



MIGRANTS OR REFUGEES?

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From the moment Barry Malone, a journalist on the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, stopped using the work “migrant” to define the people risking their lives in the Mediterranean, a semantic and political debate has arisen over the most appropriate term for the hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their countries. For the editors of Al Jazeera, in the Mediterranean there is no migratory crisis; rather, a large number of refugees are fleeing war in their countries and a smaller number of people are escaping poverty. It is not a migratory crisis because the majority are refugees fleeing armed conflicts, civil wars and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Somalia and other countries. It would be more correct to speak of migratory movements, although this concept places the emphasis on the territorial aspect of the movement and sees it as voluntary and nothing more. For some, “migrant” is no longer a valid concept for describing what is happening in the Mediterranean because it dehumanises and generalises. For others, calling all migrants making their way towards Europe “refugees” would also be incorrect, though they share routes, mafias and the risks to their lives in search of a better life or societies with more security.

It is normal that when a “new” problem arises, so does a need to develop a rhetoric that allows us to speak of the problem and locate its “novelty”. With the pressure for quick understanding, certain concepts become confused and ambiguous. Some words acquire an almost magical sense, activating non-existent structures meant to act as tranquillisers when dealing with the new uncertainty. They become abstract terms that convert what is happening into anonymous, indefinite events that (most of the time) mask political arrogance and genuine opposition. Their job is to reduce the uncertainty, but they help neither to understand it nor to make it comprehensible. They neutralise the uncertain by setting it in an everyday vocabulary and in this way allow phenomena, situations and problems to be handled with fleeting, almost instantaneous comprehension. Nevertheless, the debate that has arisen shows that there is no such instantaneous comprehension and the challenge of placing mixed flows of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with smuggling and people trafficking operations is a symptom of an imbalance between the international response to the forced displacements and the needs of the displaced.

What makes comprehension so confused?

The accelerated speed of the events complicates the task of reducing the current complexity and our direct contact with people speaking to us through images paralyzes us. Trapped by old values we are incapable of negotiating our way through these new contexts.

One resource to speed up communication and help us to speak about the crisis or the problem is to recover and reuse already-known terms (some of which may have fallen into disuse) with which to narrate a similar problem in different times. Thus, words with a degree of historical baggage, such as territory, self-determination and territorial conflict, re-enter the scene to explain conflict realities whose effects are still unknown. Other times, to make it clear that we are dealing with “new” situations, an adjective may be added to update old terms, such as, for example, jhadist brigades, urban tribes, new racism and new citizens. Reference to something already known speeds up communication, and adding an adjective allows a degree of reinterpretation only by naming it, leaving the analysis of possible causes and effects for later.

“Refugee” is a political concept. A refugee, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”. By ratifying the convention, 145 United Nations member states committed to protecting such displaced people and acquired obligations towards them: they may enter another territory where they will be taken in, protected and will have the opportunity to request asylum. They will have the status of refugee once they have passed through the legal process of the asylum application, and must provide proof of why they have fled their countries. If they are refused, the asylum seeker will be in a category that is usually called “economic migrants”, depending on the decision and definition of the state where they made their asylum application. The admittance of these “economic migrants” will be informed by the needs of the labour market in the country in question. We continue to speak of immigrants – who come – and emigrants – who go – but actual migration processes cannot be understood exclusively from the perspective of the country of origin or reception. The difference between a “refugee” and an “immigrant” is based on the first movement being a forced displacement and the second a voluntary one. A “refugee” is not only someone who flees their country to escape war or persecution, but one for whom it is dangerous to return to their country and it is for this reason that they may appeal for help and protection. The “immigrant” will have chosen to move to another country voluntarily and has the possibility of returning, if they so decide. The resolution of the displacement of this “migrant” will be possible legal residency or, eventually, citizenship in what is known as the “reception” country.

So goes the theory, but what happens when we contrast it with the multiple experiences and practices of people in displacement?

Though the right to request asylum is a fundamental one (meaning there is no such thing as illegal asylum seekers) the reality is something else. Many national arrangements restrict the circulation of populations without distinguishing between migrants and refugees. Ever larger numbers of refugees are joining irregular migratory movements, using the same routes and the same services from the same traffickers, procuring, as well, the same false documentation. It is a reality that, without influencing the fundamental difference between refugees and migrants, contributes to this distinction becoming confused.

The dividing line between “forced” and “voluntary” is no clearer, as people’s motivations tend to be diverse. The refugee flees some kind of threat in their country of origin. Should flight from hunger be in a different category to voluntary migration? Is the immigrant who went to Libya seeking an improvement in the conditions of their life and suddenly has to flee that country because of its violence still an immigrant? Other factors that motivate displacement are demographic pressure and political instability, not to mention cultural and historical factors and the influence of the media. What do we call migrants who are the victims of illegal people trafficking? Do we know the motivation of children who travel alone? In what category do we place women fleeing socio-cultural systems or patriarchal hierarchies that violate human rights? Yet another factor are ecological problems that oblige people or groups to move, temporarily or permanently: natural disasters, degradation of the environment and desertification leave many people living without security and unable to envisage their primary needs being covered. Are they migrants? Are they refugees? Though there are attempts to speak of “environmental refugees”, the concept still does not have weight at legal level.

One origin of the confusion is the complexity of the drivers behind the displacement and the lack of an effective grammar that goes beyond insertion, integration and assimilation. Another confusion is the political intentionality in the choice of words. The semantic distinction between “refugees” and “migrants” is clearly a political weapon that generates a discourse based on highly differentiated poles: on one side is the acceptable displacement – the refugee; on the other, the person who is rejected - the immigrant, the invader. This discourse can appeal to the feelings, make us feel sorry, regretful or victims, but never responsible for what is presented as a problem, a conflict or a crisis. There is no single body that defines the status of a refugee, each particular country follows its own criteria on whether a person can really be called a refugee within the legal definition. If the country declines the application, the asylum seeker cannot receive the status of refugee and is considered a migrant in an irregular situation and is liable to be the victim of harsh immigration policies.

The phenomenon itself is complex but the words used to speak about it are not innocent. Is preference given to the term “immigrant” in order to discharge European states of their international responsibility to protect and receive the refugees? Adjectives such as “illegal” and “clandestine” are not innocent either – they criminalise the person rather than the act of entering or remaining irregularly in a country. This pejorative and even criminal connotation is found in political discourses that insist on speaking of immigrants and not refugees. In Italy, the leader of the far-right Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, normally speaks of “clandestines”. In the media discourse in Poland, “illegals” are still spoken of, an expression that, fortunately, has been replaced by “irregular” in most countries. Hungary prefers to speak of immigrants and has closed its borders for identity reasons. The French Front National often speaks of the “migratory danger”. Bart De Wever, of the Flemish NVA, has gone as far as to ask for the annulation or reformulation of the Geneva Convention in relation to the right to asylum in an attempt to seduce a far-right electorate.

But the aim is not to consider all displaced persons refugees – that would only lead to the banalisation of asylum applications and the status of refugee. Migrants and refugees are two concepts, each with specific projects and restrictions and the differences and similarities between them only add to the confusion. Though migration is a moment of trajectory, it is often treated as a condition: this means that whole generations of migrants are conditioned by reference to a distant origin, not only in space but also in time, which is why we speak of second and third generation migrants. This is not a “new” threat. What has changed is its rhythm and intensity and its transnational character necessitates renewed responsibility.

On the political landscape and in the field of communication, as well as that of research, the concept of “mobility” is being progressively replaced by that of “migration”. For some it is a sterile concept, unengaging, but for this reason, it requires thought on the displacements within their contexts, taking the specific circumstances and conditions of each displacement into account. This could be the starting point for a new policy to manage the flows, without prior classifications and assignments. What is more, it could be a policy that investigates the importance people give to their displacement as a continuous flow between intentions, reasons and motivations, all in interrelation.