

# SURPLUS AND DISPLACEMENT, REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

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## ABSTRACT

The idea of "surplus-humanity" is mobilised by different theorists to analyse the status of masses of people who are marginalised, due to inequality, dispossession, and mass displacement. It describes the social condition of the great masses who remain excluded from social and human rights. In this essay, Alameda's researcher Nadia Bou Ali connects this concept to the **critical discussion of "surplus populations"**, a category derived from political economy and which greatly complexifies the analysis of how economic systems relate to – and potentially absorb – the very people they cast aside. In Bou Ali's analysis, the consideration of this underlying economic dynamic can help us identify the specificity, and the specific challenges, posed to refugees – and humanitarian responses – in contexts such as the aftermath of the Türkiye/Syria earthquake, where **often social insecurity and formal unemployment is not an obstacle, but the actual condition for economic integration of displaced or "surplus" populations.**

## INTRO

The essay begins by recognising that the concept of surplus-population does not imply displacement or lack of place in a society, as it also applies to the way certain economic dynamics, connected with labor exploitation, lead to increased rates of unemployment within national economies themselves. There is, then, a place within regular economic functioning of capitalist societies for reacting, adapting, and integrating a growing mass of unemployed people – a process that is expanded and mobilised in the cases of mass displacements as well. The economic process in question connects the outpouring of unemployed masses – due to changes in how businesses and economic sectors rearrange themselves in order to compete – and the regulation of wages, in such a way that **surplus populations become both "the cause and effect of development of productive forces"**.

The effect of this phenomena is that, paradoxically, the very means of survival of people who have been excluded from formal rights and employment set up the condition for employers to pay informal and "underemployed" workers less than they need to survive – hence bringing wages down more generally.

This complex economic analysis is important because it demonstrates, first of all, that **social and economic exclusion are not the same**: people can be kept in a position of "surplus" as an integral part of an economy's function, rather than as a problem. Secondly, it also raises an important issue concerning the forms and effects of aid in contexts, such as the one in Lebanon, where NGOs take on a relevant role in providing means of subsistence to refugees.

## PROBLEM SETTING

The economic analysis of surplus-populations allows us to see that one of the structural issues behind refugee crises is that displaced populations can serve an economic role even while they remain socially excluded from human and civil rights. This problem connects the broader issue of the dynamics of growing unemployment rates with the particular challenges faced by refugees of natural and social catastrophes.

Focusing specifically on the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, before and after the earthquake, it is clear that the Lebanese economy is deeply dependent on not only migrant labour – that is, the socially integrated work of other peoples – but also on refugee labour – work that is able to be purchased under certain conditions only due to its invisibilised status.

The way the logic of surplus-populations shifts the onus of guaranteeing conditions of survival and subsistence onto unemployed and underemployed populations sets up an important line of questioning for the humanitarian sector acting in such contexts, as there might be forms of aid response that further reinforce this tendency, indirectly contributing to the economic integration of socially excluded groups.

## KEY FINDINGS

Humanitarian responses to both natural and social catastrophes must consider, both when analyzing the social terrain they intend to intervene upon, as well as when designing policies, that there are self-reinforcing dynamics that bind social exclusion and economic integration, specially in economies in a permanent state of crisis or in the aftermath of great turmoil. In this context, greater care needs to be given to the potential ways in which, by assuming the humanitarian burden, the condition of "surplus-humanity" is indirectly perpetuated at an economic level through attempts at mitigating it.



Economically speaking, there are key differences between refugee and migrant labor



In the MENA region, migrant and refugee labor play a constitutive part in economic development, leading to complex arrangements between social exclusion and economic integration.



The role of NGOs and humanitarian aid in the economic dynamic of surplus populations is an important factor when considering effective policy-making in responses to contexts of catastrophe.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The essay seeks primarily to demonstrate that one must be **cautious with the collateral effects of humanitarian interventions in contexts where the economic dynamic already depends on cheap and informal forms of labor.** In these scenarios, both displaced populations and growing unemployed masses can be integrated into an economic dynamic that perpetuates and exploits their status as "surplus humanity" – furthermore, the very forms of mitigation, aid and management of such predicaments by NGOs and other actors can also fit into this complex dynamic, producing unwanted collateral effects.

## FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Further investigation is suggested both in terms of empirical data analysis and of ethnographic fieldwork – both of which would either falsify or corroborate the hypothesis put forward in this essay. The author also suggests that a deeper analysis would need to consider in detail how the dynamics of surplus-populations also play into environmental concerns, connecting natural catastrophes with a further intensification of exploitative economic tendencies.