

Rethinking the outdated terminology of migration.

Academics have long written about the impact of press reporting on migration and asylum issues and the effect of labelling on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Their findings clearly show how predominantly negative labels being repeated and entrenched has a detrimental consequence for how we perceive migrants and asylum seekers.

More recently, commentators have also started discussing the semantic inaccuracy of terms like 'refugee' and '(economic) migrant', by arguing that differentiating between migrants and refugees is often arbitrary and detrimental to the way we (do not) understand complex and mutable phenomena.

In the last couple of years (2015-16), media operators and policy makers have actually been at pains to distinguish between groups of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe, noting that there are technical legal arguments to guide terminology as well as familiar tropes that we encounter through the use of one term or another, such as 'economic migrant' and 'refugee'. In order to overcome this rigid demarcation, the expression 'mixed migration' has been often used to bridge the blurry distinction between people who leave their homes due to political persecution and those who suffer economic hardship, acknowledging that the two can be related in situations of displacement and refugee outflows.

However, 'mixed migration' seems to be problematic as well: 1) it still ties public opinions to the word 'migration', which brings along with it polarizing attitudes towards migration, 2) it often serves the interests of politicians to refer to everyone crossing the Mediterranean as illegal migrants, 3) and it does not seem to be functional when a more specific and comprehensive understanding of individual stories is needed. On the other hand, more established terms like 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' have been seen as inappropriate too: their definition is still dictated by the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not take into account that since the Refugee Convention was drafted, global migration patterns have become much more complex and refugees now often travel alongside millions of so-called economic migrants.

The public has been told that "migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve the future prospects of themselves and their families," whereas "refugees have to move if they are to save their lives or preserve their freedom." But the reality is much murkier. People often move for a number of reasons that may include fear of persecution as well as wanting to find better economic opportunities, and they may move more than once. If we considered the case of Eritreans - as in 2013 "the majority of African irregular migrants detected along the Central Mediterranean route were Eritreans" - we see that classifications like 'irregular migrants' or 'economic migrants' are very inaccurate, and do not say much about the real (and long) journeys Eritreans had to embark on, or the different status they may have been granted throughout this journey.

Research and realities have also proven that the driving causes of forced migration are linked and often inextricably bound to each other. For instance, an underage economic migrant from Nigeria might become a trafficking victim along the route, thus qualifying as a “vulnerable person” in need of asylum. On the other hand, a Syrian who flees conflict may later become an impoverished, undocumented migrant in a transit country due to years of unemployment and an expired refugee status.

When commentators do attempt to distinguish between the different groups currently trying to cross the Mediterranean on smugglers’ boats, they tend to designate Syrians and Eritreans as the bona fide asylum-seekers, while the many West Africans arriving in southern Italy are grouped together as “economic migrants”. But again this kind of view ignores the very complex reasons that people set out on such dangerous journeys.

This paper aims to discuss the recent use of the aforementioned terminology (economic migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, etc.), along with the expressions ‘forced migrants’ (mainly used by academics, to acknowledge the many people who migrate unwillingly but don’t fall under the Refugee Convention’s technical definition of a refugee and are therefore not entitled to international protection) and the long debated ‘environmental migrant’/‘environmental refugee’. Examples from the British press and public discourse will be provided, as well as examples documenting the equivalent terminology in use in French, Italian, Spanish and German. The paper also aims to emphasize the need of a redefinition of this terminology. The expanding grey areas in the conditions and experiences of people who

are forced to migrate, require that media outlets, advocacy groups and aid agencies are increasingly confronted with weighing the value judgements and connotations carried by the different terms, and their implications from legal, social and human perspectives.

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