

The Non-Existence of Norway

Slavoj Žižek on the refugee crisis

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The flow of refugees from Africa and the Middle East into Western Europe has provoked a set of reactions strikingly similar to those we display on learning we have a terminal illness, according to the schema described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her classic study *On Death and Dying*. First there is *denial*: ‘It’s not so serious, let’s just ignore it’ (we don’t hear much of this any longer). Then there is *anger* – how can this happen to *me*? – which explodes when denial is no longer plausible: ‘Refugees are a threat to our way of life; Muslim fundamentalists are hiding among them; they have to be stopped!’ There is *bargaining*: ‘OK, let’s decide on quotas; let them have refugee camps in their own countries.’ There is *depression*: ‘We are lost, Europe is turning into Europastan!’ What we haven’t yet seen is Kübler-Ross’s fifth stage, *acceptance*, which in this case would involve the drawing up of an all-European plan to deal with the refugees.

What should be done? Public opinion is sharply divided. Left liberals express their outrage that Europe is allowing thousands to drown in the Mediterranean: Europe, they say, should show solidarity and throw open its doors. Anti-immigrant populists say we need to protect our way of life: foreigners should solve their own problems. Both solutions sound bad, but which is worse? To paraphrase Stalin, they are both worse. The greatest hypocrites are those who call for open borders. They know very well this will never happen: it would instantly trigger a populist revolt in Europe. They play the beautiful soul, superior to the corrupted world while continuing to get along in it. The anti-immigrant populist also knows very well that, left to themselves, people in Africa and the Middle East will not succeed in solving their own problems and changing their societies. Why not? Because we in Western Europe are preventing them from doing so. It was Western intervention in Libya that threw the country into chaos. It was the US attack on Iraq that created the conditions for the rise of Islamic State. The ongoing civil war in the Central African Republic between the Christian south and the Muslim north is not just an explosion of ethnic hatred, it was triggered by the discovery of oil in the north: France and China are fighting for the control of resources through their proxies. It was a global hunger for minerals, including coltan, cobalt,

diamonds and copper, that abetted the 'warlordism' in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the 1990s and early 2000s.

If we really want to stem the flow of refugees, then, it is crucial to recognise that most of them come from 'failed states', where public authority is more or less inoperative: Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, DRC and so on. This disintegration of state power is not a local phenomenon but a result of international politics and the global economic system, in some cases – like Libya and Iraq – a direct outcome of Western intervention. (One should also note that the 'failed states' of the Middle East were condemned to failure by the boundaries drawn up during the First World War by Britain and France.)

It has not escaped notice that the wealthiest countries in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Emirates, Qatar) have been much less open to refugees than the not so rich (Turkey, Egypt, Iran etc). Saudi Arabia has even returned 'Muslim' refugees to Somalia. Is this because Saudi Arabia is a fundamentalist theocracy which cannot tolerate foreign intruders? Yes, but Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil revenues makes it a fully integrated economic partner of the West. There should be serious international pressure on Saudi Arabia (and Kuwait and Qatar and the Emirates) to accept a large contingent of the refugees, especially since, by supporting the anti-Assad rebels, the Saudis bear a measure of responsibility for the current situation in Syria.



New forms of slavery are the hallmark of these wealthy countries: millions of immigrant workers on the Arabian peninsula are deprived of elementary civil rights and freedoms; in Asia, millions of workers live in sweatshops organised like concentration camps. But there are examples closer to home. On 1 December 2013 a Chinese-owned clothing factory in Prato, near Florence, burned down, killing seven workers trapped in an improvised cardboard dormitory. 'No one can say they are surprised at this,' Roberto Pistonina, a local trade unionist, remarked, 'because everyone has

known for years that, in the area between Florence and Prato, hundreds if not thousands of people are living and working in conditions of near slavery.’ There are more than four thousand Chinese-owned businesses in Prato, and thousands of Chinese immigrants are believed to be living in the city illegally, working as many as 16 hours a day for a network of workshops and wholesalers.

The new slavery is not confined to the suburbs of Shanghai, or Dubai, or Qatar. It is in our midst; we just don’t see it, or pretend not to see it. Sweated labour is a structural necessity of today’s global capitalism. Many of the refugees entering Europe will become part of its growing precarious workforce, in many cases at the expense of local workers, who react to the threat by joining the latest wave of anti-immigrant populism.

In escaping their war-torn homelands, the refugees are possessed by a dream. Refugees arriving in southern Italy do not want to stay there: many of them are trying to get to Scandinavia. The thousands of migrants in Calais are not satisfied with France: they are ready to risk their lives to enter the UK. Tens of thousands of refugees in Balkan countries are desperate to get to Germany. They assert their dreams as their unconditional right, and demand from the European authorities not only proper food and medical care but also transportation to the destination of their choice. There is something enigmatically utopian in this demand: as if it were the duty of Europe to realise their dreams – dreams which, incidentally, are out of reach of most Europeans (surely a good number of Southern and Eastern Europeans would prefer to live in Norway too?). It is precisely when people find themselves in poverty, distress and danger – when we’d expect them to settle for a minimum of safety and wellbeing – that their utopianism becomes most intransigent. But the hard truth to be faced by the refugees is that ‘there is no Norway,’ even in Norway.

We must abandon the notion that it is inherently racist or proto-fascist for host populations to talk of protecting their ‘way of life’. If we don’t, the way will be clear for the forward march of anti-immigration sentiment in Europe whose latest manifestation is in Sweden, where according to the latest polling the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats have overtaken the Social Democrats as the country’s most popular party. The standard left-liberal line on this is an arrogant moralism: the moment we give any credence to the idea of ‘protecting our way of life’, we compromise our position, since we’re merely proposing a more modest version of what anti-immigrant populists openly advocate. And this is indeed the cautious approach that centrist parties have adopted in recent years. They reject the open racism of anti-immigrant populists, but at the same time profess that they ‘understand the concerns’ of ordinary people, and so enact a more ‘rational’ anti-immigration policy.

We should nevertheless reject the left-liberal attitude. The complaints that moralise the situation – ‘Europe is indifferent to the suffering of others’ etc – are merely the obverse of anti-immigrant brutality. They share the presupposition, which is in no way self-evident, that the defence of one’s

own way of life is incompatible with ethical universalism. We should avoid getting trapped in the liberal self-interrogation, 'How much tolerance can we afford?' Should we tolerate migrants who prevent their children going to state schools; who force their women to dress and behave in a certain way; who arrange their children's marriages; who discriminate against homosexuals? We can never be tolerant enough, or we are always already too tolerant. The only way to break this deadlock is to move beyond mere tolerance: we should offer others not just our respect, but the prospect of joining them in a common struggle, since our problems today are problems we share.

Refugees are the price we pay for a globalised economy in which commodities – but not people – are permitted to circulate freely. The idea of porous borders, of being inundated by foreigners, is immanent to global capitalism. The migrations in Europe are not unique. In South Africa, more than a million refugees from neighbouring states came under attack in April from the local poor for stealing their jobs. There will be more of these stories, caused not only by armed conflict but also by economic crises, natural disasters, climate change and so on. There was a moment, in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, when the Japanese authorities were preparing to evacuate the entire Tokyo area – more than twenty million people. If that had happened, where would they have gone? Should they have been given a piece of land to develop in Japan, or been dispersed around the world? What if climate change makes northern Siberia more habitable and appropriate for agriculture, while large parts of sub-Saharan Africa become too dry to support a large population? How will the redistribution of people be organised? When events of this kind happened in the past, the social transformations were wild and spontaneous, accompanied by violence and destruction.

Humankind should get ready to live in a more 'plastic' and nomadic way. One thing is clear: national sovereignty will have to be radically redefined and new methods of global co-operation and decision-making devised. First, in the present moment, Europe must reassert its commitment to provide for the dignified treatment of the refugees. There should be no compromise here: large migrations are our future, and the only alternative to such a commitment is renewed barbarism (what some call a 'clash of civilisations').

Second, as a necessary consequence of this commitment, Europe should impose clear rules and regulations. Control of the stream of refugees should be enforced through an administrative network encompassing all of the members of the European Union (to prevent local barbarisms like those of the authorities in Hungary or Slovakia). Refugees should be assured of their safety, but it should also be made clear to them that they must accept the destination allocated to them by European authorities, and that they will have to respect the laws and social norms of European states: no tolerance of religious, sexist or ethnic violence; no right to impose on others one's own religion or way of life; respect for every individual's freedom to abandon his or her communal customs, etc. If a woman chooses to cover her face, her choice must be respected; if she chooses not to cover her face, her freedom not to do so must be guaranteed. Such rules privilege the Western European way of life, but that is the price to be paid for European hospitality. These rules should be clearly stated and enforced, by repressive measures – against foreign fundamentalists as well as against our own racists – where necessary.

Third, a new kind of international military and economic intervention will have to be invented – a kind of intervention that avoids the neocolonial traps of the recent past. The cases of Iraq, Syria and Libya demonstrate how the wrong sort of intervention (in Iraq and Libya) as well as non-intervention (in Syria, where, beneath the appearance of non-intervention, external powers such as Russia and Saudi Arabia are deeply involved) end up in the same deadlock.

Fourth, most important and most difficult of all, there is a need for radical economic change which would abolish the conditions that create refugees. Without a transformation in the workings of global capitalism, non-European refugees will soon be joined by migrants from Greece and other countries within the Union. When I was young, such an organised attempt at regulation was called communism. Maybe we should reinvent it. Maybe this is, in the long term, the only solution.