We live today at the time of migrations of survival.

Although Europeans are not yet at that point, it is a sign of the times that in countries such as Spain and Greece real migratory movements are once again at work. Young people are leaving those countries because their future is completely blocked. This is a situation that had not been seen for decades.

Border fences are being constructed over hundreds, indeed thousands, of kilometres. This is not only happening in Europe. It is the same in Israel, disregarding the rights of Palestinians to their land. It is the same for Mexicans in the United States- Mexico where decomposition of the State, become narco-State, and the amazing rise of violences, up to and including féminicide, contributes to the flight of the population.

The explosion of the migrations thus has multiple causes: continual wars, the climate crisis, the destruction of the social fabric, decomposition of national states, outbursts of unlimited violence; and also destruction of the earth, the collapse of the fish populations, the monopolization of peasants’ land, the marginalization of the urban poor, dispossession of the people to the profit of the multinationals...

All these specific causes have a common origin: a mode of domination imposed by capitalist globalization bringing a previously unknown situation: a permanent state of geopolitical chaos and, legacy of past defeats, a one-way class struggle carried through ferociously by the hard core of the

globalized bourgeoisies. This is the counter-revolution without the revolution, opening the way to every type of cruelty. It is sharp competition between old and new imperialisms, sub-imperialisms and other regional powers, as, in the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is permanent war as an answer to permanent instability.

The people are paying a terribly strong price for this world disorder. In return, the “crisis of the refugees” is exposing today the failure of the European project. [2] Recently, the Eurogroup (19 countries of the 28 which form the Union) wanted to put Greece under its guardianship. So it, imposed its own law at the expense of the institutions at the heart of the EU: the Commission and the Council. Today, when it comes to the way the Syrians in particular are being received, it is each for itself. 26 European countries have an agreement called the Schengen Agreement. There is supposed to be free movement of people between these countries. Now national borders are slamming shut. This is happening not only in Eastern Europe, but also between France and Italy. National borders are being closed even in the centre of the Schengen “freedom of movement” space.

In some countries, especially in Germany, vast movements of civil solidarity have been mobilized to receive the refugees. [3]. In other countries, especially Hungary, xenophobia and racism are winning the day and the extreme right wing is growing.

The EU exists, but European integration has failed. The antidemocratic process of construction of the EU has not give risen to a European citizenship. It could have been hoped that a common, solidarity identity would grow from below, within the framework of the European Social forum or the Marches against unemployment and precarity, but this dynamic failed.

The “top-down” process of building the European Union was founded on two projects:

- the single market, which shows how impotent it is in times of crisis,
- and Europe as a power capable of playing its role in the world facing the United States and, nowadays, China

But the European imperialist powers are toothless. The budget of the French and British armies has been cut in the name of austerity. Germany is an economic giant, but still a military dwarf. How can one stand out in the international arena when one cannot even stand up to the challenges launched by Putin at one’s own gates?

Tackling the *source* of the “migration crisis” means tackling globalization. Tackling the *source* of the “European crisis” means re-establishing on new foundations a Europe that is open to the peoples of the East and the South, beginning with the Mediterranean region. This perspective is crucial so that we can take long-term action and not be fooled by the misleading statements of our leaders – beginning with their claims to humanitarianism.

The civil mobilization movement in Germany is showing a genuine sense of solidarity. But the bosses of Germany are acting entirely cynically: for them, unemployment is too low. They are hoping that the country will take in a labour force that is well educated and skilled, but also desperate, and therefore ready to accept any kind of work.

The response of European states is quite often more military than humanitarian. It acts in the name of the ‘fight against people smugglers’. But instead of opening legal and safe routes for immigration, it gives the green light to conduct armed operations against the boats transporting them. France is using the tragedy of the refugees to justify extending its air force’s intervention zone from Iraq to Syria. In a growing number of EU member countries, soldiers are being mobilized alongside the police to control the “foreign” populations.

This is a major trend with which we are very familiar in France, where troops patrol against the terrorist threat [4]. Many experts believe that this policy is very costly and ineffective. It is overstretching resources, given that the army is already committed in various theatres of operations in the Middle East and Africa. In reality, this tendency is designed to blur the boundary between a situation of war (which is the business of the Army) and a situation of peace (which is the business of the police). It leads the population to become accustomed to a kind of permanent state of emergency. Now, the refugee crisis is being exploited to the same end.

If we are to provide a better defence for the refugees, we need a resurgence of anti-militarisation movements [5]; and we need to expand the fight against xenophobia and all forms of racism. This task comes at a time when the movements of the extreme right wing are riding the wave of inward-looking attitudes — in France the *Front national* has increased its support. In addition, fascistic state tendencies can be seen right up to the very gates of Europe (in Turkey) and even within the EU (in Hungary). It is entirely logical that the destructive brutality of capitalist globalization should be creating the conditions for the emergence of new forms of fascism.

The “refugee crisis ” is thus a tragic facet of the total crisis provoked by capitalist globalization. Nevertheless it has to be dealt with by taking account of its specificities, which require a big effort of “updating” from us. During the recent period, we have had to continually answer xenophobic demagogues, demonstrating with statistics to show that flows of immigration and emigration in France remained constant. It is obviously not true any more – unless the repressive policy of “Fortress France ” practised by the government continues to strip the right to asylum of any meaning.

We are facing a humanitarian crisis of exceptional scope; however, the traditional “software” of the radical lefts is not adapted to such a challenge of solidarity. They have essentially considered that the humane urgency was the business of government alone (Red Cross or Crescent) or specialized associations. There are fortunately important exceptions, like the remarkable mobilization of the *Mihands* coalition in Mindanao, in the south of Philippines, from which we can draw many lessons. [6]

In fact, we need to rethink the relationship between the humanitarian and the political. In an already distant past, we used to send medical assistance to the Liberation Fronts which in turn had their own effective and established health services. Nowadays, the vast majority of the displaced populations have been stripped of any form of organization, except for informal networks based on places of origin, using the Internet and cell phones to circulate information.

The response to the various humanitarian crises must become a key area for an internationalist approach. The vast majority of the refugees are not in Europe, but in the countries of the South, which have neither the infrastructure nor the resources of the countries of the North. And the leaders of the North bear a major responsibility for the current situation. In addition, there are huge numbers of “internal refugees” who are still in their own countries. Some have even stayed where they are, as in the case of the victims of climate disaster, because they have not been able to find refuge elsewhere. No official figure effectively conveys the scale of the problem. It is here that solidarity between North and South must be organized and strengthened.

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P.S.

* This article was originally written for Amandla! magazine (-><http://amandla.org.za/>), South Africa where it appeared under a somehow different format in the issue n°42.

* Translation Amandla! and IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] See the [Asian Development Bank report](#).

[2] See Etienne Balibar, *Open Democracy*, 8 September 2015. Available on ESSF (article ESSF (article 35897), [Borderland Europe and the challenge of migration – On the relationship between European construction \(or de-construction\) and the new reality of human migration](#).

[3] Manuel Kellner, ESSF (article 35980), [An upsurge of solidarity - Refugees, welcome! Something new in Germany...](#).

For an update, see ESSF (article 36062), [L'accueil des réfugiés en Allemagne : politique du gouvernement et polarisation au sein de la population](#).

[4] Franck Johannès, ESSF (article 35808), [Confusion entre guerre et paix : Vigipirate, sa fonction sociale et le fantôme de la guerre d'Algérie](#).

[5] Nick Buxton, Ben Hayes, ESSF (article 35880), [USA & beyond – Ten years on: Katrina, militarisation and climate change](#).

[6] Sally Rousset, ESSF (article 35825), [The socio-ecological crisis and the climate victims: some lessons from Asia](#).