Books

Endless exodus: 3,000 years of fearing and depending on refugees

We know that xenophobia is on the rise but why has its opposite, 'philoxenia', worn so thin in the west?

FT Books Essay

A photograph taken in 1923 by William Scoville Moore shows an exhausted priest and a woman, victims of the refugee crisis triggered by Turkey's defeat of the Greek army in Anatolia the previous year © David E Moore Collection, Columbia University

FEBRUARY 10, 2017 by: Mark Mazower

It is a privilege not to have known war. It is also a kind of ignorance.

The wars of the last century are fading from view across much of Europe, as they are in the US. They are no longer things people have lived through; at best they are stories handed down by parents and grandparents. Historians try to animate these stories, to make them resonate. But there is a price to pay for this erosion of memory.

The European Union emerged out of the second world war with one main goal: to ensure the peace. It has done the job so well that many Europeans now assume peace can look after itself. The same war turned the US into the world's leading power, the creator of global institutions and norms. President Donald Trump's executive order banning immigration from seven Muslim countries underscores his intent to turn his back on this role. The war on terror will trump international obligations to refugees; outright discrimination will trump both.

Karl Schlögel's newly translated *In Space We Read Time* is a series of reflections on the geographical imagination in history, by an eminent German historian of Russia and eastern Europe. It contains an astonishing map of the world that was published in Berlin in 1938. Part of a "Handbook for Jewish Emigration", it shows the distance from Germany of various potential destinations for Jews fleeing the Nazis — "Wellington, 16,400 kilometres; Cape Town, 11,050 kilometres; Buenos Aires, 13,250 kilometres . . . ". Schlögel's work underlines how far the experience of the 20th century was one of upheaval, of destroyed homes and housing crises, of displaced persons and the search for shelter. Out of this emerged solidarities that underpinned the modern refugee rights regime but which have now worn thin in those parts of the world most easily able to help. In 2015, the US, with an annual per

capita income of more than $50,000, hosted half as many refugees as Kenya (per capita income $3,400). A mere 6 per cent of the world's displaced persons are sheltered in Europe. Only Germany, the country that has thought more openly and searchingly than any other in recent times about war and its meaning, bucks the trend.

Map from Ernst G. Löwenthal's Philo-Atlas, Handbuch für die jüdische Auswanderung, from 'In Space We Read Time'

Refugees, economic migrants, displaced persons: ours is a world of bureaucratic categories that carry life-or-death implications, and we have become accustomed to making fine and frequently unsustainable distinctions. In *The Great Departure*, an illuminating study of emigration from eastern Europe to the US, University of Chicago historian Tara Zahra shows how migration shaped conceptions of freedom and state practices of regulation before many of these distinctions had taken hold. They don't always serve us well. My grandfather had been jailed by the Tsars in Siberia before coming to London to take up a job: was he fleeing persecution or trying to make a living? Both, surely. Viewed in the very long run, what we are talking about is simply people on the move. Indeed, that is perhaps as good a definition of history itself as any other. Over the millennia, millions have poured out of Europe and Asia; millions more have poured in. Without populations in motion, there would be no history of the Americas, nor of anywhere else.

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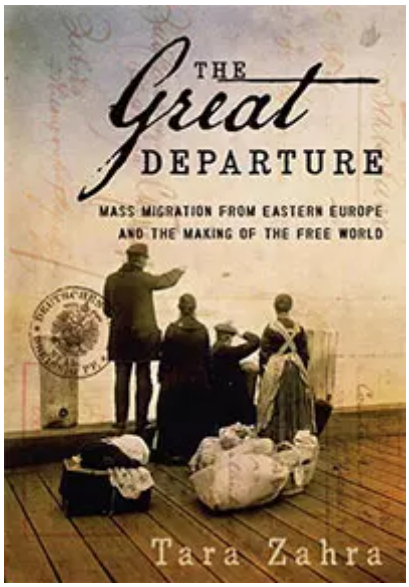
Precisely because the lessons of the 20th century reverberate so profoundly in the background of the events of the past few weeks, exploring this much longer view can be helpful. *The Great Leveler*, a new survey by the Stanford historian Walter Scheidel, argues that throughout the ages war has been one of the great equalising forces in society. Underscoring the sheer fragility of life in the premodern world, he writes about the constant threat of famines, floods and plagues that beset organised life, everyday catastrophes whose impact archaeologists trace in innumerable abandoned settlements, in the faint indentations left by field boundaries and walls once they had crumbled away.



In particular, he reminds us of the pivotal role of cities — simultaneously the most fragile of political achievements and the most necessary — and their complicated relationship with strangers. Cities provided balconies upon which the powerful could show themselves and receive applause; they provided squares for traders to set their stalls, wealth and offices for bureaucrats to run things. But premodern cities were also death traps. It was not uncommon for one-third of their population to die over a summer when the plague struck. Mothers died in childbirth; the cemeteries filled with the corpses of babies who had not reached their first year. So cities needed new blood to keep going.

Kings and republics alike thus welcomed entire communities and gave them tools and shelter: strangers brought wealth and new skills. At the same time, rulers instructed guards at the city gates to register them and keep an eye for undesirables. Because strangers were not known, they might be disloyal or stir up trouble. They might be carrying rare diseases or be sick, or covet what was not theirs.

The infrastructure of our modern cities may be more complex but that makes them more fragile, not less. I was only once in a war-torn city, and then just for a few days during a ceasefire. This was besieged Sarajevo in the spring of 1994. The roads were empty, and those cars that were parked by the roadside had been stripped of their tires. Yet the traffic lights functioned perfectly, completely indifferent to the lack of life on the streets. To someone who had grown up in the long postwar peace of western Europe, it was an unnerving sight. But perhaps the oddest part about it came when I realised that 20 minutes away by plane, on the Dalmatian coast, there were people waiting calmly to cross the road, shopping and queueing to catch the ferry to the islands for the weekend, everyday actions none of which seemed strange to them. They had forgotten what the refugees from across the mountains knew — that civilisation is a precarious achievement. This knowledge is only one of the gifts refugees bring those who give them shelter.

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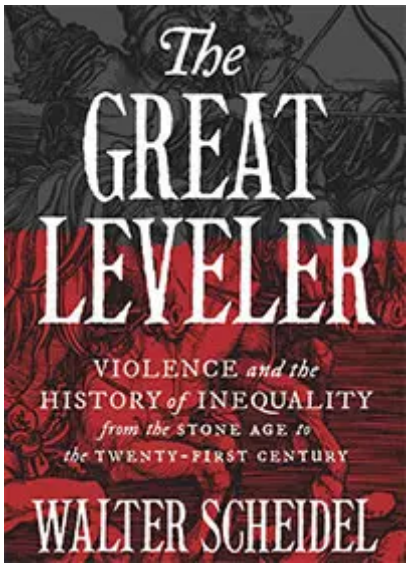
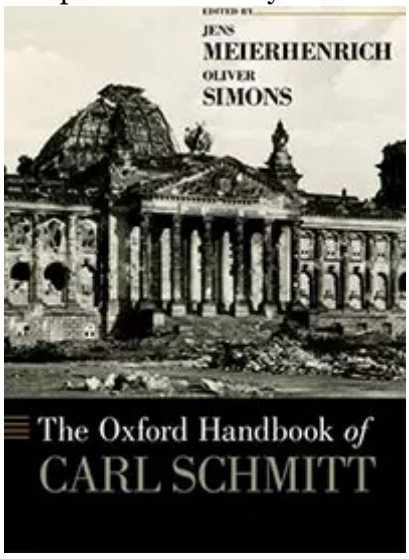


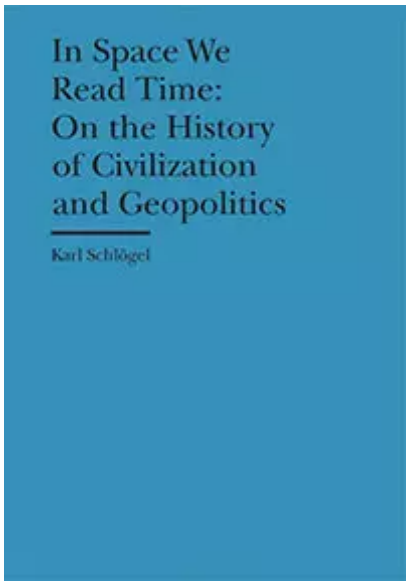
There was a time, not so long ago, when the US was new to the Mediterranean and the Middle East and the philanthropic impulse beat powerfully. This was in the years after the first world war, a time when the humanitarian problems of the region were immense. Greece's population had swelled by one-fifth with the influx of more than a million refugees from Asia Minor. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians, survivors of genocide, had fled Turkey for neighbouring countries. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims had been expelled from their ancestral homes in the Balkans. William Scoville Moore was a young American helping with the relief effort. Many decades later, his son showed me some photographs that his father had taken to publicise the refugees' plight. One image remained in my mind — a Greek priest, sitting on the ground, and next to him a woman, both of them exhausted.

The Greek *xenos* means both stranger and guest. English derives "xenophobia" from the word but its opposite — *philoxenia*, the cultivation of strangers — has little currency. How might we explain this asymmetry? To the German thinker, Carl Schmitt, the philosopher of xenophobia, the answer is easy: *philoxenia* and modern politics don't mix. Schmitt tells us the stranger is the alien, the enemy, the defining principle that binds a community in opposition to him. (It is usually imagined as a "him".) This, says Schmitt, is what politics is all about, this dividing up into those like us, and those who are not. He is a theorist of the dangerous, the endless war. But as *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* makes clear, the works that he produced over a long life — encompassing the Weimar Republic (he was an opponent), the Third Reich (a supporter) and cold war West Germany (a critic) were at heart one long lament for a European utopia that in reality had existed only in his imagination.



Philoxenia has always had its advocates too, and not just among those in Greece today for whom the word still means something as they struggle with the fallout from the war in Syria. There are the theorists of cosmopolitan humanity, Enlightenment rationalists such as Immanuel Kant, or Romantics such as the novelist Victor Hugo, who responded to the rise of nationalism by calling on his readers to regard all men as brothers. But the ethics of the guest go further back than that. In the Bible there is Abraham sitting outside his tent, waiting for passers-by so that he can wash their feet and show them hospitality. And there is Hebrews 13, with its injunction to brotherly love and its reminder that strangers may be angels in disguise.

How is it that the fear — that the stranger may really be a terrorist — is today so much stronger than our hope of helping a messenger from God? One reason may be that we live in a more fearful world than our predecessors. Accustomed to an ideal of secular progress, many in the west have come over decades to believe that things will get indefinitely better, or at least that they should. When faced with a sustained downturn in living standards, we find it hard to see this as part of the natural order. The stranger, the symbol of the new and unfamiliar, stands for disruption, not salvation.



The premodern expectation of risk was different. Fate was not a line; it moved in a great circle, a *peripeteia* that placed all mortals in a genuine equality before death. The storybooks were full of kings who had fallen on hard times and tasted defeat and humiliation. Odysseus, once mighty, is washed up on a Phaeacian shore, naked and exhausted. It pays to be welcoming. Sophocles contrasts the fate of Thebes, a city unwilling to allow the blind Oedipus to find shelter there and beset by civil strife, and the prosperity of Theseus's Athens, which welcomes him and is rewarded by the gods for this kindness to a stranger. Later on, the Roman poet Statius pointed to the divine sanction for this generosity:

There was in the midst of the city an altar belonging to no god of power; gentle Clemency had there her seat, and the wretched made it sacred . . . hither came flocking those defeated in war and exiled from their country, kings who had lost their realms and those guilty of grievous crime, seeking peace . . . Scarce were they arrived, when their troubles were soothed and their hearts had rest. [Statius, Th. xii 481-2]

Is this all ancient history? Or will we see the generosity of the past as a kind of challenge? A few months ago, something strange happened. I was looking through an old newsreel of the Near Eastern crisis. A long human river was flowing through the fields of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, as the camera came closer, you could see the refugees trudging along the track to safety. A group sits on the ground; they are eating from a common pot, ladling food into their mouths. And suddenly he was there — the old priest in Moore's photograph — now moving, though barely, raising his eyes to the lens, or almost. As one watches, he seems to be wondering what the

cameraman is doing. He is neither angry nor welcoming. He looks towards the lens as if to say: it is no use trying to communicate. This is a different world. Too much time has passed. Look after your own strangers now.

In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics, by Karl Schlögel, translated by Gerrit Jackson, *University of Chicago Press, RRP£31.50/$45, 550 pages*

The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World, by Tara Zahra, *Norton, RRP£22.99/$28.95*

The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century, by Walter Scheidel, *Princeton, RRP£27.95/$35, 528 pages*

The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt, edited by Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simon, *OUP, RRP£97/$150, 872 pages*

Mark Mazower is author of 'Governing the World' (Penguin). This essay elaborates some ideas from 'Techniques of the Body', a film he made with Constantine Giannaris

Photographs: David E Moore Collection, Columbia University
