1

The Political Economy of Migration

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"Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives." This is how Jean-Paul Sartre started his "Preface" to the rightly acclaimed *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, first published in 1961 in French (Fanon 1963: 7). The times have changed. Decades have gone by, during which the international intellectual scene has been dominated by postmodernism, postcolonial theory, and identity politics. Politically correct language is the order of the day. No longer is any nation or ethnic group called "natives," unless even the word "native" is an improvement on the common appellation used for that group, as in the case of the "Redskins" or "Injuns" of America, who are now much more politely called "Native Americans." Whether they are treated much better, in objective and material terms, by the system that no longer disparages them subjectively and nominally is another question. All indicators suggest that not only native Americans but all the wretched of the world still carry on as miserable an existence as that described by Fanon, but the world now covers it up by niceties that are supposed to make their suffering tolerable or, perhaps more importantly, that work to soothe the conscience of those that are not and have never belonged to the wretched of the earth.

But, unfortunately for the intelligentsia, there remain spheres in which the dressing-up operation may not have been completed. The terms used are not as crassly discriminatory in a postcolonial environment as they were when colonialism raged with fury and violence, but nonetheless the nuances

and the fine distinctions live on without being noticed by the partisans of politically correct language. When young Africans and Middle Easterners desperate for a decent life make it to Europe to find a job, or when unskilled Mexicans or Hondurans somehow cross the US-Mexican border and establish a new life in *el Norte*, they become "immigrant workers." But when a Canadian or an Australian moves to a less developed country to make a living, they are never called that: they are proud "expats," even when the person in question is not a company manager or computer expert but simply a young and adventurous unskilled worker who gets paid almost subsistence wages in return for the teaching of that lingua franca of our age, the English language, which happens to be their mother tongue. So the distinction between the citizens of the former colonialist countries and those of the formerly colonized countries lives on in this sphere, in a hardly noticeable guise and goes unchallenged. *Formal*–i.e., legal–colonialism survives in marginal form, but that is not decisive. What is decisive is that the *real* relationship between the imperialist countries and those that lead an existence in subordination to imperialism has not evaporated together with the more cumbersome and distasteful forms and practices of colonialism.

What is true of the purely economic category of immigration also applies to the more complex and confusing category of the refugee. The life of the ordinary refugee is fraught with such dire economic difficulties, and their fragile right to asylum is subject to such delicate conditions that nostalgia for one's own country probably takes last place among their worries. But not everyone is so desolate in a foreign country even if they have been banished from their own: not so the "émigré," not so the "exile," whether willingly or forcefully removed from their surroundings. These usually come from the privileged nations and are not even required to apply for any status–they are simply granted asylum almost automatically. A German intellectual such as Erich Auerbach who escaped the hazards of Nazi Germany and settled in Istanbul, Turkey, in the 1930s was honored and embraced and comforted in his new surroundings. Not so the intellectuals of the Turkish or Kurdish left who escaped to Western Europe under threat of torture and extinction at the hands of the officials of the military coup d'état in Turkey of 12 September 1980: they had to go through all the tortuous formalities of "seeking asylum" before being accorded or refused refugee status.

And the distinctions do not only apply to the dominant nations, the imperialist ones, as opposed to oppressed ones. They go even deeper and reproduce social distinction between people from different classes and strata originally from the same country. Most advanced countries have an entirely different disposition toward the skilled and the professional in terms of migration compared to their attitude to the unskilled, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. But, worse, refugees are also subjected to a sorting process that surreptitiously favors the educated and skilled. It should also be pointed

out that many of the refugees that wish to cross over into their El Dorado, whether this is an EU country or the United States, are at least somewhat more well-to-do than the ordinary unskilled worker. Having amassed some money to pay off the human traffickers, the fees being counted in the thousands of euros or US dollars, they can at least hope to be transported, by some miracle, to the other side of the border. The unskilled and the uneducated simply cannot afford that much.

Going one rung up, all kinds of wealthy people are granted residence permits or even citizenship on the basis of the money they bring in to the country in question, buying real estate or investing in certain other assets, or starting up a business. In countries bordering Europe to the east and south–i.e., the Middle East and its eastern neighbors such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as North Africa and those countries of sub-Saharan Africa close enough to the Mediterranean Sea to reach via land–where millions or even tens of millions of poor and destitute people, especially the youth, are dying to migrate to one of the EU countries, the wealthy and the select make their calculations of what country is most profitable to make one's investment in for a residence permit or citizenship. Some members of the European Union have made it their sphere of specialization to trade EU passports for investment in their country in return. Portugal and Malta offer the most inexpensive deals, and so many Turks, starting from the second richest family of the country (who own an industrial empire in Turkey) have bought their future security in such places, or so they think, in the eventuality of a thorough Islamization of their country or, God forbid, a proletarian revolution.

There is one country, though, that specializes in the upper end of the "market" for citizenship and residence permits. The superrich have been feverishly buying property in New Zealand for the last decade or even longer, as the country appears to be the uppermost candidate as a sanctuary in case World War III breaks out, which would, in all likelihood, involve the use of weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear arms. There is probably an implicit "gentlemen's agreement" between the great powers on turning New Zealand into a global version of what Switzerland stood for in Europe during the two world wars of the twentieth century. Modern science being the handmaid of wealth and capital, it has now been discovered that New Zealand's geological formation proves that it is a distinct continent from the rest of Australasia, which presumably will grant some special privileges to the geography that is called New Zealand.

Is it not clear that the dark reality of immigration and of asylum (and refugee status) does not apply to the citizens of New Zealand, or even to those of Portugal or Malta for that matter? Is it not clear that the social, political, and legal restrictions that apply to real, flesh-and-blood, dispossessed millions have no relevance when it is a question of the wealthy and the well-to-do? One can and should add to this the trials and tribulations of women

who face the possibility of all kinds of sexual assault on their journey to the promised land and who, not infrequently, fall prey to the machinations of human traffickers, ending up as sex workers, living in a state of semi-servitude. The concept of servitude may perhaps sound exaggerated to those uninitiated in the area of migratory movements, but a quick check of the facts shows that at least in Libya, and at least during a certain period, slave camps were a reality to be reckoned with.

Overall then, migration, whether under its pure economic form or the more complex one of seeking asylum in other countries, is, as in all spheres of life, a class issue, an issue of inequality between different nationalities, and a gender issue. To approach the question as one alien to social differences, as if all nationalities and classes suffer in the same manner and to the same extent, is deception. Unfortunately, this is all too common among even those who, with the best intentions in the world and with the noblest of sentiments, engage in defending refugees and migrants in the face of the cruel treatment they are subjected to and more so among those who study the question and try to offer solutions. As we shall shortly see, the question of migration and of refugees is an economic and a political question through and through, and if one intends to help the millions of migrants and refugees who are in search of security and survival all around the world, one has to take a political stand that extends beyond the narrow confines of the question itself.

Migration as a Phenomenon of the World Capitalist System

To be able to come to terms with the very difficult questions posed by international migratory flows, one first needs to understand the structural mechanisms that lie behind these flows. Unless the driving forces behind a phenomenon are comprehended in their overall logic, one can only see the tip of the iceberg and fail to respond adequately to all problems relevant to the question at hand.

Most writing on the subject of international migration dwells on the immediate causes that set in motion the specific flow that is under scrutiny: a war between two nations, a civil war, ethnic cleansing of an "undesirable" minority, a natural disaster, abrupt changes in the political setup of a country that overnight criminalizes an entire portion of the population—on and on goes the list of diverse situations that are considered to be the root causes of different migratory waves. And there is no doubt that the events that are considered to be the root causes are all operational in bringing about the mass migration under scrutiny. Only they are not root causes but merely proximate ones. There is a fundamental structural mechanism in the mod-

ern world that is at the root of all the significant migratory flows for at least the period that extends from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. It is that structural element that sheds light on the migratory movements of the modern age and makes it possible to understand the unity of these movements. This is the logic of the accumulation of capital on the world scale.

In order to understand the relationship between the accumulation of capital on the world scale and international migratory movements, one needs to turn to the concept of industrial reserve army or relative surplus population that Marx examines toward the end of volume 1 of his major opus, *Capital*, and integrate the analysis he lays out there with his study of what is commonly called "primitive accumulation." (The term is somewhat misleading since the original German term used by Marx implies the connection of this special type of "accumulation" to the origins of capital, to its genesis, and has nothing to do with being "primitive." This is why I will use the term "original accumulation" in the rest of this chapter.)

Marx's discussion of the industrial reserve army is one of the areas that have proven to be most difficult for a full comprehension of the author's intentions, for a reason that I will explain shortly. What is not understood is not the concept of the industrial reserve army. That is one of the concepts peculiar to Marx that is most readily understood and even accepted without hesitation, since the term refers to unemployment, which is such a commonplace scourge under capitalism. However, there are several propositions in Marx's treatment of the industrial reserve army that provide an entirely different picture of how capitalism functions. One of these is the idea that unemployment is not a problem that capitalism, through certain unfortunate circumstances, has very frequently failed to resolve but a mechanism that is *necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist economy*. According to Marx, because capitalists have the possibility of choosing a more machinery-intensive set of technologies when wages rise, they can always resort to those techniques and bring down the demand for labor, leading to rising unemployment, a more intense competition among the workers, and, hence, lower wages. Moreover, in addition to this deliberate action on the part of single capitalists, the cyclical movement of capital accumulation characteristic of capitalism, with periods of rapid growth being followed each time by slumps, causes the demand for labor to fall periodically, hence creating an industrial reserve army that will act to check any rise in wages that will prove cumbersome for capitalists. Thus, the labor market is not like any others. In any other market, supply and demand are shaped as the result of forces independent of each other. Not so in the labor market:

> It is not a case of two independent forces working on one another. Les dés sont pipés. Capital works on both sides at the same time. If the accumulation, on the one hand, increases the demand for labor, it increases on the other the

> supply of laborers by the "setting free" of them, whilst at the same time the pressure of the unemployed compels those that are employed to furnish more labor, and makes the supply of labor, to a certain extent, independent of the supply of laborers. The action of the law of supply and demand of labor on this basis completes the despotism of capital. (Marx 1968: 640)

The existence of a reserve army of labor becomes, thus, perhaps the major economic mechanism for keeping the results to be obtained through workers' collective struggles (unionization, strikes, occupations, etc.) at a level acceptable to capitalists, i.e., at a level that will not hamper capital accumulation.

However, there is a second function of the reserve army of labor. As capitalism is, by its very nature, an extremely complex but unplanned system of production, there is no reckoning before the fact how rapidly capital accumulation will proceed at any given moment in time. There are of course attempts at forecasting the rate of growth, and many institutions have developed subtle techniques in predicting the performance of capitalist economies for the short term, both internationally and at the level of individual countries, but anyone who has remotely followed the relationship between forecasts and the realized results will know that there are times when the forecasts are wide off the mark in both directions. Thus, capital always needs a reserve army of labor for an eventual rapid acceleration of accumulation and growth. Here we come to the crux of the matter regarding the relevance of the concept of the industrial reserve army for international migration:

> Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labor-power which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its free play an industrial reserve army independent of these natural limits. (Marx 1968: 635)

And where is this industrial reserve army to be found? Even the structure of the sentence above immediately points beyond a "national economy" toward the world economy. Those economists who are accustomed to thinking of the functioning of the capitalist economy as within a nationally bounded entity, with international trade, investment, and finance being brought in only later as additional factors, have a difficulty understanding, even under the conditions of the eulogistic celebration of the so-called phenomenon of "globalization," that the conceptual structure of Marx's work is different. Marx's *Capital* was planned as a series of volumes rising from the abstract to the concrete, and the last volume was to take up the world market as a synthetic expression of all the laws developed in the previous volumes. The world market is, in Marx's view, the only arena in which the fundamental laws of the functioning of the capitalist economy can be understood. Be-

cause economists, including latter-day Marxist economists, regarded Marx's analysis on the reserve army of labor as the depiction of the functioning of a nationally defined economy, those who were by disposition inclined to dismiss Marx's contribution simply chafed at his further propositions, and even those who took him seriously found themselves scratching their heads in bewilderment.

What are these "further propositions" developed on the basis of the centrality of the industrial reserve army for the functioning of the capitalist economy? There are two such propositions that seemed to fly in the face of the realities of the modern capitalist economies, such as those of the United States, the European Union, Japan, and similar ones elsewhere. The first is that the reserve army of labor is made up of several components. Of these, the one Marx calls "floating" is perfectly acceptable to economists of all stripes, since it is but the expression of the rise and fall in the level of unemployment depending on, respectively, the onset of recessions and slumps and the recovery of growth. The second component is the rise in surplus agricultural population as capitalism takes hold of the rural economy, which Marx calls "latent." This part of the reserve army is "constantly on the point of passing over into an urban or manufacturing proletariat, and on the lookout for circumstances favorable to this transformation" (Marx 1968: 642). So far this is not an outrageous statement for orthodox economists, since the long-term diminution of the rural population and the swelling of the ranks of the urban proletariat as a result of urban-rural (domestic) migration is a commonplace phenomenon in all countries. But already there is a first corollary that may disturb the observer of the modern-day advanced capitalist economy: in Marx's rendering, because the transition from the rural labor force to the urban one is not a smooth one, there is a permanent element of unemployment here, and "the agricultural laborer is therefore reduced to the minimum of wages, and always stands with one foot already in the swamp of pauperism" (Marx 1968: 642).

The third component lends itself immediately to criticism: this is the so-called "stagnant" component of the reserve army that suffers from "extremely irregular employment," with conditions of life that "sink below the average normal level of the working class." Its lowest strata are placed squarely within what Marx calls pauperism, including "the demoralized and ragged, and those unable to work, … the mutilated, the sickly, the widows etc." (Marx 1968: 644). This is the first proposition that rings alien to the ears of the economists given the state of advanced capitalist societies of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. Some others may rightly retort that the last few decades are testimony to the fact that Marx was right, as unemployment became an almost permanent condition in the advanced capitalist countries and soup kitchens and food coupons became more and

more popular. But Marx is not talking only about situations of deep economic crisis, as is the case in particular with the period since 2008, when all economists started to compare the situation to the 1930s. For Marx, the stagnant component and its strata that have sunk into pauperism are *permanent* features of the reserve army of labor.

The second proposition follows from here. We need to quote Marx at length once again in order to understand the real import of the proposition in question:

> The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, develop also the labor-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army increases therefore with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labor army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus-population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labor. The more extensive, finally, the lazarus-layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* (Marx 1968: 644, emphasis in the original)

This bold overarching statement has baffled many a Marxist economist, let alone orthodox economists. The latter only rejoiced to see Marx's prediction brought to its knees by the historical levels of prosperity that were allegedly attained by the advanced capitalist economies. Whatever our reservations with respect to the celebration of the level of welfare attained in the advanced economies, the picture of the "lazarus-layers of the working class" depicted by Marx cannot be sustained for these societies, not even for times of crisis, let alone for times of a booming economy. The "misery" of the kind that Marx is talking about seems to be alien to these societies. So much for Marxist economics then. If this is the "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation" that derives from the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, one is then permitted, so the reasoning goes, to discard the whole Marxist economic framework as pointless.

But as soon as one broadens the perspective and looks at the entire capitalist system as it has developed over the twentieth century, uniting the already existing world market into a single world economy under the laws of the imperialist system, the objections become so many pieces of shattered glass, and the criticism directed at Marx is transformed into a parochial protestation in denial of a capitalist juggernaut that unites the world in combined but uneven fashion. Then the rural laboring population of the entire "Third World" of yesterday and the "Global South" of today becomes the "latent" component of the reserve army of labor on the world scale, and the urban poor of Africa, of the Indian subcontinent, of Haiti and Bolivia and similar countries in Latin America, etc., become the "stagnant" component,

and the lower strata of these two components are the layers that have sunk into pauperism. These are the people who are said, by all commentators as a matter of fact, to have to work every day to eke out a living for themselves and their families. These are the people whom international statistics register as living on less than two dollars a day. What other "lazarus-layers" does one need to seek when these masses of millions, nay hundreds of millions or even billions, suffer from malnutrition, from uninhabitable dwellings, from lack of the basic elements of sanitation, even from outright starvation? Not only has capitalism not brought prosperity to these regions of the world except for the few, but it also reproduces this miserable existence day in and day out. So, it turns out that the "general law of capitalist accumulation," so outlandish in the eyes of many economists, proves to have been confirmed by historical development.

And why is this the case? One need not go any further than Marx's analysis of original accumulation ("primitive accumulation") in the last part of *Capital*, volume 1, immediately after the part (part VII) that takes up the accumulation of capital and the concluding chapters of this part on the "general law of capitalist accumulation." Original accumulation is simply the process through which the direct producers are separated from the means of production that they had access to under different forms in precapitalist societies (I use "form" in the plural to make clear that before capitalism took over, there was a variety of social relations that were dominant in different parts of the world). This process was completed in England and Scotland very early on. It was later accomplished in the countries of continental Europe. It was brought to many parts of the rest of the world through white settler colonialism and colonialism tout court. Remember that Marx, in discussing the impact of the introduction of capitalism in agriculture, stressed that this process led to a significant loss of economic activity for the laborers. This is precisely what happened to the petty producers, tribal networks, etc., in those countries that were economically conquered by capitalism and, later on, capitalist imperialism. Subsequently, this led to the swelling of the urban poor as the rural labor that was set free through dispossession moved into towns and cities. So, although the historical process differed, the outcome paralleled the formation of the latent and the stagnant components of the industrial reserve army in the original capitalist countries. Original accumulation played the role of midwife in the birth of a worldwide industrial reserve army. Now they had an additional problem to overcome in their quest for survival, beyond the original "lazarus-layers" in the original capitalist countries. The world had become a patchwork of nation-states, and hence they had to cross national borders in order to survive.

These are the people who are the big armies of potential immigrants and refugees.

Contradictory Manifestations of the Law

The most obvious objection that could be made to the proposition that international migration is subject to the working of the general law of capital accumulation is that although this law implies that the capitalist class of the imperialist core of the world capitalist economy is in constant need of the supply of labor power from the less-developed and poorer countries, albeit to a varying degree over time, the cross-border movement of labor is, as a rule, rendered almost impossible by the very same states that serve the interests of those capitalist economies. There is nothing in this seemingly contradictory situation that would pose a problem for the analysis laid out in the previous section.

The need capital feels for a reserve army of labor does not automatically imply that all national restrictions will be lifted on migratory flows and that the circulation of labor will be made free across nations. There are, as in the working of each socioeconomic law, mediations of a social and political character that act to translate the law into more concrete corollaries and, furthermore, concrete factors that are at play in determining the course of things at each concrete moment and for each specific country or region.

There *are* moments in the course of the accumulation of capital when all advanced economies opened up deliberately to an inflow of immigrant labor. The most striking such moment is the period that followed World War II, when the so-called postwar boom that accompanied the reconstruction of the war-ravaged advanced countries, and in particular the European countries, required an immense extra labor force lest a bottleneck should arise from a lack of labor supply. The United Kingdom granted the citizens of the British Commonwealth special rights for settlement and work, leading to a significant flow of population from its former colonies, which lies at the root of the presence of sizeable populations of Pakistani, Indian, and Caribbean, even Greek and Turkish Cypriot, origin to this day. The continental powers followed suit, with North African Arabs from the Maghreb and Black Africans from the sub-Saharan former colonies taking the pride of place in France, Indonesians in the Netherlands, and even Mozambicans, Angolans, and others in Portugal, a minor and rather poor economy within the overall European context. And what did Germany do, that latecomer on the imperialist scene without a substantial colonial empire? It first depended upon a tolerant policy regarding the latent reserve army from the Mezzogiorno, that peculiar region of Italy that was like an internal colony of the rich industrial north. Once that flow started to slow down, Germany turned to other predominantly Christian European countries such as Yugoslavia. It finally struck up a special agreement with Muslim-majority Turkey in the mid-1950s, which was to give it the largest minority population in the country and a never-ending clash of cultures that has lasted to this day.

The postwar boom was thus a classic case of the general law of capitalist accumulation manifesting itself in the replenishment of the ranks of labor in the advanced centers of capitalism through migratory flows of labor from the underdeveloped regions of the world. It was almost a laboratory experiment that showed the connection between the need for surplus labor created by rapid accumulation and the reserve army of labor ever present in the poorer regions and countries of the world.

There are also certain countries that historically have made immigration relatively easy, almost, but not entirely, independent of the cyclical movement of capital accumulation at a given moment. Such are some of the countries formed on the basis of white settler colonialism, the United States first and foremost, but Canada, Australia, and others as well. The reason is clear: as Marx quite early on made clear in the very last chapter, titled "The Modern Theory of Colonization," of volume 1 of *Capital*, once white settlers reached these sparsely populated lands, and even the sparse population that existed was later decimated by the newcomers, they easily got possession of small plots of land and became independent farmers. Thus, in the course of its historical development, the capitalist class of these countries was in constant starvation of a sufficiently large reserve army of labor and had to look abroad to migration from other continents and, later, in the case of the United States, the countries of Latin South America and the Caribbean. Tens of millions of emigrants are estimated to have moved from Europe, including czarist Russia, and from China to the Americas, North and South, throughout the nineteenth century. Naturally, smallholding ownership has weakened over the centuries. Yet throughout the twentieth century as well, America has been much more open to foreign migration than Europe.

These two prominent examples show clearly, one in time and the other in space, that there is a *definite* relationship between the needs of the capitalist class for additional labor and the influx of a laboring population from other, poorer regions, countries, and even continents. It would then be easy to say that national restrictions on the inflow of labor are the result of a lack of need for additional labor in times when the pace of accumulation of capital slows down. The capitalist class does not feel the necessity for the reserve army of labor to be replenished from other countries, since a sizeable part of the working class of the country in question has been laid off and is therefore acting as the reserve army of labor. In other words, the expansion in times of crisis of the domestic reserve army of labor, of what Marx calls the "floating" component, makes it unnecessary for the capitalist class to dip into the "latent" and "stagnant" components that are to be found in poorer countries.

That would be a rash judgment. For the two examples that we looked at—one temporal and one spatial—are based *exclusively* on the need for an absolute expansion of the labor force of the country in question. In those two

cases, capital accumulation is in dire need of expanding the pool of labor; otherwise, the lack of a sufficient labor force will act as an absolute barrier to the further expansion of capital accumulation. It is for this reason that the capitalist states in question relax restrictions on the inflow of foreign labor to such an extent.

However, the need for additional labor so as to expand the scale of capital accumulation is, as we have already seen, only one aspect of the reliance of the capitalist class on a reserve army of labor. There is a second aspect, it will be remembered, that relates to the reserve army of labor acting as a lever in the hands of the capitalist class to hold back an upward push of the wage rate in times of rapid growth and to bring wages down perceptibly in times of crisis. The reserve army of labor does this by pitting the unemployed part of the working class against the employed sections, putting all workers under fiercer competition and creating a downward spiral in wages. (Let me add here, once and for all, that the wage rate in reality stands as the most significant aspect among a series of other matters that lend themselves to class struggle between the capitalist class and the working class, such as working hours, conditions of work, intensity of labor, aspects of unionization [the closed shop or otherwise, for instance], and sick leave. I will use the wage rate as an indicator that stands for all these different variables.)

It may be concluded that a reserve army of labor is necessary even when there is already an expansion of the "floating" domestic component of the reserve army of labor. However, it is most direly needed for the interests of the capitalist class when rapid capital accumulation tends to decrease the ranks of the reserve army and thus, by reducing competition among the workers, makes possible a significant upward drift of the wage rate. Hence almost under all circumstances, the expansion of the reserve army, in addition to the already existing domestic "floating" component, is good for the capitalists. So, we cannot explain the national restrictions imposed on the inflow of immigrant workers simply by referring to the size of the domestic reserve army of labor. There is an additional factor here that is very important to understand.

Or, rather, there are several other factors one needs to understand. The one that comes immediately to mind is the resistance put up by the domestic working class to a lax immigration policy. It is almost common sense for the domestic worker to resist the expansion of the reserve army of labor through immigration, whether of the purely economic kind or under refugee status. For if it is true that capital enjoys benefits from the competition of workers through an expansion of the reserve army, first and foremost manifested in the pressure on the wage rate, then ipso facto the worker stands to lose in the face of additional competition from the immigrant laborer. And even though the state is a class state controlled by the capitalist class, it does not act in a vacuum but in constant attention to the response

and reaction of other class forces, and it has to make certain concessions to the widespread sentiments in the ranks of the working class under most circumstances. Thus, working-class hostility to foreign workers is one factor that tends to create barriers in the way of a loose regime of immigration.

There is another, much more purely political factor that tends to bring additional restrictions to immigration. This partially preys on the aversion within the ranks of the working class to immigration. Certain political movements harp on the fears and insecurity of not only the workers but other plebeian elements of the population, and they attack immigration as the fundamental root cause of all the ills that the country in question faces. Movements of this kind grow rapidly in times of deep economic crisis in the advanced and semiadvanced countries, since such times create conditions in which all resources tend to dry up, lots of cuts in social services occur, and society experiences a generalized scarcity in all areas, such as housing, education, healthcare, etc. In such times, a rabidly nationalistic discourse that blames immigration for all of the scourges that the country faces gains support from the masses. Fascism grew rapidly in the 1930s, which was precisely the decade of the Great Depression. The period since 2008, in our opinion, deserves the same characterization of "great depression," which once again has given rise to ultranationalist movements that are completely hostile to immigration: Le Pen's movement in France, Salvini's Lega in Italy, or Nigel Farage, the champion of Brexit, and his followers in Britain are only the most prominent ones. Donald Trump is, of course, the paradigmatic instance of this political orientation. The appellation widely used for these movements is "populism." I choose to point to their roots in the fascist movements of their respective countries (with some exceptions, such as Trump and Farage), regard them as incomplete fascist movements or lone fascist figures, and propose to call them "proto-fascist" for reasons that would take me too far afield to explain.

There are also more particularistic factors at play in this or that country, into which we need not go. However, we have not yet touched upon the decisive factor. To understand that decisive factor is of capital importance, for it is this that gives us the basis for a class-based progressive political attitude to be adopted toward international migration.

The restrictions that hit immigration are, first and foremost in our opinion, the result of efforts that aim to create a situation that works toward the highest impact of the competition within the working class in favor of capital. The reasoning here is quite simple: if you allow for a rather lax regime of migratory inflows or even encourage them, this implies, by the very nature of things, that the foreign newcomers will enjoy the same kind of rights as workers as the domestic workforce (although not perhaps as citizens for a very long time). Turkish workers in Germany had, from the beginning, the same rights, with respect to unionization or social services, as their fellow

German workers. So, after a period of adaptation, these workers, German and Turkish, were able to protect their interests in their relation to the capitalist as unionized workers. The paradigmatic example for this situation is the case of the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. Filled with workers from a variety of countries thanks to the liberal regime of immigration that was in place, the US working class created one of the strongest and most radical unions in its own and in world history: International Workers of the World, better known by its initials, IWW. Hence competition within the working class during an expansion of the reserve army of labor does not necessarily lead to defeat; there is a countertendency in the organizing drive of the working class that can, at least partially, neutralize the impact of the high level of joblessness by canceling competition.

The way capitalists can overcome this prospect of unity among the workers—among, that is, the domestic and foreign elements—suggests itself immediately: let the foreign workers come into the country as illegal immigrants, thus leading to a status that curtails their rights, puts them in a precarious situation where they are beholden to the constant pressure of being apprehended, and thus makes them thankful for getting even the lowest-paying job. This is the best formula for the interests of the capitalist class one can imagine. These are the situations when the workers, facing the alternative of poverty and destitution back home, will bow to any conditions as long as they get a job in a sweatshop or a farm or as home help under any conditions, including giving up a part of their freedom of movement and turning their passport over to the middlemen, who constitute another category of beneficiaries, along with the capitalist class, of the irregular and shady deals of employment created under such murky regimes of immigration.

If this argument is correct, then it leads to the necessity of a total inversion of the commonsense response of the domestic working class. Common sense is usually not a good guide for action since things are hardly ever the same as they seem to be when viewed superficially. The "latent" and the "stagnant" components of the industrial reserve army on the world scale—i.e., the billions who live from hand to mouth in the underdeveloped and poor countries of the world—form an almost inexhaustible source for the needs of the world capitalist class. They are good for simply replenishing the ranks of the working class in advanced and semiadvanced capitalist countries quantitatively when the natural increase in population cannot meet the domestic pace of capital accumulation. They are also good for increasing the number of "hands" in times of prosperity as a check against the push for higher wages as unemployment shrinks. They are even good for creating additional competition in times of crisis, times when capital is going through hardships and needs to push down wages drastically. But the best fix is to keep them in a miserable state even as they have moved geo-

graphically in space and are now living in an otherwise affluent society. Illegal immigration does the job. If illegal immigration is the best scenario for the capitalists, then it is obviously the worst for the workers. Hence making immigration legal is to the best interests of the working class of the advanced country. This is what unions, along with the political parties that claim to side with or organize the working class, should fight for.

If such is the case, there is another implication. Humanistic and altruistic language of the type adopted by NGOs and charities might seem to help in an immediate sense. This approach is obviously incomparably superior to any degree of chauvinistic or hateful attitude toward immigrants. However, it is, as are many other such abstract discourses, self-defeating. For the humanistic discourse is one that implies that the citizens of the advanced country must treat immigrants well out of kindness, out of a consideration for their plight, out of a humane attitude that preaches that "we, citizens of a rich country" all give, privileged as we are, a small part of what we have to "these poor fellow human beings." We are not saying that the discourse in question is couched in these terms. What we are saying is that the underlying argument has this kind of structure.

This is doubly wrong. To the immigrant it insinuates a relationship of superiority on the part of the speaker, a benign attitude that is mixed with pity and compassion. Worse still in terms of its consequences, to the underdog of the advanced society–already living in fear for their job, for their child's education, dreading possible eviction from their housing, sharing with immigrant populations, legal and illegal, the insecurity and the dilapidation of their urban surroundings–what is being said is, "Share some of what you have with these poor souls." That may sound nice to the ears of people with a secure job and a safe home who do not fear for their future, who may even soothe their conscience for any qualms about the global inequity they enjoy the fruits of, but for the working class that has been suffering the consequences of neoliberal globalism for the last four decades and those, even more devastating, of the great depression that set in in 2008, they sound like just another attack on their interests. The idea that "we should sacrifice to a certain degree from our standards for the benefit of these poor souls" plays directly into the hands of the proto-fascist chauvinists. It is the obverse of their discourse, i.e., the proposition that these people take away what "we" deserve.

The only correct solution to the quandary born of the existence of a worldwide reserve army of labor is to fight together, citizen and foreigner, as fellow workers against the real culprits who play the unemployed sections of the international working class, those who live in misery, against the sections that have acquired certain rights and gains and positions in the past so as to take away from both.

The Migrant and the Refugee

It is now time to assess the extent to which this general analysis regarding the forces that govern international migration is relevant for the category "refugee." It is certainly true that the category "refugee" and the predicament of seeking asylum in a foreign country has certain specific characteristics that set it apart from the general concept of international migration. For one thing, it has its special place in international law through conventions that accord special rights to refugees not enjoyed by the migrant who crosses borders for mostly economic reasons. Also, migration is in general independent of a special traumatic experience such as war or civil war, religious or racial discrimination, or political persecution, while asylum is in principle predicated on that kind of event that abruptly and brutally changes the situation in the lives of individuals and families. Finally, this difference is the source of another: asylum and refugee status are usually not considered as economic in their nature but mostly political, while migration per se without any qualifying terms is strictly of an economic nature. So how is what I have said thus far of international migration relevant for refugees?

The author of these lines is of the opinion that, despite the clear differences that originally existed between the categories of migrant and refugee, over the decades and centuries these positions have converged so closely in the real world that it is no longer useful or even possible to distinguish between the two.

Before going on to explicate this process of convergence, I would like to point out one fact: in the two most important migratory events of the last decade, the entire world media constantly used the two categories of refugee and migrant interchangeably. The events I am referring to are, respectively, the 2015 mass exodus of Syrians and other Middle Eastern peoples toward Europe, via the sea route of the Mediterranean and later the land journey into the heart of Europe and the so-called "migrant caravans" of Central American origin, mostly Honduran but also Salvadoran and Guatemalan, that marched from the Guatemala-Mexico border in the south to the Mexico-US border in the north. In the first case the overwhelming majority were Syrians, who are considered to be refugees by everyone, although the media constantly referred to "migration" and "migrants" when discussing them. In the second case, a serious debate took place as to whether these were "migrant caravans," as they came to be commonly called, or in truth "refugee caravans." This debate was important because, within the last two decades, Central American countries (and Honduras most acutely) have become hotbeds for gang criminality, reporting some of the highest homicide rates per capita internationally, and many of those joining the caravans based their claim of a right to entry into the United States on incidents of persecution.

What both cases show is that in actual fact the two categories have become inseparable.

Let us now dwell on the reasons why it is no longer useful or even possible to distinguish between the two. Let me immediately make clear that I am not, or at least not yet, debating the utility and possibility of a legal distinction. That may appear on the agenda once the collective debate clarifies the issues involved in objective terms.

The first point to establish is that the meaning of asylum and refugee status has changed over time. Granting asylum to democrats fighting against tyranny was considered to be a paramount duty for democratic governments in the age of the democratic revolution in the Western Hemisphere, roughly the period extending from the American Revolution of 1776 through the Great French Revolution all the way to the so-called "spring of nations" in 1848, when there was a concatenation of revolutions all over Europe. This tradition has survived to this day. The figure of Karl Marx finding asylum as a German revolutionary successively in Paris, Brussels, and London (his lifelong co-thinker and friend Friedrich Engels had the advantage of being employed at a family concern in Manchester and did not need asylum) is all too well recognized. The same is true of Bakunin, Marx's nemesis in the First International, who was granted asylum in Switzerland as a political opponent of the czar. There are many other illustrious cases of such political opponents of repressive regimes seeking asylum in the more democratic countries of the continent. Refugees of yesteryear were single individuals or at most groups of people, even sometimes very large groups such as the Armenians in World War I and the Jews in the 1930s, who were, by the very nature of their activities or their position in society, direct targets of the repressive regimes they were escaping.

Not so today. The refugees of our day, most typically represented by the millions of Syrians that have fled the country in the course of the civil war that has gone on for close to a decade, are simply "the Syrians" or "the Palestinians" or "the Sudanese," etc. They are not tested to see whether they have indeed been or are likely to be persecuted or discriminated against. Being a Syrian caught in the midst of a cruel war that has gone on and on is deemed sufficient for the person to be considered a candidate for asylum. This conversion of the figure of the refugee or the exile from a single individual or a group that is known to have been specifically targeted by repression to immense crowds of people has totally changed the position of refugees. Because they are an enormous mass of people from a certain country, they are, as a general rule, the same group of people that belong to the economic position of the "latent" or the "stagnant" components of the industrial reserve army in their country, or even the "lazarus-layers" of that section of the population. They become lazarus-like even if they were not before.

It is not that mass-scale asylum is alien to history—persecuted populations have long sought safety in foreign lands. Examples include the temporary Hegira of the prophet of Islam, together with his followers, from Mecca to what was later to be called Medina in the seventh century; the migration of the Jews of Spain persecuted by the Inquisition to Istanbul at the end of the fifteenth century; the flight of the Huguenots, the Protestants of France, to Britain in the late seventeenth century; the flight of the Armenians from what had been their homeland in Anatolia since time immemorial to escape the genocide; and the hounding of the Jew under the Nazi boot in Europe, the last two both in the twentieth. What is relevant here is again the fact that these were all religious groups that were persecuted simply because they belonged to that religious group. Not so with the Syrians today, who are a mixture of ethnic (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen), religious (Muslim, Christian, Druze), and denominational (Sunni and Alevi) groups, who, regardless of whether they or their family were under threat of persecution or oppression, have fled the country. Other cases of mass exodus can be found in the twentieth century. In the first of two examples, the Greco-Turkish exchange of populations totaled close to two million souls leaving their ancestral homes after the war between the two countries between 1919 and1922; in the second, an immense population movement occurred after the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. But these were national (or binational, if one wishes to call them that) affairs that did not lend them to a more general internationalized solution.

The second point follows on directly from the first: because the masses in question are candidates for asylum and the status of refugee not by virtue of the fact that they have suffered any particular practice of persecution but simply because they have found themselves in the midst of a vortex that would cause an upheaval in almost anyone's life, their plight does not differ qualitatively from many migrants who set out on the road because of extreme adverse economic conditions. What is the difference between Congolese or Sudanese escapees of civil war and Indian peasants fleeing their homestead because of an invasion of locusts, or Mozambicans who can no longer survive as a result of unprecedented hurricanes destroying their sources of livelihood? (By the way, the two latter examples are likely results of the fast-approaching climate catastrophe and can be considered part of the "great climate migration," a new category that will make the status of refugee even more difficult to situate.) Although there is a difference in the proximate cause of the problems, the final consequence from the point of view of the masses that are sent fleeing their ancestral habitats are the same—i.e., the impossibility of self-reproduction and of sustaining their families.

Whether masses on such a large scale migrate for political or economic reasons, the end result turns out to be exactly the same: miserable wages and work conditions for the refugees or migrants as the case may be, with

additional hazards for women, in particular the younger ones, that include regular prostitution or being married to older men already in wedlock (in most cases a disguised form of partial servitude). The bosses who buy their labor power are purchasing extremely cheap labor, and the intense possibility of exploitation manifests itself in work days extending beyond classical nineteenth-century standards and work conditions that would break the back of even the sturdiest laborer. So, whether these masses are considered as refugees or migrants, the economic consequences are the same. Hence all that has been said from the beginning to the end of this chapter is equally valid for both categories.

So, there is a very perceptible process of convergence between the categories of migrant and refugee, and the general law of the accumulation of capital applies to the mass of refugees as well as to migrants.

To make this observation is different from determining whether identifying the two categories is to the benefit of the groups in question. Here, in our opinion, the choice is very clear: of course, identifying refugees with migrants may play into the hands of the enemies of international migration by allowing them to reduce refugees to ordinary (economic) migrants and thereby assail the well-established legal rights of refugees enshrined in international law. However, even leaving aside the fact that when it is a question of such large masses the legal rights in question immediately become theoretical, as demonstrated by the experience of the 2015 exodus of Syrian refugees into Europe, there is an obverse side to the reasoning that says, "Let us not give up the hard-won legal rights of refugees by equating them with migrants." The question can easily be turned around: should we defend the acquired rights of refugees and thereby turn them into a (theoretically) privileged mass as opposed to the migrants, or should we perhaps defend, on a broader platform, the right of every economic migrant and, *a fortiori*, of every refugee to a decent life in the country of their choice? The question is up for debate, and I will leave it there.

Wars and Civil Wars as Triggering Factors

As I have already said, there is a widespread tendency to see wars, whether international or civil wars, as the main cause of migration. In a certain sense, there is nothing wrong in doing so. After all, wars are among the proximate causes of migration. However, the tendency I am talking about of focusing on wars also involves attributing, albeit in somewhat latent fashion, the responsibility for these wars purely and simply to local political forces. In other words, received opinion in the advanced countries really lays the responsibility of the flow of refugees and migrants into the richer parts of the world exclusively to forces that reside in the countries themselves.

The policy prescription that flows from this perception is to bring in the "international community" to set right whatever has gone wrong in the poorer regions of the world. Let the United Nations stop the wars, adjudicate between opposing claims, and thus protect our pristine cities and neighborhoods from being swamped by hordes of poor and uneducated foreigners. This is the kind of logic that perhaps unconsciously exonerates the vested interests and governments of the advanced imperialist countries from all responsibility.

What I am discussing here is not the role of the specialized agencies of the United Nations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (the agency for Palestinian refugees). This is a topic unto its own, and any discussion should also include the role of NGOs and charities, religious or otherwise, in particular the large and ever-present international organizations and the relations of these to the poorer and less-influential regional or national ones, usually established ad hoc for each particular crisis. No doubt this is an important topic, because as long as the problem of refugees and migrants exists, there are things to be done to improve their lot and alleviate their suffering. What is debatable in this area is how best to do this. There is a voluminous literature on this area, and the reader might benefit from a survey of that literature, in particular if they are working in the field. I am no expert myself in this sphere and will as such pass on to the main topic: wars as the main triggering factor in refugee and migrant flows.

This is of course not the place to delve into a general discussion of the causes of war in our day and age. What I will do instead is to try and provide a brief panorama of twenty-first-century armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region so as to evoke in the reader a sense of how laying the blame for wars, international or civil, at the foot of the regional peoples and polities is fundamentally vitiated in an understanding of the real situation. The reason I am choosing the MENA region is that this is the region from which the largest convoys of refugees have been flowing into the richer regions of the world.

In the two decades of the twenty-first century, there have been four successive waves of wars in the MENA region. The first wave, which still lives on, was started by the United States as a reaction to a new type of transnational Islamism that can best be characterized as *takfirism*, an ideological current in Islam that arrogates to itself the authority to judge the entire world, including those who consider themselves Muslims in terms of its own self-styled Islamic precepts, and violently eliminates those it considers as a barrier to the spread of its own brand of Islam. The two outstanding organizations exemplifying *takfirism* are Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The US administration under George W. Bush reacted to the 9/11 events by declar-

ing war, under the slogan of "war on terror," immediately on Afghanistan (2001) and somewhat later on Iraq (2003).

The sagacity of initiating these two wars may be seen in the following facts. After almost two decades of conflict and tens of thousands of casualties (3,500 US soldiers, 72,000 Afghan National Army forces, and up to 90,000 Taliban and Afghan civilians) and an estimated 2.3 trillion dollars spent on the war by the US, the war in Afghanistan has resulted as an inglorious debacle for the US. As for Iraq, it would be a pity if we silently passed over one of the most ironic twists of recent history. It will be recalled that there were two different reasons cited for the US assault on Iraq. One was that Saddam Hussein was collaborating with Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda. Saddam, as anyone who knows a bit of Iraqi history will testify, was one of the most secular leaders of the MENA region by Arab standards, so the story cannot withstand even the most cursory scrutiny. However, as the Bush administration knew that this would hardly be credible, it also claimed that Saddam had amassed a dangerous number of weapons of mass destruction. Weeks before the invasion of Iraq by the United States and what was then called the "Coalition of the Willing," former general Colin Powell, then US secretary of state, stood at the Security Council of the United Nations and made a presentation using state-of-the art technology with the aim of proving this. The occupying military forces, first and foremost those of the United States and the United Kingdom, would later search frantically for these weapons of mass destruction without being able to discover a single cache, finally admitting that there were none.

This first wave has continued most conspicuously in the war waged by the United States, with the assistance of Kurdish ground forces, on Islamic State. It should be added that this self-declared Caliphate of all Muslims was itself a direct product of the war on Iraq. The organization, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, found the strongest support among the Sunni population of Iraq, in particular the tribal structures in the north. This population had been totally alienated by the US occupying forces since the latter bet on the Shia and Kurdish segments of the population at the expense of the Sunni.

The second wave has consisted of the response of the United States and its closest allies to what has commonly been called the "Arab Spring." The succession of uprisings in 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria were, in our opinion, genuine revolutions that brought down long-reigning dictators in at least two of these (Tunisia and Egypt), partially in one of them (Yemen), and posed a real challenge to a king and a republican dynasty respectively in Yemen and Syria. (Libya, usually considered akin to these five cases, was no revolution but a tribal and regional settling of accounts from the very beginning.) America and the former colonial powers (Britain, France, and Italy) were caught off guard and vacillated at first in their policy

response. But their regional allies, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and NATO member Turkey, spearheaded the struggle against revolution in the MENA region. The response varied from country to country. In Tunisia, the luckiest of all since in the end it at least gained a parliamentary regime replacing an autocratic one, the European Union absorbed the revolution into channels acceptable to imperialist domination. (At the time of writing, even Tunisian democracy seems to be menaced by the single-handed suspension of all parliamentary activity by the president of the republic.) The others went through hell. Saudi Arabia occupied Bahrain militarily (under the guise of the forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC) to crush the revolution. It acted as the financier of the Bonapartist coup d'état by al-Sisi, the chief of staff of the Egyptian army, in 2013 and has since been economically propping up the new dictatorship. And the Saudis again intervened heavily in neighboring Yemen, first by fanning the flames of civil war and waging since 2015 one of the most ruthless wars, together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the newly rising local power, on the country.

But the neuralgic center turned out to be Syria. As we are now past the tenth anniversary of the uprising against Beshar al-Assad's regime, which was set off on 15 March 2011, the younger generations might not even be aware and the older generations may have forgotten that the Syrian turmoil started out as a people's rebellion, or even a revolution, that had nothing to do with armed conflict and nothing to do with sectarian religious feuds. For close to six months, it was the regime versus the unarmed ordinary people, the workers and peasants of Syria struggling over economic problems, unemployment, hunger, social services, etc. For the first six months, neither the United States and Israel nor the Muslim majority powers of the region worked against Assad, particularly since during the last years before the Arab Spring Assad had been negotiating indirectly for a rapprochement with Israel through the intermediation of Erdoğan's Turkish government, all under the benevolent gaze of the United States. It was only when the troika–Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey–from September 2011 on and particularly in early 2012, decided to bring down Assad that the Syrian situation turned from a popular rebellion into a civil war. The conflict progressively took on the allure of sectarian war from the point of view of the Sunni armies that were fighting what they considered to be the Alevi government of Assad but was in fact a secular government that, along with the Alevi minority of the country, relied on the support of the Sunni and Maronite bourgeoisie and the Druze as well.

To call the decade-long Syrian war a civil war is one of the most misled characterizations of recent history. Roughly one-third of the approximately two hundred countries in the world are engaged in the war in Syria. The anti–Islamic State coalition included around sixty-five countries. Add to this countries such as Russia, Iran, Israel, and Lebanon (in the form of Hez-

bollah) involved in some way in the Syrian war and you certainly have an explosive mixture. To call this a civil war tout court is, as I said at the beginning of this section, a handy way of attributing the Syrian catastrophe and the accompanying refugee flow to the ineptitude of the Syrian people and thus exonerating the "international community." However, the civil war aspect here is only a minuscule aspect of the overall conflict.

Libya is the other striking example of the responsibility of the rich world in striking up what is falsely perceived to be a "civil war." The immense hydrocarbon riches of this sparsely populated country have always whetted the appetite of the oil companies, which were highly frustrated over four decades–from 1969 all the way to the Arab Spring–by the idiosyncratic rule of Colonel Gaddafi, a minor Nasserite. As soon as the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caused a tremor in Libyan society, leading to a series of tribal and regional revolts against Gaddafi, the imperialist countries–with France and Italy at the forefront and the United States, under then-president and Nobel Peace Prize awardee Obama, "leading from the back"–immediately turned against the dictator, not only to cast off the close control on Libyan oil but also to establish control over this country geographically located precisely between the two most powerful revolutions in the Arab world, giving them the possibility of intervening in either country should either revolution get out of hand. The brutal, inhumane treatment given to Gaddafi's corpse, only matched by the grisly killing of the US ambassador to Libya sometime later, are but minor incidents when compared to the mutual slaughter of tribal and regional warlords in the years since then. Libya is now Syria in 2015 or 2017. It is a powder keg waiting to ignite, and a score of countries lurk there and play the warlords as puppets from behind the scenes.

To understand the importance of Syria and Libya, the reader should realize not only that the MENA region has been by far the major source of refugees since 2011 but also that these two countries are precisely the two major routes through which all the peoples of the Middle East and beyond (for Syria) and those of Africa all the way to Sudan and Congo (for Libya) offload their human suffering. Overpowering as the Syrian flow of refugees may be, when the Erdoğan government opened Turkey's borders to Europe at the beginning of 2020 in retaliation to Western policies vis-à-vis Turkey, it was not only, or even mostly, Syrians that flocked Turkey's frontier with Greece but Afghans, Iraqis, Kurds, Yemenis, and many from other nations. As for Libya, to the best of our knowledge, the overwhelming majority of the migrants who try to reach the shores of Europe, first and foremost Italy, are non-Libyans, since the Libyan state has collapsed and left the country free for all kinds of avaricious elements that wish to profit from human trafficking. There are, as I pointed out earlier, slave camps for would-be immigrants and refugees. So, what I am discussing here when I talk about Syria and Libya are not two countries but the entire geographies of Western

Asia, on the one hand, and Northern Africa all the way down to Congo on the other.

The third wave of wars is in fact already contained in the second wave. The Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East has a long history, but in the last decade this has almost become a casus belli. The rivalry is led by the two rich and powerful states of Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively Sunni and Shia. The struggle over hydrocarbon resources between these two countries finds an ideological expression in this age-old sectarian divide in the Islamic world. The divide was partially responsible for the events in Iraq, in Syria (where the ally of the Shia is the Alevi minority), in Yemen, and in Bahrain. However, after Trump took office, things have taken another turn. Trump has established a front led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and, to top it all, Israel and targeted Iran, withdrawing from the nuclear deal signed in 2015 when Obama was president. Since then, all wars in the Middle East (though not in North Africa, since Shia presence there is very weak) are also, or even primarily, Sunni-Shia wars. The potential danger is immense. The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s lasted eight years and took an estimated one million lives. So, a generalized Sunni-Shia war cannot even be imagined in terms of the overall toll. At the time of writing, the Biden administration has started to renegotiate the nuclear deal with Iran, which reduces the risk of belligerence, but has not reversed other policies established by Trump.

The fourth wave of wars in the MENA region comes as a result of the relationship of Israel to the entire region. In 2006 Israel heavily bombed Lebanon, causing immense damage, but was then repelled by Hezbollah. In the winter of 2008–9 Israel again bombed the Gaza Strip, causing devastation. These attacks leave their scar not only among the Palestinian people but also across the Arab world, later becoming the source of other wars or warlike activities.

Apart from the waves so far discussed, there are also some other armed conflicts in the MENA region that lack regional importance, however vital they may be to the contending parties, such as that which has confronted the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrilla of the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK) for close to four decades or the conflict that has pitted the Moroccan army against the Polisario Front for the Liberation of Western Sahara.

It should be clear that an overwhelming responsibility for wars, civil or international, in the MENA region lies with the imperialist countries of the West, in particular the United States and the European Union and their close local allies, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey. With the MENA, from Iran in the east all the way to Algeria in the west, being the central hub of hydrocarbons, the long shadow of oil companies and rich countries has been cast over the entire region for more than a century. The well-meaning citizens of these Western countries ought to take a closer look at the foreign and military policies pursued by their own governments because in the end

these wars tend to come home in other disguises. And the plight of refugees and migrants cannot be overcome unless we understand the causes that create the suffering.

Need for a Broader Perspective

In conclusion, all that has been said in this chapter on the question of migration and asylum seeking invariably leads us to broaden our perspective as we look at the suffering and exploitation of the millions who set out on the road for a better future. Both the economic dynamics and the political and military drivers of migration as a solution of last resort find their roots in the inequalities of the imperialist world economy, in the class dynamics of the capitalist mode of production, and in the wars that are ignited in the name of greed and domination. It is, without a shred of doubt, necessary to attend to the wounds opened by each and every episode of refugee flight or migration caravan, but it is as important to turn our eyes to the root causes of the misery and exploitation involved in these cases. The wounds must be healed, but the weapons used by those who inflict the wounds must also be wrested from their hands and destroyed.

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