The Myth of Thumbprints: Reading John Berger in Berlin

By Alexis Zanghi

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“THEY TRAVELED in groups of 100. Mostly at night. In lorries. And on foot.”

During the 1970s, migrants leaving Portugal in search of opportunity developed a system to ensure their safe arrival at their destination, and to deter fleecing by people smugglers. Before departing, each man would take his own picture. Then, he would rip the picture in two, keeping one half of his face for himself and giving the other half to the smuggler. Once over the border, the man would mail his half back to his family, to indicate that he had arrived safely in France, Germany, or Switzerland, or any of the other northern European countries reliant on cheap labor from the depressed and volatile countries ringing the Mediterranean. Then, the smuggler would come to collect payment from the migrant’s family, bearing his half of the man’s face as evidence.

These pictures stare up at the reader of *A Seventh Man* like eerie passport photos. Written by John Berger in collaboration with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr in the 1970s, the book sought to document the daily lives of migrant workers in the industrial north of Europe. In one, ripped in half on a diagonal, a man’s forehead drifts apart from his chin, eyes obscured by the tear, suspended on the page. The effect is one of facelessness and anonymity. This is perhaps the intention of Berger and Mohr: to highlight, and in doing so, hopefully negate the erasure inherent in migration. Berger sought to facilitate “working class solidarity”: to promote empathy among workers, across linguistic and cultural borders. Then, one in every seven workers in Europe was a migrant.

Today, as well, one in every seven people in the world is a migrant, refugee, or otherwise displaced individual.

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At the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin, a collective of migrant artists called KUNSTASYL (literally “art asylum”) are at work on a “peaceful takeover” of the museum’s east wing. On the ground floor, one artist, Dachil Sado, has painted a large Hokusai wave washing over a giant, oversized thumbprint. He has an engineer’s eye for detail; the wave is so precise that initially I thought it was stenciled. But it is the group’s logo that draws my attention: a large, wall-sized thumbprint comprised of smaller, individual thumbprints.


NENN MICH BEIM NAMEN KUNSTASYL
CALL ME BY MY NAME KUNSTASYL

Sado has designed the thumbprint as an explicit reference to the Dublin III Regulation, which allocates responsibility for the processing of asylum applications: the first designated "safe" country in which an asylum seeker registers is the country that must process their application. As people make their way through southern Europe, tracing the same routes that Berger's migrants did decades ago, they are caught, in places like Macedonia and Bulgaria — where reports suggest police brutality against migrants is routine — and are fingerprinted, often under circumstances that amount to coercion. Once fingerprinted, they must wait six months before applying for asylum elsewhere. This documentation functions as a registration, tantamount to application, and the migrant is now trapped: they must either wait six months in sometimes hostile countries in southern Europe with fewer resources and opportunities as their savings and hopes dwindle, or push on to their intended destination, where they will await likely deportation under the Dublin Regulation's terms. During this purgatory between fingerprinting and classification, time is suspended for those in migration: "if you have this fingerprint," Sado tells me, "you cannot start your life. Even if you get asylum, you wait for two years, you do nothing, just waiting."

Like the smuggler's half of a photo, the thumbprint is an imperfect way to trace a life. The requirements for refugee status (and subsequently, the process for resident status) are stringent and specific, and as inconsistently applied as they are deeply imperfect. Many of those working in the field call it what it is: migration, or, even more to the point, displacement. These interstitial times — in between waiting and acknowledgment, precarity and semblance of security — form a considerable part of Berger's text, which itself is divided into three parts: departure, work, and return.

During the second third of the text, "Work," Berger takes special care to draw parallels between past migrations that helped build the industries of wealthier European states. Particular attention is paid to migration to Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow, incentivized by the new Poor Laws. Berger also takes care to describe the living conditions in migrant worker barracks, comparing one barrack to "a maid's room, a century before" and moving into an imaginary every-migrant close-third narration:

One of the walls of the corner where his bed is, leads to a door, the door opens on to a passage, at the end of the passage are the taps to wash under and the place he can shit in, the wet floor of this place leads to the way out, down the stairs into the street, along the walls of the buildings on one side and the wall of the traffic on the other, past the railings […]

The barracks are confining and often underground, ill lit, as overcrowded as they are simultaneously lonesome. In drawing parallels between the migrants of the 1970s and the migrants of the 19th century, Berger has anticipated the migration issues of the present; the descriptions and accompanying photographs call to mind the shipping container and airport hangar resettlement stations of today, while the lines outside employment centers both presage and mirror the current ones at LaGeSo, the social services office in Berlin where migrants must declare their intent to seek asylum.

In ancient Rome, the *Homo sacer* was an individual who was banned from general society and could be killed with impunity by anyone (but not for religious sacrifice), a person whose humanity was only acknowledged in that there were limitations on how they died. This has since been applied to the current age by philosopher Giorgio Agamben as "bare life": an individual who has become so dispossessed as to have no rights beyond the recognition that they are a human being — "the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusions found the city of men."

In the case of the migrants that Berger describes, there are some rights, albeit limited, highly restricted ones, and they are all contingent upon the migrant's labor. Some belong to a union, though they are treated as inferior by its members. The migrants in *A Seventh Man* are free to cook their own food on hot plates, for instance, or travel to city centers on the weekends. In many of today's shelters, the former is forbidden, the latter made difficult by their placement on the fringes of the city, where public transport is less available. Reading today, though, one notices that the anonymous migrants in Berger's text, however painful their lives are, are not so precarious in this anonymity as the people and families who migrate today.

Indeed, arrival in today's shelters can seem like a huge stroke of luck: in the first six months of 2016, nearly 3,000 died in the Mediterranean alone according to the International Organization for Migration's missing migrants project. (Personal accounts from people smugglers and survivors suggest that this number may be much higher.) It's also estimated that 10,000 migrant children have gone missing in the mass migration to Europe, some slipping through the entrapments established by the Dublin Regulation, but others likely trafficked or dead. In other words, Berger's concerns, at times, can feel dated. Lines like "to live he can sell his life" sound overwrought, and not so bad, even, compared to today's literal selling of lives: recently, an Italian investigation uncovered that it is routine

to sell a person's organs on the black market when their family cannot pay a smuggler's dues. Bare life can even seem generous in these circumstances.

Here, another grisly precedent arises in Berger's text. In what is perhaps an allusion to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, he tells the story of a butcher who has traveled from his small-town abattoir to find himself working on the assembly line of a slaughterhouse, where the bodies of cattle draw parallels to the migrant experience:

In the city the scale of the abattoir astounded him. And the speed of the line. The only clearing of relative stillness is around the bleeding trough where the cattle having been stunned and automatically hoisted, hang like tree trunks from which red streams flow with a leisure which, although mortal, seems natural. After ten long minutes, the neck pouches are opened and the rhythm of the machines takes over. The bled forest opens on to a highway […] A truck full of hoofs: the broken experience of a hundred fields.

Sometimes Berger's empathy explodes into a kind of pity-as-polemic — a hazard of writing about what is urgent in the lives of others. But these stories appear next to poetry excerpts and interviews, statistics and theses, each lending credence to the other — Berger is creating a kind of archetype of alienation and erasure. Poetry by Attila József frames migrant testimony — "you could say we are the niggers of Europe," goes one unattributed quote — and commentary from the nativist right, like, "Why do they come here? For the money. And they send it out of the country. That's why prices go up."

What Berger and Mohr depict is thus a powerful precedent for the current emergency — if migrants successfully make the crossing (i.e., if they live), bare life is all they have. The text is determinedly and emphatically a meditation on labor, and as such, the book quietly elides — some might say speciously omits — some factors that might make it all the more relevant today: many of the seventh men who came to the north to work dealt with political instability at home, with conditions that were not unlike what many of the migrants to Europe deal with now. From 1967–1974, Greece existed under a brutal military junta. In 1973, Portugal was at the tail end of a decades-long dictatorship, eventually leading to a series of military coups called the Carnation Revolution.

To migrate to Germany, France, Switzerland, or the UK then, even temporarily, meant to send home remittances and save money and escape instability, while doing the "hardest, most disagreeable, and less well-paid jobs": working in asbestos and rubber processing facilities, or in construction. As Berger notes, "it is he who has built the roads which will lead him to a new life. Roads, autoroutes, tunnels, airstrips, fly-overs." In 1974, 45 percent of workers at the Volvo plant in Gothenburg, Sweden, were migrants. Most of these migrants were from countries that are either still sources of migration, or points of entry for current migrants — Algeria, Libya, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Spain, the southernmost parts of Italy, and the former Yugoslavia.

In sum: Migration to Europe's most stable powerhouse economies not only abounds with precedent, it is also integral to how these economies — and nations — have evolved.

Europe traces its own footsteps again and again. At the Museum Europäischer Kulturen, the walls are marked with maps that indicate the journeys that people have taken to Germany: Jasim walked from Afghanistan to Pakistan to Iraq to Iran to Turkey, took a boat to Greece, walked through Macedonia and Hungary, to Lichtenstein, his intended destination, and then back to Greece, back up through Macedonia to Hungary to Austria to France before finally arriving in Germany. Charted in red, Jasim's path takes up the entire museum wall, and it's pockmarked with Xs, indicating border guards, military personnel, and violence. In Hungary, Jasim's red way meets with a black one: his road meets with the path taken by a Cold War–era refugee, fleeing the Eastern Bloc.

Like one map laid over the other, *A Seventh Man* is a hybrid thing, an act of witness and testimony to its own recursiveness. It mixes poetry and polemic, fact and fable, and the book's photography remains strikingly; it almost seems stridently similar to today's imagery. On one page, men and women press up against the same barricades that are used today in Mediterranean and Balkan "hot spot" processing centers; in another, a group of men walk toward an unknown destination in a formation that evokes Nigel Farage's particularly odious "Breaking Point" Brexit campaign poster. As Berger says in his 2010 introduction to the reissue, "it can happen that a book gets younger with age." And this, as other reviewers have noted, especially holds with *A Seventh Man*: only the stakes have now been raised. By Berger's own admission, *A Seventh Man* was mostly ignored, occasionally even panned, in the West; one US reviewer dismissed it as a lower-case "marxist harangue." But, Berger adds, once the work was translated into "Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Punjab. […] It began to be read by some of the people it was about." The end effect of reading *A Seventh Man* today is a flattening of these decades of narratives into one of distressing durability and painful universality.

Writing on war in *The New Yorker* in 2002, Susan Sontag notes that: "the iconography of suffering has a long

pedigree. The suffering most often deemed worthy of representation is that which is understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human." A central question *A Seventh Man* asks — a question that is also central to the contemporary discussion about migration — is what and whose suffering is legitimate. Those who process thumbprints and chart out maps are determining and enforcing the validity of other people's suffering: civil war, dictatorships, religious factionalism vis-à-vis the slow rage of the existing neoliberal order (what Berger called "economic fascism" in his 2010 foreword), an order from which economies like the UK and Germany and France benefit a good deal.

At the risk of further haranguing: It is possible to feel that another's suffering is worthy of compassion or sympathy even if one has benefited from that same suffering, but it is complicated. It is even more complicated, but again not impossible, to attempt to intervene, to alleviate that suffering. This is how Berger came to write *A Seventh Man* in the first place. After winning the 1972 Man Booker Prize for his novel *G.*, Berger took the opportunity to express his outrage at the prize's colonial origins: "the extreme poverty [in the Caribbean] is a direct outcome of the exploitation of companies like Booker's […]" He gave half the £5,000 purse to the London branch of the Black Panther Party and used the remainder to undertake *A Seventh Man* with Mohr. While its intention to encourage worker solidarity may have gone unfulfilled, the book lives on as a testimony to the erasure that is inherent in migration, and as a grim reflection on its consequences. Taken together, the work of Berger and Mohr provides an important lens for viewing migration to Europe today: not as part of a sudden and bewildering crisis, but as part of an existing pattern, with precedent — continuity, even.

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