

## Who gives a Foucault!

Last year I was introduced to the concept of biopolitics, the entry of life into the discourse of power and politics. In one of his lectures, Foucault examines the transformation of political power over life and explains how a sovereign's power over life was his ability to kill; what he calls the "right to take life or let live" (241). Then, the state's power was transformed into one that fosters life, "the power to make live and to let die" (241). He traces this transformation by looking at the changes in the mechanisms and techniques of power over bodies and populations. The power to 'kill' and the power to foster life suggest that power can be both repressive and productive. Focusing on the optimization of the life of a population, by regulating morbidity, for example, is a productive use of power as the state's role seems to be one that is protecting the nation's health. This use of power may be in some ways productive, but the reality is that it often leads to discrimination. How could the killing of humans be justified in an era where the state's role is to foster life? Foucault explains that racism, for instance, allows for the justification of killing in the name of protecting the human-species from inferior and less valued races that pose a 'threat' to the overall human population (257). Devaluing one's life and 'letting it die' in the name of fostering life allows states to take certain actions, or ignore an issue, without much public outcry.

Another theorist that has inspired me, Agamben, who is influenced by Foucault's work, examines the state's power over life by discussing how the state exercises power over life by 'protecting it' and 'letting it die' (Agamben, 1998). He introduces the concept 'state of exception' to explain how the sovereign creates laws that ordinary people are obliged to follow, but can simultaneously exclude itself. A state, for example, passes the law that ordinary citizens are not permitted to take one's life or torture an individual. It often, however, excludes itself from these laws by permitting itself to uptake activities it deems necessary for the protection of the nation. In justifying its actions to 'let die', the notion of protecting the population comes into play and makes war or imprisonment justifiable. The holocaust, colonization and countless other examples of tragic historical events were falsely justified – tragic times in history we now learn about and condemn. Despite the fact that most are resentful of these past atrocities, history continues to repeat itself as I witness the rise of global anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, anti-immigration sentiment, among other atrocities towards humans, animals and the environment. Like many, I struggle to understand how we can be aware of the false and inhumane reasoning of such past human rights violations, and at the same time fail to recognize the means used by governments and those in power to present a given population, 'them', as a threat to 'us'.

Agamben uses the concept of homo sacer, someone "who can be killed but not sacrificed" (1998, p.8), to show the justification for letting life die. The homo sacer cannot be sacrificed because of their lack of value to society but can be killed. If one is deemed to pose a threat to the security of the population their existence can be reduced to bare life and thus their killing is legal. In such cases, the state can participate in the killing of a bare life through the state of exception and in the name of national security. Displaced individuals, who lose their connection to their state that grants them their rights, are in a way reduced to bare life. States can pass laws, take actions, or fail to take actions in order to 'protect' the nation while 'letting [others] die' or suffer. Foucault and Agamben are among various theorists who offer us vast

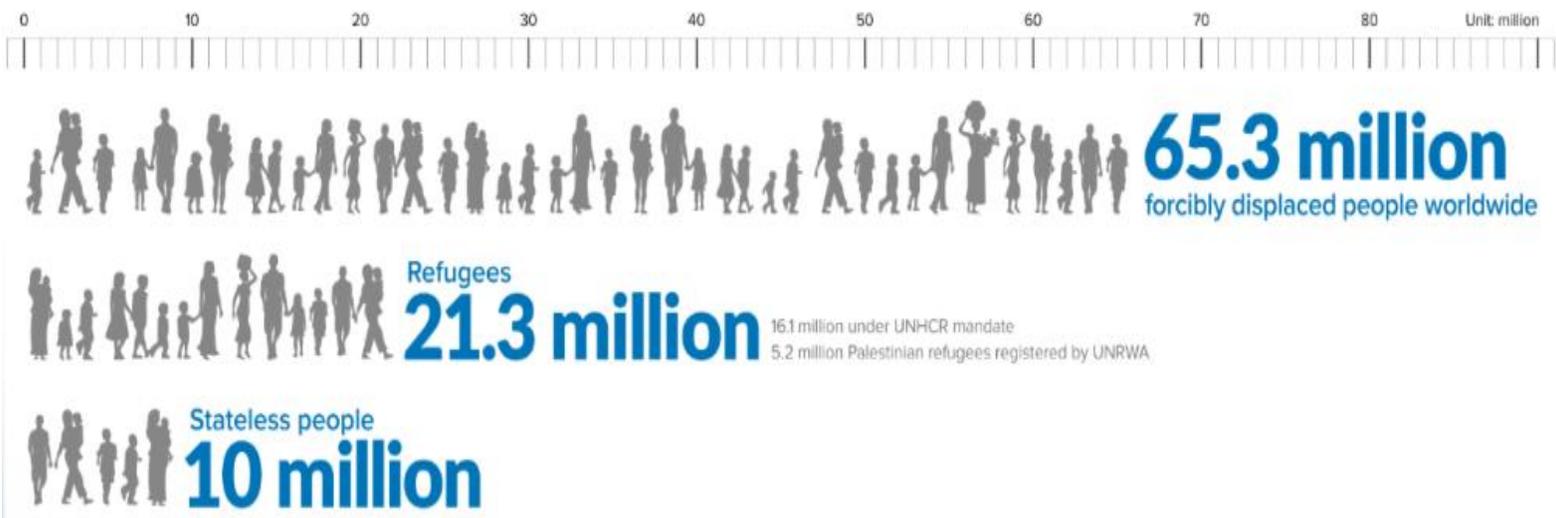
knowledge and intriguing, but often complex, perceptive in understanding the relation between human life and political power.

The above concepts I briefly discuss in this blog and the work of these two theorists, I find fascinating. I could attempt to discuss their work in more detail and to try to gain a better understanding of their theories, but I will leave this for another time. My internship is soon coming to an end, as all good experiences do, and I will have plenty of papers to work on next semester! I acknowledge that I am discussing various topics in this blog but I am not attempting to deeply explore one of them. There are many more I would like to bring up, such as the role the media can play to stimulate anxiety and fear, or affect theory. Instead, I now want to explore some personal discussions (that often turned into arguments) over the past couple of years.

"The death of one man is a tragedy.  
The death of millions is a statistic." – J. Stalin

At MSRI, one of my roles has been to work on the database and to generate statistics. I have to admit that I am not a big fan of statistics and I prefer qualitative studies to quantitative ones. I believe that in statistics we lose the human side of situations and issues. That there is much more to the number of people being displaced, for example. That it doesn't matter whether one or two or thousands of individuals and families have been affected by bomb blasts. What matters is that a person's life, with all the sense of security and peace that he/she may have been enjoying, is disrupted. Furthermore, because each individual, enduring a trauma and being forcibly displaced, has a unique experience to share, has been impacted differently and needs a unique approach in addressing that lifelong impact. I do, however, recognize the importance of statistics, and that often quantitative research is favorable. I recognize that the fact that more than 65 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, according to UNHCR, has much to offer in understanding how widespread this social issue is and in catching people's attention. Also, knowing where these individuals are from, how people from different socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientations are affected by an issue has a lot to offer in understanding inequality, marginalization, and power dynamics. Here are some figures from the UNHCR that represent some of this important information:

<http://www.unhcr.ie/about-unhcr/facts-and-figures-about-refugees>



I sometimes engage in conversations with people who are afraid that among refugees there might be terrorists. I often hear friends, family, acquaintances and strangers suggest that displaced people take away local jobs and have led to an increase in crime rates. These are arguments I have heard not only in Malaysia, but elsewhere such as in Greece, during personal discussions and through the media. In such discussions with others, I often find myself arguing with emotion to get my point across and express my understanding of issues. I do acknowledge that individuals who have been displaced may engage in criminal activities. That a terrorist may have a refugee status. The same way I recognize that one's neighbor could be a serial killer, or one's uncle a child sex offender. It's any and many individuals who commit atrocities, no matter their gender, color, age, nationality; my concern is that these acts of terror should be addressed and eliminated – as should war and forced displacement. I also recognize that when one group based on gender, for example, is more likely to commit a certain crime, we must explore deeper to understand the social forces that have led to this and not label that group as the ‘other’ or the ‘enemy’.

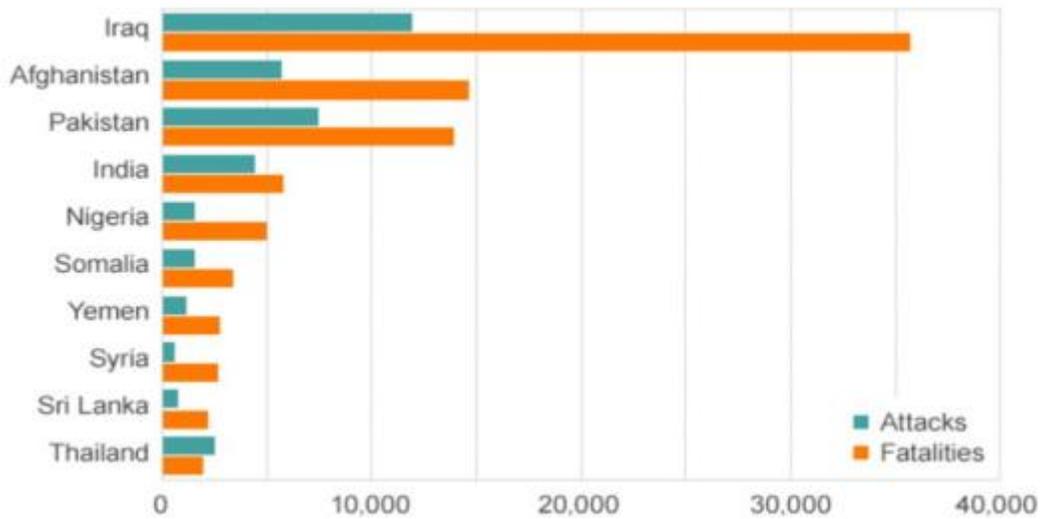
Findings and statistics on the following research topics are vast and I have picked very few to share. Understanding data is complicated. Comparing data between countries for example that collect similar information in different ways will give us wrong results. I recently heard, for instance, that although Malaysia considers children to be up to eighteen years old, in detention centers it is up to 12 or 14. Therefore, comparing the number of children in immigration detention between Malaysia and another country that may have a different cut-off age would give us wrong results, unless we take into account the differences in the data collected. Moreover, looking at the number of refugees who have committed a crime, without looking at their socioeconomic status or identifying the types of crime can give the wrong impression. Below I am sharing some findings on issues I have had personal discussions on with others.

#### **a) Refugees and terrorism**

“The United States has resettled 784,000 refugees since September 11, 2001. In those 14 years, exactly three resettled refugees have been arrested for planning terrorist activities—and it is worth noting two were not planning an attack in the United States and the plans of the third were barely credible.”

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-record-shows-refugees-are-not-threat>

Countries with most fatalities from terror attacks, 2004-13

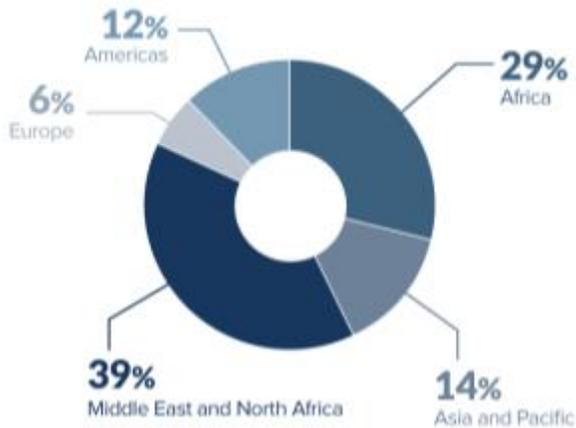


Source: GTD

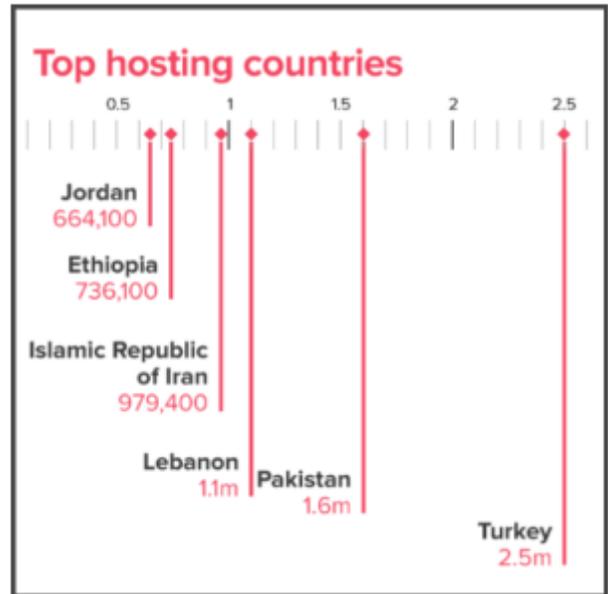
(Sited on the Global Research website: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/muslims-are-the-victims-of-between-82-and-97-of-terrorism-related-fatalities-us-government/5516565>)

**b) Why do displaced people mainly chose to go to European nations?**

Where the world's displaced people are being hosted



<http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>



<http://www.unhcr.ie/about-unhcr/facts-and-figures-about-refugees>

### **c) Refugees and social welfare**

“Each asylum seeker in Britain gets a meagre £36.95 a week to live on (and they are not usually allowed to work to supplement this sum)” <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/10/10-truths-about-europes-refugee-crisis>

### **d) Refugees and communicable diseases:**

“In spite of the common perception of an association between migration and the importation of infectious diseases, there is no systematic association. Communicable diseases are associated primarily with poverty. Migrants often come from communities affected by war, conflict or economic crisis and undertake long, exhausting journeys that increase their risks for diseases that include communicable diseases, particularly measles, and food- and waterborne diseases.”  
<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-determinants/migration-and-health/migrant-health-in-the-european-region/migration-and-health-key-issues>

The World Health Organization provides a lot of information on migration and health. WHO provides information on interventions to prevent any spread of diseases, but highlight that there is no systemic association between migration and the spread of infectious diseases.

### **e) Displaced people take away local jobs**

In most cases, a refugee is not allowed to work. Many do, however, but the fear of being arrested, assaulted, fined and detained prevents most from seeking employment. Those that do work, including refugees and migrant workers, are often exploited, as they work long hours for minimal wage and under bad conditions.

### **References**

- Agamben, G., & Heller-Roazen, D. (1998). Introduction, Potentiality and Law, & The Politicization of Life. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). Chapter 11 - 17 March 1976. In D. Macey (Trans.), *Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. New York: New Press.