

No, migrants are not a burden

The Greek crisis today represents one of the most significant challenges for the European Union since its inception. But in the international spotlight for the past month, Greece has eclipsed another pressing concern for Europe, and perhaps of even greater urgency: the growing flow of incoming migrants. This issue has been addressed with a particularly short-sighted, defensive approach by politicians and commentators alike. For instance, French President François Hollande referred to a “burden” of migrants that should be shared among European countries – a position also adopted by the European Commission in its negotiation of “quotas.”

In 2015, the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to reach European shores could well attain 100,000 or more: one hundred thousand people arriving on a territory inhabited by 500 million. And some claim it is a problem to welcome one person for every 5,000, in today’s Europe? The very representation of immigration as a threat comes from the influence of extreme-right movements which, for decades now, have instilled in our minds –including those of politicians, always fixated on the short-term goal of upcoming elections - a distorted, fear-fed image of migrants. What contributed to alter our perception so radically in the last three decades? Did we really forget about the mobilization around the boat people coming from Vietnam and Cambodia in 1979– an initiative supported by both Sartre and Aron who, despite their opposite political views, initiated a joint appeal to President Giscard d’Estaing to organize decent conditions for East-Asian refugees?

No doubt, the economic situation has evolved since the 1970s, and the rise of mass unemployment has contributed to feed the fear of immigration. Nevertheless, such fear derives from an economic prejudice that considers resources as a pie to share among ourselves, whereas, in our modern societies, wealth is created by human activity, built from ideas, inventions, needs. Indeed, territories of immigration have often become territories of the future: just look at California!

No, migrants are not coming to Europe to invade us, eat our bread, steal our work, or plunder our resources. They are utterly brave and admirable human beings, who were forced to flee their home countries because of desperate conditions created by war. They are men and women genuinely trustful of our democracies and resolutely opposed to those obscurantists who, in their countries, fuel conflicts and make them flee. Furthermore, just like the migrants from previous generations who have enriched Europe during the past centuries, they epitomize a huge potential of ideas, energy and determination for the Europe of 2050. Does one need to recall the names of all the immigrants who created France as it is today? The list would make up many volumes: among them, scientists Marie Curie, Georges Charpak and Alexandre Grothendieck, writers Samuel Beckett and Milan Kundera, artists Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall, not to mention the countless business leaders, athletes, politicians, and all those who, without making headlines, managed to create their own conditions of integration.

This is well known to scientists: when confronted with a difficult problem, one often finds the path to a solution through a radical change of perspective. Thus, shifting our perception of those migrants, and considering them not as a *burden* to bear or to share, but rather an *opportunity* for Europe, seems to be the indispensable starting point today. Only then can the complex efforts required to welcome these men and women be initiated – through trust, self-organization and empowerment. It is by rejecting this distorted image of immigration, which has penetrated like a poison at the heart of our countries, that we will pave the way for a bright future in Europe. Thus, we might in fact succeed in finding new meaning to our societies, and become somewhat more human as well.

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