

Refugees: Human mobility between past and present (part 2)

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Part 1 available [here](#).

Patterns of coexistence

One of the major problems with the influx of refugees and migrants is therefore that of their legal integration (what status to grant: foreign resident or citizen?), and of their social condition: what financial protection, what formation, what job opportunities?

The openness of the community to the Other, whether an “absolute stranger”, whose background is unfamiliar, or a “relative stranger”, who comes from a place with preexisting ties and agreements, according to the distinction by Jacques Derrida, has had a long history. Works of literature since the *Odyssey* and Greek tragedies like *Oedipus at Colonus* have continuously wrestled with the issue, presenting a broad typology of the various possible choices (assimilation, ghettoization, exclusion, and discrimination). Legal categories also expressed these possibilities, ranking different kinds of foreigners and migrants and distinguishing them from the locals, thus showing the place assigned to them in language.

Unlike contemporary societies, national and territorial, where the word « foreign » always takes the same meaning (referring back to the non-national), the notion of the foreigner was uncertain in previous societies, where there were various forms of foreignness. The meaning varies according to the

political systems, and even within the same society, it could vary from one era to another. In other words, the status of the Other was constantly being defined and redefined. Moreover, the foreigner was not necessarily the one who came from elsewhere,, but one whose origin was unknown – bastards, for example – or he who had no social networks and therefore no authority – like the *miserabiles* of Italian cities in the early modern period[1].

However, the central question raised in all societies is with whom to share common space and common goods. The response may have to do with the political structures: community size, degree of centralization, cultural unity, administrative development ... but also with circumstantial conditions: like famines, religious, political, economical crises, wars – that is to say, the actual state of a society.

This last point seems essential. Let us return to our example about the Goths who in 376 CE knocked on the doors of the Roman Empire, with women and children, seeking asylum under pressure from the Huns. They were very similar to the Syrians fleeing Daech and Assad, and the Somalis fleeing Dadaab. But the Roman Emperor hesitated before accepting, and then the Roman officials were so disorganized, corrupt, ineffective that the Goths revolted: the war broke and Rome experienced a bitter defeat.

The example deserves reflection: Rome before this episode extensively practiced the integration, forced or voluntary, of foreign peoples. But in 376, that policy no longer worked. And one reason is that the Empire itself was fragile and disorganized, and that it was more and more closed, beginning a century earlier a process of reification of Romaness and of defining Roman identity against that of others, whether Persians, Manicheans, or heretics, etc.

Isn't it what is happening now similar? European identity is reified, it closes, and rejects the Other ... In the media and

all public places, it is all about “the crisis of migrants” but the crisis concerns also the host societies.

The security measures and the widespread panic is reflected in language (invasion, crisis, hotspots). It is also found in the spectacular images and the exaggerated figures, and in the increasing role of Frontex (the European agency for the regulation and supervision borders). Likewise, this finds expression in the haggling over migrants between England and France, which resulted in setting up the Camp of Calais, and between Europe and Turkey, and with Morocco, and previously with Libya. So too does the construction of walls. All these procedures have shown the inability of national governments and the European Union to plan and organize the movement of people, even though the High Commissioner of the Refugees gave early and repeated warnings when between 2011 and 2014 Turkey and Lebanon absorbed massive numbers.

Economic arguments in support of limiting entry to refugees also testify to the precarious state of the Europeans, and finds expression in the slogans often used by populist parties such as “our boat is full” even if it is the migrants who are shipwrecked. Or, as former

French minister Rocard used to say, “we cannot accommodate all the misery of the world.”. Words like “saturation’ and “density” are so familiar to those who remember the Evian Conference in July 1938 organized by Roosevelt to address the problem of Jewish refugees, of German and Austrian origin. At that conference which brought together 32 countries (9 European and 20 Latin American), representatives were incapable of taking any concrete decision, arguing over quotas[2].

The economic threat expressed by quotas is indeed not an objective phenomenon and the figures are disputed: it is necessary in these arguments to distinguish fantasies and fears from reality. It is clear that mass immigration can only

be resolved if *everyone* is concerned – for example if every member of the European Union participate; and that Asylum policies do not entail just the philosophical question of sharing, but they also reflect the immediate interests of societies. The Roman Empire (until the third century) and the Ottoman Empire, both non-ethnic states, some Italian cities like Livorno in the 15th-16th century, and the Netherlands and Germany in the 17th derived great economic profits from the welcoming of migrants. Some used them to cultivate fallow lands, to defend border areas, and to serve in the military as deportees worked for all the dominant powers across history. Other countries benefited from a transfer of knowledge and wealth. In return, host countries provided stability to these people in the form of citizenship or protected status.

Yet the cost of this policy was sometimes enormous, particularly in demographic terms. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in October 1685, which made Catholicism the only official religion of France, around 200,000 French Protestants fled to Switzerland, the United Provinces, to the British Island and to Protestant Germany[3]. Geneva tripled its population in the 1680s; and to take a final example 34 million immigrants reached the United States between 1810 and 1921[4]!

Of course, there were always voices that opposed the arrival of so many migrants and still others who recalled a tradition of integration. In fact, the reception of migrants has a great deal to do with the imaginary, that is to say, with the self-image of a society and its vision of the world, its ideals, and its values. About the possible settlement of the Goths in Thrace before the war, Greek rhetorician Themistius argued: "Philanthropy triumphs over destruction[...] It is said that already the barbarians transform their iron spades and sickles, and they cultivate the fields. So soon we will see the Scythians not be called barbarians but Romans. Soon we will see such companions, living in our community, to our

table, in military expeditions and contribute to tax.”[5] Themistius expresses in fact three ideas: the superiority of solidarity over closure, the usefulness of migrants; and the possibility of making foreigners into fellow citizens sharing duties and privileges.

Living together shapes culture as much as it is shaped by it.

Today anxiety towards migrants reflects a crisis of identity of the host societies, their fear of losing their values, their civilization. But can we integrate only those who are similar to us? We must get out of the terms in which the immigration debates enclose us, the choice between basing our attitude not on culture but on " sharing the common"[6] or defending our fixed identity[7]. The first position too easily forgets the importance of culture, language, history; the second reifies identity. Let's accept the changes that come from mobility like those that come from technology transfers, and defend the values that we consider universal – the status of women, the protection of children, to name but these. These values will actually be strengthened and defended by integrating migrants, who are, once again, not invaders or colonizers, but exiles fleeing barbarism.

Now is Europe changing today?

There is always a plurality of competing discourses. Along with the discourse on national identities, there has existed throughout history a "European principle of circulation,"[8] which re-emerged from time to time. This discourse was articulated during the Enlightenment, when European societies conceived of the movement of people and goods as a necessary exchange, and again in the nineteenth century when Europe welcomed revolutionaries expelled from their countries while labor migration developed on a larger scale across the Atlantic[9]. But these movements were supported by civil society. However, in the late nineteenth, and especially during the First World War, liberal migration policies were

rejected, and the States seized upon the issue of migration[10]. From then on and throughout the twentieth century, the principle of nationality has permanently removed all cosmopolitan ideas, even as the number of migrants increased. The European Union has only reproduced the same national idea on a large scale, while disempowering member states.

The current situation is thus a continuation of the challenging facing European construction with on one side a free trade area and on the other border closures. It is a continuation of the great reversal that I mentioned at the beginning of this article, which led to the crushing of the human. It is also a continuation of the history of a Europe that has never really accepted otherness.

It is not enough to say that the new security discourse only helps to hide the profound responsibility of European states in the crisis of the Middle East and in the rise of extremist groups within populations born in Europe. We do not need guilt to practice inclusion.

Rather, we should develop an alternative discourse to Neoliberalism, a project of a democratic society that enables citizen action. When citizens are in control of their destiny, when they feel capable of shaping their world, they are not afraid of the Other, and they even recognize the courage of those fleeing persecution, as Harry Truman said in 1952[11]. It is a lesson that can be drawn from the actual action of citizens who help and interact with migrants in opposition to the law.

Besides “the moral imperative to save lives” and to preserve the integrity of the bodies and of the minds of human beings, it seems better, as François Crépeau suggested, to organize mobility than resist it. It is better to open legal channels for migration and facilitate the movement of people in order to create fluidity, which was so successful in ancient times.

The choice before us is twofold: either close borders and create mafias and violence, revolt and dehumanization; or bring protection and co-responsibility, negotiation and above all dialogue. In my view, this last choice is the only way to retain in our globalized societies a sense of our own humanity.

NOTES:

[1] Simona Cerutti, *Étrangers. Étude d'une condition d'incertitude dans une société d'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Bayard, 2012.

[2] And creating the "Comité intergouvernemental pour les réfugiés" (CIR). See Greg Robinson « Le Projet M de Franklin D. Roosevelt : construire un monde meilleur grâce à la science... des races », in *Critique internationale* 2/2005 (n° 27), p. 65-82.

[3] Philippe Joutard, "Réseaux huguenots et espaces européens", in *Revue de Synthèse. Circulation et cosmopolitisme en Europe*, dir. H.Asséo, 2002, tome 123, p.111-129: p. 111.

[4] Hans Magnus Enzenberger, *Die Grosse Wanderung*, Francfort, 1992, p. 26.

[5] *Oration* XVI.211-212

[6] Jay Walljasper, *All That We Share. A Field Guide to the Commons*, December 2010 (<https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/6687/all%20that%20we%20share.pdf?sequence=1>)

[7] Garrett Hardin, *The Immigration Dilemma. Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons*, Washington, DC, 1995

[8] Daniel Roche, "Voyages, Mobilité, Lumières", in *Revue de Synthèse. Circulation et cosmopolitisme en Europe*, dir. H.Asséo, 2002, tome 123, p. 17-36: p.19.

[9] Dick Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact. World Migrations in the Second Millenium*, Duke University Press, 2002, p.277 ff.

[10] Karl Bade, *Europa in Bewegung: Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Munchen, 2000, p. 292ff.

[11] Against the *Immigration and Nationality Act* (Mac Carran-Walter Act) which aimed at limiting the European immigration, Truman said: « we do not need to be protected against immigrants from these countries ; on the contrary we want to stretch out a helping hand, to save those who have managed to flee from Europe, to succor those who were brave enough to escape from barbarism ». The same Truman had send bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seven years before.

The text is transcribed version of Claudia Moatti's speech during B-fest 5 in Athens, Greece.

Video from the same speech: