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Paper One: The Causes of, Dangers of, and Reactions to Migration

The year 2014 saw the highest number of displaced people since World War II, with almost 60 million people displaced globally (Jones 2016, p. 4). While migration has always been a contentious issue, it has received an abundance of media coverage in the past few years thanks to the hardening of borders, which makes migration deadlier than ever. In this paper, I consider three structural causes of migration: political, environmental, and economic. Then, I consider how the hardening of borders has forced migrants to pursue unsafe migration routes, as is evident in the Mediterranean and at the U.S.-Mexican border. I then turn to how people have mobilized against migration in the United States by looking at the case study of the Minutemen in Arizona. I conclude by examining policies states could implement to help alleviate the migration crisis, including having all countries adhere to refugee quotas, to the Paris Climate Agreement, and to a global minimum wage.

The Causes of Migration

I first consider political causes for migration. One political factor is conflict, and, in the media today, the Syrian Civil War is one of the most talked about causes of mass migration. The documentary, *Frontline: Exodus* (2017), discusses the political factors fueling migration extensively. Millions of Syrians have been forced to leave their country and millions of others have been internally displaced due to government violence, brutality, and terrorism. The documentary followed Isra’a’s family and Hassan from Syria to examine how their migration was caused by conflict. Both Isra’a’s family and Ahmed recounted bombs falling close to their homes and having to flee the country to seek safety elsewhere. Their stories show how the government is one of the main perpetrators of violence.

Another political factor *Frontline: Exodus* (2017) highlights is repression by the government. Political repression, while present in Syria, was also explored in the documentary in the context of Afghanistan. One man, Sadiq, fled Afghanistan to escape from Taliban rule. He recounted how people were not free under Taliban governance, and especially women. His story highlights how migration occurs to escape repressive regimes and pursue the freedom to live life without restrictions. The Syrian Civil War and the Taliban regime are just two examples of how conflict and governments force people to leave their countries to find safety and freedom elsewhere in the world.

The next structural factor of migration I consider is how climate change is forcing people to migrate. Today, developing nations are the largest producers of carbon emissions, which is unsurprising. Historically, industrializing nations produce high levels of carbon emissions. But, these countries suffering the most from climate change are producing some of the lowest levels of emissions. Furthermore, the countries suffering most from climate change are often the ones least equipped to deal with it. This includes the three lowest emissions producers: Malawi, Mali, and the Congo (Jones 2016, p. 149). Climate change is resulting in increasingly arid regions and rising sea levels, among many other negative consequences.

Jones (2016, p. 150) further explains how sub-Saharan states are experiencing the largest decrease in annual rainfall, and this crisis, compounded with the fact that most sub-Saharan states are poor and lack effective governments, results in migration to states in which water is more readily available. Rising sea levels also affect states that are not producing high carbon emissions because they are generally smaller island nations, like the Maldives. The Maldives consists of small islands that are barely above sea level. Scientists therefore expect large parts of the country to disappear by the end of the century. While the country is working to be carbon neutral, climate change is a global phenomenon because carbon emissions do not stay in one place (Jones 2016, p. 151). As climate change continues to worsen, it will become impossible to live in certain areas. Currently there are climate refugees coming from the Maldives and other island nations, and it is inevitable that their numbers will climb.

Another structural cause of migration is the result of international economic organizations’ policies. Economic migrants are being forced to seek work outside of their countries because of trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the legacies of extractivist colonial rule. This issue is discussed both in the documentary, *Frontline: Exodus* (2017), and in the documentary, *The Other Side of Immigration* (Germano, 2009). *Frontline: Exodus* (2017) follows the story of Alaigie, a man from the Gambia who migrates to Europe to provide for his family after his father dies. The documentary discusses how many Gambians only make $1.25 per day, and migrants from countries like the Gambia leave because their economic situations are desperate enough to make the dangerous journey to Libya and beyond to Europe worth it. Similarly, in *The Other Side of Immigration* (2009)*,* the documentary discusses the economic reasons pushing Mexican migrants to make the dangerous journey into the United States. The rural poor in Mexico also make very little money per day, as many Africans and others in the developing world. Even so, by migrating to the United States, migrant workers can make $70 to $80 per day, versus $13 per day (Germano 2009), which also funds schools, infrastructure, and family living costs in the migrants’ hometowns.

Migrants from Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere face similar desperate economic conditions. Many African countries have dysfunctional economies thanks to their colonial legacies of being exploited for resources. Furthermore, colonial rulers did not establish economies that could function in the long-term after they left the country (Austin, 2010). These structural economic conditions, combined with corrupt governments, results in desperate economic situations for most of the world’s population. Rural Mexican workers have been similarly disadvantaged by the economic system set up through NAFTA. The United States has used this agreement to protect farmers, which in turn has made it too expensive for Mexicans to grow their own grains or produce their own meat. Mexico similarly struggles with corruption in the government, and many workers believe the government has not done enough to ensure rural Mexicans can make a living in their towns (*The Other Side of Immigration*, 2009).

The Dangers of Migration

Migration has become more dangerous as states have hardened their borders and forced migrants to pursue unsafe routes to their intended destinations. Many migrants trying to reach the U.S. and European Union (EU) are using smugglers to attempt to cross the Mediterranean and the Arizona desert. They are being forced to choose these routes because of increased restrictions on borders.

Jones (2016, p. 7) examines how the external borders of the European Union have hardened since 1990s as the internal borders between EU states have loosened. In 2005, the EU hired a security agency called Frontex to coordinate border security of its external borders. This in turn has forced migrants to pursue unsafe routes into the EU by being smuggled through the Mediterranean Sea and across land in Europe. As was depicted in the documentary *Frontline: Exodus* (2017), Isra’a’s family and Hassan were forced to enter the EU through the Mediterranean Sea even though thousands died attempting to cross it before them. Jones (2016, p. 19) discusses how thousands of migrants died attempting to enter the EU, but it was not until horrific images such as the body of a migrant child, Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore in Turkey that the knowledge of the increasing danger of crossing borders became mainstream. *Frontline: Exodus* showed Hassan discussing how smugglers are capitalizing on the hardening of borders by providing migrants with life preserves that do not function and dinghies that barely have enough room for the migrants. Smugglers can do this because migrants have few alternatives to get to the EU besides attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

Similarly, along the U.S.-Mexican border, the U.S. has hardened its border considerably since 9/11, which has forced migrant workers to enter the U.S. through the most dangerous route available with the help of smugglers. Shapira (2013, p. xviii) explains how the U.S. focused on securing the Texas and California borders in the 1990s but left most of the border in Arizona without a physical border wall. This is because this area of the border consists of a large desert and is very difficult to cross. Since the hardening of the border areas with safer environmental conditions in Texas and California, migrants have been forced to cross in Arizona, resulting in an increase in migrant deaths. Between 1999 and 2005, the number of migrants who died while trying to cross the border doubled (Shapira 2013, p. xix). Smugglers also play a role in making migration more dangerous Shapira describes how they sometimes abandon migrants who they are supposed to shephard safely across the border and sexually assault female migrants. Both of these examples highlight how the hardening of borders is causing migrants to find less safe routes to flee their countries. This is resulting in higher levels of deaths of migrants than in previous years when borders were not as rigidly patrolled.

The Reactions to Migration

It is very common today to hear anti-immigrant rhetoric, but one group of individuals in the U.S. took action and mobilized into a group called the Minutemen to stop illegal migration through the U.S.-Mexican border. According to Shapira (2013), the Minutemen mobilized not only to stop migration, but to also regain a sense of purpose that has very little to do with the actual act of migration. The individuals who were part of the Minutemen had diverse opinions on immigration. Many viewed Mexicans stereotypically as rapists and drug runners, while others were sympathetic towards the economic struggles of many Mexican migrants. The Minutemen tried to help the Border Patrol by scouting for illegal immigrants and reporting them to Border Patrol, but Shapira found that the Minutemen in fact joined this organization first and foremost to regain a purpose in life. Most Minutemen were ex-military and used illegal migration as an excuse to reenter the military world. This was reproduced in the Arizonan desert through gadgets like radios and night-vision goggles, a structured hierarchy, and guns and camouflage clothing. The Minutemen earned the respect of their peers by taking the midnight shifts and displaying their military skills. One man nicknamed Blowfish, for instance, was highly regarded for his ability to drive a car in the dark so that migrants would not know a car was approaching. These were all highly ritualistic actions that reminded the Minutemen of their time in the military and made them feel like they were helping to defend their country once again.

In reality, the Minutemen did very little to help stop illegal migration. Shapira interviewed a Border Patrol agent who said the Minutemen did not help catch migrants and could actually make the Border Patrol’s life harder when the Minutemen mistakenly called in sightings. Throughout the book Shapira went with the Minutemen to patrol the border, but illegal migrants were never caught. Even so, these men continued to patrol the border and mobilize against migration. This gives credence to Shapira’s argument that mobilization around illegal immigration was more about regaining a lost sense of self and respect for this group of people than it was about stopping migration into the U.S.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined three structural factors that are fueling migration: political, environmental, and economic. Very often these three factors interact with each other and, as is evident in the examples of Syria, Afghanistan, sub-Sahara Africa, and Mexico, these factors affect migrants from around the world in similar ways. Many of the migrants who are leaving sub-Sahara Africa are facing the same kinds of economic incentives to leave as the migrants from Mexico. I also argue that the hardening of borders has made migration even more dangerous than it was 20 to 30 years ago. This was made evident through the case studies of the Mediterranean Sea and the Arizona desert. While both of these areas are vastly different geographically, migrants are forced to cross at these much more dangerous points because borders have become harder to cross. Finally, I argued that mobilization against migration in the U.S. through the Minutemen organization was much less about illegal migration and more about a group of individuals who feel marginalized in the U.S. regaining respect and purpose in life.

Going forward I would suggest three policies states could implement to make migration less intense and less dangerous. The U.N. is the best organization to make this happen, as migration and the causes of migration are global phenomena that the traditional nation-state is failing to address. By having refugee quotas for each nation based on its population and available resources, refugees would be able to flee their homes and not have to pursue dangerous pathways to get to a country that is more welcoming to refugees. If the international community can guarantee there is a safe place for each refugee, refugees would have a safer route to resettlement. To tackle climate migrants and refugees, all countries should be required to implement the Paris Climate Agreement because climate change is a global phenomenon. The lack of water in certain countries and impending disappearance of others needs to be tackled by the international community because at the end of the day climate change will affect every single country on this planet. By tackling climate change, we could stem the flow of climate refugees before it becomes a pervasive issue. Finally, I believe Jones’s (2016, p. 175) suggestion of a global minimum wage and workers protections would help end economic migration. Based on the documentaries we have watched, economic migrants would prefer to stay with their families in their own countries. Therefore, by making sure each person who is willing and able to work can provide for themselves and their family adequately, the international community could end economic migration. All of these suggestions would require the international community to think beyond their borders to solve global issues, and the U.N. is ideally situated to help solve these issues.

Works Cited

Austin, Gareth. “African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies.” *International*

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