

IN DEPTH

Debunking myths, recovering common stories

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Forced displacement is not a new phenomenon. But, now more than ever, several factors invite us to reflect on how to manage the resettlement of displaced persons, at a practical level and with regard to social perception. Some of these factors are the magnitude of this human tragedy – with the highest number of refugees and displaced persons in history, more than 65 million worldwide¹; media coverage of the arrival – which leads to falsely believe that Europe resettles a large proportion of refugees – and, more importantly, the drift towards xenophobia observed in some European countries. How can the radicalization of European xenophobic sectors be prevented? How can empathy towards refugees be developed?

The most immediate response, in order to reduce this drift towards xenophobia and increase empathy towards refugees, is to connect with their personal and collective life stories: to understand the reasons that have led Ashanti, Yasir, Ayani or Dakarihagin to flee their homes, and recognize situations of persecution or structural violence. Humanizing these people, knowing their names, knowing details about their lives before fleeing, understanding that they are people who are struggling and wish to live independently in better situations can be a way to promote empathy. Many refugee resettlement organizations² offer the possibility of inviting refugees (to schools, civic centers, etc.) to learn about their stories firsthand. Teacher assessments tend to highlight the great interest generated in students, both in learning about the life stories of the people invited, and denouncing the conditions that exist in their countries and which have forced them to flee.

In addition to learning about these terrifying experiences, there are initiatives that seek to highlight similarities between these personal and collective life stories and the experience of having lived through the (Civil) War, in exile, or in refugee camps. In exhibitions like “Art and Commitment, Responses to the Civil War” at MNAC, or the Museum of Memory and Exile (MUME) in La Jonquera, local history calls into question present accounts of forced displacement around the world. It wasn’t that long ago when images of flight to France during the Spanish Civil War were evoked by more recent images of people displaced by the Balkan War. There are also obvious similarities between the (concentration) camps in southern France in the 1930s and 40s and current images of Idomeni, the Calais “Jungle” or Immigration Detention Centers ³. Besides learning about the harsh personal stories of people who have been forced to flee, recognizing that this experience is very close undoubtedly helps to create empathy with the problem.

“ To reduce the drift towards xenophobia and increase empathy towards refugees, it is necessary to understand the reasons why they have fled their homes ”

But beyond these obvious responses, it is important to keep in mind that dehumanization processes of the “other” are closely linked to the feeling of threat. Seeing the “other” in a way that ignores their feelings, that minimizes their suffering, or that subordinates them to “our” alleged general well-being, is often a consequence of a progressive dehumanization process that originates from the feeling that some basic needs (identity, well-being, physical integrity, etc.) are threatened. What can these needs be?

Some recent surveys deduce that the main fears regarding the arrival of refugees have to do mainly with physical integrity and well-being: according to a survey conducted in ten European countries, 59 percent of Europeans⁴ believe that a greater influx of refugees implies an increased risk of terrorist attacks. The second problem identified,

with which 50 percent of survey respondents would agree with according to the ten-country average, is that an increase in refugees results in their grabbing jobs and welfare benefits. These, then, are two arguments that must be refuted carefully. Networks such as Unity Against Fascism ⁵ have published documents that challenge some of these prejudices. However, a more generalized scope of this reasoning is needed, and the media and public service messages should deliver the news with fewer stereotypes and more critical thinking.

Some of the information that should be repeated ad nauseam to debunk myths and understand that European societies have a lot to learn regarding solidarity is, first of all, that resettling refugees is not an act of generosity; it is an obligation according to international law, which European countries are committed to. Therefore, there is no margin to decide whether or not to be a resettlement country: it must be done. A second myth that needs to be debunked is that Europe is accepting a large proportion of refugees: not a single one of the ten countries that resettle the most is European. European countries are not overwhelmed by the resettlement of refugees, in terms of the cost of this resettlement (the EU is the richest continent in the world), nor in terms of demographics, since granting asylum to all the people currently seeking asylum would amount to 0.36 percent of the total population of the EU. A third myth, concerning the alleged increase in terrorist attacks, can be refuted by saying that the majority of terrorist acts that have occurred on European soil have been perpetrated by European citizens, not by refugees, and that, at least in Spain, the main cause of hate crimes in 2015 was Islamophobia (“natives” who attack Muslims) and not the other way around. Finally, regarding the fear that refugees monopolize jobs and social benefits, these benefits are as scarce as they are for the local population. Only a small minority of people are granted refugee status and are thus entitled to relief (unfortunately, only 220 people were granted refugee status out of a total of 3240 asylum seekers in 2015). ⁶

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Finally, because the process of dehumanization of the “other” also leads to believe that the endogroup (“we”) acts legitimately, while the exogroup (“others”) doesn’t, it is important to debunk these polarized misconceptions and make clear that the increase in forced displacements is not accidental or unconnected to European countries. Some organizations such as the Centre Delàs⁷ shed light on the connection between forced displacements and profits made by Western countries, either because they are the greatest arms exporters in the world or because they benefit from the security business (control of borders, building of fences, etc.). Therefore, another way to approach the reality of forced displacement is to recognize self-responsibility – “ours” – for the problem.

Promoting empathy towards refugees begins, first of all, with recognizing the main reasons why some people feel suspicious about resettling them, and responding to this feeling of threat with information campaigns that debunk myths. In addition, it involves collecting common experiences.

1. All the data on refugees mentioned in this article, unless otherwise specified, are taken from Global Trends 2015: Forced Displacement in 2015, UNHCR 2016.

2. In Catalonia, several resettlement organizations are coordinated through the Asil.Cat network. These include UNHCR, the ACSAR Foundation, the Catalan Commission for Refugee Aid, the Catalan Association for the Integration of Immigrant Homosexuals, Bisexuals and Transsexuals (ACATHI), etc.

3. Although the article focuses on refugees, it is important to be aware that there is a blurred line between refugees and immigrants in terms of contexts and people, and that, in any case, the authorities can deal with these cases indiscriminately.

4. Richard Wike, Bruce Strokes, Katie Simmons. “Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs,” July 11, 2016. Pew Research Center.

5. See, for example, the pamphlet “#RefugeesWelcome Protegeix-te contra els rumors racistes.”

6. CEAR data based on Eurostat.

7. Especially worth mentioning: Mark Akkerman (2016). *Border Wars: The Arms Dealers Profiting from Europe's Refugee Tragedy*. Barcelona: Centre Delàs.

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