

European Union and the Mediterranean: the different “paintings” of the refugee concept

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Abstract

The study of migration is endowed with a complexity of meanings, symbols, images, attributes and stereotypes that have been shaped over decades. Studying and digging these nuances are key to realizing the true scope and meaning of the concept of the “refugee crisis” in the Mediterranean Sea. The ease with which discourses and images are constructed about these issues completely undermines our perceptions as individuals and society. Post-structuralism tells us that only by perceiving how things are represented can we explain a given reality and criticize the absolute objectivity of a truth. The poststructuralist ideas are based on three assumptions: context, reality and truth. Truth is the affirmation of a position of power and it is what we want to accept as real. The paper argues that through deconstruction, genealogy and discourse, the concept of refugee crisis has been co-opted by those who want to maintain power and the status quo.

Keywords: Migration, Refugee Crisis, Post-structuralism, Power, Status-quo

Introduction

The contemporary world is complex and often filled with mazes that confuse and disorient. The inability to put the problem of migration on a map that is understandable is a source of confusion. When we generally address the issue of migration we tend to involuntarily meditate on refugees. It is not strictly so and what we are talking about is something much broader, the beginning of a global mobility movement in which refugees are just one of the first movements, but there are others. Refugees are individuals or groups of people who need support, who are subject to special protection for a variety of reasons that put them at some point in need (UNESCO, 2017). The discussion around this terminology is essential to perceive some realities and is also interesting from the point of view of what the political debate is (UNESCO, 2017). What happens often is that these people are not always spoken of as refugees. It is also interesting that in this influx of migrants to Europe, the first entity that spoke generally of this group as refugees was the Al Jazeera television station (Malone, 2015). All this obviously has a political purpose which has created enormous pressure on the European countries, and therefore has not yet been able to emerge. That is, it is a kind of “trap” to speak of all these people as being a homogeneous group. On the contrary, they constitute a very heterogeneous group. Taking into account the issue of European migratory crisis why did the concept of refugee suddenly become contemporaneously so normal or a “regime of truth”?

The importance of constructions of reality is fundamental. All reality is constructed, interpreted, and meticulously thought out (Wendt, 1999). The point of departure may be the same, but there is no objective reality that imposes itself, what exists is the dispute of interpretations about that reality. Words are used with more or less emotional charge, tactically thought-provoking feelings, emotions, effects of agglutination or obedience (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, everything is translated into a dispute of speeches. Knowledge and discourse are power (Foucault, 1973). What made refugees a security problem? The way it was enunciated, and the public discourse built around it motivated this perception. One could have called the “refugee crisis” a migratory

crisis like any other, and yet the words “Muslims,” “terrorists” in themselves already have a negative connotation. Why did they not call these people “migrants”, “fugitives”, “survivors”, “displaced”? All this is not “cellophane” or a “wrapping” of words, it is a determining factor of the mobilization itself (Buzan and Hansen, 2009). Is important to understand why the concept of refugee has become contemporaneously normal and a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 2002). The word representation is an important word in post-structuralism, because it is through how things are represented that one can explain a given reality (Derrida, 1992a). Using three fundamental methods of post-structuralism, deconstructivism, genealogy and discourse, this paper aims to explain how the use of certain words, images, memories and symbolic loads of emotion of the concept of refugee was being instrumentalized and transformed according to the appetites of those who hold power.

Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism should not be understood as a theory, but as a critical attitude. What Michel Foucault called the “limiting attitude” (Foucault, 1977). In international relations this entry comes in the 1980s with a whole series of authors influenced by the thinking of Jacques Derrida and Foucault, as Richard Ashley (1988), Michel Shapiro (1997) and R.B.J. Walker (1993). Recently, these approaches have turned to issues of a more micro nature and to representations of events in a very concrete way. Post-structuralism has three fundamental assumptions (Derrida, 1978).

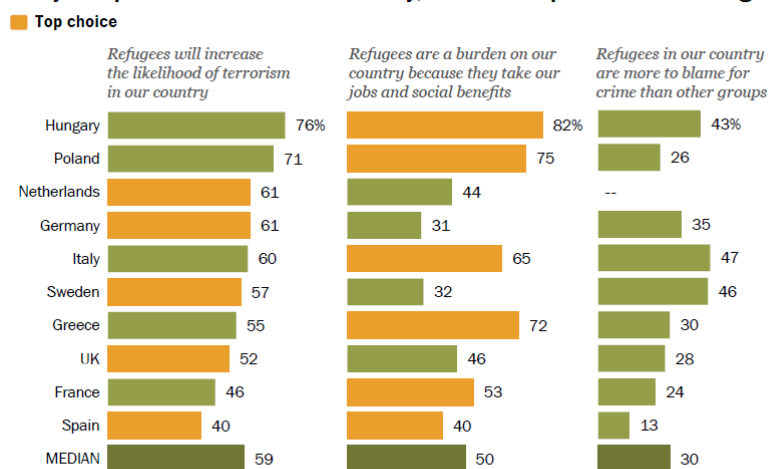
Firstly, the issue of context. That is, all knowledge is contextualized and linked to a given spatial and temporal dimension. It is through the context that our knowledge has a subsequent validity and we are able to apprehend a certain identity (Derrida, 1978). Secondly, reality always lacks interpretation and the fundamentals of this interpretation are always subject to discussion, contestation and the presentation of alternatives (Derrida, 1978). That is, we can never grasp reality objectively and this apprehension is always subject to interpretation. All this leads us to a third very important point that has to do with truth. For the post-structuralists, especially for Foucault, the truth is the affirmation of a position of power (Faubion, 2001). Truth is not necessarily what exists as real, truth is what we accept as real (Faubion, 2001). For example, the “Mediterranean crisis” could also be a discourse of power. In fact, it can be either a discourse of power or a discourse to contest it. In this context, opinions are divided between those who want this issue not to be debated, considering this influx of refugees a threat to European security, and those who want different immigration policies. The idea is not: let’s see if this crisis is or is not a danger. The starting point is that the “refugee crisis is a threat to our security,” and therefore all those associated with the diffusion of this thought are in a position of superiority to those who have a contrary view (Faubion, 2001): “Refugee crisis: majority of Europeans believe increased migration raises terror, threat” (Yeung, 2016).

According to the Pew Research Center¹, the refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks are closely intertwined with each other in the minds of Europeans (Wike, 2016). Of the 10 countries monitored, more than half believe that the arrival of refugees increases the chances of terrorism rising and 50% even think that they will withdraw jobs and social benefits from Europeans (Wike, 2016) (Figure 1)

¹ The Pew Research Center surveys are conducted via telephone or face-to-face interviews, depending on the country. Face-to-face interviews are either computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) or pen and paper interviews (PAPI). The results are based on national samples, unless otherwise noted. Included here is detailed information, such as mode of interview, sampling design, margin of error, and design effect, for each country, organized by survey, country and year.

Figure 1

Many Europeans concerned with security, economic repercussions of refugee crisis



Note: Netherlands excluded on question about crime (Q51b) due to administrative error.

Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey, Q51a-c.

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Therefore, many of the principles that we accept as truth are in a poststructuralist logic a mere form of discourses, practices and structures of power (Faubion, 2001). In the concrete case of the migrations of the Mediterranean there is an important element: the discourse is made on the basis of what is objective and not subjective. What the poststructuralists say is that regardless of whether refugees are considered a threat or correspond to what happens in reality, this logic generates relations of power (Derrida, 1992a). There is an intimate relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 2002).

The idea that the refugee crisis poses a threat to European security is an idea conceived in a specific context. In this sense, the search for generalizations made in an absolute or objective logic is misleading (Derrida, 1992b). Because the logic of generalizations assumes that human behavior can be understood in a more or less objective way. What post-structuralists say is that this is not true, starting with the fact that there is a whole contextual difference in terms of the behavior of the various agents (Derrida, 1992b). Therefore, the general principle of poststructuralism is the critique of the idea of this objectivity of truth, and its ultimate goal is to question all assumptions that are taken as absolute truth (Derrida, 1978). Moreover, poststructuralism explores in what form the diffusion and disclosure of many different assumptions of the word “refugees” generates a particular kind of power relations in society (Derrida, 1978). This view requires taking a “limiting attitude” individually and thinking about the limits of our own thinking or how we are already overcoming what we believe in a logic of constantly questioning everything we know (Foucault, 1977). According to poststructuralists, it is the only way we can define our identities in a context where we are constantly subjugated by discourses of power (Faubion, 2001).

Refugee Crisis in Europe

In this moment there are four large groups of refugees arriving in Europe², coming mainly from countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, which until the refugee crisis began was the major supplier of migrants to Europe (Aiyar, 2016). But also from Eritrea and Sudan which resulted in something very difficult to manage A refugee is an individual who already has a certain status

² Frontex: Eastern, Western and Central Mediterranean, and Western African.

that was guaranteed to him when entering a given country (Aiyar, 2016). Refugees are only a special category of these migrants and are subject to a legal framework by the various international conventions such as the Geneva Convention, but also in the case of the EU by some regulations, agreements, conventions, such as the Dublin Convention. Then there are national laws that frame the migratory problem (Aiyar, 2016).

We can say that the first moment was triggered by a number of securitizing agents that arose from the Arab Spring (2010- 2012) and the various conflicts to be fought in the Maghreb and Middle East mobilized social attention to the problem of mass influx of people into Europe. Enunciating the circumstance of a particular form, with a certain *Speech-Act* vocabulary and evoking a certain imaginary, immigration towards Europe began to be considered a security problem from the moment that it came from a certain discursive strategy (Buzan *et Al.*, 1998).

At the end of World War II, they called the refugees “40 million displaced people,” according to UNHCR. The Evian agreements on 18 March 1962 marked the end of the war in Algeria and in this case called them “repatriates from Algeria” (Bade, 2003). With the fall of Saigon in 1975, which ended the Vietnam War, 1.3 million people were designated as “boat people” (Bade, 2003). After the fall of communism and the USSR (1990-1991), almost 2.5 million East Germans headed towards the Federal Republic of Germany and called them “Aussiedler” (Bade, 2003). To add to all this, in the early 1990s thousands of people fled the wars of the former Yugoslavia to Germany and designated them as “fugitive immigrants”, and in the following years arrived in the EU under the name “asylum seekers”. In December 1990, about 400,000 people left Albania and called themselves “Albanians” (Bade, 2003). The examples could be multiplied. All are refugees, but with different “status”.

Facts that have some social normality or do not present themselves as having an unusual character when they are worked allow them to be represented as needing exceptional treatment. Faced with this situation the hyper-reality always has a very large fictional dimension and the most natural, human, spontaneous, most common expression was: “refugee crisis”. It is striking how the emptiness of words is suddenly filled by “right” and chosen words, whether the “speechwriter of the EU” or any journalist: “Europe is struggling with its biggest migration crisis since World War Two, with unprecedented numbers of refugees and other migrants seeking asylum in the EU” (Laurence, 2015). Therefore, there is a choice of words that obey certain criteria, such as the criterion of mythification compared with other historical myths (Barthes, 2001). This notion of a quick, instantaneous, brutal, devastating mythification of that situation later allows for a naturalization effect of discourses, responses and practices (Barthes, 2001): “The number of migrants at the EU’s borders reached a record high of 107,500 in July, officials say, as a sharp surge in expected asylum requests was reported in Germany” (Hill, 2015).

Discourses are constructed to naturalize certain types of response strategies. If everything had been constructed otherwise, they would be the most absurd practices (Derrida, 1992a). But as that event was constructed in a certain way, the answers were also subsequent. That is, the execution of the discourse in a historical perspective evoking memories, traumas and glories, as the evocation of the memory of the European powers that have to defend their Western way of life and its power (Derrida, 1992b). This historicizing dimension is an ambivalent discourse. On the one hand, it evokes memories that legitimize. On the other hand, it puts in the penumbra a series of other historical dimensions. But, it builds a story (Derrida, 1992b). Discourse is power (Foucault, 2001); it is the power to select. Therefore, this situation is in line with a certain interpretation of a historical past. But it is a historical past, as if it was an objective reality that imposes itself on our eyes and that we can do nothing more than pick it up and capture it (Derrida, 1992a). In all this there is a fundamental word, and that word is power, “status quo”.

Filling in the emptiness of words is a huge exercise in power (Foucault, 2001). When the EU formalized the speech to be the “refugee crisis” rather than a “humanitarian emergency” it began a process of reproduction of power and superiority. The truth is that all this discourse, words, representations that have a structure of power, a very disguised representation, that operates naturalization, mythification and a certain form of historical legacy, are devices of legitimation that seek to fill the shock with a given representation (Derrida, 1992a).

Postmodern authors operate or give themselves an essential task which is to work the words, the speeches, the images on certain situations that served as a springboard for answers or policies of a certain nature. They show, for example, how the discourse on the migratory flow from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe has gained, above all, a sense of security:

EU leaders have decided to create a new system of quarantining migrants in southern Italy and Greece to enable the forcible and swift registration, fingerprinting, expulsion, and, if necessary, detention for up to 18 months of those deemed to be illegal immigrants crossing the Mediterranean from Libya (Traynor, 2015).

They show that one arrives there through a certain discursive strategy made with a series of devices, namely the use of certain words or images together with certain memories and symbolic loads of emotion (Walker, 1993). As it was the case with the sexual attacks on women in Cologne. Soon after, a poster of a human body with a black hand aimed at the genitals, symbolizing its racist nature and blaming the refugees for the acts, was published in the press (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Source: Guardian, 2016

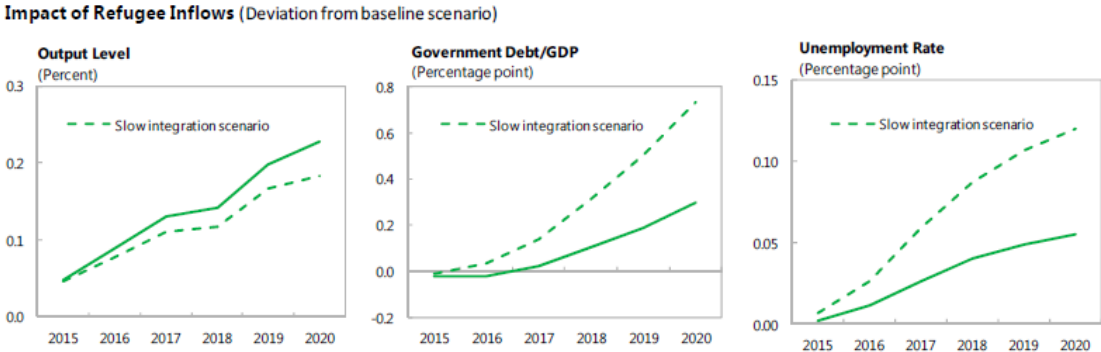
All the small details of the construction of the speech that was canonized around a certain reality are of the greatest relevance (Weaver, 1995).

Immigration, Deconstructivism, genealogy and discourse

Taking as its starting point the logic of dichotomies, all Western philosophy is based on pairs of functions that are mutually exclusive and establish relations of superiority and inferiority between concepts (Derrida, 1978). For example, what is good is what is not bad or what is beautiful is what is not ugly. And therefore, between pairs of concepts there is a relationship that is not horizontal (Derrida, 1978). What happens is that this relationship goes through our entire discourse and we are constantly using these logics. Adapting this thinking to the field of migration, we can only define what is an anti-immigration policy if we understand what the phenomenon of migration is. And yet in Europe, in most cases, anti-immigration policies are more advocated than pro-migration policies (Eurobarometer, 2017). According to the latest EU Eurobarometer, 71% of Europeans want more EU intervention at the external borders, in order to strengthen security in the Schengen area (Eurobarometer, 2017). The logic of deconstructivism starts from these pairs of binomials. In terms of the logic of approach, Jacques Derrida tells us that we have to look at these pairs of words, perceive their connection and their social function and operate in two directions: the operation of inversion and relocation (Derrida, 1978).

The inversion operation puts the matter in reverse. Instead of finding that the beautiful is good, why do not we find what's bad is that it's good? Why do not we think that immigration is good and anti-immigration measures are bad? Why do we attach more importance to the issue of anti-immigration policies than to policies to welcome immigrants in Europe? If we reverse the logic that refugees are a bad thing, because they are Islamists, terrorists, "blacks", that they are people who come to take away our jobs, etc. What are we going to get? However, if we simply reverse the roles there is a problem. The power structures remain the same, they have simply been reversed, and therefore one dimension continues to have a higher value than the other. To do this inversion step we must to add the one of the relocation (Derrida, 1978). This implies questioning whether the issue of pro-immigration policies can be understood as something separate from its opposite pole. If we analyze the effects of migrations on aggregate EU GDP, we can see that they are positive (Aiyar, 2016: 14). Especially in countries where the flow of refugees is greater. In relation to the baseline, the level of GDP increased to about 0.05%, 0.09% and 0.13% between 2015 and 2017, respectively (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Sources: IMF staff estimates.

By 2015, output growth had to do with the impact of aggregate demand on additional fiscal expenditures. The supply of labor has also increased, but the effect on GDP can only be verified later (Aiyar, 2016: 14). The impact of migration to Europe has been different for the various countries, reflecting an asymmetric distribution of asylum seekers relative to the population of the countries (Aiyar, 2016: 14) (Figure 3). On the other hand, in the external information circles or in the media, knowledge about the real impact of immigrants' remittances is very limited. European political leaders are also never very keen to disseminate and comment on the positive results of these indicators. According to the World Bank, remittances from immigrants contribute more than 20% of GDP in some countries (Guardian, 2017). In 2016 migrants contributed \$429bn to remittances from developing countries (World Bank, 2017). This sum represents three times more than the official total in development assistance. Projections also indicate that by the end of the 21st century, Europe will show a considerable population decline due to the low fertility rate (UN, 2017). According to projections, the African population will be triple the European population (2.39 billion versus 709 million) (UN). By 2100 the UN predicts that the population in Africa will be 4.2 billion and 639 million in Europe (6.6 times higher). "Replacement migration" could play a very important role in preventing a dramatic decline in the European population. However, it will be impossible for Europe to absorb the entire African population.

The materialized power in terms of knowledge allows us to shape history (Foucault, 1977). When we look back we see only certain things or what people want us to see. This idea that who has power is that storytelling is an idea that is at the starting point of genealogy thinking (Foucault, 1977). Instead of accepting the story of how the subject has been constituted over

time we must search the extremes, the marginalized of these stories, always looking at a micro-approach (Foucault, 1977). The aim is to show how the story that has been told us about the “refugee crisis” is full of discontinuities and how the concept of refugee that we have today as certain has evolved in a very differentiated way throughout history. Therefore, in each historical moment and in each context, there is a different way of understanding this same concept. The goal is to look at the day-to-day discourses and to understand how they enabled the emergence of these ideas, their maintenance and reproduction (Derrida, 1978).

The discourse is not mere communication, is also production (Derrida, 1978). That is, it is through the discourse that we construct reality, that we reproduce and maintain it. In this sense, discourse builds or produces something, and more or so important to produce is what it excludes (Derrida, 1978). Therefore, the discourses define what can be said or not, constituting itself as a form of power (Foucault, 2002). In this way, the world has meaning only through discourse, not meaning that there is no physical reality, but reality exists only in social terms when mediated through discourse, images and gestures (Foucault, 2002). In international politics and in the media, discourses are constructed around the themes of migration and the terms “asylum seeker”, “refugee” and “immigrant” are generally used in an interchangeable way. The speech given by William Hague, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on April 18, 2000, is quite explicit about latent ambiguity. In the first sentence the speech refers to asylum seekers, in the second to immigrants, and to refugees in the third:

Everyone gets put into a file called “refugees”, with the exception of high-profile individuals in well-publicized cases who are seeking political asylum in the UK. The library has decided that the term “asylum seeker” is bogus, rather than the bona fides of the claimant. Refugee organizations have drawn the same conclusion. There has been no obvious rush to rename themselves: the Asylum Seeker Council would not have quite the same ring to it (Moss, 2001).

However, for post-structuralists, the use of this type of language does not reflect disarray at all, but relevant meanings that configure connection channels. For example, using the bargaining of the various terms tones the association we make between asylum seekers and “illegal” and “undesirable” immigrants.

Conclusion

In addition to the inherent legal rights and statuses, words bring with them discursive categories that convey symbolic meanings and associations to which refugees in a more or less just way have not escaped. The associated labels can be dangerous in that they can help create false identities. In general, in international politics, in the media and in the more domestic political discussion the words “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “migrant,” “economic migrant,” or “Internal Displaced People” carry adjectives that may be more or less “false” or “true”. Generally categorizing such diverse individuals with such diverse experiences of suffering and exile, ignoring other social divisions in their daily lives helps to homogenize concepts and reinforce stereotypes. All these generalizations constitute a mere production and reproduction of power structures that have been operated over time for the purpose of disguising to maintain a certain status quo.

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