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Social Contract in a Borderless World

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Social Contract in a Borderless World

Abstract

Addressing the American Political Science Association in 2000, the international relations theorist Robert Keohane of Princeton University noted that effective governance in a globalized world depends more on interstate cooperation and transnational networks than any type of world body. Keohane made the claim that the people and players in a globalized world stand to gain from the system through cooperation across borders and boundaries. Nevertheless, Keohane also observed that the actors may exploit interdependence in that system by transferring blame to others and that, although institutions may be essential, they can also be dangerous. So it is when confronting the issues of forced migration and displacement. While the economic and security issues concerning displaced persons place the matter at the forefront of the global agenda, it is largely a matter for people to settle.

Keywords

Human rights, War on terror, Humanitarian aid, Non-governmental organizations, Military

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Social Contract in a Borderless World

by Daniel J. Graeber

Addressing the American Political Science Association in 2000, the international relations theorist [Robert Keohane](#) of Princeton University [noted](#) that effective governance in a globalized world depends more on interstate cooperation and transnational networks than any type of world body. Keohane made the claim that the people and players in a globalized world stand to gain from the system through cooperation across borders and boundaries. Nevertheless, Keohane also observed that the actors may exploit interdependence in that system by transferring blame to others and that, although institutions may be essential, they can also be dangerous. So it is when confronting the issues of forced migration and displacement. While the economic and security issues concerning displaced persons place the matter at the forefront of the global agenda, it is largely a matter for people to settle.

The article in the June 19 edition of *The Economist* entitled “Still knocking, as the doors close” presents the notion that many of the so-called rich countries are bowing to a widening sense of xenophobia among the European community by closing the doors on displaced persons fleeing conflict zones. *The Economist* says the “luckless people” in conflict zones in Central Asia and the Middle East are turning to Europe as a place of safety and source for a better future. And why shouldn't they? As Europe moves toward the next phase of geopolitical identity, that of a national federal system rather than a provincial federal system, she should expect to experience the same wave of immigration that eventually defined the multinational demographic of the United States. But at the same time, why should Europe not tackle the issue in the same fashion that the United States is tackling its own immigration problem? At which point does a nation, or supra-nation, extend its [social contract](#) to wards of the state that operate outside that contract?

The Economist points to a general rise in the number of displaced persons in the world and blames the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for contributing to that factor. As of December 2007, the number of displaced persons rose from 1.6 million in the previous year to 26 million. “And if you throw the net really wide,” the report says, to include non-conflict issues such as climate change, food shortages and natural disasters, that figure rises to 67 million.

Of these displaced millions, however, *The Economist* says only a small fraction sought the assistance of the [U.N. human rights agency](#) by demanding asylum in another country. It would be curious to compare that fraction with those displaced persons who are aware of such procedures or those who find U.N. procedures expeditious. Migration of a populace tends to move from a situation of deteriorating living conditions to a situation of improved living conditions. Many of the displaced, one could argue, are at or below the middle class demographic and lack any resources to give them the benefit of time. The [U.S. Helsinki Commission](#) said in an April 2008 [report](#) that the majority of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, for example, fled their homeland with few resources and have depleted whatever income they had while living as refugees. Fleeing conflict or disaster does not allow time for procedure.

The report then goes on to condemn the “[returns directive](#)” in the European Union that permits at least six-months of detention for those entering Europe illegally. The directive allows further detention of immigrants beyond the six-month term should they “fail to cooperate” with authorities. At least some of those detained as illegal immigrants, the report says, are asylum seekers and the “returns directive” is perhaps enforced in such a manner that the distinction between the two is blurred. The report then asks if it is therefore permissible for the “other rich countries” to condemn Europe for its treatment of the less fortunate. The answer is an emphatic no.

The displaced Iraqi in Jordan poses the same question facing America concerning the migration from Latin America. Specifically, illegal migration, displaced persons, and asylum seekers may become wards of the host nation, who, sometimes at great cost, use revenue derived from their populace to care for the disadvantaged. The government of Iraq, and the United Nations for that matter, heaped praise upon Jordan for its generosity in hosting refugees, but Jordan cannot maintain that assistance indefinitely. Americans, for their part, face similar issues when confronting their own immigration problem. Given the declining world economy and the global uptick in violence, it is no wonder the issue is in the spotlight. Extending the social contract to outsiders in the name of philanthropy would make [Milton Friedman](#) stand up in his grave.

The Economist notes a softening of the public perception extended toward forced migration. It points to policies embraced by Australian Prime Minister [Kevin Rudd](#) who closed several detention centers in the country and moved to ease the process by which asylum seekers become full citizens. Keohane noted that leaders have a variety of goals, but staying in power is very near the top of their agenda. Europe may address the burdens of migration with its “returns directive,” and America may address the burden with a border fence, but it is not Europe or America who is making those decisions. It is the people who are dealing with their own degree of xenophobia that are calling the shots. *The Economist* notes that a lack of distinction exists in public opinion between asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. But what really is the difference when the social contract is involved? Institutions such as the UNHCR may provide a means by which displaced persons address their concerns, but for better or worse, it is not the institution’s decision to make.

Daniel J. Graeber has been a contributor to the Foreign Policy Association's Great Decisions series since its inception, writing on war crimes and international law. He has focused considerably on the legal aspects concerning the U.S.-led "war on terror" and various war crimes tribunals. He has lectured on the history of war crimes in the international arena and served as a professor of ethics at Grand Valley State University. He has published works on the history of the U.S. relationship with Israel and the U.S. foreign policy regarding Hamas. He is currently a writer for United Press International covering Iraqi political developments, as well as the oil and energy sector. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.