THIS WEEK

EDITORIALS

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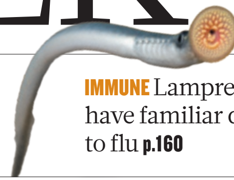

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Keep a welcome

The plight of a record number of refugees is something the West cannot ignore. Humanitarian values should be upheld, and people fleeing war and persecution must be offered protection.

In the refugee crisis facing Europe and the Middle East, an image can be worth a thousand articles or opinion pieces. Academics and humanitarian organizations have long battled to debunk the vicious myths and disinformation that often surround the refugee issue, and to counter often fact-free government policies — to little effect. It took a single iconic and heartbreaking image of a three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up drowned on a beach in Turkey for the world's conscience to wake up to the plight of refugees.

Science and other academic interests have a long tradition of offering both refuge and professional hope to displaced people. Almost every discipline has its own story of influential figures in the field who arrived with oppression and conflict snapping at their heels. This journal has long chronicled and supported such efforts. In June 1939, for example, *Nature* published a three-page editorial that concluded that if Britain relaxed its "exceedingly cautious" attitude to accepting refugees, then this would not only defend humanitarian values and academic freedom, but also "might prove in the long run to be wise and sound from the economic point of view".

What is there to say in 2015? Worldwide, there are some 60 million refugees, up from 37.5 million a decade ago — the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Yet the humanitarian response so far has been largely inadequate. The shrill rhetoric in many European Union and other wealthy nations claiming an 'invasion' of refugees doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Four million refugees have fled Syria since the conflict began there in 2011, but last year, the United Kingdom accepted 4,500 Syrian refugees, or just 0.007% of the UK population. Among the more generous EU countries, Germany took in 40,000 and Sweden 34,000 — the United States took only 4,750. By contrast, over the same period, Turkey temporarily accepted 1.5 million, and Lebanon, a tiny country of just 4.5 million people, took in some 1.15 million refugees, or 26% of its population.

EU refugee law is a mess. For refugees to apply for asylum, they must first reach a territory outside their own country. But the EU, and other countries, have increasingly sought to circumvent international refugee law by introducing rules to keep refugees out and so prevent them from applying in the first place.

A pernicious 2001 EU directive, for example, erects a barrier by imposing fines and the costs of repatriating illegal immigrants on airline, train, shipping and other carriers, essentially shifting the responsibility for deciding who is a legitimate refugee and who is an illegal migrant from governments to the carrier companies. Predictably, carriers have refused to accept passengers who lack visas. This fortress-Europe mentality explains why, this year alone, more than 300,000 people have embarked on perilous crossings of the Mediterranean — with 2,600 perishing — instead of taking a commercial ferry or airliner to apply for asylum.

There is also no EU-wide asylum status, with decisions on applications left to each member state, and no mutual recognition of positive outcomes by countries. And the seriously flawed 'Dublin Regulation' also obliges the EU member state in which a refugee first arrives to take the refugee's asylum application. This has resulted in frontier countries such as Greece and Italy bearing a hugely disproportionate burden.

The rule also frustrates applicants who have a legitimate preference for a specific country, for example to join their extended family. This encourages irregular movement within the EU, and allows other member states to forcibly return refugees to their first port of call — so turning what should be a humanitarian exercise into one of excessive coercion and criminalization.

> ***"The EU, and other countries, have increasingly sought to circumvent international refugee law."***

In August, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel rightly suspended her country's adherence to the Dublin Regulation, and called for a radical, permanent EU-wide system of processing asylum applications, with an enforced distribution of refugees throughout EU member states. Merkel last week courageously stated that Germany itself can and will cope with its inflow of refugees, an expected 800,000 this year. The proposal is vigorously opposed by some member states, in particular the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The public outcry following the photograph of Aylan has given the proposal new momentum, with François Hollande, the French president, last week lending his support, and also the United Nations. The EU will formally discuss the proposal on 14 September — it should be embraced as long-overdue reform.

The scientific community must also play its part. It is in everyone's interest for refugee students and academics to be given opportunities to continue their careers, because otherwise, the Middle East and elsewhere risks losing a generation of talent. The Western academic community must boost efforts to welcome refugee academics and students. ■

Money matters

It is not how much people have, it is how much we know they have that stokes inequality.

It would be so convenient if fundamental laws of nature told us how best to run a society. Governance would be a simple optimization problem, like finding the shortest route through a network; we could do without left–right political confrontation, and just solve the equations. Unfortunately, governance is not a well-posed problem. There must inevitably be balance and compromise: for example, of the rights of the individual against the overall good for society. This is what

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makes politics and economics not just controversial, but interesting.

Inequality is one of the biggest items on the agendas of both of these disciplines. Few people are likely to speak in favour of inequality as such, but in stereotypical terms the political right defends wealth as a reward for hard work, whereas the left deplores a society in which, as economist Joseph Stiglitz has said of the United States, "1 percent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income". It seems an unavoidable truth that a free-market capitalist system will create wealth inequality; to a free-market fundamentalist who sees markets as meritocratic optimizers of efficiency and resource utilization, that is not only necessary but moral. Under that philosophy, by intervening in the market in the hope of making the outcome 'fairer', we only throw a spanner in the works.

Yet even if one accepts some inequality as a necessary evil, there are options beyond laissez-faire. How, and how strenuously, governments and legislators should attempt to limit the extent of wealth inequality — crudely measured by the Gini coefficient, which quantifies the statistical dispersion of income distribution — is currently a hotly disputed matter. Should companies and banks be restricted in what they can pay their chief executives? Should taxes aim to inhibit or reduce the perpetuation of inherited wealth? Or is all this crypto-communist social engineering?

The strongest argument for such measures is not that it makes things more 'fair' (although meritocratic defences of free-market inequalities should surely at least demand a level playing field). Rather, it is that gross wealth inequality is socially corrosive. It polarizes attitudes, foments unrest (see, for example, the Occupy movement) and degrades trust and cooperation. At face value, a study published online this week in *Nature* supports that view — but with an added twist.

In the study, groups of volunteers played a simple economic game involving cooperation (a "public goods game"), in which they could lose or gain wealth through voluntary redistribution within social networks that started with three different levels of inequality (A. Nishi *et al. Nature* http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature15392; 2015). Crucially, in some games the wealth of participants was made visible to others, whereas in others it was kept hidden. For "invisible" wealth conditions, the games tended to converge on a fairly low Gini coefficient, but "visible" wealth produced higher (and less stable) average Gini coefficients. This result was exacerbated when the initial inequality was greater. In other words, simply hiding wealth decreased the wealth disparity in otherwise identical games and networks.

Still more importantly, visible wealth reduced the overall cooperation and interconnectedness of the social network, and in fact led to lower total wealth. As the authors say: "it is not inequality per se that is so problematic, but rather visibility" of that inequality. This fits with the established idea that it is relative, not absolute, differences in wealth that compromise happiness and promote discord: we resent what our neighbours have and we don't. What grates is not knowing that others have more than us, but seeing that difference ostentatiously displayed.

"Inequality is not solely down to market mechanisms, but also responds in subtle ways to our own dispositions."

It is dangerous, however, to think that these laboratory experiments can be extrapolated into a political or moral message for the real world. They invite us to frown on bling and the champagne-drenched excesses of financiers, but we should be cautious about their implications, even (or especially) if they flatter our preconceptions. Besides, there is scope here for upsetting both ends of the political spectrum. Right-wingers might deplore an injunction to hide one's wealth, compromising personal freedom — isn't it up to us how we spend our money? Left-wingers might dislike the idea of being relaxed about inequality as long as it is kept out of sight — and, anyway, might that not provoke a climate of secrecy and suspicion?

For now, the results should simply inform and broaden the discussion. They show, for example, that inequality is not solely down to market mechanisms, but also responds in subtle ways to our own dispositions. Above all, the findings are a reminder, along with related behavioural experiments on the role of punishment in public-goods games, that John Maynard Keynes's "animal spirits" are an irreducible part of what shapes a market economy. It is time to lay the idea of the rational *Homo economicus* to rest. ■

Loaded language

There can be more to a question than appears at first sight.

William Burroughs, the infamous US writer and author of *Naked Lunch*, had a typically counter-culture approach to seeking knowledge: "Your mind will answer most questions if you learn to relax and wait for the answer."

If only it were that easy for the rest of us. Instead, to ask a question is harder than it might seem. British Prime Minister David Cameron discovered this last month when the UK Electoral Commission told him to change the wording of a proposed question for the country's referendum on membership of the European Union.

Cameron's suggestion — "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?" — was a classic example of what linguists call acquiescence bias. Take the Burroughs route and relax, and the answer to such a question that comes to mind more often than not is to stick with the status quo. Rejecting something is more difficult.

If that was Cameron's intention, then his plan has been rumbled. The question will now have the extra clause at the end: "or leave the European Union?" To answer that one, citizens must now make more of a cognitive effort, and that should remove the chance for bias.

Cameron's linguistic nudging was more subtle than most attempts to bias questions. Lawyers and politicians tend to be fans of more explicit tricks of language. There is the classic loaded question — when did you stop beating your wife? — which presupposes guilt; and the pernicious influence of the hypothetical question. During the 2000 US election campaigns, South Carolina voters were asked: would you be more likely or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child??"

Researchers have found that the way a question is phrased can alter how people remember incidents. Witnesses asked how quickly cars were travelling when they "smashed" are more likely to imagine that they saw broken glass on the ground than others told that the vehicles simply "bumped" into each other or "collided". They were also more likely to say that the cars were travelling at higher speed.

Scientists have a particular relationship to questions. Turned into testable null hypotheses, questions are at the heart of the scientific method. Allied with proper experimental design and robust statistical analysis, they can be answered with confidence — or not.

Some answers are known before the question is asked; other questions are genuine calls for information. Some want to benefit the questioner and others to empower those who answer it. How to judge? In all areas — politics and science included — the best questions are simple and to the point. So who knows what the residents of Quebec thought when confronted with the following for their referendum on independence in 1995:

"Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?"

The 'No' vote won with 50.6%. 'Don't know's were not recorded. ■

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