

Class Exercise:

Fake News and the European Invasion Panic of 2015



Student Prompt: “In 2015, this dramatic image went around the world on social media. Three different stories accompanied it. Read the three narratives from social media [see links to Facebook, Twitter, etc. below] in the exact order listed and summarize each storyline after reading it. Next, compare the different political and moral lessons the three narratives invoke on the question of what qualifies a ‘real’ from a ‘fake’ refugee. How are such qualifications constructed in the virtual public sphere? What references to historical precedents do these stories provide, and what themes do they invoke to construct a specific image of refugees?”

Rationale: In this exercise, students engage in a “flash” research project during class time. I assign three narratives about the image above that received international social media attention in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. I draw here on Facebook, Twitter, and various online media accounts. In the first narrative iteration, different Facebook groups claimed that the thousands of disheveled men ready to disembark on some European port were Syrian refugees (and other “Muslims”) “invading” Europe. A second media story insisted that the image depicted

Europeans fleeing to North Africa from World War II. A third account circulated by journalists and academic blogs corrected the false attributions and clarified that the picture showed neither Syrians fleeing to Europe nor Europeans fleeing to North Africa. Instead, the critics pointed out that the depicted men were Albanians fleeing to nearby Italy aboard the commercial ship “Vlora” after the collapse of the communist regime in Albania in August 1991.

In this exercise, my students explore how social media and other online platforms are involved in the production of ideas about refugees and migrants. Such media discourses on refugeedom regularly exploit emotional responses such as outrage and shock via historical misattribution and fake stories that turn into “viral moments” on social media.

After students conclude their research by summarizing, analyzing, and comparing these narrative structures, I divide the classroom into small groups. This interactive setting allows students to discuss their findings before launching into a class discussion, where I ask groups to respond to additional questions:

- How do viral moments on social media create outrage and fantasies of invasion, threat, and Otherness? How is history invoked to engineer these responses?
- Is the debunking of falsified images (narrative three) sufficient to reestablish the sanctity of refugee life and acknowledge their agency? What unexpected side-effects do such corrective interventions have?
- What does the 2015 media incident tell us about the Geneva Conventions’ precarious nature that established refugee status in the West in 1951? (This question asks students to mobilize the assigned readings for this class session and situate this story within broader historical trends).

As my students analyze and discuss the three narratives, they creatively bring together important fields of historical inquiry—critical theory, analysis, and empirical evidence—and to develop an independent authorial voice as researchers with their interpretative understanding of the contested nature of refugee status and migration in the twentieth century.

Required texts for this session:

Jessica Reinisch, (2015), “‘Forever Temporary’: Migrants in Calais, Then and Now.” *The Political Quarterly*, 86: 515-522.

Peter Gatrell, “Introduction: The Making of the Modern Refugee” (Oxford 2013).