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He has published extensively and among other publications he is the author of the book: *On the East/West Slope. Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe*. New York-Budapest, CEU Press, 2006. He is the president of the European Network in Universal and Global History and he is a founder/director of Karl Polanyi Research Center for Global Social Studies at Corvinus University.

Abstract:

The so called refugee crisis and related discursive strategies have at least four key elements, namely the conflicts of the regions from where refugees come; change in the migratory position of Europe; overall structures of European identity and related political manoeuvring, and the direct debates over modes of handling the refugee waves. We have to see the developments in this complex framework in order to see the overall dynamics and interplays in order to better understand how the crisis is evolving and how it is handled discursively. Also this complex dynamic analysis helps in taking away the discursive blame put on refugees themselves.

Political discourses and key elements of the refugee crisis

Introduction

The refugee crisis and related discursive strategies have highlighted at least four key elements:

- 1) Conflicts in the regions from which refugees come
- 2) Changes in the migratory positions of various parts of Europe
- 3) Overall structures of European identity and the related political maneuvering
- 4) EU-level debates over handling the refugee waves.

This complex framework reveals the overall dynamics and help us better understand how the crisis is evolving and how it is reflected discursively. It also helps us to remove some of the discursive blame that is put on refugees by various political discourses today.

1. Crises of the refugee-releasing regions

The crises in West Asia and North Africa have long historical roots in Western colonial-capitalist interventions. Europe's relations to these regions of the world have changed in terms of their aims and methods, but the asymmetries in their linkages have been continuous since the late 18th century. Since the second Iraq war of the US, supported by key European allies and, very importantly, by basically all states of Eastern Europe, the West and Central Asian parts of the world have experienced repeated interventions and irresponsible meddling in several regions. The wars have destroyed some of the major secular, pluri-ethnic and multi-religious states of the region. Since 2011, North and Central Africa have also become a renewed Western focus and various regions and states have collapsed or have been put under great pressure there as well. Libya, for instance, which was home to large contingents of migrant workers, was bombed into a failed state by the United Kingdom and France, and later by the US, in 2011. These conflicts, also promoted by regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, uprooted, by 2014, more than 15 million people. Another 5 million were already outside their home regions, so at least 20 million people have been, essentially, on the move for years now.

At the moment we see that neither the key North American and European actors (including Russia), nor their various regional allies are willing to secure a quick end to this series of conflicts. Terrorist attacks and bombings follow each other in a deadly chain of events. Among the protagonists, we need to watch not only governments, but various non-state and corporate actors that keep a close eye on the conflict, seeking opportunities for extra profit. Today, political and military violence are increasing—although some positive developments are also occurring.

As opposed to a number of global and local players, the European Union (even as a capitalist block) needs stability around its territories, as its Neighborhood Policy is in crisis. Due to the imperialist-historical legacy of European and, more broadly, Western interventions, any stabilizing policy on behalf of the EU will lack credibility in this part of the world, for a long time. Moreover, if there is a change in European policies, the chances of controlling those regional powers that fight for some kind of ideologically framed hegemony over the region and finance and support terrorist or armed groups are very slim at best. Realistically, we can imagine only a very fragile temporary balance, if not a full scale war between blocks of powers (Russia, Syria and Iran versus NATO-backed Turkey and Saudi Arabia).

This means that the refugee flows will most likely increase—or at least will remain at current levels. Due to the obvious anti-refugee shift in European public discourse, the asylum seekers themselves will be exposed to far more repressive European and regional measures. The global struggle will also appear in the conflicting media coverage of major global and regional TV channels, most of which represent interested parties in the conflict areas. This media fight will also hide the suffering and repression of local civilians and/or refugees and misuse them for various political purposes.

2. Migratory processes, refugees and the division of Europe

European countries—and among them EU countries—have experienced important changes in terms of their integration into the global flows of people and capital since the 1980s. The whole world has seen an increase in migrant stock numbers. The departure of industrial capital from Western Europe and the related decline in the number and quality of industrial jobs, the creation of a new type of service sector jobs, the ever intensifying competition with low wage regions being fully integrated into global chains and the creation of an extended EU have led to increased reliance on migrant labor in the economies of Europe. This “opening up” has affected internal regions of Europe in various ways. Northern and Southern Europe started receiving larger numbers of immigrants. And parts of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have become migrant labor suppliers to the rest of the continent. This shift had a major impact on how various countries position themselves in the current policy debates. Europe, which was an overall emigrant-generating region of the world up until the 1960s, has split into at least three distinct parts.

There are “immigrant” countries which have received a large number of people through increasing labor demand and guest-worker programs (France, United Kingdom, Germany, and to some extent Sweden and Austria) for a considerable period of time, at least since the 1960s. In these societies, the volume of inflows exceeded outflows. In addition, considerable numbers of migrants headed for countries with a colonial past (like North and Central Africans to France, Central, Southern and Western Asians to the UK). These two countries had an overlap between refugee links and non-refugee links in the web of migratory flows and thus they have larger “diasporas.” That structural condition certainly influences political discourses there. It is also important that the number of migrants already residing (not the arriving migrants) have been always high in these countries—well in the hundreds of thousands, and in the case of Germany well above five-hundred thousand—at all times since the late 1980s. In other words, these countries already have experiences in receiving, administering refugees and migrants in greater numbers. In addition, specifically Germany has improving employment statistics—a fact that also influences political discourses and the behavior of political elites. In this respect, the UK and France have different political climates, as the recent neoliberal political attacks on the welfare system have weakened the socio-economic position of various local groups (most importantly that of the politically abandoned working classes and their children’s generation) and thus these countries do have increasing numbers of the domestic poor.

There are also regions that have begun receiving sizeable immigrant inflows after the 1980s. These include Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal), as well as, since the 1990s, parts of Central Europe (Slovenia, the Czech Republic and, for a short while, Hungary). Hungary is a special case as, for a while after the collapse of the state

socialist status quo, inflows of predominantly co-ethnic Magyars coming for economically more depressed neighboring countries had counterbalanced the increasing outflows of people. Today, Hungary is again returning to its *longue-durée* historical pattern as a predominantly migrant-releasing country.

The countries of Southern Europe started relying on migrant labor in various service jobs and, very importantly, in domestic care work. This had everything to do with reductions in welfare services and various other economic transformations. These countries also “invited” migrants to carry out low wage agrarian jobs, as such economic sectors had to cope with declining or stagnating prices in the world market. Therefore the refugee crisis is taking place under the condition of a peculiar conflict between anti-immigrant hostility on the one hand, and the need for migrants on the other.

As a third group, there are those East and Southeast European countries that had been net migrant generating societies even during the state socialist period. They have become major sources of labor utilized in Southern and Western Europe. The so called “regime change” uprooted large numbers of people in Central and Eastern Europe due to transformations in their economic structure and the substantial general decline of employment. This was a more dramatic shock of globalization as described above. According to the UN migration matrix statistics, 72 million foreign-born people lived in Europe in 2013. Out of that, the former socialist block, not counting the erstwhile-Soviet states (i.e. Ukraine, Russia, Moldova etc.) had contributed more than 7.5 million citizens living somewhere else in Europe, mainly in Western and Southern Europe. At the same time, this region received a much smaller number of immigrants (under 4 million). The major sources of immigrants are from Eastern Europe itself, and from some previous territories of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, these countries have had only very limited experiences in hosting refugees: Out of the estimated 1.5 million refugees living in Europe in 2013, Eastern European states provided shelter for little more than thirty-thousand of them. These countries, up until now, provided protection either for a short transitory period (like citizens of the GDR fleeing to West Germany via Austria), or for co-ethnics (as in the case of Hungary sheltering ethnic Magyars of Ceausescu’s Romania)¹. Some Southeast European states produced remarkably large flows of refugees, for example during the Yugoslavia crisis of the 1990s.

Eastern and South-Eastern Europe has been a major emigrant-generating region. In some countries, their remittances partially relieve the burdens of an unequal exchange of labor and capital, and the loss of social security payments, mainly within the EU (hence some of the anxieties), while it receives considerably less immigrant labor than Western, Northern and even Southern Europe, and only a truly tiny number of refugees. Thus, this region has relatively little experience in hosting a larger number of immigrants and refugees, and, in addition there are serious political conflicts around the social crises due to past regime changes. No surprise, then, that Eastern Europe has produced some of the harshest policies and the most inflammatory discourses on migrants in all of Europe. Overall nationalist hostility to foreigners and increasing EU-skepticism are coupled with the imagination of a “struggle-for-life-and-death” with immigrants who come to take away jobs locally. All this is ratcheted up further by references to the need to protect the interests of the region’s own migrants in other European regions. This is a particularly powerful motivation for east European governments’ absurdly loud and simplistic rhetoric against other incoming groups, like Syrians. We can certainly foresee larger-scale conflicts among various immigrant groups, a fight that would even worsen the problem itself. Due to these structural constraints, it seems unlikely that Eastern European states will change their discursive and policy positions in the foreseeable future.

3. Identity strategies and related political maneuvering

Various actors within Europe utilize various identity strategies. These identity strategies have in common the insistence on maintaining some kind of historically based “civilizational” superiority (e.g. positing that the rule of law, or more general notions of “liberty” only make sense within Europe). This is particularly aimed at North African and Western Asian regions that are depicted as the “Muslim” ergo “terrorist” Other of Europe and of the West in general. This image is, of course, in sharp contradiction to the historical fact that the Mediterranean has been a rather compact historical region for millennia, interwoven by a very large number of economic, cultural and

¹ According to UN statistics, in 2013, Hungary hosted approximately five-thousand refugees, and it received asylum claimants only periodically and mainly from the neighboring regions. It admitted a larger number (tens of thousands) of East German refugees in 1989, ethnic Magyars coming mainly from Romania between 1988 and 1992 and asylum seekers from Bosnia in 1994 and 1995.

migratory linkages. In a perverse manner, this negative image is also produced and maintained by the ongoing political crisis' in some of the regions of North Africa and West Asia—accounted for to a large extent by the West itself. This is illustrated by the fact that the ceaseless western bombings and military interventions in these regions are factors both forcing people to leave the region in large numbers and prompting various armed groups to fight against “Westerners”. This overall sense of superiority and the overall Euro- and/or ethnocentrism of European cultures were to be seen by the use of the French national flag commemorating the victims of the terror in Paris, while ignoring the victims who were non-French, including North Africans and West Asians. Unfortunately, there is almost a complete consensus on this violently narrow interpretation of the recent events. Only a handful of political groups or a tiny fraction of the social media question this hierarchical representation and the social background of it. Such representation has the immediate effect that countries and people of the North African and Western Asian regions can be seen being ontologically separated from the reality of Europeans, whose life and social conditions are not to be compared and linked to them.

Neoliberal globalization and the active search for asylum in certain European countries with better living conditions have put “European” identity structure under stress in various ways. Europe is becoming more and more touchable and this is also felt by “Europeans” who, in an immediate panic response, intensify their “Orientalist” rhetoric. Refugees suddenly become “Eastern hordes” that need no mercy on behalf of otherwise benevolent “Europeans”.

And this leads to a very interesting combination of hatred and sense of solidarity throughout Europe. Actually, the recently expressed hatred is also a reaction to other elements of European identity, namely the notion of “helping” and Christianity. Clearly we can assume that one of the reasons why we have so many strong negative sentiments regarding “illegals” is that people would like to explain to themselves, why they themselves refuse to help. Many groups, including Christians, construct “conspiracy theories” not only out of ignorance, racism and aggression (they are all important), but also because of a need to silence the other half in themselves.

These identity twists have been understood—and fomented—by some political actors, including Mr. Orbán, who definitely aims at becoming a leader of a semi-fascist, super nationalistic “passive” pan-European counter-revolution, an ongoing process that has been accelerated by the refugee crisis. The original cause of this is the objective decline of Europe in the global scope and the restructuring of it's working class, coupled with a very intense struggle among various business elites to control capital. This overall restructuring process has led to the emergence of some “frustrated”, relatively young elites that make a new claim for power and utilize brand new discursive techniques. We should not forget that this new elite and its experts have already received professional political movement and communication / media backing at our universities. That knowledge can be utilized on a daily basis.

These new elites not only understand the sense of insecurity, isolation and frustrations of the “abandoned” working classes in East and West (“liberals” and “socialists” will remain discredited for a very long period), but they also see the need to question longer term assumptions, which they can destroy within seconds with professional media campaigns - for instance the assumption that Europe is to be understood as “benevolent”—a claim that has of course never been true but successfully maintained at least since the 1950s. Intra-European and interregional prestige hierarchies—according to which “internal Orientals”, “East Europeans” are supposed to be passive and dependent objects of Western policy making—have also been questioned. And this “revolution” against those “liberal fossils” can be performed in public discourses and peacefully through democratic elections. Orbán named this process in 2010 on the night of its “glorious” victory a “voting booth revolution”. According to him and fellow members of this new (and old) elite, a this revolution is going on, first in Hungary, then throughout Eastern Europe and possibly, eventually, in Western Europe as well. So we not only have the expectations resp. needs of asylum seekers, but also of East European elites who now want to have the privilege to be as nasty as the “West”. Furthermore, very importantly, the abandoned domestic working classes (including the state socialist ones in Eastern Europe) have also staged a silent revolt. These groups have already been thrown into a new type of service economy, financed through insecure credit and stock market methods worked out after the collapse of state socialism and, in Western Europe, of the Keynesian system providing large enough profit margins in capitalist societies until the 1970s. The collapse started with the due financial crisis, continued with an international debt crisis and the refugee crisis just gave a new impetus to these ongoing passive revolutions and changes.

Nonetheless, the process is not over, and there is a slight chance that Germany, as a powerhouse of the European economy, and its elite being super-frightened by any “fascistic” instinct of other Europeans, anticipating a need for

further immigrants, might clam down a bit on some other European countries and their elites. Thus Germany might push for the continued use of refugee conventions and fulfilling some of the key international obligations in handling the immediate problem of more than a million people who have claimed refugee status during the last years within the EU. They might even opt to provide some minor aid for those who are kept outside the EU. But even those slight chances are diminishing after the newest terrorist hysteria going through Europe. Surely, we will see dramatic scenes, where—in the name of Europe—people on the move will be pushed back, forced out or stuck outside Europe. The repression is clearly coming, and in this policing East European states (not even receiving larger numbers of settled down refugee groups) and the EU-critical United Kingdom might form a coalition, supported by large crowds even in France and Germany, not to mention in Eastern Europe.

4. Intra-EU conflicts and their global consequences

The EU as a supranational structure and a coalition of nation states is in crisis, as its internal principles do not work or at least they are sabotaged from within. In a capitalist regional bloc with free movement of goods, services, capital and labor, it is impossible to maintain any idea of national sovereignty on issues of migration beyond actually providing a status of citizenship. The refugees or any other types of migrants would always, understandably and worthy of support, make a good use of open internal borders. Even now, when border control mechanisms are already reinforced, many arrived migrants have some kind of sufficient paperwork, permitting them to move around to meet the demand for their labor. But the acceptance of some kind of common migration policy most likely will be sabotaged by various European states, including those of Eastern Europe, which prefer to maintain migratory privileges only for themselves. The latter countries would never accept larger numbers of “non-whites”. In addition, the United Kingdom and small EU-member states like Malta could be useful allies for Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the EU could strengthen its right-wing policeman status in the global debates over migration, vetoing any move toward a better protection of “illegal” migrants. Altogether, Europe is not likely to solve its internal contradictions along the existing economic and social structures which will affect other migration crises in the world, including those within Africa, South Asia or Latin America. So, even if larger-scale wars are avoided, we should be prepared to see rising conflicts over migration. In a capitalist world, changes of its biopolitical techniques, as in the 21st century “quality labor force” for the capital, will not be guaranteed spontaneously; we could rather see an open competition over migrant groups themselves. But this capitalist-driven transnationalism (often cherished by liberals) is so full of fierce conflicts that they might actually change the course of global history - and not for the better.