

The Displaced: An Editorial

Nate Kerkhoff

The issue of migration and reactionary politics has exploded over the past three years. Migrants flee their homelands to escape horrors that most of us in the first world cannot imagine. They risk their lives to move to a foreign land, often abandoning their culture, language, friends, and sometimes family. Seeing people survive a harrowing journey only to be mistreated in their countries of destination is a heartbreaking sight, almost shameful in some ways. While there is no justification for such treatment of fellow human beings, simply labeling unwelcoming locals as close-minded does not contribute to the solution. The biggest problem is the disconnect between those who are most strongly advocating refugee-friendly policies, and those who are most affected by them. Those most passionate about refugee resettlement would be wise to look at this issue from a local viewpoint. While the solutions may be straightforward, the implementation is complicated and must be done with utmost precaution. Many pragmatic and thoughtful ideas about addressing this issue have been put forward, but often times they are directed toward an audience that has similar values. Many in the academic and policy world may not have faced the same economic pressure that the European and American working classes are currently facing. If those in power want to create a welcoming environment for refugees while at the same time assuring their countrymen of physical safety and job security, then action must be aimed in the right direction. Migration affects all of us, and in order solve this complex matter, we must widen our perspectives to include not only to refugees, but the natives in the refugees' new homes as well.

This action must start at the federal level and flow downward. These policies are important because only federal governments deal with international relations and big picture migrant policies. Open channels of communication and organized programs will help the flow of refugees. Unfortunately, due to the sudden influx, refugee infrastructure is lacking and social programs have superseded capacity. This is a point of contention for many lawmakers. Should part of the budget be spent to help refugees when other problems should seemingly have priority? In this case, contention stems more from the fear of outsiders than economic troubles. Economists point out that migrant workers have helped expand the economy. Migrants in Britain between the years 2011-2015 contributed a

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substantially higher number to the state than they took away.¹ Wages are not low because of immigration either. In fact, wages in the United States and the EU, after plummeting from the 2008 financial crisis, have been slowly rising. In terms of taking jobs, a report published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine shows that not only have immigrants not taken jobs from Americans, but they have also helped create new ones.² Security is another issue for refugee policy. The reality is refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East go through a screening process that takes nearly two years. Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute, an American think-tank, in a report published in September 2016, calculated that the chances of suffering a terrorist attack by a refugee in the U.S. are about 1 in 3.64 billion per year.³ However, this is preaching to the choir. It is not the political elite or scholarly class that needs convincing about the benefits of refugee-friendly policies.

The plight of the first world working class received more attention than usual in 2016, mostly due to extreme government shifts in the U.S. with the election of Donald Trump, and the vote by Britain to leave the EU, a decision based largely on independent border control. In 2017, elections in Germany, the Netherlands, France, and possibly Italy will all prominently feature the issue of refugee acceptance. While the working middle class is evolving, it still comprises the core of the U.S. and western European societies. Due to rapidly advancing technology and globalization, many of these workers feel left behind by their governments, like being displaced in their own countries. This is the bridge that needs to be rebuilt. Governments must multitask better. They have a duty to not only accommodate migrants escaping war, but to accommodate their own citizens as well. Unfortunately, the working class has politically devolved into little more than a mascot for emotions during campaigns and photo ops for candidates to go to factories and pose in hard hats.

The working and middle class deserve better than shallow patronage. Improve the lives of the people surrounding refugees, and the lives of refugees will improve as well. Responsible politicians need to get serious about tackling domestic labor issues, and liberal elites need to better understand how migrant policy is taken at a local level. How do we begin this process? Slow assimilation and direct interaction is a good place to start. There are a few ways this can be done. Work programs that group similarly-skilled migrants led by carefully selected local workers will help migrants adjust to the new work culture, and

1 Alan Travis, "Are EU Immigrants Really Taking British Jobs and Pushing Down Wages?" *The Guardian*, May 20, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/20/reality-check-are-eu-migrants-really-taking-british-jobs>.

2 Julia Preston, "Immigrants Aren't Taking Americans' Jobs, New Study Finds," *New York Times*, September 21, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/us/immigrants-arent-taking-americans-jobs-new-study-finds.html?_r=1.

3 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis," (Policy Analysis no. 798, *Cato Institute*, September 13, 2016), accessed January 13, 2017, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/terrorism-immigration-risk-analysis>.

local workers adjust to migrants. Reaching out to union leaders and community activists would play a vital role. Many national and international policymakers underestimate the clout local community leaders have. It is more likely that a metal worker will listen to a comrade in arms he or she can identify with than a distant politician or scholar holding up a chart showing GDP trends.

Part of President Trump's campaign promises included massive infrastructure projects. Not only would this be a great opportunity to provide jobs to struggling American craftsmen, it can also serve as a place where skilled local and migrant workers can work together. What could be more patriotic for skilled migrants to work hand-in-hand with locals to help build their new country?

Investments at the civic and state level would be a significant contribution to this cause. Places like churches, schools, and community centers are excellent for assimilation, especially for young people. The federal government would be wise to create an office for adjustment, targeted at resettled refugees and their new local neighbors, which would be run by state and civic governments. Eventually, non government-run organizations would be most effective. After creating a blueprint and providing basic funding, the federal government's best role is as a facilitator.

As for attitudes towards newcomers, most people are humane and tolerant at their core; it is the unknown they fear. Putting a human face on migrants and refugees can go a long way. According to a Trump supporter in an article about Syrian refugees that ran in the *Kansas City Star* on November 30, 2016, "You could spend years learning what we've learned in the last few weeks...it's changed my thoughts on the original feelings I had."

⁴ This is not an isolated case. Many people who have loudly expressed their contempt for letting in refugees before have had a change of heart after meeting them. I have seen this for myself as well. As a university student I helped at a community center for migrants from Spanish speaking countries. The attendees had all made the sacrifice to move to a new place where they believed they could find opportunities for a better life. Many refugees, no matter where they come from, have done some sort of skilled labor job, work hard to support their families, and only want a stable environment in which to raise their kids. Sound like people we may know?

Security must also be addressed. It is a sensitive issue, and when people move into the neighborhood from the same places where acts of terrorism are occurring, suspicion and fear follow shortly, especially in relatively safe places like the U.S. and western Europe. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that migrants and refugees have the same fears of terrorism; some have even witnessed it firsthand or know someone who has fallen victim. Again, community leaders like principals, priests, and labor activists can play a role in

4 Joe Robertson, "Neighbors Vow to Protect Syrian Family as Nation Watches for Trump's Refugee Policies," *Kansas City Star*, November 30, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, <http://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article117865318.html>.

connecting the new neighbors with the old.

Tackling these issues is very complicated, and publications such as these and others represent only a small platform. Reality must take all factors into account. Southern European countries are facing an economic crisis as well as an influx of refugees, and it is easy to come to the conclusion that borders should be closed. Rather, this should be seen as an opportunity for long-term investment. Southern European governments can employ craftsmen and teachers for state-sponsored programs to help refugees adapt quickly and contribute to society. This can even be implemented simultaneously with the vetting period, expediting the process. Unfortunately, at the federal level, migrants have at times become political bargaining chips, such as the deal made between Turkey and the EU that sent thousands of refugees who made it to the EU back to Turkey. This is not a viable long-term solution. Refugees have chosen the United States and Europe for a reason, and even arriving in Turkey or the Mediterranean Sea in the first place shows that they are willing to risk everything to make it there. A sober reminder of this to our politicians and those opposed to pro-migrant policies is needed.

It would be fantastic if we all could extend a helping hand to those in desperate need, play the role of our brother's keeper, and help migrants assimilate smoothly into new societies, but that is not reality. While it is not a popular notion among the idealist and energetic millennials (including myself), a generation of middle-class killed workers has felt left-behind by the neo-liberal order. They deserve attention as well. It is by starting here that we begin to make the transition from migrant to functioning member of society smoother. Perception is reality, and until we can expunge the image of refugees/migrants as job-stealing, terrorists-in-waiting, they will always be met with resistance. Good paying jobs for the middle and blue-collar class will help shed the scapegoat role many migrants play. When building a house, work begins with the foundation. Thinking of the unstable middle-classes of the U.S. and Europe as the foundation to our houses is appropriate, and solidifying that portion of society is necessary to accommodate the thousands of refugees and migrants trying to resettle in our countries.