

World in motion—the emotional impact of mass migration

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I feel very honoured and am enormously pleased to have been invited to speak here at the 17th Symposium of the Group Analytic Society International in Berlin. It means a lot to me, to be able to speak here today, because Berlin is a very special place for me. It is here, in this town, that my Jewish grandfather met my Christian grandmother almost 100 years ago. They fell in love and about a year later my mother was born. 20 years later my Jewish grandfather was forced to leave Germany, together with his new family. Therefore, I never had a chance to get to know him. When I was 20, I myself left Germany to live in New Orleans, USA. I stayed there for five years and then returned to Germany. It cannot be denied, migration and refuge have always been an issue in my family and in my personal life, that is why I cannot talk about migration and refugees without emotions and without being moved. This can be sensed and felt also in the following explorations and thoughts about the emotional impact of mass migration.

Key words: mass migration and refugee movements

Introduction

Crossing borders seems a core issue and a highly volatile challenge in a globalized world: a world, which is in motion (Besharow and Lopez, 2016). But whereas economic production and trade of

merchandise do not recognize borders anymore, this is not true for human beings.

There are numerous obstacles established at each and every international border to prevent easy border crossings—especially if you are a refugee or a migrant. Highly deterrent examples are the seven metre high fences between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves Melilla and Ceuta and the barbed wire fences put up by Hungary to prevent Syrian and other refugees entering the country.

The United Nations have called the 20th-century a century of refugees (Guterres, 2011). As we all know, mass migration and the refugee flows have continued way into the 21st-century: people are on the move on a global level.

Europe had a taste of the dimensions of these migratory and refugee movements in the summer of 2015, when record numbers of refugees arrived in Europe on their way to the North. But also Central America and especially Mexico have been experiencing growing migratory flows as well as countries in Asia (most recently Bangladesh and the influx of the Rohingya from Myanmar) and African countries (Uganda and Kenya and the influx of refugees from South Sudan). Thousands of migrants, who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Italy (3000 already in 2017), provide just a faint idea of tragedies happening in many places around the world, when people desperately try to leave their homes to escape from wars, violence and persecution.

Of course, the images we might have seen on television or in the newspapers convey just a snap shot of the dimensions of this mass migration and refugee movement that turned into a refugee crisis in 2015.

As Ban Ki-moon, ex UN Secretary General, pointed out last year, it is true that we were witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, levels even higher than the displacements caused by the Second World War. And then he added that it is ‘not just a crisis of numbers’, but ‘a crisis of solidarity’ as well (Ban Ki-moon, 2016).

Let us first have a look at numbers, facts and figures, surrounding this so called refugee crisis and try to sort out reality from mythology: An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the globe have been forced to flee from their homes (United Nations, 2016). Among these 65 million are nearly 21 million international refugees, people who have experienced conflict and persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular political party. Half of these refugees are children under the age of 18.

Included in these 65.6 million are also 40 million internally displaced people. According to the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 internally displaced people are not defined as refugees, since they have not crossed any international border and have not experienced persecution by a regular army, only by ethnic war lords or Guerilla forces.

Within the last decade the number of refugees and international migrants has increased considerably: From 15 to 21 million refugees and from 172 to 243 million migrants in only 15 years (Sigona, 2016). Today 55% of these migrants are women (Rohr, 2002; Clayton, 2016). Even though the increase seems extremely high, we have to take into account that within these 15 years the population of the world has increased as well.

If we compare the growth of the world's population with the increase of migrants and refugees on a global level, it turns out that today refugees and migrants together count for 3.3% of the world population; it was 2.83% 15 years ago: That is a total increase of 0.47% (de Haas, 2016).

So, do we have to conclude that there is no international refugee crisis? The answer depends on the perspective. There are regions on earth, where unimaginable numbers of refugees live in deplorable situations and in absolute misery, for example in the camp 'Zaatari' in Jordan, a camp built in the middle of the desert for Syrian refugees. Today more than 80,000 Syrian refugees live there, three quarters of them are women and children. This camp is neither by its size, nor by its make shift misery any exception, it is simply one of many others organized by the UN, spread out all over in the Near and Middle East and in Africa.

Currently more than half of the world's refugee comes from six countries alone: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan and the DR of the Congo, and by far the overwhelming majority of them live in Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Uganda, Germany and Chad¹.

Only a fraction, and I repeat a fraction, of these refugees ever reaches Europe or North America. This imbalance becomes quite obvious, if we look at the GNP of the countries with the highest influx of refugees (Birdsall et al., 2016). It is obvious: The international refugee crisis does exist, but affects primarily war torn and poverty stricken regions of the world, whereas wealthy nations in Europe and in Northern America are by far not affected that much. This does not mean of course that there are no challenges connected

with the influx of refugees in Europe or in North America. But beyond the challenges, there are also benefits connected with migration and refugees, especially in affluent nations. The Wall Street Journal, a well-known US newspaper, wrote in March of this year (2017) that migration always has been beneficial to any society. 'Immigration literally spawns innovation . . . and is an economic multiplier' (The Wall Street Journal, 2017). Proving this argument the article points to the fact that 83% of last year's finalists of the so called Junior Nobel Prize in the USA were children of immigrants. This confirms Hanna Arendt's (1943) writing that refugees are the avant-garde of their societies. And the Wall Street Journal (2017) concludes: A ban on immigration would damage the economy. I assume, this statement was meant as a slightly polite, but nevertheless stern recommendation to Mr. Trump, who has reduced the admission of refugees drastically to 50,000 in 2017 and even suspended admission for months shortly after coming into power (Krogstad and Radford, 2017).

Nevertheless the US is still host to the greatest numbers of immigrants in the world: There were 47 million in 2016. Second place is being taken up by Germany with 17 million, followed by the Russian Federation with 11 million, Saudi Arabia with 10 million and Great Britain with 9 million (McCarthy, 2017). However, not the regular immigrant, but the so called illegal immigrant seems to pose a political threat and challenge not only to US politics, but to national politics in general.

Currently about 12 million so called illegal immigrants live in the US, mostly Mexicans. But in contrast to popular opinion, illegal border crossings at the Mexican-US border are today at its lowest rate within the last 50 years. More Mexicans are leaving the US, than entering the country (Krogstad et al., 2017). In fact, it turns out that legal and illegal migration from India (12 million), Russia (11 million) and China (10 million) has increased drastically in the last years and has meanwhile surpassed in numbers the Mexican immigration (McCarthy, 2017).

Illegal immigration and not refugees are therefore the primary political challenge in the US. Not coming from any war torn country and not having experienced political persecution, torture or severe repression, migrants from India, China, Russia and Latin America are not able to claim the status of a refugee and therefore often revert to networks of organized crime, specialized in human trafficking, in order to enter the US.

Human trafficking is thought to be one of the fastest-growing activities of trans-national criminal organizations. Their business involves increasingly migrants and refugees and specifically unaccompanied minors.

In recent years sometimes up to 60,000 minors from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador arrived at the US border, where they were apprehended and taken into detainee centres for further processes of child care or deported to their home countries (Echenique, 2016). Many of these minors are less than five years old and many young girls are found among them, even though they specifically run a high risk of being violated, captured, kept as sex slaves or killed for their organs and their eyes (Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano, 2016).

They migrate, even though their families know the risk is extremely high. There are several reasons to migrate of course, but two reasons, are outstanding in the case of these minors from Central America:

1. the extreme violence and mainly gender based violence in Central America: a result of civil wars, traumatized societies, extreme poverty and failed states²;
2. the desperate desire to reunite with parents, who have migrated long ago to the US and left children behind in the care of grandparents or other family members (Nazario, 2017; Rohr, 2014a).

Alone in Ecuador, UNICEF states that there are about 300,000 children left behind by parents, who have migrated to the US or Europe, hoping to be able to send money back home to support their families and reunite in the near future (Rohr, 2014b; Pesantes, 2015). But quite often this is not possible, since children cannot join their families, if the parents have not acquired a legal status as immigrants in the countries, where they live and work.

A nine year old girl in Ecuador, who committed suicide by intoxicating herself with pesticides, wrote in her farewell letter:

My parents forgot about me, they don't love me anymore, they won't come back anymore and I can't live any longer without them. (Diario el Comercio, 2nd November 2004)

She was one of more than 60 children in Ecuador, who committed suicide in recent years, because they felt left alone and forgotten by their parents who had migrated long ago (Pesantes, 2015).

As Grinberg and Grinberg (1984) pointed out in their study, migration is always connected with suffering and it might turn into a traumatizing experience, because migration is always connected with the separation of loved ones, the disruption of families and with cultural and social losses.

This is specifically the case for unaccompanied minor refugee children, who arrived recently in hitherto unknown large numbers in Europe. In 2017 there were 47,990 unaccompanied minors living in Germany and 15,458 young adults, slightly over 18 years of age (Huber and Lechner, 2017). They came in their majority from Afghanistan, Syria, Irak, Eritrea and Somalia.

It is estimated that between 5% and 20% of them are traumatized and need psychotherapeutic treatment (Podlech, 2017). 90% of the unaccompanied minors are boys between 13 and 17 years of age (Bühning, 2017). Very few girls are able to make this journey on their own; they usually come together with at least one family member.

The majority of these unaccompanied minors came in 2015 and in 2016, when more than one million refugees came into Europe, trying to make their way to Austria, Hungary and to Sweden, the majority of them arriving and staying in Germany. According to the German Interior Ministry by mid-2016 there were 1.38 million refugees living in Germany (Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht and Migration, 2016).

Angela Merkel had overnight, despite the Dublin agreement and after futile negotiations with several European countries, decided to open the borders of Germany and allow more than a million of refugees to enter the country. This produced quite a political shock in Europe and in Germany as well. The opening of the borders was criticized by many as an unforgivable political mistake, but others like Obama, the Pope and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees supported her and her political action (Dempsey, 2016). And for the first time in her career, she received applause even from the political left in our country.

I think three decisive, partially unconscious motives drove her to this decision:

Firstly, as the daughter of a socialist pastor in East Germany, she grew up with strong humanitarian convictions. She explained later on that in order to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, she had little choice but to open the borders, because she could not imagine German soldiers employing force and maybe even weapons to drive back refugees at the border. *'She wanted to give back to Germany a friendly,*

humanitarian face’, wrote the Spiegel—one of the most influential German political journals (Feldenkirchen and Pfister, 2016). ‘*To give back?*’ Yes, I think, there was more to it, not just a humanitarian reason.

Secondly, the decision to open the borders was without any doubt also a strong political action. She pointed out: ‘I lived behind a fence for too long for me to now wish for those times to return’ (Feldenkirchen and Pfister, 2016). As a young woman living in the German Democratic Republic she witnessed the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria that initiated the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and that allowed the refuge of 200,000 East Germans to West Germany. In the same year the Berlin wall came down. Pictures of thousands of Germans breaking through the border fence in Hungary into Austria, pictures of miles and miles of East German cars full of East German ‘refugees’ lined up to leave the country and pictures of people celebrating on the wall in front of the Brandenburger Tor in full view of the East German border patrol police, went around the world.

The opening of the borders between East and West-Germany was experienced by the majority of the East Germans as an unforgettable moment of liberation and of long desired freedom. And the peaceful reunification of Germany was celebrated and cheered worldwide as a political victory of the West over socialism and as a victory of capitalism. By opening the borders in 2015 Angela Merkel reenacted a victorious and liberating experience that once was cheered worldwide and that represented not only a humanitarian, but also a strong political signal and a liberating experience.

Thirdly, there was even more to it: I think, by opening the borders she wanted to rehabilitate a nation that had gone through great efforts to work through the crimes of a horrific past. Opening the borders and allowing refugees to come in, was a strong symbolic act of repair and of rehabilitation in view of almost 60 million refugees that Germany had produced during the Second World War (Bade, 2000). She opened the borders to allow refugees to come into a country that once was known to have committed the utmost of almost unimaginable crimes against Jews, Sinti and Roma and many other people, driving them out of the country, forcing them to leave their homes and their families and finally killing them in gas-chambers. Now in the midst of a political crisis and in defiance of her own political future, she followed her humanitarian and political convictions and opened the borders. In consideration of the specific German history and

legacy, there was simply nothing else she could have done and no other option, but to open the borders.

This decision to open the German border to refugees is considered the most relevant decision of her entire decade in office (Feldenkirchen and Pfister, 2016). In fact, it did help to rehabilitate Germany on an international level more than any other previous political act or decision—maybe with the exception of Willy Brandt kneeling down at the monument to victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising³.

In Germany two strong reactions to her opening the borders and allowing refugees to come in, developed almost instantaneously. First, an extraordinary movement of solidarity arose, a movement that strongly identified with Merkel's action and its unconscious meanings. All over Germany young people brought food and clothing to train stations to welcome refugees. Elderly couples organized support for refugee families, inviting them to their homes. This welcoming-culture exists until today . . . even though it has calmed down, still a lot of people are involved as volunteers, some supported by churches and community organizations and by supervision, offered by group analysts throughout Germany.

But of course, the opening of the borders reinforced also a political right wing movement of people, who felt threatened by Merkel's politics and the influx of foreigners. Today this right wing movement has calmed down on the streets, but has shown its strength in the recent elections. Neither the government's heavy restrictions on asylum laws, nor the deportations of refugees or Merkel's strategic action to keep refugees out of the country, could pacify the political right wing. Still her courageous action has changed something essential inside of Germany: There has never been in all of our history such a strong welcoming attitude towards refugees and strangers and that is something that will not vanish again soon.

Nevertheless there is a split in the country that cannot be denied and this split throws quite an interesting light on a nation that has in part, I would say, learned its lesson from history and that has been able to confront itself with the horrors of the past, especially the Shoa. But there are others as well, who deal with this same past in a different way, wanting to close borders again, rejecting foreigners, idealizing the seemingly pure, autochthonous German population. As Aleida Assmann (2010) pointed out, the transmission of the social life of Holocaust memory is dealt with in very different ways and does not end up in homogenous attitudes, but produces modes of denial as well as modes of empathy. Therefore,

there is still a lot to do and a lot ahead of us, but there is new hope too, for a better future.

At this point, I would like to leave all facts and figures behind and try to find out more about the unconscious projections connected with migration and refugees. What makes it so difficult for many to welcome them in our countries and show solidarity? Why is there so much aggression and even hatred directed towards refugees and migrants?

Adam and Eve: the first refugees of mankind

As a first step and to help us dive into the unconscious, I would like to invite you on an imaginary journey to Rome, to be exact, to the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican and to the painting of Michelangelo about Adam and Eve being expelled from paradise.

Looking at Adam and Eve means we are looking at the first refugees of mankind and we can see clearly what it means to be a refugee: there is a tremendous amount of shame; they are naked, vulnerable, and unprotected. It is not possible to return: there is the angel with the sword, threatening them to be killed, if they would dare to return. And there is nothing ahead of them . . . except pain, sweat and tears.

Adam and Eve are completely left alone, with their shame, their nakedness, their misery, and their feelings of guilt. They have not rescued anything, except their skin. Their home, which was paradise, is lost forever; there is no loving God anymore, only the wrath of God is left. The painting describes in almost unbearable intensity: there is no way back to paradise, only a completely unknown and scary future.

Cultural Anthropologists like Van Gennep (1981) and Turner (1982) have defined this situation as a state of 'liminality', meaning a liminal space without a past and without a future. It is like standing on a threshold, not daring to step back or step forward. This, I think, describes precisely the emotional situation of refugees and migrants, who are forced to live in liminal spaces for long periods of time, not only during the flight, but long before and long after as well. This liminal space is filled with anxieties, with constant fears and ambivalences. You never know whom you can trust and whom not to trust. The new language is not understandable and the new habits of the people are frightening and strange. This experience is very painful. It can turn into a traumatizing experience, if you are left alone, because it puts refugees and migrants in a constant

fight-flight mode (Bion, 1961) that makes it extremely difficult for others to connect. A fight-flight situation is always full of tension; there is no peace and quietness, no relaxation, only a highly defensive and emotionally exciting as well as aggressive situation that provokes rejection.

A liminal space is always a transitional space and therefore connected symbolically with death and re-birth. Refugees and migrants have to disconnect from their home, their families, their culture and they have to find ways to reconnect to something completely new and unknown. This space of liminality is a space that Earl Hopper (2009) has defined as incohesion: The cohesion of the old national community of the refugees has broken down and the new community does not yet offer any cohesiveness to the newly arrived migrants and refugees. In fact, it might be forced or compelled to redefine its cohesive state as well as a consequence of the influx of refugees and migrants. This loss of cohesion might be experienced by the autochthonous population as a huge and unknown threat, because it provokes anxieties, but possibly also desires of insurgency. Georges Devereux (1976) wrote that what is unknown produces fears as well as enticement. Fears because of the new and unknown and enticement because it might enforce hidden desires to break out of traditions, to dare something new, to disobey authorities or to rebel.

Maybe that is one of the unconscious reasons for the rejection of refugees and migrants. We fear that refugees and migrants might introduce incohesion into our society and this might change the inner dynamics of our communities. Because as Hopper (2009) explains, any state of incohesion is bound to produce enormous anxieties of annihilation. And incohesion, according to Hopper, always comes along with long periods of silence and non-communication, also with the avoidance of eye-contact. Like in a large group this generates aggression, sometimes even psychotic states of the mind, because the capacity to bond and the feeling of containment get lost or maybe weakened. And this produces rejection and resistance and reinforces mechanisms of defence. Again, this fits exactly van Genneps and Turners description of 'liminality', but now we can connect it to incohesion as well: liminality is a space filled with anxieties of annihilation. This might explain why refugees and migrants feel so lost in their new society and are unable for long periods of time, to function properly, to study, to work, etc., and it does not necessarily mean they are traumatized. This might also explain why the host society feels so threatened by refugees and migrants: they carry incohesion and

anxieties of annihilation into the host society . . . and confront us with anxieties that we have strongly rejected and denied for a long time: What happened to them could also happen to us one day.

At the same time it is quite clear, that refugees and migrants need a lot of courage and a lot of strength, to survive these liminal and incohesive states of existence and make it, albeit all the obstacles, to a safe place in this world. But they might need what cultural anthropology calls a ‘master of ceremonies’—in today’s societies this could be a social worker or a psychotherapist, somebody who turns out to be a ‘significant other’, somebody, who can act as a witness or as a coach, offering knowledge, guidance, experience and as Weinberg (2016) put it, a ‘secure presence’ in insecure times.

However, as group-analysts and as ‘modern masters of ceremonies’ we need special knowledge, to prepare ourselves for the challenges of our profession in this globalized world, especially if we work with refugees and migrants:

There are six educational requirements that I think are vital (Schaich, 2017):

Cultural sensitivity: to have basic knowledge about culturally different ways of raising children, of relating to parents, to men and women. This also means to simply stay curious about different ways of behaviour and keep up a strong desire to understand even if something seems strange and irritating.

Diversity: to be aware of cultural and social diversity, there are many different ways to deal with one’s existence, with love, life and its vicissitudes – in any given society.

Unconscious bias: to be aware of one’s own ethnic, cultural, religious and gendered prejudices and biases and be able to question them, reflect upon them and eventually change them.

Cross cultural and power relationships: to be aware of the effects of social exclusion and inclusion and of power relationships in dealing with migrants and refugees.

A second language: is needed to help open up new ways of perceiving and understanding the world and to connect to people who surround us.

We need strong professional networks: like GASi to allow us to feel safe and contained in this changing world and within an association that offers guidance, orientation and sometimes even friendships in order to empower us to reach out and to work with those, who are excluded, also with refugees and migrants.

Notes

1. Of all countries, Turkey sheltered the greatest numbers of refugees, hosting 2.8 million by mid-2016. It was followed by Pakistan (1.6 million), Lebanon (1 million), Iran (978,000), Ethiopia (742,700), Jordan (691,800), Kenya (523,500), Uganda (512,600), Germany (478,600) (in 2017 = 1.38 mill) and Chad (386,100). These numbers are changing daily (UNHCR, 2017).
2. There are 108 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador, 5.2 in the USA, 0.8 in Germany, Amnesty International 2016/2017.
3. Friends in France, Guatemala and in the USA have confirmed this view point and stressed their admiration for Chancellor Merkel.

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