

Resisting Post-truth Politics, a Primer: Or, How Not to Think about Human Mobility and the Global Environment

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Abstract

In recent years, students of world politics have been shaken to the core by the ascent of post-truth politics, which is a particular style of 'doing politics' by politicians and pundits – a style that strategically relies on misrepresentations at best, and at worst, lies. The so-called post-truth world has had consequences beyond those who are in the business of doing politics. The pervasiveness of presumed causal linkages between environmental degradation, violent conflict and human mobility has been utilized by policy makers and pundits to shape public opinion about the predicament of the Syrian refugees, the human tragedy of this decade in the Northern hemisphere. On the one hand, scholarly research shows that the relationship between environmental degradation, violent conflict and irregular mobility is far too complex to be understood in terms of causal linkages. On the other hand, in a post-truth world, it is politicians and pundits who repeat falsehoods that have shaped public opinion about the Syrian refugees. It is in the spirit of engaging with post-truth politics as such that I present what follows as a primer: how *not* to think about human mobility and the global environment.

Post-truth has been declared as word of the year by Oxford English Dictionaries (OED, the qualifier 'in the English-speaking world' is implied but not always spelled out). Here is how OED defines post-truth:

relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (OED 2016).

Post-truth politics is a particular style of 'doing politics' by politicians and pundits – a style that strategically relies on misrepresentations at best, and at worst, lies. Finally, post-truth world is a state in which 'blatant lies' become 'routine across the society', the implication being that 'politicians can lie without condemnation' (Higgins 2016: 9).

According to philosopher Katherine Higgins, it is important to distinguish the rise of a post-truth world from everyday practices of politicians and pundits who may be economical with the truth or bend it as they see fit. Higgins writes:

This is different from the cliché that all politicians lie and make promises they have no intention of keeping – this still expects honesty to be the default position. In a post-truth world, this expectation no longer holds (Higgins 2016: 9).

Ironically, notes Higgins, 'politicians who benefit from post-truth tendencies rely on truth, too'. This is 'not because they adhere to it'. Rather, politicians who bend the truth also 'depend on most people's good-natured tendency to trust that

others are telling the truth, at least the vast majority of the time' (Higgins 2016: 9).

Yet, such irony offers little reprieve for the students of world politics who are shaken to the core by the ascent of post-truth politics. For, the post-truth world has had consequences beyond those who are in the business of doing politics. The pervasiveness of presumed causal linkages between environmental degradation, violent conflict and human mobility has been utilized by policy makers and pundits to shape public opinion about the predicament of refugees in general and the Syrian refugees in particular. Such utilization of presumed linkages by policy makers and pundits have imposed limits on potential policy responses, thereby worsening the predicament of Syrians on the move from their temporary abode in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey to somewhere in Western Europe or beyond. On the one hand, scholarly research shows that the relationship between environmental degradation, violent conflict and irregular mobility is far too complex to be understood in terms of causal linkages. On the other hand, in a post-truth world, it is politicians and pundits who repeat falsehoods that have shaped public opinion about the Syrian refugees, our understanding of their reasons for leaving home, and the potential implications of their arrival for the threat of so-called homegrown terrorism. As such, people's responsiveness to humanitarian calls for offering sanctuary to Syrian refugees was limited. Not surprisingly, the calls for going beyond mere humanitarian action were drowned out.

The point being that resisting post-truth politics, as it has shaped policy making *vis-à-vis* human mobility and the

global environment, is a must for students of world politics seeking to inform policies *vis-à-vis* human mobility in general and the Syrian refugees in particular. After all, even those who are somewhat more skeptical about 'people's good-natured tendency to trust that others are telling the truth' nevertheless rely on the public's receptiveness to the force of the better argument as they call for intellectuals to 'engage with post-truth politics' (Tallis 2016). Higgins concurs: 'Scientists and philosophers should be shocked by the idea of post-truth, and they should speak up when scientific findings are ignored by those in power or treated as mere matters of faith' (Higgins 2016: 9). It is in this spirit of engaging with post-truth politics as such that I present what follows as a primer: how *not* to think about human mobility and the global environment. The predicament of Syrians on the move constitutes the human tragedy of this decade in the Northern hemisphere. Hence my focus on their predicament (along with many of the contributors to this special issue). Yet the primer below applies to human mobility beyond the Syrian people's present-day predicament.

Human mobility is the norm, *not* the exception

Human beings have been on the move for as long as the history of humankind. Indeed, it is population movements that have been the norm throughout history. If it were not for human mobility, the face of the Australian and American continents, for instance, would be very different today. Yet, where politicians and pundits encourage the public to consider how their polity has recently changed with the arrival of immigrants, they often overlook the people flows that have historically shaped their countries and themselves – especially if their (grand)parents were immigrants.

Over the years, reasons for human mobility have varied. It was drought experienced at a catastrophic scale that led Turkic peoples to move from Central Asia to Anatolia around the 6th century. A search for religious freedom for some and escape from famine and poverty for others shaped 17-19th century human flows from Western Europe to North America. The rise and fall of empires gave shape to human mobility in particular ways, as they encouraged the movement of subjects across the imperial realm. Finally, it was a need for manual labor in Western Europe's post-Second World War reconstruction that resulted in the arrival of so-called guest workers to Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia.

In the particular case of Syrian refugees, it is important to note, as Chatty does in this volume, that Syria has been a 'refuge state' throughout its modern history. 'Five times in modern history Syria and its peoples have received and accommodated massive influxes of forced migrants', notes Chatty. Indeed, it was thanks to Syrian hospitality that a series of regional refugee emergencies, some environmental and others political, were contained within the region. According to Chatty, 'the Arab and Syrian institution of hospitality and refuge meant that, until 2011, the international humanitarian aid regime did not have to deal with mass

influx into Europe of Iraqi or other refugees from the Arab world'.

Such generous hospitality on the part of Syrians was returned when, in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, they had to flee their homes. A majority of those fleeing Syria were contained within the region, with Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey doing the heavy lifting. It was only when Syrian refugees began to outlive their welcome as guests (for, they are not always accorded refugee status) and the lack of proper schooling facilities in their temporary abode became unendurable that they turned to Western Europe and North America 'for opportunities to save their youth from becoming 'a lost generation' and possible radicalization in the region'. Still, Chatty insists, mobility and *not* a search for permanent residence has been the norm for Syrian refugees throughout this period, with many refugees expressing their wish to return to Syria once it becomes safer to do so.

What renders the current situation a 'crisis' is our response, *not* the event

In the past few years, it has become a commonplace to characterize the arrival of Syrian refugees by boats or on foot at the borders of the European Union as a crisis. Invariably referred to as the 'refugee crisis', 'migrant crisis' or 'Mediterranean refugee crisis', the arrival of Syrian refugees has become a cause for alarm in European Union circles. Yet, as Pallister-Wilkins, following political theorist Craig Calhoun, underscores (in this volume):

crises are very rarely sudden or unforeseen events. Instead they are brought about by what the humanitarian organization MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] terms a 'failure of politics'.

For instance, what rendered the Cuban missile crisis a crisis and not a foreign policy problem was not the mere presence of Soviet Union missiles within striking distance of the US mainland. For, the Soviets had acquired that capability some time ago. Accordingly, their placement or removal did not alter the balance of power between the two superpowers – not in material terms. It was the fact that the Soviets had dared to enter what the US considered its own backyard, thereby challenging US identity as the defender of the so-called free world. As such, it was not the materiality of missiles but the meaning attached to them that rendered the placement of missiles in Cuba a crisis, empowering those who called for their removal (Weldes 1996).

Accordingly, labeling the latest set of events surrounding the Syrian refugees a crisis empowers those who are calling for instant policy-responses: either in humanitarian terms in the forms of rescue operations, or in militarized terms, in the form of stricter border controls. Either way, concludes Pallister-Wilkins,

the framing of current events in the Mediterranean and elsewhere in terms of individualized tragedies and the mobilization of 'crisis' enacts particular, limited, responses that simultaneously perform

processes of humanitarian rescue and sovereign capture.

For, crises are popularly understood to demand immediate policy responses, leaving little room for political deliberations, as Bettini underscores in this volume. However, inquiring into the history of Euro-Mediterranean relations reveals the politics of what is popularly presented as a crisis.

- If we take the end of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (mid-2000s) as the beginning of the unfolding of events, this is a crisis that has been in the making for almost a decade. Indeed, for the Mediterranean-littoral members of the European Union, the so-called refugee crisis has been a fact of life since the 1990s. Spain, Italy and Greece have been active in shaping EU policies toward managing human mobility at EU borders, in the face of an increasing number of arrivals from countries to the south and east of the Mediterranean. Yet, they did not always succeed in getting their Northern European counterparts to see the human tragedy.
- If we take the European Community's initial diagnosis of its Mediterranean problem as the beginning of today's situation, this is a crisis that has been in the making since the mid-1970s (for almost 40 years). Indeed, the European Union's precursor, European Community (EC) was among the first to diagnose persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean. They did so during the 1970s, when EC policy makers adopted a new and coordinated policy toward the Near East and North Africa, that is, those parts of the Middle East that are geographically closer to the European continent, and designed the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (the so-called Barcelona process) as a solution (Bilgin 2004).

Whichever date we take as the beginning, then, what is difficult to deny is that what we are experiencing is not a crisis that has emerged out of the blue. It has been in the making for a long time. Furthermore, focusing on the influx of refugees as a problem for the EU alone, does not allow considering the crux of the problem for those who are on the move: persistent insecurities experienced in sending countries. Put differently, what we are currently experiencing is not a crisis that has suddenly emerged, but the culmination of a series of policy (mis)steps that prioritized stopping human mobility, and not understanding and addressing the structural violence shaping such mobility (see also: Bank, Fröhlich and Schneider, this volume).

There are no scholarly proven causal linkages between environmental degradation, violent conflict and human mobility

In present-day debates, we come across all-too-easy explanations about the dynamics behind human mobility. For some, human mobility is shaped by individuals' desire to seek better life chances; that is, mobility is mostly if not

purely voluntary. Such explanations often underestimate the violence experienced by those on the move (see Bank, Fröhlich and Schneider, this volume). For others, human mobility is about escaping (structural) violence either politically or environmentally caused.

In an attempt to link the plight of Syrian refugees with environmental degradation, some politicians and pundits have offered presumed links of causality: environmental degradation causing violence, which then results in forced migration. While there certainly are links between these three phenomena, notes Myrntinen in this volume, 'the links are not simple and straight-forward'. Indeed, all contributors to this volume join in underscoring that there are *no* scholarly-proven causal linkages between environmental degradation, violent conflict and human mobility. Astonishingly, however, in a post-truth world, we got used to hearing some politicians and pundits make such claims without offering much in the form of evidence: 'climate change leads to conflict, conflict leads to extremism, and this leads to migration'. Such unfounded claims, then, allow them to make a further claim linking migration and terrorism, thereby privileging militarized responses while marginalizing calls for humanitarian action.

Bank, Fröhlich and Schneider's contribution to this volume debunk such claims by offering a counterintuitive argument about the relationship between human mobility and violence: that (1) human mobility could be an escape from violence, (2) a process of violence in itself, and (3) a path into physical and structural violence. It is often the physical part of the third and sometimes the first dimension of this relationship that is considered in everyday debates in our post-truth world (i.e. human mobility as causing violent extremism, or human mobility as an escape from violent extremism). What is needed, argue Bank, Fröhlich and Schneider, is a 'holistic understanding of the complex migration-violence nexus'. They write:

The common assumption that the violence ends in the moment that a migrant reaches a place which is not considered 'at war', 'under siege' or 'in distress' urgently needs to be revised. For instance, while refugee camps can certainly provide safe havens for human beings trying to get away from violence, they may just as well reproduce old or create new patterns of violence. They may also protect some and at the same time expose others to violence.

A case at hand is the experiences of women and young girls fleeing Syria. According to reports on the refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Libya and Lebanon women often find life inside camps suffocating due to demands made on them for marrying older men.¹ Yet, those who forego the security of the camps have to make their own way amid uncertainties and demands made on them by their network of relatives or acquaintances. Such demands come from their own families, who seek to ease their financial burden, or see marrying off their daughters as 'second wives' as a way of managing the potential risk of violence. While polygamy is

not allowed in many of the aforementioned countries, it is nevertheless known to persist in some remote areas. Giving in to such demands for becoming 'second wives' results in an array of insecurities for women (or children, for some are as young as 12). What is more, insecurities experienced by the 'first wives' remain yet another dimension of this tangled web of relationships between human mobility and violence.²

Gender is a key factor, but *not the way you think*

Some politicians and pundits in the EU and US have made the case against receiving Syrian refugees by tapping particular portrayals of women's rights in Islam. They suggested that bringing in Syrian refugees is likely to endanger women at home by virtue of refugee men having little respect for women due to their presumed cultural conditioning. In a post-truth world, it is difficult to check the veracity of claims regarding acts of violence conducted by refugee men against women of the host countries. For, rampant portrayals of docile Muslim women and hyper-aggressive Muslim men color the lenses through which Syrian refugees are viewed, as Rothe has shown. Furthermore, as Myrntinen has argued, such gendered representations are by no means exceptional to Syrian refugees in the US and EU, but can also be observed elsewhere in the world.

That said, while it is difficult to check the veracity of claims regarding acts of violence conducted by refugee men against women in host societies, what is not difficult is to check is the status of women in pre-war Syria. For, before 2011, women in Syria enjoyed a degree of freedom that is not always seen in some of its neighboring countries. Women's level of education was high and their participation in public life went beyond schools and included working outside the home. The point being that the claimed link between advocating women's rights and blocking refugees from Syria is spurious. There are broader issues at stake, including gendered stereotypes coloring the hosts' understanding of the behavior and needs of Syrian refugees.

That said it is not only those who seek to block the arrival of Syrian refugees who rely on gendered stereotypes. Rothe has shown in this volume that both those who warn against the security risks generated by refugees (the control discourse), and those who consider migration as an adaptation mechanism (the resilience discourse), understand the relationship between environmental degradation and mobility in gendered terms. These two discourses are drawn from Rothe's analysis of EU policy reports and publications on the relationship between climate change, migration and resilience.

The control discourse seeks to address environmental degradation, argues Rothe, because its proponents worry that such degradation, when coupled with demographic pressure, is likely to generate uncontrollable migratory flows. Such portrayals rely on gendered stereotypes of hyper-feminized women who are a part of the problem by virtue of their 'irresponsible' reproductive behavior, and hyper-masculinized men who seek to make up for their 'infantilization'

by contributing to feeding the demographic trends. Overall, this is a paternalistic reading of the problem of environmental degradation, where the South is portrayed as entirely responsible for its environment-related problems and the North's role is portrayed as limited to 'measuring', 'calculating' and 'visualizing' 'security risks'.

The resilience discourse views migration in positive terms, as an adaptation mechanism. Communities respond to environmental degradation by sending some of their members to lands far away, it is argued, as part of an attempt to survive under the new circumstances. Those who migrate (often men) help to lessen the demographic pressure at home by sending remittances and by acquiring otherwise unavailable cultural and economic capital. Those who stay behind (often women) find resourceful ways of coping with the new circumstances. While framing women's roles in positive terms, the resilience discourse, too, relies on gendered stereotypes, argues Rothe, by way of portraying women as enjoying 'a special relationship with nature'.

In the specific context of Syrian refugees, underscoring the resilience of Syrian peoples in general and Middle Eastern societies in particular marks a positive shift away from portraying human mobility as a threat, toward viewing refugees as resilient agents of their own destiny. However, as Rothe underscores, women are viewed in gendered terms all the same: either as perpetrators of the problem of uncontrolled population increase; or as a key part of the solution by virtue of their presumed 'special relationship with nature'. My point being that gender is a key factor shaping the relationship between human mobility, environmental degradation and violence, but not the way you think!

Conclusion

Some policy makers and pundits' present day portrayals of human mobility as a threat to security are reminiscent of immediate post-Cold War fear-mongering about a coming 'clash of civilizations' as suggested by Samuel P. Huntington (1993). Scholarly studies on the relationship between (presumed) civilizational differences and (violent) conflict found the relationship to be weak at best, and at worst, spurious (Chiozza 2002; Fox 2002; Henderson 2005; Henderson and Tucker 2001; Russett et al. 2000). Yet, the civilizational clash scenario enjoyed staying power in policy discourse, being taken up by politicians and pundits who do not always rely on evidence in making claims in a post-truth world.

The risk we are faced with is that our understanding of the relationship between human mobility and environmental degradation could be heading in the same direction insofar as post-truth world assumptions about refugees causing insecurity are allowed to shape policy debates, thereby leaving little room for politics. The point being that 'reducing politics to policy' (Bettini, this volume) is not likely to get us far in a post-truth world. We need debates on the politics behind policy options and their limitations – debates that are informed by 'facts' and 'truths'. It is in the spirit of

resisting the forces of post-truth politics that shape our understandings of and responses to the predicament of Syrian refugees that I offered the foregoing discussion in the form of a primer: how *not* to think about human mobility and environmental degradation.

Notes

1. Needless to say, such practices are not isolated to Turkey. On Jordan, Libya and Lebanon, see, for example: Karasapan (2015).
2. 'Suriyeli kız çocukları imam nikâhıyla kuma yapılıyor' [online]. Available from: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/suriyeli-kiz-cocuklari-imam-nikah-iyyla-kuma-yapiliyor,320210>. [Accessed 7 December 2016].

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