

# IMMIGRATION, REFUGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS. RECLAIMING HUMANISM

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## **Abstract**

Migration is one of the most complex and formative social processes in contemporary history. Its multifactorial nature—economic, political, environmental, and cultural—makes migration a phenomenon that transcends borders, ideologies, and historical periods. Throughout human history, and especially in the last two centuries, human mobility has decisively shaped demographics, national economies, and collective identities. This paper offers a historical perspective on the main migration dynamics between the mid-19th century and 2025, integrating an analysis of their structural causes, recent transformations, and institutional responses, particularly those promoted by the UN, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It also examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the humanitarian emergency in Gaza as factors that have redefined the migration landscape and the international refugee protection system. Finally, the need to strengthen a global humanism based on multilateral cooperation and the effective defense of human rights is raised.

## **Keywords**

Migration, Refugees, Human Rights, Humanism, Multilateralism.

## **Summary**

1. Introduction 2. A brief contemporary history of migration (1850–1973) 3. From 1973 to the present: crisis, globalization and humanitarianism 4. Conclusions: towards humanism in mobility.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has accompanied humanity since its origins, but its scientific analysis has become fully relevant in the modern era, when industrialization, colonization, and global demographic transformations consolidated migratory flows of unprecedented magnitude. Migration involves a confluence of structural factors (inequality, poverty, environmental degradation) and situational factors (health crises, regional conflicts, restrictive migration policies). From this perspective, migration cannot be understood solely as the displacement of people, but rather as a global dynamic of interdependencies that redefines the relationships between states, economies, and cultures. As Cristina Blanco (2000) points out, its study requires an integrated approach that goes beyond purely demographic or economic perspectives, incorporating sociocultural and political dimensions. This vision is more necessary today than ever before, in a context marked by the intensification of forced displacement and a profound crisis in the multilateral protection system.

This research aims to analyze international migrations from 1850 to 2025 from a dual perspective:

1. Historical, taking into account the evolution of large migratory flows and their structural causes;
2. Contemporary, focused on recent dynamics linking human mobility, refuge and human rights.

This work begins with the observation that migration has undergone significant qualitative transformations: former countries of origin have become receiving countries, traditional routes have shifted, and environmental and war-related factors are playing an increasingly important role. Furthermore, the international response faces an ethical dilemma: reconciling state sovereignty with the universality of human rights.

The research draws on a broad base of classic literature, including seminal authors such as Louis Dollot (1971), Klaus Bade (2005), and Cristina Blanco (2000), and is complemented by recent institutional sources, including reports from UNHCR (2025) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), as well as data from the Eurobarometer (2023). The combination of these approaches allows for a long-term vision that connects the past, present, and future of human migration.

## 2. A BRIEF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF MIGRATION (1850–1973)

The second half of the 19th century marks a turning point in the history of human mobility. During this period, a global migration system was consolidated, accompanying the expansion of industrial capitalism, rapid urbanization, and the development of maritime and rail communications. As Cristina Blanco has pointed out, understanding these dynamics requires distinguishing between

different migratory subprocesses, each with its own specific logic and socioeconomic consequences<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.1. First migratory cycle: industrialization and colonial expansion (1850–1920)

Between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, migration flows reached unprecedented levels. Millions of Europeans migrated to the Americas, driven by rural poverty, agricultural crises, and the promise of social mobility. It is estimated that between 1800 and 1930, more than forty million people emigrated from Europe to the Americas, with the United States being the primary destination<sup>3</sup>.

Simultaneously, forced migrations occurred from Asian and African colonies to other territories under European control, in what Louis Dollot termed “induced colonial migrations<sup>4</sup>”. These flows responded to the need for cheap labor on plantations and the expansion of colonial infrastructure, leading to coercive labor systems, especially in the Caribbean, East Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Intranational migration flows from rural areas to cities also intensified, especially in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Industrialization drew large rural populations to industrial centers, causing a profound transformation of the European social structure. In Great Britain, for example, more than 700,000 Irish people had already

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<sup>2</sup>BLANCO 2000.

<sup>3</sup>BADE 2003.

<sup>4</sup>DOLLOT 1971.

settled by 1851, forming a vital workforce for the burgeoning textile and construction industries<sup>5</sup>.

On the continent, Germany developed seasonal recruitment mechanisms for workers from Poland and Ukraine, under extremely harsh conditions, while France experienced primarily spontaneous immigration of Italians and Belgians attracted by its booming industrial sector. By 1911, foreigners represented around 3% of the French population, with 1.2 million residents<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.2. Crises, wars and decline of transoceanic movements (1920–1945)

The outbreak of World War I abruptly halted the major transoceanic migration flows. Hostilities, border controls, and the subsequent economic collapse drastically reduced long-distance migration. The Great Depression of 1929 marked the end of mass European migrations, as states adopted protectionist and nationalist policies that prioritized domestic employment<sup>7</sup>.

Louis Dollot points out that in 1938 there were barely 100,000 European emigrants, compared to 600,000 in 1927 or 1.4 million in 1913<sup>8</sup>. This was compounded by the rise of totalitarian regimes—fascism and Nazism—which generated forced flows of political

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<sup>5</sup>BEDANI 2005.

<sup>6</sup>BLANCO 2000.

<sup>7</sup>HIDALGO 1994, 25–46.

<sup>8</sup>DOLLOT 1971.

refugees and exiles. Nazism alone caused more than seven million people to flee, including 1.5 million German Jews<sup>9</sup>.

During these years, forced migrations became a structural phenomenon of the 20th century. The Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires triggered massive displacements: 1.5 million White Russians, more than 1.3 million Greeks, and 400,000 Turks were forced to relocate after the Treaty of Lausanne<sup>10</sup>. These figures foreshadowed the model of forced displacement that would dominate the postwar period.

### 2.3. Second migratory cycle: reconstruction and consolidation of the industrial West (1945–1973)

The post-war period ushered in a new era characterized by economic growth and a reorganization of migration flows. Former countries of origin, such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, became suppliers of labor for the economies of Northern Europe, within a framework of bilateral agreements between governments. This led to a growing influx of workers recruited on a temporary basis to meet the industrial demands of countries like Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands<sup>11</sup>.

Although these programs envisaged periodic returns, many workers ended up settling permanently, giving rise to stable immigrant

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<sup>9</sup>RICHARDS 2003.

<sup>10</sup>BADE 2005, 45–67.

<sup>11</sup>BLANCO 2000.

communities. At the same time, European countries also received numerous citizens from their former colonies: North Africans in France, Caribbeans and Indians in the United Kingdom, Indonesians and Surinamese in the Netherlands. These postcolonial migrations strengthened cultural and linguistic ties with the metropolises, but also posed unprecedented challenges to social integration<sup>12</sup>.

Meanwhile, in Latin America, countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela consolidated their positions as centers for regional migration. Argentina, for example, received migrants from Chile, Bolivia, and Paraguay, while continuing to attract European immigrants until the 1950s<sup>13</sup>. In Africa, nations such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Mauritania played a similar role within short-distance migration networks.

This second cycle coincided with the creation of the first international refugee protection structures, in response to the mass displacements caused by war. The founding of UNHCR in 1950 and the adoption of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its 1967 Protocol marked a turning point in the legal recognition of the right to asylum and in the consolidation of an international protection regime<sup>14</sup>.

In the words of Klaus Bade, “the 20th century transformed exile and mobility into structural components of late modernity<sup>15</sup>.” Human

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<sup>12</sup>LUCASSEN 2005.

<sup>13</sup>PANADERO MOYA 1997.

<sup>14</sup>UNHCR. *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and Protocol of 1967*. Geneva: United Nations, 1951.

<sup>15</sup>BADE 2003.

mobility ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and became a constitutive element of the global economic and political order.

### 3. FROM 1973 TO THE PRESENT: CRISIS, GLOBALIZATION AND HUMANITARIANISM

The 1973 oil crisis marked a turning point in international migration policies. After three decades of sustained economic expansion, the industrialized countries of Western Europe began to perceive immigration as a structural problem linked to unemployment, recession, and the transformation of the productive sector. From then on, the management of human mobility was structured around a dual axis: control and containment of flows, on the one hand, and protection of the fundamental rights of migrants and refugees, on the other<sup>16</sup>.

During the 1980s, immigration to Europe became increasingly permanent. Spain, Italy, and Greece transitioned from countries of origin to receiving countries, while Germany, France, and the United Kingdom consolidated their already established immigrant communities. Conflicts in North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America reinforced northward migration, creating a mosaic of origins and trajectories. Simultaneously, growing concern arose regarding irregular immigration and political asylum, prompting the creation of European coordination mechanisms, culminating in the Schengen Agreement (1985) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992).

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<sup>16</sup>DE LUCAS 1996.

The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the socialist bloc radically transformed migration patterns. Millions of people from Eastern Europe moved to Western Europe in search of stability and job opportunities. This phenomenon coincided with the consolidation of global migration networks that linked the continents of the Global South and North. As the IOM has pointed out, since the 1990s, international migration has ceased to be a regional phenomenon and has become an interdependent system, where mobility is intertwined with trade, technology, and environmental crises<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.1. Globalization and migration in the 21st century

The 21st century has highlighted the paradox of an increasingly interconnected world that is simultaneously more unequal in its access to mobility. According to the IOM (2024), more than 281 million people currently live outside their country of origin, representing approximately 3.6% of the world's population. This figure is 128 million higher than in 1990 and more than triple that of 1970. However, freedom of movement remains a restricted privilege, conditioned by nationality, social class, and the geopolitical context<sup>18</sup>. In this new scenario, migration flows have taken on more diverse and fragmented forms: temporary labor migration, forced displacement due to violence or climate disasters, irregular movements, and skilled

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<sup>17</sup>INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION. *World Migration Report 2024*. Geneva: IOM, 2024, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>UNHCR. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024–2025*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2025.

migration. In many cases, economic, political, and humanitarian motivations intertwine, blurring the lines between refugee and economic migrant.

UNHCR estimates that by the end of 2024, more than 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced, the highest number ever recorded. The war in Syria, ethnic persecution in Myanmar, conflicts in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza have exacerbated this trend.

### 3.2. Pandemic, displacement and vulnerability

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) dramatically exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Migrants and refugees, often excluded from healthcare systems and access to housing and formal employment, faced disproportionate health and social risks. According to UNHCR (2021), more than 80% of refugees lived in low- or middle-income countries, where the capacity to respond to the health emergency was limited<sup>19</sup>.

In this context, both UNHCR and IOM developed an unprecedented humanitarian response, focused not only on health protection but also on raising awareness and including displaced populations in national vaccination programs. The pandemic demonstrated that human mobility cannot be managed solely as a matter of security or border control, but rather as an ethical and global challenge requiring transnational cooperation and solidarity.

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<sup>19</sup>UNHCR. *Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees and Migrants*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2021.

### 3.3. Recent wars and forced displacements

The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) triggered the largest population displacement in Europe since World War II. According to UNHCR reports (October 2025), more than 12 million people are displaced, of whom 3.7 million remain within the country and 6.5 million have fled abroad. Directive 2001/55/EC, activated for the first time, allowed for immediate temporary protection to be offered to Ukrainian refugees by removing numerous bureaucratic obstacles<sup>20</sup>.

However, this case has also highlighted a stark ethical asymmetry in the European response: while Ukrainian refugees received welcome and support, people from Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, and Sudan continue to face pushbacks and severe asylum restrictions. The European Parliament itself has acknowledged shortcomings in the actions of the FRONTEX agency, whose pushbacks in the Aegean Sea and at the Italian border violated basic human rights guarantees<sup>21</sup>.

The situation in the Gaza Strip is dire. According to the UN (October 2025), more than two million people—90% of the population—have been displaced by the Israeli military offensive. At least 67,000 people have been killed and 170,000 wounded, while 92% of homes have

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<sup>20</sup>EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Report on the application of Directive 2001/55/EC on temporary protection*. Brussels: European Commission, 2025.

<sup>21</sup>EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Resolution on FRONTEX actions and fundamental rights in the management of external borders*. Strasbourg: European Parliament, 2023.

suffered severe damage or total destruction<sup>22</sup>. The UN has insisted on three basic demands: allowing humanitarian access, preventing collective punishment, and releasing hostages. This crisis reopens the debate on international responsibility and the urgent need for a new legal framework to protect people displaced by protracted conflicts.

### 3.4. Europe, migration policy and humanist responsibility

The European Union has allocated over €1.677 billion to the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and €2.215 billion to the Border Management Fund for 2024<sup>23</sup>. However, the increase in financial resources has not necessarily translated into a more humane policy. Data from the 2023 Eurobarometer reveals that immigration is the fourth greatest concern for European citizens (14%), behind only inflation, the economy, and unemployment, which has fueled populist rhetoric that associates migration with threat<sup>24</sup>.

In response, citizen and civil society initiatives have proliferated. Mobilizations such as the massive march for welcome in Barcelona (2017) and the “Together Without Walls” demonstration in Milan (2020) highlight the emergence of a civic humanism that demands migration policies based on hospitality, solidarity, and social justice.

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<sup>22</sup>UNITED NATIONS. *Humanitarian Situation Report on Gaza*. New York: UN, 2025.

<sup>23</sup>COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *EU Budget. Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund*. Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2024.

<sup>24</sup>EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Special Eurobarometer 540: European public opinion on migration and asylum*. Brussels: European Commission, 2023.

These expressions of global citizenship represent an ethical counterweight to the hardening of borders and demonstrate that the defense of human rights remains a shared value.

### 3.5. Towards an ethics of refuge and mobility

The current migration landscape, characterized by the intensification of flows, the multiplication of push factors and inequality in reception conditions, raises a fundamental question: how to preserve human dignity in the current context?

The Global Compact for Migration (2018), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, represents a significant attempt to reorient migration governance toward multilateral cooperation. However, its non-binding nature limits its effectiveness. As UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi warned, the challenge lies in moving from declarative consensus to effective action<sup>25</sup>.

From a humanist perspective, mobility should be understood not as a threat, but as an expression of freedom and the pursuit of a dignified life. History demonstrates that migration is inherent to human development and that its criminalization represents a moral and political setback. In the words of Hannah Arendt, “the right to have rights” is put to the test precisely in the figure of the refugee, one who

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<sup>25</sup>UNHCR. *Statement by the High Commissioner on the Global Compact for Migration*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2018.

has lost the protection of their political community and depends on the ethical conscience of humanity.

The 21st century, therefore, demands a reaffirmation of humanism that transcends the logic of fear and restores the centrality of the individual within the international system. Multilateral cooperation, intercultural education, and the active defense of human rights now constitute the pillars of a truly global and solidarity-based migration policy.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS HUMANISM IN MOBILITY

The historical overview shows that migration, far from being an anomaly, is a structural constant of the human experience. From the mass displacements of the 19th century to the global mobilities of the 21st century, migrations have reflected the tensions between development and inequality, openness and exclusion, security and freedom. Each era has projected its own fears and hopes onto the phenomenon, but the root of mobility remains the same: the search for a better life and the universal drive for survival.

The 21st century has placed this reality at the heart of an unprecedented ethical dilemma. Advances in technology and transportation have expanded the possibilities for movement, but states, by reinforcing their borders, have drastically restricted access to protection and the right to asylum. This contradiction—a world open to capital and closed to vulnerable people—reveals a profound crisis of contemporary humanism.

The international protection system, represented by UNHCR and IOM, has made significant progress: legal recognition of refugees,

resettlement mechanisms, multilateral cooperation, and a growing global awareness of forced displacement. However, limitations remain evident. The lack of binding commitments from states, the unequal distribution of responsibilities, and the political exploitation of fear hinder the development of truly compassionate policies<sup>26</sup>.

In light of this, the challenge is not only political or legal, but also moral. As Paul Ricoeur pointed out, humanism is founded on the recognition of otherness, on living with and for the other<sup>27</sup>. This conception invites us to move beyond the utilitarian view that reduces migrants to mere labor or a threat, and to recognize them as subjects of dignity and rights.

Recent history demonstrates that human mobility cannot be managed solely through the logic of control, but rather through an ethic of care and shared responsibility. The crises in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza have highlighted both the fragility of the international system and the strength of citizen solidarity. Thousands of volunteers, NGOs, and local communities have filled the void left by state inaction, reminding us that hospitality is a political act, not a moral concession. Climate change also presents a new horizon of forced displacement. According to IOM estimates, more than 200 million people could be forced to leave their homes by 2050 due to environmental causes<sup>28</sup>. This scenario demands a rethinking of the concept of “refugee”

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<sup>26</sup>UNHCR. *Global Compact on Refugees: Progress Report*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2023.

<sup>27</sup>RICOEUR 1990.

<sup>28</sup>INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION. *World Migration Report 2023*. Geneva: IOM, 2023.

beyond political persecution, incorporating climate migration and ecological emergencies as part of international humanitarian law.

Looking ahead, a truly humanistic conception of mobility involves three fundamental commitments:

1. Reaffirm the centrality of human rights as a guiding principle of all migration policy.
2. Strengthen multilateral cooperation by articulating co-responsibility mechanisms that equitably distribute the burdens of reception and protection.
3. Promote a culture of hospitality that transforms the social perception of migration, integrating intercultural education and dialogue as tools for coexistence.

Ultimately, migration is an act of hope. Every displacement embodies a story of loss and reconstruction, but also of resilience. Recognizing the humanity inherent in every migrant is the first step toward recovering the ethical meaning of politics and the moral dimension of globalization. Only from this perspective—that of an active humanist reason, capable of uniting justice, compassion, and responsibility — can the 21st century face the challenge of contemporary migration with dignity.

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