

The Migrant Crisis Isn't a Crisis – It's a Trend

John Erik Meyer

Unlike the relatively small pulses of migrants from states experiencing rapid regime change, such as the communist takeovers of Vietnam and Hungary, today's flows of migrants from the Middle East and Africa are vastly larger and increasing.

In fact, the situation is much more similar to the European crisis of the 17th and 18th centuries. In that period, populations had once again exceeded agricultural capacity and the climate had become far less favourable, particularly in the 1600s. Geoffrey Parker's book, "Global Crisis" lays this out in great and disturbing detail. "The New World" offered a solution and, over the next two centuries, huge numbers of Europeans migrants made their way to the shores of the Americas, Australia and southern Africa.

Not only did this out-migration relieve the population pressure in Europe by about a third, but the colonies also shipped large quantities of food back to the motherlands. To further reduce agricultural shortfalls, New World crops were transplanted in Europe, dramatically increasing food yields. Corn and the potato offered more than double the caloric output per hectare of any crop previously grown in Europe.

Expansion into the still resource-rich colonies was a once-in-a-species God-send for

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Western nations but the indigenous populations paid a heavy price, their numbers falling by some 95% (50 to 90 million people) over the 1500 to 1700 time span.

In terms of today's declining global environment, moving more people from low-footprint societies

into high-footprint societies is exactly the wrong approach, particularly when those high-consumption societies are net resource importers of resources. And the source countries of the migrations are typically the ones who are having their resources, including the über-resource, oil, primarily exploited by the destination countries. This is a classic downward spiral.

Hans Rosling uses elegant data visualization techniques to illustrate straight line extrapolations and has made the case that the population of Africa will soar from the current 1 billion to 4 billion in this century. Few environmentalists, energy experts or agricultural scientists believe this to be possible, but Rosling's forecast reveals the pressure behind migration very well.

Nations that fail to feed, clothe and house their populations well are prone to social decline and various levels of chaos. People migrate away from regions so affected to regions



Migrants walk on the railway tracks between Bicske and Szar, some 40 km west of Budapest. [Photo: Flickr/SyriaFreedom]

with more secure and higher per capita resource availability.

The Guardian's Ellie Mae O'Hagan summarized the situation very clearly in her article "Mass migration is no 'crisis': it's the new normal as the climate changes."

She made the direct case for climate change driving migration. Crop failures, high food prices and the resultant social disruption in the Middle East and Africa (and greatly supplemented by numerous long-term wars) are direct drivers of social upheaval, political instability and out-migration. Of course, not everyone connects those dots of symptoms to fundamental causes. A typical response:

"Go to a refugee camp in Calais and ask why migration is so necessary for the people there and I highly doubt you'll get one answer of 'climate change.'"

The dynamics of decline and collapse are multi-faceted and interdependent, and therefore hard to resolve. Political intransigence, conflicting interests, financial entanglements and misleading metrics all combine to make cogent and timely reaction to declining circumstances quite rare in highly stratified human societies.

Given climate change, population increases, consumerism and a world of increasingly scarce

energy, some regions are being impacted more severely than others. Those regions will be the source of increasing and continuous migrant flows. Flows of this scale cannot even now be accommodated by more prosperous nations. And

the poor in those more advanced nations are unlikely to tolerate a further decline in their circumstances brought on by a wave of migrants for very long.

Instead of a combination of guilt and compassion driving a short-term, ineffective effort to accommodate migrants, developed nations need to

take a deep breath and expend the effort to reduce their own consumption and its impact on the planet and solve the pressures of migration in the nations in which they occur. These steps would make it a new world but if such a new world order is not implemented, an old world of disorder will once again play out. •

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