REFUGEE CRISIS, VULNERABILITY AND ETHICS OF COHABITATION

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The ethics of liberation has no desire to appear to be some kind of novelty. It wishes instead to appear as the updated version of a millenarian tradition that has been trodden underfoot by the cynicism of globalizing capitalism, which struts about as if it were the maximum exponent of science and reason, when in truth it amounts to a decadent ethics of irrationality which is deaf to the pain of its victims.[1]

In 2015 our world was faced with the photography of the death of a three-year old migrant child Aylan Kurdi. Syrian poet Adonis characterized this young child from Syria as a paradigm of a totally innocent victim, comparable even to Christ. This ethically impossible death of a child was one of the last calls, sent to us – as members of *one* global community – to rethink the nature of our civic lives and the scope of our compassions in this world.

Related to this tragic event, and related events, the purpose of this essay is to question some politicoethical responses to the current migration crisis. According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 30,000 refugees and migrants died in the Mediterranean Sea alone trying to reach Europe from the year 2000 onwards.[2] These events and the consequences they bear have not yet been discussed sufficiently in an ethical framework. This calls for a new attention regarding some of the most fundamental questions of humanity, which, as a consequence, should influence further research in humanities and social sciences, especially in contemporary philosophy (political ethics), but also in theology (political theology), sociology and political geography, and in

[1] Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 451.

[2] See "Mediterranean migrant arrivals," International Organization for Migration, accessed September 2, 2018, https://www.iom.int/.

various approaches to migration which could be labelled with what Shé Hawke calls "an ontology of asylum".[3] It is an awareness that we would like to raise – to confront the problems of our age, which Zygmunt Bauman designated as an age of the loss of sensitivity. Enrique Dussel, the Argentinian-Mexican theologian and philosopher of liberation, also claims in his *Ethics of Liberation* that there is a need for new ethical criterion in today's unjust world.[4] Dussel is a radical critic of the prevalent world system, demanding from so many people to search for the new opportunities by risking their lives – and lives of their children – facing various borders or obstacles. The consequences, as translated into our political and economic systems and lives, of the loss of sensitivity toward, and grave injustice experienced by real individuals traversing the Mediterranean, and other parts of Europe and elsewhere in the world, must be interrogated. We might yet discover that we are all much more connected than we have ever been willing to admit.

Upon his 2013 visit of Lampedusa, Pope Francis – in his speech about the indifference of *our* global community – posited the following ethical question: *Has any one wept? Today has anyone wept in our world?*[5] We could in this sense be reminded of an ancient story from the Bible – the story of Cain and Abel, in which, through the interpretation of St. Augustine, Cain founded a city, whereas Abel, a pilgrim, did not found one. It is on this basis that, in a profoundly politico-ethical *and* theological manner, Mariano Barbato proposes a new political theology and indeed political ethics, based on St. Augustine's theory of the state (*Civitas Dei*). These thoughts of Barbato are based on an ethics of the twofold constellation – of a terrestrial, or earthly city *vs*. heavenly, or utopian City of God. The earlier is the Pilgrim City, in which *all of us* (global community) are striving to overcome our selfish bounderies (later this will translate into the ethics of vulnerability): *we all* are pilgrims

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[3] Referring to "ontology of asylum" as expressed in Hawke's chapter "Graft versus Host: Waters that Convey and Harbors that Reject Liminal Subjects – Toward a New Ethics of Hospitality," in *Borders and Debordering: Topologies, Praxes, Hospitableness,* eds. Tomaž Grušovnik, Eduardo Mendieta and Lenart Škof (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 198.

[4] Cf. Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation;* see on this aspect of a new materially sensitive ethics especially ch. 4 of his book.

[5] See Pope Francis, *Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of the Holy Father* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

in our lives, and it is our task, as humans, to overcome our selfishness by sharing what we have in common with the others.[6] Derrida's idea of a *city of refuge* further represents this thought, which endows the old concept of the city with new meaning: one being sensitive to vulnerable bodies and identities, and thus being of a kind of *another politics of the city.* This guides us towards the new thinking regarding a community, and towards a new future kind of cohabitation on this Earth.[7] For all those, who have lost their autonomy and have instead become extremely vulnerable to external conditions of their lives (food, security, shelter, autonomy, education, work, but also play for children) *there is no shelter in our cities and in our communities*. All these profound messages are not limited to only one community, one religion, or one single church, but are a part of a universal, or cosmopolitan idea of a future community, based on closely related politico-ethical ideals of hospitality and justice.

In this essay we wish to discuss two basic concepts of contemporary political ethics: community and vulnerability. Our argument is that in response to the migration and refugee crisis, an ethico-democratic response needs to be offered, one that is infused with an imaginaive capacity for both remembrance as well as for a future hope. In his beautiful essay "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization", Cornel West states:

> What I find so fascinating is that when we talk about the future of capitalist civilization – with the U.S empire in decline and its culture in decay – and its democratic possibilities waning, can we imagine having a public discourse without there being voices – not just echoes, voices – keeping track of the catastrophic, so that unaccountable elites at the top don't run amok with greed and narrow empathy and truncated imagination?[8]

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[6] Mariano Barbato, "Pilgrim City or Belonging beyond the State: St. Augustine, Pope Francis and the Refugee Crisis," in *The Refugee Crisis and Religion*, eds. Luca Maveli and Erin Wilson (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 132f.

[7] On the "city of refugee" see Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 8.

[8] Cornel West, "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere,* eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 97.

West is a pragmatist with a visionary stance and his trade mark is a prophetic language full of pragmatist hope in the midst of our broken, pervert and narcissistic capitalist culture: it is to expand and broaden our sympathies and compassions, and to expand our imagination towards the impossible, indeed, towards the superabundance of love. These words, namely about the catastrophic (or disastrous) state of our broken culture of cohabitation need to be highlighted. We may ask ourselves: in what culture do we live today? Are not the old Biblical words – *to love the orphan, the widow, the stranger* – more needed in our world than ever? What these thoughts therefore bring us is that empathy and faith for a better future should be more related to and intertwined into our politics than we have recognised before.

The ethical question to pose – on community and vulnerability – is ultimately the question of justice: from Levinas or Derrida to Caputo we know that the name of justice should be hope – hope for the cohabitation in a future civilization, being in a close proximity to the secular-eschatological hope – if we may paraphraze the late Rorty –, "that some day my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law".[9] This thought thus rests on a certain superabundance of imagination and related ideals of political ethics, which were always so vital for the American pragmatists, as it is the case with John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, or R. M. Unger – who claims in his *The Religion of the Future* that it is perhaps our only real task to hope for greater love, the higher forms of cooperation, and, perhaps most importantly, that we need to live through accepting the vulnerability we all are sharing. According to Unger:

> The first context is personal love, founded upon the imagination of the other and a heightened acceptance of vulnerability and resulting, when it survives, in our most complete experience of success in reconciling the contradictory requirements self-assertion.[10]

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[9] Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40. On the issue of religion and social justice see also Richard Rorty, *An Ethics for Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[10] Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 375.

An indispensable part of this process is also compassion and a higher awareness of being a part of a community. From this view any loss of human life and its potentials is a sign of grave injustice, and a catastrophe from the ethical point of view. It is for this reason that according to Benjamin, we may even look at the history as such as a catastrophe, a pile of debris, or simply as a place of immense suffering – wasted potential of too many precious persons drowned, killed … – but also and despite all this – as a place where recurrent hope for a future community and its immanent peaceful cohabitation is reborn.[11]

For the purpose of this essay we propose that, apart from the well-known (mainly Far-right) populist responses within politics, we basically have two lines of approaches to the current refugee crisis in the academia: the first one would be oriented more towards political economy, and the second more towards political ethics. Regarding the political economy approach it is appropriate to consider a brief analysis and a critical address of the recent intervention of a group of thinkers, gathered around Slavoj Žižek. In *The Final Countdown: Europe, Refugees and the Left,* we find a series of critical and innovative interventions, basically dedicated to the crisis of the liberal Left in Europe. It seems that the main idea for Žižek in his essay "Terrorists with a Human Face" is that the effects of various humanitarian and ethical appeals to com-

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[11] I think of his famous "Theses On the Concept of History" (cf. for citation Judith Butler and her chapter in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere,* eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 81ff.). Cf, here Benjamin's answer to Horkheimer's letter, in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 6: "On the question of incompleteness of history, Horkheimer's letter of March 16, 1937: 'The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain. If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgement. Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable (…).' The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance <*Eingedenken*>. What science has 'determined', remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts."

passion and solidarity regarding the current refugee crisis "are null".[12] These and related appeals would of course more typically come from the Left. Žižek also criticizes another typical "leftist" trait – namely the self-culpabilization of Europe – as visible, for example, in various accounts about "murderous Europe leaving thousands of drowned bodies at its borders" which, again, do not have any emancipatory potential for him whatsoever. Ultimately, humanitarian approach, for Žižek, transforms "a politico-economic problem into a moral one" and thus – using Dante's *Divina comedia* – for all these humanitarians in deep circle of hell a very special place has kindly been reserved by Žižek. A general observation of *The Final Countdown* could be that the Left has not provided an alternative to the global capitalism, and that, if we focus on the current refugee crisis, we do not get any better. In this context, according to another contributor from this volume, Agon Hamza, when the Left is weak, "the economic crises do not open up the field for a radical emancipatory project, but rather they necessitate the rise of populism, wars, poverty, and greater social division".[13] The Far Right takes over, as a consequence, and the circle is closed. Even worse, by patronizing and *humanizing* of the refugees, the Left itself infantilizes the entire group of people, and thus itself becomes racist, according to Hamza. The economic causes, and capitalism as such, remain intact and, again, the crisis is depoliticized. What is to be done, then? What should the radical emancipatory project presuppose? How should we go on? Our argument is that despite such criticism we still need to insist on an ethical approach, since nothing else could provide us with a better tool for coping with the current crisis of global capitalism, and for the prospects of its overcoming.

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[12] Slavoj Žižek, "Terrorists with a Human Face," in *The Final Countdown: Europe, Refugees, and the Left*, ed. Jela Krečič (Ljubljana and Vienna: IRWIN & Wiener Festwochen, 2017), 196. Cf. also his reflection on the problem of suffering on the shores of Lampedusa and at similar places across the Mediterranean: "The other dimension is the tragi-comic spectacle of the endless self-culpabilization of Europe, which allegedly betrayed its humanity; of a murderous Europe leaving thousands of drowned bodies at its borders – a self-serving exercise with no emancipatory potential whatsoever." (195) One may ask why a simple, but ethically profound humanitarian help might need to be related to any emancipatory potential at all?

[13] Ibid., 174.

The remaining paragraphs of this essay defend and therefore preserve ethical and humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis, but by focusing on another paradigm – the politico-ethical thought. If in these difficult times we again sacrifice (as it was done by Communist movements) ethics to (political) economy, we are in danger. Let us try to outline a proposal of an ethics which could perhaps revive democratic emancipatory project, and, quite in an experimental pragmatist manner, deepen and strengthen our political sensibilities and democratic vistas far beyond mere critical or even cynical approaches. We know from John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* the famous principle called the *veil of ignorance*. The principle assumes that, in advance, or, within the imagined original position, "no one really knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abililites, his intelligence and strength, and the like".[14] The principle is an excellent social proviso and has an immense ethical potential. This potential was beautifully developed or extended, and indeed radicalized into a new ethical maxim by Clemens Sedmak. The new maxim is now based on vulnerability and fragility of our lives, and our existence as such. In his essay "Peace, Vulnerability, and Human Imagination" Sedmak labels it with the name a *wound of knowledge,* and explains it with the following thoughts:

> What does it mean to live life with a wound of knowledge that makes the experience of vulnerability tangible and thick and unavoidable? Or, suppose I know now that I will end my life suffering with Alzheimer's disease, in dependence and helplessness, suffering from experiences of loss and confusion – how would I live my life now? (…) A wound of knowledge makes it easier for us to accept that behind our roles, and the masks we often wear, we are all vulnerable and struggling human beings, whose hearts are more needy than we would dare to admit at times.[15]

This maxim might serve as the most radical critique of capitalism and nationalism, and their anti-immigration and anti-refugee political narratives, and represents an ethical response to the broken laws

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[14] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 118.
[15] Clemens Sedmak, "Peace, Vulnerability, and Human Imagination," in *The Poesis of Peace: Narratives, Cultures, and Philosophies*, eds. Klaus-Gerd Giesen, Carool Kersten and Lenart Škof (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 33.

of our global community ("Suppose I know now that I will end my life being displaced, in a refugee camp, with my family, suffering from experiences of loss and confusion – how would I live my life now?") To imagine a future political ethics based on mutual recognition of our vulnerability, fragility and, at least at times in our lives, *humility,* is what is missing in our political order of neoliberal capitalism. Vulnerability is thus my first concept: with Cornel West – this is Greek *ananke*, radical finitude and fallibility in the midst of our lives. And it demands another kind of a politics, perhaps even into a new political theology, one being attuned to the one and only possible credo of *any* religion, as posited by our prophetic pragmatist – and this is from George Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine*: "Religion is the love of life in the consciousness of impotence."[16] How could this politico-ethico-theological emotion be translated into the life of community as a form of cohabitation? This is my second, and final concept in this essay. According to Judith Butler in her essay "Is Judaism Zionism",

> we must actively preserve the nonchosen character of inclusive and plural cohabitation: we not only live with those we never chose, and to whom we may feel no social sense or belonging, but we are also obliged to preserve those lives and the plurality of which they form a part. In this sense, concrete political norms and ethical prescriptions emerge from the unchosen character of these modes of cohabitation. To cohabit the earth is prior to any possible community or nation or neighborhood. We may choose where to live, and who to live by, but we cannot choose with whom to cohabit the earth.[17]

This is the principle of community. It includes the acceptance of an enhanced vulnerability, and is an immanent critique of the prevailing selfish and brutal neoliberal capitalist order. We have to resist the disastrous capitalism, not only by fighting on political level but first and foremost by strenghtening our ethical sensibilities, which is the ideal of any cohabitation on this earth. Ideally, for those rare individuals, following this path, this communal ethics could be extended even to *exiling oneself to the other as he or she is* (Agamben)[18] – to offer hospitality to

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16 For citation see West, "Prophetic Religion," 94.

17 Butler, "Is Judaism Zionism," 84.

18 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 23. This citation refers to Agamben's elaboration on

those in need, exiled, persecuted, raped, tortured. Hospitality that was not offered to Alyan Kurdi. This substitution of oneself for the other – first of me to myself within the *wound of knowledge* maxim, followed by the substitution as taking-place of other (symbolically, or by a concrete act of hospitality), is the gesture of offering out of the most precious gift we may have – a gift from our vulnerable, fragile and compassionate being. For Agamben, finally, this compassionate gesture represents "an unconditioned substitutability, without either representation or possible description – an absolutely unrepresentable community".[19]

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Louis Masignon and his concept of Badaliya or substitution – which means *substituting someone for someone else* – now in a deep anti-žižekian ethical sense.

[19] Ibid.

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