

Migration and Catastrophes

Introduction

Paul DUMOUCHEL

Catastrophes often occasion important movements of population. Especially when they are human made; in particular social catastrophes like war, civil war, genocide, ethnic cleaning frequently lead to large scale migrations. In many cases, these displacements of population are not accidental but planned, intentional; chasing people from where they have been living for a long time, sometimes generations, is a deliberate policy executed either through violence or through legal means, as is now planned by the new American administration. These large-scale migrations may also be the result of a natural disaster, flood, volcanic eruption, global warming, or of a large scale industrial accident, the meltdown of a nuclear reactor. This exodus can be short lived and temporary or definitive, but in all cases the migration itself constitutes an important aspect of the catastrophe, and sometimes the mass migration is precisely what constitutes the catastrophe. This is clear, for example, in the case of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant accident of March 2011. The forced displacement of more than 170,000 persons is not external to the catastrophe, but is what transformed an industrial accident, the meltdown of a nuclear reactor, into a catastrophe. To the opposite, the 1991 Tokaimura nuclear accident in which two technicians died was rapidly forgotten and never considered as a catastrophe for, apart from the two direct victims, others were barely affected. People at large simply continued their life as if nothing had happened. Yet, from a purely technical point of view, that accident was as dangerous as what happened in Fukushima.¹⁾ Similarly for the refugees that are today knocking at the doors of Europe, or are in a camp somewhere in Turkey, Iraq, Syria or Lebanon²⁾ waiting for the war to be over, the catastrophe is just that, being a refugee. Having lost one's home and living in uncertainty as to how and where one will live. For these people, that is the catastrophe and, somewhat surprisingly, for Europe they, the refugees themselves are the catastrophe. Their migration may be a consequence of the conflicts raging in Syria, and other places in Middle East and Africa, conflicts which in themselves constitute catastrophes, but their forced displacement, first to refugee camps, and then the dangerous trek to Europe in search of a better life is an essential part of what that catastrophe is to them.

The goal of the conference "Migration and Catastrophes" that was held at Ritsumeikan University on March 6 and 7, 2016 was to enquire into the relationship between migrations, catastrophes, and justice. Migration inevitably occasions particular issues of justice, because unlike the 'original' catastrophe that caused the movement of population, it does not only concern others.

The issue cannot remain limited to the immediate victims of the catastrophe, nor can it be confined to the reassuring domain of humanitarian aid. Migrants, as opposed to displaced persons who remain in camps anxiously waiting for the situation to change, either never made it to a camp or have decided to wait no more, to take the issue into their own hands and to assert their freedom. Migrants are victims who have rebelled against their status of victims, in which humanitarian help tends to imprison them, and who now demand justice.

Migrants, refugees, inevitably also concerns “us”, those among whom they plan to settle, unlike humanitarian aids which essentially concerns its recipients. The questions that need to be addressed are in the case of humanitarian aid are: how much, for how long and to whom? Migration however is not only about migrants, the issues of justice that migration raise also concern those among whom migrants now wish to settle. Their presence at the doorsteps of rich countries, many of which have been waging war in the regions of the world from where the refugees come, necessarily raises issues of reciprocity and justice. Of reciprocity because short of chasing them away we need to find a scheme of cooperation that includes them. Of justice because: what right do we have to chase them, to forcefully send them back or let them die at our doorstep? If we do not have any such right, as seems to be the case, then what should be done?

The papers in this special section were all presented at the conference Migration and Catastrophes of March 2016. Most of them do not deal directly with the present crisis but all either address fundamental questions concerning justice and migration or historical changes in refugee politics.

Notes

- 1) Constance Perin describes the Tokaimura accident as the nuclear industry's third shock, following first the Three Miles Island and then the Chernobyl accidents, indicating that the accident was taken quite seriously by the international atomic energy community. Perrin, C. 2005. *Shouldering Risks. The Culture of Control in the Nuclear Power Industry*. Princeton University Press. 262.
- 2) In 2016 more than 5 million people were in refugee camps in the countries surrounding Syria. That is five times as many as tried to enter Europe during that year.