

Overcrowded Refugee Camps Are Designed to Tell Us That Non-Europeans' Lives Count for Less



Refugees find shelter outside a Lidl supermarket after a fire destroyed Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos on September 11. (Milos Bicanski / Getty Images)

The fire at Greece's notorious Moria refugee camp left over 12,000 people without shelter, but the new camp built to replace it holds only 3,000. The deliberate overcrowding flies in the face of anti-COVID measures, but it also has a clear political message: asylum seekers' lives are more dispensable than European citizens'.

On September 9, flames engulfed the notoriously overcrowded Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, leaving over twelve thousand people without

shelter. In the time since the fire, a new camp has been built — but with an official capacity of only three thousand. Many describe the new and massively overcrowded camp as “even worse than Moria,” lacking essential facilities like baths and clean toilets.

The former Moria residents and activists, as well as locals living in Lesbos, oppose the building of a new camp — instead call for the relocation of the asylum seekers to countries around the European Union. Yet even given these dire conditions, EU countries are only making symbolic gestures; Germany and France each pledged to take 100 to 150 children, the Netherlands fifty children, and Finland as few as eleven. Meanwhile, at least 240 asylum seekers have tested positive for the new coronavirus.

Professor Nikos Xypolytas is part of the sociology department at the University of the Aegean, focusing on migration and labor. Having interviewed many of Moria’s former residents, he sees the burning of the camp as a “symbolic event” in the continent’s so-called “migration crisis.” With winter looming over the poorly housed asylum seekers, *Jacobin*’s Elena Gagovska spoke to Xypolytas about the destruction of Moria and the future of European Union migration policy.

EG

Could you give a brief history of Moria and what the conditions were like before it burned down?

NX

Even though there are five other refugee camps in Greece, no other camp was ever like Moria. Moria was the crown jewel of European migration policy. It was established in 2015 and the conditions at Moria were always atrocious — because it was designed that way. The EU was always in the shadows when it came to Moria: the camp was part of European migration policy, but also, it wasn’t.

When Moria burned down, Europe *had* to step up essentially and say “yes, we need a new camp.” Up until that moment, the official narrative was that Moria was necessary in order to house people whose claims were being processed, but also that the EU was supposedly unhappy with what existed there — while not being able to do much to change the situation because the circumstances were dire and there was a state of emergency. In that state of emergency, certain things can be allowed. But of course, there’s no such thing as a five-year-long

emergency.

EG

You have called Moria the EU's "most effective tool of deterrent migrant policy." Could you unpack this?

NX

Moria always had a twofold goal: to send a message to those both inside and outside the camp. When it comes to those outside Moria, the message is quite straightforward. It is a deterrent in the sense that if you wish to come to Europe, you have to go through this horrible process.

On the other hand, for those inside the camp there are ostensibly two goals. The first is to facilitate so-called "voluntary repatriation" (i.e. asylum seekers deciding to go back to their home countries that they were fleeing). Given these horrible conditions, this was obviously not voluntary at all. When people find themselves in situations even worse than those they left, it says a lot not about how good things were back home, but about how terrible things are in the camp.

The second part of Moria's function is about disciplining the asylum seekers who won't go back to their home countries, into the role of their new social identity. There is a social identity or status of being a refugee that is not related to the 1951 Geneva Convention, but is instead about a new construction of what we call an "unwanted population." This unwanted population has to internalize the fact that they are unwanted — and that they are not second- or third-class citizens, but a category that does not relate to the concept of European citizen, or even to the concept of a human being that we can respect on European soil.

EG

You have also talked about how Moria's horrendous living conditions, as well as the fact of waiting for months or even years to have asylum claims examined, have contributed to a kind of epidemic of mental illness rampant throughout the camp. Could you tell us more about this?

NX

The way refugees approach mental illness in Moria camp is very similar to how they approach the coronavirus: "the more I stay in this environment, the more prone I am to getting this disease." Mental illness in Moria is directly related to the fundamental aspect of European migration policy: *waiting*. Not only do the

asylum seekers have to endure unacceptable conditions, but they also have to wait.

There is a long history of sociological and anthropological analysis of waiting that argues that by forcing someone to wait, you more or less demonstrate their social value as opposed to your own. Your social value is far more important when you make someone wait; thus, we can assume the kind of social value that is assigned to asylum seekers who are made to wait for years.

EG

As you have mentioned, a new camp with a capacity of three thousand people is being built in order to replace Moria. Could you talk about the message the EU is sending with this new policy?

NX

It became evident after Moria burned down that it always served a policy of deterrence. Before, no one wanted to admit that officially — but now it's something that is officially accepted.

It is always impressive to officially state that the capacity of a center is much less than the number of people expected to stay there. By stating a very specific official fact and by creating a new camp that is by definition overcrowded, a message is sent about the lives of asylum seekers not being worth the same as the lives of European citizens.

You would expect an official policy statement to say at least — even if it was not accurate — something like “the new camp has a more or less 6,000+ people capacity, but we are trying to figure this out.” Instead, this is a blatant expression that the camp is built for less people than it will house. And there is a reason for that. This camp sends a message to every single European, and more importantly to every single non-European that is trying to enter. The EU is starting to unmask itself as a dysfunctional, faceless bureaucratic entity, in terms of its political identity, its lack of moral principles, and its actions.

Can NGO workers access the new camp? Could you talk about the limits of NGO work in this field, in terms of actually bringing about a solution to the “migrant crisis”?

NX

Certain NGOs do have access. Many smaller NGOs also left just before the coronavirus outbreak. But it should also be noted that with this huge engagement of NGOs as a major player in the refugee crisis a specific message is sent: civil and social protection cannot be expected to derive solely from the state.

Obviously, not all NGOs are the same or have the same access to finance, though they are forced to search manically for funding because their whole existence is based on it. So, of course, NGOs are deeply affected by market forces. Competition runs through the core of NGOs, among NGOs, and within the same NGOs: you have project managers working against other project managers, and so on. Social protection as a concept in social policy and sociology means protection from the market. So, you have an agent of social protection who is by definition formed by market forces.

Still, many NGOs truly help migrants and by doing so they try to undermine EU migration policy — because this is essentially the biggest danger that migrants face. It is not that refugees need help and EU migration policy is providing that help. They need help *from* migration policy.

When NGO workers take such a position of solidarity with migrants rather than simply being part of the migration management system, they become demonized and are even seen as traitors by the Greek right. In fact, the extreme right-wing in Lesbos has targeted people who support refugees in one way or another, whether they are left-wingers, autonomous groups that try to show solidarity to the refugees' situation, or NGO workers.

EG

Speaking of market forces, I wanted to ask you to speak about how the right to work is denied to most refugees in this camp, including access to work, and how this furthers their marginalization. This lack of access to work can push refugees into black market or criminal activities, and thus facilitate the creation of negative stereotypes about refugees.

NX

Exactly. It is important to understand migration flows as part of an effort to create a cheap labor force. This is not about being offered a specific job on the labor market, but about disciplining refugees as part of a cheap labor force. To condition someone in this way is a long process that involves constructing a

specific social status of a refugee population. It is about making sure that they understand that their place in this continent — if they are ever given one — is a very specific place. This disciplining aspect of migration policy should always be stressed.

EG

How does the coronavirus affect refugees, especially given that refugees at the new camp have no way to do social distancing or have facilities to maintain proper hygiene? To what degree is the EU complicit in the spread of the virus among refugees and for possible future deaths?

NX

Fortunately, as far as I know, no one has gotten sick from COVID-19 in the camp. Many have tested positive, but no one has been seriously ill. Now the temperature is high; however, the camp will be hit by north winds in the coming months so I do not know how the situation will change, nobody does.

But in terms of “migration management,” COVID-19 was a godsend since the much-protested idea of a closed camp now became acceptable. Previously, that idea was protested against by the local population in Lesbos and other islands on two grounds: first, that they did not want the refugees in their backyard, and second, that they did not want the idea of a concentration camp.

However, the COVID-19 outbreak helped to turn the issue of refugee management into a public health issue. Now, even if we support “the wretched of the earth,” there is an absolutely rational reason why they should avoid contact with the local population because that might be catastrophic for everyone. So suddenly there is a new narrative that pushes support for the detention of refugees in terms of public health.

EG

Do you see any political will to change the way refugees are treated in the EU?

NX

Absolutely none. It is a destructive policy. And I am afraid that the only thing that would change this policy is if everything changes, through some symbolic event like the one you had when Moria burned down. There are all of these people who mistakenly believe in just buying time before the dead bodies start piling up. Because of this, the next symbolic event will be bloody.

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Source:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/overcrowded-refugee-camps-eu-migration-policy-lesbos-moria>

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