



UNESCO RILA CALABASH COMMENTARIES

Reclaiming our Humanity from the Necropolitics of Coloniality

Blog for World Refugee Day

By Hyab Yohannes - 20 June 2022

Over the last few weeks, we have witnessed the very notion of ‘asylum’ being radically called into question by the so-called Nationality and Borders Bill and the Rwanda deal (referred to hereafter as ‘legislations’) enacted by the UK government.

These pieces of legislation were debunked by the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Gillian Triggs as evading ‘international obligations, and are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention’ (Refugees, 2022). Triggs went on to say that ‘People fleeing war, conflict and persecution... should not be traded like commodities and transferred abroad for processing’ (Refugees, 2022). While these are designed to render impossible the very right to asylum, they also reveal fundamental truths about who we are as people – as citizens. In this short blog, I highlight four stakes foisted on us by these pieces of legislation and suggest how we can reclaim our humanity from the necropolitics of coloniality. These reflections are unfinished thoughts – provisional reflections – and should be read as such.

The first stake is that the very fact that such legislation has been passed by our own government reveals undeniable incapacity to receive, to welcome and to grant protection to people forced to seek refuge by circumstances our government is complicit in creating. Our sensibilities as human beings are worth nothing if we are incapable of receiving and welcoming others who are appealing to us. We cannot refuse our fellow human beings a simple greeting – a welcome – and continue to proclaim ourselves as hospitable. We cannot allow dehumanisation of our fellow human beings and remain human. These incapacities to greet, welcome and receive mark enormous losses to our own humanity. Certainly, the enormity of the losses erodes our humanity, our subjectivities, irreparably.

Second, the legislations reveal our government’s intention to warehouse people seeking refuge in offshore detention facilities. The fact that the government is using taxpayer money – our money, so to speak – to fund this hugely expensive operation of reducing people into violable and transportable commodities qualifies us as citizens to be complicit in the spectacle of exclusive (b)ordering. This begs fundamental questions: How much control do we have over how our own money is being used? What is our ethical relationship with people against whom are money is being used in order to condemn them to a spectacle tantamount to state trafficking? How does this policy affect our human qualities of care, compassion, sympathy and welcoming others? I am not in a position to answer these questions; they are questions for all of us to contemplate.

Third, the government's decision to use these pieces of legislation as weapons against marginalised people desperately seeking refuge calls into question the notion of the 'rule of law'. The UK is a country where such legislation is not only made possible but is used as an instrument of dehumanisation. As Foucault famously proclaimed, 'Law cannot help but be armed, and its arm, par excellence, is death; to those who transgress it, it replies, at least as a last resort, with that absolute menace' (Foucault, 1978, p. 144). The legislations are born out of a 'subjugation of [refugee] life to the power of death (necropolitics)' in an inherently colonial world order (Mbembé, 2003, p. 39). The politics of death – necropolitics – makes mockery of the rule of law.

Last, but not least, the aforementioned stakes are emboldened by a culture of impunity in which the UK government renders itself accountable to neither its national laws nor international obligations. This growing culture of impunity against racialised refugees has turned the UK into a country where people seeking refuge can never claim asylum. This impossibility to seek asylum marks 'the death of asylum' as Alison Mountz pronounces in her book titled *The Death of Asylum: hidden geographies of the enforcement archipelago* (2020). This is why World Refugee Day in the UK, at least in my mind, feels like 'no-refugee day', for nothing is more hopeless than being hopeless. We must hold onto hope against hope for a better future.

These stakes must provoke us to ask what the seminal American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler invites us to think:

*If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only
passive and powerless, as some might fear?
Or are we, rather, returned a sense of human vulnerability,
to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?
(Butler, 2006, p. 30)*

I would appeal to you, dear reader, to hold onto the latter against the hopelessness and incapacity of the current state of affairs. This sense of optimism, however, must be grounded in 'hope [that] remembers violence that has occurred, bringing humanization of individuals back into the frame alongside a commitment to alternative futures' (Mountz, 2020, p. 201). This is to say that we have reached a critical juncture in human history in which an impersonal logic of violent sovereign power is in charge 'to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not' (Mbembé, 2003, p. 27).

We must shift our efforts and imagination away from the omnipresent violence and reclaim our humanity and subjectivity from the necropolitics of coloniality. Reclaiming our humanity and subjectivity requires of us understanding that receiving the Other is an inescapable ethical relationality. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas reminds us of the idea of 'subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality' (Lévinas, 2011, p. 27). Lévinas strongly asserts that 'ethics is an optics. But it is a "vision" without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type' (2011, p. 23). This radical ethical relationality is more visible than ever in the 'welcome refugees' movements across the country; effortless protests led by ordinary citizens spreading from Kenmure Street in Glasgow to Gatwick Airport; fearless immigration lawyers defending the rule of law; and scholars denouncing the severing spectacle of bordering. Amidst the violence of necropolitics and coloniality, these people from all walks of life 'call for a direct, unmediated, visceral response, life to life' (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005, p. 23). They are demanding what Edkins and Pin-Fat call the 'politics of radical relationality' (2005, p. 21).

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In the end, we can have no doubt that our humanity is constituted by 'fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' towards one another (Butler, 2006, p. 22). The breach of this hospitality towards and responsibility for one another is the greatest act of inhumanity against not only the Other's humanity but also of our own humanity. This is why the direct human-to-human and face-to-face ethical relationality 'is a final and irreducible relation... [that] makes possible the pluralism of society' (Lévinas, 2011, p. 291). Such a countenance reveals what is concealed in each of us by the exclusive necropolitics and avaricious greed of capitalism that is eroding our very humanity. We, therefore, must be prepared for the test of facing the arduous tasks of unconditional hospitality and non-exclusive humanity. As Butler asserts: 'Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we are not, we're missing something' (2006, p. 23).

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