

The Opinion Pages

The Refugee Crisis Is Humanity's Crisis

Brad Evans and Zygmunt Bauman

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This is the third in a series of dialogues with philosophers and critical theorists on the question of violence. This conversation is with Zygmunt Bauman, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Leeds, Britain. His latest book, "Strangers at Our Door" is published with Polity Press.

Brad Evans: For over a decade you have focused on the desperate plight of refugees. Attention has been particularly drawn in your work to the many indignities and insecurities the refugee continuously faces on a daily basis. You have also stressed how the problem is not entirely new, and must be understood in a broader historical context. With this in mind, do you think the current refugee crises engulfing Europe represent yet another chapter in the history of flight from persecution, or is there something different taking place here?

Zygmunt Bauman: It does seem like "yet another chapter," though as with all political problems, which all have histories, something is added to the contents of its predecessors. In the modern era, massive migration itself is not a novelty, nor is it a sporadic event. It is in fact a constant, steady effect of the modern mode of life, with its perpetual preoccupation with order-building and economic progress. Those two qualities in particular act as factories endlessly capable of producing "redundant people," those who are either locally unemployable or politically intolerable, and are therefore forced to seek shelter or more promising life opportunities away from their homes.

It's true that the prevalent direction of migration has changed following the spread of the modern way of life from Europe, its place of origin, to the rest of the globe. As long as Europe remained the only "modern" Continent of the planet, its redundant populations kept being unloaded onto the still "premodern" lands — recycled into colonist settlers, soldiers or members of colonial administration. Indeed, up to 60 million Europeans are believed to have left Europe for the two Americas, Africa, Australia during the heyday of colonial imperialism.

Starting from the middle of the 20th century, however, the trajectory of migration took a U-turn. During this time, the logic of migration changed as it was dissociated from the conquest of the lands. The migrants of the post-colonial era have been and still are exchanging inherited ways of eking out existence, now destroyed by the triumphant modernization promoted by their former colonizers, for the chance of building a nest in the gaps of those colonizers' domestic economies.

On top of that, however, there is a rising volume of people forced out from their homes, particularly in the Middle East and in Africa, by the dozens of civil wars, ethnic and religious conflicts and sheer banditry in the territories the colonizers left behind in nominally sovereign, artificially concocted "states" with little prospects of stability, but enormous arsenals of weaponry supplied by their former colonial masters.

B.E.: Hannah Arendt once used the term "worldlessness" to define those conditions where a person doesn't belong to a world in which they matter as human beings. This seems to be equally resonant in describing the plight of contemporary refugees. Might the problem here be our framing of the debate in terms of "security" — that of either the refugees or their destinations?

Z.B.: Part of the issue is the way in which the political world is framed and understood. Refugees are worldless in a world that is spliced into sovereign territorial states, and that demands identifying the possession of human rights with state citizenship. This situation is further compounded by the fact that there are no countries left ready to accept and offer shelter and a chance of decent life and human dignity to the *stateless* refugees.

In such a world, those people who are forced to flee intolerable conditions are not considered to be “bearers of rights,” even those supposedly considered inalienable to humanity. Forced to depend for their survival on the people on whose doors they knock, refugees are in a way thrown outside the realm of “humanity,” as far as it is meant to confer the rights they aren’t afforded. And there are millions upon millions of such people inhabiting our shared planet.

As you rightly point out, refugees end up all too often cast in the role of a threat to the human rights of established native populations, instead of being defined and treated as a vulnerable part of humanity in search of the restoration of those same rights of which they have been violently robbed.

There is currently a pronounced tendency — among the settled populations as well as the politicians they elect to state offices — to transfer the “issue of refugees” from the area of universal human rights into that of internal security. Being tough on foreigners in the name of safety from potential terrorists is evidently generating more political currency than appealing for benevolence and compassion for people in distress. And to outsource the whole problem into the care of security services is eminently more convenient for governments overloaded with social care duties, which they are apparently neither able nor willing to perform to the satisfaction of their electors.

B.E.: Central to your analysis has been to argue how many of the vulnerabilities people now face need to be explained in more planetary terms. Increasingly, individual nation states seem incapable of responding to the multiplicity of threats defining our interconnected age. Does the figure of the refugee reveal more fully the globalized nature of power and violence today?

Z.B.: Seeing the problem in “more planetary terms” is indispensable to fully understanding not only the phenomenon of massive migration, but also of the genuine and widespread *migration panic* that the phenomenon has triggered in most of Europe. The influx of a great number of refugees, and their sudden high visibility, draws to the surface fears that we are trying hard to stifle and hide: those fears that are gestated by the premonition of our own fragilities in society, and by the continuously reaffirmed suspicion that our fate is in the hands of forces far beyond our comprehension — let alone our control.

In part, they bring the mysterious and obscure, but hopefully distant, horrors of “global forces” right into our visible and tangible neighborhood. As recently as a few weeks ago those newcomers may have felt just as safe at home as we do right now. But now, they look at us, deprived of their homes, possessions, security, often their “inalienable” human rights, and of their entitlement to have the respect and acceptance that provide a guarantee of self-esteem.

Following the age-old habit, the messengers are blamed for the contents of their message. No wonder the successive tides of fresh immigrants are resented, to quote Brecht, as “harbingers of bad news.” They are embodiments of the collapse of order, a state of affairs in which the relations between causes and effects are stable and so graspable and predictable, allowing those inside a situation to know how to proceed. Because they reveal these insecurities to us, refugees are easily demonized. By stopping them on the other side of our properly fortified borders, it is implied that we’ll manage to stop those global forces that brought them to our doors.

B.E.: Those who flee from war-torn situations ignite vociferous debates regarding their correct labeling: the “migrant” or the “refugee?” But both terms can be reductive. Might we need a new vocabulary here to emphasize more the human agency of those who are trying to escape such conditions? After all, as the poet Warsan Shire observed, ‘no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.’

Z.B.: In most cases the choice open to a refugee is between a place where one’s presence is not tolerated and another where one’s arrival is unwanted and disallowed. Similarly, the choice open to the so-called economic migrants is one between famine or a prospectless existence and a chance, however tenuous, of tolerable conditions for oneself and one’s family. This is not any more of a “choice,” in any meaningful sense, than that faced by the refugee fleeing overt physical violence. Each one of us would be horrified by the necessity to make such choices. We do need a language and critical vocabulary for a worldly condition that forces millions of its inhabitants to do so.

Insofar as the label “economic migrant” stigmatizes these victims, its use

should be condemned. Such discursive acrobatics leave the causes of these crises unexamined, and those responsible untouched by guilt. In a culture that ennoble the pursuit of self-betterment and happiness by raising it to the rank of life purpose and meaning, it is nothing less than utter hypocrisy to condemn those who try to follow this precept but are prevented from doing so by lack of means or proper papers.

B.E.: When dealing with the racial and cultural politics of the refugee you have used the metaphor “setting fears afloat” to emphasize how the refugee has become *the* signifier upon which many of our contemporary fears and anxieties are projected. Mindful of what you address above in respect to the politics of (in)security; is there not a danger that the heightened focus on the refugee adds to the scapegoating by presenting the problem as defining of our times (hence truly polarizing the debate and driving it to the extremes)?

Z.B.: As Hegel warned nearly two centuries ago, the owl of Minerva, that goddess of wisdom, spreads its wings at dusk. By this I mean that we tend to learn only what defines “our times” in retrospect, once they are over. And rarely even in hindsight do we learn this definitely. Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps the greatest historian of the modern era, gathered courage to attach a name of the “Age of Extremes” to the 20th century only in 1994. And even then he felt the need to apologize for such attachments:

“Nobody can write the history of the twentieth century like that of any other era, if only because nobody can write about his or her lifetime as one can (and must) write about a period known only from outside, at second or third-hand, from sources of the period or the works of later historians (...) This is one reason why under my professional hat as a historian I avoided working on the era since 1914 for most of my career.”

Let's heed the advice/warning by the great historian and resist the temptation to overemphasize what Thomas Hylland Eriksen has called, with particular reference to the power of the media, the “tyranny of the moment.” The refugees might have indeed more entitlements than most other categories to hold the status of “the defining scapegoats” of “our times” — but for how long? In my latest book I write that our insecurities keep “floating,” as none of

the anchors we cast proves to be solid enough to hold them in place with any degree of permanence. So it may go with the refugee, who embodies in the clearest way the liquidity of fear in the contemporary moment. Right now, at least, that liquidity creates a sort of affinity between the strangers at our doors and the mysterious, seemingly omnipotent global forces that pushed them there. Both stay staunchly beyond our reach and control, ignoring our deepest wishes and our most ingenious “solutions.”

B.E.: It is arguable that one of the “intellectual casualties” of the war on terror has been the humanitarian ideal the world might be transformed for the better. Do we perhaps need a new humanism for the 21st century?

Z.B.: In his “Cosmopolitan Vision” Ulrich Beck captured the predicament brilliantly: We have been already cast (without having been asked) into a cosmopolitan condition of universal, humanity-wide interdependence. But we are still missing, and have not yet started in earnest to compose and acquire, an accompanying cosmopolitan awareness. This creates a kind of cultural lag, as William Fielding Ogburn would call it, the evidence of which is the treatment of the refugee. They may well remain the collateral victims of this lack of understanding until such time that we try in earnest to attend to that lag’s institutional, state-based foundations.

As Benjamin Barber crisply put it in his manifesto “If Mayors Ruled the World,” “today, after a long history of regional success, the nation-state is failing us on the global scale. It was the perfect political recipe for the liberty and independence of autonomous peoples and nations. It is utterly unsuited for interdependence.” He sees that nation states are singularly unfit to tackle the challenges arising from our planet-wide interdependence, in that they are “too inclined by their nature to rivalry and mutual exclusion,” and appear “quintessentially indisposed to cooperation and incapable of establishing global common goods.”

I trace much of the problem to the growing separation between power and politics, a rift that results in powers free from political constraints and a politics that is suffering a constant, and growing, deficit of power. Powers, and particularly those most heavily influencing the human condition and humanity’s

prospects, are today global, roaming ever more freely in (to use the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells's words) the "space of flows" while ignoring at will the borders, laws, and internally defined interests of political entities — whereas the extant instruments of political action remain, as they were a century or two ago, fixed and confined to the "space of places," that of states. Alternative "historical agents" are much in demand, and one may surmise that until they are found and put in place, debating the models of a "good" or at least a "better" society will seem to be an idle pastime — and except in the extreme margins of the political spectrum won't arouse much emotion.

All the same, I don't believe there is a shortcut solution to the current refugee problem. Humanity is in crisis --- and there is no exit from that crisis other than the solidarity of humans. The first obstacle on the road to the exit from mutual alienation is the refusal of dialogue: that silence that accompanies self-alienation, aloofness, inattention, disregard and indifference. Instead of the duo of love and hate, the dialectical process of border-drawing needs to be thought therefore in terms of the triad of love, hate and indifference or neglect that the refugee, in particular, continues to face.

Correction: May 2, 2016

An earlier version of this article rendered incorrectly the name of a sociologist who discussed society's "culture lag" in adjusting to change. He was William Fielding Ogburn, not Willliam Fielding. It also misstated the title of one of Zygmunt Bauman's books. It is "Strangers at Our Door," not "Strangers at the Door." Brad Evans is a senior lecturer in international relations at the University of Bristol in England. He is the founder and director of the Histories of Violence project (@histofviolence), dedicated to critiquing the problem of violence in the 21st century. His most recent books include "Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle" (with Henry Giroux) & "Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously" (with Julian Reid).

Now in print: "The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments," An anthology of essays from The Times's philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

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