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RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND MEDIATED ACTIVISM: CREATIVE RESPONSES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Some Human's Rights: Neocolonial Discourses of Otherness in the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis

Siobhan Holohan

Keele University, UK
s.holohan@keele.ac.uk

Taking as my starting point Hannah Arendt's (1994/1943) observations on the public response to the mass exile of Jews during World War Two, I argue that the UK's mediated reaction to those escaping conflict during the Mediterranean refugee crisis followed similar ideological patterns: fear, suspicion, antipathy and reserved compassion. I then move on to examine the role that human rights organisations had in the sympathetic re-construction of migrants/refugees. Here, I argue that at the same time as media platforms have become progressively more intertwined, ideologically complex, and perhaps as a result more responsive to shifting narratives and the changing public mood about the other, non-governmental organisations continue to operate within an established system of representation that render the migrant abject in terms of western dominance. In response to this reading of the refugee crisis, I offer the conclusion that while discourses produced by the various actors with a stake in the construction and counter-construction of the crisis were multifaceted and dynamic in their response to the evolving situation, the competing narratives surrounding the event remained resolutely embedded within a neocolonial discourse of otherness.

Introduction

In the first place, we don't like to be called 'refugees'
(Arendt, 1994/1943: 110)

Recent research into mainstream media narratives that formed around what became known variably as the 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis' in 2015 have revealed a set of discourses that, although ranging from hostile to (superficially, at least) sympathetic, remain firmly embedded in a system of representation that marks the subjects of discourse as outsiders (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016; Barlai et al. 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Early readings into the media coverage of the plight of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean in search of safety echo the work of foundational media research that did much to reveal how minority groups are assigned outsider status within hegemonic discourse (Hall et al. 1978; van Dijk, 1991). However, in contrast to this conventional view of dominant discourses of otherness, more recently media scholars have developed a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which a diverse array of media organisations and their audiences interact in order to create a varied set of meanings around public sphere matters. Instead of a homogenous public sphere environment where audiences possess limited opportunities to challenge dominant constructions of meaning, we now are said to co-exist in a multi-mediated and heterogeneous space in which marginal voices have the potential to be heard (Bolin, 2011). Despite this view, there remains an influence gap between those with the resources to construct and manipulate the news agenda and others whose voices remain at the margins of representation. The human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that manage the effects of transnational migration first hand reside in the second camp due to restricted access to mainstream communication forms, instead relying greatly on digital media environments that piggyback off the mainstream news agenda. In this regard there exists a complex and often fraught relationship between NGOs and the media forums that they rely on to disperse their message that has the potential to restrict the oppositional function of the counter-narrative (Barker, 2008; Fenton, 2010; Powers, 2014; Powers, 2016).

Considering this last point, my aim in this article is to develop an understanding of how the figure of exile is constructed in contemporary stories of migration. Here,

I offer a conceptual reading of the 'crisis' found in both the mainstream media accounts and in the counter-narratives extended by NGOs that sought to advocate on behalf of refugees. Rather than providing a reading based on a corpus linguistics approach, as has been extended elsewhere (for example see Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017), my aim here is to offer critical insight into how public sphere discourses work to repeat a hegemonic understanding of migration. I extend this reading by first returning to Hannah Arendt's and Giorgio Agamben's influential work on exile. For these authors the figure of the refugee, or exile, is central to the continued politics of exclusion because they are allowed to be constructed as less than human in language and law. Against this critical reading I argue that the dominant discourses put forward by the mainstream media depicted the familiar trope of migrants as dangerous other; in other words as a threat to sovereignty. The following two sections work through the contemporary rendering of this process by presenting in turn a brief overview of the mainstream media headline stories that appeared at the height of the crisis, between April–September 2015, before moving on to discuss the counter-narratives produced by NGOs largely in the form of online interventions. In this section I also turn to Shivji's (2007) work on the deficiency of neoliberal humanitarianism to suggest that while NGOs appeared to extend a counter-narrative that called for understanding and protection, they too located their refugee narrative within an established colonial system of representation that functioned to subjugate the other in terms of their subordinate relationship to the West (Hall, 1992). I end by considering how these narratives and counter-narratives operated within a shared system of representation that worked together to discursively oppress those who cannot speak for themselves.

Who is a refugee?

Political and media discourses about the refugee crisis began to appear during the summer of 2015 after reports emerged about greater numbers of people arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2015).¹ While historically Greece

¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded over a million (1,015,078) refugees arriving by sea to mainland Europe in 2015. This figure was a significant increase from the previous year (216,054).

and Turkey had been the established departure points for movement into Europe, increased border controls funded by the European Union had made the journey by land more difficult. In fact in the seven years leading up to the crisis Amnesty International estimates that the EU had spent nearly 2 billion euros on border patrols and the installation of security fences and surveillance systems in key land and sea access points across the Mediterranean as a deterrent to people seeking to enter western Europe (Amnesty International, 2015a). This increased securitisation of the region, coupled with the spike in overall migrant numbers caused by close to 5 million men, women and children escaping war in Syria since 2011, led to greater use of the maritime route for those seeking sanctuary. Although the sea route into mainland Europe was not new, attempts to enter the region via boat from the Middle East and North Africa sharply increased at the start of the summer 2015 when, theoretically at least, the sea should have become safer to navigate. The increased number of migrants attempting to make this journey came to public attention on 15 April when reports emerged of a boat capsized off the coast of Italy carrying more than 500 migrants (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Scholars, journalists and bloggers around the world have since returned to our collective past in an attempt to understand the public debates surrounding the refugee crisis. The work of Arendt and Agamben in particular has once more become central to understanding debates about the miserable bond between the state and the state-less individual in this scramble to make sense of the spectacle of human tragedy that collided with our collective consciousness (Lendaro, 2016; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Arcimaviciene & Bağlama, 2018). Here, I too, briefly return to Arendt and Agamben's work on statelessness and human rights, in order to provide a conceptual basis for thinking through how contemporary public debates about migration are framed in terms of a set of power relations that seeks to inscribe the other in abject relation to, in this case, the EU and any nation-state within it.

The figure of the refugee, as a mass phenomenon, originated in the remnants of World War I when the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires led to hundreds of thousands of people dispersing throughout Europe.

While many had been forcibly displaced by the redrawing of national borders, finding themselves stateless in the process, others migrated to avoid persecution in their newly created nation-states (Marrus, 1987; Agamben, 1995; Gatrell, 2013). The effects of this mass exodus were documented in Arendt's (1994/1943) short but powerful essay about the experience of Jewish refugees during the World War II, in which she described a situation where, as exiles, Jews were stripped of identity. Here, she argued that, first, Jews were driven out of Germany, where they had been re-constructed as 'untermenschen' (subhuman), non-people with no rights. Then, when they migrated to France, they were interned 'for their safety' and designated as 'boche' (a derogatory French word for a person of German nationality) or 'voluntary prisoners' (a new category of person or non-person with no legal rights or status). By the time exiled Jews arrived on American shores they had again been rewritten, this time as 'enemy alien'. According to Arendt, this perpetual reconstruction of Jewish identity to suit the master narrative of the host nation worked to empty the exile of meaning, resulting in their subjection to whatever discourse was required by the nation-state in which they arrived. Importantly, for Arendt, Jewish identity existed *a priori* and separate from politics, and as a consequence could not be reconciled within its regulatory organisation. The physical and psychological violence meted out to Jewish people during and after the World War II damaged their collective psyche, with the result for Arendt being that 'we don't want to be refugees, since we don't want to be Jews' (1994/1943: 117). Jewish exiles therefore had their identity emptied by the political discourses that followed them around the world. Consequently, the figure of the 'Jew' became a container for whatever meaning the state wished to pour into it, and Jews' human rights were contingent on the protection of a political community, something they could not hope to achieve without surrendering their identity. Rejection of self was the price to be paid for being granted human rights. So, while Arendt argued that all humans have the right to have rights, Human Rights can only be granted by states operating within a recognised legal-political system. Arendt (1976/1951) expanded this idea in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when she reasoned that human beings could not expect protection by their own governments if they fell

outside of state law. State law, however, is arbitrary and unpredictable, dictated by changing circumstances and political agendas.

Extending Arendt's work, Agamben (1995, 1998) argues that the arrangement of sovereignty around legal status necessitates the exclusion of others: the stateless. Referring to the significance and the signification of the figure of the refugee, Agamben reminds us of Arendt's (1998/1958) reference to natality, which can be explained as a fact of birth, or what can be called personal sovereignty. According to Arendt there is value in natality, the essence of our existence, which supersedes the national legal-political complex of state law. That is to say that everyone has fundamental human rights no matter who they are or where they are. In this regard there exists a space to behave in a humanitarian manner toward the refugee. But as we have seen, this is always at cost to selfhood. Agamben situates the notion of natality in the context of a second type of sovereignty which inscribes individuals as citizens who belong to the nation-state. He explains that the exile:

Represents such a disquieting figure [...] because by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty (Agamben, 1995: 115).

In other words, the exile provokes anxiety precisely because they are no longer of a place. Like Arendt, Agamben argues that once a human being becomes exiled from state sovereignty (or its protection), they exist at the margins of sociality, a liminal space where they are emptied of humanity, to be filled with whatever meaning suits the needs of the nation at any given point in time. In this regard they enter a *state of exception*. When occupying the state of exception, otherwise known as a state of emergency, normal legal human rights are suspended. This suspension of human rights is in turn legitimised by the repeated articulation of the potential threat the exile poses to the state and to those who legally occupy the nation-state, for example as a terrorist threat, a threat to jobs or to the customary way of life (Esses, Medianu & Lawson, 2013). The construction of the figure of refugee as illegal is important

for two reasons: first, it allows the state to justify its actions with regard to the state of exception, for example additional border security or immigration controls as seen across Europe. Second, it prevents the exile from being humanised, an act that might lead to a public outcry. In this liminal space, then, the exile is a non-person. While they are permitted to exist they have no rights or identity; they live only what Agamben (1998) terms a 'bare life'.

Referring to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Agamben (1998) explores the Roman law *homo sacer*, which defines the stateless individual as someone who has been drained of humanity and is therefore not subject to the normal rule of law, yet cannot be sacrificed lest they become a martyr figure. While Foucault argued that biopolitics structures all aspects of human life in a way that regulates everyday actions, Agamben extends his thesis, arguing that in the case of the stateless, the politics of the management of life becomes the politics of death and extermination, or thanatopolitics. The example Agamben cites is that of the Euthanasia Programme for The Incurably Ill in Nazi Germany (1998: 140–41), but he also relates the idea to the camp, in particular the concentration camp. For Agamben, the nation-state is inseparable from the concentration camp because the state builds its sovereignty, and legitimates its truth, on a rejection of the value of human life. Similarly, the job of the camp is to provide a spatial reminder of the authority of the state by presenting a visceral symbol of the lack of humanity of the camp occupant. The miserable conditions in which the camp occupants find themselves are surely a sign that the state was right in their decision to reject their humanity? Like an animal going to the slaughterhouse to meet its inevitable end, so too the camp occupant must be subjected to an official discourse of exclusion that renders the political decision correct. The outcome of this situation is the demonstration of a life not worth living. This condition, however, was not exclusive to Nazi Germany, but is present in all societies; none more so than in the modern-day refugee camp. Here, Bauman (1995) reminds us, that ultimately the contemporary camp is a bureaucratic enterprise, not unlike the Nazi concentration camp, intent on the systematic regulation of people within.

A state of emergency

The symbolic construction of the refugee camp as a space of exception pervaded the political responses and news stories that accompanied the emerging migrant crisis in 2015, and consequently does much to reveal the stages of development in the ensuing crisis discourse. The makeshift encampment at Calais known as 'the Jungle' had for a number of years been a persistent and contentious feature in the right-wing print media (Howarth & Ibrahim, 2012; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2018). Known as a crossing point for migrants seeking to enter the UK, numbers began to grow at the port of Calais at the start of 2015 in the wake of wars in the Middle East. For UK commentators, then, Calais provided a conveniently familiar backdrop to stories about mass migration across Europe and the mounting humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean, which led to plans for the resettlement of refugees across EU states. In this regard, the stage for the unfolding Mediterranean drama had been set long before the escalation of media interest in the summer months. For example, in the UK, in the months between January and April 2015 the *Daily Mail* alone had published more than forty headline reports about the camp at Calais. Many of these stories centred on migrants seeking illegal entry into the UK by concealing themselves on lorries or by attempting to enter on foot via Eurotunnel.

As noted above, in the work of Agamben and Bauman the camp is primarily a bureaucratic enterprise that subjugates its occupants in terms of legal-political regulation. Here, the exile is contained within a biopolitical structure that defines them literally and symbolically in terms of their abject (in)human condition, thus working to uphold the authority of the sovereign position. However, the unofficial status of the camp at Calais had the potential to subvert the meaning inscribed by state authority. For example, camp occupants regularly asserted individual agency in their visible efforts to breach the border into the UK. In this regard 'Jungle' occupants frustrated attempts to inscribe them with official meaning. However, as outlined in my discussion to follow, in instances where state authority fails, public sphere discourse intervenes to exclude the other. This exclusionary process was in

evidence by June when the number of migrants reaching Calais in a bid to travel across the Channel to Dover had increased to the extent that a COBRA Committee was convened to put an emergency plan in place for increased border security.² By July the growing threat of illegal migration into the UK had been discursively tied to disruption to holiday travel caused by the temporary closure of Eurotunnel. At this point border control at Calais had been rewritten by politicians and mainstream media in terms of a state of emergency. As a result, while the portrayal of the migrant as dangerous other persisted in the populist discursive construction of the migrant, this danger was presented in terms of a neoliberal logic that positioned the other as a burden on our financial resources. Responding to a statement by the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey requesting more resources to help secure the port at Dover, the *Daily Mail* redeployed a typical discourse of invasion that sought a call for action with the headline: 'Calais' thin blue line: Helpless French police are overrun as hundreds more migrants storm Channel Tunnel declaring "it's England or death" – so when will Cameron finally take action?' (Robinson et al. 2015). However, the right-wing *Daily Mail* was not alone in its call to arms. Migrants attempting to enter the UK via Calais were depicted as a threat to national borders, security and the rule of law across both the left and right-wing tabloid press:

MIGRANT CRISIS: Call to send in our Army: Softy Calais goes ballistic... Frenchies are atrocious! (Wilkinson, July 2015).

Send in the Army: Migrant dies as 1,500 try to overrun Channel Tunnel again (Proctor, 2015).

Call in the Army to Halt Migrant Invasion: Call for action to end chaos in Calais (Reynolds, 2015).

Send in the Dogs: PM's bid to halt tide of illegal migrants (Beattie, 2015).

² The Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA) refers to a select government committee that convenes in response to emergency situations. The committee met on 25 June 2015 to discuss the impact that migrant activity at the port of Calais was having on the movement of goods and people across the Channel border.

The sense of a growing state of emergency caused by the movement of migrants was also evident in the broadsheet press, which responded to events in Calais in a similarly urgent manner. Here, the right-wing *Telegraph* followed the tabloid call to 'Send Army to halt Calais crisis' (Barrett & Mulholland, 2015); and *The Times* deployed comparable battle motifs when it spoke of '[t]housands of migrants storm Calais terminal: 148 reach Britain in biggest security breach yet' (Ford & O'Neill, 2015). However, this populist discourse was not so straightforward. Within stories about the threat to borders, there were also attempts to humanise the people trying to seek refuge. For example the *Daily Mail* entreated for a political solution to the situation at Calais that recognised the growing humanitarian crisis (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore 2016; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Also taking an outwardly humanitarian stance, some centre-left media outlets, such as *The Guardian* and national broadcaster *BBC News*, led with a human interest story about a man dying after attempting to enter to UK via Eurotunnel (Eglot & Wintour, 2015; BBC News, 2015). Yet, at the same time as personalising the growing crisis by telling the stories of migrants, these media organisations broadsheet press continued to rearticulate the scale of the problem by referring to the difficulties for UK travellers caused by high numbers of migrants attempting to enter the UK. When asked about the growing emergency it was then Prime Minister, David Cameron, who restored the economies of scale narrative with an all too familiar invasion/vermin motif when he stated in an interview to *ITV News*: '[y]ou have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life' (Cameron, 2015). Alluding to the disruption to holiday travel for Britons heading to Europe via Eurotunnel advanced by large sections of the media within an economic discourse, Cameron's statement both supported the populist media narratives that had developed around Calais and re-emboldened the tabloid media to restate their anti-migrant position.

Chouliaraki and Zaborowski note that this collectivising motif of 'swarm[s]' dominated large sections of the print and broadcast media across Europe as they attempted to pick through the tricky terrain of othering the refugee, and argue that 'in so doing, journalism-as-bordering [...] renegotiate[d] the boundaries of 'our' own

communities of belonging' (2017: 615). Here, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski discuss the dominant media discourses surrounding the refugee crisis in terms of 'symbolic bordering'. With the aim of re-ordering the public debate in a way that supports the hegemonic position of the nation-state, the refugee is symbolically located within a hierarchy of belonging by the producer of knowledge – in this case journalists – who work to discursively secure *our* position as sovereign while rationalising the exile's place on the fringes of civilisation. A threat to sovereignty is established by rendering the other in largely abstract terms. Here, migrants were linguistically and symbolically massified and animalised as a means of legitimising their outsider status. Referring to the refugee crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski argue that for the duration of the 'crisis', media producers engaged in discursive practices which alternately silenced, collectivised and de-contextualised refugees in ways that still allowed for the construction of the 'problem' of migration from within a humanitarian framework that sought to render the other as docile:

On the one hand, news stories systematically misrecognize refugees as political, social and historical subjects; on the other, in so doing, it simultaneously calls up largely 'communitarian' publics: publics willing to consider the humanity of 'others' only in order to affirm 'our' benevolence but not in order to consider including 'them' into 'our' communities of belonging (2017: 615–616).

According to this view, a hierarchy of belonging is created within a system of representation that seeks to establish acceptable parameters for thinking about sovereignty and strangeness in a post-Holocaust era. History demands that dominant voices cannot unequivocally debase someone who, while thought to be a threat, may also be understood to be a victim of circumstance. Like Arendt's Jewish exiles who hold the possibility of sympathetic reconstruction if they choose to rescind their identity, the Calais migrants were framed alongside others crossing the Mediterranean in terms of their relationship to the sovereign nation-state in which they seek sanctuary until such time as they could be reconstructed as acceptable.

Following Cameron's statement, there was an exceptionally fast turnaround in the mediated discourse of the crisis. While the immediate online response from the daily tabloid press was broadly supportive of Cameron's statement, it too eventually reported that his words were misjudged. The critique of Cameron's choice of words was led by a tweet from the Refugee Council of Britain (**Figure 1**).

In a statement released to media, Dr Lisa Doyle, Head of Advocacy at the Refugee Council, added: 'It's extremely disappointing to hear the prime minister using such irresponsible, dehumanising language to describe the desperate men, women and children fleeing for their lives across the Mediterranean Sea' (cited in Eglot & Taylor, 2015). The intervention by the Refugee Council recognised the damaging rhetoric populating the mass mediated public sphere debate about the migrant crisis. The statement was repeated across the spectrum of UK print and broadcast news media in the UK, though only followed through with more in-depth critical reporting in *The Guardian* and *The Independent* (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016). However, it was shared hundreds of times across multiple social media platforms suggesting the possibility of a counter-discourse. For example, following the hashtags #migrantcrisis and #refugeecrisis in 2015, Llewellyn and Cram (2015) found more than 10,000 tweets and shares between 7 August and 11 September 2015.



Figure 1: Tweet by Refugee Council in response to David Cameron's use of the word 'swarm' in his interview to *ITV News*.

It would be easy to say that Refugee Council's tweet and the ensuing public sphere debate opened up space for a humanitarian discourse to emerge. That, however, would suggest that human rights organisations had not already been immersed in a counter-public that challenged the dominant construction of the migrant crisis outlined above. For instance Fenton (2010) has shown that NGOs regularly engage with mainstream media producers in order to promote their message or offer an alternative view on events linked to their charitable remit. Referring to the relationships built up over a number of years between media organisations and NGOs, Powers (2016) calls this 'path dependency'. Like Fenton, Powers argues that despite the growing social media environment, NGOs still largely rely on mainstream media producers to reproduce their message. This dependency, he suggests, limits their ability to challenge the prevailing discourse. So while mainstream news agencies have been able to adapt to the digital media environment and extend their reach globally, NGOs simply do not have the resources to match the mainstream media dominance of the spaces intended for counter-discourse. Here, Fenton contends that there is 'little evidence of NGOs managing to change news agendas and challenge normative conceptions of news criteria'. Indeed, she adds '[o]n the contrary, pressure to reproduce these normative conceptions are increasing' [...] result[ing] in what I refer to as "cloning"' (2010: 158). In part, this need to imitate the discursive norms of mainstream news organisations is related to the fragmented spaces that NGOs operate in. News production is not the primary goal of NGOs. While most campaigning NGOs have dedicated press or communications officers, the limited resources at their disposal mean that they cannot produce a publication with a wide enough reach to successfully challenge the prevailing public sphere narrative. Instead, such organisations rely, as they always have, on their already engaged communities to spread the word. Although direct engagement with wider publics via social media has addressed the communications issue to some extent, it cannot on its own overcome NGOs' uneven access to the public sphere. In this regard, they operate within counter-publics, where as much effort is put into directly lobbying parliament as it is on communicating directly with the public

(Fenton & Downey, 2003). In truth, then, the intervention by the Refugee Council did little to dent the hostile tabloid media environment surrounding the growing refugee crisis, but rather perhaps opened up space for the inclusion of a media-led humanitarian critique of the political inadequacy in dealing with the problem of migration (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016).

Neocolonial systems of representation

Extending Fenton's notion of 'cloning', it is clear that NGOs have limited space to offer a counter-discourse that truly challenges dominant media constructions of migration, and that instead they occupy an existing system of representation that relies on power structures that originated in colonial discourse. This is partially a consequence of mainstream news values being transferred into the charitable sector when professional journalists take jobs in NGO communications departments (Fenton, 2010; Powers, 2016). Kamat (2004) suggests that the professionalisation of international NGOs, and in this case the larger human rights organisations that responded to the migration crisis, grew in the later part of the twentieth century in response to neoliberal modes of governance. In this model, charitable organisations, whose remit it is to advocate on behalf of the marginalised, are drawn further into the governance system that they frequently seek to challenge.

In his exploration of NGOs working in Africa, Shivji (2007) similarly asserts that charitable organisations mirror state institutions built upon neoliberal models of governance, but in doing so repeat the historical power relations that they represent. Relating this idea to the colonial project, he argues that despite their good intentions NGOs repeat historical discourses by positioning those who 'must be saved' in a debased position beside those who 'do the saving'. In this regard, the formerly colonial subject – the other who is written in terms of their neediness – is always, as they have always been, the product of somebody else's imagination. Drawing on Nkrumah's treatise on neocolonialism as the last stage of capitalism (1966, cited in Shivji, 2007), whereby imperial rule was deferred onto the institutionalisation of Western political and economic structures in the former colonies, Shivji declares that NGOs function as the philanthropic arm of neoliberalism based on a European model of caring statism. Here, salvation is cast as selfless altruism, but in fact repeats the

dominance of the West, which in turn is explicitly linked to multiple humanitarian crises borne from the legacy of the imperial project. In this sense Shivji 'locate[s] the rise, prominence and privileging of the NGO sector in the womb of the neoliberal offensive. Its aims are ideological, economic and political' (2007: 2).

Consequently, I argue that this neocolonial and neoliberal reconstruction of the refugee was a feature of the accounts that emerged from a fragmented array of press releases, blogs and reports from NGOs responding to nationalised concerns about migration. An analysis of the interventions from NGOs reveals that while counter-narratives did indeed challenge dominant discourses around migration that saw the figure of the migrant/refugee as a threat to the social order, by expanding the discussion to encompass the growing crisis in the Mediterranean they offered this critique from within a simplified discourse of *responsibility for the other* in a way that repeated the neocolonial system of representation previously outlined (Shivji, 2007). For example, a statement on the Amnesty International website responding to international press coverage of the unfolding crisis stated simply that 'the world's system for protecting refugees is broken', before urging western powers to take responsibility for the crisis:

Worldwide, 19.5 million people have been forced to seek sanctuary abroad. Governments have a duty to help them. But most rich countries are still treating refugees as somebody else's problem. Hiding behind closed borders and fears of being "flooded", they have conveniently allowed poorer, mainly Middle Eastern, African and South Asian countries, to host an incredible 86% of all refugees (2015b).

This was followed by a blog by Amnesty's Refugee and Migrant Rights Programme Director emphasising that:

Governments need to show leadership in addressing rather than fuelling anti-migrant sentiment. And that requires facing up to the true global situation [...] Responsibility for refugees continues to fall disproportionately on poorer countries (Valdez-Symonds, 2015).

Judith Sunderland, senior Western Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, also declared that wealthy nations must ensure the safety of refugees:

It is demoralizing to see EU leaders squabble over how many hundreds or few thousand refugees they will take in when there are over 20 million refugees in the world today... It wouldn't matter whether these programs for resettlement and relocation were voluntary or mandatory if there were certainty that all EU countries would live up to their responsibilities: ensure access to fair asylum procedures, provide decent accommodation, help refugees integrate (Sutherland, cited in Human Rights Watch press release, 2015).

Extending the protection narrative, UK-based human rights organisation Liberty appealed to the UK's historical reputation as a space of inclusion when Director of Policy, Bella Sankey, blogged:

It is a sad state of affairs that today our Government's response seems to veer from pandering to xenophobia to pitiful denial – rather than honouring our proud tradition of providing sanctuary for those in need (Sankey, 2015).

The above statements can only provide a snapshot of the response to the narratives that dominated the mainstream public sphere during the Mediterranean crisis, yet they are emblematic of the wider counter-narrative presented by NGOs. As noted in the work of Shivji, it is undeniable that the sentiment offered in these accounts has the best of humanitarian intentions. However, the discourse produced within the words and phrases used in these accounts relied on an understanding of the refugee as *in need* of care, and focused on the *duty* of Western governments to *protect* the *victims* of crisis. The overarching discourse to emerge from the responses is one of responsibility for the refugee. The emphasis here was on Europeans to help those in need and to save them (see **Table 1**).

These alternative narratives emphasised that the system for dealing with refugees was broken and countered media and political rhetoric with 'facts' while redefining

Table 1: Dominant and counter-narratives in the Mediterranean refugee crisis.

Dominant narrative	Counter-narrative
Sovereign position; not <i>our</i> problem	Europe (developed world) as <i>responsible for</i> ; problem to be solved
Threat to national security; racialised and religious difference	Refugee; victim; under threat; at risk; in danger
Swarm (infestation/invasion metaphor)	Fleeing chaos
Scale of problem (no more room)	Scale of problem (humanitarian crisis)
The refugee turn (individualised exceptions)	In need of protection

the crisis in terms of refugees' victimhood and the West's obligation to police and protect migratory routes and the refugees that use them. To explain this rewriting of the object-subject in terms of a form of humanitarianism that is more tolerable to wider Western audience, Vossen, van Gorp and Schulpen (2016) assert that UK media organisations have historically operated within a discourse that frames people in developing countries as 'pitiful victims'. This characterisation then reinforces the idea that people from poorer countries are dependent on the West, a trope stemming from the civilising discourses of imperial rule and that has persisted since the first images of 'starving children' appeared on our television screens (Lissner, 1981; Manzo, 2008; Alam, 2007, cited in Vossen, van Gorp, & Schulpen 2016). While such object discourses may appear to be a fair payoff for the possibility of safe passage and the sympathy of a wider audience, Dogra (2007) argues that they strengthen the regulatory authority of the 'givers' at the same time as dehumanising the 'victim' and robbing them of dignity. In turn such accounts rationalise global structural inequalities as normal and acceptable (Cohen, 2001). In the accounts offered by NGOs, refugees were repeatedly written in terms of their victim status:

Amnesty recently met survivors in Southeast Asia who said traffickers killed people on board boats when their families couldn't pay ransoms. Others were thrown overboard and left to drown, or died because there was no food and water (Amnesty International, 2015b).

We need to see an emergency response to this escalating humanitarian crisis that is happening on our doorstep. More than 1500 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea this year as a result of Europe's decision to stop search and rescue. Lifting this death sentence for refugees is just the first part of the solution (Press statement by Stephen Hale, Refugee Watch, 2015).

Although these counter-narratives operated in tandem to the dominant media discourses of refugees, the event that eventually signalled a humanitarian turn in the anti-immigrant discourse was not the intervention of NGOs, but the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach on 3 September 2015. The publication of this one photograph transformed the 'migrant' crisis into 'refugee' crisis and the dangerous other into the sympathetic victim. Despite the discursive abjectification of migrants, Alan's dead body enabled a widespread rewriting of the popular narrative by mobilising a collective imaginary of the other as 'like us'. Although by this point many hundreds of refugees had died in the course of their perilous journeys, the personalisation of one victim by the act of naming, meant that abstract migrants could become part of his tragic tale. Personalisation, of course, is a device employed by media when it wants to draw an audience on side. It is also commonly used by NGOs as a way to tell the story of the subject of discourse, without appearing to speak for the subject of discourse (Cohen, 2001). While the dominant anti-immigration narrative endured, following the photograph of Alan media stories began to focus on tales of individual difficulty and bravery in the face of adversity (Goodman, Sirriyeh & McMahon, 2017). In this regard humanity was temporarily restored to the stateless through the personalisation of the refugee condition. However, despite this apparently humanitarian turn, a seemingly minor administrative error reproduced by multiple news outlets in their reporting of Alan's name perhaps revealed something about how accustomed we are to framing migrants as other. When the story of Alan emerged he was presented as 'Aylan' Kurdi. The inclusion of a 'y' (why?) into his name might seem insignificant, yet it speaks to how media organisations use a chain of signifiers to create sufficient emotional distance between the audience and the victim: we can empathise with his plight,

but remain resolute in our fight against the tide of immigration into the UK. The presence of the 'y' in Alan's name signified just enough difference between us and him to abstract the terrible event, to make him different to 'us'.

The spectacle of Alan's body prompted the #refugeeswelcome movement across Europe that originated from a campaign in *The Independent* and in the UK culminated in the 'Solidarity with Refugees' march in London convened by human rights campaigners. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International rode the publicity tide of the discursive transformation of the crisis. Following a pattern of discursive rehabilitation, migrants were no longer faceless boat people, but 'refugees', and as such worthy of our help. Such discursive reconstruction in terms of the changeable predilections of the dominant culture resonates with the earlier discussion of Arendt. In either case – threat to sovereignty or pitiful victim – the subject of discourse is written by the author in a way that destroys their identity. Both narratives work to contain the subject of discourse within the discursive bounds chosen by the dominant society. In this regard, the photograph of Alan allowed the mainstream media and NGOs to operate side by side, presenting a unified critique of governmental failure to solve the problem within a humanitarian discourse that could salve our collective conscience. Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon (2017) discuss this discursive shift from the hostile construction of the 'migrant' to the sympathetic reconstruction of 'refugees' (and later back again) as being contextually dependent on the wider socio-political landscape. So, when migrants/refugees were being represented in abstract form – observed from a distance as formless creatures crowded into boats – they could be demarcated as unspecified other, and considered in terms of their possible danger to us (Sigona, 2018). The problem was happening somewhere else and our only concern was what both Arendt and Agamben identify as their transformative possibility (Feldman, 2015), that they might *become* our problem if the narrative was not fully controlled. The term 'migrant', then, became a container for the risk posed to our sovereignty and permitted mainstream media and politicians alike to enact a form of emotional distancing from the subject of discourse. This linguistic and symbolic distancing had the same effect as colonial discourses of the past.

Conclusion: the *abjectification* of migration

In his work *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre (1948) critiques the position of the 'democrat', or what one might call the 'do-gooder', when he says that both positions – that of hatred and that of sympathy – work to reduce the identity of the exile to something that can be managed within their own system of representation. While the sovereign position seeks to exorcise the other by reimagining them as inhuman, the democrat repositions the exile as someone to be saved. Sartre argues:

There may not be so much difference between the anti-Semite and the democrat. The former wishes to destroy him as a man and leave nothing in him but the Jew, the pariah, the untouchable; the latter wishes to destroy him as a Jew and leave nothing in him but the man, the abstract and universal subject of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen (1948: 57).

What I have argued in this article echoes Sartre's belief, that both positions – that of the nationalist and that of the humanitarian – want to support their claim of authority over the other. In claiming absolute authority both systems of representation ignore the personhood of the refugee. They are both revolted by the exile's being because they fear it; or rather, they fear becoming it. For Agamben, too, humanitarians are not moderates, as Larsen (2013) notes:

[E]ither they are complicit with the political exclusion from the state, or they are complicit with the repression within the state. Either way human rights seem to amount to nothing more than a humanitarian mask of the structural violence of the state.

For Shivji (2007) the blind-spot of NGOs is that they are seemingly unable to step outside of the neocolonial system of representation that itself maintains the unequal power relation between the West and the Rest. For Shivji, there is too much at stake for the humanitarian. Their whole character rests on an understanding of themselves as 'good'. In the same way that mainstream media offer the impression of democratic debate, but in reality pursue a discourse of racism that intends to reinstate the

notion of sovereignty, counter-narratives are also caught in a neocolonial system of representation that privilege the dominance of Western regimes of truth. So, perhaps unwittingly, and certainly paradoxically, counter-narratives of the refugee crisis reimagine the exile in terms of a colonial, or neocolonial, system of representation that, as Spivak (1983/2010) would argue, maintains the authority of the West to speak for the other. If they are not a threat, they are there to be saved: the classic civilising discourse.

So, what is the representational future for the exile? According to Arendt and Sartre, the exile must take control over the construction of meaning in order to allow for collective mobilisation without inciting fear. For Arendt, this was a Jewish State and the rebuilding of a self-assured identity securely embedded in a collective past that preceded the imaginings of those seeking to destroy them. Rather than 'gifting' voice to the voiceless, then, it means the exile taking control of the means to represent themselves and thus entering the public sphere in their own terms. In these terms the solution offered by Spivak holds true; we must listen to the voice of the exile, let them speak for and define their identity rather than continuing to repeat the dominance of Western authority to speak for the other.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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