Book review of *Images of immigrants and refugees in Western Europe. Media representations, public opinion, and refugees experiences*

Recensão do livro *Images of immigrants and refugees in Western Europe. Media representations, public opinion, and refugees experiences*

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A child, wearing only wrinkled and dirty clothes, stares at a gigantic wall of bars and barbed wire. She seems resigned; the obstacle is too high to climb over. Looking at this picture, no caption is needed. Probably this photograph was taken in a refugee camp or in a border area where the circulation of people is not allowed. This is the book cover of *Images of immigrants and refugees in Western Europe is titled. Media representations, public opinion, and refugees' experiences* (2019), written by Leen d'Haenens, Willem Joris and François Heinderyckx, which collects the work of several researchers about the implications of migratory movements from a communicational, media and sociological point of view in the European context.

Multiculturalism is at the heart of the European Union, which brings back "a portrait of memories, cultures and identities, raising multiple discussions through constructive and transformative dialogues" (Silva, Cabecinhas & Evans, 2019, p. 7). In the political agenda of the European Union, migration is a permanent topic within government representatives, especially with the hot-spotted dilemma of illegal migratory movements. The current migration crisis in Europe, which has reached its peak in 2015, "is already considered to be the largest displacement of people, motivated by armed conflicts, which occurred after the Second World War" (Abdo, Cabecinhas & Brites, 2019, p. 17). This is the general background of the reviewed book. Moreover, the authors believe that the current migration crisis is directly related to the so-called Arab Spring, which dates back from 2011. Unprecedented uprisings triggered massive exodus of people from Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Egypt, just to name a few countries. Many of these revolutions, which were intended to overthrow dictators, did not last longer, and citizens continued

to struggle with economic and political instabilities. Egypt is one of them. Following the recent death of Hosni Mubarak, the former president, on 25 February 2020, who ruled the country for more than 30 years, the Portuguese newspaper *Público* explained that the Egyptian Arab Spring was nothing but a pyrrhic victory: "the Arab spring that detained him [Mubarak] did not hold out for so long" (Fernandes, 2020).

From an historical and demographic point of view, the problem of migration, particularly those involving people seeking to leave their countries of origin without any legal documentation enabling them to live in another, is not exclusively to Europe. Saskia Sassen (2016), one of the world's most renowned scholars in the field of Sociology of Development and Demography, presents three crucial migratory flows to understand this problem worldwide: 1) in Central America, where children and teenagers autonomously escape to USA; 2) in South-East Asia, with the ongoing refugee crisis in Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia, heading to Australia and New Zealand; 3) in the Mediterranean Sea, in the aftermath of the oil crisis, massively relevant since 2015.

Some diplomatic efforts seem to show that Europe is keen to solve this problem. On June 29, 2018, European leaders reached an understanding to rescue refugees to European territory by transferring them to "control centres" with the support of several Member States. According to *The Guardian*, the agreement was a result of intensive and long talks, but its relevance remains unclear. The distribution of refugee quotas for each country is no simple issue within delegations (Henley, 2018). In addition, this endless geopolitical tension has not been easy to handle with recent events. In February 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan decided to suspend border control of the country, allowing Syrian citizens to reach the European border. Erdogan argued that Europe was not properly cooperating with Turkey on this issue (Turquia abre as portas da Europa aos refugiados. NATO solidária, 2020). As a response to this drastic decision, the Greek coastguard welcomed with gunshots the arrival of migrants who had crossed the Turkish territory (Guarda costeira grega dispara para afastar migrantes, 2020).

Taking into account recent events in the migration scope and the multiple lack of understanding in the diplomatic field, this book presents a different perspective to the political and legal debate, by engaging with both sociological and media framework. As Vliegenthart (2015) stresses out, Communication Sciences scholars should include a third dimension of analysis when studying migration topics, alongside cultural attitudes and public policies: the role of media. However, it is probably not accurate to consider the research about the intersection of media and migrants as scarcely explored in the Communication Sciences field. Some literature has been published around this topic. Studies addressed the role of refugees as "objects of symbolic violence" (Butler, 2004) or as a symbol of "poor information" about the world (Wall, Campbell & Janbek, 2015). Through a simple search[1], one can easily find papers in this subject, namely in the scientific publications with the highest impact factor worldwide in the Scimago/Scopus

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[1] The data were collected in March 2020.

ranking[2]. The *New Media and Society* journal, the second most rated one highest rated, includes 61 articles that could fit this subject, discussing, for example, the Islamophobia regarding refugees (Poole, Giraud & de Quincey, 2020) or the "nightmare of multiculturalism" (Nortio, Niska, Renvik & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020). *Digital Journalism* presents 23 papers in this area, including the use of virtual images in news coverage of refugees (Mast & Hanegreefs, 2015), whilst the latest of the top ten, *Political Communication*, published 54 articles, featuring topics such as the humanitarian crisis in Somalia and the response of the international community (Livingston & Eachus, 2010).

This very up-to-date and documented book joins this whole effort of scientific production on migration and refugees in general. Common sense typically puts portraits the word "refugee" in an illegal perspective of migration, defied by risk and subjected to all sorts of constant dangers. However, although not all migrants are refugees, in this negative sense of the term, the authors choose not to distinguish the two concepts.

This book addresses four challenges: discussing immigration and integration policies in Europe; evaluating media representations about refugees; measuring public opinion features about migrants and its consolidation; presenting reports and experiences of citizens whom, in these conditions, are seeking a better life in the Old Continent. Each of these challenges are transformed into specific parts within the text, featuring 10 chapters, of more than a dozen researchers, mostly Belgian and Swedish. This is probably a potential flaw of the book, as Netherlands and Sweden remain as constant contexts of observation. However, it is must be noted that this is related to the scientific production of athe research project "Images of immigrants in the media: thought-provoking effects" (IM²MEDIATE), carried out in the University of Louvain, in Belgium, from 2015 to 2019.

The first chapter is something but a preface, thus highlighting the overall 209 pages of the book. Leen d'Haenens and Willem Joris start out with a very simple, yet obvious, idea: "there are no simple solutions for the migration crisis in Europe" (p. 7). However, the authors acknowledge that the number of people asking for legal permission to work in the European Union decreases every year – around 600,000 in 2018. Applicants are mostly male (67%), it is said. Although the authors do not justify this number, one can wonder possible reasons: bureaucracy; some disbelief in the public institutions; or the political signals showing xenophobic and nationalistic perspectives, such as those made by Salvini, in Italy, or Viktor Orbán, in Hungary, just to name a few. Regardless this speculative discussion, d'Haenens and Joris explain why Belgium and Sweden are constantly used as study object throughout the book. They state that "both countries face identical realities in terms of the number of refugees they receive" (p. 13), establishing long-lasting policies capable of promoting tolerance and openness among migrants.

In the first part of the book, different integration policies in Europe are discussed. Starting with the Belgian and Swedish case, Paul Puschmann, Ebba Sundin, David De

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Coninck and Leen d'Haenens argue that these countries foster multicultural policies, which is said to be the most reliable fact to justify why far-right movements are not successful in these regions: "it is therefore better and wiser to put the greatest efforts into the integration of immigrants and to develop policies which counteract segregation and discrimination in all domains of society" (p. 34).

The second part of the book is the longest one. Four chapters discuss media representations on migration and integration. In the first, through a content analysis of the news published on migrants and refugees between 2015 and 2017 in several Belgian and Swedish newspapers, the authors state that media coverage can be quite different when these people are at stake. Swedish newspapers publish in depth articles, focusing on numbers within this subject. However, they share a common feature: the migrant performing the role of "good" and "bad" individual, with some pieces highlighting the "dreams" that motivated them to start this journey.

The second text, written by Valériane Mistiaen, examined the media coverage of French-language television – RTL-TVI (public) and La Une (commercial). Using a lexical analysis of 300 news items, dating back from 2015, the author concluded that there are no substantial differences between the public and private service operators, i.e. both offer a stereotyped view of these minority groups, which is somehow distant from previous studies such as De Bens's (2004). Still, commercial television typically reports on refugee crime problems. The possible positive contribution – social or economic – of integrating these people remains silent in such coverage.

The third text, by Lutgard Lams, addresses one of the most traumatic events Europe has faced: an unprecedented migration crisis in 2015. According to *BBC* (Migrant crisis: migration to Europe explained in seven charts, 2016), as more than a million people tried to reach Europe by air, most of the migrants defied the Mediterranean Sea, using precarious and overcrowded boats to illegally flee to the continent. The political context in Syria, but also the dramatic war situations in Afghanistan or Eritrea, triggered such massive flows of people. Looking at some newspapers in the Netherlands, and the way they portrayed this particular crisis, Lams identified different approaches in the "journalistic semantics": *De Volkskrant* (Netherlands) and *De Morgen* (Belgium) often put the emphasis on the positive role of the European Union, although the latter did not fail to make some criticism, pointing the finger at German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The author also concluded that these newspapers see refugees as individuals disconnected with reality, powerless and distant from political decisions.

Finally, the fourth article studies journalists' views on this subject. The authors – Stefan Mertens, Leen d'Haenens, Rozane De Cock and Olivier Standaert – analysed the opinions of 24 journalists from Western countries about the integration policies of migrants and refugees in their countries. They felt a bit surprised to find that countries with multicultural and tolerant journalistic traditions have fewer integration policies. Although the majority of the journalists reinforced tolerance and diversity as crucial social

values, it is curious to observe that previous studies highlighted opposite ideas in the way media often presents refugees and migrants, negatively.

The third part of the book discusses the way public opinion is involved in this issue. In the first text, David De Coninck, Hanne Vandenberghe and Koen Matthijs studied how Belgian and Swedish citizens (from 18 to 65 years old) feel about the way migrants are portrayed by the media. In Belgium, citizens tend to argue that commercial television presents negative images towards refugees, in contrast to public service. The authors also tried to measure if media texts influence peoples' ideas towards this topic, by presenting them specific information (positive or negative) about migrants. They concluded that media played a little role in the public opinion. This idea follows similar recent studies (Correia, Jerónimo & Gradim, 2019), proposing that the agenda setting theory is completely outdated.

The text that is followed deals with the concept of "information bubbles", as media engage with audiences to filter public perceptions. This somehow plays a different perspective in the book, taking into account the last study presented. Through an online survey, researchers evaluated the attitudes of six thousand people towards specific media content and concluded that there is a strong correlation between individuals' beliefs and media content that fits into one's perspective. However, they admit that "public opinion is split (if not negative) and generally uninformed or misinformed on the issue, tending to overestimate both the numbers of the newcomers and any association with crime and terrorism" (p. 155).

In the third part of book, a text very close to the previous contribution. Willem Joris and Rozane De Cock tried to understand if a certain journalistic framework is able to influence one's attitude. In a study involving one thousand and four hundred Belgian citizens, the researchers concluded that the frame effect[3] was not effective, as exposing individuals to a different perspective contrary did not change their attitudes or opinions. Moreover, the authors found that such influence is not decisive if citizens are more aware of the subject of refugees.

Finally, the fourth part of this book presents the result of an investigation about the discourses of the refugees themselves. After contacting with various agencies and non-governmental organisations, researchers studied the perceptions of 44 refugees – 24 from Syria, 11 from Afghanistan and nine from Iraq – living in Belgium since 2015. Using online questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the authors concluded that refugees invariably felt represented as "victims" by the mainstream media, thus recognising the lack of news about the positive contribution they could make to European economies and societies. This idea is not new in the book. However, the refugees strongly believe that the media can change this negative paradigm, which can be decisive for more effective political actions.

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[3] This means the effect towards a specific group of images or content.

The books ends with the chapter of François Heinderyckx, a renowned academic, who sums up the general guidelines of the discussion. The author brings back a not so much discussed topic throughout the pages: how political extremism – from left to right – easily takes over migration subjects for their own agenda: "migrants, refugees, and other visible minorities have proved to be the perfect scapegoats for the scourge of the moment: economic crisis, unemployment, poverty, criminality, terrorism, health hazards, cultural homogenization" (p. 199). As Heinderyckx tries to highlight areas of discussion that other authors did not emphasise that much, he also decides to leave some note towards a paradigm shift: media professionals should avoid the use of *clichés* in the representation of migrants, snubbing negative perspectives in a group of "convicts"; journalists show be aware that only diversity will be able to change attitudes and mentalities.

Theoretically relevant, reflecting a highly topical problem, the book *Images of immigrants and refugees in Western Europe. Media representations, public opinion, and refugees' experiences* is a very reliable scientific document due to its methodological focus, as plenty research techniques are tested, from the survey to the focus group. This is probably a very suitable study tool for university students and academics in general. The book is also available in open access[4] in the Leuven University Press website.

Translation: Fábio Ribeiro

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[4] Available at https://lup.be/products/119590

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