

## **INTERSECTIONS AND CROSS-FERTILISATIONS BETWEEN FEMINIST RESEARCH AND REFUGEE STUDIES**

**Alexandra Zavos**

[alexandra.zavos@gmail.com](mailto:alexandra.zavos@gmail.com)

**Panteion University, Athens, Greece**

“BORDERS WILL NEVER WORK. PEOPLE WILL ALWAYS TRAVEL. *EUROPE WILL NOT LAST FOREVER.*” (Watch the Med Alarmphone).

Launched in December 2013, “Watch the Med Alarmphone” is a digital web and smartphone mapping application developed by activists, migrants and researchers across Europe, to facilitate ongoing reporting of information concerning sea crossings and deaths in the Mediterranean (<http://www.watchthemed.net>). It is one of the initiatives that have sprung up in the wake of the severe increase in the number of deaths at sea of refugees and migrants from war-torn and/or economically decimated regions in the Middle East, Asia and Africa trying to reach different European destinations.

Using the ‘refugee crisis’ in Greece as starting point, in this short intervention I explore cross-fertilisations between feminist research and refugee studies for three methodological and political challenges: deconstructing Europe, deconstructing humanitarianism and deconstructing agency. My aim is to consider briefly, on the one hand, whether a feminist perspective can help us formulate questions that would support a critical approach to the study of contemporary refugee issues; on the other, whether the refugee crisis as such calls for a renewed interrogation of feminist knowledge practices.

It is by now not uncommon to identify the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ as a multifaceted crisis of the European asylum and migration system, therefore a major political issue encompassing tensions and transformations taking place in the EU over the past decade. At stake is not only the humanitarian protection and integration of refugees but the identity of Europe and its role as a global power.

A hallmark of feminist research has been the interrogation of ideological and epistemological foundations of knowledge practices. The ‘refugee crisis’ presents a vantage point for questioning politico-ethical imperatives as well as epistemic entitlements. As the title caption suggests, Europe might no longer be assumed a privileged geopolitical, nor, I would argue, epistemic location.

Indeed, Europe has come under scrutiny in both feminist and refugee studies. Starting from the use of gender as an analytical category, and moving on to intersectionality as a more multifaceted conceptualisation of social positionality and difference, feminist research has sought to integrate not only the implications of critical knowledge traditions, most notably postcolonial studies, which point to the necessity of deconstructing Europe as a foundational discourse, but also to address the far-reaching impact of globalisation on changing social realities the world over. In this sense, the study of migration and refugeehood *in* Europe cannot be detached from the politics of global development and its simultaneous localised and non-local effects; European destinations being but one of these groundings; nor from

Europe's continued cultural imperialism encoded in regimes of humanitarian governance.

From the analytical perspective of intersectionality, the institutionalisation of gendered and racialised entitlements is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the convoluted and fractious asylum and migration policies of the EU. Administrative categories such as 'deserving', 'non-deserving', 'family reunification', 'unaccompanied minor', 'pre' or 'post-agreement' (with Turkey), to name but a few of the more contentious ones, enforce spurious divisions with life-altering implications on migrants and refugees, as well as tellingly reveal the double standards by which different (European and non-European) subjectivities are recognised and authorised. To highlight just one example, would migrant and refugee same-sex couples and families be entitled to family reunification, or are the legal rights of 'queer families' reserved only for European citizens, with migrant and refugee subjects assumed to be heterosexual by default, hence also signified as 'backward'? Put differently, is queerness constructed as a mainly European phenomenon and privilege, a new 'civilisational frontier'?

From the analytical perspective of global development, Europe has come under scrutiny both in feminist as well as in refugee studies. Feminist research has long drawn attention to the feminisation of poverty and inequality, the role of global care chains in the gendered domestic and affective economy, and the importance of transnational migration for women, while refugee studies have analysed refugee policy over the past three decades as becoming progressively more restrictive, intending to avert rather than protect refugees. Border studies have also raised crucial questions about the EU's ever widening scope in controlling human mobility, in regions far removed from its external and/or internal borders. Drawing on such insights, it is possible to consider the role of Europe in *producing* the very vulnerabilities it is supposed to protect.

Finally, feminist technoscience studies elaborate the role of technology in changing conceptualisations and practices of corporeality. While such debates do not usually address questions of asylum and migration, the militarisation of borders and mobility, biometric identification, but also the increasing reliance of migrants, refugees and activists on sophisticated communication technologies, lend themselves to investigation of configurations of both governance and subjectivity that fuse the human-machine divide and reinvent agency.

Following, I would like to consider some of the above dynamics from my own personal involvement as a gender and migration researcher in Greece and a feminist antiracist activist. In terms of the positionality of the researcher, my starting question is whether a feminist intersectional approach can indeed offer us a way of understanding the changing politics, including socio-cultural investments, involved in the 'refugee crisis'. In this circumstance, I regard a feminist engagement more as a kind of attentive disposition and less as a definitive epistemic location. Rather than assume an already defined set of theoretical and methodological tools, which in this case could lead to the unwitting reinforcement of processes of marginalisation or 'othering,' not least through the assumption of the position of the 'knower' and/or 'doer', a willingness to actively suspend one's given premises in light of new

configurations of power shaping the socio-political landscape might recommend itself.

As is the case when religious, gender and sexual identities are considered registers of socio-cultural difference, rather than colonial histories of privilege and oppression, feminist and/or antiracist discourses of emancipation and rights may come to lend themselves to new forms of governmentality constellating around a globalising human rights and security regime. Mirroring conditions of uncertainty and structural immobilisation experienced by refugees themselves, an openness to and tolerance of the discomfort of *unknowingness* could prove more mindful of the situation.

Likewise, in terms of situating the researched, these should be understood not only as ‘the refugees’, but also as the ‘host society’ and the long series of ‘international actors’ entangled in the production and management of the ‘refugee crisis’ as well. In other words, the field produced by, and producing, the ‘refugee crisis’ encompasses multiple actants and agencies extending well beyond the identified problem population. Indeed, to the extent that the ‘refugee crisis’ entails processes of subjectification, it is for *both* refugees *and* non-refugees alike. Along with the subject positions of refugee, asylum seeker (vs. migrant), we also have *allileggios* (solidarity activist), humanitarian aid worker, international volunteer, a.o. So, my next question is whether, in light of the morphings of power taking hold, we can speak of an asylum dispositif as such.

To venture to answer this question, using Greece as a magnifying lens through which to trace emerging processes, a series of contextualisations are necessary. As indicated above, if we consider the ‘refugee crisis’ as a ‘symptom’ of a pre-existing crisis of the Common European Asylum & Migration System, the EU border regime, and European cooperation, often referred to as ‘burden-sharing’, then the questions and politics of intervention gain a much wider ambit. The ‘refugee crisis’ is a game-changer *not* because of the numbers involved but because of the regime of governance it constellates. Greece, here, represents the ‘border’ (and margin) of Europe, *and* at the same time one of the epicentres of the crisis, where new forms of biopolitical governmentality are tried out.

1) The current historical moment: The socioeconomic crisis of Greece and the ‘Troica’ enforced politics of austerity, signalling the political defeat of the wide anti austerity movement spearheaded by the SYRIZA party, has created the sense of being ‘trapped’ as a common feeling for both Greeks *and* refugees. In this sense, Greece, and even Europe perhaps, no longer represent a ‘good’ but a ‘necessary’ destination for people feeling war and poverty in the region and beyond. Crossing into Europe via Greece or Italy, at the risk of death, becomes the lesser of two evils, yet not necessarily the end in itself.

2) The periodisation of the migration phenomenon: Since the 1990s, the development of contemporary migration in Greece has undergone roughly three phases. The first one, during the 90s, involved mass migrations of labour migrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, who were eventually integrated through ad hoc regularisations as well as informally, and came to be regarded as familiar but ‘backward’ foreigners. The second phase, in the 2000s, following the post 9/11 wars on terror, was characterised by migrations from Asia and Africa. These

populations were seen as unassimilable 'others' and, by the time the socio-economic crisis broke out, became targets of unprecedented institutional abuse and racist violence, including lengthy unlawful incarceration, mass 'broom operations', and fascist pogroms in various neighbourhoods of Athens. During the third phase, which coincides with the onset of the economic crisis in 2010, a double movement of migrant exodus and refugee influx is observed. Older migrants who can no longer make a decent living in Greece leave, at the same time as Syrian and other refugees, representing now the multitude of the 'wretched', arrive in different waves. Taking advantage of Greece's unofficial 'open border' policy, they seek passage to more desirable European destinations, only to find themselves immobilised here once the new European border security and deportation regime takes effect in the spring of 2016.

3) The fluctuating temporality of the 'refugee crisis': The timeline of the unfolding crisis presents, both from the perspective of refugees-on-the-move as well as the host society, different densities and modulations, with the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 signalling a turning point. A first more dynamic and 'chaotic' phase with large, daily transit flows, rescue operations, nomadic settlements, and international humanitarian interventions is followed by a second, more static yet no less 'messy' and organisationally demanding phase, with the confinement of refugees on island 'hot spots' or in camps in the mainland requiring coordination of reception facilities, infrastructures and services, and streamlining of asylum application and assessment protocols. Ubiquitous international presence (media, volunteers, researchers, advisors) recedes and/or is channeled to 'expert' IOs/INGOs, which have established different niche services in the management of the 'refugee issue' (*prosfygiko*), as it is now called. In tandem, the role of state agencies and municipalities - and their NGO subsidiaries - grows, since Greece is now responsible for the 60.000-70.000 refugees remaining in the country. Significantly, as a population falling under different forms of international protection, refugees are rendered hyper-visible and, hence, much less mobile than undocumented migrants of the previous periods. An 'in limbo' phase sets in, given that for most refugees Greece is not their asylum country of choice. Conceptualised as 'flows and blockages', the tension between intense mobility and indefinite immobilisation comes to define the refugee experience and the practice of refugee management.

4) The spatialisation of the 'refugee crisis': A series of novel structurations of territory, encompassing fast-changing refugee 'flows' and 'routes', EU 'hot spots' on the islands, mainland camps, and controlled urban relocation indicate a significant departure from past practices of migrant mobility and settlement, which corresponded to what can be understood as a gradual 'integration from below'. In contrast to previous migration phases, reception of refugees is now centrally 'managed', in part deployed on the basis of EU regulations, and involves a large number of specific 'measures' to be applied on the 'refugee population', mainly aiming to 'contain' the problem. Reacting to refugees' ad hoc appropriation of space, whether on the islands, at the border, or in cities, the new architecture of interventions, especially as regards the use of urban space, involves the removal and segregation of refugees to the outskirts of the city, in extra- and peri-urban settlements, where old army barracks, factories and warehouses are set up as temporary reception facilities or camps. Administrative confinement in island 'hot

spots' while waiting for asylum applications to be processed through the EURODAC database, also attempts to control the turbulence and unpredictability of refugee movements.

5) Policy changes: In contrast to previous migration periods, the 'refugee crisis' initiates and legitimises a European, rather than national, asylum governance apparatus defined by the militarisation of borders within, at the perimeter and outside Europe (FRONTEX/EBCG), the general enforcement of biometric identification (EURODAC), and, importantly also, the financialisation of asylum, the administration of which grows into an economy in its own right, with different sectors, not least of which is research involving continuous production of data (numbers, maps, narratives) on 'refugee flows'. Along with EU policy changes, the large influx of IO and INGOS tasked with administering the crisis, whose presence and remit exceed state jurisdiction, introduces not only new regulatory instruments but a host of 'support/control' practices as well. Whereas before migrants were integrated 'from below', albeit on the premise of assimilation and economic exploitation, refugees now are part of a complex regime involving EU asylum and migration governance and international humanitarian intervention.

6) Human Rights (not Anti-racist) discourse: Whereas migrants were represented, both in policy as well as in public debates, through discourses of gender, culture and identity -gender working as a form of racialisation and minoritisation of migrants - refugees are represented through 'human rights' discourse, as persons who need to be protected but also administered as a 'population', precluding thus anti-racist critiques that question precisely the homogenisation of alterity.

7) Responses: The range of responses illustrates the multiplicity of societal investments attending the 'refugee crisis'. The widespread welcome of refugees, especially in the islands where they first arrived, has been interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, responses may be conditioned by what has been called 'solidarity patriotism' (Papataxiarchis 2016), the sense that even if 'we', Greeks, lost the political battle in the EU, we have, through our unconditional support of refugees in their plight, gained the moral high ground. Such 'selfless solidarity' in face of our own crisis shows that, 'we', in contrast to powerful European leaders, have a superior humanity and community feeling. On the other hand, a sense of identification is also invoked through the notion that, "We were also once refugees ourselves, therefore we understand your suffering". Such cultural references to Greece's own history of refugeehood, going back to the 1923 exchange of populations with Turkey, signal both an 'internal' vindication of the past by those who suffered at the hands of the racist Greek state and local elites, as well as a sense of resistance to current 'external' interventions, in the face of which 'we' retain our identity. At the same time, new solidarity initiatives with a distinctly international dimension have emerged (e.g. Plaza Hotel), involving both local and foreign anti-racist activists from different parts of the world as far removed as the US and Australia, intensifying the transnational and event-based character of anti-systemic political interventions. Also to be taken into account, however, is the parallel development of an asylum & humanitarian protection 'industry', morphing various 'grass roots' interventions, activism and research into what would amount to the professionalisation of solidarity.

By way of closing the present reflection, rather than offer a conclusive statement, I would like to highlight once more that, from my own feminist perspective, taking seriously into account the implications of the unsettled, shifting field of power, politics and subjectivity constellating around the 'refugee crisis' requires developing new ways of thinking about the role and tools of research and activism, even at the cost of uncertainty or temporary inaction.

### **References**

- Papataxiarchis, E. (2016), "Η προσφυγική κρίση και ο πατριωτισμός της αλληλεγγύης" (trans. The refugee crisis and the patriotism of 'solidarity'), *Σύγχρονα Θέματα*, 132-133: 7-28.