

Migration, rights, and survival: the importance of the humanities today¹

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a reflection on the right to move and the need to create horizons of hope, in the context of the Mediterranean refugee crisis. It evokes conceptual and theoretical problems linked to the anguish and despair of migration, found in geopolitical scenarios such as the rubbish dumps of Zarsis, a coastal town on the Southeastern coast of Tunisia, which has become a beachhead for refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Bhabha focuses on examples of tropic language used to represent the loss of human rights and status of the Zarsis refugees: figures of speech that turn statelessness from a legal, political condition into an existential and ethical imperative. He argues that the language of tropes plays a heuristic role in diagnosing “black holes” or “blind spots” in political and legal discourses concerning the rights of migrants. Tropic language reveals a structure of disavowal that afflicts many traditions of policy-thinking that resort to physical barriers, like building walls and sealing borders, when what needs to be dealt with are existential, intersubjective dilemmas that emerge from the affective realm of ethical choice, psychic trauma, cultural subjectivity, the powers of tropic expression, and the paradoxes of personhood. The text is written in the interest of a humanistic philology and phenomenology of the migration crisis when the very act of survival suffers a close encounter with figures of death – loss, fear, risk, vulnerability, negation. The side-by-side proximity of death-life marks the everyday emergencies of our present history and severely tests humanistic critical thinking. At their best, the humanities work to restore the humanity of migrant men, women and children without rights; but the proximity of daily repetitions of death continues to put the method and courage of critical thinking to the test.

Keywords

migration, refugee crisis, human rights, survival, death-life, risk, alterity, affect, tropic language, humanities

The conceptual framework of the humanities is particularly relevant to understanding the cultural and political lifeworlds of the migrant experience. Built around pedagogies of representation and interpretation, the humanities engage with the ‘deep’ history of shifting relations between cultural expression, historical transition, and political transformation: they play a mediating role in this three-way process. Humanistic disciplines articulate the changing relationships between cultural meaning and social value as they shape civic ‘agents’ who participate in the creation of public opinion and the definition of public interest.

The ethics of citizenship, in our time, are defined as much by migration and resettlement as by indigenous belonging, as much by inter-national governance as by national sovereignty. Any curricular inquiry must confront the ethical reality that there is no ‘outside’ to the global system, as Hannah Arendt suggests. Whatever alienates global interdependency, or anni-

hilates cosmopolitan values, must be seen to be an effect of the internal dialectic of the global condition itself. “Deadly danger to any [global] civilization is no longer likely to come from without,” Arendt writes.

“The danger is that a global universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages” (1958, 302). As barbarism stirs in the midst of our own interconnected civilization, the barbarians are no longer at the gates. Today, the barbarians police the gates and the victims are migrants and refugees who, in Arendt’s poignant description, are “the oppressed history-suffering groups” (271).

This text focuses on the discrimination and dishonor mobilized by contemporary forms of ‘barbaric’ nationalism to denigrate and humiliate minority populations, and is written in the interest of a humanistic philology and phenomenology of the migration crisis when the very act of survival suffers a close encounter with figures of death – loss, fear, risk, vulnerability, negation. The side-by-side proximity of death-life repeats in the everyday emergencies of our present history and severely tests the method and mettle of our critical thinking.

The rubbish dumps of Zarsis

Zarzis, a coastal town on the Southeastern coast of Tunisia, is known for its thriving fishing industry and its prodigious olive production. Zarzis has, in the last decade, become a beach-head for beleaguered refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Syrians, Eritreans, Libyans, Ethiopians, Bangladeshis and Afghans head for Zarzis in their attempts to reach Tunisia’s long Mediterranean Coast. Refugees, like migrants more generally, soon lose their singular identities to the sovereign denomination of legal status and political designation. They are ironically named after the very nations that have driven them into the wilderness and rendered them rightless: *Syrian* refugees, *Eritrean* refugees, *Bangladeshi* refugees. Names, lost in life, are anonymous in death.

The stench of decaying bodies hangs heavy in the air, and the citizens of Zarzis create a *cordon sanitaire* around the polluting presence of refugees, dead and alive. Fisherfolk refuse to cast their nets in waters they believe to be polluted. The people of Zarzis refuse to admit foreign corpses into local morgues because their very existence defiles the sanctity of the deaths of local families. Underfunded municipal authorities, unqualified for the task, dump the bodies on waste ground outside the town-limits.

Mohamed Trabelsi, of the Tunisian Red Crescent, believes that the harsh sentence of statelessness delivered to the migrant dead by national neglect cannot be allowed to have the last word. Outraged by the *rigor mortis* relegated to the dumps of Zarzis – death as a kind of detritus – Trabelsi provocatively speaks of the dead as though they are still alive, deserving not only of proper burial rites, but the dignity of human rights:

For me, these corpses are people who have human rights. They should be treated with respect. After all, we never know how our lives can change [...] and we can become those people. (Reidy 2015)

The counterfactual claim made in the declarative present tense raises an awkward, even impossible, question: in what sense are corpses people who have the rights to have rights? Does the image-laden, affective language of tropes deepen our historical understanding? Trabelsi's figure of speech turns statelessness from a legal, political condition into an existential and ethical imperative. The trope of bare survival – corpses as denizens of rights-claims – has become a leitmotif of the migration crisis in both fact and fiction.

Refugees and distressed migrants from a host of African countries dwell in a melancholic state of anomie and apathy in Jenny Erpenbeck's migration masterwork, *Go Went Gone* (2017). In silent protest, they camp outside Berlin's Town Hall marking their presence with a written sign, *We become visible*. Their lives suspended in transit, they are victims of the Dublin Agreement that "treats asylum seekers as objects, not subjects," observes Guy Goodwin-Gill, the leading legal authority on the Refugee convention and on distress migration. "Disentitled from any right to express a preference, [...] the asylum seeker] is seen as someone, something, therefore, to be 'taken back' or 'taken in charge'" (2016, 284). Of such lives, where the saved continue to live out the burden of the drowned, their own lives silent and still, Erpenbeck writes:

These days the difference between the refugees who drown somewhere between Africa and Europe and those who don't is just a matter of happenstance. In this sense, every one of the African refugees here [...] is simultaneously alive and dead. (2017, 167)

Such a matter of happenstance is an ontological condition with a jurisdictional history. Once migrants fall into the "legal black holes" of the migration crisis, argues the legal scholar Itimar Mann, "[they] are beyond every state's jurisdiction" (15): "killing typically occurs while all involved actors express their dismay, their shame, and indeed their horror – but can avoid extending their help" (29).

The trope of the "living dead" has developed an ontological authority across diverse discourses, but its ubiquity must not be allowed to totalize political trajectories or sentimentalize personal tragedies. Death-life is as much a condition of the agency of survival, as it is a resistant agency of risk, choice, desperation. In each of these invocations of death-life there sounds a common *cri-de-coeur*. "How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life," writes Goodwin-Gill in a rebuke to the 'rational choice' policy-thinking on "deterrence" and the inadequate provisions for refugee and migrant protection (2016, 284). The language of tropes plays a heuristic role in diagnosing these legal "black holes" or "blind spots." Tropic language reveals a structure of disavowal that afflicts many traditions of policy-thinking that resort to physical barriers, like building walls and sealing borders, when what needs to be dealt with are existential, intersubjective dilemmas that emerge from the affective and anxious realm of ethical choice, psychic trauma, cultural subjectivity, the powers of tropic expression, and the

paradoxes of personhood. Goodwin Gill gets to the heart of the matter in his *Mediterranean Papers*:

Whether we are thinking about sealing borders or of the many current 'lesser' policies and practices favoured by governments today, what we see time and again is how they fail entirely to understand what it is that drives people *knowingly and rationally* to risk their own and their families' lives.

[...] *How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life.*

Only when knowledge and understanding of the despair of others, of their need to survive, and of their persistent optimism, only when these factors are integrated into serious, long-term policy thinking, will we begin to see programmes with a chance of making a positive impact – of providing, proactively, not reactively, humanitarian alternatives to the present crisis on the doorstep of Europe. (284, my emphasis)

There are technical, legal, and administrative forms of knowledge that Goodwin-Gill sees as being essential to a new European policy, which impose on states a special duty of care in which the obligation not to harm is effectively translated into a positive obligation to protect (2016, 282).

"How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life," Goodwin-Gill remarks of the policy-establishment, and suddenly the problem of knowledge and understanding enters a different moral register. The problem of migration-knowledge articulated in relation to 'otherness' is neither information, nor *savoir faire*, nor even good practice. To seek knowledge of what it is that drives people knowingly and rationally to risk their own and their families' lives, is to demand a radical shift, in the very structure of the ethical and political identification with the 'other'. It is no longer a matter of new data, fresh information, or benevolent intent. It is here that symbolic language of affect and metaphor, whether it informs literature or law, or raw experience, provides an unsurpassable insight into the desperate phenomenology of survival. The tropic imagination is shot through with contradiction, irony, ambivalence, even agonism. To understand what drives people to such degrees of risk one has to start with the paradoxes of a desperate optimism, the resilience of risk, the determination of despair, and the driving force of doubt.

The 'despair of others' is a complex, contradictory thing. In order to enhance the "positive obligation to protect" (282) and to achieve a new ethic of care, Goodwin-Gill explicitly rejects the agenda of (what he calls) "rational choice" (284). In contrast, we need to understand what we may call the "rationality of risk": risk, not simply as the "last act" of desperation, but as a kind of "disappointed hope," to recall Adorno's phrase.² In challenging policy-thinking to understand the despair of others in order to diminish the risk of physical and social death (criminalization of irregular migrants), Goodwin-Gill paradoxically makes a 'positive virtue' of the phenomenology and ethics of 'risk'.

Putting migrants at risk undoubtedly reveals a major "rights and rule of law deficit" (283); but it is only by positivizing our knowledge of risk, locating the *starting point* of policy discourse from within the enunciative and existential space of the 'other' – simultaneously dead and alive

– that we will be in a position to reform and reverse what Goodwin-Gill describes as the “blatant disregard of those values on which the EU is based, and of those principles at the heart of any representative democracy” (283).

Taking a risk, in this sense, can amount to an act of moral agency. And it is James Baldwin who makes, by far, the best case for it: we achieve our nation and our citizenship, he writes, when we fully realize that “the price of this transformation is [...] social and psychic risk, no matter what” (*The Fire Next Time*, 108). Understanding the despair of others is not merely an act of empathy; it is a risky business. It requires a mode of self-identification with ‘alterity’, in the process of reversing the perspective of migration policy. This would require policy to begin other-wise, from another place and by way of another ‘subject’.

Alterity is the contradictory and perverse sense in which the ‘risk’ we want to protect against – the despair of migration – becomes itself the risky ground, and vital hermeneutic, that is proactive in protecting against the practices of ‘rational-choice’ thinking. This odd coupling of risk-as-protection and risk-as-death, or risk-as-happenstance and risk-as-hermeneutic, reminds me of Hannah Arendt’s definition of alterity as “the two-in-one” that is constitutive of consciousness and moral considerations.

I read Goodwin-Gill’s identification with ‘the other’ as ‘actualizing this difference’ in order to ‘rehumanise’ the asylum system by acknowledging not only the rights but also the agency of the refugee or the distressed migrant. The appeal to alterity, as a policy of care and hospitality, protects proactively against the “disregard of individual interests, in an almost dehumanizing approach to the asylum seeker as object, not subject, as therefore disempowered from any right to express a preference, let alone choose his or her destination; as someone, something, therefore, to be ‘taken back’ or ‘taken in charge’” (2016, 284). It is indeed this very dehumanizing approach that endlessly talks of “saving lives” while participating in the black-hole jurisdictional infamy of “letting die.”

Notes

¹ This is the title of a lecture Homi Bhabha gave at the University of Padua on June 6, 2018. The text that follows is an excerpt from the author’s much longer speech, and we wish to thank him for generously allowing us to publish it in our journal. The video of the event is available [here](#). [editor’s note]

² Adorno and Horkheimer argued that “only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: [...] we, like them, are victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 215).

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