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CHAPTER 7:

FROM MIGRANT CRISIS TO MIGRANT CRITIQUE:

AFFIRMATIVE SABOTAGE AND THE CLAIMS TO RIGHTS BY AFGHANS EMPLOYED BY WESTERN ARMIES

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Introduction

> On his next try, Darius's boat made it to Lesbos. As a joyful man jumped out and began pulling the boat ashore, a voice nearby whispered, 'Don't celebrate too soon. This is where the hardship really starts.'
>
> 'We're in Europe,' said Darius, to the dark. 'We are on free soil.'
>
> 'But we're not going into Europe. We're going to Moria [refugee camp].'
>
> (Nayeri, 2019, p. 20)

The rise in the number of asylum seekers seeking protection in European countries during 2015-2016 has commonly been described in terms of Europe facing 'a refugee or migration crisis'. Critical scholars have reframed this moment by severing the link between 'migrants' and 'crisis' and instead have referred to a "welcoming crisis" (Farrah & Muggah, 2018), a "crisis of public administration" (Bock, 2018, p. 376), a "crisis of European migration policies" (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015), a "solidarity crisis" (De Jong & Ataç, 2017, p. 28), a "racial crisis" (De Genova, 2018, p. 1769), and a European identity crisis (Fotou, 2021, p. 21). By attaching crisis to European migration policies, administrations, identity and morality, these scholars have signalled that the 'crisis' was not brought to Europe by refugees, but that the arrival of migrants exposed existing fault lines in European institutions and values. Indeed, even Frederica Mogherini, the then EU high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, referred to the multitude of refugee boats that got stranded during their attempt to cross to Europe, as a "test" for the values of Europe (quoted in: Stierl, 2020, p. 4). However, "crisis" remains a common frame to describe rising numbers of sanctuary seekers arriving on European territory. This is illustrated by the statement of the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, who declared in May 2021, when within a few days about 6,000 people crossed into Ceuta (a Spanish enclave on the northern tip of Morocco), "This sudden arrival of irregular migrants is a serious crisis for Spain and for Europe" (Kassam, 2021)

The reframings of 'refugee crisis' offered by critical migration, race and postcolonial scholars (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; De Genova, 2018; De Jong & Ataç, 2017; Farrah & Muggah, 2018; Fotou, 2021) often draw on close engagement with migrant activism and in several cases also draw on personal experiences with racial discrimination and othering. However, as intellectuals, these critical scholars still occupy a relatively privileged status as meaning-makers. Because "framing migration as a crisis [...] disregards migrant agency" (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 35), it is important to complement these activist-academic conceptualisations of the so-called refugee crisis, with migrants' own understandings of crisis. In this chapter, I, therefore, seek to draw on, but also extend the aforementioned, alternative conceptualisations of the so-called refugee crisis, by focussing on understandings of crisis 'from below'. More specifically I ask: What do migrants who recently arrived in Europe or who still seek to find protection think of Europe? What expectations, norms, experiences, institutions, and policies did they consider in crisis or pushed them to a point of crisis, if any at all? These questions are important, because crisis should not merely be understood as a descriptive term that seeks to capture a specific socio-historical conjuncture, but rather as a performative concept that shapes meanings, which in turn get translated into concrete political decisions and actions (Dines, Montagna, & Vacchelli, 2018). Migrants should be recognised as agents who themselves make sense of crises – however conceived – and respond to them according to their understandings. This includes migrants' active role in political struggles, which reshape the Europe that they encounter, "reconfiguring and contesting its space" (Picozza, 2021, p. xviii).

In this chapter, I will draw on Janet Roitman's (2016) suggestion that a diagnosis of crisis is bound to a critique, because declaring crisis indicates reference to a norm with which the current moment is negatively compared and contrasted. I will identify bottom-up or subaltern understanding of crises by presenting migrants' own understanding of the Europe they encountered. Following Roitman's idea that "crisis is an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge" (Roitman, Angeli Aguiton, Cornilleau, & Cabane, 2020, p. 775) that allows us to see certain things, while leaving other assumptions and norms invisible, I suggest that tracing subaltern understandings of crisis, helps to develop alternative critiques. This chapter will show that the crises diagnosed by migrants are multiple and intersecting, converging around the barriers to living in human dignity and the double moral standards of Europe. I will subsequently challenge a-historical conceptualisations of crisis, which present it as an abrupt rupture, by demonstrating that these acutely felt contemporary crises also intersect with an entrenched crisis of (neo-) imperialism.

Migrants' diagnoses of converging crises and the critiques linked to these, inform their agentive social responses. I will develop the argument that this enables migrants to adopt a strategy of 'affirmative sabotage' (Dhawan, Davis, & Spivak, 2019), which is based on a simultaneous appeal to and critique of European values. By foregrounding the voices and actions of migrants, I seek to work against a framing of crisis which "reproduces a division of labor, according to which migrants and refugees play a passive role while states, governments, and European institutions are the active agents, called upon to intervene and solve the 'crisis'" (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015). Instead, as various examples in the last section of this chapter demonstrate, migrants have actively sought out various avenues to respond to and challenge the intersecting crises that they have identified.

This chapter focuses on the narrations of a particular subset of migrants who encounter Europe; Afghan local interpreters, who worked for Western armies in Afghanistan. With the gradual reduction of troops during the course of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission (2001-2014), association with Western forces became increasingly dangerous and local staff became explicit targets for insurgents (UNHCR, 2018). They have sought protection through international relocation to Western states, either through official resettlement programmes or via asylum routes. Some who felt forced to pursue the latter option got stranded in countries like Turkey or Greece, including in the Moria camp on Lesvos, referred to in the epigraph opening this chapter. Following the April 2021 announcement of the US and NATO that a full drawdown from Afghanistan would take place within the next months, the evacuation of local staff out of harm's way gained renewed urgency. However, as this chapter shows, the threats to life faced by Afghan locally employed staff associated with Western forces long preceded the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in August 2021. Hence while many Western audiences only became conscious of a crisis in the protection of Afghan former locally employed staff when the images of the fraught evacuation efforts, following the Taliban take-over of Kabul, hit their television screens and social media in August 2021, viewing this crisis 'from below' reveals that this intersecting crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants, originated much earlier.

Context and Data

To foreground the voices of migrants, the main source for the analysis offered here are 48 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2017-2022 with male former Afghan interpreters who now live in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, and the

Netherlands. In the same period, I also interviewed 36 advocates and service providers in the aforementioned countries, including veterans, lawyers, representatives of professional interpreting associations, civil society activists, and refugee resettlement caseworkers. Finally, I carried out (participant) observations of several national and international political meetings in which Afghans who had worked for Western armies and their advocates discussed and raised awareness for the protection and rights of Afghan local civilian staff.

To understand the context of the mobilisation of Afghan former employees of Western armies and their allies, it is important to know that there was no overarching international NATO coordinated protection scheme. National resettlement schemes for Afghan local staff were haphazard and non-comprehensive both prior to and post August 2021 (De Jong & Sarantidis, 2022). Where countries had resettlement programmes in place before the last-minute evacuation efforts in August 2021, implementation had been slow or inadequate. For instance, a UK Defence Select Committee Report from May 2018, characterised the Government's *Intimidation scheme*, open at the time to Afghan local staff under threat who did not qualify for the alternative Redundancy (ex-gratia) scheme, "hitherto useless"; indeed none of the 401 applicants to this scheme were granted the right to relocate to the UK. It took until April 2021 before the new Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) replaced the Intimidation scheme, only a few months before the eventual NATO withdrawal and the Taliban take-over in August 2021. Already prior to August 2021, for those who were not eligible under the stringent criteria of the various national resettlement programmes or for whom the waiting period posed too great a risk, fleeing and claiming asylum in the hope to obtain protection was the only option. Some were forced to claim asylum in third countries rather than the counties that employed them, as the Dublin Regulation stipulates that asylum seekers must claim asylum in the first safe country they reach (El-Enany, 2013). However, Afghan former interpreters who fled to third countries were often left in limbo or at risk of deportation, as several states refused to take responsibility for Afghans, who had been employed by other NATO forces. Those Afghan former employees with Western armies who were lucky enough to be resettled under protection schemes or who were successful in their asylum claims often continued to struggle with un- and underemployment, lack of access to education, separation from their families, and mental health issues brought about by long-term exposure to traumatic experiences as frontline interpreters. However, they did not remain passive in the face of these challenges. Both in- and outside of Afghanistan, Afghans who had worked for Western forces, engaged in political activities such as protests, strategic litigation, and exposure of injustices through (social) media, together with their allies. They also founded associations and support organisations in the years preceding the disastrous withdrawal in August 2021 (De Jong, 2019) and continued making their voices heard after the Taliban take-over (e.g. De Jong & Sarantidis, 2022, p. 49).

Crisis and Norms

Crisis, as Roitman has argued, is "bound to its cognate 'critique'" (2016, p. 24), because declaring crisis involves "reference to a norm" (2016, p. 28), for instance, an ethical expectation or a comparatively better history. It is therefore important to trace the norms that structure the expectations of locally employed Afghan staff who sought sanctuary following employment with Western troops. This will subsequently help to understand how they understood crises as a deviation from certain norms. Moreover, it will aid the analysis of how they developed a critique of the 'crisis' situation they found themselves, which fuelled their agentic social responses.

At a macro-level, Afghan local staff were exposed to the norms embedded in the rhetoric surrounding neo-imperial war in Afghanistan, fought in the name of the defense and spread of supposedly "Western values", such as democracy, freedom and women's rights. The doctrinal focus on 'winning hearts and minds' both shaped the expectations of interpreters and cultural advisers and made them conduits for this discourse. As one former interpreter who I met in the UK explains, "it was the image that these heroes of human rights are helping [...] they are the heroes of the civilized countries in the world". Based on this perception, he considered it his duty to support the mission. Idealised images of Western culture, embedded in the legacies of Empire, also played a role in the motivation of LECs to work with western militaries. While he now considered his initial motivation a misjudgement and critically interrogates the pretext for British and US engagement in Afghanistan, a former Afghan interpreter who I interviewed in the UK described his initial motivation as follows: "When the Westerners came to Afghanistan, I was an excited boy. I thought these men with blond hair and blue eyes they were quite interesting. They're peaceful people; they built up their own nations."

On the meso-level, Afghan local staff, in particular patrol interpreters, were immersed in the norms surrounding military ethic, including the battlefield credo "no one left behind". The Western adage "shoulder to shoulder", translated into Dari as "Shona-ba-Shona", was a constant reference to describe the relationship between Western and Afghan military. It also extended to the relationship with Afghan civilian interpreters who accompanied Western soldiers on their patrols. As General Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan (2010-2011) formulated it in one of his speeches, "We are all - civilian and military, Afghan and international - part of one team with one mission" (Petraeus, 2010). Afghan locally employed civilians were neither passive recipients of these norms, nor empty vessels, and these norms were mixed with and interpreted in relation to their own moral codes, including for instance the ethics of hospitality.

At a micro-level, Afghan local staff absorbed the cultural influences of the soldiers that they worked alongside. In some cases, this exposure was significant, as their employment often lasted for years, in contrast to the much shorter tours of duty of Western soldiers themselves, and many Afghan civilian staff members were young men who quickly absorbed the military and national cultural codes. Some interpreters adopted the local dialect of the troops they were associated with, for instance, a distinct Scottish twang, and displayed their affinity with the military family with their military slang and humour. As narrated in my own interview data as well as in autobiographies of Western soldiers, they struck friendships with Western soldiers, adopted or were given Western nicknames, and exchanged about music and food (Zeller, 2012). However, the interviews with former local Afghan staff also revealed tensions in the masculine bonding and brotherhood, pointing to the structures of racialised inequality shaping the experiences of Afghan local staff (de Jong, 2022a).

After operating 'shoulder to shoulder' with European troops, ostensibly united by "one mission", Afghan local interpreters and other staff found themselves abandoned when their security was jeopardised. Following downscaling of military operations or terminations, they lost the protection of the military base and were exposed to threats by those who considered them 'traitors'. Local Afghan staff whose work was vital to protecting western soldiers – decoding dangerous situations, intercepting enemy intelligence and in some cases using weapons to directly protect them – found that their own security was not regarded with equal concern. The rhetoric of values and norms that had partially attracted them to work for western militaries and which they had absorbed and even promoted during their employment, was thrown into a crisis when these Afghan local staff members sought the protection of the very same states for which they had worked. In the next section, I will further develop how the macro-meso and micro-norms of human rights, military ethics and brotherhood were a reference point for Afghan former local interpreters and other staff for the critique they developed.

Critique and a Crisis of Expectations

Adil, an Afghan interpreter who now lives in the UK, explained to me that he wished that the NATO had introduced a unified protection scheme that included the protection of all local staff. He then wondered aloud: "The thing is that these western countries who are always shouting about human rights, human rights, human rights, human rights, where are the human rights in here?" He continued:

> *Where are the human rights? Like you are always shouting [...] 'they have done that against human rights', [...] Afghanistan is doing everything against human rights', but where are the human rights in the UK? Where are the human rights in Germany? Where are the human rights in America? Are these people human? Of course, we are from Afghanistan, but we are human beings as*

> *well. We have rights in this world as well, so where are the human rights to listen to me?*

Adil's critique offers insight into two intersecting crises: a crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants.

Firstly, his reference to the false claims of Western human rights, identifies a moral crisis of the West. Adil's questions present a challenge to "the cosmopolitan liberal order that is said to define the European project [being] founded on a commitment to human rights" (Bhambra, 2017, p. 395). As Bhambra has argued, if there "is a crisis in Europe, it is a moral crisis associated with Europe's failure, in the main, to act in a manner consistent with what are claimed as European values (at the very least, these would include a commitment to human rights and upholding the rule of law, including international law)" (2017, p. 395). Secondly, Adil references what Serena Parekh has referred to as a crisis hidden in the shadow of the much more visible European "migration crisis", namely the "crisis for refugees themselves" (2020, p. 3). This is the crisis of the struggle to find refuge and to access a life of human dignity in the face of European border policies. As Parekh highlights, the majority of those seeking sanctuary, never attain secure legal status in Europe. In some cases, this crisis became visible by former Afghan local staff having to take precarious flight routes, which left some of my interlocutors traumatised. In interviews, they would mention having nightmares about trying to cross borders in the back of a lorry, reference time in detention or spells of homelessness, while some simply did not want to talk about certain parts of their journey. Gurminder Bhambra's reframing of the crisis as crisis *of* Europe rather than a crisis *in* Europe (2017, p. 400) is particularly pertinent in this light. As she has argued elsewhere, Europe symbolising the "hope of freedom, democracy and openness to the world [...] is in in question if instead of starting with the dreams of those in crowded refugee boats, we started with the corpses of many of those very refugees piling up in places like Lampedusa" (2016, pp. 191-192).

Many of those who, like Adil, were in the relatively fortunate position to find refuge through resettlement or who obtained refugee status, struggled with legal and other obstacles to building a life in dignity. Adil, who now works as a taxi driver, provided a personal example to illustrate his disillusionment with the promises of Europe. His dream to become an engineer, which he had hoped would finally come true in Europe, was jeopardised by the high college fees, due to his migration status. The distinct and rare type of visa that the UK Government provided at the time to Afghan former interpreters for the British Armed Forces resettled under the so-called Ex-Gratia Schem, had caused confusion and for a few weeks, he was enrolled in an engineering college paying (the much lower) home student fees. His dream was shattered when after a few weeks the head of the college took him out of his classroom to tell him that he had to pay a prohibitively high fee or leave. His attachment to his dream was still tangible, when while navigating his car around a roundabout to drive me back after the interview, I saw him fumbling in his purse to show me something: the college identity card that he still treasured. He asked me:

> *What's the difference between the Taliban, and the government of the UK? When Taliban refuses to [let people] go to the schools and the government of the UK refuses to [let people] go to college, they're the same! They have treated us the same way that the Taliban has treated us.*

Adil continued by saying that "the government of UK is even worse than that, because at least the Taliban were letting men and boys to go to school to go to college to go to university." This comparison and contrast between the Taliban and the UK government is even starker in light of the fact that the military invasion of Afghanistan was intertwined with development and humanitarian efforts, including in the field of education.

Adil's observation that the circumscribed opportunities in Afghanistan framed by the Taliban regime were not dissimilar in effect to the limitations imposed by the British Government, was echoed by Mohammed, a former Afghan interpreter in the Netherlands. Mohammed faced extreme racist abuse from his neighbours, including to his young children and wife. He told me that if he would have known that he would experience this, he would never have brought his family to the Netherlands. He decried the lack of tolerance on both sides, asking what the difference was between the Taliban not accepting Christians and his neighbours not accepting Muslims: "In Afghanistan, they ask me, 'why do you wear a shirt and shorts, or why do you not go to the mosque?', while here they tell my wife that she should not wear a headscarf." Adil's critique was echoed by former Afghan staff resettled to the UK who had not been able to bring their wives with them when they relocated under the Ex-Gratia Scheme. Despite having the legal right to family reunification, they experienced years of separation from their spouses and children as the UK's visa office would simply delay processing their visa applications. Over the years, I have had many informal conversations with former Afghan interpreters who expressed their dismay that despite the Western rhetoric of women's rights, their wives were left behind in dangerous and socially comprised positions.

Intersecting Crises

These examples show that former Afghan local staff who migrated to the West found themselves at the intersection of at least two crises: a crisis of faith in so-called Western values and a crisis of their human dignity as they found themselves excluded from rights and protection. Abdul, a UK-based former interpreter told me: "In this Western world we look up to you guys [in terms of] knowledge, education, fairness, human rights, [...] but at the end of the day, since I have come here to the UK, one thing

I have learned is that none of these things in reality exist." Abdul continued to explain to me that there is an Indian expression that refers to the two sets of teeth that elephants have: one set, the tusks, are visible to the outside world, while the smaller set of teeth are used for eating. Drawing on this expression, he explained that the protracted asylum procedure that he personally faced and the refusals that many of those he worked with had received, showed him "that the Western civilised world has two faces, one they have for the public [ab]using their naivety, and the second that they use for their games". For Abdul, and others, this realisation also led to a crisis of conscience. While some Afghan men that I interviewed were still proud of their employment with Western armies, others like Abdul, regretted their decision. They would point to the ulterior motives of Western states for their involvement in the military mission in Afghanistan or wondered if they had indeed betrayed their country by having sided with Western forces that abandoned the country in a state of destruction (de Jong, 2022b).

Afghan local staff, like Abdul, tend to come from the relatively well-educated segments of the young male population in Afghanistan and often experienced further upward social mobility by their association with the West and a financially elevated status through their employment. The loss of this employment following troops' withdrawal and the corresponding decline in social status following migration, is hence at odds with the norms that they became accustomed to in their young adulthood. Mustafa is another Afghan interpreter who suffered an acute loss of social status and profound disillusionment with European values. Mustafa, who I interviewed in Germany, explained to me in fluent German that his decision to work for the German Army was not motivated by financial need, but by his desire to use the German that he learned in school. "I always had the aim to do something with this language in the future, either in the context of an exchange, or as a student […] and then I finished school in 2002 and 2003, the Germans arrived, the international community, so this was the best possible opportunity to use the German language that I learned in school."

Indeed, he used and perfected his German in his high-status interpreter job at the German Embassy in Afghanistan and subsequently had to resettle to Germany with his extended family, because of the escalating security situation. However, this reception was at odds with his expectations.

> *Like I said before, I have loved this country, the culture, the people, everything. I still do so, but I realised it was one-sided. I didn't want them to love me, I never expected that, but I wanted that they respected what I have done for this country. That we interpreters risked everything, to help them achieve success.*

Mustafa explained that he had expected that the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and Turkey would treat refugees "like animals", and that he wanted to go somewhere where one "is at least respected and treated like a human being". He hence contrasted the values he associated with Europe with those of non-Western countries. However, he encountered a crisis of his faith in "European values" and human dignity, when he found that the protracted asylum process, which lets refugees wait without offering any perspective and barred entry to the labour market, was equally dehumanising. This translated in a critique that Mustafa formulated as follows: "From the beginning, one was undesired, and they also showed that. And if it wouldn't have been for [individual supporters] and for volunteers who held placards in their hands with 'Refugees Welcome', then Germany had lost its face."

Mustafa, whose own resettlement coincided with the Syrian refugee crisis, also found himself in the situation in which various services prioritised Syrian refugees over Afghan former local employees, including in accessing German language courses and refugee scholarships. He, and many others that I interviewed, felt that this denied the relationship they had with Western states prior to their migration, based on their employment. Being used to the norms of sociability of military bases and Western embassies, even if imperfect, they now found themselves treated as complete outsiders to the nation. This is ironic, because as noted by Picozza "refugees are not the product of crises external to Europe; they are the product of 'Europe' itself – as both a project of global domination and a fragmented geopolitical assemblage (Picozza, 2021, p. 7). While this relationship between European interventions and the production of refugees extends to a broad variety of refugees, including Syrian refugees, it is even more directly tangible in the case of those whose security is at risk, as a direct result of their association with Western armies.

Converging Past and Present Crises

Mustafa expressed how he struggled with "the status of being a refugee, to be undesired in a country, and to always have to fight for one's rights, to have to convince others that I am also a human being, like you [...]." He was surprised about Germany's and Europe's amnesia of its own history of war and displacement. Addressing an imaginary German or European person, who did not recognise the humanity of refugees, he said:

> *You have a country, you are lucky, and I am happy for you that you have this fortune, that you didn't need to leave your country, also when this country has suffered much – like Europe in general. When you haven't learned from this, when you so easily forgot your own history, and these images in documentaries, which I still find horrible, about the second World War, of the*

> *suffering of people in Poland, in Russia, in Eastern Europe, in Germany, when you, as a highly educated person haven't learned from this, when this hasn't taught you anything in terms of understanding the suffering and pain of other fellow human beings, I am sorry for you. And I am sorry for humanity, and I am sorry for myself that I also live in this time on this planet.*

Mustafa's reference to Europe's amnesia of its own history of war and displacement illustrates that the crisis of European values experienced by Afghan former local staff reverberates across history. As David Runciman suggests, the notion of 'crisis' holds in tension competing temporalities as it can be associated both with "an acute moment of threat/danger/choice [and] with a more entrenched or intractable situation" (2016, p. 5).

If the so-called migration crisis is regarded against the backdrop of imperial histories and neo-imperial presents, the 'crisis' cannot be seen as one abrupt and sudden moment without legacy. This suggests that crisis should not only be understood as intersecting with other contemporaneous crises (e.g. a moral crisis, a crisis of human dignity and a crisis of conscience), but also as converging with historically entrenched contradictions. A conceptualisation of crisis as a convergence between acute ruptures and deep-rooted contradictions helps to recognise that the seeds of crisis are sown with Western military interventions in Afghanistan, rather than that Afghan refugees bring crisis to Europe. This is important to work against a "crisis discourse" that tends to "obscure[…] historical and structural factors that shape decisions to migrate: colonial histories and contemporary policies that continue to produce inequality, poverty and violence" (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 35). As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez has noted, "considering Europe's entangled global history, it is, in fact, surprising that contemporary migratory movements are perceived in political and media discourses as *external* to Europe's history" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 21 italics added). Considering migrants as external to Europe and Europe as the unproblematic protagonist of freedom and democracy relies on a "colonial amnesia" that ignores Europe's colonial empires and its legacies (De Genova, 2018, p. 1769; Shilliam, 2017, p. 125). Secondly, it explains the continued reverberance of claims of Western superiority, including its status as a beacon of human rights, despite countless examples that prove the opposite, including colonial and fascist violence. Hence, Afghan civilians who worked for Western troops or organisations are neither alone nor particularly naïve in expecting Europe to uphold human rights norms. Indeed, "many [asylum seekers] believed they would be safe in Europe because of the propaganda of empire and European self-assertion as the homeland of rights and justice in the post-war/postcolonial period" (Bhambra, 2017, p. 405).

Recognising that crises converge between acute ruptures and historical contradictions, helps illustrate that while the specific experiences of crisis of the Afghan civilian staff who seek the protection from the Western states they have worked for, are unique, they also echo those of earlier colonial migrants to the West. Martiniquais colonial critic Aimé Césaire, who spent extended time in the French metropole, employed the term "pseudo-humanism" to express the crisis of European humanism (2001, p. 37). Fellow Martiniquais Frantz Fanon, who initially joined the French army during the Second World War, started questioning his commitment to the colonial army of a racist state, who denied him and other colonial subjects, precisely those rights he risked his own life to defend. He expressed an awakening to the hypocrisy of European values, similar to the account of Afghan migrants who worked for Western troops, when he described Europe as a place "where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe" (Fanon, 1963). Also, Adil's outrage quoted above about the legal barriers that prevent him from accessing education in the UK, despite the West claiming to bring education to the people of Afghanistan, resonates with earlier anti-colonial critiques. Césaire already suggested that the civilising mission was a mere cover for colonial exploitation: "The proof is that at present it is the indigenous people of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools, and colonialist Europe which refuses them" (2001, p. 46). Finally, Mustafa's frustration with the short-term memory of the German people's own history of war and displacement, which prevented them from empathising with his experience of refuge, reflects Césaire's critique that European outrage directed at the violence of Nazism is highly selective. The same violent methods of genocide and annihilation that were considered unbearable on European soil had been used against non-European others. Reading Mustafa's reflections through Césaire's lens suggests that while Mustafa views his own displacement as comparable to European experiences of displacement, Europeans themselves have long refused to see Mustafa's and other non-western migrants' plight as equal to their own or their ancestors.

In their own rights struggles, Afghan local employees of Western armies have shown their awareness of how contemporary crises caused by neo-imperial wars converge with earlier crises. Those formerly employed by U.S. forces have staged demonstrations with banners stating 'President Biden: Do Not Turn Your Back To Us. The Consequences Will Be of Vietnam' (TOLO News, 2021). Former interpreters for the French army in Afghanistan referred to the reverberations of colonial soldiers' struggles for protection and rights in neo-imperial wars, carrying protest banners with the text: "Ne répétez pas l'irréparable! (Les Harkis de Kaboul?)" [Don't repeat the irreparable! (The Harkis of Kabul?]. They feared a repeat of 1962, when "the French state created a migration crisis through the way it managed the arrival and installation of the Harkis [the Algerians who supported the French army in the Algerian war of Independence] and their families in France" (Sims, 2019, p. 57). As I will explore in detail in the next section, the critiques developed from the experiences of anti-colonial struggles and contemporary migrant struggles have formed the basis for agentic grassroots responses to enduring structures of intersecting crises.

Affirmative Sabotage

The subaltern diagnosis of intersecting crises and the critique that emerges from it, raises challenging questions for formulating agentic grassroots responses to enduring structures of crises. How to claim one's right to human dignity when you have realised that the rights discourses you appeal to, are fundamentally in crisis? How to appeal to Enlightenment values when your own experience of violent bordering practices demonstrate that their supposed universality excludes you? How to turn subaltern or grassroots understandings of crisis into a critique that finds political expression?

Despite of, or because of these contradictions, migrants have continued to appeal to the supposedly quintessential European values of human rights in their struggles for rights. I propose to read these strategies as a form of "affirmative sabotage", using the term of postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak. As she explains: "The idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticising fully, so that you can turn it around from inside because the only way you can sabotage something is when you are working intimately with it" (quoted in: Brohi, 2014). For example, a picture of a protest by Pakistani refugees in Moria, Greece, shows a cardboard placard with the text 'EU where is your humanity' (Sewell, 2016). In a gesture of affirmative sabotage, this quote simultaneously diagnoses the absence of humanity and appeals to the EU to show its humanity. Below I will develop in more detail how affirmative sabotage is practised by former Afghan local staff working for Western armies and organisations. As Spivak emphasises, the strategy of affirmative sabotage is not a weapon of the weak, who need to take recourse to hidden methods for self-preservation (Scott, 2008). Instead, affirmative sabotage "can only be done from a position of strength because the weak do not have the social ability to enter those discourses" (Spivak quoted in: Brohi, 2014). Locally employed civilians seeking sanctuary have a broader base of support compared to 'regular refugees', as their history of employment with Western armies also appeals to parties and news media on the right-side of the political spectrum who value patriotism and who consider this group particularly "deserving". Moreover, refugee organisations and lawyers have told me that they experienced resettled Afghan former staff as exceptionally articulate and therefore able to tell their stories in particularly persuasive ways – referencing the norms their employment exposed them to – due to their background as interpreters. In this light, Spivak's notion of affirmative sabotage is particularly compelling as she explains the strategy with reference to subaltern uses of dominant languages:

> *When a Chinese guy said to me that you speak English well, because the British had their boots on your neck, I said 'Brother, you are right. [...] But the thing is, we defeated the English by loving the language. So that's what I will tell you. There is no way that a language is just a criminal language. You turn it around. (Dhawan et al., 2019, pp. 69-70)*

Former Afghan local staff of Western armies have gone beyond merely expressing their personal disenchantment by creating various platforms to share their stories and demands, and thus constitute a distinct and vocal subgroup of migrants who demand protection and rights. While their migration is accompanied by a loss of social status, their employment history still feeds into substantial social and cultural capital. They have used a combination of political, legal and (social) media strategies and utilised their dexterity with Western discourses and proximity to Western networks developed during their employment. For instance, they rekindled contacts with embedded war journalists after their resettlement as well as with the soldiers with whom they worked (some of whom joined the political establishment), to make their voices heard. As many resettled former local Afghan staff lack the citizenship rights that provide access to conventional forms of political participation, they "engage in alternative forms of political participation" (Però & Solomos, 2010, p. 4). They have, however, also managed to employ formal political channels, including lobbying their MPs to advocate for a relaxing of family reunification rules (Paterson, 2018) and giving evidence to Parliamentary committees to improve the resettlement schemes (Ayeen, 2017; Hottak, 2017). Afghan former locally employed interpreters have furthermore formed associations to present a collective voice, such as the self-organised *Sulha Network* of Afghan interpreters in the UK and its counterpart in France, the *Association des interprètes et auxiliaires afghans de l'Armée Française*. In addition to organising themselves nationally, they have organised transnationally. For instance, in 2017 Afghans formerly employed with the French army staged simultaneous protests at the French Embassy in Kabul and at the Invalides military museum in Paris, carrying placards asking for solidarity and equality of treatment ("Ex-Afghan interpreters say French army abandoned them, demand visas," 2017). In a climate that is generally hostile to migrants, "it is crucial [for migrants] to find allies with whom to mobilise to promote their rights and conditions" (Però & Solomos, 2010, p. 14). Afghan interpreters have mobilised an impressive range of allies, including groups not usually associated with migrants' rights, such as military staff and veterans who constitute an important and powerful supporter base. They have also connected with lawyers to pursue high-profile litigation against the state.

For example, in the UK, interpreters Hottak and 'AL' (who remained anonymous), supported by lawyers from the legal firm Leigh Day, litigated against the UK Government claiming that the differential protection scheme for Iraqi interpreters compared to Afghan interpreters constituted discrimination. The litigation case used the 2010 UK Equality Act, which legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and beyond, to seek better protection for former Afghan interpreters. In an act of "affirmative sabotage", they argued that the Equality Act's application should not be territorially bound, since they had been employed by the UK Government, albeit in Afghanistan. The case rested on the claim that the Afghan resettlement scheme was discriminatory and that "they are excluded from the more generous benefits of the Iraq [interpreters resettlement] Scheme on grounds of nationality which amounts to direct, alternatively indirect, discrimination" (*Hottak & Anor, R (on the application of) v The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs & Anor [2015] EWHC 1953 (Admin)* 2015). Hottak and 'AL' eventually lost their High Court challenge (May 2016), but the case pushed at the limits of the duty of the State towards employees and interrogated if the Equality Act can be limited to a specific territory. This case creatively tried to inscribe Afghan interpreters employed by British Armed Forces into existing equality legislation. It was hence a tangible application of Spivak's call to practice affirmative sabotage:

> *We should take those well-developed methods, make our former masters our servants as it were, put them on tap rather than on top, inhabit them well, turn them around. Don't accuse them, don't excuse them, use them for something which they were not made for. (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69).*

Another example of affirmative sabotage through legal challenges could be found in France. The lawyer Caroline Decroix and the *Association des interprètes et auxiliaires afghans de l'Armée Française*, which is co-led by a former Afghan interpreter, achieved a major victory when France's Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, ordered that "the state owed local staff a duty of 'functional protection'" (AFP, 2019). This court case was based on a 1983 law, which guaranteed protection to French civil servants who due to their employment received threats, such as police officers. The court finally ruled that this "functional protection" had to extend to non-tenured employees of the state abroad, even if their contract was subject to local law. This forced the French state to take responsibility for the protection of Afghan former interpreters whose asylum applications they had previously rejected. For instance, under their duty of "functional protection", they had to provide some former Afghan local employees with leave to remain in France (https://www.actu-juridique.fr/etrangers/un-nouveau-cas-dextension-de-la-protection-fonctionnelle-le-cas-des-anciens-interpretes-afghans/). Innovatively and radically, through affirmative sabotage, Afghan former staff and their legal allies managed to "inhabit" these laws and "turn them around" (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69).

In hegemonic understandings of the refugee crisis, migrants are often framed as posing a threat to Western values. Taking migrants' own understanding of crisis from below, one can argue instead that they remind Europe of its purported values. Following in the footsteps of anti-colonial critics who held European empires to account for their colonial violence, drawing on their proclamation of values such as liberty and equality, Afghan former local staff have appealed to European values and institutions in their political activism. They have hence worked with this "tainted methodology" (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69) to affirmatively sabotage the systems that failed to protect their lives. A former interpreter for the British army tweeted in November 2020, "UK behaviour towards their allied Afghan interpreters is against the UK Charter and values", tagging the UK Secretary of State for Defence and Home

Secretary. In Spring 2021, another Afghan former interpreter who had fled to a third country tweeted a self-drawn image depicting some interpreters saying, "We are left behind and our lives are at risk" next to a group of soldiers with the text "Our team members, our interpreters who worked side by side with us are left behind." The far corner of the picture shows a Union Jack flag that the British soldiers are marching towards, with the words "British Government" underneath and the message "Welcome home. We hope nothing left behind". At the bottom of the picture, he has drawn the demand to "Please Save Interpreters Lives Unconditionally".

In another powerful example of affirmative sabotage, a group of Afghan former employees staged a protest in front of the military base Camp Marmal in Mazar-i-sharif in Afghanistan (the largest German military base outside Germany), in August 2018. They had prepared several German and English language banners, which demanded that the German government take responsibility for their security. The protest had come about following a strategic conversation between an Afghan interpreter who, when he was made redundant after 10 years of work for the German military, approached Marcus Grotian, a lieutenant in the German Bundeswehr and a tireless advocate for the protection of locally employed staff. The protestors called themselves the 'German Local Employees Union', appealing to Germany's well-established trade unionist traditions. Their claim to being a trade union, despite not being legally established and recognised, was, to use Spivak's words "the deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside", which characterises affirmative sabotage (Brohi, 2014).

At the outset of the protest, the group of protesters also referred to themselves as a civil movement and formulated the following demands:

> *Our intentions for this civil movement is to convince German Government to fallow and confirm our security challenges and security threats which we are face with. We keep rise our protest tent up to German Government listen to our voices and understand our satiation. (German Employees Union Facebook page, 31 August 2018).*

They amplified their protests through media appearances in German newspapers (Kastner, 2018; Salloum, 2018), videos, photos and messages on Facebook, and letters to the German Government and German citizens. For over a year, they continued their protest, despite being cleared away by local police after blocking the entry to the base, defiantly asking 'How Germans are advising our police to act like this?' (2 October, 2018).

In September 2019, more than a year after the official start of the protest, they published an Open Letter to the German Government ending on a note, which again demonstrates their fluency in human rights discourse: "We are sure that the Strong German government as human rights advocate will never deprive us of our rights and freedoms". A letter addressed to German citizens published a few weeks later calls upon "German human rights and civil activist institutions to hear our suppressed voice" and asks the "honourable German people" to recognise that they "fought shoulder by shoulder" alongside "your soldiers that are fighting for freedom and liberties". Not without irony, given that the ISAF mission purportedly brought human rights to Afghanistan, the German Local Employees Union explained their Facebook audience their repeated temporary blockades, by arguing that "We have to give [the German Government] daily Dose of Human right awareness" (27 October 2018).

I suggest that the German Local Employees Union simultaneously exposes the hollowness of Europe's claim to be the progenitor of liberty and equality, and at the same time continues to appeal to these values in the hope they will be extended to include them. As Nikita Dhawan has argued, "despite their white, bourgeois, masculinist bias, Enlightenment ideals are eminently indispensable, and we 'cannot not want them,' even as we must doggedly critique their coercive mobilization in service of the continued justification of imperialism" (Dhawan, 2013, pp. 156-157). Hence together with other migrants, Afghan former local staff formulate and fight for rights by appealing to the very European values that they simultaneously interrogate and critique as being in crisis. While critical migration scholar Nicholas de Genova recognises that "discrepant racialized flashpoints of Europe's multifarious 'crisis'" do not constitute a mature social movement or "a coherent oppositional politics", he argues that "their very existence has an objectively political character inasmuch as they are repeatedly made the object of moral panics and produced as a 'problem' that is consistently posed in terms of what a nativist (white) we – the nation, 'Europe', 'the West' – will do with them" (De Genova, 2018, p. 1788). Maurice Stierl concurs that "migration struggles not merely problematize this or that border materialisation, this or that policy, this or that dehumanising discourse, but Europe as such, or at least the dominant frames through which a collective European identity is constructed and made recognisable" (2018, pp. 9-10).

This section has shown that Afghan former local staff who sought protection through relocation not only articulated a critique of the intersecting crises they faced, but also developed compelling political responses to it, using the strategy of affirmative sabotage. Well-versed in the norms and rights rhetoric of Western countries, they have simultaneously confronted Europe with its failure to live up to the values it claims and appealed to these very values.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the experiences, perspectives and actions of former local Afghan employees of Western armies who have sought sanctuary, allow us to reframe the so-called ‘migration crisis’ into a crisis of European values with deep roots in colonial histories and neo-colonial pursuits in places like Afghanistan. The hegemonic notion of a ‘migration crisis’, which suggests that migrants have brought crisis to Europe, has been contested by critical scholars (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; De Genova, 2018; De Jong & Ataç, 2017; Farrah & Muggah, 2018; Fotou, 2021), who have argued that the arrival of migrants laid bare a crisis in European societies, migration policies, administrations and moralities. Drawing on the idea that there is not only a crisis in, but *of* Europe, I have proposed in this chapter to theorise crisis ‘from below’ by foregrounding refugees’ own narratives, focusing on the stories and struggles of former Afghan staff employed by Western militaries. Their stories recast crisis in several ways.

Firstly, attention to their and other migrants’ struggles exposes a Europe in crisis “that conflicts fundamentally with its dominant (self-)conception [….] as a normative power and humanitarian force that leads by example” (Stierl, 2018, p. 10). Afghan former local staff seeking sanctuary join the chorus of migrants for whom Europe is “both very real and an elusive imaginary”, who “dumbfounded at their violent treatment, ask ‘is this Europe?’” (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 11). Hence, as I have demonstrated, by substituting the hegemonic framing of crisis, which understands the disturbance as brought by refugees for refugees’ own diagnosis of the crisis of Europe, a more substantive critique becomes visible. Afghan former local staff seeking refuge identified an intersecting crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants, which in some cases also led to a personal crisis of conscience about their own decision to work for Western troops as part of the international military mission in Afghanistan.

Secondly, tracing migrants’ conceptions of crisis from below shows the intimate connection between crisis and critique as refugees find Europe’s reception falling short of expectations and norms. I have shown with several examples that the crisis diagnosis by Afghan former employees of Western armies seeking sanctuary, was articulated through a critique that got channelled into defiantly calling Europe to account. Echoing the voices of anti-colonial activists, they show – against the notion that crises are sudden ruptures – that the defects, exclusions, and violence of Europe are historically entrenched in its (neo-)imperial conduct.

Finally, I have argued that migrants and refugees productively express this critique through political struggles. I have argued that the strategies underlying these struggles can be understood through Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “affirmative sabotage”, as refugees employ the concepts and tools that are central to European human rights discourses, while demonstrating through their actions that these are defective. Rephrasing Abdelmalek Sayad’s suggestion that migration illuminates the limits of the state, functioning as a mirror or even as a magnifying glass that not only reflects but highlights its shortcomings (Sayad, 1996, 2010), migrants and refugees confront Europe with its own image and the falsehood of that image. They expose the migrant crisis that is projected onto them as non-welcome Others by reflecting it back, forcing Europe to face its own deficiencies and deceits, through acts of affirmative sabotage.

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