

Prem Kumar Rajaram

Beyond crisis: Rethinking the population movements at Europe's border

[October 19, 2015](#)

This post is part of a [series on migration and the refugee crisis](#) moderated and edited by Prem Kumar Rajaram (Central European University).

Crisis

The refugee crisis in Europe is fabricated. Like most "crises," the recent onset of people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan trying to cross into the European Union is a representation. Anxiety and specific readings of law and humanitarianism frame this issue. This framing works inward as well as outward. Inward, it establishes a dominant regulating norm—an idea of "the refugee"—that allows for internal comparison and inequalities (people are said to have varying rights to protection). Outward, the framing helps create an understanding of a complex situation—an *abstracted* understanding—and allows for policy makers and commentators to treat "the refugee crisis" as an exceptional condition. As exception, that crisis appears to be regarded and treated as an "event" distinct from the political "norm," and it enables a vertical form of politics. The crisis is the state acting as it tends to, as a protection racket in Charles Tilly's memorable take, defining a danger or threat that strengthens its force and its hold over territory.

Reading the movement of people, or really any social phenomenon, as "crisis" puts a frame around a complex social process and effectively separates it historically, socially, and politically from other social processes, non-crises. It creates a series of dualisms, where the "crisis" is the less desirable mirror of a more orderly form of what is effectively the same phenomenon (mobility of populations). The refugee crisis is contrasted with orderly visa-enabled forms of migration. It is a crisis only with respect to the possibility and desirability of a more orderly form of the same. The depiction "crisis" is then an anxious one, based on fear. This suggests that "the refugee crisis" is about states, about their capacity to protect the territorial orders that they guarantee. This is a type of displacement, where the issue becomes an urgent state responsibility and therefore legitimizes the limited ethical and moral bases from which states make decisions about responsibilities. We then have the grotesque sight of states bargaining about which and how many refugees they can be responsible for.

The interpretation of this round of population mobility as crisis runs the political gamut. Observers as diverse as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and philosopher Slavoj Žižek use the language of crisis unreflectively and perhaps instrumentally, too. Orbán's im-

663
Shares

crises” to perceived problems of having a domestic Roma population are infamous. [Zizek](#) for his part warns us of “hypocritical left liberals” who advocate open borders as they know full well that this would never be allowed to happen as it would “trigger an instant populist revolt in Europe.” It is, however, not so much what we know or could know but rather *how* we know. The crisis narrative creates and maintains specific ideas about what is politically possible, what is irrelevant, and what we have to fear.

As a representation, the narrative of crisis frames an “event,” distancing this current round of population mobility (and its counterpoint, strategies of immobilization) from other forms of mobility/immobilization that have been central to the constitution of the European state and its capitalist economy. “Eventing” draws borders around complex social processes, enabling certain forms of intervention and the production of specific types of subjects. In other words, it privileges certain forms of politics, and in this case, a politics also of depoliticization, that can address a “problem” that does not actually exist outside of these frames of representation and intervention.

Refugees

For its part, the term “refugee,” as it is used across the range of think pieces and commentaries on the “crisis,” contributes to a narrow reading of intervention and the politically possible and desirable. Zizek suggests that we need to address the inequalities of global economy to “abolish social conditions that create refugees.” This is a strategy of immobilization that is reflected in other recommendations Zizek makes, including that refugees should accept restrictions on their mobility in a Europe-wide quota system.

While there are many reasons to end the inequalities of global economy, preventing refugee situations cannot be considered one of them. Preventing situations that “create refugees” would in all likelihood simply illegitimize the movement of populations rather than create conditions where mobility would not be a desired life choice. The 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol were never intended simply to manifest a right to protect. They equally defined how that right of protection could be limited. The Convention remains as much a means of protecting states as it does protecting individuals fleeing persecution.

The strategy of immobilization where “refugees” would be bound to accept EU directives on where they should live speaks to a cultural reading of the “crisis” where the question is about European identity. At its core is an idea that a European identity of some form first exists, second is worth preserving or protecting in that form, and third that “refugee” movements are a stress on this identity and need to be carefully regulated. The idea of European identity, like any large and abstract identity, depends on filtering, marginalizing, and excluding, a biopolitical processing that distinguishes between worthy and unworthy. This same type of biopolitical processing is at work in accounts of crisis. As [Balibar](#) notes, it makes lit-

663

Shares

the pillorying of “economic migrant.” There is neither migrant nor refugee; there are instead modes of biopolitical processing that seek to manage and hierarchize different populations and subject positions—on all sides of the border—in light of cultural, political, and ideological interests.

Capitalism and race

There are parallels between the biopolitical and racial exclusions of contemporary capitalism in Europe and the response to the “refugee crisis.” Some are obvious and empirical ones. The much trumpeted border fence between Serbia and Hungary was built under “public work schemes,” work for welfare projects where Roma are disproportionately represented and which reflect a political culture suspicious of welfare recipients. The largest refugee camp in Hungary, in the northeast, is being cleared in the same region where Roma neighborhoods are being emptied out, both replaced with signs of neoliberal consumption: the camp is to be replaced by a shopping mall; a Roma neighborhood in nearby Miskolc will be replaced with a football stadium. The European economy’s reliance on undocumented migrants for agricultural and other work is manifest in the numbers of Chinese and Bangladeshi underpaid (or at times unpaid) workers in Greece, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Meanwhile at the border, the Hungarian state has effectively declared a state of exception, deploying soldiers with the right to use arms and to enter and search any home where refugees are thought to be harbored.

An account of the production of surplus populations may provide the relational link between the management of troublesome populations, internal and external. In brief, the production of surplus, of an excess of unproductive labor, is, according to Marx, a necessary supplement to the production of labor. The surplus population (such as those on public work schemes) is not excluded from modes of production. Rather, they have a tangential relation to the norm, brought in as needed to work “black” in low-paying jobs. Foucault argues that the surplus population is delimited by the exercise of sub-power, of localized action on populations. The activity of the Hungarian state, and other European states, against migrants is an exercise of this sub-power, a logical extension of the “meta” level capitalist production of labor and surplus labor.

The governing of migration is not separate from domestic political and social processes but rather an outcome of these. Declarations of states of exception are means by which a surplus population is outlined at the edges of the nation-state, and points to ongoing processes of cultivating surplus and unproductive populations at the core. There is, in other words, a dialectic relationship between the management of a supposedly troublesome internal population, like the Roma, and the same of an externalized population of migrants and refugees. There is a ready slippage between those narratives that pillory migrants and

relational understanding between domestic politics and capitalism in Europe and the management of migrants and refugees.

Politics

The narrative of crisis mobilizes specific types of intervention. At the core of the crisis is an unspoken methodological nationalism: the reading of a crisis at a state's border sets up a politics of state-led intervention centered on border control. The state as protection racket continues to do its work, fudging what may—at a stretch—be a threat to state sovereignty into a threat to society itself. The narrative of crisis lends itself readily to accounts that set a state up as the guarantor of ways of life, legitimizing a cultural and affective account of the moral worth and purpose of the state.

A central consequence of this has been a ready willingness of European citizens to subcontract their right to decide on moral and ethical behavior to the state. This in turn legitimizes to a great extent a vertical, state-centered politics of intervention toward this mobile population at Europe's doors. The narrative of crisis and the consignment of migrants and refugees to states of exception depoliticizes their situation. By trying to place people outside of the political norm, the state legitimizes three types of action all centered on depoliticizing—a humanitarian approach centered on saving souls, a securitized approach where harm is legitimized (witness the deployment of antiterrorism forces at Hungary's borders against unarmed people), and a technical or administrative approach to refugee status adjudication that prioritizes speedy, cost-effective, and deterring procedures while restricting the right to legal recourse including the right of appeal.

That these vertical, state-centered strategies are depoliticizing does not, of course, mean that they are not political. It means that the political instrumentalization of refugees and migrants can be concealed, meaning that their utility to state-making and how their management relates to the management of troublesome populations at home become difficult to discern under the ballast of depoliticizing narratives of crisis coupled with similarly depoliticizing strategies of management and control.

There are, however, other (horizontal) modes of politics. The advent of people at the borders of Europe has been met with responses and actions based on solidarity in direct opposition to state norms and the idea of the state as the sole legitimate political actor. In doing this, groups, organized and less organized, implicitly question the narrative of the crisis, of a discernible threat that needs the intervention of a managerial, technicalizing, and securitizing state. These acts—for example, helping people cross borders and, in Hungary, sheltering them in homes—stretch relations of solidarity and ethics beyond that desired by the state, actively question its protection racket character, and re-politicize the situation. Such actions question the artificial constraints of the Dublin Convention (as well as its imperialism

663

Shares

readings of European identity that center on a fear of what others may bring. Activists are now pointing at the relations between how states are managing all populations that it defines as troublesome, whether external or internal. These sets of horizontal politics provide politics and ethical options beyond the state-centric, and beyond fear, whether of Orban's or Zizek's variety. They seem to point to the possibility of cultivating new relations and solidarities and break through the obscurantism generated by narratives of crisis.

Prem Kumar Rajaram is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University and is Academic Director of CEU's Roma Access Program. His work centers on populations at the margins of politics. His most recent book is *Ruling the Margins: Colonial Power and Administrative Rule in the Past and Present* (Routledge, 2014).

Cite as: Rajaram, Prem Kumar. 2015. "Beyond crisis: Rethinking the population movements at Europe's border." FocaalBlog. 19 October. www.focaalblog.com/2015/10/19/prem-kumar-rajaram-beyond-crisis.

Tags: [Europe](#), [Hungary](#), [Migration](#), [Prem Kumar Rajaram](#), [refugee crisis](#)