



A Tale of Two Crises: Migration and Terrorism after the Paris Attacks

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Abstract

This paper argues that the figure of the migrant has come to be seen as a potential terrorist in the West, under the condition of a double, but completely opposed, set of crises internal to the nation-state. The refugee crisis in Europe can no longer be understood as separate from the crisis of terrorism after the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015. In fact, the two crises were never really separate in the nationalist imaginary to begin with. The difference is that, with such a quick shift of attention between crises, we now see what was only implicit in the European response to the Syrian refugees has now become explicit in the response to the tragic attacks in Paris: that migration is understood to be a form of barbarian warfare that threatens the European Union.

Refugees and Terrorists

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Increased border security in the EU now means that thousands of refugees will suffer continued displacement.

It should hardly go without saying that migration and terrorism are not the same thing, but the fact that they have become each other's *doppelgänger* in contemporary politics, at least since 9/11, cannot simply be dismissed or ignored. It is important to understand why and how this has happened. Namely, what is crucial to understand are the conditions under which the convergence of these two figures has become possible in contemporary politics. In answer to this question I would like to put forward the following thesis: migration and terrorism have become conflated in nationalist politics because they expose a double crisis of the nation-state.

On the one hand, nation-states have failed to provide the social conditions necessary for the universal 'rights of man' initially promised by the nineteenth-century declaration. The phenomenon of migration thus presents a unique problem for the nation-state. If citizenship and legal equality are the concepts by which many nation-states and liberal democracies understand the political agency and rights of a people, what does this mean for the 15–20% of people living in countries like the United States, for example, without full status (Passel and Cohn 2010)? It means that a continually increasing population of migrants with partial or no status are now subject to a permanent structural inequality – the lack of voting and labour rights, possible deportation, and other deprivations, depending on the degree of status. This is difficult to reconcile with almost any political theory of equality, universality, or liberty (Cole 2000). The fact that hundreds of millions of human beings are currently living outside their country of origin as a result of migration and frequent relocation should dramatically challenge the conditions of political life assumed by many European nation-states.

On the other hand, nation-states have failed to adequately neutralize terrorist organizations. In fact, the phenomenon of contemporary religious terrorist groups like Al Qaida is, in part, the product of nationalist wars like the Cold War where the United States armed and trained Jihadist groups to fight the Soviets in the 1980s, as well as the result of the failure of a certain Western and imperialist ethno-nationalist political model to organize diverse ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East into homogenous territories with the Skyes-Picot agreement (Barr 2012). When the goal of ethnic homogeneity becomes a defining feature of nationalism, as it has historically in Western Europe, the outcome is a proliferation of ethnic 'minority' groups as witnessed in World War I and World War II (Arendt 1966). The splintering of minority groups thus creates the possibility of civil and nationalist wars of all varieties. Religious terrorism is not a natural or necessary outcome of the failure of ethno-nationalism by any means, but it has certainly become one of its most prominent contemporary manifestations that cannot be understood outside a certain historical crisis of the nation-state to handle ethnic and religious factions.

What the two crises of migration and terrorism both have in common is that they have become the dominant political figures through which Western nation-states express their own internal crises. However, this is not because migration and terrorism are the same, but precisely because they are so different – as the opposed poles of the crisis of the nation-state. On the one hand, the figure of the migrant and refugee increasingly push the nation-state toward greater social inclusion, free

mobility, cosmopolitan right, and hospitality. At the limits of this trajectory, the migrant is pushing the nation-state to its critical limits insofar as it can no longer support the requirements of such heterogeneity, mobility, and autonomy – since the nation-state remains tied to fixed forms of territory, national identity, and the state. On the other hand, the figure of the terrorist is increasingly pushing the form of the nation-state toward greater social exclusion, restricted mobility, religious and ethnic extremism, and xenophobia. In particular, Al Qaida and ISIS are themselves not only expressions of a kind of hyper-nationalism based in ethnic and religious exclusions, but through terrorism, they have also pushed other nation-states to adopt increasingly exclusionary, nationalist, and security measures that have increased conservative, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant sentiment in the West. ISIS defines itself as an Islamic ‘state’, and most Al Qaida fighters were motivated by nationalist causes (Gerges 2011:75).¹ In short, hyper-religious-nationalism in the form of terrorism has pushed nation-states increasingly beyond the limits of liberal democracy and closer to authoritarian states of martial law – as evidenced in France’s recent declaration of a ‘state of emergency’ and deployment of ten thousand troops onto the streets of Paris after the attacks.

In this paper I would like to argue, therefore, that the figure of the migrant has come to be seen as a potential terrorist in the West, under the condition of a double, but completely opposed, set of crises internal to the nation-state. However, since the threat of terrorism is already quite explicit regarding its war against the West, and so much has already been written on the way in which terrorism has changed contemporary warfare (Hoge and Rose 2001; Robb 2007), and increased nationalist securitization in the West and Middle East (Posner and Vermeule 2007), I would like to focus instead on the figure of the migrant. In particular, I show the ways in which the migrant and refugee in Europe and the United States have been characterized as a destructive and even militarized war against Western civilization. More specifically, I argue that Europe’s anti-immigrant rhetoric equates migrants to terrorists through the language of barbarism and the threat to security – a strategy similar to the one used by the United States – used after 9/11 to scrutinize migrants and curtail civil liberties.

The Migrant as Barbarian

The recent increase in movement of refugees and migrants into Europe is not the cause of the current crisis – Europe is. Migration has occurred – and will continue – for all kinds of reasons, as it has since the beginning of human societies. Indeed, mass human movement is not the historical anomaly – Europe is. If the mistreatment, marginalization, and death of recent European migrants is so deplorable, it is because Europe has created a social system that has made this a reality. The subject of the crisis should thus be flipped right side up: Europe is a crisis for migrants. Therefore, the critical question (in the Greek sense of the word ‘*krisis*’ as a decision) is not what is to be done with the migrants, but rather what is to be done with Europe? Should it be transformed, following the demands and needs of global migrants, in a more cosmopolitan direction, or increasingly fortified, securitized, and nationalized, responding to attacks by terrorist groups?

It should also be noted that the crisis of migration is not unique to our present conjuncture, and its historical formation is worthy of further consideration.² Throughout history, migrants, refugees, and stateless people have almost always prompted a similar critical question for Western civilization, and often posed more inclusive political organizations as alternatives to it (Nail 2015).³ In the neolithic world, the nomads of the steppe were territorially displaced by agricultural peoples, and so invented a new social organization of their own, based on solidarity, inclusion, and undivided territory. In the ancient world, barbarians were kidnapped from all over the Mediterranean and enslaved for the purpose of supporting the Greek and Roman political apparatus. Maroon societies of escaped slaves in Chios and communities of revolting slaves in the Servile Wars, including the one led by Spartacus, were by far the most open and diverse cosmopolitan societies of the ancient period. In the medieval world, hundreds of thousands of peasants were forced from their homes by excessive taxation, the invention of money rent (commutation debt), enclosures (land privatization), and other means, and then criminalized as vagabonds. Vagabonds of all kinds created maroon societies like those of Bacaude in Gaul, that welcomed all displaced people; they created roaming bands of military defectors, paupers, heretics, minstrels, and so on, with open membership. They created universalist and often egalitarian underground societies that dug up enclosure fences in the night; lived in the forests, wastelands, and commons; and preached the cosmopolitan right of the poor to the land. In the modern world, after centuries of displacement, migrants were dispossessed of everything but their own labour and were forced to move to wherever, and work for whatever, capitalists desired. The migrant proletariat in the modern period created the Paris commune and socialist utopian societies of all sorts. Communists, anarchists, and others advocated the universal equality of an international working class against capitalist displacement and all political exclusion. The legacy and challenge of this migrant cosmopolitanism continues today.

Europe's current crisis, therefore, is that it is increasingly forced to choose between its pretensions of liberal democracy – based on the idea of universal equality – and the fact that its provision of certain rights is absolutely limited by territorial, political, legal, and economic borders. The real crisis is that one cannot have both. Thousands of years of history have demonstrated the exclusionary nature of states, but the twenty-first century will force us to realize it. More than any other century, this will be the century of the migrant, despite the reactionary attempt to equate it with terrorism. The international nation-state system (UN) and now the infra-national nation-state system (EU) have failed to adapt to the cosmopolitan requirements of the migrant. What we are witnessing today in the brutal deaths of African boat refugees and Mexican migrants is the demonstration of this failure.

If Europe, and the West more broadly, are in crisis today, it is partially due to the fact that they continue to resist the changes demanded by global migrants and instead model their immigration policy on that of the Roman empire against the Barbarian tides. It is precisely this reactionary equation of migrants with Barbarians that supports the false equation of migrants with terrorists, as threats to civilization, i.e. Western nation-states.

Today this thesis is increasingly common in the popular portrayal of migrants. In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* recently published an editorial comment on Europe's crisis that ends by describing refugees as the 'fearful dispossessed' who are 'rattling Europe's gates' (*The Guardian* 2015). Although unfamiliar to some, others will know that the phrase 'rattling the gates' refers to a very specific historical moment: the barbarian invasion of Rome. Numerous historical and popular books, films, and news articles evidence this same rhetorical use of 'barbarians at the gates'.

In particular, if we want to locate the origins of the recent emergence of the European discourse on immigrant barbarism we have to first look at the United States. The popularization of the political figure of the migrant barbarian began in the United States and has been especially influential on the recent European reception of refugees thanks to Samuel Huntington's 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, and its explicit description of a 'Mexican immigrant invasion' of American civilization (Huntington 1996). This political formulation has even been adopted in Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump's xenophobic rhetoric about 'migrant rapists and murderers' (FoxNews.com 2015), evoking images of barbarian hordes invading America, or the way in which recent Central American child refugees to the United States were described by the media and the government as an influx of dangerous waters in the form of a 'flood', 'surge', 'tidal wave', or 'deluge' (Nail 2014).

Significant portions of the population of the United States and Europe believe that immigrants are politically unequal to citizens. The attitude is not new. In fact, the idea of a natural political inferiority was invented in the ancient world, though it has repeated itself again and again throughout history – hence the persistence of the term 'barbarian'. Originally used to classify those beyond the pale of ancient Greek and Roman society, 'barbarian' has since been redeployed throughout all of history to designate one's cultural and political enemies as 'naturally inferior'. From the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie who called the migrant peasants in Paris 'savage barbarians', to the Nazi propaganda that described migrant Jews as 'uncivilized oriental barbarians', the perceived inferiority of migrant groups relative to political centres has proven to be an enduring source of antagonism.

The recent slurs against Mexican migrants to the United States on the presidential campaign stage retreads this familiar ground. Mexican immigrants are perceived by many in the United States (including the government) to have a negative impact on the states. It is for this same reason that the entry of barbarians in the Greek polis, Roman Empire, and even in ancient Sumer was carefully restricted. In the United States, and in the ancient empires, large military-style walls were built and guarded to control the movement of undesirable foreigners into the community. The reasons for the undesirability of their respective foreign populations vary in each society, yet all these powers are associated with massive wall projects. Today European countries like Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia, are now building massive fence projects as a response to transformation of migrants into potential terrorists after the Paris attacks (Bouras and Stamouli 2015).

Significant portions of ancient societies also found populations of migrant foreigners undesirable because they would have a negative impact on the 'culture' of the host country – yet barbarians were also required as manual labourers to

support that culture. In part, it is the language of the immigrant's culture that is perceived as inferior or incompatible to the host's language. Anti-immigrant discourse in the United States and Europe is filled with rhetoric about immigrants who cannot or 'refuse to' learn the national language and whose populations are changing their 'way of life'. Both contemporary and ancient societies believed that these immigrations were not benign but constituted a political and military 'invasion' that required a military response, thus the walls, deportations, and military operations. This is precisely why migration and terrorism today both receive a direct military response where other social issues do not.

If we want to locate the origins of the recent emergence of the European discourse on immigrant barbarism we should also look in particular to the specific rhetorical strategies used by American politicians and media. This is important because the same thing is now happening in Europe in its recent crisis.

For the last fifteen years or so, right-wing author Patrick Buchanan, along with others, has been popularizing this political concept of 'barbarian invasion' for conservative audiences in the United States and now Europe. Buchanan writes:

History repeats itself. After the Roman republic spread out, Rome became a polyglot city of all creeds and cultures of the empire. But these alien people brought with them no reverence for Roman gods, no respect for Roman tradition, no love of Roman culture. And so, as Rome had conquered the barbarians, the barbarians conquered Rome. In the 5th century, beginning with Alaric and the Visigoths in 410, the northern tribes, one after another, invaded and sacked the Eternal City. And the Dark Ages descended. And as Rome passed away, so, the West is passing away, from the same causes and in much the same way. What the Danube and Rhine were to Rome, the Rio Grande and Mediterranean are to America and Europe, the frontiers of a civilization no longer defended. (Buchanan 2006:2)

Buchanan argues that the decline of the United States and the decline of Rome are both due not so much to the strength of the 'invaders' (barbarians and 'illegal immigrants') but to the so-called Christian generosity of 'emperor Valens, who has his modern counterpart in George W. Bush', which has been taken advantage of as migrants are allowed to cross the border. Buchanan's historical parallel is deeply disturbing on many levels, since Rome has always been the go-to model for Western imperialism from Napoleon to Hitler. But the comparison with the United States is true in many ways – just not in the ways Buchanan thinks.

In 376, an 'incalculable multitude' of barbarian refugees arrived at Rome's Danube border, asking for asylum from the Huns. But the reason Valens eventually helped them cross the river was not 'generosity' but power and greed: he required them to be enlisted in the Roman army and pay heavy taxes in exchange for land, grain, and protection. As they crossed, many drowned. Corrupt Roman soldiers allowed barbarians to keep their weapons if they sold their wives and children into prostitution and slavery. Once they arrived on the other side of the river, they were put into deplorable refugee camps where the great Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes the exchange of Gothic slaves for dogs to be eaten as meat. Food was insufficient, and the barbarians were never given the

land, grain, and protection they were promised. Instead, thousands starved to death, watched their younger children die, and their wives raped or sold into slavery or prostitution for food. Finally, the barbarians were so desperate and dispossessed that they revolted. ‘In this way’, as Ammianus writes, ‘through the turbulent zeal of violent people, the ruin of the Roman empire was brought on’ (Lenski 2002:326; ‘Eunapius and Zosimus lament the frenzy of Roman commanders racing to acquire sex slaves and agricultural laborers on the cheap’ (Ammianus, *Roman History*, 31.4.11)).

There is a contemporary parallel to this in Mexico-U.S. migration. Mexican migrants are frequently recruited in Mexico by American corporations with the promise of a good wage, food, and the American dream (land, protection, etc.). If they arrive, they are promised the possibility of a pathway to citizenship through military service in one of the foreign wars in which the United States is engaged. But many of those who try to cross illegally die because of the U.S.-Mexico border wall (more than six thousand have died since 1994).

Mexican migrants pay the *coyotajes*’ exorbitant fees to smuggle them across the border, and the *coyotajes* in turn bribe U.S. officials and others to get them across. Sometimes, however, the *coyotajes* kidnap their clients, rape them, or sell them to human traffickers. Once on the other side of the river, migrants are caught – taken from their families and put in a detention camp, where more than 107 migrants’ deaths have been covered up by ICE since October 2003 (Bernstein 2010).⁴ Or the migrants get a job and are often cheated by their employers, who charge them excess fees for their transport, pay them less than they promised, physically abuse them, and generally take advantage of their partial or lack of status. Migrants work some of the hardest and most slavish jobs in the United States and still live below poverty. ICE raids on elementary schools take migrants’ children away from them. Migrants are also frequently deported away from their children, who then grow up in poverty (Anderson 2016). Without legal means of work, migrants are more likely to end up in the underground economy of prostitution, drugs, and so forth.

After 9/11 in the United States the right-wing description of migrants as barbarian hordes against civilization began to overlap with the popular description of terrorists trying to destroy the nation. This led directly to increased border securitization inside the country (at airports) and at the periphery (the U.S.-Mexico border), despite the fact that no terrorist has ever come across the U.S.-Mexico border, and that the 9/11 attacks were not perpetrated by Mexican migrants. The false connection between migrants and terrorists is not natural or universal but had to be forged through the language of migrant barbarism as a militarized attack on the United States. Once the migrant came to be seen as a threat to the nation-state (ignoring that it is a specifically cosmopolitan kind of threat), it could then be equated with its polar opposite: hyper-nationalist, religious extremism. Theoretically, this looks like a ludicrous move but, practically, it has been extremely successful – so successful in fact, that Europe is now following suit.

Europe’s New Barbarians

Europe’s anti-immigrant rhetoric is now following the same strategy as the United States – connecting migrants to terrorism through the language of barbarism. In

Europe, French presidential frontrunner Marine Le Pen said at a recent rally that ‘this migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the 4th century, and the consequences will be the same’ (Kent 2015). Even when their rhetoric is veiled, sometimes even when they claim to support the migrant population, much of the rest of Europe and its media have now uncritically adopted the same ‘dangerous waters’ metaphors used by Romans and almost every other imperial power in history who have described their migrants as ‘fierce waves’, ‘influxes’, ‘storms’, ‘surges’ (Basu 2014), and ‘floods’ (Semple 2014). Even the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has described the refugees as a ‘great tide’ that has ‘flooded into Europe’ producing ‘chaos’ that needs to be ‘stemmed and managed’ (Holehouse 2015a). ‘We are slowly becoming witnesses to the birth of a new form of political pressure’, Tusk claims, ‘and some even call it a kind of a new hybrid war, in which migratory waves have become a tool, a weapon against neighbours’ (Holehouse 2015b).

This is not neutral terminology. What Tusk and others are doing, consciously or not, is creating a deadly system of political analogy. Migrants are a tide of bellicose barbarians banging at Europe’s gates and threatening the nation with cultural warfare; just as terrorists threaten the European nation-state with religious warfare. Insofar as both threaten the European nation, both are part of the same contemporary war against the Western nation-state. Every migrant, as a fighter in this new hybrid war, is a potential terrorist and every terrorist is just waiting to infiltrate the West as a potential migrant. This is the political analogy that justifies increased border securitization against the two perceived common enemies confronting European nation-states: migrant cosmopolitanism and Islamic terrorism.

In light of this analogy, Tusk’s description of migrant warfare above, made before the Paris attacks, may just as well refer to the description of the terrorists after the attack. Therefore, what we are able to witness in this rapid flip from one crisis to the other (migration to terrorism), is the explicit way in which the two discourses feed off each other and rely on the same imagery of violence, danger, and warfare. What Tusk and others have described as a ‘new hybrid warfare’ initiated by migrants has been used almost word for word to describe the ‘new hybrid warfare’ of international terrorism. This is possible only under the condition that both are perceived as threats to the nation-state – albeit in completely different ways rendered invisible by the discourse of war and security.

However, seemingly unbeknownst to those who intentionally equate contemporary migrants with the ‘barbarian tides’ of old, the popularization of this collective political idea (whether consciously or unconsciously deployed for dramatic rhetorical effect) has two interestingly opposed implications. On the one hand, it implies an historical affirmation of Roman imperialism and slavery that has its contemporary parallel in modern nationalism and the economic exploitation of migrants in Western countries. But it also implies a negation of the Empire and presents the historical inevitability that the Barbarians will destroy Rome, or today that global migrants, like the Goths, will no longer be able to tolerate the current conditions of exploitation and incarceration and will bring about a cosmopolitan revolution against the Empire. This is the ‘critical’ decision

to be made today in Europe and elsewhere: to yield to the forces of hyper-nationalist terrorism and abandon the democratic aims of equality, or to yield to the forces of a new migrant cosmopolitanism based on hospitality and inclusion. It appears that the middle ground of the Western nation-state is increasingly unable to manage these dual crises.

Notes

¹ Jihadism expert Gerges (2011:75) calls bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri ‘religiously hyper-nationalist[s]’, and argues: ‘The bulk of al-Qaeda’s foot soldiers were, as we have seen, Saudi and Yemeni, indicative of the local, nationalist context of bin Laden’s struggle, as opposed to the globalized, borderless public utterances. Stripped of its rhetoric and drama, bin Laden’s call was aimed at inciting opposition against the House of Saud and destabilizing the regime.’

² Such a further study is provided in Nail (2015) and Nail (forthcoming).

³ A full analysis of the history of migrant resistance and alternative societies cannot be given here, but is fully developed and cited at length in Nail (2015).

⁴ ‘The documents, obtained over recent months by The Times and the American Civil Liberties Union under the Freedom of Information Act, concern most of the 107 deaths in detention counted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement since October 2003, after the agency was created within the Department of Homeland Security’ (Bernstein 2010).

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