

On the value of uselessness for refugees

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For Unnecessary, Unwanted and Uncalled-for: A Workshop on Uselessness
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Abstract

This article explores the concept of uselessness as an overarching value that could help ameliorate the circumstances of forcibly displaced people. By drawing on instances of modern slavery, abuse, and warfare, and tying them together with reference to dystopian fiction, this article argues that by forcing utility upon new arrivals, we are in fact exploiting their vulnerability. It goes on to show how this exploitation most likely benefits the ownership classes, and may be detrimental to society at large. It will also show how this exploitation reaches into political discourse, where it creates division and smokescreens for otherwise controversial legislation. It concludes with a discussion of the benefits of establishing conventions and norms for allowing increasing numbers of refugees the space to be useless in an uncertain and dangerous world.

The first ripple

The world seems suddenly awash with refugees. UNHCR (2015) estimated that there were 65 million displaced people in the world that year, that “one in every 113 people on earth [was] either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee”. If climatic, economic and political predictions come to pass, this could be the first ripple in a tidal wave of displaced people. If they're lucky, the more educated and better off might be seen as useful to another country and channelled off. But the masses remain, stagnant, behind dams and fences. Adrift in foreign lands they find themselves unwanted and helpless, their uselessness decried across the political spectrum – if there can be said to be any consensus among the citizens of their host countries in Europe, it is that at the very least these people should work for their upkeep.

Yet the consequences of insisting on refugees paying their own way are both contradictory to other deep-held feelings and can be harmful both to the refugees themselves, their families and the societies into which they might find themselves thrust. To ameliorate this situation, allowing the space and time for uselessness will turn out to be a most vital concept.

A dystopian present

My 2016 novel *Pap: A 21st Century Dystopia** imagines an extreme endgame of neo-liberal capitalism, where the fictional PapCorp is the only corporation left to run the world, entirely for its own profit. The company's refugee division channels off millions of new-comers to modern day gulags, where they are imprisoned and forced to work like slaves, hidden behind enormous walls and under a burden of debt which turns out to be impossible to pay off. This is a simplified and extreme version of a situation which, for many in today's world, is all too real.

In Lebanon, for example, where one in five people are now refugees from neighbouring Syria, 60-70 percent of children are made to work, others to undertake early marriages or acquiesce to 'survival' sex and exploitation. Forced labour, meanwhile, is “increasingly common as Syrian refugees become more desperate, so much so that it may even constitute the ‘new norm’” (Freedom Fund, 2016).

In their seminal work on migrant trafficking, Salt & Stein (1997) assert that international migration should be treated as part of a global business, parts of which can be considered both legitimate and illegitimate. The UN Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air considers the organised transborder movement of people to be illegal as part of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (McAuliffe & Laczko, 2016).

Yet the benefits of migrant trafficking and forced labour often accrue to businesses considered legitimate and even ethical. We gladly turn a blind eye to the slavery and child labour which goes into making our clothes and gadgets in far off poor countries. But even within the European Union, where freedom of movement should involve rights for EU nationals finding transborder work through agencies, there are documented cases of indentured labour. The dozens of Hungarian workers held captive in the UK while making beds, for a company which had passed numerous ethical audits and supplied a number of established High Street outlets (Connett, 2015), could easily be seen as the reported tip of an iceberg of illegal activity.

* *Pap: A 21st Century Dystopia*, published by Arena Books 2016 . ISBN: 978-1-909421-75-2

Of all the people forced into leaving their homes, for whatever reason, children are always among the most vulnerable. According to Europol, a fifth of the 100,000-odd child refugees registered in the EU up to January 2016 had vanished into the underworld of organised crime (Townsend, 2016). And that was before the Refugee Youth Service found that a third of child refugees had gone missing following the widely-publicised closure of the Jungle refugee camp outside Calais (Harris, 2016). This young, criminalised underclass provide easy bait for sex traffickers and extremist groups.

Fear and division as primary narratives

Narratives are as important in political discourse as they are in fiction writing, something the most authoritarian leaders seem to grasp instinctively. In Viktor Orbán's Hungary, for example, the government used the sudden and unexplained influx of foreigners onto the streets of the capital city to reinforce existing stories and therefore also their own hold on power. So intense has been the propaganda, repeated on billboards and news campaigns, that even the more liberal and worldly Hungarians now readily associate 'migrants' with terrorism and crime; they've apparently forgotten the warm reception quarter of a million of their country folk received when fleeing from the aftermath of their rebellion against the Soviets just 60 years ago, even as they celebrate the anniversaries.

To point the blame at the 'other' is one of the oldest, and lowest, forms of political narrative. And it is a discourse into which we are all in danger of becoming implicated, unless we can remember to see it largely as a distraction from more real issues. A confused, divided and fearful public allows governments to press ahead with legislation which would not normally be permitted. A study of 1200 refugee-themed articles from across Europe in 2015 found “in the diversity of the coverage ... the initially ambivalent and eventually strong reaffirmation of a securitisation regime underlying Europe’s press response to the new arrivals” (Zaborowski & Georgiou, 2016). So it was that “barely a whimper” resulted from the passing of the UK's Investigatory Powers Act, which legalised the previously “unlawfully collecting [of] massive volumes of confidential personal data” and allowed dozens of governmental bodies access to the internet histories and personal data of everyone in the country (MacAskill, 2016).

If that sounds like some Orwellian dystopia, we would do well to remember that Orwell himself was acutely aware of the importance of language in creating a narrative. His 1946 essay on politics and the English language was highly concerned with the perceived and demonstrated decline of

English, which he wrote “must ultimately have political and economic causes,” and which would resurface in the Newspeak of his novel 1984. But while many of the words used in Orwell's time have changed, phrases like “transfer of population or rectification of frontiers” (Orwell, 1946) hold more recognisably sinister overtones these days, the underlying concept remains. Today our language turns towards bland words like 'migrant' to lump all poor displaced people under an unemotive umbrella word.

In reality, the words and categories we use to identify these people make little difference to those concerned, every individual case will necessarily be specific to those involved. What separates an economic emigrant and a refugee, after all, may be simply that one has family to send money back to, somewhere, and the other does not. But what if they don't know where their family is? The conditions from which they are fleeing may be on a spectrum of dreadfulness, but all are escaping desperation of one sort or another; nobody treks thousands of miles without provisions while risking their lives and those of the families, for fun. Yet the narratives which our politicians paint for the delight of the tabloid presses make little mention of this; so it was that the then British Prime Minister David Cameron was able to use the word “swarm” to describe refugees crossing the Mediterranean, and even defend his stance (Walton & Ross, 2015).

While these same narratives, same collective nouns and derogatory terms are repeated at us from headline-hungry media sources, the choice of stories excluded from the news is often more inciteful than what actually makes the front pages. On the ground coverage of events in Syria has been sparse, certainly since the apparent targeting by Syrian artillery of journalist Marie Colvin in Homs in 2012 (Priest, 2016). The causes of the conflict are discussed only in passing, and of those fleeting discussions many have missed the role that the extra stress of climate change had on the Arab Spring, and on Syria in particular. Because while the Assad dynasty had long been subject to dissent, and prone to the occasional outburst of violence against those dissenters (such as the 1982 Hama massacre), the Climate change-induced drought that hit the country between 2006 and 2011 was “the worst drought ever recorded there” and led to “800,000 Syrians [losing] their entire livelihoods as a result,” creating “a massive exodus of farmers, herders, and agriculturally dependent rural families from the Syrian countryside to the cities,” and “fueling unrest” (Friedman, 2013).

But at least there is some effort to report on Syria, given the international significance which the conflict may have. In Somalia and Afghanistan, from where, alongside Syria, more than 50% of the

displaced persons worldwide originate (UNHCR, 2015), the causes of the crises are too complicated, long-term and mired in foreign interests to warrant too much introspection.

Without these stories of war and climate change, of the tragedy of displacement, how can any of us in Europe begin to imagine the conditions these people are leaving behind? How could we possibly put ourselves in the desperate situation of having to walk thousands of miles before being shunted around between countries that don't want us, barred from crossing political boundaries by fences and tear gas as much as by the open seas? And this difficulty in empathising leaves open a lot of space for alternative narratives, of scare stories and false accusations. While great efforts have been made to associate the four and a half million refugees now in Europe with criminal and terrorist acts, getting the allegations to stick after the headlines has proven rather more difficult. Despite the initial reports, attacks such as those in Paris turned out to have been committed by European citizens (Farmer, 2016). In reference to a fake news story on Breitbart.com about a “mob” of migrants burning down a church in Dortmund, Germany, Agence France-Presse (2017) quoted The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's accusations that the far-right news portal had used “exaggerations and factual errors to create “an image of chaotic civil war-like conditions in Germany, caused by Islamist aggressors”.” The CEO of Breitbart is going to be President Donald Trump's chief strategist.

These displaced people, so often portrayed as a threat, are actually vulnerable to the point of helplessness. And this vulnerability is something which sits heavily on the shoulders of the displaced. In the camps that remain around Calais, where people wait for their chance to get over the English Channel into Britain, there is a lot of talk about what will happen to them. One recurring and very real fear is that they will be channelled into slavery of one form or another (Fischer P, personal conversation, 10 November 2016).

Moral Bankruptcy

In the heady days of imperial conquest, Europe considered itself a civilising force that would bring the dark-skinned barbarians up towards 'our' level. Now in our post-industrial, post-colonial present, as far off people with different faces and skin colours surpass us in all the metrics, Europe and the USA seem to have lost themselves in the politics of division and petty nationalism. Unprotected by laws of apartheid, without the benefit of coming from 'a superior race', white Americans and Europeans have become increasingly scared of the stranger. In such an environment, the so-called 'Schroedinger's migrant' is an easy target, someone to blame for stealing jobs while scrounging off

imaginary benefits which should, apparently, be going to hard-working locals.

What a civilised society would provide for refugees is security, not demonisation and barriers. As Salil Shetty, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, put it, “instead of rising to the challenge of this unprecedented crisis, many governments have been busy devising ways to keep people outside their borders while thousands are dying at sea or enduring squalid conditions in the shadow of razor-wire fences. This is moral bankruptcy of the highest order” (Amnesty International, 2015).

Among all the world's leaders, Pope Francis has been the most vocal of critics against the “moral bankruptcy” of the west. As he told refugees stranded on the Greek Island of Lesbos, “God created mankind to be one family; when any of our brothers and sisters suffer, we are all affected. We all know from experience how easy it is for some to ignore other people’s suffering and even to exploit their vulnerability. But we also know that these crises can bring out the very best in us” (Pope Francis, 2016).

Refugees need to be allowed to be useless

This constant drive for utility, the idea that everyone must be producing in order to pay for their product-heavy lives, has caused us to forget our greater, common humanity. By being brainwashed into believing that next purchase will bring us the happiness we desperately crave, we've been forced into longer hours to pay for lifestyles and possessions which we guard most precious, and we've even allowed other voices, like religion, to become submerged under spending frenzies while genuine political debate is drowned out by empty slogans and name-calling. Amidst all this, the Pope's simple act of washing refugees' feet on Holy Thursday 2016 was something that should have garnered rather more international press attention than it did. That it did not is a telling sign of our times.

Rather than being forced to scratch out a living and find ways of feeding their families while being chased and attacked like animals or forced into abusive sexual relationships, what these people need is time to be useless. These new arrivals will have suffered the kind of trauma that would have many in the west going to therapy for the rest of their lives. What they need is somewhere to be safe, to be able to regather themselves, to search for loved ones and come to terms with what they have just encountered. In failing to provide this, we may in fact be pushing people into the arms of the terrorist and criminal organisations about which we are meant to be so fearful.

The argument is not to oblige uselessness, some people might find that keeping themselves busy with work is the best way of dealing with the grief of upheaval. But the space and time to be useless should be a fundamental right to those who need it.

As far-right media outlets gain official credence and extreme headlines become more commonplace in the coming years, it's going to be vital for all our survivals that we regain our common humanity. As the late-British Member of Parliament, Tony Benn once said, “the way a government treats refugees is very instructive because it shows you how they would treat the rest of us if they thought they could get away with it” (Paul, 2015). And in a time of global insecurity and run-away climate change, these look like being circumstances which more and more people will experience in the coming years.

Uselessness as a solution

Amnesty International (2015) have come up with an eight-point plan for the world's richest countries to help alleviate the current refugee crisis, of which at least seven relate directly to giving refugees the opportunity to be useless, to allow them the space to grieve and come to terms with that through which they have just lived. As such, Amnesty call for “continuous, sufficient and predictable funding for refugee crises ... fulfilling all resettlement needs identified by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) ... safe and legal routes for refugees ... saving lives ... combat trafficking ... combat xenophobia and racism ... ensure access to territory for refugees arriving at borders.” Only the final point covers the topic of work, and that only indirectly in calling for “global ratification of the Refugee Convention,” which contains stipulations for the equal treatment of workers from refugee backgrounds.

The world is on the edge of a great upheaval. The tectonic plates of global political, economic and military power are shifting and there will probably be more losers than winners. The Trump-Putin relationship could result in a de-escalation of tensions such as Kennedy and Khrushchev achieved, or could prove to be as enduring as the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939. One thing that does appear pretty certain is that with Exxon-Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson in the State Department, acting as a bridge between the USA and Russia, greenhouse gas emissions are unlikely to be brought under control before tipping the global climate over a point which we may, in fairness, already have surpassed. The droughts, the pollution and private ownership of watersheds, global extinctions and severe weather that will affect the whole planet, combined with the prolongation of

the type of industrial and economic growth already driving many problems, from de-employment to resource depletion, will mean that even more people will most probably be displaced in the near future. Climate change will be indiscriminate, eventually the reality of the world will force people from even the richest cities. What will happen to the green lawns of Las Vegas when water becomes too expensive to ship in, now the water table is dry? How will Amsterdam cope when 1-in-100-year storms start battering the dykes and sea walls every winter?

In this uncertain future, no-one is completely immune from the threat of one day falling victim to the destruction and insecurity of war and climatic changes. The way in which we deal with people now asking for our aid will not be forgotten. For the sake of our future selves, for that of our children, let us all bear in mind the old saying that 'there but for the grace of God goes I.' Let us hope that, should we ever get caught up in the kind of upheavals we've seen in Syria and elsewhere, we be accorded the time and freedom to be useless for a while.

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