Which Refugee Crisis?

On the Proxy of the Systemic Euro-Crisis and its Spatialities

Dimitris Dalakoglou

Vrije University Amsterdam

I. Drowning Migrants

Europe was shocked by the news that a boat full of migrants sunk into the Mediterranean Sea taking with it 57 people. The episode occurred when the Italian Navy vessel ‘Sibilla’, in its effort to protect the common EU borders collided with the migrants’ boat. Some serious debates took place then, raising questions as to whether it was an accident or part of a political effort to stop the flow of migrants or whether the Italian Navy could have intervened and rescued the migrants. The year was 1997 and the non-EU migrants were Albanians fleeing the 1997 civil war that followed the collapse of the ‘pyramid’ banking system in their home country. The transition of the country to market economy and the new ambitious financial innovations had been promoted by WB and IMF but also the EEC.

It is one of history’s ironies that the name ‘Sibilla’ refers to the ancient oracles who foresaw the future. Almost twenty years later as the Albanian government together with most other European governments sealed off their borders to the Syrian refugees, sinking boats and dead migrants trying to enter the EU still are a common phenomenon in the Mediterranean. Obviously the then Others, who did not have the right to enter into Europe, were of a primarily different ethnic origin than the current Others; yet, the persistent refusal of the right to mobility and, more generally, the border securitization regime currently being witnessed was rehearsed
and shaped in the early 1990s. Although the exact location of this border moves, qualitatively the border regime of ‘Fortress Europe’, as we know it today, remains the same over the last decades, protecting the core of Europe and its strategic peripheries.

However, I claim, that today there is an additional reason we focus so much on the security of the EU common borders and our governments ignore the right to life, and thus we accept the regular deaths on the sea in the name of the security of Fortress-Europe. This is because, spatially speaking, a symbolically privileged territorial belonging is the only benefit that EU has to offer to its citizens, the rest of the promises of United Europe are fading away.

It is well known that emergencies and the accompanying exceptional conditions often evolve into a more permanent modes of governance (Agamben 2003). The refugee crisis of 2015 is not different. It was an opportunity for European governments and the European elites to administrate the declining consent of European citizens for their policies. These are the elites that punished a great part of EU’s population (the majority of the impoverished PIIGS residents) and implemented harsh neoliberal austerity to the rest of the people in Europe in the name of the economic recovery. The EU’s neoliberal economic project of several decades that promised certain spatial conditions for the everyday life of EU citizens (mainly summarised into a territorial privilege and middle class private property conditions and lifestyle to the masses) is shaken since 2008. Within that context, increased disappointment among Europeans could be tackled instantly in the name of that vaguely defined urgent danger that comes from across our supposedly common borders. With this paper I wish to focus on the spatial dimensions of this process and explain how the collapse of a main spatial pillar of post-Cold-War Europe (the novel private forms of real estate property, the renewal of built environment and the related growth) led
to the overemphasis on the other spatial pillar, the boundaries of the privileged territorial condition.

II. Building Europe

Historically, the 20th century has witnessed two major pan-European construction projects that have taken place over the entire length and width of the continent, renewing its built environment. The first one is the post-World War II reconstruction of the whole continent and the second one is the post-Cold War ‘reconstruction’. Besides being a much larger-scale project, the post-WWII project explicitly had a two-fold character. The two sides of the Cold War divide were each building their own urban and infrastructural materiality. Via this material reconstruction, they aimed to engineer their respective social and political entity. Moreover, the construction project of the 1940s and 50s was to (re-)build a devastated continent. The ensuing physical construction project, from the 1990s to the 2000s, was tied to the metaphysical destruction of the Communist regimes’ infrastructure and materiality – its very ethos. Thus the building construction was part of the destruction both physical and symbolic of the defeated enemy.

We have detailed ethnographies of the socio-material transformations that occurred in Eastern Europe at that time (Buchli 1999; Salaru 2017; Dalakoglou 2017), and these have also been recorded and recreated in art. For example, the celebrated film ‘Goodbye Lenin’ (Becker 2003) describes on a fictional level, this process of deconstruction of the enemy’s material culture and its replacement by the capitalist version, which was novel to the former socialist countries. The movie’s hero is desperately trying to reconstruct East Germany’s material reality
for his mother who wakes after a long coma - she must not get shocked to find the world has changed lest she fall ill again. He tries to recreate the GDR’s material culture and with every passing moment this becomes more difficult as the material samples of the previous world are systematically erased.

Beyond fiction, the Cold War was a war and at the end its outcome was one that most wars share: the winner occupied the territory of the loser. Because this war was waged between two economic/political systems, this ‘occupation of territories’ meant the instant transformation of the vast majority of immobile resources and real estate of socialist countries from state, public or cooperative hands to private ones. The enormous influx of resources into the European capitalist economy resulted in its overnight expansion.

Another type of resource that was added in the early 1990s to the capitalist European economic system was the instantly impoverished masses of Eastern European populations who provided an inexpensive work force either as migrants to the West or worked in their own countries – often for Western European interests and in the interest of the new local capitalist elites– whilst drawing on the private property of productive means as yet another source of power. Thus it was only a matter of time until the construction sector evolved into the ‘steam-engine’ of economic growth during the 1990’s and 2000’s, occupying an increasing percentage of GDP all over Europe. Certainly, the dilapidation and reconstruction of the socialist infrastructures, but also the big grids crossing what was once upon the time the Iron Curtain, aiming to the physical connection of the two Europes, were great part of that activity. And yet, was not only the East, Western Europe witnessed some of the largest construction projects, both in terms of publicly funded works and in terms of private contracts. One can only see here the radical metamorphosis of cities like Amsterdam or Dublin or even see the Spanish seaside or the
transformations of London as typical examples. Within this context the whole phenomenon must also be linked with the emergence of the infrastructural mega-event of which the European continent saw at least 4 over the period of twenty years (Olympic Games of Barcelona, Athens, London or European Football Championship in Lisbon etc.) which fundamentally changed the entire built materiality of four of its metropolises.

This particular project of the built environment’s reconstruction not only created profit but also contributed to the engineering of the new socio-cultural capitalist subjectivities and relationships. For example, in the case of Eastern Europe, these subjects had to get used to the world of private automobility, the private housing market, the cosmology of super markets or malls, the new capitalist social hierarchies, etc. Similarly, the West was being reengineered socially, first of all quantitatively, thanks to the intake of human and financial resources and accelerated growth, but also qualitatively. The post-world war II housing policies, that were much more extended and inclusive in comparison to the current ones, since the 1990s were replaced with increasing expansion of private forms of property, financialisation of real estate and related price manipulation changing most of the Western European metropolises and their demographics beyond recognition within 2 decades. As these lines are written, in April of 2018, it was just announced that a champion of affordable housing in the previous decade, Berlin, is the European city with the fastest increasing real estate prices. Certainly as I will show below this very same project of construction boom and economic growth is related with the bust that followed, but before going there, one should focus on the other spatial pillar of post-Cold-War Europe.
III. Borders

Apart from this reconstruction of the built environment, the post-Cold War era also had another significant spatial dimension. Following 1990, an ongoing process of internal and external reconfiguration of the European borders ensued. Primarily, the new borders created a new privileged European space and identity, which was promising or even providing the dreams of wealth and growth alongside those of a supposed territorial/cultural exclusivity.

However that process of symbolic and territorial integration between Western and Eastern Europeans to a new European identity was only a gradual process. The sudden collapse of the main division between socialist and capitalist Europe made the previous internal Western division between Core Western Europe (e.g. Germany, BENELUX) and Peripheral Western Europe (e.g. Ireland and Mediterranean countries) much less significant. In fact, given the common capitalist history, the Western periphery and Western core shared commonalities in comparison to the Easterners. Events such as the wars in Yugoslavia or the brief Albanian Civil War (1997) were attributed mostly to the primary ‘sin’ of communism and were used to confirm the former distinction, where the West had to intervene to ‘civilize’ the East of Europe. Despite the various infrastructural cross-border projects between EU and non-EU member countries on the continent that were promoted since the early 1990s, which attempted to materialize the new links, the new United Europe’s identification processes became problematic (see Dalakoglou 2017). The division had strong roots as for over 50 years the archetypal enemy were the ‘other’ Europeans and, as the Otranto tragedy shows, overcoming such old divisions is a long and hard process. So this is a clockwork symbolic bomb in the very project of (not that) united Europe.
The EU/non-EU borders became the favored arena for testing, developing and shaping the policies of ‘Fortress-Europe’. Indeed as more and more Eastern European countries enter the EU or gain potential member status, the geopolitical border is constantly redrawn. It is for example worth noting how within just two decades the Western governments’ attitude towards the Easterners who crossed the borders of the old EU of the 12 member states, has radically altered. When the first Eastern migrants started crossing the (former) iron curtain towards the West, Western governments perceived this as a political success and as a positive development, which indisputably manifested the defeat of the enemy – the socialist regimes. However, only within a few months, the Eastern Europeans became an undesired flow for EU member countries. And yet, one after the other, the former infidels prove their fidelity to some of the most savage versions of the market economy and are welcomed into the EU. Despite this gradual inclusion of many Eastern European countries to the EU, the usual zones of the inexpensive sex or gambling industries along the old East/West European borders -irrelevant of EU membership status for the Eastern neighbor- are an explicit witness of the fact that the whole process of division and compartmentalization between East and Western Europeans is indeed ongoing.

So, currently we are witnessing the next stage of this ongoing identity crisis of the supposed common European identity. It is the turn of Eastern Europe to claim its right to European-ness and Western-ness over the bodies of the new Others, precisely as the periphery of Western Europe did in the 1990s over the bodies of Eastern European migrants. Exactly as Greece or South Italy, Ireland or Spain saw in the 1990s and early 2000s their own ‘economic miracles’ after the collapse of socialism, largely thanks to the influx of economic and symbolic resources to the Western capitalist economic system from Eastern Europe, similarly the Eastern European elites confirm their upgrade into the hierarchies of Europe via the new 'Others' and
especially based on the boundary. A good example is Albania. In the 1990s in Greece the phrase 'I became an Albanian' was commonly used to express that someone works hard for very little money and under generally bad conditions of exploitation. This was very much the case for most Albanian migrants in the 1990s, as the Greek government made sure that until 2001 almost no Albanian will be able to acquire green card, thus a country of 10 million people got over a million 'illegal' migrants as an inexpensive labour force, boosting local and national economy. In February 2016, the Albanian PM of the Socialist Party, announced that he would seal off the borders of his country against Syrian refugees using it as a passage on their way to Northern Europe via Greece.

At the same time, several Balkan countries came to an agreement with Austria to seal off their own borders, thus closing down the Balkan corridors to refugees. Meanwhile, the Hungarian governmental practices highlights a growing trend within the Eastern European states of the EU of openly racist and anti-refugee rhetoric and policy. In early 2016 the Dutch Presidency of the EU silently accepted all these tactics and decisions. Greece's and Frontex security measures in combination with the EU-Turkey agreement leads to an entrapment of millions of Syrians and other refugees in Turkey, providing again inexpensive labour in the struggling Turkish economy. Nevertheless, there is something important in this connection, the relative tolerance towards Hungary and other far-Right and anti-refugee governments in Eastern Europe which break the EU agreement to host proportionally refugees, simply confirms that Western Europe sees this as a disturbing side-effect of the proper inclusion of Eastern European states to the common European identity. In fact the only attractive part of EU membership since the EU is in fact running out of financial resources to maintain the promises of the economic neoliberal dream of unlimited economic growth for everyone that never came.
Taking the internal European divisions even further we see novel forms of old divides remerging, PIIGS as the new infidels of the proper capitalism versus the careful Northern Europeans who do not 'spend their money to alcohol and women' as the Dutch Minister of Finance claimed in 2017, echoes precisely the predominant until the end of the Cold War divide between the core and periphery of old EU members. Even worse given all the new divides and alliances (e.g. see the agreements between the states of the former Austro-Hungarian empire regarding the refugee flows) one can safely state that Europe faces an unrepresented crisis of its supposed collective identity since the end of the Cold War.

Europeans were forced to spend decades hating each other, Socialist regimes disseminated fear and hate to their citizens for the Westerners and vice versa, governments of core North Western Europe was disseminating fear for the Western periphery and vice versa etc. These became the dominant schemes of creating collective national and regional identities orchestrated by ideological and violent state apparatuses for decades. So in spite of the million of EUROS spent on cross-border infrastructures, on trans-Europeans and inter-European corridors, highways, railways, natural gas pipelines etc. it will take generations until the symbolic and economic divides within Europe to be bridged. Meanwhile, the crisis came, making the buy of consent unsustainable. If EU and the individual European governments had until recently the resources to finance all these major public works, bail out the banking sectors that generated too much money in the markets via credit economy, promising to the Europeans indebted os State sponsored middle class lifestyles, the crisis brought an end to this utopia of unlimited growth and the related positive identifications. So an emphasis on the undisputed common 'Other' (the non-European refugees) and on the boundaries that divide Europeans from these Others can potentially serve the purpose of holding together -for now- this divided population.
IV. The 'Actual Existing' Crisis

So, another reason that European governments emphasize so much the spatial column of Fortress-Europe is precisely because the other spatial column of the post-cold war European dream is collapsing together with the 2008 crisis. This pillar in tangible everyday life terms was that of a private house for everyone, Easterner or Westerner. A private house/investment that would transform everyone into a micro-capitalist as house prices would rise *in perpetuum*. Nevertheless, despite the final boost that outlets such as airbnb or State-sponsored mortgages industry have offered to house-owners, in reality this dream seems to vanish. The mortgage industry that bails out the failed European banking sector leads to the occupation of real estate from the financial institutes leading to prices being manipulated artificially so much that the latest generation, the so-called millennials, are met with the peak of this financial bubble and are increasingly excluded from that so praised asset: the private house. It is since World War II that we have so many young adults in Europe living with their parents. Meanwhile, inflation in real estate prices is mirrored in products and services while real wages decrease as workloads increase in the European too late capitalism. So we have a young European generation with very little in comparison to their parents' generation. Simultaneously, the soft infrastructural provisions of social democracy that were part of the parcel, are also vanishing under the triumphal neoliberal configuration of post-Cold-War Europe, childcare, healthcare or care for the elders, social housing etc. are not here anymore as safety nets. After all that was part of the excuse for Fortress-Europe: 'Europe cannot take care of its own citizens' how can we care for so many refugees? Simultaneously, the typical economic circle of capitalism has its risks, it eventually will turn once again, the real estate bubble will burst in certain cities, so an enormous amount of the European population will potentially be trapped owning real estate in negative equity, condemned not just to repay huge mortgages but to bail out local and international banking sectors *ad infinitum*. The case of Spain where riot police evict people who cannot afford to pay their mortgages or the Greek courthouses where the house confiscations need to be
approved in courtrooms occupied by riot police to keep the protesters out, the ghost suburbs of Ireland, built by developers during the boom and who went bust overnight, the empty holiday villages of Spain, the abandoned infrastructures of excess all around Europe are all potential images of the collective European future. A future that scares European citizens. Britain has already opted to leave the EU as reaction, whilst the rest of the forces that support the dissolution of the EU were enhanced during the elections that took place over the last two years.

V. Rescuing Europe?

After the outbreak of the European Financial Crisis in 2008, one of the main spatial pillars of the post-Cold War Europe – the mass transformation of the built environment and real estate and the related economic growth – has either been deregulated or has slowed dramatically (see Dalakoglou 2017b). Meanwhile, the schisms within the hypothetically common European identity are deeper than ever before since the foundation of the EEC. In light of such events the only main spatial axis of reference of post-Cold War Europe that remains intact but at the same time seems like a necessity to emphasize on, is the border securitization. Thus, I suggest that the refugees in 2015 came like a deus ex machina, to rescue Europe from its deep political and economic crises.

The refugee flow was instantly declared by all European governments as a 'crisis'. The claim was that the richest continent in the world could not afford to rescue and carry out the welfare of 2-3 million people who crossed its common borders over a period of two years. Seeing this flow in comparison to other recent Even basic principles that Europe was supposedly a champion of and had in the past pointed the finger to other places for not applying them, such
as the respect for the right to life, protection of children, the right to mobility etc. were sacrificed instantly. Allegedly, the Belgian Minister of Migration proposed to its Greek counterpart that they 'should let them drown' as a policy of prevention of the refugee flows, as the Greek Minister of Migration admitted (New Europe 2016). Refugee flows were reinvented as pan-European emergency, which we are all facing and which became the means of governing the entire continent, and blackmailing social consent at the time that most European political elites are struggling to get some consent to their policies.

In early 2016 the whole humanitarian refugee tragedy that unfolded along the Syrian-Balkan corridor was of little importance -if any at all- compared to the question of the region’s border policing. Europe’s leaders have spent their time negotiating where exactly the European borders lie, to which countries Europe will externalize the refugees and how it will guard its common borders in order to decrease the flow of refugees and filter people through. The life of a few million human beings became a secondary question to be debated by the European leadership – acceptable collateral damage for the protection of European spatial exclusivity. The only spatial privilege that can be provided by the common EU these days, phenomenally cost-free for EU citizens. On the one hand, this securitisation of the common EU border is one of the last things that might hold Europe together; on the other hand, this process exhibits more and more explicitly elements from what Marc Mazower (1999) has called the history of our ‘Dark Continent’. Europe is not only the continent that became, in the Post-World War Two era, the champion of human rights, refugee rights, bourgeois democracy, etc., but also the continent that produced Nazism and Fascism, and previously had produced very effective versions of colonialism, imperialism and the genocide of various populations characterized as inferior and undesired ‘Others’.
Dimitris Dalakoglou is the Professor of Social Anthropology at Vrije University Amsterdam.

References


---

1 A previous version of this article was published in the journal City vol 20(2). The current version was written as I am being funded from a VIDI Innovative research grant of NWO for my project infra-demos.net but parts of these ideas were developed as part of my project crisis-scapes.net funded by an ESRC Future Research Leaders grant. I wish to thank Fotis Vergis, Eva Nanopoulos, David Harvey, Anna Christofides, Christos Filippidis, Anna Richter and Bob Catterall for discussing with me some of the ideas appearing in this article over the last three years. The first notes for this brief paper were written during my visiting position at CUNY Graduate Center; the paper was completed for my Lecture in Amsterdam Anthropology Lecture Series at Vrije University Amsterdam, largely thanks to the academic environment of these two places I am thus thankful to the colleagues in these two institutions.