

We are all migrants

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Introduction

COV&R invited us in 2019 to imagine the other. In other words, it is here-and-now migrants, coming to the West as the new faces at the forefront of current events, after having played, repeatedly and around the world, a major role in history. As well as terrorists who have played the leading role since 2001, migrants return to front stage in new circumstances. We picture the former and the latter as threats inasmuch as they both seem to put into question the “we” that we make, or that we believe we make, as soon as we are confronted with “them”. In some cases, hybridization is indeed a reality: accomplished or future terrorists sometimes mix in with the flow of migrants, while some migrants, disappointed with the reception received in the West, can at some stage turn into terrorists. Very little is then needed to condemn the crowd of pacific migrants, and such a condemnation enables us to be suspicious of them all, if not to reject them altogether. Yet even though migrants and terrorists often share the same socio-historical background, one should never assimilate the former to the latter.

As Bertrand Badie reminds us, one should also keep a sense of proportion: “In half of a century, the part of migrant populations has only risen from 2.2% up to a bit more than 3% of the global population, bearing in mind, in addition, that South to North migrations only stand for a third of all migrations!”¹

Imagining the other is a thought experiment, as philosophers say, and it naturally suggests a difference between “them” and “us”. Indeed, by choosing to speak of the Other, the organizers of our symposium seem to endorse such a point of view; but my point will take an opposite way. With the help of mimetic theory, which is crystal-clear on the subject, we are indeed able to verify that migrants are none other than ourselves, even to the extreme extent of our own desiring beings.

1 Bertrand Badie, “Le migrant est l’avenir du monde,” *The Conversation (French edition)*, October 14, 2018: <https://theconversation.com/le-migrant-est-lavenir-du-monde-104798>.

Yet, at first sight, migrants seem the most unfamiliar kind of strangers: they come from a remote country, and do not share our own culture. In most cases, because of their physical traits and mother tongue, or the accent in which they speak our own language with greater or lesser accuracy, migrants are easily recognizable. They are moving, while we are settled. In the past, our vocabulary – at least in French – came down to distinguishing between two, sometimes three stable situations, depending on the chosen point of view: immigrants, emigrés, and refugees. Today, our vocabulary offers us halfway location, between a point of departure and a point of arrival: migrants are migrating, in a movement that has started, but has not yet stopped. Migrants come a long way, one that is most often fraught with pitfalls at the very start, along the way, and at the end. There is nothing stable, starting with the boat on which they embark their journey. There is nothing certain amidst the specter of death, the thieving smugglers, the authorities rejecting their files, the policemen's use of administrative detention, and the judges deciding on expulsion.

And yet, what would we see through the mirror, if we put on our Girardian spectacles? In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* Girard offers a definition of contemporary desire which applies especially to the characters in Proust and Dostoyevsky's novels: "Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another."² In addition, the character in the novel "wants to become the Other and still be himself"³. In fact, it illustrates the model as mediator, at work in the mechanism of desire: we want what our model *has*, and in a deeper sense, what our model seems to be. In acquiring for myself what makes the mediator remarkable in my eyes, I eventually want to acquire his being, what makes his being something superior to mine. Such a desire originates in the feeling of an "insufficiency of being".⁴

So, firstly, what do migrants desire, and what are they lacking? Secondly, what kind of superiority do migrants attribute to Westerners? Thirdly, and to conclu-

2 René Girard. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 83.

3 Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 54.

4 In the introduction to "De la violence à la divinité", reissue in French by Grasset & Fasquelle in 2007 of his first main books, René Girard wrote about *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*: "Il y a dans l'homme une "insuffisance d'être" que chacun ressent obscurément ("There is in man an 'insufficiency of being' that everyone feels obscurely", my translation).

de, I will have to re-evaluate migrants' desires as well as what we have by birth, in light of the death and the sufferings they are prepared to undergo, in order to obtain it.

1 The migrants' object of desire

Wanting to become like the others while being oneself: is Girard's definition of ontological or metaphysical desire not best suited to the desire to flee one's country of residence in order to permanently settle in another country? If his definition applies to the Proustian dandy and to the underground man imagined by Dostoyevsky as well as many of our contemporaries –including ourselves? – have imagined, it also applies to the migrants. Thus, the latter direct towards us a magnifying mirror of our own condition of desiring beings, as well as the futility and grotesqueness of our desires which give way, in their case, to truly vital issues.

1.1 Victims fleeing their insufficiency of being

Migrants' insufficiency of being does not, or not mainly, focus on a lack of material comfort, or even on unreachable ambitions. We are dealing with people who simply want to live in decent conditions for the rest of their existence, a project both more modest in theory, and much more demanding in practice.

To benefit from the right to asylum, political refugees are obliged to produce edifying testimonies⁵ about events in their lives: rape, excision, mutilation, forced marriage, slavery, arbitrary arrests, torture, destruction of property, fatal retaliation where appropriate, and threats against family members, prohibition of profession or even of belief in a particular faith, and so on. In some European countries, like Albania, one may even have to escape from customary vendettas, in order to avoid killing or being killed. This radical insufficiency of being, pushing migrants to flee, is primarily an insufficiency of rights to oppose to their persecutors. It is not even necessary to address freedom and equality of rights, as

5 Florence Boreil *et alii* / ACAT. *Je n'avais plus le choix, il fallait fuir. Paroles de réfugiés* (Paris: Les petits matins, 2013).

they are deprived of the elementary protections necessary to human safety and security. To a certain extent, migrants are like scapegoats, isolated over against a forceful group whose violence remains unpunished and which consider itself legitimate; having no other choice than to renounce life, or to expel themselves from their native country.

If acts of violence or discrimination are the past and daily reality of candidates for migration, they are essentially lacking in future prospects, and that is the only gap they can hope to fill. Life in their home country is simply not worth living. Now, what is the point of living, if it is to see one's relatives suffer and die, knowing of no other emotion than fear and, at best, anger? Candidates for migration cannot limit their future prospects to the repetition of a hurting past, with death as the only way out.

1.2 Migrants hoping for the object of their mimetic desire

Therefore, putting an end to short, medium and long term sufferings, is the horizon to which migrants are committed, and they set themselves in motion to achieve it. They know of lands where such an arbitrary kind of violence is largely reduced, if not eradicated. However, whether they belong to the category of political refugees or economic migrants, authorities from the host countries cleverly establish further distinctions. For them, the stakes are to dissuade mass arrivals and pull factors that their population refuses.

Political refugees desire what we have in the West: no more, no less, than a rule of law. Such a legal arrangement provides the application of rules which are protective of rights, a fair trial when there is a grievance, freedom of opinion and expression, and so on, not only to nationals, but also to both the legal and the clandestine foreigner.

As for those exclusively considered economic migrants, they desire the same opportunities to flourish, made possible by freedom of enterprise, on the basis of regularity and safety of transactions, fair taxation, and so on. It is also necessary to apply a minimal set of rules to migrants: be willing to accumulate property, earn an income, and build capital without taking part in corruption or predation. In practice, the absence of economic freedom and security generally accompanies the absence of public liberties; it is difficult, therefore, to consider any migrant

as exclusively economic. The absence of economic opportunity indeed provokes a chain of consequences in the entire field of political and social rights, which are thus, at best and according to the Marxist distinction, formal more than real.

In a more rudimentary way, an essential motivation for migrants consists in accessing health and education services for themselves, and more importantly, for their progeny. Those are the minimal conditions, therefore, for living a good life.

As we can see, migrants' object of desire has nothing to do with the futilities often associated with ours. Migrants come to remind us that desire also sometimes focuses on the major conditions for the good life. It is one of the lessons to take from such a reflection upon the desire of migrants, a mimetic desire modelled on the situation of Westerners.

2 The desirability of Westerners

Our fate is desirable, and it is easy to forget this, so significant does our own insufficiency of being seem to us. That is right, we are imitable models, in the eyes of a large part of the world's population! Without realizing it, we inspire other people's desire, and we certainly owe it to being the heirs of a politico-legal system which we have not created, but from which we nonetheless benefit.

2.1 We are self-ignorant models

As it often turns out, those who inspire mimetic desire ignore their own qualities or attributes that others would like to appropriate. And yet, Westerners continually display the superiority which they are supposed to enjoy.

We have the tendency and capacity to display the things that can make people envious. A crucial phenomenon to consider when it comes to migratory flows is, first, the colonization of a large part of the world by a few European countries, in most cases between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The pitiful decolonization that often followed left pseudo-countries with artificial boundaries and institutions, and faced with tremendous challenges.

And there is more to it. We turned demanding legal standards into models for the whole of humanity, promising equal protection and freedom to all individu-

als, to which the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the slowly-emerging international criminal justice testify. In short, we assigned a universal span to standards which had been progressively enacted, in the context of national history and for national use, following the progressive perfecting of robust institutions.

Beyond the legal context, the economic, social, and cultural frame of globalization, also promoted in large part by Western countries, reveals a flattering picture which contributes to the contagion of desires. As the French expert in international relations Bertrand Badie claims: “We are in a world where everybody sees everybody, keeps comparing oneself to others and unfolding an imaginary that is, this time, of world-wide dimension. A world in which no one will any longer see oneself forbidden to think the suffering of one’s relatives could be lessened elsewhere, a world where no future at home inspires hope to find a patch elsewhere.”⁶

Just as equality of conditions in European countries and the United States, was dear to Tocqueville in his own time, globalization spreads models all around the world at an unprecedented pace; as the internet and smartphones have created the widest scope for comparison in history. If the images and messages we emit often upset us, they are of deep interest to those discovering them in political and economic environments of a depressed kind.

One final point deserves notice: migrating is also our doing. There is always a land where the grass is greener, or so it seems, either in political, economic or fiscal terms. Our children dream of a better future outside their own country. The international dimension of educational systems is very old indeed, and leads to very significant North to North migratory flows. For many young French citizens, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom (until recently), and Australia, stand for new *El Dorados*, where they can earn more money, set up a business in better conditions, and conduct their scientific research in better laboratories, with higher budgets.

Those who deplore migrants arriving from the South, therefore are not slow to claim a right to international mobility in their own interest. Beyond such

6 Bertrand Badie, “Le migrant est l’avenir du monde,” *The Conversation France*, October 14, 2018. Quotation translated from French by Shawn Witkovski.

mimetic mechanisms, simply caring for intellectual consistency should make us acknowledge that we – as well, and probably in the first place – have aspired, and still aspire to migrate, if opportunities seem better to us in places other than our place of birth or of nationality. To do so, however, we are neither required to prove we are persecuted, nor to claim the right of asylum.

2.2 We are the heirs of the politico-legal system that guarantees our rights

Our lack of lucidity with regards to such obvious facts may result from the fact that our only merit, so far at least and in spite of some dilapidation, consists in preserving a politico-legal system, which we have for the main part inherited.

Between Judeo-Christian impregnation and traces of the legal system, spread across the entire Roman empire in Antiquity- in other words, between papal and imperial legacy- we emerged, from the seventeenth century onwards, towards the rule of law, and to its corollary, the State's monopoly on legitimate violence. In such a context, we enjoy the guarantees of the rule of law, and the opportunities of a relatively fair economy. However, the rule of law is not our making, and if it were completely destroyed, we would probably not know how to build it anew in only one generation. The succession of many generations, claims, revolutions, as well as violent acts, was necessary to that end. We have inherited it all, without need of significant effort on our part. At most, we succeed today in adding new rights at the margins, and to push back discriminations, even if we simultaneously also permit setbacks.

As for every heritage acquired through legacy, the moral question of the legitimacy of exclusive use of its benefits should be asked. Why should we be granted fundamental rights which are denied to so many? Or rather, by what reasons should the deprived be excluded from their share? Is it fair that we inherited them? Is it fair that others should be kept away from them forever? To ask these questions is to answer them.

We may add that many recent immigrants are found among those who most relentlessly defend the national and identitarian exclusivity of the enjoyment of human rights. On a historical trajectory, recent immigrants have more to share with presently aspiring migrants than with those whose nationality gets

lost in the roots of their genealogical tree. Some of those coming in such recent waves of immigration have parents or grandparents, who also had to flee hopeless situations so as to settle into a rule of law, or in a country of economic opportunity.

In practice, most places on our planet, old nations as well as young countries, have either become lands of immigration or of emigration, with a few exceptions such as Japan. The distribution of the guarantees of rights and arbitrary violence is somehow random, therefore: in such a lottery, the winners are those who were born at the right time and place, and the losers are everybody else. And when a loser attempts to join the right place, he/she is most often considered a freeloader. Such is, in general, the heirs' point of view, whatever the nature of their legacy.

Thus, most of us are in fact heirs refusing to share our legacy. Yet, we had assumed the obligation to disseminate such a legacy in some way, when talking in the nineteenth century about the white man's civilizing mission and burden.

3 Desiring at the risk of death

There is one last point I would like to address: the migrants' object of desire is significantly reevaluated, when it appears that life and death are at stake.

3.1 The cost of migration

One should bear in mind that migrating is costly, which should reassure those who fear a great population replacement. Moreover, the greater the distance to cover, in both geographical and cultural terms, the higher the cost of migration. Such a life-project indeed demands from any candidate economic, social, and cultural capital. One needs money to finance the journey, to pass through the borders, to pass through the corruption of civil servants, and to wait for a long-term solution that is sometimes delayed for a very long time. One then needs to be able to earn a living after all one's money has been spent on the various stages of the journey. One needs to speak the host country's language, or at least, to speak a little English. One needs to be able to bring together documents and files capable of convincing the host country's authorities, and to give a plausible

narration of the persecution. Numerous asylum applications are rejected because of an only approximate translation, or an inability to prove the abuse of which migrants were victims, and dangers they face in the event of being returned to their country.

Nevertheless, such a cost is minor in comparison with the probability of dying on the way, and to a lesser extent, the risk of being sent back home at arrival. The logic of migration is that of Pascal's wager. If a migrant loses a life of poverty and assured humiliation, he does not lose anything; if he arrives at the Northern shore, that of democracy and prosperity, he believes he has won the chance to obtain something better for himself, or at least for his progeny. In other words, he believes he has won fullness of being, which contrasts with the insufficiency of being he has decided to flee. He is certainly not given paradise in the North, but hell seems inevitable to him in the South. A rational calculation leads to a single decision: it is better to risk dying as a migrant, than to go on living without any future prospects or dignity, and to take the risk of dying at any time by staying or return to one's home country.

Even if a migrant's project turns out successfully, there is still a price to pay, namely their probable downgrading in the host country. A higher education graduate or political activist, who could have aspired to elective functions, will most often find himself in the host journey doing poorly qualified jobs in order to survive, while starting from scratch. For instance, they will do the cleaning, pick up garbage at restrictive hours, or work on construction sites with questionable safety conditions, and for non-declared income. At best, they will make a commercial or artisanal activity flourish.

3.2 An altruistic motivation for one's relatives and progeny

To conclude, we should also underline that the risks migrants take, or even the sacrifices they make, usually have altruistic motivations. If they leave because of the violence of which they are victims, their will to act is also often driven by the concern to provide opportunities for their children rather than for themselves, especially for access to health and education services, as much as to enjoy public liberties. It is all about giving their children more opportunities to live a decent life, kept away from the traumas of which they themselves were victims.

In fact, once the right of asylum is obtained, or the clandestine situation regularized, migrants' primary aim is family reunification, through the arrival of the partner and children arrival.

Undoubtedly, it will always be objected that profiteers sneak in among the mass of migrants – undeniably so. Moreover, some well-meaning migrants will not succeed in integrating into a culture they were not prepared for. But to what extent? Their actions cannot suffice to discredit the efforts made towards a decent life to which migrants aspire, in virtue of the equality between all humans proclaimed by the Universal Declaration, and of religious conceptions, at least since the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians (3:28).

Conclusion

Humans have been migrating since they were humans: *homo sapiens sapiens* moved one kilometer a year on average, as long as a *terra incognita* appeared in sight. As for *homo mimeticus*, he/she cannot refrain from glancing at his/her neighbors, and envying their place. Rightly or wrongly, he/she imagines he/she will enjoy their benefits by joining them. Nowadays, such neighborhood is worldwide. The enviable neighbor can be found thousands of kilometers away: his/her fate is known, sometimes with a certain idealization, and it is tempting to go and look for a solution to the ills which the candidate to migration suffers from, on the other's distant territory, and in his company. There is nothing scandalous to all that, rather it is only logical and rational!

Yet, in spite of some concern, the tendency to migrate to the West will probably still remain limited for a long time, including climatic migration⁷: if there is an acceptable solution within reach rather than at a distance, it will probably be favored. War zones, as well as the history of rising waters, glaciations or droughts, all demonstrate this.

Realizing such facts should provide an inspiration to our international politics: it should cohere with the legal standards we produce. Besides, and in a personal capacity, to imagine the other as a migrant is to finally become lucid

⁷ Cf. Hervé Le Bras, *L'âge des migrations* (Paris: Autrement, 2017).

about one's own desire. Not only does it focus on what we possess – the rule of law, liberties, opportunities, and recognition – the desire of the migrant, which we mediate, is quintessentially the desire of our contemporary: “to become like the others while being oneself”. In short, to imagine the other is to picture (or to finally become lucid about) one's own desire!

Translated from French by Shawn Witkowski.

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