

***History in the Making #1*****Broadening the Discussion on the Refugee Crisis in Europe: The Need for Global and Historical Perspective**

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In a May 2016 statement on the refugee crisis in Europe, the United Nations envoy for human rights, Francois Crepeau, criticized the European Union's response to date, saying that it has shown a "lack of vision."<sup>1</sup> Issuing this statement after spending five days in Greece on a fact finding mission, Crepeau's critical remarks drew attention to the plight of migrants in one of Europe's poorest countries, and criticized the EU not just for its callous treatment of refugees (especially children), but also for its recent agreement with the Turkish government which has allowed Greek authorities to return "illegal migrants" to Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

Lamenting the lack of a "long-term, human rights-based migration policy" in Europe, Crepeau is just one of many critics who have blasted the EU and "developed" nations more generally for their failure to act decisively and compassionately in the face of a growing human tragedy, one that has garnered much attention in mainstream western media since the stories and images of capsized boats and desperate migrants *en route* from North Africa to Italy began to surface in news reports in the late spring and early summer of 2015.

Of paramount concern for critics like Crepeau is Europe's increasingly isolationist—and often openly right wing and racist—stance towards refugees and migrants. Opponents of anti-refugee

sentiments and policies have decried the fences and legal obstacles that have been put in place to thwart the movement of people into and through Europe, and have likewise been critical of the relatively "stingy" response of countries like Canada, Australia, and the United States. Faced with a mass movement of people from war-torn countries like Syria, the right thing to do, they argue, would be to open our borders and offer these people a new home, or at the very least temporary asylum from the violence that has forced them to flee their countries.

The desire to do more to help people fleeing from violence and other tragedies and hardships is, of course, understandable and admirable. However, opening our doors wider to accommodate more migrants will not solve the global crisis we are now facing. In fact, by advocating for a more robust immigration policy to help people "less fortunate than ourselves" without at the same time engaging in sustained public dialogue on the interconnected reasons why people are currently on the move in ever increasing numbers will only blind us to the bigger picture. As developed nations (and here I am writing from my point of view as a Canadian), we can and should do more to offer relief to people who for many reasons really have nowhere else to go. But we cannot allow ourselves to think that these more or less "limited" acts of generosity are sufficient, at least not if we want to effect real change in the

world. What we need is some careful consideration of, and no doubt critical self-reflection on, the global and historical forces that, for the better part of half a century or more, have brought about so much dislocation and suffering.

The proof is in the numbers. 2015 saw just over one million refugees flood into Europe, primarily from North Africa and, by the middle of the summer, from the Middle East. News reports told us that this was the largest movement of people in Europe since the end of WWII. Though on some level an important fact to let sink in, what we didn't hear was that this number was merely a drop in the bucket when it comes to the displacement of people worldwide.

According to a mid-year report<sup>3</sup> released by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2015, there are over 60 million people displaced in the world today, which is up from 43 million in 2010. That's roughly 17 million *more* displaced people today than there were only five or six years ago. Of the 60 million people currently displaced in the world (to which we should add 4.9 million Palestinians who fall under the mandate of the UNHCR's sister agency, the UN Relief and Works Agency), most are displaced internally (i.e., within their own countries). Of those people who have fled their home countries, roughly half are hosted by the world's poorest countries (i.e., by countries that have a per capita GDP of less than US\$5,000). According to a 2013 UNHCR report, developing countries host just over 80% of the world's refugees (compared to 70% a decade ago).<sup>4</sup>

What we have seen in Europe over the course of the last year, then, is quite clearly just the tip of the iceberg. And the problem seems to be growing, not subsiding. Therefore, while we look for ways to house and support refugees in our own communities, it may also be prudent to ask what is causing this upheaval in the first place.

The most obvious culprit is war and violence, which goes a long way to explaining why the vast majority of refugees (as high as 85%) who have crossed into Europe since 2015 have been from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Though many people could probably identify the civil war in Syria and the on-going fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq as the immediate causes of the current flight of refugees from the Middle East, our own understanding of these conflicts is greatly hampered by our limited knowledge of their current scope, and of their links to over a century of western imperialism and great power politics.

Even less is known about the political violence and warfare that has created parallel crises in Africa, Latin America, and many parts of Asia.

Equally impoverished is our current understanding of the role that capitalism has played both historically and more recently in the economic marginalization and geographic dislocation of mass numbers of people around the world, and especially in the global south. Capitalist exploitation, which since World War II has manifested itself in neocolonial, neoliberal ways, has created a set of conditions worldwide which has seen the gap between the rich and the poor widen,

rather than close. Macroeconomic data might very well suggest impressive growth in former non-Western countries like Brazil, China, and Angola (to name only three), but accounts of the lived experiences of the vast majority of people point to material conditions that have been in decline since the 1970s and 1980s, and which for many have become unsustainable.

When climate change, competition for scarce resources, deindustrialization, and the movement towards full automation are added to the mix, we are left asking ourselves: What else are we missing? What stories need to be told in order to paint a fuller picture of a world in the

midst of profound social, economic, and technological change?

The question of refugees and mass migration requires a more open, critical, and honest discussion than it is currently getting. The numbers of displaced people in the world show no sign of waning, and if anything only promise to increase. Effective solutions to a refugee crisis that has only recently appeared on the radar screens of many in Europe and North America requires a clearer and more concise understanding of the root causes of this crisis.

Our project, we hope, is one small but important step in that direction.

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<sup>1</sup> The Associated Press, "UN envoy blasts EU's 'lack of vision' on refugee policies" May 16, 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/un-eu-lack-of-vision-refugees-1.3584361>

<sup>2</sup> The Associated Press, "EU, Turkey reach deal on migrant crisis, Czech PM says" March 19, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/eu-turkey-migrants-deal-1.3497118>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR *Mid-Year Trends 2015*, <http://www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html>

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Edwards, "New UNHCR report says global forced displacement at 18-year high," June 19, 2013, <http://www.unhcr.org/51c071816.html>