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The Great Uprooting

Migration and Displacement in an Age of Planetary Crisis

I.

MUCH, IF NOT MOST, of my work is about migrants and displaced people, so it is scarcely surprising that the so-called European “migration crisis” of 2014–16” caught my attention. Like millions of others around the world I was riveted by media reports about the refugees who were then making their way to Europe via the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

At a certain point, as I followed the coverage, I noticed something that I couldn’t quite make sense of. The European media were more or less unanimous in claiming that the refugees were from war-torn or economically devastated countries in Africa and the Middle East—Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and so on. But when I looked closely at photographs and television footage I saw many faces that were unmistakably from the Indian subcontinent. Indeed a large number seemed to be from the part of the world where my own origins lie—Bengal.¹

On looking deeper into the matter I learned, from official UN statistics, that Bangladesh was near the top of the list of the countries of origin of the migrants and refugees.² This was completely at odds with the media narrative about refugees fleeing from war-torn and economically devastated countries. There are of course many simmering political conflicts in Bangladesh—as indeed there are in every South Asian country. But the level of violence in Bangladesh does not even begin to approach that of, say, Syria or Afghanistan or Eritrea.³ Nor can it be said that Bangladesh’s economy is in dire straits: the country has actually been one of the top performers globally for the last few years; its growth rate surpassed India’s in 2018. It is a fact also that according to some social indicators Bangladesh has done better than India: average life expectancy in the country is now seventy-two years, as opposed to sixty-eight years in India and sixty-six in Pakistan. Indeed Bangladesh’s performance has been so impressive that a leading economist recently commented

that the country is “on a path that would have been unimaginable just two decades ago: toward becoming an Asian success story.”⁴

Having just published *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, it was perhaps inevitable that I should begin to wonder whether the exodus from the Indian subcontinent was somehow related to climate change. The fact that many of the migrants were from Bangladesh seemed to support this idea.⁵ As is well known, the Bengal delta is extremely vulnerable to climate change, and it is projected that tens of millions of Bangladeshis will be displaced by climate change in the coming decades.⁶

Given all this it seemed natural to assume that climate change was somehow, invisibly, pushing people out of Bangladesh. Why else would so many young men—and the migrants were indeed overwhelmingly male, and young—be undertaking dangerous journeys across west Asia and North Africa to Europe?

Such answers as I was able to find in the media tended to be formulaic: it was often said, for instance, that the migrants had set off in search of “a better life.” To me this seemed to raise many questions: For instance, what is a good life? How is that life imagined? What are the images and promises that give shape to the idea of a better life? On examination it turned out that the phrase “better life” was just another meaningless marketing slogan.⁷

Media reports rarely probe into the motivations of migrants in any depth. This may be because the journalists who write about “the migration crisis” are overwhelmingly Western and their interests tend to be focused on matters of policy, public welfare, and so on. Moreover, and most crucially, very few of these journalists are familiar with the languages of the migrants. It struck me that this might be a barrier to understanding some aspects of this phenomenon.

Because of the circumstances of my birth and education I happen to speak three languages that are widely spoken among migrant communities: Bengali, Hindi/Urdu, and Egyptian Arabic. This might, I thought, provide a different perspective (and I am now convinced that this is indeed the case). So in 2017 I decided to spend some time in Italy to see what I could learn from the migrants themselves and from the people who work with them.⁸ The concern that was uppermost in my mind at that time was climate change. Was it possible, I asked myself, that the European migrant crisis marked the beginning of a long-predicted era of mass “climate migration”?⁹

2.

ACCORDING TO SUNIL AMRITH, one of the world's foremost historians of the environment and of migration, "One of the things that the history of the Bay of Bengal teaches us is that we need to be careful not to simplify the relationship between the environment and migration. While sudden environmental change, crises, or disasters can certainly be a cause for migration, you learn that it's not as simple as that; we're not just talking about anthropogenic climate change."¹⁰

The truth of this quickly became apparent to me in the course of my conversations with Bengali migrants in Italy. The people I spoke to insisted, almost without exception, that environmental changes were only one of many factors that had shaped their decision to leave. Of the other factors, those that were cited most often were land disputes, family difficulties, religious conflicts, and political problems.

But as I listened to the migrants' stories it became obvious that the more easily identifiable factors sometimes obscured certain motivating forces that were also formative yet difficult to identify. One such is the power of example, or the desire to emulate friends, neighbors, and relatives who had already made the journey.¹¹

This is perhaps particularly important in relation to Bangladesh, which has a long history of sending young men overseas. Maritime trade was a critical vector in this: for centuries Bengali men supplied much of the labor for sailships and steamers. Some of these sailors—or lascars, as they were called—settled in Britain and other countries, including the United States.¹² Because of the money they sent home these migrants came to be greatly admired in their villages. In other words successful migrants became, as it were, objects of mimesis in every stratum of society.¹³

Mimesis has probably always played an important part in the movements of people. In the nineteenth century, for instance, many migratory journeys from Europe to Australia and the Americas were prompted by the example of friends and relatives. But today we are in an age in which the mimetic urge has become a goldmine for new, very powerful technologies. The social media, for example, are programmed precisely on mimetic principles. As Geoff Shullenberger points out in an illuminating account of the genesis of Facebook, "social media platforms perpetually enjoin users, through various means, to enter the iterative chain of mimesis: to signal their desires to other users, eliciting

further desires in the process.”¹⁴ It is worth recalling that the seed money for Facebook came from Peter Thiel, a disciple of the leading contemporary theorist of mimesis, René Girard: indeed Thiel credits Girard’s theories with having inspired his interest in this technology.

In exploiting the mimetic urge the social media have given a new strength and urgency to the desires that it generates. Moreover, such is the reach of the social media that they have ensured that no one, anywhere, is excluded from these desires. Even in the remotest corners of the world, the social media are now accessible to anyone who has the means to buy a device that is available in many inexpensive iterations: the smartphone, which provides even the illiterate a means of accessing the Internet through voice recognition technology.¹⁵

Cell phones have also hugely accelerated the circulation of images, thereby greatly expanding the reach of the advertising industry, which is expressly dedicated to the production of mimetic desire. This in turn has brought about a homogenization of desire on a scale never before seen, extending across the planet and into the deepest reaches of the human soul. Today, with very few exceptions, people everywhere, on every continent, nurture the same desires, most of which are centered on commodities.

This cannot but have profound consequences. Let us imagine, for example, a boy in a Bengal village who spends most of his day working in his father’s rice fields. The conditions are difficult because he has to be on his feet through the day under a burning sun, often standing in ankle-deep mud. Changing weather patterns are making things still worse because daytime temperatures now sometimes go up almost to 50 degrees Celsius and the rains, increasingly, don’t come on time. The boy’s family does however happen to possess a cell phone, which they charge with a solar panel. Through WhatsApp they are linked to a couple of relatives who have already sold up and left. On the screen of their phone they see advertisements for fine clothes, refrigerators, and other goods; they also see pictures of their relatives taken on the streets of prosperous European cities.

Does the boy’s uprooting begin with climate events? Or does it begin with the images he sees on that tiny screen? And is it a coincidence that climate events and consumer culture have begun to impact his life at the same time? Or are they perhaps both symptoms of the same thing: an ever-increasing acceleration of economy and technology, production and consumption?

The transformative powers of devices like computers and smart-phones have long been recognized. Such devices are not merely tools that humans use to achieve certain ends. To use them is inevitably to interact with them, and this process is known to bring about certain neurological changes in human “mind-bodies” especially among the young and impressionable.¹⁶

All of this is well known, yet when the effects of virtual reality on human consciousness are discussed it is almost always in relation to affluent and semi-affluent countries. The very subject conjures up images of Palo Alto, Shanghai, and Osaka and of unsociable teenagers skulking in rooms that are filled with expensive gear.

In my view this picture is deeply misleading. The digital revolution has broken the long-standing links between affluence, education, and technical ability. In India and in many other poor countries there are large numbers of people whose virtual abilities are completely disproportionate to their formal education and material circumstances. Even in remote villages young people are exposed to digital technologies quite early, and many become adept at using the Internet. Although they may not be immersed in the virtual world in the way of a teenager in, say, Palo Alto or Osaka, the impact on them may be just as great or even greater, precisely because of the vast difference between their lived reality and what they see on the screen.

This in turn raises another question: What is the nature of the migrant’s agency in these circumstances? Take the case of the boy in the Bengal village: Is his decision to migrate wholly his own or is it, to some degree, the product of his interactions with the “cognitive assemblage” that manifests itself in his handheld device? If that is the case then to what degree are young migrants responsible for their decision to move?¹⁷

Today there is a widespread awareness of the ethical and philosophical dilemmas that arise when humans interact with self-guided machines—for example autonomous weapons, like killer drones.¹⁸ If we are unwilling to accept that the same dilemmas may arise also at the other end of the human and technological spectrum—that is, in relation to poor people in the global South—it is perhaps because we are unable to acknowledge the true scale of the disruptions that have been set in motion by the technologies of our time.¹⁹

3.

TO RETURN TO THAT BOY in a Bengal village: his predicament is not wholly imaginary. Across Italy I met many young Bengali migrants who had grown up in such villages. Many of them had come to Italy through Libya, where they had been subjected to beatings, abuse, and torture. They all speak of being “sold” by labor contractors, of being deprived of food and water, of being denied wages, and of the constant threat of robbery by roadside gangs.

These accounts are so saturated with stories of savagery that it is easy to think of those experiences as being somehow extrinsic to our own time of accelerated communication; they are taken to be symptoms of the growing gulf between the First and Third Worlds. Yet far from being throwbacks, these journeys are inseparable from contemporary technologies.²⁰

Cell phones, for instance, are a pervasive presence on the migrants’ persons and within their accounts of their journeys. Every link in the chain of movement depends on cell phones: it is through them that migrants receive money from home and make payments to the agents who arrange their journeys; their mobile devices are the compasses that guide them on their long overland treks, and they also provide vital information about entry points, shelters, and assistance. When migrants confront danger their first move is to reach for their phones to summon help; it is through them that they distract themselves from the rigors of the road, stay in constant touch with their cohorts, and chronicle their journeys for their friends and relatives.

Similarly, cell phones and social media are indispensable also for the clandestine networks that arrange migrant journeys.²¹ The Internet makes every element of their business safer and more anonymous, beginning with recruiting and publicizing their services and extending to procuring forged documents for the migrants. “The cellphone is an essential instrument for traffickers,” notes a prominent Italian anti-Mafia official. “They are not like other organized criminals who stay away from telephonic communications.”²²

No wonder then that cell phones have become iconic of the present wave of migration in the same way that bundles and battered suitcases were in earlier times.²³ Far from expanding the distance between poor and rich countries, in certain, very important respects information technology has actually shrunk that gulf.

Yet the presence of this technology is rarely explicitly identified, either by the narrator or the listener—and the reason for this is that the cell phone has become a part of our “technological unconscious.” In other words these devices and technologies are now so deeply embedded in our unconscious cognitive processes that we take them for granted in the same way that we do the presence of electricity or cars. Like all formative technologies this one too has become invisible.²⁴

But every now and then a detail surfaces to remind us of this ubiquitous presence. Here, for example, is a story that I was told by a twenty-something Bangladeshi migrant who had spent several years in Libya. I’ll call him Palash. One day when Palash and some others were walking back from a day’s work on the outskirts of Tripoli, they were ambushed by a gang of Kalashnikov-carrying Libyans. The only thing of value that Palash had on him was his cell phone; he managed to kick it into the sand, praying that it would not ring or light up with a notification.

When the gangsters asked him to hand over his valuables he gave them his money and told them he had nothing else, not even a cell phone. The gangsters didn’t believe him and made him strip naked, and then bent him over so that they could probe his rectal cavity with sticks to see if he had hidden something in there. Finding nothing they beat him and stabbed him in the arm—but he still didn’t tell them that the phone was lying in the sand nearby. They left him lying by the road, bleeding profusely—and the first thing he did, even before binding his wounds or putting on his clothes, was to retrieve his cell-phone. To him it was almost as valuable as life itself.

It might be asked: If the migrants are indeed adept at dealing with information technology, why are they not able to acquire more realistic impressions of the current conditions in Europe? Why do they not understand that they will probably never find regular employment in Greece or Italy and might well have to eke out a living selling trinkets on the street while being preyed upon by gangs, predatory employers, and even the police?

This is where the interactive aspect of the cyber world becomes crucial. It is widely acknowledged today that the information provided to us by the Internet and social media is to a large extent shaped by our own desires, presuppositions, and networks. As a result such information often has the effect of buttressing our prejudices and expectations leading us to lend credence to “fake news.” I suspect that this is precisely what happened to many of the migrants I met. What

they saw of Europe on the Net was shaped by their own expectations, and by feedback from their social networks: they ended up seeing what they wanted to see. In effect they, like so many of us, are victims of wish-fulfillment fantasies based on “fake news.”

As an illustration here is a story told to two Italian reporters by a Pakistani “connection man” based in Italy:

“Every time I go home to Pakistan I meet many people. One day a close friend from my schooldays comes to see me. ‘Help my son to go to Italy,’ he begs me. ‘It’s not a good time,’ I tell him. He falls silent. ‘What does your son do?’ I ask. ‘He has a medical testing laboratory. He manages it and is doing well.’ I look him in the eyes: ‘Let him remain here then, it’s much better believe me. Try to convince your son.’ The next day my friend comes back with tears in his eyes. He tells me that he has conveyed my words to his son but the boy is desperate and wants to leave at all costs. If he can’t leave he will shoot himself in the head with a pistol. My friend explains that he would prefer to lose the cost of the journey than lose his son. He does not want to have that on his conscience. The boy has to go. So then I tell him that I will think of a way of changing the boy’s mind and I go to meet him at his medical laboratory. It is big and clean, in a nice locality. My friend’s son is wearing a white tunic, and everyone calls him ‘Doctor’ even though he is only a technician. I talk with him briefly because he is busy. I tell him what I said to his father. I try to make him change his mind, tell him about what he will find there and what he will lose. I explain to him that in Italy he will never have what he has in Pakistan. That he is making a mistake. But there is nothing to be done: he wants to leave and try his luck, and thinks of nothing but Italy.

“I warned them, the father and the son. I was honest with them, but it was as if I was talking to the deaf. Very well then. So on to Italy. The son arrives. I see him again after two years; he is working in the black economy, on the fields, and is often hungry. He tells me that I was right, that he regrets not having listened to me. That he would have done much better to remain in Pakistan, that this is not the land of opportunity. But it is too late.”²⁵

4.

MANY OF THE MIGRANTS I spoke to had courted extreme danger in making their way to Europe. Some had been shot at while trying to cross borders; some had almost drowned when their boats capsized in

the Mediterranean; one had come close to being run over as he tried to cross into Greece by clinging to the undercarriage of an eighteen-wheel truck.

The element of risk in these journeys is so great that it is not easy to understand why any sane person would jeopardize their lives in this fashion. The only explanation that suggests itself is desperation: the implication is that the migrants have been pushed to such extremes that they have no other option.

Desperation, as the scenes following on the recent American withdrawal from Afghanistan have demonstrated yet again, is indeed often the prime factor that compels people to flee from war zones. Some of the catastrophic impacts of global warming, such as droughts, wildfires and sea-level rise, can also leave people no choice but to relocate: their moves too are effectively driven by desperation. But those explanations can scarcely be applied to the journeys of young men, in the prime of their lives, who leave relatively peaceful countries like Bangladesh, Senegal, and Morocco. The very fact that they are able to raise the funds required for these journeys indicates that they are not entirely without options.²⁶ Why, then, do they expose themselves to life-threatening risks?

This was a question I often asked the migrants I met in Italy. Their answers varied but were also similar in that they made me realize that my question was founded on mistaken assumptions: risk is not a measurable quantity but, rather, a perception that depends on age, material circumstances, and life experience (or the lack of it). Here again social media and the Internet play an important part.

Much of the information that circles back to prospective migrants comes from friends and relatives who have already reached their destinations. In their accounts the perils of the journey are often downplayed as only rarely posing life-threatening risks. Or else those risks are presented as mere obstacles that can be overcome with courage and determination.

A boy growing up in a village where many, slightly older, youths have already departed may draw heart from his friends' accounts of their journeys. But the example of their journeys will also create inducements of other kinds: the pride that older villagers take in their migrant kin, and the comforts afforded by remittances from abroad, may convince the boy that he would be failing in his own duties to his family if he did not undertake a similar journey himself. In this way, "[o]ver

time a culture of migration establishes itself, and migration becomes a social norm or even a modern rite of passage in which staying at home is associated with failure and a lack of ambition.”²⁷ In other words, in a village where many others have already left, not to do so for fear of the risks appears as nothing other than cowardice.

But such decisions are almost never made individually. Refugees and migrants almost always travel in cohorts consisting, usually, of close friends and relatives.²⁸ This too creates a sense of security by, as it were, distributing the risks.

And the very fact that a machinery of transcontinental movement exists, invisibly—like a conveyor belt that starts to move the moment you step on it—is sometimes enough to carry people away, almost independently of their volition. This is something new in the history of human movement: in the words of two specialists on migration, “What we are witnessing is not just the story of traditional migrant smuggling on a larger scale. Rather we are witnessing a paradigm shift. . .”²⁹

I met several young Bengali and Punjabi who had run away from home, after quarreling with their families, and almost inadvertently stepped on the conveyor belt and been carried all the way to Italy. One such journey was that of a fourteen-year-old Pakistani boy who had fought with his father and run off to the local railway station. In another era he might have spent a few weeks with relatives in another city before returning to his parents. But this being the era that it is, he had fallen in with a group that was starting a long overland journey across Iran and Turkey to Europe. After surviving many close brushes with death on the borders of Turkey, he had ended up in Rome.

I also met several former farmers from Pakistan whose lands had been swamped by the Jhelum floods of 2014.³⁰ In another era they might have moved to a town or tried to rebuild their lives after the floods had receded. But such is the present time that they too had decided to set off for Europe instead; to them that step had not seemed at all drastic, which is a measure of the degree to which these journeys have begun to seem normal, even quotidian.

It is, of course, not unusual for migrants to develop apprehensions on the road. But very few are able to abort their journeys, usually because they are prevented by their guides or their cohorts of fellow migrants. But very often the consideration that keeps them from turning back is, simply, pride, or the fear of being regarded as a quitter or coward.

In speaking to migrants I often had to remind myself that most of

them were of an age when it comes almost naturally to court dangers of a certain kind, as, for instance extreme adventurers do when they toboggan down the slopes of active volcanoes or rappel into canyons. Indeed, for a certain kind of person danger is not a deterrent but an incentive.

Conversely, in some societies the willingness to brave certain dangers has long been regarded as a necessary step toward adulthood: thus, since ancient times, ordeals of various kinds have often served as life-cycle rituals.³¹ Today, in those parts of the world where it has become commonplace for young people to make difficult overseas journeys, migration is sometimes viewed through a similar prism, as a step toward being recognized as a full-fledged adult, capable of supporting a family.³²

These analogies may sound farfetched, or even frivolous, in relation to migration. But consider the case of Davide, a Cameroonian who succeeded in migrating to Europe by scaling the heavily armored fences that surround the city of Ceuta, on the coast of Morocco. Along with Melilla, Ceuta is one of two Spanish enclaves in Africa; migrants who manage to set foot in either city must, by law, be treated as though they had stepped on European soil. Both cities are surrounded by trenches and several layers of fences, topped with razor wire; they are also guarded by large contingents of Spanish and Moroccan soldiers, armed with all the most advanced equipment.

Davide, who left Cameroon in September 2013 at age twenty-five, was interviewed in Madrid in 2018, by David Kestenbaum of Chicago Public Radio.³³ In Kestenbaum's words, "Davide describes the whole thing almost as if he were a kid setting out on an adventure . . . Unlike a lot of people trying to get from Africa to Europe he said he wasn't persecuted back home. He wasn't starving, he wasn't fleeing violence. He was just curious about the world and excited to see it."

Davide's journey took him from Cameroon to Algeria, and it was there that he learned that instead of crossing the Mediterranean he could also reach Europe by climbing the fences that surround Ceuta and Melilla. So Davide traveled to Morocco and joined the large throngs of would-be migrants, from all over Africa, who camp near the two cities and periodically attempt to cross over.

"In the beginning," says Davide, "my opinion was, you know, I'm a pretty brave guy, and . . . I like challenges. I thought I would do it in one try. I had a lot of optimism because that's the type of person I am.

I usually do things the first time I try them.”

Davide’s first attempt to cross the fences was encouraging because he managed to get past a trench and even reached the third barrier. “I don’t know how to express it but it was something strange, I was thinking, ‘I’m going to do it, then I thought I can’t do it.’ Then I was doing it, so I said, ‘This is how it’s done. I’m doing it, I’m doing it.’ But I don’t know how to express it, that’s the truth.”

Here Kestenbaum interjects. “Does it feel like a crazy sport?”

“Yes,” answers Davide. “Exactly! That’s exactly what it is. The way you put it. It was a weird sport.”

But Davide’s first attempt failed, as did many others. A year went by and he began to ask himself, “Why am I doing this? What good is this? . . . I thought about abandoning everything. I would cry.”

But it was the fence itself that held him there. “It’s something more than a fence. I know it may seem silly, but there is something mystical in this fence. I’ve seen people when they get in front of the fence they can’t move . . . there must be a spirit inside the fence that tries to prevent things. It’s really something very powerful. It’s not just a fence.”

After two years of failed attempts Davide finally succeeded in crossing over. But his joy did not last long. “When I realized that I had made it, it was like a vacuum. That’s the truth. When we are in Morocco we think whenever I manage to get there I’m going to be very happy. But once you make it you don’t feel anything. The feeling ends.”

Davide’s experience is a reminder that the idea of the ordeal has always held a certain fascination for human beings. This is why, for many migrants, their journeys become the defining moments of their lives. This is, in a way, the strangest aspect of their plight: in Europe they are confronted with the political rationality of a certain kind of liberalism that confers its sympathy only on victims. So, in dealing with the state, and when talking to activists, they learn to present themselves as victims, as objects without agency propelled solely by external forces.³⁴ Yet in their own eyes, as in the eyes of their families back home, they are heroes who have taken their destinies into their hands and endured terrible ordeals.³⁵ No wonder then that many of them say that the worst part of their journeys consists not of their time on the road or at sea but rather the months and years they spend languishing in European migrant camps. In those camps there is nothing to do but wait and sleep: it is little consolation that you are fed and housed and given allowances; it is the waiting and the idleness that break the spirit.

5.

LISTENING TO THE MIGRANTS' stories I was often struck by the similarities with the journeys I had long been writing about—the voyages of nineteenth century indentured workers (“coolies”).³⁶ Some of the parallels were uncanny: coolies too had been mainly young and overwhelmingly male; then too dalals and other middlemen (duffadars and mahajans—recruiters and contractors) had been essential cogs in the machinery of transportation; and then again debt and money-lending had been vital to the oiling of the machine.³⁷ There were startling similarities also in the circumstances under which the coolies had traveled; they too had been policed and preyed upon by brutal guards and overseers (*maistries*); they too had been crammed into confined spaces and had had to subsist on meager rations. Beatings and whippings, seeing their own die before their eyes—all of this would have been familiar to the passengers of the fictional schooner of my *Ibis Trilogy*.

Similar also was the strength of the ties that linked the new migrants to those they left behind. Today, on entering the formal European reception system, migrants and refugees receive a daily subsistence allowance as well as a weekly stipend for phone calls: the total adds up to some one hundred and fifty Euros a month. Many migrants, including teenage boys, send most of this money home; often their families have no other means of support, having destituted themselves in order to pay for their sons' journeys. It is impossible not to be moved by the sacrifices some of the young migrants make in order to support their families back home. Similarly, under the indenture too, coolies had scrimped and saved, in plantations halfway around the world, in order to be able to send something back to their villages in India.

And, as with the commerce in coolies, this chain of movement runs upon wheels that are powered by profits. Then as now, trafficking in human beings was an immensely lucrative form of commerce. The difference—and it is a crucial one—is that the system of indentured labor, like slavery before it, was managed and controlled by Western colonial powers. The migration flows of today, in contrast, function outside state control, and the profits that accrue from them do not go to agents who are approved by states.³⁸ And the profits are such that the machinery of movement is now capable of sustaining itself by creating its own markets: this commerce has now overtaken drugs as

the world's biggest clandestine business.³⁹ The system has taken on its own life, outside the control of any established authority.

Contemporary communications technology is the critical factor that has allowed this commerce to escape state control. It is responsible also for another crucial difference between the indenture system and the mass movements of today: since the nineteenth century there has been a complete reversal in the control and flow of information.

During the indenture, especially in its early years, the workers knew nothing of the systems they were surrendering themselves to. They often had no idea of where they were going and the conditions that awaited them there; nor did they know much about the laws and regulations that colonial states had created to manage their transportation.

The colonial state on the other hand knew everything about them. It recorded in obsessive detail where they came from and which castes and tribes they belonged to. Even their bodies were studied with close attention, special notice being taken of scars and other marks of identification. It was the state that decided where, when, and how they would travel; on their arrival again, it was the state that allotted them to their masters. The entire machinery was created and managed by colonial states.

This asymmetry of information has now been completely reversed. Today's migrants initiate their own journeys, with their own means and networks, and by the time they arrive they are completely conversant with the relevant laws and regulations of the host country: they know their rights, they know how much money they are entitled to under law, they know everything about the immigration system including the grounds that are most likely to gain them acceptance—for example persecution on the basis of politics, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

The state on the other hand knows very little about them: it has only the haziest idea of who they are, where they are coming from, and what their motivations are. Vanishingly few European civil servants are equipped to distinguish between, say, a Syrian and an Egyptian, or a Bangladeshi Muslim and a Bengali Hindu from India.⁴⁰

This reversed asymmetry forms a stark contrast between this transplantation of peoples and those that preceded it: the coolie trade, like slavery, was set up for the production of certain goods, like sugarcane, tobacco, coffee, cotton, tea, rubber. These goods were intended for markets that were thousands of miles away, in the colonizers' home

countries. It was the desires and appetites of the metropolis that moved people between continents in order to churn out ever-growing floods of saleable merchandise. In this dispensation slaves and coolies were producers, not consumers; they could never aspire to the desires of their masters.

But the young migrants I met had not transported themselves across continents in order to become cogs in some giant machine that produces things that they cannot aspire to possess. To the contrary, just as much as anyone else they want those very things—smartphones, computers, cars. And how could they not? Since childhood the most attractive images that they had beheld were not of the rivers and fields that surrounded them but of things like these. And the cravings stoked by those images had inducted them into a global citizenry of desire—and there lies the rub, for it was only on arriving in Europe that it had dawned on many of them that they were the victims of a fantasy, that their dreams of a life like that of people in advertisements were no more likely to be fulfilled in Italy than in the countries that they had left behind.

Such being the circumstances it is hardly surprising that many migrants become disillusioned and despairing. For many of them, the conditions are not much better than those they left behind—except that at home, no matter what they lacked materially, they had, at least, had the consolations of family and community.

Disillusionment and disappointment can even affect refugees who have fled from war zones. “My life,” a Syrian refugee told a researcher in 2015, “I think it’s finished. Because really, I had [a] great life in Syria.”⁴¹

6.

VISUAL IMAGERY HAS PLAYED a very important part in forming our ideas about the recent waves of migration across the Balkans and the Mediterranean. It is hard to think of images that are as arresting, and as viscerally powerful, as those of crowds of migrants marching over mountains, or of drowning people being pulled from the sea. Such indeed is the power of those images that these journeys have come to be thought of as being, in some way, primitive or atavistic. This is why many Westerners are still surprised, and even shocked, to learn that many migrants possess cell phones and are adept at using them.⁴² At the height of the migration crisis, some European countries even passed laws that required migrants and refugees to surrender their cell phones.⁴³

No one has been more eloquent on the subject of migrants and cell phones than Donald Trump. In a speech in December 2015, Trump posed a series of questions. “First of all why are people in a migration having cell phones? Sort of strange. Who’s paying for these cell phones, where are they coming from, who are they calling? Can you imagine? Many, many, many cell phones. Why, where do they get cellphones?”⁴⁴

These questions are an indication of how profoundly the phenomenon of contemporary migration has been misunderstood. Cell phones and cyber technology are not anomalies in the context of these voyages: to the contrary they play a critical part in enabling them.⁴⁵ Of course there are many other factors in the background: it goes without saying that migration is an extremely complex, multidimensional phenomenon in which wars, political conflicts, state collapse, climate change, poverty, and inequality may all play a part. But it remains true that today cyber technology is a crucial enabling factor in the movement of large numbers of people. Far from being primitive or atavistic, these migrations have been empowered by the very same technology that allows goods and capital to flow seamlessly around the globe.

Consider Syria for example: the refugees who fled the country in 2016 were of course displaced by war; that conflict, in turn, had emerged out of a long period of drought that may have been caused, or intensified, by anthropogenic climate change.⁴⁶ But it was cell phone technology that was responsible for the rapidity with which news of a minor change in German emigration policy was disseminated and for the sheer speed and scale of the exodus that followed.⁴⁷ Does this diminish the suffering of those refugees? Absolutely not; their suffering is no different from that which refugees have endured for centuries.

When people see a picture of a boatload of migrants marooned at sea they tend to interpret the image as a disjunction in time—they see it as a confrontation of the primitive and the modern, the backward and the advanced. From this arises the misconception that is increasingly prevalent on the right—that a barrier, or a wall, can be built to keep these two temporal dimensions apart. But those images also give rise to a similar misconception on the left—that the flow of migrants can be stemmed by creating “growth” in their countries of origin. The truth is that in a digitally interconnected world, “growth” can itself be a factor that motivates people to move by broadening their desires and aspirations. Thus do some middle class, and even affluent, young

Bangladeshis dream of escaping from crowded Dhaka and making a life in Finland, “a quiet and empty country” with “large fields and empty spaces.”⁴⁸

It needs to be recognized that the forces that are shaping the flow of people today are no different from those that are driving the relentless acceleration in processes of production, consumption, and distribution. Those who are concerned that mass migration may bring about the breakdown of communities—and I must add here that there are some legitimate reasons for these anxieties, in my view—must understand that there is a fundamental contradiction between “growth” and the preservation of community. It is an illusion to imagine that the best way to preserve communities is by excluding other humans: the only way this can be done is by abandoning the prevalent paradigms of perpetual and ever-accelerating growth.

7.

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE that this great uprooting of people is occurring at the same time that the impacts of climate change are intensifying. The relationship between the two is so close that to ask if contemporary migrations are a consequence of climate change is, I think, to ask the wrong question. Climate change and migration are, in fact, two cognate aspects of the same thing, in that both are effects of the ever-increasing growth and acceleration of processes of production, consumption, and circulation. In this sense the dynamic that is driving the other uprootings that we are now witnessing—of trees, animals, plants, glaciers, and so on—is no different from that which is driving the movements of humans. This is another respect in which human history has once again converged with the history of the Earth.⁴⁹

NOTES

¹This includes both the Indian state of West Bengal and the nation of Bangladesh.

²I use the terms “migrants” and “refugees” almost interchangeably because, as Assefaw Bariagaber observes, “the conceptual distinction between a refugee and a migrant has become increasingly blurred.” (“Globalization, Imitation Behavior, and Refugees from Eritrea,” p. 15, *Africa Today*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Special Issue: Postliberation Eritrea (Winter 2013): 3–18. For a discussion of the history of the terms “refugee” and “migrant” see Katerina Kondova, *The Smartphone as a Lifeline: The Impact of Digital Communications Technologies and Services*

on *Refugees' Experiences During Their Flight*, Master's Thesis, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam (2016): 10–11.

³US officials have described Bangladesh, the seventh most populous country in the world, as 'a voice of moderation among developing countries, in the Islamic world and in South Asia.'" Smith, Paul J. "Climate Change, Mass Migration and the Military Response," *Orbis*, 2007: 631, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2007/10/climate-change-mass-migration-military-response/> (accessed 9/7/2021)

⁴Basu, Kaushik. "Bangladesh at 50," *Project Syndicate*, Mar 5, 2021. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bangladesh-independence-three-reasons-for-economic-success-by-kaushik-basu-2021-03> (accessed 9/4/2021).

⁵See, for example, this 2017 publication by the UNHCR: "ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard," <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/58706.pdf> (accessed 9/4/2021). Bangladesh was second on the list of the migrants' countries of origin at that time. That is still the case in 2021: Cf. "Most common nationalities of Mediterranean sea and land arrivals from January 2021," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (accessed 9/4/2021).

⁶See, for example, "Bangladesh Prepares for a Changing Climate," *IMF Country Focus*, September 18, 2019. <https://www.imf.org:2019/09/18>; and Mastrojeni, Grammenno, and Pasini, Antonello. *Effetto Serra, effetto Guerra*, Chiarelettere, Milano, 2017, loc. 919.

⁷Innumerable corporations use "a better life" as a slogan. See, for example, "Panasonic Establishes 'A Better Life, A Better World' as its New Brand Slogan," Sept. 4, 2013: <https://news.panasonic.com/global/press/data/2013/09/en130904-2/en130904-2.html> (accessed 9/4/2013).

⁸For their help in Italy, and for sharing their insights, I would like to thank Luca Ciabbari, Mauro Van Aken, Roberto Beneduce, Shail Jha, Stefano Liberti, Sara Scarafia, Antonio Frascilla, Mara Matta, Fausto Melluso, Gianfranco Benello, Alessandro Triulzi, Paola Splendore and Hasnahena Dalia Mamataz.

⁹See, for instance, Chaturvedi, Sanjay, and Doyle, Timothy. "Geopolitics of fear and the emergence of 'climate refugees': imaginative geographies of climate change and displacements in Bangladesh," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 6:2, 206–222; and Reuveny, Rafael. "Climate change-induced migration and violent conflict," *Political Geography* 26 (2007): 656–673.

¹⁰Nayar, Varun. "Reframing Migration: A Conversation With Historian Sunil Amrith," *Pacific Standard*, Nov. 9, 2017: <https://psmag.com/social-justice/reframing-global-migration-with-sunil-amrith>.

¹¹In the words of Assefaw Bariagaber, "imitation minimizes costs, maximizes benefits, and reduces anxiety because possible outcomes are more predictable." Bariagaber, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹²See, for example, Visram, Rozina. *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700–1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986); *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Fisher, Michael H. *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Permanent Black, 2004); Alexander, Claire and Joya Chatterji and Annu Jalais. *The Bengal Diaspora; Rethinking Muslim Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and my article "Of Fanas and Forecasts: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age

of Sail,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 June 2008. For lascar journeys to the United States, see Vivek Bald’s excellent book *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹³In 2012, Gallup reported that 8 million Bangladeshis expressed a desire to migrate to the United States (as compared to 10 million Indians and 5 million Mexicans), and it is evident that emigration is the ambition of ever more Bangladeshis, from all segments of society.” Bal, Ellen. “Yearning for faraway places: the construction of migration desires among young and educated Bangladeshis in Dhaka,” *Identities* 21:3 (2014): 279.

¹⁴Shullenberger, Geoff. “Mimesis, Violence and Facebook: Peter Thiel’s French Connection,” <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2016/08/13/mimesis-violence-and-facebook-peter-thiels-french-connection-full-essay/>. In another essay Shullenberger writes: “Social media platforms, a Girardian analysis suggests, are machines for producing desire. Their equalizing structure—what is most widely celebrated about them—converts all users into each other’s potential models, doubles, and rivals, locked in a perpetual game of competition for the intangible objects of desire of the attention economy. By embedding users in a standardized format, social media renders all individuals instantly comparable in simple, quantitative terms. Enabling instantaneous comparison creates the conditions for a universal proliferation of horizontal rivalry. In this situation of universalized mimetic antagonism, conditions are ripe for scapegoating. Tensions may be redirected onto (innocent) victims in episodes of bullying that form communities enabled by tools of mimesis: sharing, retweeting, hashtags, and so on.” <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-scapegoating-machine/>

¹⁵For a detailed account of the penetration of cellphones in India, see Agrawal, Ravi. *India Connected: How the Smartphone Is Transforming the World’s Largest Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶My argument here owes a great deal to N. Katherine Hayles and her articles: “Cognitive Assemblages: Technical Agency and Human Interactions,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Autumn 2016): 32 – 55; and “The Cognitive Nonconscious: Enlarging the Mind of the Humanities,” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2016): 783–807. I am grateful to Debjani Ganguly for bringing these articles to my attention.

¹⁷This a circumstance in which, as Hayles notes: “both humans and technics share moral agency and, implicitly, moral responsibility . . .” (“The Cognitive Nonconscious” p. 804).

¹⁸See, for example, Singer, P.W. “The Ethics of Killer Applications: Why Is It So Hard to Talk About Morality When It Comes to New Military Technology?” *Journal of Military Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2010): 299–312.

¹⁹“Computational media,” writes Hayles, “are not just another technology. They are the quintessentially *cognitive* technology, and for this reason they have special relationships with the quintessentially cognitive species, Homo sapiens.” (“The Cognitive Nonconscious,” p. 803).

²⁰“The emergence of new technologies, leading to reduced communication costs and ‘rich’ communication content (in conjunction with decreased travel costs), is changing migration processes and structures. New technologies made snowball migration easier by increasing the number of friends and relations abroad who can be found and might be willing to provide assistance.” Komito, Lee. “Social Media and Migration: Virtual Community 2.0,” *Journal of the*

American Society for Information Science and Technology, 62(6)(2011): p. 1077.

²¹“Social media has become critically important to smuggling operations, as they allow for faster communication between the different actors, which has contributed to networks being able to operate more flexibly and to easily adapt to new circumstances.” Tinti, Peter and Tuesday Reitano. *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Savior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). p. 62.

²²Quoted by Andrea Di Nicola and Giampaolo Musumeci in their study *Confessioni di un trafficante di uomini* (Milano: Chiaralettere, 2014). Digital edition, my translation. loc 1620.

²³Cf. Brunwasser, Matthew. “A 21st-Century Migrant’s Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2015.

²⁴As Bruno Latour remarks: “it is a characteristic of these technical mediators that they ultimately require invisibility.” Latour, Bruno. “Morality and Technology; the End of the Means,” Venn, Couze, trans. *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 19 (5/6)(2002): 247–260.

²⁵Andrea Di Nicola and Giampaolo Musumeci, *op. cit.* locs. 1888–1901; my translation.

²⁶As Tinti and Reitano point out, “Those most likely to move are rarely the poorest of the poor. . . . Migrating, even illegally, costs money the poorest seldom have.” (*Op. cit.* 630).

²⁷Tinti and Reitano, *op. cit.*, p. 1087.

²⁸In the words of a Syrian refugee: “Most people go in families or groups or something. It’s very rare to have someone alone. Even if he’s alone, during the journey he’ll meet someone who will be a friend or something.” (Kondova, *op. cit.* p. 40).

²⁹Tinti and Reitano, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁰Cf. Irshad, Muhammad, and Mobeen, Muhammad. “Flood severity assessment in Jhelum water shed of Punjab Province, Pakistan,” *Journal of Biodiversity and Environmental Sciences*, 16(2)(2020): 39–49.

³¹For a detailed account of migration as a stage in life cycles, see Van Aken, Mauro. “The Experience and Hierarchy of Migration: Egyptian Labourers in the Jordan Valley,” (2006): 231–236. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-hierarchy-and-experience-of-migration%3A-Egyptian-Aken/be53e848be6867608e7120f519027f588b58c52e> (accessed 9/8/2021).

³²The Italian anthropologist and ethno-psychiatrist Roberto Beneduce and his associates at the Frantz Fanon Center in Turin have been pioneers in investigating the relationship between migration and traditional rituals and spiritual beliefs. See, for instance, his article “Traumatic pasts and the historical imagination: Symptoms of loss, postcolonial suffering, and counter-memories among African migrants,” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 53(3)(2016): 261–285. The work of the anthropologist Cristiana Giordano, who has worked with the Beneduce and the Fanon Center, is also a major contribution to these subjects, especially her book *Migrants in Translation: Caring and the Logics of Difference in Contemporary Italy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

³³Kestenbaum, David. “Just Another Kind of Outdoor Game,” *This American Life*, March 16, 2018: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/641/the-walls/act-one-17>.

³⁴Roberto Beneduce has analyzed in detail the forms of complicity that arise

“between humanitarian workers, lawyers and asylum-seekers to construct credible stories” (“The Moral Economy of Lying: Subjectcraft, Narrative Capital, and Uncertainty in the Politics of Asylum,” *Medical Anthropology*, 34:6, 551–571, DOI: 10.1080/01459740.2015.1074576, p. 563). Similarly, Giordano observes, “Through conceptual acts of translation, a complex interplay of therapeutic, bureaucratic, and religious apparatuses transforms foreign others into political categories—the ‘migrant,’ ‘refugee,’ and ‘victim’—that the state can recognize and use to legitimize their difference.” *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁵“Those whom the Italian press has re-baptized as the new slaves, are regarded, in their countries, as little heroes” (my translation, from Gabriele del Grande’s *Il Mare di Mezzo; Ai Tempi dei Respingimenti*, Infinito Edizioni, fourth edition, 2012), p. 212.

³⁶My 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* is about some such journeys. See also Anderson, Clare. “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century,” *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol 30/1: 93–109, 2009; Bhana, Surendra, ed. *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1991); Carter, Marina. *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius 1834–1874*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); and Lal, B.V. *Girmitiyas: The Origins of Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983; reprint. Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Science, 2004).

³⁷Cf. Lal, B.V. *Fiji Yatra: Aadhi Raat Se Aage* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2005); Teelock, Vijaya. *Bitter sugar: Sugar and slavery in 19th century Mauritius* (Mahatma Gandhi Inst., 1998); and Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (London, 1974).

³⁸Tinti and Reitano note that smuggling networks “have become a vector for global migration, quick to identify loopholes, exploit new areas of insecurity, and target vulnerable populations whom they see as prospective clients. They no longer simply respond to demand for smuggler services: they actively generate it.” (*Op. cit.*, p. 6).

³⁹Tinti and Reitano, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴⁰Beneduce notes that the EU’s asylum policy “produces ignorance”: it is “a system that systematically deletes identity while at the very same time demanding ‘performances of identity’” (Beneduce, *op. cit.*, p. 563).

⁴¹Kondova, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁴²Cf. O’Malley, James. “Surprised that Syrian refugees have smartphones? Sorry to break this to you, but you’re an idiot,” *The Independent*, Monday 07 September 2015.

⁴³See “Denmark, under fire, ups limit of valuables that refugees can keep,” *Reuters*, Jan. 8, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-denmark-idUSKBN0UM26220160108>; and Bell, Bethany. “Europe migrants: Austria to seize migrants’ phones in asylum clampdown,” *BBC*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43823166> (accessed 9/4/2021).

⁴⁴Brayton, Ed. “Trump and the Syrian Refugees with Cell Phones,” *Patheos*, Dec. 18, 2015. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/dispatches/2015/12/18/trump-and-the-syrian-refugees-with-cell-phones/> (accessed 9/4/2021). See also Kondova, Katerina. *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵See, for instance, “Phones are now indispensable for refugees,” *Economist*,

Feb. 11, 2017. <https://www.economist.com/international/2017/02/11/phones-are-now-indispensable-for-refugees> (accessed 9/4/2021).

⁴⁶See, for instance, “National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate; Response to Congressional Inquiry on National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate,” p. 4. https://climateandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/15_07_24-dod_gcc_congressional-report-on-national-security-implications-of-climate-change.pdf (accessed 9/7/21).

⁴⁷The late Alessandro Leogrande, a well-known journalist, noted: “Young Afghans and Pakistanis, like Syrians fleeing from war, know all of Europe from Facebook and international telephones. . .” Leogrande, Alessandro. *La Frontiera* (Feltrinelli, 2015) Digital edition, my translation. loc. 3336. Similarly Katerina Kondova observes, “. . .in the last few years Facebook turned into the main platform for information exchanges as regards every single aspect of the refugees journey and needs on the road. Facebook groups created by and for refugees turn into meeting points for former, current and future refugees where all kind of valuable insights about the journey circulate. . .” *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁸Bal, Ellen, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁴⁹Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009).