

Crises of Immigration

Professor Noam Chomsky

Pope Francis captured the essence of “crises of immigration” in simple words: “Migrants are not a danger — they are **in** danger.”

The implication is clear. The crises of immigration are, in significant measure, moral crises in the wealthy countries of the world, the societies that have the resources and the capacity to help those who are in severe danger and to mitigate or resolve the circumstances that lie at the roots of their plight – rich societies that furthermore often have significant responsibility for creating the crises in the first place and that have, in many ways, benefited from the circumstances that lie behind the plight of refugees, considerations that deepen the moral crisis of the rich and privileged.

Reflection on these matters is, I think, essential if we are to face the moral crises honestly and realistically, a prerequisite to a humane and constructive response to the enormous human problems that are right in front of our eyes now and are very likely to become far worse in the near future unless decisive actions are undertaken. And it is instructive, I think, for such reflections to reach beyond the news that reaches us every day – which is shattering enough, including the report in *El Pais* yesterday (Nov. 4) that more than 4000 desperate refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean this year, fleeing from misery and violence.

Migrants are not only in danger, but commonly in extremely severe danger. That is not to deny that sometimes migrants can become a serious burden on the society that receives them. The most extreme case is a devastating catastrophe that is rarely considered a crisis of immigration: the rise of settler-colonial societies where the migrants arrive with the intention of displacing or eliminating the indigenous population, the most savage form of imperialism, and the foundation of much of modern global society.

The most prominent cases are the world’s richest and most developed countries. We cannot properly use the term “crisis of immigration” in such cases. It is far too mild. A better description would be the words of US President John Quincy Adams, the intellectual author of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that justified the settler conquest of what is now the United States. In his later years, reflecting on what he and his associates had done, he lamented the fate of “that hapless race of native

Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty" - continuing to do so in the years that followed with genocidal assaults that won the national territory, along with the conquest of half of Mexico. In all the countries of the Anglosphere, the offshoots of England, the aftermath for the remnants who survived the onslaught remains severe, and the painful tale is repeated in other parts of the world as well.

Another crisis of immigration is forced migration of captives to slavery, again not usually described as a crisis of immigration, and again, not properly captured with such a relatively neutral phrase. The practice reached its most extreme and vicious form in the plantation economy of the American south, where slaves produced the most important commodity in world trade through the 19th century: cotton, which, to an extent not generally realized, served as the basis for the modern advanced economies, particularly those of the US and England, but the continent as well. It has been estimated, for example, that some 20% of France's wealth derives from its Haitian slave colony, at the time one of the richest colonies in the world, today a scene of devastation and disaster after centuries of imperial torment, right to the present. Its continuing agony is again on the front pages today. We find much the same wherever we look, right to the present. It is, for example, not hard to draw the connections between the sophisticated high tech devices many of us carry in our pockets and the brutal murder of Patrice Lumumba at the hands of the West, followed by western support for the bloodthirsty kleptomaniac Mobutu who ended the hopes that the Congo might realize its promise as a leader in African development after having finally liberated itself.

The record of slavery, much of it just being unearthed by scholarship, is horrifying even beyond what had previously been known; recent work by Edward Baptist is particularly shocking. And as in the case of the remnants of the settler-colonial onslaught, the aftermath remains grim. The two of course were linked. The land had to be cleared of the native scourge to prepare for the importation of slaves to produce valuable commodities, primarily cotton. Slavery was also a major factor in the American revolution, which was fought in part to safeguard the institution from the growing opposition in England to what the legal system was coming to regard as too "odious" to be tolerated in England and Wales, in the words of the important Somerset decision by Lord Mansfield in 1772.

Contemporary scholarship, notably the work of Sven Bickert, is only just beginning to unearth the vast contributions of the slave system to the modern economy. Cotton production by slave labor provided the basis for development of manufacturing, finance, commerce and retail industries, hence for much of the wealth and privilege of western industrial societies. In this critically important case,

as in others, the rich countries of the West have been not only the agents but also the beneficiaries of the "savage injustice of the Europeans" that Adam Smith deplored, crimes that helped create the circumstances that lead miserable people to flee in desperation to the lands of their historic tormentors.

Keeping to less colossal crises of immigration, the country most severely affected by the flood of refugees today is Lebanon, where some 40% of the population are refugees, some from recent wars in Iraq and Syria, many of them tracing back to Israel's expulsion of Palestinians in 1948. In Lebanon and elsewhere the descendants are still confined to miserable camps. Jordan too absorbed a huge refugee population, as did Syria before its recent cataclysm. The poor African country of Kenya has hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly fleeing from violence and repression in Somalia. They are surviving in miserable conditions and under constant threat of illegal deportation from the Dabaab camps, the largest refugee camps in the world, dating back to the Somali disasters of 1992, in which, as usual, the West had a significant role.

Meanwhile in wealthy France, the squalid Calais refugee camp, known as "the jungle," has been demolished, its population scattered. But there is also a streak of western compassion. Britain agreed to take in a few hundred unaccompanied children who have families living in the UK, bypassing the complex procedures of providing proof of flight from persecution. So the lofty values of western civilization are still being upheld.

Ranking high among the most miserable countries in the world is Afghanistan, again with no slight western responsibility. But it ranks high in another dimension as well: receiving refugees, by now estimated at 1.5 million this year, many of them expelled from the rich countries of the West where they have been refused asylum.

The plight of refugees today cannot fail to bring to mind painful moments of earlier history. The US was known as a haven for immigrants -- that is, European immigrants. Orientals were excluded as soon as they became a significant presence, brought mostly as virtual slaves. But even within favored Europe problems arose, from the beginning. Benjamin Franklin, the leading American figure of the Enlightenment, urged that Germans and Swedes should be excluded, because they are too swarthy, but that proposal was put aside. Irish immigrants in the late 19th century were treated almost as badly as African-Americans, but were finally absorbed. The same with others. That lasted as long as the country needed a European population to settle what was taken by force and guile from Native Americans. The first barrier to Europeans was in 1924, aimed at Italians and Jews -- more politely, at southern and Eastern Europeans. That barrier lasted until 1965.

The consequences were dire, particularly for Jews, as Nazi Germany descended to the depths of barbarism. In 1938, the Evian conference was a feeble and failed international effort to deal with the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany. The one enthusiast was Hitler, who expressed his hope that the world, "which has such deep sympathy for these criminals [Jews], will at least be generous enough to convert this sympathy into practical aid. We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships." Only the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica were willing to offer help. The result was "a green light for genocide," to borrow the title of a scholarly study of the conference. Even after the war, when Holocaust survivors were still living in concentration camps under miserable conditions, and there was no longer any question about the hideous crimes, the barriers were maintained. An ugly story that there is no time to go into here, but one that tells us something about the western values that are coming to the fore once again today.

One partial exception to the general pattern of refugee absorption today by the poorest countries is Turkey, an OECD member with a modern developed and highly productive sector, but at the low end within the OECD and still relatively poor overall in social and economic development. In the UN Human Development Index, Turkey is ranked 72nd, even below Lebanon and Iran, another country that has absorbed much of the detritus of the western rampages in the region. Turkey houses 2.5 million refugees, including the bulk of those fleeing the Syrian horrors. 90% of them are estimated to be women and children. Apart from emergencies, Turkey has now closed its doors to the tens of thousands of desperate people fleeing the latest horrors, which are so grotesque right now in Aleppo under the cruel aerial assault of the Assad government and its Russian allies. Tens of thousands of them are stranded at the border, with many more to come.

In response, the rich European countries pressure and bribe Turkey to absorb even more refugees and to keep them away from its borders – while harshly condemning Turkey for closing its own borders. Whatever one may think of Prime Minister Erdogan, his charges of hypocrisy are hardly without merit.

The September report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees outlines the scale of the Syrian migrant crisis. Some 11 million Syrians have fled their homes in the past 5 years of escalating destruction. 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance within Syria. Almost 5 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, while 6 and a half million are internally displaced within Syria. One million have requested asylum in Europe. The top receiving countries of the EU are Germany, with more than 300,000 cumulated applications, and Sweden

with 100,000. Others have a much more pathetic record. The United States is far behind, having absorbed only a few thousand.

The US is not only the richest and most powerful country in world history, with incomparable advantages, but also has major responsibility for generating the refugees who have been fleeing, and still are: millions from Iraq alone, not to speak of consequences of the US-UK invasion elsewhere in the region. The record of Britain is hardly better, and part of the motive for Brexit seems to be to make the record even worse.

We should never overlook the fact that the US-UK invasion of Iraq, the source of a large part of the migrant crisis, was a textbook example of criminal aggression without any credible pretext. In the words of the chief American prosecutor at Nuremberg, Justice Robert Jackson, "To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole" – all of the evil that follows, in this case not only the destruction of Iraq but also the incitement of sectarian conflict that is tearing Iraq and the region apart, and the generation of millions of refugees from the invasion itself, and those fleeing the aftermath, including the appearance of the monstrous ISIS. The West would also do well to listen to Justice Jackson's stern words to the Nuremberg Tribunal: "We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow. To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well." We can judge today how well western civilization has risen to this challenge.

These reflections apply not just to the torrential flight of refugees from Iraq and its aftermath but to the so-called "refugee crisis" more generally. It is a rather striking fact, which cannot be reiterated too often, that the countries with the least responsibility for generating refugees are handed the responsibility of somehow caring for them, while those with the greatest responsibility for generating refugees are self-absolved from this responsibility, even though they are far richer and hence more able to deal with whatever problems might arise. That holds not only for refugees fleeing Middle East disasters, but also for the refugees still fleeing the wreckage left by US intervention in Guatemala and El Salvador. And those fleeing from Honduras, the leading source of refugees since the Obama-backed military coup of 2009 that expelled the reformist president and restored the harsh and brutal rule of the traditional elite, turning Honduras into one of the murder capitals of the world. The US is reacting much the way Europe is: pressuring and bribing Mexico to keep the victims away from its border.

The same reflections apply to the huge flood of refugees from Africa to Europe, including the 4000 who have already drowned in the Mediterranean this year in their desperate flight. Here too there is of course a history, stretching back hundreds of years, which we should not have to review, and which underscores yet another moral crisis of the West.

The general attitude of western civilization towards this history was revealed rather clearly in early US global planning at the end of WWII. It was understood by planners that the US would be displacing its European predecessors as the dominant global power, at a level with no historical precedent. And, naturally, careful plans were laid about how to organize the world. The general picture was well described by Henry Kissinger: Europe and others should focus on their "regional interests," while the US, which "has global interests and responsibilities," will manage "the overall framework of order," serving as the "respected and legitimate law-enforcer" that the world needs, as Zbigniew Brzezinski put it.

Each region of the world was assigned its "function" within the global system by George Kennan and his State Department staff. Thus the function of Southeast Asia was to provide resources and raw materials to the former colonial masters, and to the US. When Kennan turned to Africa, he observed that the US had little interest in the continent, so it should be handed over to Europe to "exploit" – his term – for European reconstruction; he added also "economic development," but that was window dressing. He suggested as well that exploitation of Africa "would lend to the idea of Western European union that tangible objective for which everyone has been rather unsuccessfully groping in recent months" – a kind of psychological lift while the US was taking responsibility for the overall framework of global order.

The plans are considered unremarkable. I have found no mention of the idea that after many horrific centuries, Europe's relation to Africa should be to "exploit" Africa for its reconstruction from wartime damage. The US of course did have direct involvement in African affairs, but in another dimension: slavery, but that too imposes no obligations to the ruined continent.

This is by no means ancient history. It continues into the current period in ways that we should know very well, and is a prime reason why Africans are seeking to escape to the lands of their traditional tormenters, creating a "refugee crisis" – or more accurately, adding another layer to the moral crisis that Europe is facing. A more immediate reason for the current flood of African migrants is the attack on Libya, initiated by France and Britain and "led from behind" by the US, in Obama's words. The attack greatly increased casualties – by a factor of 10 according to an analysis in the major US establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* -- also leaving the country a

wreck, torn to shreds by warring militias. The attack also opened a flood of weapons and jihadis primarily to western Africa, now the leading center of Islamic terror according to UN figures. The attack also helped ISIS establish an African base, and opened a funnel for the flight of refugees to Europe, creating another crisis of migration.

It is of considerable interest that throughout the Libyan crisis, the African Union put forth serious and feasible proposals for peaceful diplomatic settlement that might have avoided the catastrophe. These have been reviewed in detail by Africa specialist Alex de Waal in the scholarly literature. But the proposals were ignored by the imperial triumvirate, who were intent on pursuing their traditional mission. For the masters of the world, northern Africa is not a “regional interest” of Africa but rather of Europe, and more generally of NATO, now that its mission has been expanded after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Another relevant question is whether Africa might have developed had it not been for western conquest. Perhaps so. One of the leading historians of Africa, Basil Davidson, observes that modernizing reforms in West Africa in the mid-19th century were similar to those implemented by Japan at about the same time, and he argued that the potential for development “was in substance no different from the potential realized by the Japanese after 1867.” Elaborating, an African historian comments that “The same laudable object was before them both, [but] the African's attempt was ruthlessly crushed and his plans frustrated” by imperial force. West Africa therefore joined “the third world,” but not Japan, the one part of the global South that resisted colonization, and the one part that developed, along with its colonies. Japan was also a brutal colonizer, but its former colonies, Taiwan and South Korea, followed the state-led development programs that Japan had borrowed from Britain and the US, rejecting the neoliberal model imposed by the West in its domains. Sixty years ago South Korea was at about the economic level of Ghana. The outcomes are quite different, Taiwan as well— and of course China, which also rejected the western development programs designed for the colonial and postcolonial world.

Questions like these should also be explored when confronting the moral crisis that migrant flow has created in the West.

The migrant crisis extends far beyond the flight of refugees from violence, chaos, and harsh repression. Huge droughts are already threatening survival for hundreds of millions of people – and are also factors in some of the most horrendous conflicts, as in Darfur and Syria. Some 25 million people are displaced by disasters such as floods and storms every year, a predicted and increasing effect of global warming.

That is one person every second, considerably more than those fleeing war and terror. The numbers are bound to increase as sea levels rise particularly as the huge Antarctic glaciers continue to melt. In Bangladesh alone, tens of millions are expected to have to flee in coming decades from low-lying plains because of sea level rise and more severe weather, creating a migrant crisis that will make today's pale into insignificance.

Once again, this coming crisis of immigration poses a severe moral crisis for the rich societies. With considerable justice, Bangladesh's leading climate scientist says that "These migrants should have the right to move to the countries from which all these greenhouse gases are coming. Millions should be able to go to the United States." And to the other rich countries that have grown wealthy while bringing about a new geological era, the Anthropocene, marked by radical human transformation of the environment. These catastrophic consequences can only increase, not just in Bangladesh but in all of South Asia as temperatures, already intolerable for the poor, inexorably rise and the Himalayan glaciers melt, threatening the entire water supply. Already in India some 300 million people are reported to lack drinking water.

We may soon be facing indescribable catastrophes unless we act quickly and decisively.

Returning finally to Pope Francis's words, migrants are indeed in danger, severe danger. And we should be devoting ourselves to remedying their plight in all of the many ways that we can: by addressing the causes of their flight, by greatly increasing humanitarian aid, by welcoming them into our midst.

And at the same time we should also be reflecting seriously on another familiar adage: "Physician, heal thyself."