

PASSPORT TO PRIVILEGE

THEO SIMON reflects on a week spent among the people in Calais

I drive up the ramp onto the ferry, like I'm crossing the drawbridge into a moated castle. Part of me wishes that I had Mohammed stowed away in my car. But after the border guards go through the bedding in the boot, I realise that even if I had been able to spare the young Afghan the nightly dangers of looking for lorries to jump, he would have been quickly discovered before we'd even reached the boat. I would have been detained for hours; he would have been unceremoniously dumped back in the human jungle on the other side of the razor wire, after a good old-fashioned beating from the French cops.

I'd been working for a week at L'Auberge Des Migrants, a busy warehouse and wood-yard hidden away on a Calais industrial estate. Each day the 50 or so mainly British volunteers would put in eight hours sorting clothes, medical supplies, and food donations for delivery to the thousands stranded in the refugee shanty-town. After three days I'd gone to the camp myself, and met some of the people wearing the cast-off shoes, joggers and designer tops I'd been sorting. What I experienced there changed my view of the world for ever.

Borderline Humans

It wasn't that I had to approach the camp through a wasteland of broken and burned out temporary homes, after a partial eviction which had, bizarrely, left only the structures erected by western aid workers standing - a chipboard church, a legal office, and a school. It wasn't the ramshackle make-shift shelters that still crowded together in the sandy windswept wasteland, with young men in food-queues eyeing me warily in case I was taking photographs. It wasn't even the harrowing stories I heard over chai, above the blare of generator-powered Eastern music videos in crowded DIY cafes. What humbled me was the realisation that I was no more deserving in any way whatsoever than these people who had walked through God-knows-what

from Helmand, Homs and Asmara in Eritrea, only to land at last in a limbo that turned them from escaping heroes to bothersome border-line humans.



I'm embarrassed to say it. I don't want anyone to think that I wasn't already a switched-on, one-human-family kind of guy. That was why I was there. But deep down I noticed that there was still some sense in me that I was naturally entitled to my privileged place in the global pecking order. It only took a few conversations to expose that sense of entitlement for the racism that it really was.

Hearing from a Syrian lad who would prefer to study in the absence of random barrel-bombs which had already killed half his relatives; being shown how to use my smart phone better by a 20 year-old Afghan from a village where the Taliban were moving back in; getting a lesson in British colonial history from 55 year-old Haillie, who one weekend had to up and leave his life as a conscript instructor in Eritrea's army because he got wind of his imminent arrest as a troublemaker. It was obvious that nothing I have done in my life has entitled me to one inch more of freedom, or one shopping bag more full of stuff, than any one of them. I just got born on the right side of the colonial divide.

If anything, the men and boys I met were more deserving than me. They were the strivers and entrepreneurs we hear so much about from Tory MPs who want to 'protect our borders from bogus asylum seekers', and they were just trying to make the best of their lives. With support from EU citizens whose generosity was the mirror image of EU officialdom, they had created a strange transitory community of streets, signage, shops and mosques. The Jungle was impressive rather than depressing. It was the same irrepressible ingenuity I've seen in the DIY culture of free festivals, in Delhi back-streets, or in direct action camps in Britain. It was no accident that the people who had really stepped up to offer support on the ground were the travellers and protest types who camped in caravans and trucks behind the warehouse.

But it wasn't a festival. It was just a temporary launch pad for the nightly attempts to break into the palace on the hill. In the morning any one of the people I met might be gone, never to return. Others might be queuing for medical help after twisting or breaking limbs in failed attempts to jump onto trains or lorries. They wore their discomfort and their injuries with the same stoical patience I'd like to think I would. After all, they'd already seen far worse on their epic journeys, fired at by police in the mountains of Iran who used live ammo rather than CS gas canisters, ripped-off by the unregulated travel agents we disparagingly call 'people-traffickers', or bereaved and washed up on the shores of our sun-drenched holiday locations.



London Calling

From the small minority of refugees who, because of language or kinship connections, headed for asylum in Britain rather than Sweden or Germany, these were the even smaller minority who had made it almost all the way. There were far fewer women than men, and many of the women and families who had made it to Calais had now moved to the official cabin complex to the south of the camp, built from shipping containers. But doing that meant registering with the French authorities, and that meant giving up hope of claiming refugee status in Britain. Those for whom there was no space, or who wanted to claim refuge in the UK, remained in “The Jungle”, unregistered and autonomous.

Their frustration and growing sense of depression, especially among the older men who couldn't physically play the lorry-jumping game, was due to the discovery that having finally reached their destination, the gate was locked and impenetrable. Through a security deal with the French, with policing and razor-wire paid for by my taxes, my government had contrived to deny them even the opportunity to arrive on UK soil and make a claim for refugee status. They weren't just being denied their human rights. They were being denied even the right to be considered human in the first place.

There's something cruelly perverse about a nation that projects itself through every screen on the planet as the best, the most humane, safe and desirable of all possible worlds, and then denies the majority of its viewers access. The perversion becomes pathological when the creation of the wealth we flaunt, even in our casual donations of last year's fashion-wear, is paid for in the very wars, ecological collapse and exploitation those people are trying to escape.

Ironically, the people who have the time and motivation to go and do migrant support work don't necessarily share in the migrants' aspiration for a place in the modern capitalist economy. We know, as most readers of *The Land* do, how shallow, alienated, wasteful and destructive that promise is. But I was starkly aware as the Calais coastline blurred through the window of the ferry home just how much privilege my little passport gives me. I won't be ‘disappeared’ for writing these words. I don't have to choose between two murderous sides in a civil war in East Pennard. My sexuality isn't a lethal secret, and I don't risk random death when I pop to the shops.



Temporary Privileges

Speaking to friends on my return, I saw how we make it all bearable by discussing abstract figures and talking about “Them” as a phenomenon, an intellectual problem, rather than as people exactly like ourselves and our own friends.

If I take my twelve year-old daughter to Calais, and we get separated, she won't be left to her own devices by the local police, wandering the streets and risking her life every night. That fate is reserved for unaccompanied boys like twelve-year-old Mohammed, who I had to go and pick up from the motorway twenty miles north of Calais one night. He had jumped the wrong truck, and ended up not in Dover but Brussels. He had walked back as far as Dunkirk before ringing a mate in the camp to ask for help. The police had stopped him, and then ignored him.

By the time you read this, Mohammed may have made it through - or he may have fallen under a lorry, or been taken by sexual predators. This particular ‘refugee crisis’ may have morphed and moved on. But the growing waves of displaced human beings will still be breaking repeatedly either against the fences at Calais, or against other fences further south and east. Like climate change, that is inescapable now. Either ‘they’ will overwhelm the barriers, as surely as hungry city-dwellers would overwhelm a rural small-holding, or ‘we’ will militarise our borders and watch them starve and freeze at gunpoint.

The only alternative is to offer the refugee refuge, humanely and sympathetically regardless of numbers, and to share our resources and political power to make other parts of the planet safe again. Otherwise the ‘universal human rights’ which we quite rightly see as the touchstone of progressive human culture, are not really universal at all. They are just temporary privileges afforded by a decadent civilisation to its subjects, and entitlement is a matter of luck rather than common humanity. If *that* turned out to be the case, then there would be no basis on which to develop a global community that can protect and repair the earth, and we, or our children, could well be the next people wheeling and dealing in a jungle of borderline humans.

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