

MIGRATION, ASYLUM AND REFUGEE CAMPS IN FRANCE



In Chapter 9, we discuss social transformations and some of the major threats humans face. We focus there on environmental issues and globalization as two key changes that have transformed how we live. Another vital issue, and one that is in part a result of these, is the massive shift in the ways and the numbers in which people move across the world. As such, migration is a global contemporary concern.

The positive side of migration is that people with educational and work-oriented skills can travel the world and work in different countries. While this is not without its problems (see Yeates 2004), it has palpable benefits to the world as skills, experiences and cultures are shared (see our discussion of globalization in Chapter 9). However, recently, after wars and political uprisings in the Middle East and Africa, there are real crises of migration. For example, the United Nations Refugee Agency reported that in 2017 over 65 million people were forced from their homes around the world—with 22.5 million refugees who have had to flee their country because of persecution, war or violence. As people fled Syria and other countries, many of these refugees sought protection and a new life in Europe. More than 2 million people requested asylum in the European Union in 2015 and 2016 (see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics).

Countries within Europe approached the issue in markedly different ways. The UK took very few refugees, framing the issue as a threat to its economic security. Germany took a different approach, welcoming many refugees – over a million since the migration crisis hit Europe (<http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/statistics>). One could undertake a detailed sociological analysis of why countries reacted to the issue of asylum in such different ways (e.g. Geddes & Scholten 2016), but we focus here on the lived experience of refugees in France—and those refugees who have to live in refugee camps for an extended period of time.

Refugee camps have emerged in many parts of Europe as a way to process and accommodate the influx of people into the respective countries. Yet as sociologists and journalists have described, these camps often present terrible, inhumane conditions. As arts worker and researcher, Nelli Stavropoulou (2016) reported of her visit to Grande-Synthe refugee camp:

Nothing can really prepare you for visiting a refugee camp. In fact to describe Grande-Synthe as a camp would be problematic, as that would suggest the existence of facilities and the notion of an infrastructure. Instead, this is a space filled with tents, covered in mud and surrounded by garbage.

She adds, about the indeterminate state that refugees find themselves in:

We are surrounded by tents. We are surrounded by the stories that refugees themselves carry while traversing across borders, the possible, imagined futures envisioned while waiting here, in limbo. The word seems painfully accurate. In Limbo; describing ‘an imaginary place for forgotten or unwanted people’; ‘an unknown intermediate place between two extremes’; ‘a prison’.

Sociologist Teresa Piacentini visited the site in 2016 and witnessed a similar case of transience and poverty. She also documents community being “built from scratch” – as people make the best of their situation. Yet she highlights the deeper conundrum of sites that, if they become better

established and more developed, would stand as an acknowledgement of the permanence of refugees in France. In asking what the role of these camps is, she contends that “In the scramble for security and ‘keeping out’ perhaps they are to contain, to monitor, to protect, to deter and to forget.”

France has had a particular problem with these camps in Calais because they had previously agreed with the UK to undertake immigration checks on the French side of the tunnel—meaning that the French have to deal with immigration claims rather than the British. French President Emmanuel Macron has stated in 2018 that he will resist new camps like this one in Calais being developed, and the exit of Britain from the European Union will cause further questions around this.

With the huge numbers of refugees that traverse the world, escaping violence and war, social policy debates within some rich European countries focus on the number of people the country can accommodate. Fears about immigration too often trump the horrific experiences of people who seek safety and refuge. As the sociologists in this text indicate, the refugee camps set up in many parts of Europe are not fit for purpose and do not provide suitable living conditions for those most in need.

References

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