Geneva

December 16, 2015

UN Conference on Refugees

Keynote Lecture by Arjun Appadurai

I am honored by the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience on such an urgent and difficult problem. It is not easy to offer experts in human rights, displacement and statelessness any new advice or insight, which they do not have already. So I will offer today some thoughts about the roots of the crisis which currently confronts Europe and many other world regions, which are struggling to understand, manage and repair the crisis of unplanned movement of human beings which faces many of them today.

My main focus is on sovereignty. The current global architecture of sovereignty has its direct roots in the Peace of Westphalia, where a variety of European actors gave birth to a non-religious and non-imperial idea of sovereignty. This event is commonly and rightly seen as marking the birth f the modern nation-state, which rests on the legal recognition of its territorial borders, the monopoly of legitimate violence within these borders, and the obligation to provide the basic conditions of security and livelihood to its citizens. The modern nation-state is in unique in the history of human affairs n that it rests on the universal and mutual recognition of internal sovereignty between each state which claims to be a nation-state.

The global spread of this architecture which also spread to Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle-East in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been accompanied by many other important processes, such as the growth of trans-regional industrial capitalism, the spread of what Benedict Anderson called print capitalism and eventually the growth of anti-imperial movements and the push for decolonization and self-determination on a world wide basis.

The primary challenge that faces this architecture of sovereignty is that it rests on the idea of a single envelope in which national identity, territorial sovereignty and legal citizenship are contained. This is an ambitious and utopian idea whose fragility we are now being forced to recognize. The reasons for this crisis lie in the steady globalization of capital, with its push for open economic borders, free movement of labor and raw materials and coordinated activities among producers and consumers on a worldwide basis. Each of these factors puts the architecture of the nation-state under severe stress.

The biggest symptom of this crisis of sovereignty is that no modern nation-state controls what could be called its national economy. This is equally a problem for the richest and poorest of nations. The United States economy is substantially in Chinese, the Chinese depend crucially on raw materials from Africa and Latin America as well as other parts of Asia, everyone depends to some extent on Middle-Eastern oil, and virtually all modern nation-states depend on sophisticated armaments from a small number of wealthy countries. Economic sovereignty, as a

basis for national sovereignty, was always a dubious principle. Today, it is plainly irrelevant.

In the absence of any national economy which modern states can claim to protect and develop, it is no surprise that there has been a world wide tendency in effective states to demonstrate national sovereignty by turning towards cultural majoritarianism, ethno-nationalism and the stifling of internal intellectual and cultural dissent.  In other words, the loss of economic sovereignty everywhere produces a trend towards emphasizing cultural sovereignty. This move towards cultural sovereignty as the main theatre for the expression of the value of the nation-state has dark consequences for any unwanted or undocumented border-crossers, especially those seeking refuge and asylum.

Fear of outsiders who might threaten cultural purity and sovereignty is enhanced by a another problem, namely the norms of legal citizenship in most modern nation-states, all of which stress biological, linguistic or ethnic markers of a documentable historical connection to those defined as full citizens. This is the deep "meaning" behind any and all modern ideas of "naturalization" ad they are applied to migrants and other claimants to legal citizenship. The narrative of modern citizenship cannot envisage any claim to citizenship which is not based on assimilation to the current norms of national belonging that remain primarily cultural rather than political. Put even more simply, all refugee claims to citizenship in the lands to which they come, and where they eventually wish to live, are about aspiration, and not about

identification. So the real difference of consequence is not between humanitarian refugees and economic refugees but rather between what we might call aspirational refugees as against what we might call escape refugees. All refugees and indeed all migrants arrive in new places because of some sort of aspiration, whether it to the good life in terms of livelihood or in terms of a new community in which they can be physically safe. And it is the aspiration to the good life which is what they really share with those who are already citizens of the receiving countries. The divide between economic refugees and refugees who are fleeing tyranny or discrimination is a distraction from this other reality. National citizenship is everywhere in danger of becoming a series of lifeboats, in which those already aboard are encouraged to push others back into the water simply on the grounds that there is no more room.

The final deep problem of modern sovereignty, the sovereignty built on the architecture of nation-states, is that it is simply not capable of handling the world's biggest problems, all of which are trans-regional and sometimes even trans-human in their scale: terrorism, the illegal arms trade, human trafficking, epidemic diseases and above all climate are factors which clearly do not respect national boundaries. Their empire is global. But the empire of the nation-state is local. At the same time, our most brilliant leaps forward as a species are also a product of trans-regional, trans-national and global flows of ideas, innovations, discoveries and investments. This is most clear in the realm of science and technology, but it can also be seen in such areas as conflict revolution, agricultural development and media activism, all of which are improving human political and social life on a global basis and could not

have happened if national borders were effective containers of creativity and enterprise. So global processes bring us our best and worst news. In both cases, nation-states have become less players and more referees or brokers.

And so it is with the challenges of the refugee crisis, where nation-states are either unwitting stages for exit or unprepared sites for arrival. How can this state of affairs be modified? One approach is to continue to try to inject more force and credibility into the current architecture of national sovereignty, both at the sending and receiving ends. This, in my opinion, is a losing strategy since there is no way to weaken those states which we consider to be bad while strengthening those states we consider to be good, since both draw strength from the same legal and architectural principles. The other is to squarely confront global problems with global solutions. This path is of course very close to the founding vision of the UN system. But the UN system has to design and support global conventions, agreements ad interventions with ne hand tied behind its back, since its constituents are, after all, the member-states.  And the INGO sector cannot be expected to solve all the world's problems either. So where might we look for some sort of systemic solution?

In my view, the only route is by a hard re-examination of the territoriality dimension of the modern system of nation-states, including questions of borders, regions, movement and policing. Can we imagine a new sort of ecology of sovereignty in which, instead of territory, we install some other principle of local

sovereignty, which might be ecological, industrial or linguistic, for example, rather than territorial? This is a mind-bending exercise since we are so deeply wired to think of nations as above all sovereign territories. But it is high time to start imagining these possibilities for alternative ecologies of sovereignty, or else we will live in a world of territorial sovereignties but the world itself will have become an unlivable place.