

Costas Douzinass

The 1951 Geneva Convention on Political Asylum was a typical creation of the Cold War: the system cannot deal with the huge population flows now permanently characteristic of our world.



Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. "Danaide" (1901) by Auguste Rodin. Wikicommons/ Wolfgang Sauber. Some rights reserved.

Asylum and protection for the persecuted is an old and honorable tradition. Throughout history, temples and cities have been places of protection. The tradition started with the six 'cities of refuge' listed in the Priestly and Deuteronomy codes of the Old Testament and with the supplication rituals in Ancient Greece. The Jewish cities were places of refuge for those persecuted for crimes, usually homicide. Priests would question the supplicant and, if the criminal act was not intentional, the city would offer protection from the relatives of the victim who wanted to exercise the age-old law of *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye. Asylum was granted only to refugees from Europe who had fled their home country before 1951 and was extended to all refugees only in 1967. It allowed Western Europe to offer protection to people persecuted by the newly established communist regimes.

A similar institution existed in Ancient Greece. Someone who had committed a crime or was persecuted could ask for *a-sylum*-- etymologically protection from harm. The request was made to a temple or city. The supplicant had to perform a certain ritual which placed him under the protection of the Gods, in particular the *Ikesios* or Hospitable Zeus. Examples of supplication are found in Homer while *The Suppliants*, Aeschylus masterpiece, describes the ritual and political operation of the institution.

The fifty daughters of King Danaos fleeing the proposed incestuous marriage with the sons of King Aegyptos seek asylum in the city of Argos from its King Pelasgos. The prudent king hesitates initially, fearing that the barbarians might attack the city to abduct the maidens. But if he does not offer protection, he will offend *Ikesios Zeus* and will bring a curse on the city. The King brings the issue to the assembly of the demos, which votes to grant asylum. The

city accepts the Danaids, protects them from evil and, as a result, *Zeus* blesses Argos.

After the consolidation of the modern state, asylum and the politics of refuge became a privilege granted by the sovereign as a sign of mercy. In reality however protection was no longer just a moral obligation. It became a tool in ideological rivalries. The famous 1951 Geneva Convention on Political Asylum was a typical creation of the Cold War. Asylum was granted only to refugees from Europe who had fled their home country before 1951 and was extended to all refugees only in 1967. It allowed Western Europe to offer protection to people persecuted by the newly established communist regimes. This is why the Convention stipulates that those protected must have fled their country of nationality because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” because of their race, religion or political views. The Convention creates an individualized process of examination of applications for asylum excluding from its purview those who flee for non-Convention reasons — such as discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation - or economic migrants who try to improve their lives. Asylum thus became a legal institution but its scope and extension was seriously restricted. The Geneva system cannot deal with the huge population flows that have become a permanent characteristic of our world.

A new International

Cities have always been the physical place of asylum and protection for the persecuted.

Within the urban web, anonymity and the protection of privacy allows the traumatized refugees to gradually acquire the necessary means in order to start life again. Before the consolidation of state sovereignty, the Italian, Hanseatic and Ottoman cities — the matrices of European urbanization — offered asylum to the persecuted. More recently, a number of great intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie founded in Strasbourg in 1994 a contemporary network of ‘cities of refuge’. They aimed to protect oppressed intellectuals. At the time of the initiative, artists and writers were persecuted by the new Islamic regime in Algeria. Soon, great cities like Barcelona, Hamburg and Liverpool participated in the initiative and a network of cities of refuge and hospitality of persecuted intellectuals was created. Today an international organization of such cities exists. However it has become inactive recently and its focus remains the protection of people of arts and letters.

The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Syria have given rise to a huge number of refugees fleeing the war zones. In the last twelve months over one million people, 80% of whom are Syrian refugees, travelled through Greece on the way to the contemporary Argos in Northern Europe. It is important therefore to return to and expand the institution of the cities of refuge by offering protection to the persecuted of our time irrespective of educational or social background. We must take initiatives to create a new network of European cities of refuge, which will host a number of refugees per city and offer them shelter, food and care for their basic needs and help them settle in their new home.

The city of refuge has historical and material resonance. It brings back ancient traditions and by insisting on city protection avoids the political calculations associated with state sovereignty, a permanent source of tension with local societies. The city of refuge recognizes that the settlement and the integration of foreigners takes place within the urban web, where anonymity and the protection of privacy allows the traumatized refugees to gradually acquire the necessary means in order to start life again in a foreign country which will become a second homeland.

Demographic bomb

But there are also good policy reasons for such initiatives. Europe is getting old. Its pension and social protection regimes are no longer viable. The demographic data are worrying. First, we have a very low fertility rate, 1.5 births per European female in child-bearing age when a 2.1 rate is needed for the reproduction of the population. Second, life expectancy has increased greatly. Finally, the ratio between working and out of work population has deteriorated. The EU predicts that Europe needs around 60 million new immigrants in the next 40 years in order to reproduce its active population. Angela Merkel understood this fact and without grand statements accepted around 1 million new

immigrants.

The EU predicts that Europe needs around 60 million new immigrants in the next 40 years in order to reproduce its active population. Angela Merkel understood this fact and without grand statements accepted around 1 million new immigrants.

Europe needs new blood and new ideas. The refugees knocking on Europe's door are educated, dynamic – this is always the case with people who go through all kinds of hardship to get to their imagined Argos. Repulsion, xenophobia and racism show not only meanness and lack of morality but also ignorance of basic facts about population needs.

The contemporary supplicants must therefore be welcomed. They flee bombs, death and oppression, to which western policies have contributed. They are ready to work hard in order to build a new life. The great European cities must become shelters and places of settlement for these new Danaids. Hospitality does not mean solely temporary stay but policies of inclusion and integration. This is what the values of solidarity and the reality of demographic decay demand.

We therefore call on Mayors and local councilors of European cities to participate in an initiative to receive a small number of new supplicants from Greece. We call for the creation of a new 'International of Cities of Asylum' initiative, asking the demos of great cities to follow in the steps of the citizens of Argos. It is not just about humanitarianism, philanthropy or solidarity. Behind every kind of morality stands the responsibility to offer asylum. The face of the other who suffers lies behind the identity of each and every one of us.