

# Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* is a major work, but what does the defense of immigrants entail?

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In *Human Flow*, Ai Weiwei's remarkable documentary on mass immigration, the Chinese expatriate artist and director includes a clip from an interview with Greek Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas, appointed by that country's ruling Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA).

After Mouzalas utters some bromides about the importance of humanitarianism and the need to oppose xenophobia and racism, the film immediately cuts to the reality: police clear a migrant encampment with tear gas and helicopters. Children and the elderly stumble for safety as truncheons flail amidst the human mass. An African migrant later tells the camera: we thought Europe was a democracy before we arrived here.

*Human Flow* burns such images into the memory of the viewer. Although "beautiful" is not quite the word, the images are aesthetically striking because they are true. The emergency blankets of dozens of Africans glimmer gold under floodlights in a dark Italian island town. A boat filled with 800 migrants in a sea of pitch-black water bobs under a coast guard spotlight.

Thousands of miles away, a caravan of ornate and colorful busses transports Afghan deportees through the mountains from Pakistan. Toward the end of the film, the dead body of a boy lies in the glow of oilfield fires on the outskirts of Mosul, Iraq. There are the mountains of life vests and the unmarked graves of youths. These are the lives of real people, also with cell phones and Facebook accounts, who are still fighting for their lives. In the long shots throngs of people constantly moving, the viewer spots someone that looks like a friend or relative.

The panoramas of Italian, Greek and Turkish shorelines and islets in the Mediterranean are Odyssean both in terms of plot and setting, but the footage captures something particular about life under capitalism today. The splendor and diversity of the world and its people in

all their interconnectedness contrasts with the immensity of the human suffering.

Filmed largely with the use of drones and cell phones, Planet Earth-like establishment shots in *Human Flow* capture the street patterns and rooftops of refugee villages as well as the long human chains of migrants trudging through Southern Europe. This birds-eye-view serves as a reminder that the "human flow" is a crisis of social, and not individual origins. The film tells us that over 30,000 people flee their homes each day across the world, from many of the over 20 countries Ai visited during filming. The average refugee is displaced for 26 years. Many still carry the keys to their apartment in the home country.

Ai (born in Beijing in 1957) presents the immensity of this world movement while still portraying individual stories of struggle. He shows elderly women picking grass to eat and wives washing clothes in trashcans. There is the husband whose five family members—all drowned at sea—still visit him in his dreams. One woman living in a tent city at a European border train station tells the camera that she would like to see the European leaders try to live like her for a single night. Almost as she speaks, armed guards open the barbed wire gates so that freight trains carrying coal and oil can roll across the frontier to market.

There are also moments of levity. Without presenting anything in rose-tinted glasses, Ai interviews migrants who display cell phone photos of their beloved family cat wearing a t-shirt (the cat is also making the journey!). Young migrants joke, offering to trade Ai their passports. There is something socially powerful in the confidence of the oppressed that humanity will persevere.

The sympathy with which Ai portrays the migrants contrasts with his presentation of the police and guards who have transformed the borders into hedges of bayonets.

Though the color of the uniform may change, the attitude of the police and military does not. They scream at migrants, take their mug shots, point their rifles and tank turrets at them and usher them ever onward to... somewhere else. The sick and elderly are forced to march for months, and then to camp out in the mud. A tiny minority of the migrants have any chance at asylum on account of the limitations of international asylum law. It will be hard for viewers to ever again take seriously the claims of a Macron, May, Rajoy or Merkel that Europe is a beacon for democracy and human rights.

Ai's ironically titled "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors," a multi-site, multi-media exhibition is currently on display in New York City. A statement explains that the numerous works "comprise a passionate response to the global migration crisis and a reflection on the profound social and political impulse to divide people from each other." The artist obviously feels deeply about these issues.

However, the manner in which Ai portrays the causes of the crisis in *Human Flow* is more problematic. The film's sporadic narration and limited use of on-screen text can most favorably be described as cautious.

The US responsibility is mentioned, and *Human Flow* makes clear that most refugees are fleeing countries torn by American-led wars. There is no cover-up, and yet the depth of the ongoing social crime begs the question: why cannot those responsible be taken on more directly?

Why is a Jordanian princess—the representative of a monarchy that has penned Palestinians in permanent desert camps for over 60 years—allowed to pontificate about how protecting immigrants protects our own humanity? Why is the US-Mexico border presented without reference to Donald Trump or Barack Obama, who between the two of them have deported almost 3 million people? Why is the Rohingya genocide referenced without a mention of its chief apologist, the Washington-backed Aun San Suu Kyi?

The closest Ai comes, and for this he deserves credit, is the presentation of Greek Migration Minister Mouzalas. But even here, the conclusions that must be drawn from this are passed over. The defense of immigrants is not simply a matter of humanitarianism or of vague sentiments of solidarity. Ai can criticize hypocrisy, but he hesitates to go further for fear of upsetting the liberal conscience. For all the Chinese artist's undoubtedly genuine dedication and sacrifice, Ai's inability to "politicize" the immigration crisis is the work's fundamental flaw.

Political positions have consequences. The party that appointed Mouzalas, SYRIZA, was elected to government in Greece in 2015 as a left-wing party claiming to support immigrants and even calling itself socialist. SYRIZA was the darling of the global upper-middle class left, heralded as the hope for radical politics.

But which policies has that government implemented? It is deporting thousands of refugees from countries devastated by US wars of imperialist plunder and ordering the violent eviction of refugee encampments comprised of children and the elderly. The impact of its policies has been to strengthen the far right.

Parties such as the neo-Nazi Alternative for Germany and the National Front in France gain ground as these arch-reactionaries take advantage of the complicity of all of Europe's social democratic, "left" and green parties in the attack on the social, economic and democratic rights of the entire working class. In the US, the Democrats pledge their willingness to work with Trump on an immigration deal that includes added "border security."

All those interested in the defense of the rights of immigrants should watch *Human Flow* and promote it widely. But they should do so with an understanding that the film lags far behind the times in terms of its political content.

Enough with the platitudes of the Obamas, Sanders, Clintons and SYRIZA types who pledge their love for immigrants while deporting them to their deaths. The urgency of the crisis demands a bold and unapologetically socialist response.

All people should have the right to travel freely without fear of harassment, brutality or homelessness. The imperialist wars which have killed millions and forced tens of millions to flee their homes must be brought to an immediate end and their architects hauled before an international criminal tribunal. This requires the reorganization of the world's productive forces through world socialist revolution.



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