

migrations and the media



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Introduction to Migrations and the Media

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What's in a Crisis?

Migration is a subject rarely absent from news headlines or political agendas. Every day people want to move to countries that cannot or do not want to grant them entry. Some have to move from their places of origin because of political conflict, war or natural disasters. As this book nears completion, many examples of such stories populate the news media around the world as emergencies and longer-term “migration crises”. These include the reporting of “one of the biggest human crises on the globe” (ABC news anchor Diane Sawyer), as refugees fleeing long-running war and famine in Somalia struggle to survive en route to and at camps in Kenya (Harding, 2011; Muir, 2011). They also include coverage of illegal immigration, “one of the most contentious debates in American politics” (Harris, 2011), in the United States, as Arizona made international news headlines by signing controversial Senate Bill 1070 into law. The Arizona bill was reported by the *New York Times* to be “the broadest and strictest immigration measure in generations”, and was pronounced by Governor Jan Brewer to be “another tool for our state to use as we work to solve a crisis we did not create and the federal government has refused to fix” (Archibold, 2010). In April 2011, the Obama administration’s injunction to block some of the key provisions of 1070 has been successfully upheld in the courts (Reuters, 2011). In June 2011, the US immigration debate was represented from a very different perspective by journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, whose self-disclosure as an undocumented immigrant has drawn media attention to a personal story of the crises attending such a status and the case against stringent new anti-immigration laws and for the legal recognition of sections of the already-resident undocumented population in the United States¹ (Mirkinson, 2011; Vargas, 2011).

These two contemporary migration stories begin to indicate something of the heterogeneity of meaning possible in the term “migration crisis”. It may include the experiences of those who are readily recognised and admitted by the authorities as refugees, or who somehow make it across national borders in other ways, only to find they are not necessarily welcomed in encounters with already-resident communities. In addition, “crisis” may well describe the experiences of those who are trafficked against their will to work, for example, in the

sex industry or who find themselves trapped in other conditions of highly exploitative, or forced labour akin to slavery. If these latter examples are migration “crisis narratives”, however, they are rarely given priority in news agendas. Instead, what are far more likely to take precedence in migration news, as previous media research and many of the contributions to this book would suggest, are the national interests of states and the powers they are able to exercise in controlling undesirable immigration.

Crisis Management of the “Undesirable”

In a neoliberal world order, social theorist Zygmunt Bauman argues, “uncertainty and anguish born of uncertainty” are the “staple products” of globalisation (Bauman, 2004, p. 66). Under the forces of neoliberal globalisation, the governments of nation states have altered the orientation of their policy strategies. As McNevin contends, state powers have “reformulated their priorities away from the protection of citizens and towards integration with a global economy and sources of global capital” (McNevin, 2006, p. 139). Citizens relationships to the state, their forms of political belonging and once comparatively stable social identities and relationships have been disturbed and fragmented by such changes. In turn, the sovereign power of liberal democratic state authorities have been seriously reduced, such that “the most they can do”, according to Bauman:

...is to refocus it on objects within reach; shift it from the objects they can do nothing about to those they can at least make a show of being able to handle and control. Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants—the waste products of globalisation—fit the bill perfectly. (Bauman, 2004, p. 66)

Such defensive modalities of politics, in the terms of Ghassan Hage, reflect a “deficit of hope” in modern Western democracies, where politicians endeavour to, “reassert a sense of governmental power over the nation through their worrying” (Hage, 2003, p. 2). Indeed, what Hage identifies as the expression of defensive, or “paranoid” forms of nationalism may help to account for the popularity of policies tightening national border controls around the West and their intensification in an era of globalisation (Andreas, 2000; Moses, 2006; Snyder, 2000). From this perspective, perhaps it is unsurprising that migration crisis is more likely to refer to something imperative that wealthy “receiving”

nations “manage” (see for example, Gross in this volume) or to be represented as a possible “index of national crisis” (Clarke, 2008).

Especially since the “war on terror” has positioned national security and the fear of “threatening cultural others” as pre-eminent concerns, alternative and perhaps more ethical perspectives for making sense of migration seem, as Cohen notes, to have been “effectively silenced”, at least within the dominant public discourses of wealthy “receiving” countries (Cohen, 2006; Moore, in this volume). In this context, as Altheide asserts of news crises more generally, “fear” has played an important ideological role, defining migration crises and serving certain material interests: “to bump along those claims so that leaders can take political action against ‘external enemies’ or ‘internal enemies’” (Altheide, 2002, p. 12). Nation-states have cooperated at an international level in their efforts to regulate migration flows, to define and separate “desirable” from “undesirable” migrants and to deter the latter from reaching their shores. Information sharing between states, electronic borders and other, increasingly sophisticated technologies of surveillance and securitisation, serve to control the physical movement of migrants across as well as within national borders. The bureaucracy of immigration systems, and internalisation of border controls which regulate the provision of legal, social and welfare services, have produced new regimes of control—criminalising certain categories of migrant and presenting further impediments to the free movement and survival of the unwelcome. In addition, measures to externalise borders have been designed to manage migration, for example in so called “transit processing centres” and “regional protection zones” in regions closer to migrants’ countries of origin in the South (Klepp, 2010; Weber & Bowling, 2004). Australia’s “Malaysia refugee exchange programme” is one of the latest manifestations of policies to manage and control undesirable migrants by exporting the business end of the filtering process away from Western nation-state territorial boundaries (Martin & Veness, 2011). These technologies of control of migration often remain unquestioned and are rarely radically scrutinised or subjected to critique by reporters in the pressured conditions of journalistic practice (see for example, Harris, in this volume). Nonetheless, they may play a highly determining role in the dominant news discourses surrounding the coverage of migration crises, and moreover, in important transformations of the normal mode of governance of liberal democratic states, as will be explored further below.