

Book Review

*Strangers at Our Door**

Mehmet AKSÜRMEİ**

Yokluk beni mecbur etti,

*Gurbeti ben mi
yarattım?¹*

Muhlis Akarsu

You have to understand,

That no one puts their children in a boat

Unless the water is safer than the land.

Warsan Shire

Strangers at Our Door is a book by Zygmunt Bauman, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Leeds. Bauman is one of the most influential sociologists of our age, who wrote many books and articles in various topics. Bauman is the advocator of late modern social theory and he conceptualizes the age that we live in as a "liquid modern" time or era. I think that especially last several books of Bauman are efforts to express and contextualize his social theory and liquid modernity concept through different themes like morality, love, utopia, and social inequalities. This book also has the same intention and it can be considered as a late modern social theorists' view on the current refugee crisis.

The book, which has no introduction and preface, consists of six chapters. Although the chapters are not directly related to each other, there are some common concepts. In that sense, first chapter is more like an introduction chapter. Concepts like stranger, moral panic, massive migration and relations between these concepts are presented in the first chapter. Bauman identifies migration for martial reasons as a modern phenomenon and mentions that "refugees from the bestiality of wars and despotisms or the savagery of famished and prospectless existence have knocked on other people's doors since the beginnings of modern times" (p. 8-

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¹ Impossibilities forced me, did I invent the foreign land?

9). The ones who come from 'outside' and knock the other peoples' doors for mandatory reasons are the strangers "for people behind those doors" (p. 8-9). On the other hand, being strange or stranger, in essence, is a source of anxiety for indigenous people. According to Bauman, this anxiety stems from a very fundamental state. Strangers are "fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we interact daily and from whom we believe we know what to expect; for all we know, the massive influx of strangers might have destroyed the things we cherished – and intend to maim or wipe out our consolingly familiar way of life" (p. 9-10). Moreover, this anxiety and the sense of insecurity are somehow neutral, because "one cannot help but notice that the massive and sudden appearance of strangers on our streets neither has been caused by us nor is under our control" (p. 16-17). Briefly, the people, who leave their homeland and migrate other countries, are being perceived as strangers and hosting strangers are the cause of anxiety for native people. Till that point, I have summarized how Bauman conceptualizes and explains the main mechanism of migration for our society. Bauman, moving from that point, criticizes exploiting the anxiety and the sense of insecurity rooted by refugees by politicians and different institutions. He exemplifies different cases for this exploitation, and mentions how populist politics and governments are "beefing up the anxiety" of citizens rather than "allaying their citizens' anxieties" (p. 28-29). Bauman sees migration as a mandatory result of modern times. Instead of exploiting anxieties of people and fostering 'us and they' divide in society, he points out that people should be aware of the age we live in. Globalization (or cosmopolitization), individualization, and detraditionalization are the main trends in late modern social theory. In other words, globalization (and mentioned trends) should be essentially considered, before analysing today's social phenomenon. Moreover, those trends are in the roots of turmoil that we live in our age. Bauman, in that vein, considers migration and refugees as a reminder of this fact. He mentions that "nomads – not by choice but by the verdict of a heartless fate – remind us, irritatingly, infuriatingly and horrifyingly, of the (incurable?) vulnerability of our own position and of the endemic fragility of our hard-won well-being" (p. 16-17). He also mentions that refugees and mass migration "make us aware, and keep reminding us, of what we would dearly like to forget or better still to wish away: of some global, distant, occasionally heard about but mostly unseen, intangible, obscure, mysterious and not easy to imagine forces, powerful enough to interfere also with our lives while neglecting and ignoring our own preferences" (p. 18-19).

This is a short and accessible book for the readers. It has no heavy sociological concepts or debates in it. On the contrary, time to time, Bauman quotes newspapers, TV broadcasts and public surveys; and these bring a fluid reading experience. The book's potential reader can be academic world or general public. For both group of potential reader, this book can create inspiration, sociological perspective and awareness on migration issues. To me, although the book has weak sides, it is an important contribution to the literature. Firstly, writing such a book

and questioning moral panic and public fear makes this book important. Especially, his critique of exploiting the moral panic is one of the significant aspects of this book. I also think that this book is not a pessimistic book that brings readers to conclusions of the end of the world, chaos, persistent turmoil etc. Rather I found it an optimistic study that calls humans to be aware of structural changes and social transformations of the age we live in. The only weak side of the book is its inability to portray tragedy of current migration crises. During ongoing Syria conflict (or Syrian civil war), according to *Humanitarian Needs Overview*², 13.5 million people are in need of help (6.5 millions of this people are children) (p. 3). This conflict created 4.18 million refugees till that time, according to the same report (p. 5). Basically, the report mentions that those numbers means that “more than half of Syria’s population has been forced to leave their homes” and this is “one of the largest population displacement since World War II” (p. 4). Those numbers are statistical indicators of the problem. Besides that, since starting of this ongoing Syrian conflict, I have been living in Gaziantep, a city in Turkey that has border with Syria. I have been witnessing “strangers”, and I live among them. For that reason, also, I evaluate this book as an inadequate attempt to portray and discuss the problem of migration.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2015). *Humanitarian Needs Overview*. Retrieved from

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/2016_hno_syrian_arab_republic.pdf.

