

IIT DELHI

HUL371 : SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

TERM PAPER

The Refugee Crisis

Author:

Nilaksh AGARWAL
Aakash VARSHNEY

Supervisor:

Prof. Ambuj D. SAGAR



Abstract

This article serves to unpack the Refugee Crisis (European specifically) using some Science and Technology Studies (STS) tools. It seeks to highlight the politics of refugee camps (an important technology for the Refugee Crisis). This paper, in a gist, gives an overview of the Refugee Crisis and the Refugee Camps, a product of this crisis. It then analyzes this Crisis along various aspects of Social Construction, Actor Network Theory, Power of Language and Rhetoric as well as providing a stakeholder and functional analysis of refugee camps, & giving some insight into the role of social media in shaping this crisis.

Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	The Refugee Crisis	3
1.2	The Refugee Camps	4
2	Science & Technology Studies (STS)	6
2.1	Lenses Used	6
3	Functional and Stakeholder Analysis of Camps	7
4	Social Construction of Realities	8
5	Actor Network Theory - An Analysis	9
5.1	ANT to keep refugees out	10
5.2	ANT to get refugees in	12
6	The Power of Language	13
7	Role of Social Media	16
8	Do Refugee Camps have Politics?	16
8.1	How are Camps Technical?	17
8.2	How are Camps Political?	17
9	Concluding Remarks	17

1 Introduction

This paper serves to give an overview of The Refugee Crisis (specifically in Europe) and The Refugee Camps that came about as a technology due to this crisis, from a perspective based on Science & Technology Studies (STS).

According to the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (*UNHCR*), "A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries." [7]

The majority of refugees (2/3rd) come from just 5 countries (Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia). These countries are ground zero for political and military instability, rampant hate/war crimes and other propaganda facilitated by groups from within and abroad. Due to these multitude of reasons, most refugees flee to safer havens. Since these countries don't have neighbouring countries with resources enough to take adequate care of the refugee's needs, the first world countries is but an obvious answer. Europe's proximity has made it one of the most lucrative haven's for refugees to seek asylum.

1.1 The Refugee Crisis

The "*Refugee Crisis*" refers to the acute conditions of refugees seeking asylum in Europe and other First World Countries. It is termed a crisis due to the dire situation of these refugees, being bottle-necked into gaining admission into Europe. The crisis evolved due to two major factors.

The first is the growing military and political instability in the Middle-East, Sub-Saharan Africa etc. which has led to the fleeing of people by the thousands to find safer havens. The biggest driving country has been Syria, by far[4]. But other countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan and other sources of Political and Sectarian oppression are the major contributors to this inflow of refugees.

A second, more underlying reason is the growing anti-refugee policies of Europe, USA and other First World Countries, which are best suited to take

these refugees. As mentioned in the Vox article, "People in First World Countries countries, insecure and fearful over the effects of immigration, pre-occupied with vague but long-held ideas about national identity, are driving nativist, populist politics, and thus policies that contribute to the crisis." [4] Most of this anti-immigration fear is due to fear of change, of dilution of their self perceived "*national identity*". With the exception of Germany, most other EU countries have closed themselves off to refugees, relying on arbitrary rulings like the Dublin Regulations [1] to not take in refugees.



Figure 1: A boat of refugees heading to Europe

1.2 The Refugee Camps

A refugee camp, according to UNHCR, "A refugee camp is intended as a temporary accommodation for people who have been forced to flee their home because of violence and persecution. They are constructed while crises unfold for people fleeing for their lives.

These hastily built shelters provide immediate protection and safety for the world's most vulnerable people. Camps allow UNHCR to deliver lifesaving aid like food, water and medical attention during an emergency." [8]

This definition is far from reality though. The *utopian* view of Refugee

Camps has been reconstructed by the First World Countries. These camps now serve a dual purpose. On the surface, they adhere to the UNHCR's policies and provide security, food, shelter, education, etc. to the refugees. But underneath all this, they are a cesspool of violence, sexual abuse, rampant overpopulation, health epidemics and poor qualities of life.

According to an article in the New York Times [6], almost a third of the inhabitants at refugee camps have attempted suicide. The living conditions at these camps are sometimes far worse than the war-torn countries these refugees left behind. The article toys with the idea that it would have been "*Better to Drown*" than live in these impoverished conditions.

In reality, these refugee camps serve as a "*holding cell*" for these foreign, unknown refugees, to shield the European Countries general population from them. In this way, they further the political ideologies of their creators, the administration.



Figure 2: Typical view of a refugee camp

2 Science & Technology Studies (STS)

As defined on Wikipedia, "Science and technology studies, or science, technology and society studies (both abbreviated STS) is the study of how society, politics, and culture affect scientific research and technological innovation, and how these, in turn, affect society, politics and culture." [9]

Our background in STS has been primarily referencing Sergio Sismondo's book, *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies*[3], in addition to various supplementary readings provided by our course advisor.

2.1 Lenses Used

In this paper, we utilise numerous STS lenses to look at the situation of the Refugee Crisis and the Refugee Camps, unpacking the problem with respect to these various axes of analysis. Over the course of this paper, we will go in-depth into some of them.

- **Social Construction of Narratives:** This analysis will be centered on how these narratives around refugees (for/against) are constructed and how these influence their situations.
- **Social Construction of Technology:** We see how the Refugee Camps are a technology, and how does society play a role in their make up, uses and facilities.
- **Actor Network Theory:** The focus will be on understanding who/what are the various actors in this, and how are they leveraged by both parties to further their agenda.
- **Language and Rhetoric:** Providing an analysis of how different elements utilise the power of language to garner support for their causes.
- **Politics of Technology:** Does a refugee camp have politics? Are these camps serving an ulterior motive besides the one UNHCR defines?

Apart from this we also touch upon a few other concepts like Experimental Regress, Gender and Discrimination, etc.

3 Functional and Stakeholder Analysis of Camps

These refugee camps, in an idealistic sense provide some basic facilities to refugees, not all of which are practically realizable, due to various constraints.

These include, providing Autonomy to refugees, given a large number of them escaped from dictatorial regimes which failed to do so. Part of the rehabilitation process includes giving refugees a sense of community and bonding, again to alleviate the loss of leaving their ancestral home. Basic WHO and UNHCR guidelines also mandate adequate and accessible health-care, access to education and basic security and protection. We will analyze the feasibility of providing these functions, and also their subversion in furthering the agenda of the host country.

Providing autonomy to refugees poses a logistic challenge, given the wary nature of most European citizens to them. Moreover, it is counterproductive as the host nation can no longer keep tabs on them, thereby ensuring safety and security for their native residents.

The refugee camp, in status quo, is grossly overfilled, due to an ever increasing inflow of refugees and a administrative bottleneck in asylum granting. Due to this, violence and sexual abuse is commonplace at these camps, and people are ever distrusting of the other refugees.

Due to stringent enforcing of the UNHCR health-care policies, there are measures to provide basic medical services at refugee camps, but due to the population skewness, and lack of funds provided by the host countries, the quality of this health-care pales in comparison to the state offered one to the native Europeans.

Most refugees, as well as the European countries, see education to be more of a luxury than a necessity, opting to forgo the same due to lack of positive incentives. Refugee children would wait for their asylum to get processed before considering going to school. Also due to other responsibilities that refugees need to tend to, education en neglected.[2]

Security and protection is probably the one feature that host countries take seriously, but for slightly different reasons. The security provided, in the form of barricades surrounding the camp, or reinforced gates prevent movement to and from the camp or even armed guards patrolling the borders, are all to guard the European citizens more than the refugees themselves. This is reinforced due to the presence of violence within the camp [6], which this security does nothing about. These gates are more about keeping the refugees within

their confined spaces, following an *"Out of sight, out of mind"* approach with regards to the general population of Europe.

The major stakeholders include the refugees, the administration of the host country, the residents of the host country and the NGOs and other voluntary organizations.

- Refugees: They are the most vulnerable and affected by the decisions made for the camps, but most of the time, the refugees are helpless and oblivious to their plight, having to blindly follow the rules of the land. The decisions for the camps, be it about food, security, population size etc. are made by the administration without consideration or even consulting the refugee population.[2]
- Administration: They are the decision making body for the camp and the host country as a whole, and enforce policy decisions to keep it's inhabitants happy. However, most of the time their primary focus is on safeguarding their native citizens, sometimes at the cost of the refugees.
- Citizens: This group refers to the native inhabitants of the First World Country, and their outlook plays a major role in the shaping of refugee camps. An accepting population (e.g. Germany) leads to better policies for refugees whereas a distrusting population (e.g. Hungary) leads to a state of hostility towards refugees.

In this way, each stakeholder has some roles and consequences from these refugee camps.

4 Social Construction of Realities

The current status quo of refugees wasn't created overnight. It has been a long, continuous process that culminated in the current anti-refugee policies that the EU and other First World Countries have. Here, we're going to briefly trace how the same is done, both for and against refugees.

A common method to water down the claims of refugees is to club them with migrants (people who change locations to seek economic opportunities). This dilutes the conditions and asylum requests of the refugees, especially in the eyes of the people. The magnification of controversial narratives (such as

refugees who stole, murdered, etc.) providing a myopic outlook to these easily influencable people provides an easy method to shape public opinions on the refugees. For example, the 2015 Paris Bombings were "*linked*" to a Syrian Refugee, thereby including them in their network to provide an easy target for the public hate.

Another easy way is to evoke nationalism, jobs and other crucial chunks of public identity, and by portraying refugees as "*stealing*" these, we trigger the protective fight or flight response in the Europeans. The tool of *self & the other* is often used to portray these refugees as different from the typical Europeans, and hence can never be treated as equals. This also evokes a fear of the unknown in the population.

Similarly, the narratives for refugees generally uses images, language and strong portrayal of women and children (as discussed later). The conditions of refugees is always portrayed suiting the group's agenda, so we never get a truly objective picture, any information is always leading us to think one way or another, never neutral.

These narratives have been constructed over years due to the presence of an *Echo Chamber* of sorts in the EU, due to minimal interaction with the Third World Countries, an average European citizen has become oblivious to their perils. In this way, the narrative is so constructed, by various factors, leading to the strong anti-refugee policies of the EU and other First World Countries.

5 Actor Network Theory - An Analysis

Actor-network theory (ANT) is the name given to a framework originally developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law. It is defined as "A framework and systematic way to consider the infrastructure surrounding technological achievements. Assigns agency to both human and non-human actors (e.g. artifacts)" [5] Here, we will consider the ANT map both for accepting refugees as well as keeping refugees out.

5.1 ANT to keep refugees out



(a) Checks in Austrian Trains



(b) USA's aid to Central America



(c) Hungary Razor Wire Fence



(d) Italy's Mare Nostrum Program



(e) Libya as a gateway to Europe

Figure 3: Some representations of Actors Leveraged by this Network

The main characteristics of actors leveraged by this network include discretion, since overtly no country can oppose taking in refugees (due to humanitarian and moral responsibilities).

So, one of the primary actor is "safety" which these countries incorporate into their policies and agenda, using or rather, misusing the aspect of safety to unduly oppress and discriminate against the refugees. For example, Austria conducts checks in all its goods trains from Italy (Figure 3 (a)) under the pretense of preventing illegal refugees from suffocating, but in actually it prevents any refugees from entering Austria and through it crossing over into Germany. Another example is of Hungary, which erected a Razor-Wire fence all along its southern border and enforced strict repercussions on breaching the fence (Figure 3 (c)). This effectively keeps out almost all the refugees who would want to enter Hungary.

Another major actor is the "money" that the first world countries use to exert their influence on other actors. Due to their unique financial status, they are able to exert some degree of control on the policies and structures of many weaker countries and organizations. For example, USA provides aid to Central American countries (Figure 3 (b)) to build infrastructure and resources, in exchange for not sending refugees to the USA. This again follows an "*out of sight, out of mind*" policy, which doesn't solve the underlying problem of the refugees. Another example is the EU cutting funding for the Mare Nostrum Program (Figure 3 (d)), which saved over 150,000 people annually [4]. The reasons cited for doing so were aimed at preventing refugees from "illegally" attempting to cross the Mediterranean, and opt for more organized and controlled routes. Another case is Gaddafi, Lybia's dictator, who, until 2011, served as Europe's bouncer for refugees [4] and prevented refugees from entering Europe (Figure 3 (e)). All these cases point at the First World Countries using their money to take unfair control of the refugee situation, turning things in their favour, which need not be advantageous to the refugees as such.

Another major actor leveraged is the power of policies and laws. First World Countries, due to having one of the strongest legal systems, often use *red-tape* as an opportunity to keep refugees out. For example, all countries are, on the face of it, open to taking refugees "*legally*", but most common people are often unaware that the legality of granting asylum to a refugee is a long and convoluted process. According to the "Dublin Regulation", "The Member State responsible for the examination of the asylum application" [1]. The problem with this policy is that Italy and Greece, the countries where

refugees land after crossing the Mediterranean, bear the brunt of the refugee asylum processing, whereas most other EU countries are relatively relaxed on this front[4]. Under the pretense of "legal refugees", most asylum seekers are denied entry into any other EU country, until Italy/Greece processes their asylum request. To uphold these regulations, a lot of the EU member states have cracked down on illegal movements of refugees out of Greece/Italy before their asylum request is processed. Similarly, even within camps, refugees are confined to a small space without the freedom to leave or relocate until the host country dictates it.

In this way, several actors are used to keep refugees out. Apart from the ones listed, there is also language and rhetoric, which is discussed in a later section.

5.2 ANT to get refugees in

The main characteristics of actors leveraged by this network include humanitarian and emotional reaction invoking actors, since evoking these triggers in general populations is the main aim of this network. To promote general acceptance of refugees, and to facilitate their aid, both in monetary and policy mechanisms, has been the goal of this network.

One of the main actors leveraged by this network is the hyperbole or statistical misinterpretation. Take the statistic given in the Figure 4 (b). Out of these 2.5Mn refugees, only a very small number approached the US, choosing to rather go to the EU due to proximity and ease of access etc. But, by carefully choosing to omit this information, the posters gives the impression that the USA has been overly stringent with it's refugee policy, whereas that might not be the case.

Another actor utilized is the delicateness of women and children in their portrayal of refugees. As shown in the Figure 4 (c), more often than not, women and children are on the posters of refugee agencies like the UNHCR, or NGOs due to their ability to generate compassion from the viewer. A thought on the gender discrimination in this particular field.

Lastly, the element of unnaturalness and disbelief is an important method utilized by this network. For example, the picture of Alan Kurdi (Figure 4 (a)) lying dead on the beach was one of the turning points for public awareness about the refugee crisis. To fully get public sympathy and support, the network leverages the extremest scenarios and shines a light on them.

In this way, this network utilizes and leverages various actors to reach their



(a) Kurdi lying dead on the beach



(b) Statistics used to aid refugees



(c) Poster for Refugee Campaign

Figure 4: Some representations of Actors Leveraged by this Network

end goals of promoting refugee perception. Apart from this we also have language and rhetoric, which is discussed in the next section.

6 The Power of Language

Language and rhetoric has been a forefront for the refugee movement, due to it's unique ability to draw metaphors, hyperbole, and comparatives, thereby incorporating multiple elements into your network, to be leveraged to further the refugee agenda.



(a) Rape-fugee: A strong association



(b) A "flood" of refugees



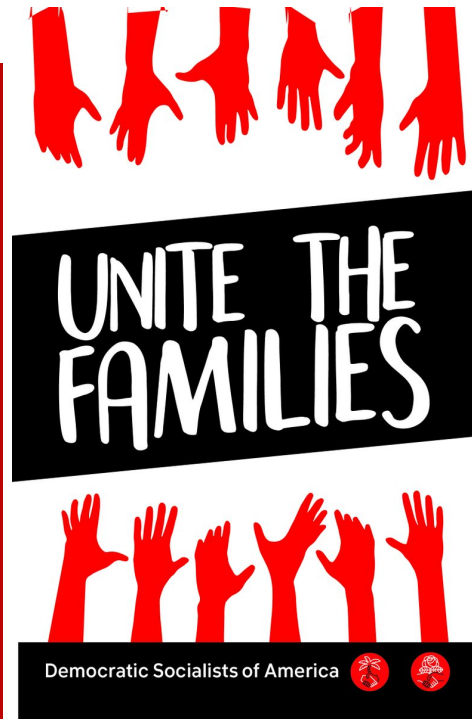
(c) Anti Refugee Poster

Figure 5: Language and images used to negatively show refugees

For example, in the Figure 5 (a), the direct connection with refugees and rape, automatically includes the hate against rapists into your network, to create a negative sentiment against refugees. Similarly, the "Breaking Point" (Figure 5 (b)) showcases thinning patience of the EU countries towards the refugees. Words like "flood", "tide", "storm", frequently associated with refugees are another example of negative connotations, since all these words signify negative phenomenon. The Afghan war poster (Figure 6(c)) likeness to the army recruitment poster incorporates the positive nationalist and patriotic sentiments associated with the army into their network. Similarly, the



(a) Anti war association



(b) Invoking Families



(c) Religious Connect



(d) Pro Refugee:America

Figure 6: Language and images used to positively show refugees

power of language is leveraged by the actors for promoting refugee influx. Associating refugees with anti-war sentiments (Figure 6 (a)) or invoking family and community feelings (Figure 6 (b), (d)) easily include these elements into their network. Additionally, wordplay on the name of the United States (US, Figure 6 (d)) invokes the nationalistic sentiments which is strongly borne by most citizens. Even religious feelings, which is one of the most sacred and unquestionable is utilized (Figure 6 (c)).

In this way, language is used as a methodology to easily incorporate diverse and powerful agents into their network, both for and against refugees.

7 Role of Social Media

Social media has played a crucial role in galvanizing public attention around the refugee crisis. Pre-2015, not much public awareness existed about the refugee crisis. It was only when the picture of Kurdi, dead on the beach, was shared on social media that public outrage and sentiments began to align themselves with the refugee crisis.

Social media has a tendency to amplify controversial news, due to the discourse oriented nature of the same. So, any deviation from the status quo is severely magnified, even in the case of the refugee crisis. For example, negative portrayals of refugees, such as a refugee convicted of theft, murder, rape etc. will gain significant traction on social media. (e.g. Syrian refugee linked to 2015 Paris Bombings). The news will be shared, *re-tweeted* and reported by anyone bearing anti-refugee sentiments, since this reinforces their viewpoint. Similarly, any conditions of refugees in abject conditions such as Alan Kurdi will again gain significant coverage on social media, since this invokes deep emotional and sentimental reactions from the public.

In this way, the refugee crisis is heavily dependant on social media for it's salvation. In this modern socio-technical age, social media can be the tool to save the refugees from their state.

8 Do Refugee Camps have Politics?

In this section, we aim to do a Winnerian analysis[10] of refugee camps as a technology. This evokes two questions:

8.1 How are Camps Technical?

Winner discusses technology as a machinery or equipment that executes a practical purpose. So, applying this to a refugee camp, we have the question: what are the components that make a refugee camp work? A refugee camp essentially consists of walls (gates, fences etc.) to demarcate the outside from the inside. It also consists of resources like houses and restrooms for refugees, food & water supplies and access to basic health care. Given these basic requirements, an area becomes a refugee camp. So, these camps take an input (refugees) and provide an output (safety/security) to the public.

8.2 How are Camps Political?

Winner states that Technologies aren't built without a political agenda. So, Refugee Camps are no exception to this rule. While constructing a camp, a lot of the political biases and ideals of the host nation's administration comes into play. For example, in Greece, the refugee camp is located on the island of Lesbos [6]. An island, away from the mainland, serves a very specific purpose of keeping these refugees from intermixing with the native European population. So, these camps serve a political agenda of maintaining the purity of their country. In this way, due to the inherent politics of camps, they are reduced to little more than prisons, providing the same basic infrastructure and loss of human rights. Just like how prisoners wait for their appeal hearing, the refugees wait their asylum hearings in these camps. These camps serve a valuable role of providing security and safety to the European population, maintaining their image of humanitarianism, whilst simultaneously, keeping the refugees out.

9 Concluding Remarks

To sum up, the Refugee Crisis and the Refugee Camps born of this crisis, were analyzed from an array of STS lenses, and unpacked using these tools. In the process Refugee Camps were recognized as a technology and the Refugee Crisis was shown to be rich with examples of this technology and Society coming around it to shape and influence it. I would like to thank Prof. Ambuj D. Sagar for giving us this opportunity.

References

- [1] COMMISSION, E. Country responsible for asylum application (Dublin). https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en.
- [2] SHENOI, S. Inside the tent: An in-depth analysis on refugee camps through science, technology, and society perspective. *Scripps Senior Theses* (2017).
- [3] SISMONDO, S. *An introduction to science and technology studies*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- [4] TAUB, A. Europe's Refugee Crisis: Explained. <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/5/9265501/refugee-crisis-europe-syria>.
- [5] THEORIES, L. Actor Network Theory. <https://www.learning-theories.com/actor-network-theory-ant.html>.
- [6] TIMES, N. Better to Drown. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/europe/greece-lesbos-moria-refugees.html>.
- [7] UNHCR. What is a refugee? <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.
- [8] UNHCR. What is a refugee camp? <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/>.
- [9] WIKIPEDIA. Science and Technology Studies. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_and_technology_studies.
- [10] WINNER, L. Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus* 109, 1 (1980), 121–136.