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The Refugee Crisis and Our Connected Histories of Colonialism and Empire

This is the first article in our series on refugees. For more information on the series, please click here.

by Gurminder K Bhambra, University of Warwick

Attempts to address the current crisis often seek to make distinctions between 'refugees' and 'migrants' and between refugees / migrants and citizens. But, I suggest, these distinctions are part of the problem. Part of the solution is to rethink our histories of 'national states' – and the rights and claims they enable – through a 'connected sociologies' approach that acknowledges the shared histories that bring states and colonies together.

The crisis – or tragedy – currently playing out on, and within, the borders of Europe cannot have escaped anyone's attention. Especially not after pictures of the body of the 3 year old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, circulated around the world. Equally shocking, although in a different way, were the images of refugees being taken, without their knowledge, to camps on trains in Hungary. The crisis is not new, but is newly gaining traction within European news media and wider political and public opinion. It is confused with ongoing debates on immigration, the free movement of people within the EU, and the nature of our obligations within international refugee law. While these are distinct issues, they are also, as I will go on to suggest in conclusion, profoundly connected through our shared histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The immediate context for the current situation is the war in Syria and conflicts across North Africa and the Middle East – conflicts within which Europe has played a central role. Caught between Assad and ISIS, and the violence and destruction perpetrated by both, Syrians have been fleeing in historical numbers and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Turkey, with an existing population of 74 million, has taken in close to two million refugees from Syria; Lebanon has taken in over a million, despite only having a population of 4.5million.

Europe, on the other hand, has been largely bickering over how many refugees to take, whether they are genuinely escaping conditions of war, or speculating on how these 'floods' or 'swarms' of 'migrants' would irreducibly alter the face of Europe. With a couple of notable exceptions – Sweden, primarily, and more recently, Germany – European Union (EU) member countries seem to have been more interested in scaremongering than honouring their treaty obligations to refugees under international law.

All EU countries are signatories to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the subsequent 1967 Protocol. This means that we are obligated, by law and not just by moral conscience, to comply with their substantive provisions and to offer refuge and protection to people fleeing political or other forms of persecution. These obligations initially fall upon the country where refugees first enter, but the Schengen Agreement implies entry in one country is entry in all participating in that Agreement (though this is technically restricted for asylum seekers, the lack of internal border controls makes it difficult to

police in practice). In addition, European Union membership entails common responsibility. This has been a particularly divisive issue in the UK which has an 'opt out' from such common responsibilities given that it is not in Schengen. Many formerly communist countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania) are also resisting the proposal for quotas that would enable the responsibilities for refugees to be shared among EU states.

What many post-communist countries seem not to be mindful of is that their own rhetoric against accepting refugees feeds into a broader discourse in many Western European countries about limiting the internal movement of European citizens. After all, this is precisely what the UK is seeking to negotiate prior to its proposed referendum on EU membership, with mobile workers from former communist states a particular concern. Within the EU, free movement is a right for all citizens and it is the numbers of Eastern Europeans moving to the West that have primarily concerned right-wing parties like the UK Independence Party. If Europe does not share its responsibilities towards refugees, the likely outcome will be restrictions on the movement of all people within the EU with the repercussions particularly severe on the populations of Eastern European countries.

While refugees have rights under international law, people who come for other reasons are labelled as migrants and deemed not to have any claims upon the states to which they are seeking entry. Instead, they are often regarded within the popular press and wider public opinion with suspicion (and worse) as here only for the benefits that are otherwise the preserve of legitimate citizens (it was not until recently, for example, that the British media stopped appending the word 'bogus' to the designation 'asylum seeker').

The UK's Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, recently talked about 'marauding migrants' coming to Europe and threatening our quality of life. His full quote was: "The gap in standards of living between Europe and Africa means there will always be millions of Africans with the economic motivation to try to get to Europe. ... So long as there are large numbers of pretty desperate migrants marauding around the area, there always will be a threat to the tunnel security. ... Europe can't protect itself, preserve its standard of living and social infrastructure if it has to absorb millions of migrants from Africa."

In a similar vein, Jürgen Habermas – one of the most prominent and respected commentators on the question of Europe – has suggested, in his book *Europe: The Faltering Project*, that 'the painful transition to post-colonial immigrant societies' within Europe is occurring alongside 'the humiliating conditions of growing social inequality' associated with the pressures of globalized labour markets.

While the tone of the two may be different, in both statements migrants are presented as responsible for the decline of the welfare and social settlement within Europe and for increasing social and economic inequality within the continent. There is no discussion by either Hammond or Habermas of the desperate conditions *elsewhere* that force people to migrate; conditions, historically created, for the most part, by European colonial powers.

Just as Western countries (their media and many politicians) fail to connect the geo-politics of war and displacement to their own foreign policies, so they fail to see that the gap in living standards between Europe and other countries is not a natural gap. The economic motivation that drives poorer people to migrate has been produced and continues to be reproduced by practices emanating from richer countries and their own deficient

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understandings of their global dominance. Europe's relatively high standard of living and social infrastructure have not been established or maintained separate from either the labour and wealth of others, or the creation of misery elsewhere.

Attempts to address these issues frequently seek to make distinctions between 'refugees' and 'migrants' but it is these distinctions that are part of the problem. While Al Jazeera has recently set out why it will no longer use the term 'migrant' and prefers, instead, to talk about people crossing the Mediterranean as 'refugees', I would wish to make a stronger argument. One that recognises our obligations to people coming to these shores, whether as refugees or migrants, by virtue of our connected histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Otherwise, the purpose of the distinctions is to divide people into those who 'deserve' our obligation and those who do not (just as there are attempts at distinctions otherwise between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor).

Migrants and refugees, by definition, are excluded from the history of the state understood in national terms and thus from the history of belonging to the political community that enjoys rights and claims upon that state. This exclusion from the history of belonging is then used to justify their exclusion in the present from entry to those states and from sharing in its wealth and resources.

Maintaining a distinction between migrant / refugee, on the one hand, and citizen, on the other, however, is based on an erroneous historical understanding that separates states and colonies. In contrast, I argue for the need to understand the contemporary crisis in the context of the connected histories that bring states and colonies within a single frame.

Europe's posited others have always been very much a part of Europe's broader imperial histories and its neo-imperial present. As such, we need an urgent reconsideration of the presentation of people as 'other' and of the ways in which they are treated within Europe's societies and polities.

The failure to properly understand and account for Europe's colonial past, cements a political division between 'legitimate' citizens with recognized claims upon the state and migrants / refugees without the rights to make such claims (or, for the latter, only those rights recognised in international law). If belonging to the history of the nation is what traditionally confers rights upon individuals (as most forms of citizenship demonstrate) then, I argue, it is incumbent upon us to recognise the connected histories and sociologies that would see migrants /refugees as already having claims upon the states they wish to enter. It is this that would enable different ways of addressing the crises that we currently face.

At this point, some would argue: why should those EU countries which don't have an imperial past be held accountable for the historical legacies of those countries that do?

The EU is not only constituted by colonial states, that is, by states with individual colonial pasts. Rather, as Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson have argued in their timely project *Eurafrica*, the EU (or EEC) was predicated on the very idea of bringing Africa as a 'dowry to Europe'; that is, Africa's natural resources – its land, labour, and markets – were seen to be available for the European project and were deemed to be central to any possibility for its future success.

The issue, then, is not only about the colonies brought to the European project by individual European states, but the fact that the very European

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project itself was based upon the idea of the joint colonization of Africa as a European endeavour. Any state that joins the EU, takes on not only the benefits of membership but has to share in the responsibilities emanating from the continuing legacies of its shared colonial history.

Europe, being the wealthiest continent on the planet, can afford to take in more refugees and migrants. Indeed, as I have argued, Europe's wealth is not unrelated to the poverty and misery in other places that produces people as refugees and migrants.

If we want a different Europe in the present and the future, then we need to narrate the colonial past of its constituent countries and the implications of the colonial past in the very project of Europe itself. We need to acknowledge the imperial past as the very condition of possibility of Europe and European countries today – with all the rights, duties, and obligations to reparatory justice that that entails.

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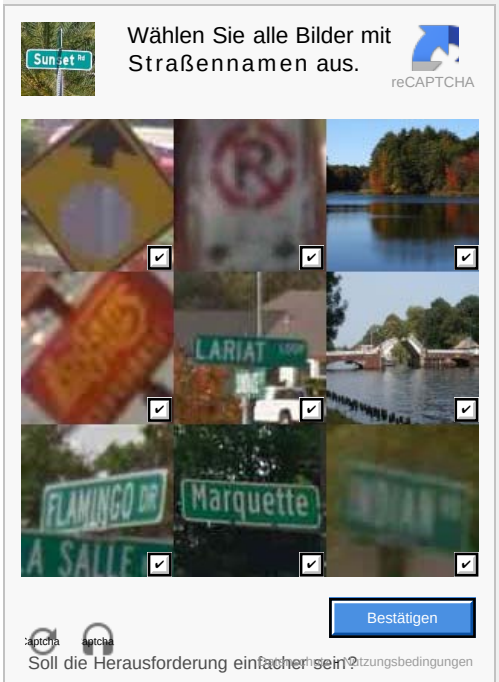

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