

The Movement of People: Human and Humane

by Peter Makari
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Whether by force or by choice, the movement of people is as old as human history. The effort to control and restrict such movement is just as old. The powerful have always sought to determine who may enter, and who may not. We have built walls to protect and defend, including the Great Wall in China against northern invaders; the Berlin Wall, the most visible symbol of the Cold War; the Separation Barrier Israel continues to build to wall off Palestinians; and the wall along the US-Mexico border, to prevent immigration from Latin America. Physical walls create and reinforce psychological barriers, stereotypes and fears.

Whether such physical structures accomplish their goals has always been debated. What is certain is that intense restrictions on movement, be they physical or legal, deny people and cultures the opportunity to interact and stimulate each other's knowledge of the other. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, Israelis and Palestinians alike are separated by a wall that prevents meaningful interaction between peoples whose fates are intertwined. In such a situation of conflict, with interaction of communities so difficult, stereotypes are only hardened and knowing the other is near impossible.

In the Mediterranean, the migration of people from Africa and elsewhere has recently attracted intensive media attention because of the spate of tragic incidents on the sea, particularly due to the trafficking of people in unsafe vessels. Border controls are in place in Europe, and in North Africa, to discourage, restrict, and control migration to the north, despite the contributions of Mediterranean cultural cross-pollination. Similarly, along the US-Mexico border, the wall presents a formidable barrier and deterrent. In both cases, people continue to try to make safe passage for themselves and their families into Europe and the United States.

Much of the movement of people is due to identifiable factors. First, people flee from situations of conflict. The staggering number of Syrians who have left the country, probably at least one-fourth of the population—is one current example. Second, people seek to travel and resettle to explore new cultures and expand their horizons. Third, many people simply wish to move to improve their economic lot, for themselves and their families. Where many professionals and manual laborers cannot find meaningful or subsistence work at home, they look beyond.

In attempts to move across boundaries, the results are so often so tragic and fatal. But, as Jeb Bush reportedly stated, “The dad who loved their children—was worried that their children didn’t have food on the table.... they crossed the border because they had no other means to... provide for their family.... It’s an act of love. It’s an act of commitment to your family.”

The interaction of peoples and cultures resulting from this movement has the benefit of mutually enriching the communities involved. When a community is content with what it knows and how it functions, then that community will stagnate.

People will continue to be migratory—even as much as we are rooted—for multiple motivations. Political powers need to find a way for that to happen responsibly, so that human society can flourish in its full diversity. Short of that ideal, human migration must be addressed in a more humane manner; the protection of human lives and aspirations must be ensured.

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