

Conceptualizing the 'migrant crisis' in Europe

by **HANNAH BRADBY** Aug 21, 2015



Photo: Port of Calais from jpellgen flickr photo stream

Images of **young men trying to enter lorries** queuing around the Port of Calais have illustrated the 'migrant crisis' this June. Industrial action by port employees disrupted lorry as well as ferry travel, and was partly in response to the growth in numbers of migrants encamped around Calais. Migrants determined to travel to the UK, found that the disruption created opportunities to board lorries. French riot police were called in to prevent migrants from getting access to lorries.

In April images of **migrants in desperate straits** crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Libya into Europe featured in the news. While thousands were rescued, at least one thousand five hundred are thought to have drowned attempting the sea-crossing so far in 2015.

Migrants are leaving behind such difficult circumstances that they are prepared to make dangerous journeys to a potentially better life elsewhere. Images of young children travelling in dangerously over-filled crafts without life-jackets underline what people are prepared to risk for a new life. The prices that people smugglers charge for a place on a boat and the long distances travelled before arriving in Libya show the considerable human and financial resources migrants are dedicating to their flight.


Over the past decades successive waves of migrants to Northern Europe have been treated as discontinuous one-off events. An underlying assumption has prevailed that migrants would be assimilated to the host culture, which would itself remain unchanged. But as immigrants adapt to a new culture they also change that culture. With economic growth, immigrant workers are absorbed into the jobs market and the way that the host culture changes has been incremental and un-remarked upon. With recession, immigrants become a visible group who can be blamed for social problems.


The policing of immigration to Europe is rarely far from the headlines. Anti-immigrant political campaigns across Europe propose that solving economic austerity lies in reducing numbers of immigrants who are a drain on welfare budgets. Counter argument says that immigrants create more wealth than the cost of the welfare they consume. One of the many conceptual problems with this form of debate is that it implies that Europe is a political entity whose boundaries can be effectively policed. Furthermore, it supposes that the legal regulation of migration will influence the number of arrivals. An alternative view is that the drivers of migration lie not in the glories of how Europe receives her immigrants – regular and otherwise – but rather the difficulties that they are fleeing.


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Wrecked and/or drifting migrant ships in the Mediterranean, particularly around the Italian island of Lampedusa, prompted the Italian year-long sea and air rescue campaign **Operation Mare Nostrum**. Its existence was held responsible for encouraging people to make the dangerous crossing from North Africa. This view was contradicted by a smuggler in Tripoli who organises up to 20 boat crossings per week in the summer. **Quoted in April 2015**, he had heard neither of Operation Mare Nostrum, nor of its cancellation and thought there were plenty of people ready to board boats, regardless of available rescue options.

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As a political entity Europe encompasses enormous inequalities within and between nation states. The differential regulation of access to labour, housing and healthcare is part of what informs migrants' movements. The ideal of equality between citizens is well established in European political frameworks. Equally well established is the lack of formal obligation towards irregular migrants who cannot claim refugee status.

There are no signs that the numbers of people arriving in Europe as migrants is going to drop. Efforts to control immigration through formal channels and legal regulation are unlikely to become more effective.

The human dilemma of refusing residency and citizenship to people who have paid a high price – financial and otherwise – to migrate is hard to ignore this summer. Citizens of Europe are being asked to share territory and privileges with more of the world's population. How can we refuse?

Collectively we refuse by relying on structures of governance that were established in the wake of World War II when migration was an event that happened rarely in the population and infrequently in a single human lifetime. In an era of increased mobility of bodies, information and capital, migration has become an option open to a much greater proportion of the world's population, both to escape oppression and to improve life chances.

A comparative European **research project** that is looking at how people put together formal and informal healthcare, solves neither the problem of the migrant boats in the Mediterranean nor the camps in Calais, but it does start the process of interrogating the consequences of migration for equality.

By avoiding sampling only by ethnic groups, legal or residential status, we seek to capture the complexity of a neighbourhood across dimensions of diversity. By including the aftermath of migration as part of wider processes of diversity and alongside wider questions of equality, we are working towards conceptualising migration as an ongoing process rather than as an aberration that is to be 'solved' by assimilation to a host culture.

What is currently labelled a 'migrant crisis' might be better rendered as the new normal. Imagining migration, from within and beyond Europe, as a constant feature of life will have implications for how health and welfare services are organised as well as funded. In the nineteenth century social reformers and activists grappled with the social obligations of society towards the urban poor. The struggles gave rise to the welfare state. Are we witnessing a new set of struggles for recognition that will reconfigure rights to welfare on a global scale?

Note: This blog **appeared** previously on the UPWEB project blog.

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