

Forced migrations: a necessary humaneness

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We have discussed what would be the added value of *Humanitarian Alternatives*³ contributing to the abundant debate over migrants and moving populations. First and foremost, the migrant crisis constitutes a mandatory injunction for politicians to make the appropriate decisions, like the German Chancellor did in the summer of 2015. But it also challenges humanitarian actors and human and social sciences researchers, scholars and teachers who represent the readership and the on field and intellectual resources of this journal. This editorial - and more broadly the theme of this new edition - encourages us to look further ahead; it appeals to our common responsibility to shed light on this situation, to add colour and different shades to a story that is becoming more and more grey.

A recent round table discussion co-organized by *Humanitarian Alternatives*¹ highlighted how almost everywhere in Europe and beyond, the welcoming of populations forced² into exile has regressed in comparison to the mass exoduses which have scarred post-WWII history; assertive policies had then successfully rallied the public's understanding and support. Today's situation is quite different: it is more than a "migration crisis", and reveals a "migration policies crisis" - according to a long-time leading NGO in this area³. Besides claims from the most populist parties, the still dominant major political groups have not yet taken clear positions - setting the course and collective duties - behind which people could rally. Governments, already confronted with a tense social climate, react to events; they "navigate by dead reckoning" when it comes to discouraging or countering, sometimes with violence, an influx of migrants which is yet far from threatening the balance of potential host countries. For lack of anticipation and public prepared-ness through audible explanations, and of enlisting the active forces of the civil society, the exiles' arrival at the doors of the most developed countries leaves all actors distraught.

This assessment reflects the now usual way that politicians and the media deal with conflicts and crises, offering a sketchy and simple representation of the affected populations and the groups to which they belong. The simplistic opposition between Good and Bad makes it hard to provide a meaningful and understandable geopolitical explanation. Sorting facts into concepts such as geographic areas or armed, religious, ethnic or social groups expresses above all the global interests of the policy makers and takes precedence over respecting civil populations and individuals. Henceforth, drones can blindly bomb large "condemned" areas, where any living being can be considered an enemy; hospitals are targeted only for being located in these areas or allegedly for hosting combatants⁴; humanitarian convoys are bombed despite harshly-negotiated

¹ Round table discussion "Against forced migrations, is humanitarian action a substitute for political failures?", held on September 7th, 2016 during the Paris Forum Convergences (September 5th to 7th, 2016). More details can be found after this editorial.

² The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines forced migration as a migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes.

³ La Cimade, <http://www.lacimade.org>

⁴ In October 2015, Doctors Without Borders' hospital was hit in Kunduz, Afghanistan. Since then, other attacks have occurred, like in Yemen in August 2016, again targeting a DWB hospital.

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truces⁵... In short, populations are denied access to aid, or aid is blocked. Misconducts - to which one gets used - are becoming mere collateral damage, and our collective consciousness agrees to it.

And so the possibility of humaneness erodes; each person's uniqueness in its moral, religious or political complexity gets confused with the group which, in situations of conflict, is an armed group, a supposedly dangerous and biased enemy who can legitimately be fought. Civilians - persons, men, women or children - no longer exist as human beings. Now "transparent", they flee the fighting that targets them, only to experience the double sentence of being identified as responsible for the wrongdoings, and of being seen as trouble-making invaders trying to circumvent the law, jeopardizing local and global equilibriums. A "migrant" is now just one of the thousands of heads of an inseparable herd, depicted in reports and press articles as a continuous - and necessarily threatening - flow that stirs the most archaic fears, fuels the fire of prejudices, revives sectarianism and justifies xenophobic impulses. The individuals who form what is presented or experienced by the host communities as a "human tide" are reduced to a disincarnate social, political and financial problem.

The fault lies with the development and conflict resolution policies - within the countries of origin - but also with the strategies for the reception of migrants. In order to cope with this situation, it is vital to foster the enthusiastic solidarity of civil society. Efi Latsoudi and Konstantinos Mitragas⁶ received the 2016 Nansen Refugee Award for their relentless devotion to the refugees who arrived in Greece in 2015, illustrating how fear and anger can give way to the whispers of those who refuse to give in to mistrust and hatred; those who only wish to remain human. Providing a rationale behind spontaneous initiatives, acknowledging and encouraging them, is to protect them from the hostility of a misinformed and self-centered social body; it is helping society to overcome fear of strangers - successfully imposed by acts of terror; it is drawing on humanity's brightest resources.

This ambition is all the more necessary that the hardest part is yet to come. The consequences of global warming on human beings are finally breaking free from denial, even though we still gladly convince ourselves that the worst can be avoided, or that developed countries will be spared. The foreseeable consequences are expressed in terms of a rising sea level rather than impacted populations - who yet are and will be forced to leave their land or their country. But this is still happening too far away... and we all hesitate between fear and lack of concern, dramatization and relief, according to an information flow that is too often left unverified.

Indeed, it is difficult to get a sense of the extent of the current - and especially future - population movements, but we do know that climate disruption exacerbates poverty and tensions where resources are scarce. It threatens the populations' food security where their dependence on the pace of harvests and local ecosystems - combined with a strong demographic growth and poor infrastructures - is strongest. The inevitable decline in access to water, sanitation, health, education and shelter are crisis drivers that hurt resilience - this surprising ability of populations to endure precariousness -, on which all aid policies, falling short of solutions, seem to rely.

⁵ In reference to the thirty-one UN and Syrian Red Crescent trucks destroyed in Syria in September 2016 while delivering aid to the populations of Aleppo.

⁶ Award received in the name of the Hellenic Rescue Team: <http://www.unhcr.ca/fr/news/la-distinction-nansen-pour-les-refugies/>. See also section "Culture" of this edition, about Barbara Hendricks' homage to the Greek civil society. Barbara Hendricks is Honorary Lifetime Goodwill Ambassador to the UNHCR.

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One thing is certain: the countries of the North will not find solitary salvation hiding behind pointless prosperity, betting on the continuation of their technological and economic superiority, shielded by borders made of walls and barbwire - tomorrow electrified or surrounded by heavily armed watchtowers... Closing borders and hunting people smugglers have proved a tragic dead-end, costing many human lives and causing collective shame and resentment. The countries that resort to this for protection will gain nothing from the unavoidable destabilization of the countries of first asylum and the distress that they shelter, supported through endless and soulless humanitarian programs, powerless to restore or maintain hope and dignity.

As for humanitarian organizations, they cannot resolve to become accessories to a generalized policy of firmness, nor can they merely reason in operational terms and organizational or technical adaptations. They must continue to act according to their founding principles so migrants are allowed a decent and rightful access to the aid to which they are entitled, and also in order to arouse the desire to help and to allay the fears inspired by mistruths. To win the hearts and minds of public opinion, they must constantly explain the diverse realities that the migrants run from; they must tell who they are and why they take such risks. And every time they are in a position to do so, they must have the audacity to get involved in initiatives which are favourable to conflict resolution.

The fear of the other - whom we complacently reduce to a religion, a terrorist threat or a profiteer - can only be overcome through a battle of public opinion; we need to kindle empathy rather than compassion, to make people realize that for every human being attached to their land, their culture and roots, an endless flight is always a last resort. Therefore, the role of humanitarian actors is also to remind loudly and without naivety the right of every human being to exist, to be rescued and protected, to choose the unknown over the familiar land, when exile means salvation.

The persuasive force of created fears leads to simplistic and radical solutions, which history has taught us that they add chaos to crisis, war to misery. Aid practitioners and researchers have a unique window of opportunity for responsibility and collaboration: they must objectivize and rationalize the importance and the ways to an elementary solidarity and to an unconditional fraternity - which are indicators of our social and civilization-al choices. Host nations' views can be changed through the understanding of migratory phenomena and what motivates them, through hearing the stories of those who have resigned themselves to crossing borders, stepping into the unknown and entering a foreign land feared as hostile. Joining the authority of their experience and of their respective skills in an essential educational approach, practitioners and scholars can hold back the temptation for simplification that shapes our collective misunderstanding and rejection. Influencing policies, raising awareness among the media and inviting citizens to think ahead, to rediscover the meaning of otherness.

Tomorrow, humanity will have its back to the wall, and rich countries don't have the luxury of indifference. It would be a worthwhile initiative to convene a "General Assembly on the Human Condition of Moving Populations". A better understanding of the interdependence of countries and peoples teaches us that security cannot be achieved without solidarity, and that a new ambition is necessary - founded on a more equitable sharing of wealth, which fosters stability, social cohesion and peace. Having failed to prevent, humanity must now accept its duty of solidarity. This will take time and create discomfort and insecurity at first, but selfishness would be self-delusion. On the contrary, the positive repercussions of an assertive solidarity will be tangible and must be highlighted, so that host societies can live in peace with themselves.

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Translated from the French by Benjamin Richardier

On September 7th 2016, in the context of the 9th Convergence World Forum, (www.convergences.org), *Humanitarian Alternatives* co-organized its first public debate “In the face of constrained migration, Humanitarian action, as a substitute to political failure?”

Led by Boris Martin, Editor in Chief of the publication, the conference brought together in Paris a panel of French NGO leaders, the representative in France of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the President of the French Foundation Centre, all committed to defend migrants’ rights.

Bernard Kouchner, former Minister of Foreign and European Affairs (2007-2010) and co-founder of Doctors With-out Borders and Médecins du Monde, agreed to be the Great Witness, stating that the important thing was to “fight against this extraordinary wave of racism, nationalism and catastrophism. This is why politicians - because they are afraid of the FN (“Front National”) [Editor’s note: The FN - National Front - is an extreme right wing French political party], for the upcoming elections - built this suspicion, or in any case, didn’t participate in the welcoming and in the elementary generosity movement for those coming to our country, and they weren’t that many.” Furthermore he added that if “the State has to give money and resources [...] it is to the solidarity of proximity and to the human and family sense we must call upon.”



From left to right: Benoît Miribel, President of the French Foundation Center and Honorary President of Action Against Hunger; Fabienne Lassalle, Deputy Executive Director of Paris SOS Méditerranée; Bernard Kouchner former minister and co-founder of Doctors Without Borders and Médecins du Monde; Boris Martin Editor in Chief of *Humanitarian Alternatives*; Geneviève Jacques, President of La Cimade; Ralf H. W. Gruenert, representative in France, High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amal Abou El Ghayt, Advocacy Officer, Secours Islamique France.

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