

Western democracy and the necessity of the 'illegal traveller'

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United States

A migrant toddler's body washes up on the beach at Bodrun, Turkey. A father and daughter drown together in the Rio Grande. The trump administration in the United States separates families and locks children in cages. In Manus Island and on Christmas Island, persons seeking asylum in Australia stitch their lips shut in silent protest at their inhumane and indefinite incarceration.¹ What are we as human beings if we allow our governments to create what Agamben calls *states of exception* in which some people take on the status of *homo sacer* – unwanted ones, rejects, “vermin people”? Mbembe speaks of *necropolitics*, Khanna talks of *human disposability*, Bauman speaks of some lives as *human waste*, and Scheper-Hughes speaks of people who are rubbished.² Refugees and asylum-seekers, trapped in legal limbo and subjected to enforced anomie and destitution are perhaps the world's most disposable people. Refugee children, lacking legal status in any country live lives of unimaginable precarity. As Bhabha notes:

Refugee children and their female caregivers are much *less* likely than adult men to reach a wealthy destination state where they can make an application for permanent refugee protection. Though, as I have just noted, children constitute almost half of the world's refugees, they amount to less than a third of asylum seekers in developed states. Among the majority of children who do not make it to a developed state to claim asylum, some 1-4 million live in impoverished and overcrowded refugee camps and settlements...Tragically, more than two thirds of today's refugees have spent five or more years “warehoused” in such camps where the average length of stay is close to twenty years. These refugees include millions of children trapped in a limbo of *temporary permanence*, dependence and

¹ For Bodrun see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>. For Rio Grande, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/us/father-daughter-border-drowning-picture-mexico.html>. For migrant children in cages, see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/11/written-testimony-kids-cages-inhumane-treatment-border>. For Manus Island see <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/dec/04/four-asylum-seekers-manus-sew-lips-together-mass-hunger-strike> and for Christmas Island see <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-11-19/asylum-seekers-sew-lips-together/2343854>.

² For related discussion, see Bauman (2003) on lives as human waste; Khanna (2009a) on disposable people; Mbembe (2003) on necropolitics; and Scheper-Hughes (1997) on people who get rubbished.

despair, where only periodic aid handouts from international organizations or intracamp fights interrupt the endless flow of boredom and depression induced by the lack of prospects. (2014, p. 209).

In *'Illegal' Traveller*, Khosravi speaks of the dehumanization of undocumented border crossers. Borders are “where the third world grates against the first world and bleeds” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 12, cited in Khosravi, 2010, p. 28). Asylum seekers “are discursively constituted as ‘non-agents’, that strategically appropriate a refugee discourse in their own self-preservation through performing ‘victimcy” (p. 72). Khosravi elaborates:

...pain and suffering have become the hallmarks of refugeeness. The term ‘refugee’ generally signifies deprived and underprivileged people. A ‘real’ refugee is thus supposed to be a ‘profound,’ ‘poor,’ ‘traumatized,’ ‘serious,’ and of course ‘sad’ person...a happy, well-dressed, good-looking refugee is a contradiction. Refugees have to perform ‘refugeeness.’ (p.73)

Fleeing Iran as a teenager, Khosravi learned to perform this abjection of refugeeness:

To have a chance of getting refugee status, one must have the ability to translate one’s life story into Eurocentric juridical language and to perform the role expected of a refuge...I was advised to wear dirty clothes when going to the UNHCR and to look ‘sad’ and ‘profound’. (p. 33)

Khosravi continues:

The victim role followed me for a long time beyond the walls of the refugee camp...I had left no space for enjoyment, agency, self-representation or individual background. In that interview...my self-represented victim role appeared, stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history. (pp. 71-72)

Malkki (2006) notes that through depoliticization, refugees “stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child” (p. 378). This process creates Others who are conceptualized as mute and ahistorical, and without agency. Refugees do not need to be consulted, their voices do not need to be heard, because the international script for refugeeness is predetermined, and enabling refugees “to establish narrative authority over [their] own circumstances” (p. 393) could only lead to trouble. The price all of us pay, however, is significant, Malkki notes: “For if humanism can only constitute itself on the bodies of dehistoricized, archetypal refugees and other similarly styled victims—if clinical and philanthropic modes of humanitarianism are the only options—then citizenship in this human community itself remains curiously, indecently, outside of history” (p. 398).

The refugee, therefore, is a bureaucratic formulation designed to exclude, and to permit actions on the body of the refugee that would never be permitted on person with full human rights. Notions of justice necessarily occur within frames of representation and it is useless to seek to reconceptualize the treatment of *the refugee* without probing the discursive contexts within which the political world has chosen to delimit the human status of *the refugee*.

Violence and social death

Mechanisms have been developed by sovereigns to ensure what Patterson (1985) referred to as *social death*. These have sprung, in part, from a tightening of national borders. As Allon (2002) and Bigo (2006) note, paranoid fears of global insecurity are stoked so that nation states are invested with draconian powers to regulate the flow of marginal peoples across the world. In Europe, billions of euros are paid to Turkey to

stanch the migrant flow across the Mediterranean, with no apparent concern for the welfare of the incarcerated migrants, the conditions of their incarceration, or the process by which asylum or repatriation is determined. The U.S. president has made a similar deal with Mexico and Central American countries to keep migrants from reaching the U.S. Chimni (2009) speaks of “muscular humanitarianism”—policies that, while masquerading as humanitarian, are unmistakably self-interested, authoritarian, and often draconian. One further qualification should be added. Simon (1998) ties the authoritarian response to refugee people to the growth of incarceration across the western world. The development of a globalized and often privatized prison-industrial complex that has gained increasing influence in the world of refugee policy.

The sovereign and the constitution of the abject

Agamben’s notion of *bare life* and *state of exception* offer a political explanation for the way in which ostensibly progressive and democratic countries create conditions of abjection for refugees.³ Agamben ties the existential condition of the *disposable* refugee to the workings of sovereign power thereby questioning individual liberty as a foundational assumption of western democracy—a system that permits citizens to benefit from its freedoms only because it can invoke autocratic powers of extra-judicial regulation to control and manage its Others.

Sovereign power has the capacity to take away the participatory powers of a person as citizen thus reducing that person to *homo sacer* or *bare life*. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben (2002) offers a detailed inquiry into Primo Levi’s account of the

³ For details see Agamben, 1998, 2002, 2005.

development of what came to be known as *Muselmann*, zombie-like persons who, while not having died, experienced living death. “The Jew is a human being who has been deprived of all *Würde*, all dignity: he is merely human—and for this reason non-human”. *Bare life*, therefore, is a form of life that begins where normal life ends. In *bare life* people do not live, yet they are alive.” (p. 68). Their eventual death, for the Nazis, became merely “the fabrication of corpses,” (p. 68), exclusion from natural life and political life for the *Muselmann* having already taken place.

We can only enjoy the freedoms that we in the West, enjoy because we invest our sovereigns with the power to create *bare life*. Declarations of rights, Agamben notes, apply only to persons within the normal juridico-political order. The state is not constructed on a natural order based on being human. One becomes a sovereign subject by virtue of birth. Refugees, “by breaking the continuity between *nativity* and *nationality*... put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis” (p. 130). NGOs are complicit too because of their uncritical adherence to the political status quo: “humanitarian organizations...can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the power they ought to fight” (p. 133).

Mbembe (2003) points out that mechanisms of social death have deeper origins. Such necropolitical intent was also central to the Othering and states of exclusion at the core colonialism. It is no coincidence that the colonial powers of yesteryear are handling the flow of world refugees using a state of exception. Such an approach to inferiorized others is naturalized in a colonial mentality. The current flow of refugees from the Middle East, for example, is eliciting the invocation of draconian states by Western powers that reflexively invoke a necropolitical authority to manage the chickens that

have come home to roost as formerly colonized subjects knock on their door. This kind of humanitarian crisis, it appears, requires a *muscular* response from the sovereign.

Papastergiadis (2006) refers to refugee camps as a form of limbo, and he points out that moral outrage or horror is unlikely to have any influence on the presence of such camps precisely because the construction of the camps, as discussed above, “is consistent with modern democratic definitions of executive power” (p. 437) and furthermore that “the normalization of the state of exception is also embedded in a deeper process of depoliticization” which is evident in the “ubiquitous colonization of the sphere of private life by the state and the market forces of globalization” (p. 437).

The ethics of psychoanalysis and the limit case of ‘the refugee’.

Understanding subjectivization—and the desubjectivization and depoliticization involved in the imposition of *bare life* and the *state of exception*—is inherently a political process. As Butler (1997) stated, subjectivity necessarily implies *subjection* to prevailing discursive practices. Questions can be raised about whether psychoanalysis is so ideologically bound to conventional power structures as to make it unusable for deciphering a limit situation such as the production of refugee subjectivity. Khanna states unabashedly that “Psychoanalysis is a colonial discipline... that formalized and perpetuated an idea of uncivilized, primitive, concealed, and timeless colonized peoples. As a discipline, it formalized strategies to normalize a form of civilized being constituted through colonial political dynamics” (p. 6)

In 1981, Jacques Derrida presented an address in which he took the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) to task for a waffling and obscurantist statement which failed to condemn torture by the military junta in Argentina. Derrida castigated

the IPA for seeking refuge in an abstract resolution that enabled the organization to distance itself from the realities of torture and political oppression in Argentina. Rather than becoming a tool with the potential to “constitute an irreplaceable means for deciphering [forms of violence] and hence a prerequisite for their denunciation”, Derrida said psychoanalysis risked, instead, serving “as a conduit for these forms of violence” (p. 74). Bar-Haim noted that “Derrida insisted that the IPA should not be silent. To many in the audience, his speech seemed to call for a radical revision of the psychoanalytic “Magna Carta” by encouraging psychoanalytic institutions to be much more engaged, standing at the centre of real political events” (np).

Derrida charged the IPA with being *apolitical*, and even *apsychoanalytic*. In the interest of advancing a view of the subject that neutralized ethical concerns, the official body of psychoanalysis dissociated “the psychoanalytic sphere from the sphere of the citizen” (p. 77). Derrida, Algerian by birth, noted “that there is practically no psychoanalysis in Africa, white or black, just as there is practically no psychoanalysis in Asia or in the South Seas. These are among those parts of ‘the rest of the world’ where psychoanalysis has never set foot, or in any case where it has never taken off its European shoes” (1995, p. 69).

Anderson, Jenson and Keller (2011) argue that psychoanalysis and colonialism “together forged the conflicted cosmopolitan figure of the universalized, psychoanalyzable subject” and thereby produced a psychoanalytic subject which is “constitutively a colonial creature” (p. 1). Greedharry (2008) takes psychoanalysis to task for its lack of interest in the material, political, and cultural factors that produce human subjectivity” (p. 3). Can a psychoanalysis constituted around universalist,

ahistorical, and colonial notions of being, prove useful in any way in understanding terror, genocide, violence, or the kind of displacement constituted in the body of *the refugee*? Does psychoanalysis have a capacity to understand subjectivity as constructed through political violence and through constructions such as nationhood? Without such understandings how can we possibly comprehend the function of nether zones of *bare life* and *states of exception* as an integral part of Western democracy? Is it possible that displaced persons and asylum seekers are the kind of limit persons who represent “the kind of subject that psychoanalysis is not able to imagine or provide for”?

There but for the grace of God...

Khosravi concludes his book with a story of how noted intellectual Walter Benjamin attempted to flee the Nazis by crossing the mountains from France to Spain. Having been denied an entry visa, Benjamin committed suicide and then suffered the following fate:

Not even death could save him from violence of the border regime. Not even a dead Jewish body could be tolerated. He was buried as a Catholic, under the name ‘Benjamin Walter’ in a Catholic graveyard—despite his being a secularist who believed in materialist philosophy. His displacement endures even in death. The money left with him was only enough for five years’ rent on the grave. In 1945, his remains were moved to a collective grave... his final burial place is unknown. (p. 131)

There but of the grace of God...

It seems to me that Jungians and non-Jungians could benefit from dialog where we unite around a deconstruction of colonialism, and a capacity to theorize and critique

social movements and political developments in our societies in the service of articulating a more socially inclusive, critical, activist psychoanalysis.

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