On seeking asylum from poverty:
Why the refugee/migrant paradigm cannot hold

Summary

This paper explores the ‘politics of labelling’ in the UK in relation to the perceived migration ‘crisis’ of 2014-present. Drawing upon philosophical insights in relation to types of violence, I argue that the moral distinction that sustains the labels ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ in the present context is untenable, and find that:

- The words we use when we talk about people on the move have real, material impact on those people’s lives.
- The many people trying to reach Europe during the migration ‘crisis’ of recent years — some fleeing conflict in the Middle East, others coming from Africa and South-East Asia for similar or different reasons — have been represented in our public debate by a binary discourse, according to which each is either a ‘refugee’, fleeing conflict, or a ‘migrant’, travelling through choice, for ‘economic’ reasons.
- This refugee/migrant paradigm has been embraced and utilised across the British political spectrum, with the ideological Right seeking to keep out so-called ‘economic migrants’ and the Left championing slogans like ‘refugees are welcome’ in response.
- But, as I argue in this paper, this ‘politics of labelling’ is not only flawed in its binary construction of identity, which goes against the grain of people’s real, complex lives, it also reinforces a dubious moral distinction: that people seeking to escape poverty are in some sense less deserving of asylum than people seeking to escape armed conflict.
- I conclude that it is possible to seek asylum from poverty, and that the refugee/migrant paradigm that has developed in recent years should be resisted for the false moral distinction it draws, and the policies of asylum denial this enables.

Introduction

An important fact, recently recognised by the Mixed Migration Platform, is that the ‘language of migration [...] and the implications it can have for the protection of people on the move, cannot be underestimated’.¹ Media coverage of people trying to enter the EU from the Middle East, South-East Asia and Africa has, in recent years, made much of the difference between ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’ on the one hand, and ‘economic migrants’ or simply ‘migrants’ on the other. While the former have legitimacy in fleeing to Europe for protection from the violence of war and persecution, the latter are represented as essentially coming through choice rather than necessity and should be encouraged to stay in their own countries and help build stronger, more resilient economies. Or so we are told.

Politicians from across the mainstream political spectrum have also adopted this framing, for example in the UK, with former Prime Minister David Cameron’s notorious ‘swarm’ and ‘bunch of migrants’ comments emblematic of representations by the British political Right, and Jeremy Corbyn (the leader of the UK Labour party) and others on the Left emphasising that ‘refugees are welcome’. Both sides of this polarised debate accept, at least implicitly, this typology of people on the move arriving on Europe’s shores; categorical, moral and legal distinctions between the refugee and the migrant.

This paper explores the basis of the distinction between refugees and migrants and employs the concept of structural violence – as developed in particular by the renowned peace studies scholar Johan Galtung and the philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek – to argue that such a moral distinction cannot hold. Through a critical analysis of what the refugee/migrant paradigm discursively achieves, I argue that it should be contested in favour of a hybrid view, wherein it is altogether possible to seek asylum or refuge from the ‘structural’ violence of poverty with the same urgency and moral considerations at stake as in cases of people fleeing the ‘direct’ violence of war, detention, torture and persecution, in countries of origin. Of course, individual people on the move can be subject to both forms of violence too; they may leave their country of origin to find a better living elsewhere, and be subject to direct violence by, for example, traffickers and border guards while on the move. This argument is rooted in a postcolonial view of global political economy. I conclude that we cannot make a meaningful moral or ethical distinction between ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ and that this explanatory paradigm and binary representation must therefore be vigorously contested.

‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’?
The politics of labelling in the European ‘migrant crisis’

The ongoing attempts by large numbers of people coming from the Middle East, South-East Asia and Africa to enter European countries, many arriving in Turkey or on Greek and Italian islands and many others drowning en route, have been at a heightened level since early 2015. The increased numbers of people desperately seeking entry to Europe and risking life and limb to achieve this goal has led to political debate across the continent – and not least in the UK – about a European ‘migrant crisis’.

As with all such debates, whether it is being played out in parliament, in the news, on social media, or in our homes and workplaces, the construction of a ‘migrant crisis’ is characterised by a particular sort of discourse. I use ‘discourse’ here to mean structured ‘ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feelings, beliefs [...] and the social world’. But discursive representations do more than represent, they also achieve concrete changes in the social world, since their ontological, ethical and political dimensions can instigate and justify or prohibit our material action or inaction on the issues, processes and actors represented:

“Many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information [...] [but] are perhaps intended, solely or partly, to evince emotion or to prescribe conduct or to influence it in special ways.”

In this sense, discourses and the representations that they are made of amount not to a simple ‘linguistic system’ – a structured set of words to draw upon when we talk about something – nor ‘a mere intersection of things and words’, but rather ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. Discourses have concrete, material effects on our lives; because we see and interpret what happens in the world in particular ‘discursive’ ways, so we act in the world in a way that accords with those discursive representations. What we do, including how we treat others, is shaped by how we speak about, represent and interpret the social world and their place in it. Or, to put it in yet another

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5 Ibid., p. 53.
6 Ibid., p. 54.
way, while everyday linguistic representations and tropes like metaphors are in a sense ‘neither good nor bad’ and are ‘simply commonplace and inescapable’, nevertheless ‘metaphors can kill’.7

The very framing of this recent surge in migration to Europe as a ‘crisis’ is, as Heaven Crawley notes, a means of achieving a particular political goal— that of persuading the public that these new arrivals cannot be simply accepted.8 Furthermore, the migrant crisis discourse has seen a clear, central distinction drawn between two binary identities applied to the people trying to enter Europe. Each of those people is to be understood as either a ‘refugee’9 or a ‘migrant’.10 As Jørgen Carling points out, this involves a fundamental resignification of the label ‘migrant’, since this has traditionally been used as a catch-all term employed by many international organisations, including most branches of the United Nations,11 to refer to people moving between countries, of which refugees may be a particular variety.12 The new refugee/migrant paradigm employed for the purposes of explaining and representing the motives of those coming to Europe has been utterly pervasive in mainstream British political culture. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the news media. The BBC went so far as to offer an entire article discussing ‘the battle over the words we use to describe migrants’, noting that Al-Jazeera News had opted to abandon the term ‘migrant’ altogether (with the Washington Post also meeting this as a possibility), because of the pejorative status the term attained in 2015, and the obviously desperate situation of those being branded ‘migrants’ in boats and camps at Europe’s borders.13 The distinction has become so entrenched at the heart of the migrant crisis discourse that the BBC’s attempt in March 2016 to offer an overview of the situation as it developed over the previous year states: ‘More than a million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe in 2015’.14

But the refugee/migrant paradigm has not been confined to media representations of the situation. Politicians from across the spectrum have been integral to the production of these discursive representations. An interview with British television channel ITV, in which then Prime Minister David Cameron discussed the role of UK law enforcement in stopping ‘criminal gangs’ from ‘trafficking migrants’, garnered much controversy after he added that ‘you’ve got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean’, with Labour’s interim leader Harriet Harman seeing a need to remind people that “he is talking about people and not insects”.15 In fact, his choice of metaphor was extremely telling— and nowhere is George Lakoff’s point, discussed above, that ‘metaphors can kill’ more clear than here. The great anticolonial scholar and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, wrote, in his 1961 masterpiece, The Wretched of the Earth, the book that has inspired anticolonial and postcolonial scholarship ever since:

“In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man’s reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of fowlness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary.”16

But Cameron was only drawing upon a discursive representation already well established in relation to the current situation. Just a few months before his ‘swarm’ comment, Sun columnist, Katie Hopkins, had penned a column of racist invective for Britain’s most-read newspaper using the subtitle ‘make no mistake these migrants are like cockroaches’.17 In other words, the language of colonialism identified by Fanon is alive and well in the construction of the figure of the

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9 BBC (2015), ‘The battle over the words used to describe migrants’, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34061097
'economic migrant' in current British political discourse. The 'migrant', like the 'native' or the 'savage', is represented as a less-than-human other.

While the right wing of the political and media establishment has relished the opportunity to revive the politics of race and division through the politics of labelling on migration, the British Left has also played a significant role. Despite politicians from the Left, including Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and media outlets using the term 'refugee' as much as possible, this discursive engagement merely serves to reinforce, rather than abolish, binary identities. The careful use of the term 'refugee crisis' by the Left has, in practice, served not to escape the refugee/migrant paradigm, but to displace the term 'migrant crisis' with its discursive opposite, a move which conceals that 'migrant' is now a dirty word.

**Structural violence and postcolonial order**

If discourses go beyond language, though, and are instead about structured representations that are capable of achieving social action and inaction, the really interesting question is: what does the refugee/migrant paradigm achieve, politically, socially and materially? Here, I argue that the categories and moral judgements underpinning the constructed distinction between 'refugee' and 'migrant' identities in the present debate serve the function of providing us — not only political leaders but also individual citizens — with a means of politically, ethically and materially responding to the crisis.

As Alexander Betts, Director of the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford, told the BBC in 2015: "‘Refugee’ implies that we have an obligation to people [...] It implies that we have to let them on to our territory and give them the chance to seek asylum". The corollary to this is that if we are able to classify some of those seeking to enter Europe as ‘migrants’, we could reasonably deny them entry — our politicians and border forces could block and deport them with impunity, and we citizens could sleep restfully at night, our consciences clear. A neat discursive, political and ultimately material solution to a complex and messy problem. But does the refugee/migrant distinction stand up to scrutiny?

It is clear that the discursive representations of refugees and migrants rest on a moral distinction. But on what basis are these categories supposed to be morally distinguishable? The answer seems to lie in violence, or the threat of violence. Those fleeing civil war, arbitrary detention or torture, and religious persecution, are understood to be ‘refugees’ in the current debate.

The term ‘economic migrant’ has now been abbreviated in media and political discourse to simply ‘migrant’. This allows for the linguistically and conceptually clear binarism, according to which all of those arriving in Europe are either ‘refugees’ or ‘migrants’. ‘Migrants’ are represented, unlike refugees, as people making a choice. They are seen as being motivated by economics (and, often by implication, greed) rather than fear of violence, and thus as being less legitimate seekers of asylum in Europe. But what of the torture and persecution and inhumane treatment of living in poverty? What of the violence of economic exploitation? Is this really of such a different category that we cannot consider it, in some way equivalent or analogous, to war-violence?

While debates persist over the nature and justification of different forms of violence (for example, is property damage violence? At what point does an aggressive encounter become violent? Are verbal threats and so-called ‘micro-aggressions’ violence?), there has, at least in critical academic circles, emerged something of a consensus over the idea that there are at least two broad forms of violence. This framework, popular with the Left because it helps to explain how ostensibly ‘peaceful’ capitalist states are in their day-to-day functioning underwritten by violence, involves a conceptual distinction (but also an essential unity) between what Johan Galtung has called ‘violent acts’ on the one hand and ‘violent facts’ on the other.

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Violent acts, examples of what Galtung calls ‘direct violence’, and Slavoj Žižek calls ‘subjective violence’, are how violence is constituted at the level of the empirically observable. That is to say they are instances or events of observable (if not always observed) violence – whether a fist-fight, a sexual assault, or a heavy artillery battle – between individuals or groups identifiable as agents in that they are directly inflicting pain and suffering.

Violent facts, on the other hand – variously termed ‘structural’, ‘institutional’ and ‘systemic’ violence – are the forms of violence at work in the day-to-day functioning of large-scale social relations of dominance and exploitation. Structural violence is realised at a less observable level than direct violence.

The distinction between subjective and systemic violence, elaborated by Žižek, is important in that events involving shocking acts of subjective violence can often be understood as an outburst or eruption resulting from the deeper, unobservable structural violence which sustains everyday life in contemporary societies. For example, Žižek points out that when young French people rioted on the streets of Paris and Marseille in 2005, attacking police officers, burning cars and destroying buildings in what he calls a Lacanian ‘passage a l’acte’ or ‘blind acting-out’, they did so because they are systematically denied any real means of representation in France, where, especially in relation to French people whose families originated in former colonies, popular media discourse has framed young ‘Arabs’ as a social problem and threat.

I have argued elsewhere that riots in the UK can often be best understood as an explosion of subjective or direct violence, usually triggered or enabled by the intensification or sudden visibility of structural violence. In the context of domestic British political economy, this usually means the intensification of economic exploitation and precarity – the increase in student tuition fees, police shootings in deprived neighbourhoods and racial discrimination by law enforcement, as well as the widening gap between rich and poor, including the co-existence, cheek-by-jowl, of deprived housing estates and opulent shopping malls. If work and everyday economic life are becoming more ‘precarious’ in the UK, how much more precarious are they in so-called ‘developing’ countries – the countries further along what Immanuel Wallerstein calls the ‘commodity chain’, where margins of surplus are most squeezed and social returns on capitalism lower. In these ‘peripheral’ countries, to use Wallerstein’s terminology, whose role in the globalised economy is to act as a source of cheap materials and labour for the wealthy ‘core’, exploitation and inequality is always at its most intense, comparative to the wealthy West.

Sweatshops, hard labour with few labour rights, scavenging on landfill sites, extracting toxic ingredients from recycled Western hi-tech equipment, or simple unemployment, hand-to-mouth existence, poverty (relative and absolute), hunger, suffering, or death from curable diseases - these are all things that any of us would seek asylum from. Many of those who risk their lives, and those of their children and families, to enter the EU on dangerously overloaded boats can legitimately be described as ‘economic migrants’, but they too are ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘refugees’ from poverty, and to deny them asylum from their suffering is no more morally acceptable than denying asylum to those fleeing armed conflict or religious persecution. They too face very real and immediate threats to their bodily integrity. This is not to deny the agency of, or choices made by, people on the move for ‘economic’ reasons. It is rather to emphasise that just as we would consider it unconscionably offensive to suggest that refugees from armed conflict or persecution are ‘choosing’ not to be persecuted or raped or tortured or murdered, so we should resist emphasising choice in our explanations of people on the move looking for work or fleeing poverty.

Moreover, asylum is not something to be selectively and begrudgingly granted to those arriving in Europe after perilous journeys from Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia. It is, rather, the repaying of a debt. Not the sort of quantifiable,

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massive monetary debt that countries in those regions are thought to owe the IMF or World Bank, but rather the sort of incalculable debt that Europe owes to the people born in regions that European imperialism and colonialism ravaged for centuries. The structural violence intrinsic to today’s global political economy, as it is exerted upon these ‘peripheral’ regions, is one of the costs of the triumphal racism and the brutal, murderous exploitation so characteristic of Europe’s recent history. The price for Europe is that it cannot maintain its borders in the way it has, and that it cannot exclude from its population any longer the ‘swarms’ it once controlled and exploited in faraway places.

Conclusion: Contesting the refugee/migrant paradigm

I would now like to recall just one of the horrific stories from recent years in relation to migration to Europe, but not one that fits with the dominant narrative of the migrant crisis discourse. It was reported in June 2015 that the body of a man was found on a rooftop in Richmond, south-west London. He died falling from the undercarriage of an aeroplane en route from Johannesburg to London Heathrow, to which he had been clinging with the hope of surviving the trip to the UK. His companion did survive the flight.27 It does not matter whether those two people, or the thousands of other people arriving in the EU by boat or drowning in the Mediterranean as they try, are fleeing war, persecution or poverty – they were searching for a better life and they sought it in the relatively wealthy and secure countries of the European Union. The relative wealth and security of these European countries today, meanwhile, is a product of their relative position of global political economic power, itself a legacy of their colonialist past. We Europeans owe it to those risking life and limb to recognise that asylum may be sought from poverty just as much as war, and that structural violence can be just as immediate, terrifying and threatening as direct violence.

To further illustrate what I mean, I would like to return to Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a psychiatrist by training. His interest was in the effects of colonialism on the mental life and mental health of the colonised. The vast majority of people arriving at European borders in recent years are coming from former colonies. While the formal trappings of direct control that marked the colonial era were largely dismantled in the 20th century, postcolonial scholars, often drawing upon the work of Fanon, but also on global political economy, remind us that the present global economic order – the ‘North-South’ divide, for want of a better terminology – has been structured by the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

Put aside for now the ancient etymology of the term ‘asylum’ as an inviolable sacred space and instead consider the specific way it came to be used as a replacement for ‘hospital of madmen’ or ‘madhouse’28 in the phrase ‘lunatic asylum’, especially in 19th century Britain. The asylum in this sense was supposed to act as a refuge from the terrifying relentlessness of the madness that hounded its patients in the outside world.

What would it take to drive someone to desperation? To make them desperate enough that they would risk their own health, their own life – would risk the drowning of their infant children – to find asylum? How about a life in a place where unemployment is the norm, where formal education is unavailable or unaffordable, where the scarcity and cost of food and clean water leave you and your family hungry, where illnesses considered ‘curable’ in Europe take the lives of thousands, where infant mortality remains high, and where you know that no amount of industriousness, of sheer will and commitment and self-belief, can help you to achieve your dreams, since the resources you need simply do not exist? This world exists for many people, and is a product of an unequal global political economy forged by European colonialism in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Empire is coming home to roost, harder and faster than at any other time since decolonisation began, and the role of Europe cannot be to scrabble desperately for excuses to exclude people – an approach that will, in any case, likely fail. We should instead be doing all we can to both support those who have made treacherous journeys for a new life, and to address the structural inequalities that have led them to do so. So, we must reject the distinction between ‘refugee’

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and ‘migrant’ and perhaps, rather than seek a third, ostensibly more neutral but ultimately no less dehumanising label (‘displaced persons’, for example), we should instead call people ‘people’.

To illustrate how a seemingly small change in language neutralises some of the most hateful discourse in our societies today, we can simply swap ‘migrants’ for ‘people’ in more or less any Daily Express front-page headline: PEOPLE DO TAKE BRITISH JOBS; ALL PEOPLE TO GET A BRITISH PENSION; SHOCKING SCALE OF PEOPLE PROBLEM; PEOPLE MADNESS. Ridiculous though they seem, these re-phrased headlines get to the heart of the current migration ‘crisis’ discourse: our present language on migration is fundamentally geared toward dehumanisation, to rendering people as something other than people, so that we might, at best, actively ignore their plight. Judith Butler has already captured this dynamic perfectly, and so I turn to her for some closing words that underscore why the refugee/migrant paradigm cannot hold:

“[T]he shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as “destructible” and “ungrievable”. Such populations are “lose-able”, or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalises their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of “the living.”
