

IN DEPTH

Why the refugee crisis is not a refugee crisis

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In the context of the European research project “Collective action and the refugee crisis”¹, I have spent several months interviewing activists who work on the denunciation, solidarity and support of migrants and refugees²: in Barcelona, Madrid, and along the Spanish southern border; in Calais and in the entire region of Pas-de-Calais, and in Paris. And, finally, in Brussels. In Barcelona I have spoken to, among others, people from organizations such as Stop Mare Mortum, SOS Racisme, EICA, Fotomovimiento, activists in the districts of Raval and Sagrada Família, and others with no specific affiliation. I have also spoken to several people linked to institutional politics, in reference to political parties that are concerned about this issue as well as the Barcelona City Council. Even though they do not all share the same analysis of the causes and solutions, there is one point on which they unanimously agree: the refugee crisis is not actually a crisis of refugees.

This term, popularized by the media in the spring and summer of 2015, is still the expression most often used to refer to the increase in the number of people that have been coming to the European Union in recent times seeking asylum. Since then, the vast majority of stakeholders, including politicians, NGOs, international organizations, journalists and university professors in a variety of disciplines have used the expression again and again. And they continue to do so. Oftentimes, when we hear or read it, we know instinctively that we do not like it, but we may not be able to explain exactly why not. As we shall see, there are many complementary answers. Some of the criticisms focus on the word “crisis”; others, on the concept of “refugee”; others still, on

the combination of the two words; and others, on the absence of alternative words that explicitly state the causes and those responsible for this situation.

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First of all, the word “crisis” has negative connotations and is alarmist, negatively predisposing the listener or reader. Nobody likes crises; they are something that must be fought. Furthermore, they incorporate an element of quantity. There are too many (or, depending on the issue, too few). From this perspective, one must make a great mental effort to realize that the presence of people from other countries is an opportunity for the host society. Abdelraouf, a Sudanese engineer who has been in Calais (France) for over a year, trying to reach the United Kingdom, explained it to me graphically: “British and French authorities are foregoing ten thousand teachers of Arabic.” In Grand-Synthe and Norres-Fontes, nearby towns where activists have sometimes enjoyed the complicity of municipal authorities, I was told of activities in schools, where refugees shared their experiences in war or during their journey to Europe, as well as the methods of nonviolent conflict resolution that are created in the camps: an invaluable potential wealth that the word “crisis” makes hard to see.

Moreover, the dominant perspective in published opinion is totally Eurocentric. Thus, if we compare the circumstances in Europe with the number of displaced persons and refugees, for example, in the Middle Eastern countries, the situation in Europe would not be considered a crisis. Given the number of refugees in Lebanon or Jordan ³, how can we talk about a refugee crisis in Europe? Again, we have first- and second-class people in a world where what matters is what happens in the West. Thus, we only react to attacks occurring in France or Belgium, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of

jihadist attacks occur in Muslim countries. Activists are well aware of this, as are the people who survive in the camps and who often come from cultures in which hospitality is an essential part of interacting with foreigners.

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Those who have worked as volunteers in some of the refugee camps admit the existence of a crisis at a humanitarian level. From this perspective, the focus is placed on the migration, asylum and reception policies of the countries of the European Union. It is these policies that would be in crisis since they are not able to deal with the arrival of refugees in an effective and dignified manner. Often, in the pursuit of selfish and myopic interests, the borders have been outsourced to countries like Morocco or Turkey (but also to France, in the case of the United Kingdom, which is not part of the Schengen agreement) without dissuading those who flee war. Thus, as a result of certain policies, refugees pile up in makeshift camps, with a real need for humanitarian aid, which is partially covered by volunteers coming from many different places. For activists, the situation is obvious. In the words of Natàlia, a volunteer in refugee camps in various countries and a Stop Mare Mortum activist: “We are doing the humanitarian work that states and the European Union should be doing.”

In situations of crisis, the present is transformed, becoming unstable and dangerous. There is a sudden change in matters that are economic, political, social, environmental, related to security, etc. It is a change that is both abrupt and inevitable, and it becomes an emergency. In our case, the situation is somewhat different because the causes of this humanitarian emergency are well known: wars, mainly. Thus, we must relate issues such as the arms trade with the emergence and development of armed conflict, as well

as their effects in human terms. What is interesting about making this connection is that, suddenly, there are culprits. In other words, the humanitarian emergency is not a natural and unpredictable phenomenon, but the consequence of very specific policies ⁴.

Perhaps the problem is that we do not think of refugees as actors, as subjects, but as objects, as something that affects us. If we change the focus it will be easier to appreciate that they are people who have needs and rights... and that they are not too different from us. Thus they remind us of a capacity for empathy that perhaps we had forgotten. From this perspective, refugees put us in front of a mirror. So maybe we are facing a crisis, but of values. The fact that politicians and institutions are not dealing humanely with people who are fleeing from contexts where it is literally no longer possible to live in a dignified manner proves that the values that Europeans traditionally have purportedly exported around the world are presently in crisis. And yet refugees are still coming to Europe. It is therefore an opportunity to correct policies that are completely misguided and even to save the European project.

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Another term that is very popular (especially in French-speaking countries) is “migration crisis.” In this sense, many activists criticize the distinction between refugees and migrants. On a legal level, the difference has consequences because refugees have more rights than migrants, who are at the expense of what each state decides. Therefore, institutions are more interested in labeling these people as migrants (bad, because they have freely decided to come – as if that were a crime!) so they can return them to their countries of origin without violating international law. However, if they are refugees (good, since they come because they have no choice), there is a duty to take them in and offer them all the benefits provided by the right to asylum. In an attempt to overcome this distinction, activists of the Migreurop network, among others, have proposed the term “exiles,” which has caught on in English and in French (

exilés) and which does not distinguish whether the causes that have forced people to leave their homes are economic or political (or environmental, etc.).

In short, language matters. Words are not neutral and what we call things is important. In this case, the term “refugee crisis” is not the most appropriate. On the contrary, we must use wording that contextualizes the situation of refugees, assuming our responsibilities and taking into account the causes that have made them leave their homes and countries. We must emphasize that they are active subjects who therefore have rights. Like us. Furthermore, we must overcome Eurocentric perspectives and seek a more global approach, keeping in mind that, given the interdependent relations of our time, what we do has consequences. In other words, the increase in the arrival of refugees since the spring of 2015 was not an unpredictable situation, but largely a result of Western policies carried out in previous years. Hopefully, by calling things by their name, we will be able to find solutions within our possibilities, which are unlimited ⁵.

1. The European research project “Collective Action and the Refugee Crisis” is part of the ERC Advanced Grant Project “Mobilizing for Democracy,” directed by Donatella della Porta.

2. Following the usage of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in this text the word “refugee” denotes those who qualify to apply for asylum and thus to obtain the legal status of refugee.

3. According to the United Nations, in Lebanon there are more than one million refugees from Syria, in addition to more than 450 000 Palestinians. And there are 630 000 Syrians, in addition to over two million Palestinians and 200 000 Iraqis, among the refugees living in Jordan. However, according to other estimates, the numbers are much higher.

4. For example, the military operation Mare Nostrum rescued 150 000 people between October 2013 and October 2014. It was clear that the end of this mission would result in an increase in the number of deaths in the Mediterranean. It was thought that this would stop immigrants from risking their lives. But that was not the case. Furthermore, treaties such as those of Dublin or Touquet have resulted in an artificial concentration

of refugees in places like Idomeni or Calais, causing tensions at the local level that a truly supportive European policy would have largely mitigated.

5. In this sense, I argue that it was feasible to take in, in a supportive and fair manner, all the people seeking asylum in the EU last year. According to Eurostat data, the average of European asylum requests per 100 000 people was 260 in 2015. This means that it would have been enough if every town of 5 000 inhabitants had taken in 13 people, i.e. four families.

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