Nobody wants to be a refugee

A conversation with Seyla Benhabib

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The current crisis is generating the myth of borders as controlled, says Seyla Benhabib. But this is only a myth. It is a fact that states are escaping their obligations under international and European law; while migrants themselves may be helping to keep the social peace between classes.

Slawomir Sierakowski: Who are the people who are coming to Europe now? What should we call them?

Seyla Benhabib: There is a lot of discussion over this terminology, whether we should call them refugees or migrants. These people are coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and Libya. All of these countries are in states of either civil war, as in Syria, or in post-war conflict situations that still have not settled down, as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention definitions, individuals who are fleeing their country because of persecution, which can take the form of civil war, or a threat to life based on ethnicity, religion, etc., are to be considered convention refugees. It is hard to disagree that these are areas of the world where the lives of certain human beings are in danger. So there is reason to call these people refugees. But the reason there is so much dispute in European public opinion about refugees and migrants is the assumption that we do not have any special obligations towards migrants, but we have special obligations towards refugees. But is it to be precluded that some of the individuals who are coming also want better economic and life opportunities for themselves? No, you cannot preclude that.

SS: The boundary between refugees and migrants remains unclear.

SB: Yet international law tells us to observe this distinction. But if you are, for example, in Iraq, or even in Turkey, and you cannot find employment because you are Sunni or Shia, a Kurd or an Alawite, or your business is being bombed - no one is threatening your life, but you are in a position of destitution, you have no possibilities. What are you then, a refugee or an economic migrant? So we are in a catch-22 situation, where international law gives protection to refugees and not migrants, yet what we see not just in Europe,
but the world over, is that these categories are inadequate in dealing with realities.

**SS:** Do you think that some EU politicians or political elites are consciously exploiting the ambiguity of these categories, that they treat refugees as economic migrants and are using this to justify their own “impossibilism”?  

**SB:** Absolutely. I like the term “impossibilism”. Another term we could use is the artificial creation of a “state of exception”, as Hungary has done. These terms are being exploited by states to escape their obligations under international and European law. In countries like Hungary, as well as France, the UK, and maybe to a lesser degree Germany, there are significant rightwing groups that have emerged in opposition to migration and the European Union, and this mood is being exploited by many forces. There is little question though that the tragic refugee situation is becoming a ping pong ball in a political game. But if you start playing politics with the lives of these individuals, you are giving a green light to groups who might want to attack them. Migrants and refugees become the unwanted, the others – in Agamben’s words, they reside in a state of exception, without anybody protecting them, and thus they become prey to possible attacks.

**SS:** You are a philosopher of ethics, but let me ask about the economic context: what do you think, from the moral point of view, about economic arguments on the topic, are they justified or not?  

**SB:** If we speak about migrants as opposed to refugees, a distinction needs to be made between the short and the long term. Migrants are, by and large, young and mobile. They begin to contribute to the economy, and in the long term they end up paying in more than they take out. Countries like Germany have receding birth rates and an ageing population and so have made a very rational calculation to open the country to migrants. The United States is probably an extreme example because we don’t have a regulated marketplace. Europe is regulated differently, so the real question is the relationship between the wages of the migrants and the wages of the existing population. The more unregulated labor is, the greater the downward pressure on all wages. This is something that can be altered by European-wide policy, as was the case with the famous example of the “Polish plumbers” who went to work in France or the UK.

Now with refugees, the question is somewhat different. A refugee is someone who applies for asylum. This process takes anywhere from two to five years in many European countries. They do not have work permits, so in that sense they are not exactly economic migrants. Many of them receive local aid from municipalities. And this is a very tricky situation, because in effect, refugees are a burden to the local region although they are admitted at a national level. This creates tension between national inclusion and local integration. National governments have to devise intelligent policies for the integration of refugees even while they are waiting for their status to be resolved.

**SS:** In response to the argument that European countries need to accept economic migrants or refugees in order to fill their demographic gap, some could ask why there are three million unemployed Germans or why we see such high youth unemployment in Greece and Spain.  

**SB:** In every labor economy, there are niches that are not filled by the national working
classes. For some reason there are certain jobs that are only filled by migrants. Cleaning jobs are the best example. Speaking from the US experience, jobs for nannies are now more often filled by Central American women rather than African-American women. Why is this happening? To use a post-Marxist argument, I believe that economic migration is part and parcel of the national peace that various social classes in advanced industrial economies have reached among themselves. It just seems that an unemployed German or Polish worker will not do some jobs that an Iraqi or Afghani will do. There is some strange segmentation in the labor market that cuts across national and ethnic lines. So is the migrant taking away the local worker’s job, or is the migrant helping keep the social peace between classes?

SS: Why do we fear otherness? Why do some react like the people of Iceland who voluntarily invited thousands of refugees, while others respond like Slovakia, which continues to insist it will only accept a few hundred?

SB: Countries like Slovakia or Hungary are small nations in the heart of Europe who fear that they will lose their own identity. But Iceland is all the more remarkable, because like Hungary and Slovakia, it is also a very homogeneous country. Perhaps the people of Iceland are themselves trying to expand their self-understanding: what does it mean to be a citizen of Iceland if you are Libyan, if you are Afghani? Some countries like Sweden and Norway, which are very homogeneous as well, have been successful in creating a post-national multicultural identity. Denmark, on the other hand, is just as defensive as Slovakia. I’m not sure that anyone can explain this well.

SS: But why is homogeneity so important in developed countries? The welfare state began to decline with the arrival of migrants.

SB: I don’t think that is the case. I think the relationship between the welfare state, national homogeneity, and migration is not a zero sum game. Australia and Canada are countries of migration and they have a welfare state. We see in welfare states like Germany, Sweden, or Norway, that if you do not absorb a young working class, you then face the question of who is going to pay the benefits for the elderly. A young labor force is a prerequisite for the welfare state to continue and to flourish. And that’s why some countries open up to immigration, others don’t.

SS: Why do wealthy countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, not want to accept any refugees?

SB: These countries are not signatories of the refugee convention. Qatar is particularly interesting because it is an extremely wealthy country that takes in labor migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, and elsewhere, who work in slave-like conditions. And yet it does not accept its own brethren from Syria. Turkey, on the other hand, has accepted 2.5 million refugees from Syria, it’s an enormous number. Of course there is some realpolitik involved, president Erdogan wants to influence Syrian politics. But nonetheless, it is pretty remarkable. Lebanon and Jordan have each accepted between a million and a million and a half refugees, so Qatar and other Gulf countries are moral failures.

SS: What about the responsibility of countries that have been directly involved in the
conflicts in Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan?

**SB:** I’m very irritated about the following fact: in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the United States were directly involved in military action. Now morally, if you have a causal responsibility for creating certain conditions, you also have the responsibility to accept some of the consequences of your actions. The United States, the United Kingdom, France are countries that are still actively militarily involved in these regions in some way or another, and they have a responsibility towards the refugee problem. I’m very disappointed by the reaction of the United States and I’m very disappointed by the United Nations. I think this is not just Europe’s burden, and it is not just Europe’s responsibility. All countries involved in this region, in the conflict, have to come to the table.

**SS:** Russia also has interests in Syria, and perhaps even has a military presence there.

**SB:** I don’t know too much about Russian migration or refugee policy, but we all know that Russia has had tremendous influence in Syria and even Afghanistan, for many, many years. But let’s talk about the United States. Because it has the blessing of the ocean between it and the refugees, it simply has no policy at present and does not grant many visas to refugees. The Obama administration has said that it will accept 10,000 refugees but the number should really be closer to 100,000 at least if it is to meet the USA’s moral obligations toward these countries.

**SS:** In your work you talk about more flexible borders, or as you say, porous borders. Do you think that that is what we are witnessing now?

**SB:** Clearly, the state system and state bureaucracy are failing to deal with the dimensions of the problem. If the borders are porous, why are refugees who want to reach Germany not being granted access? According to the Dublin Conventions, refugees need to be granted refuge in the first country that they make contact with. Obviously the Dublin Convention needs to be renegotiated. Porous borders are the only viable way in which nations can co-exist, but we are now living in a situation of crisis that is generating, or attempting to generate, the myth of those borders as controlled – but this is only a myth.

**SS:** What is the difference between porous borders and open borders?

**SB:** How can we have open borders without a world state? None of us wants a world state because we don’t believe that it can guarantee democratic self-governance. So porous borders is a theory that recognizes the moral and legal rights of human beings to move across borders, and yet at the same time, also acknowledges that there is a public authority that is responsible for the territory of the settled population. Increasingly we see that nation-states alone are not that public authority.

**SS:** Today, in a condition of liquid modernity, we rely on fluid definitions of citizenship sovereignty, borders. But could it go further? Could this be just the beginning of not thousands, but millions of refugees coming to the “island” of Europe soon?

**SB:** I think that the language of mass migration, of invasion, produces morally and politically charged terms that create fear, which does not enable us to think rationally,
calmly, and morally about the situation. I think that clearly what needs to be done is some very serious regional political coordination that will resolve or attempt to find a solution to the instability in the Middle East. Nobody wants to be a refugee. People don’t just put their children on a boat and watch them die. I think we should have some more sympathy for what these people are undergoing, and politicians have an obligation not to exploit this incendiary language.

SS: On what basis do you believe it might be possible to stabilize and improve the situation in the regions of crisis? The involvement of western countries in Iraq has led to chaos in the whole region and president Obama is not willing to intervene in Syria.

SB: This was a big political mistake. I think something should have been done. Not necessarily with American military force on the ground, but trying to negotiate, trying to get the Russians to the table. Something similar has to happen for Syria as what happened for Iran. We have a presidential campaign in the United States and it’s a very ugly campaign, so I don’t anticipate any quick developments, but it was a failure of the Obama administration not to try to do anything about the instability in Syria.

SS: Do you think that Donald Trump expresses the opinion of ordinary Americans on refugees?

SB: America is in a period of profound dissatisfaction with establishment politics. Donald Trump represents something unusual and that’s why the Republican Party is so confused, because it does not know what to do with this kind of nativist language that Trump invokes. Donald Trump represents something that is much closer to a European anti-refugee and rightwing nationalist stance than we have seen in the United States.

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