

# A Postcolonial Analysis of the European 'Migrant Crisis'

Written by Caoimhe ODwyer

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CAOIMHE ODWYER, AUG 29 2018

The hegemonic discourse of migration in many European countries, particularly in relation to the recent migrant crisis, has been marred by an explicitly Eurocentric stance and a pronounced 'postcolonial arrogance', according to some observers (Gatt et al, 2016). As a postcolonial location, 'deeply entangled in colonial legacies' it has been said that colonialism has never left Europe, but instead it remains a fundamental part of the 'European reality' (Kinnvall, 2015). In an attempt to critically understand the ways in which 'migrant bodies have become nexus points for spatial practices' (Mains, 2013) across many levels, such as the reification in mainstream media of migrants and refugees and the fortification of Europe with ever tightening border controls, a postcolonial analysis seeks to provide a theoretical framework for undoing epistemic structures and provides a perspective that highlights issues which are often blind spotted in traditional IR theories. In an attempt to open up spaces for alternative narratives, the postcolonial theoretical basis deconstructs the state and its 'narration of the nation' (Bhaba, 1994) in order to expose the 'spatial, temporal and subjective imaginations' (Kinnvall, 2015), that have been imposed onto a non-European 'Other' by a European populous in a subconscious postcolonial legacy.

This paper seeks to identify the postcolonial dimensions of the 'crisis' and its consequences, by examining how the crisis is entrenching existing postcolonial norms, narratives and asymmetries on the continent and also how the crisis has destabilised the existing order, and in doing so has created or is creating, new postcolonial landscapes. This analysis will also examine the colonial articulations of the world which have now become entangled in the present and have thus manifested across 'political, economic, cultural, psychological and epistemological domains' (Westin et al, 2008). There will also be a focus on how these have shaped border and immigration regimes, the rise of nationalism and far right discourse and how the crisis has made Europe question its commitments, as a bastion of Human Rights and 'Western' humanitarian principles.

'Cosmopolitan Europe' (Bhambra, 2017), the normative promise that is widely understood as one of the foundations of the European Union, is under threat. As new fences are erected, borders re-established and 'fortress Europe implodes into a multitude of mini-fortresses' (Ponzanesi, 2016), ardently defended European ideals have been abandoned and civil liberties eroded in the name of national security. The Western values espoused by the European Union, a self-confessed citadel of civilisation and humanitarianism have been put under considerable pressure in the Mediterranean Sea during the migrant crisis, which has been cited as the greatest challenge to these European values, since World War II. Since the beginnings of the current crisis, the Mediterranean has become synonymous as a migration frontier, however, the representation of the Mediterranean Sea as the limit between 'European civilisation' and its counterpart 'Others', is distinctly colonial in its imaginings (Guizardi, 2017). It is therefore interesting to note the narrative of novelty that European policy makers are employing when justifying the expansion and externalisation of the European borders to the South and the degree to which the crisis appears to have caught Europe off-guard and therefore quite defensive in its reaction.

In order to understand the reaction of European elites to the migrant crisis, it is imperative to reflect on the colonial enterprise of European nations with the mind set of civilizational superiority. For Europe, the migrant crisis has presented a struggle against itself and its preconceptions of what Europe and European values stand for. The European Union is seen as a 'gold standard', with its 'alleged exceptionality serving as a yardstick' (Kinnvall, 2015)

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for non-European societies. However, Europe's high standards of living and economic resources have not been realised separate from the misery of others elsewhere. The migrant, as a postcolonial subject who 'radically contests the place assigned to them by political and legal boundaries', disrupts the European order and unearths the 'nefarious long term effects' (Ponzanesi, 2016), that colonialism still has in shaping political and social structures, in a way that Europeans can no longer ignore.

The migrant crisis has created a mirror by which the West is forced to look back on itself and its past colonial pursuits, and it is apparent through the policies, discourse and general fearfulness in Europe, that many do not like this reflection. It is observable in the literature and the practical realities of European policy implementations that a link has not been made between colonial activities by Western powers and the conflicts that continue to rage on to this day, in their wake. Now that the residual effects of these colonization enterprises no longer suit the West and are in fact, landing on our doorsteps, Europeans are being challenged to face their 'colonial amnesia' (Owens,2016) and are being drafted to share their 'imperially acquired' wealth and resources (Bhambra,2015). The highlighting of certain histories in Europe and a persistent refusal to acknowledge 'inconvenient truths' (Bhambra, 2017) from the past, have led to a silencing of alternative histories and therefore a silencing of 'Others'. These matter particularly as histories shape the construction of concepts whereby people are 'recognised as being in, or out'. Through the suppression of alternative accounts of European histories, Others are continually excluded from narratives of Europe and Europeanness and are forced into the dichotomy of the inside/outside, particularly refugees, who despite being 'victims of an International System that brings them into being', this International system 'then fails to take responsibility for them' (Fitzgerald, 2017).

The immigration policies of Fortress Europe have ultimately reiterated this inside/outside dynamic and have legitimised the racialization of cultural and religious difference and the process of exclusion, an inherently colonial condition. The current migrant crisis has 'coincided with a racial crisis in Europe' which has manifested in various security acts and border regimes with the intention of increasing mobility for some and immobility for others. The 'colonial technologies of governmentality and power' (Kinnvall,2015) are glaringly obvious when assessing EU immigration policies, however the racial nature of the European border regime is scarcely acknowledged, as to do so would entail a confrontation with the 'cruel postcoloniality of the 'new' Europe'(De Genova,2017). The apartheid structure of dividing the world into two realities has been institutionalized through European border regimes, where one people can move freely across Schengen borders without hindrance and others are pre-emptively illegalized, with many stumbling blocks laid out to block their passage. In his book the '*The Wretched of the Earth*' (1961), Frantz Fanon describes this 'categorisation of space according to race', whereby the coloniser divided the world into two opposite sections, 'a bifurcated experience' (Hage, 2016), of one space for the native and another for the settler. Whilst modern European immigration regimes are not wholly comparable with that of which Fanon describes, the continuities between the two however are significant when determining what has 'survived decolonisation'. Achille Mbembe in his analysis of the 'bio politics of occupation' in *Necropolitics* (2003), develops on Fanon's meditations, and notes the 'expressions of sovereign power over the body which emerged during colonialism' has since expanded and manifested into border controls, surveillance and the production of racial hierarchies in immigration regimes (Guild,2013).

The distinction between the in-group and out-group essentially boils down to race, although in post-Holocaust Europe, the ideological fixture of anti-racism has ensured that despite not seeming outwardly racist, the policies against non-Europeans, say otherwise. From a postcolonial perspective, the unmasking of these falsehoods and the duplicity of double talk in European immigration discourse and policy implementation is essential to expose the travesty of an otherwise concealed reality. In terms of immigration controls, from this perspective, immigration regimes are essentially 'an expression of sovereign power over racialised bodies' (Guild, 2013). In terms of flexing this power, European states have been contradictory in terms of what they say and what they actually do. In order to appear to promote universal multicultural rights, Europe has had to draw on the narrative of crisis, and framed the situation in such a way that 'security becomes something to be marked a solution' (Kinnvall,2015) and therefore emergency legislation is allowed for and presumed to be a genuine response to what appears to be a chaotic circumstance. The emergency narratives circumnavigate the ethical questions of racialisation of border control due to the perceived need for immediate action and thus allow for postcolonial subjectivities to be governed unquestionably in the name of national and European security. In this sense Europe and its political elites can

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equivocate from their commitment to the values that define its 'institutional and civilizational project' (Bhamba, 2017) as these states are framed as the sole authority capable of remedying such threats (Kallius, 2016).

Not only has Europe sought to exert its influence in its own region, by pushing a hard-line agenda for tighter border regimes on its peripheries and 'emergency' closures of its internal borders, but the EU has also flexed its imperialistic muscles to project European border practices to the wider neighbouring region, in an attempt to export control and therefore once again export its borders to a worldwide level. In order to consign this problem to its poorer neighbours, Europe has essentially turned the crisis into a test of 'postcolonial responsibility' whereby non-European nation states such as Turkey and Libya are confronted with a dutiful obligation to serve Europe and help it to 're-fortify' its borders, for quite modest returns (Heller, 2018). By extension of the externalisation of its borders through agencies such as Frontex, Europe therefore insulates its populations from the violence of the border controls which are carried out in their name (Little and Vaughan-Williams, 2016). The shielded nature of the realities of EU border regimes have been particularly salient in Europe, in terms of galvanising a discourse of othering and fear of the 'out-group' who are poised in a dehumanizing manner as a security threat arriving en masse in 'swarms' onto the continent. The European populous is removed from the situation on the ground and therefore more malleable to the 'polemic narratives of the far right' among others (Kinnvall, 2015). The Dublin regulations in particular have been criticised as a manifestation of the mind-set that refugees and migrants are conceptualised as a threat and therefore need to be contained.

When assessing Europe through a postcolonial lens it is clear that the migrant crisis coincided with the 're-assertion of national identities' on the continent. Inward looking nationalism has manifested into the construction of national belonging through the 'otherness of non-EU nationals as the opposing identity' (Stokholm, 2016). As the migrant is a postcolonial subject, as previously mentioned, it replaces and decentres Europe on a fundamental basis, and challenges its entire being on a level of everyday life. This postcolonial social transformation has left many in Europe increasingly anxious, which can be seen in the dominant discourses of migration in the mainstream media as well as political narratives. In a world of hybrid identities, cosmopolitanism and dissolving borders, as theorised by Paul Gilroy (2005) a 'postcolonial melancholia' among the white population, particularly seen in France and the UK has emerged, whereby the population has not dealt with the consequence of its loss of colonial empire. What has ensued, Gilroy states, is a 'mass lamentation' for the colonial power the nation once possessed which has resulted in fluctuations in the collective psyche between 'racist hostility' and shared guilt. This guilt has been dubbed the 'white man's burden' (Djurica, 2016) but in recent European immigration policies and media narratives it appears that the guilt has all but dissipated and has instead been replaced with a deep-rooted feeling of aversion, evident for example in the UK government's policy of creating a 'hostile environment for migrants' in order to discourage them from coming to the UK (Bhamba, 2017).

The majority media discourse in relation to the migrant crisis have also played a pivotal role in the creation of the 'us' and 'them' simplistic distinctions, which capitalise on the paranoid nationalism, abundant in Europe societies. This 'politics of naming', could be seen as having perpetuated problematic beliefs and stereotypes of refugees and migrants in order to reify colonial legacies and reinforce a racialised 'other' that harks back to Derrida's (1976) "anthropological war' between dominant and marginalised cultures, the 'naming and leaving unnamed'" (Harindranath, 2007). Through their representations of refugees and their societies, media discourses can reproduce orientalist constructions, which in turn inform public debates and state policies. From a postcolonial perspective, the creation of the 'third space', the opening up of alternative discourses to the Western hegemonic characterisations of refugees is crucial in order to denounce Western produced discursive binaries and break down the underlying power that the West possesses as creator of these representations and distinctions. As discussed by Spivak (1988), 'representation is not only a matter of speaking about but also speaking for' and therefore the postcolonial enquiry attempts to write against, over and from below these representations to present a new history of knowledge, in a bid to challenge the residual aspects of colonial discourse that seem to have survived beyond the colonial age and continue to 'colour perceptions of the non-Western world' (Harindranath, 2007). The postcolonial enquiry of refugee and migrant representation during the current crisis is important in terms of understanding the direction that Europe is heading in, and also how to change this direction away from a Europe predicated on its 'singularity and exceptionality' (Ponzanesi, 2015), but to also include the Other as Derrida theorises in his text *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (1992). With this shift in terms of who can speak, the postcolonial

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turn envisages that the gaze will therefore no longer be upon the actions of the colonized, but of the actions of the colonists who hold the tools for change that will allow this to happen.

However, European state's bordering practices and exclusionary narratives have left this postcolonial imagining of another Europe, as just that, an imagining, which will only be realised when we can open up the silence of the 'subaltern' (Spivak, 1999). It is interesting to note the distinct absence of voices in academic literature and journalistic enquiries of a standpoint approach, exploring refugee and migrant's subjectivities and experiences when analysing the current migrant crisis. The invisibility of the subaltern allows for the continuation of their 'marginalisation from mainstream culture' and consequently their silence detains them in the subordinated capacity of the Other, to be 'named and unnamed, ignored or vilified in the public arena' (Harindranath, 2007) according to the political agendas of the signifier. In this sense, their identities are essentialised by a white Western application of their voices. In the present expression of this essentialism in migration, not only can the migrant not speak due to its inferior position, but also as a result of the securitization of the Arabic language. Along with other signifiers of difference such as dress, skin colour and facial hair, a post 9/11 preoccupation that terrorism is borne of a brown face and looks and behaves in a certain way, has manifested into the creation of suspect communities and an 'unrelenting impulse to sort and rank refugees and migrants, in particular Muslims, as good or bad' (De Genova, 2017) and in doing so has created racial hierarchies and propagated the colonial stereotypes of migrants as a problem, that need to be 'controlled' (Mensing, 2016).

A postcolonial scholarship deconstructs the European narratives that are presented as universal and challenges the discourse that Europe is the 'innocent bystander, not implicated in the causes' of the crisis (Heller, 2018). In order to rectify the situation Spivak (1988) refers to the 'unlearning of our privileges as our loss', whereby the West allows the colonial subject to speak and therefore the colonial subjectivity transforms into a hybrid, or un-fixed character, who is enabled to undermine colonial authority and subvert the discursive dominance predicated against them (Kinnvall, 2015). Bhaba also mentions this colonial subjectivity and suggests that space be granted to the subaltern to speak, in order to reorientate the European project and allow the West to challenge its own foundational values and structured inequalities and to acknowledge its 'dark legacy', the 'black box of Europe', which still needs to be decrypted (Ponzanesi, 2015). Without a postcolonial enquiry the significance of racial hierarchies is not illuminated nor are immigration regimes which act along these hierarchical lines questioned. A postcolonial analysis offers space for resistance, where marginalized peoples can 'realise their agency in the subversion of the national narrative' (Guild, 2013) and create acts of 'anti-statecraft' (Doty, 2006) in order to envisage a more optimistic future for immigration in contemporary Western societies. The opening up of discussions of alternatives to the hegemonic characterisations of migrants and refugees presented by the West, allows for a new 'narration of the nation', one which is inclusive and rejects colonial tropes and conventions.

Post colonialism looks forward to a time when its enquiry will no longer be needed, when the neo-colonial world order it currently challenges and resists, will have been completely transformed. Europe has perceived the migrant crisis as an 'external intrusion disrupting an otherwise ordered European polity' (Bhabra, 2015), however if Europe does not acknowledge the 'inflections of colonialism' in the European project itself, and come to terms with its colonial past, then a new form of neo-colonial cosmopolitanism will be firmly established, which has serious consequences for the image that Europe pageants itself as, a normative power. A postcolonial analysis of the European migrant crisis shows that the immigration and border regimes of the current political establishment on the continent are products of the European colonial heritage and racialised identities, however the question of migration to Europe cannot be solved by turning Europe into a fortress. With the help of a tightly wound right wing narrative Europe has 'replaced humanity with an overbearing fetish for security' (Fitzgerald, 2017). Europe will have to revisit the core values that its own community purports, 'respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law' (Europa, 2018) in order to take the post colonialist turn and save it from reverting back to an incarnation of its former self.

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