Claudia Tazreiter, PhD
Associate Professor of Sociology
UNSW
c.tazreiter@unsw.edu.au

A crisis of political imaginary: categorising mobile populations and the ambivalence of a categorised life

In this paper the labeling of refugee arrivals as 'crisis' is turned on its head to reveal instead a crisis of political imaginary. The paper has at its heart the circumstances of refugees through considering time as a concept and a technique conditioning the social context of relationships as well as the administrative context of the state. Time is experienced socially in making and remaking human communities, identities and relational connections through past, present and future orientation. Time has also been instrumentalised and technologised as a device of capitalist accumulation, set in train as processes to discipline and extract value from populations.

What I argue for in this paper is broader recognition of the coextensive elements of human experience and sociality as well as the weighty imposition of the dominant economic system (neoliberal capital) in the atomising and erosion of cooperation and fellow feeling, witnessed in the context of refugee arrivals as social distance that fosters turning away from the harms of indefinite off-shore detention, of interdiction and push backs. The Australian Government's *Operation Sovereign Borders* has frozen time for asylum seekers, taking away the capacity for future horizons and dehumanising life in the present.

I will draw on recent research conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia with asylum seekers subject to the changing policy environment in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. These asylum seekers, as 'irregular migrants' are living lives of 'permanent impermanence' in transit in these two countries that do not offer protection under the Refugee Convention or any prospects for resettlement. I draw on their narratives of survival in everyday life.

Introduction

Donald Trump is the US President Elect, and the British people voted to leave the European Union. Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front Nationalê is currently the front-runner in France's presidential elections to be held in 2017. In Austria, Norbert Hofer of the far-right Freedom Party may well become the new president after a re-run of elections to be held in early December.

I could list many other examples of nation-states in various parts of the world where a turn to neo-nationalist, anti-immigrant rhetoric has not only been a fringe irritation but is having demonstrable impact on government policy, on legislative agendas and public attitudes as well as on everyday life in towns, cities and neighbourhoods. In many parts of the world, immigrants and most recently refugees and asylum seekers, are the focus of such hate talk and increasingly punitive policies focused on borders. This is also certainly true here in Australia, confounding in a successful multicultural, immigrant society.

I want to challenge the notion of refugee arrivals as 'crisis'. Rather, I see the crisis as one of political imaginary. My talk has at its heart the circumstances of refugees through considering time as a concept and a technique conditioning the social context of relationships as well as the administrative context of the state. Time is experienced socially in making and remaking human communities, identities and relational connections through past, present and future orientation. Time is also a key aspect of very modern systems of rationalities imposed on humans through various disciplining techniques.

What I will argue for is broader recognition of the shared elements of human experience and sociality and to highlight the effects of the dominant economic system (neoliberal capital) in atomising and eroding the qualities of cooperation and 'fellow feeling'. In the context of refugee arrivals this atomising is evident as social distance that leads to a turning away from the harms of indefinite off-shore detention, of interdiction, push backs and so on that we know so well in the Australian context. The Australian Government's *Operation Sovereign Borders* has for example, frozen time for asylum seekers, taking away the capacity for future horizons and dehumanising life in the present.

Considering time in our lives and the specifics of time for irregular migrants

Time has a sociological context – both as a key aspect of human sociality and as a device of capitalist accumulation and the contemporary global political economy. First, human sociability means that time moderates how humans organise and structure life and its living – into communities, villages and later nation-states, towns, cities, suburbs, enclaves and so on. What I am pointing to here is the human capacity for future orientation, planning, the deferral of wants and desires in the present, and importantly the use of individual, social

and collective memories and memory making processes that accumulate to shaping how the present is understood, experienced, lived.

Human life is marked through the life course, through generations and the relation and dependencies between generations. We need each other to survive – evident in sharp relief at the two ends of a human life and at various points of vulnerability in between (illness, disability, unemployment) – things we, or those whom we care for, all experience at some point.

For irregular migrants, time is experienced through the withdrawal of 'normal life' through the weight of being in 'non places' of detention, removal and non-resolution. In these 'zones of exception' time is truly frozen and discontinuous. In this sense we can say the people in such circumstances are disappeared.

The freezing or suspension of time has the effect of erasure. That is, the irregular migrant, the person without rights and the visibilities that rights and belonging grant, is incrementally removed from the imaginary of those living in 'real time' – with a past, a present and a future. The collective 'we' that have a passport or passports and citizenship or citizenships in countries that count, that matter, more easily overlook, set aside or cannot even imagine the circumstances of those who have a life experience outside what seems possible and imaginable. Can we imagine losing three years or five years of life as those in offshore detention? Having that time suspended, with no normality of social, cultural, relational flows? No planning for the months and years ahead, crafting the development of life and capabilities for self, family, friends, community?

Such a person and such an experience is outside the realm of the possible and the imaginable. It raises a barrier that like a membrane over time thickens, becomes opaque and hardens – with the patina of time. And that returns me to Trump's Americans – the long-term unemployed on the scrap-heap of post-industrial modernity also experience a kind of disappearance and invisibility – in the freezing of time through long-term unemployment – though I am in no way suggesting an equivalence with the experience of asylum seekers stuck in transit (in Indonesia or Malaysia for example), much less those subject to Australia's extreme policies of off-shore 'disappearance' in indefinite immigration detention.

I turn now to briefly consider the role of time in social theory and some key interventions and concepts that allow greater clarity for understanding the predicament of the present.

Cataclysms of change, revolutions and wars always reference time. The past and contested collective memories of the past are part of, often central to, the root causes of all war and conflict. The most radical change human societies have undergone though, is through industrialisation and the technologisation of life. Most recently, our very relations have altered in such a fundamental way through object relations – our devices have become our close friends. For many post-industrial elites – but also the remaining hollowed out middle class – object relations trump other forms of relation (pardon the pun). Industrial capitalism since the mid 18th century has captured us through the allocation of value through time, understood today as billable hours and minutes. In addition, the socio/philosophical concept of time/space compression – which we colloquially call globalisation – has had considerable impacts on how we live. Think of the global reach of technologies that transmit signals, signs, meaning, information and money in compressed milliseconds.

This new experience of time is at the same moment liberating and enslaving. Take the 'Fitbit' watch. Do we need really need to know how many steps we take each day or have we become enslaved to our devices?

It is salient to be reminded of the Marxian prediction highlighted in contemporary times by Marshal Berman's analysis of late modernity – which we are arguably still living through;

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men and women are at last compelled to face with sober senses, their real conditions of life, and their relations with their kind.[1]

---

[1] Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition, 1978, Norton, Translation by Samuel Moore 1888, pp.475-76.

<u>Case study – asylum seeker voices</u>

I turn now to draw on two recent research projects with asylum seekers in transit in Indonesia[2] and Malaysia[3] – to highlight their experience of time.

Asylum seekers, as 'irregular migrants' are living in 'permanent impermanence' in transit. I draw on some of their narratives and voices of survival in everyday life. The Indonesian research was conducted with Iranian and Afghani asylum seekers in multiple locations in Indonesia during 2014 (n=150in-depth interviews). The Malaysian research was conducted in 2015 – also in multiple locations with Rohingya women (n= 350 surveys and n=35 in-depth interviews).

During the interviews difficulties experiences during life in transit were explained by the asylum seekers as resulting from their irregular status, which led to an inability to work and therefore to generate an income. Subsequently many asylum seekers living in the community reported financial difficulties and stress, homesickness for family, friends, community left behind and the uncertainty of how long they would remain in transit. Transit was understood as either waiting to journey to Australia by boat or another destination, or waiting for the outcome of UNHCR protection and resettlement processing.

Indonesia was talked about as a place of transit, en route to another country of safety. Most of the respondents did not anticipate having to stay in Indonesia for a long period of time, thinking that transit would be a matter of days or weeks. However, on learning of closed boat passages to Australia and limited access to the UNHCR registration processes, many of the respondents experienced longer periods of transit than anticipated.

"It's relatively hard. I'm just staying until the time comes for me to go. Everyone here is in the same position. We are all waiting." [Cisarua_Iranian_Male_09_AK]

"…we are not living here, we are just taking breath, we are just breathing here, we don't have a life of a human, so please help us do something for us. We lack financial support,

[2] Pickering S, Tazreiter, C, Powell, R and Barry, J (2016) 'Information consumption and decision making of irregular migrants in Indonesia' Research Programme, *Occasional Paper Series*, DIBP, Australian Government, No. 19, pp. 1-43.

[3] Tazreiter C, Pickering, S and Powell R (2016 forthcoming) 'Women's decision-making and information sharing in the course of irregular migration' Research Programme, *Occasional Paper Series*, DIBP, Australian Government No. 21, pp. 1-67.

we are jobless, we cannot work, we don't have the right to work, we have heard about lots of people who have spent two years here and then what shall I say, they got crazy because of this situation and they had a lot of psychological problems, you have to wait and you don't have money, you cannot support yourself…"
[Cisarua_Afghan_3xM_098,099and100_TE]

"Here we are so much frustrated; we can't make a living, our children don't go to school, our children cannot get good education and we cannot pay, we cannot afford medical treatment and all these problems have made us frustrated, have made our life here very difficult, those are the main problems," [Cisarua_Iranian_M&F_122&123_TE]

I will turn now briefly to some examples from the Malaysian research conducted with Rohingya women asylum seekers in transit in Malaysia. Despite the fact that the majority of women in the study had intended Malaysia to be their final destination when they left, the difficulty of life for Rohingya in Malaysia was unexpected for many. This is reflected in the findings, with the majority of women stating that living in Malaysia is more difficult than they had expected. Of the total (350), 315 women (90%) reported having no form of income in Malaysia and 77% reported that they had no access to healthcare. 58% had UNHCR identification cards, though such documentation does not allow holders to work legally or to access Malaysian medical care.

These statistics are also reflected in the women's descriptions of the difficulties of their life in Malaysia. The precarious nature of their status (as illegal immigrants according to the state, impacts on quality of life; one woman reported that 'she has no UN card, cannot travel or move around easily, and is scared of the police' (AMPANG_DE_08). Another spoke of the impact of the financial hardship she experienced in Malaysia saying: 'The difficulties I face in Malaysia, are that we can't live with the small money of my husband's salary' (AMPANG_HS_July10).

Yet, overwhelmingly, the insecure nature of their existence as irregular migrants; and their lack of income, access to adequate healthcare and education opportunities for their children act as strong drivers of onward migration from Malaysia. The major motivation for onward migration is to escape the long-term insecurity that Rohingya face in their everyday life in Malaysia. The findings from this research reinforce the important point that after attaining safety from persecution and violence, access to a secure, sustainable life that offers

reasonable opportunities for access to 'basic rights' such as employment and access to healthcare and education are important factors that condition decisions around onward migration. This also speaks to the significant advocacy from many researchers, non-government organisations and other agencies for more genuine and comprehensive work on regional cooperation on refugee protection.

Findings from the Malaysia research confirm that a lack of opportunities for future orientation, such as being able to plan for children's future is a key driver for onward migration. Those who have access to stability of everyday life with reasonable opportunities are willing to remain where they are, while only those who face situations with little income or poor future prospects for their children have a strong desire to move on. As explained by one respondent, '[life is] better than [in Myanmar] but if possible we want to resettle to a third country … as our life is difficult in Malaysia and we cannot plan for our children's lives (AMPANG_HDA_13July_05).

In Conclusion

To return to where I began, there are two points that I would like to stress. First, let me return to the hollowed out middle class and discarded blue-collar workers that appear to have largely led to the election of Donald Trump. They are certainly not in the same circumstances as the 'surplus populations' that Mike Davis referred to over a decade ago in his critique of developing society contexts, yet their lives 'feel' similar in loss of control, loss of visibility and any predictability for the future.

Trump's disaffected blue collar and lower middle class Americans have one important feature in common with asylum seekers, and that is they have lost future horizons and are also frozen in time – though of course I am not suggesting that their everyday lives are in any way comparable. Trump's Americans have liberty of person and an existential presence – both of which have been stripped from asylum seekers in the extreme circumstances of Manus Island and Nauru, but also living indefinite temporariness in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Nevertheless, global wage equalisation experienced in job losses as manufacturing industries have off-shored over the last three to four decades leaving the 'rust belt' mean that a growing sub-class is also experiencing a kind of frozen time.

Second, the argument that I have built – though admittedly in a preliminary way (due to the constraints of time), is to suggest that the typologies of crisis, migrant crisis, refugee crisis, are political creations of nation-states and also fostered through the intergovernmental system that self-referentially feeds the machine – the machine of capitalist accumulation which today at the sharp end of the neoliberal project is beginning to feed on itself.

But that is a much larger argument and to get back to the matter at hand what I want to suggest is that working from a bottom up perspective – from our everyday lives and highlighting what we have in common, such as the central part that time plays in our social lives – that we live *with* the past rather than despite it, that future orientation, planning, imagining and creatively working on tomorrows rather than being stuck in a repeat feed present – is what makes us truly human.

There is no existential crisis because of human mobility and certainly not because of the 65 million displaced persons and refugees. The existential crisis of our times is rather climate change and the reminder that ensues of our collective turning away from the excesses of consumption, of rampant wage differentials over not just decades but centuries, and the stripping of natural resources from Indigenous populations and lands without proper recompense.

The focus on irregular arrivals as the crisis point for countries such as Australia, enacted through punishing people due to their mode of arrival is a diversion from the pressing problems and abuses that if unchecked do point to an 'end times' scenario.

But my paper also has a hopeful message with which I want to end. And I turn it into a question for you all. Is it possible to imagine a different kind of politics – one where what is common among persons is brought to the fore? Is a new politics that recognises a 'becoming world' based on immanent interconnections[4] possible?

---

[4] Rosi Braidotti, 'The Contested Posthumanities' in Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy (editors). 2016. *Conflicting Humanities*, Bloomsbury, London 9-46.

This would mean recognising that we are all constantly in creation and recreation *with* others as social beings. Such a 'politics of becoming' does not rest merely on sympathy with the asylum seeker frozen time, but rather prioritises a fundamental shift in subjectivity, our subjectivity – realigning the 'me' as well as the 'us' (of inward looking neo-nationalism) to the 'we' – the whole, not the sum of its parts that is premised always in reference to the outsider, the other. And all of this to foster political will that prioritises continuities over discontinuities, flows over ruptures.