The globalisation of migration control


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- people [3]
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An Italian call [6] to action against the G8 summit, arguing that migration is the new ghost haunting the world, contained an important truth. For at the core of People Flow [6] today is the underlying social challenge of no less an event than the birth of a globally-mobile world proletariat.

In its most extreme form, the tension between the right to free movement and the nation states' claim to defend their borders and control access to their territory is quite simply a matter of life and death. Moreover, what happens on the ground is no coincidence, but a mirror-reflection of the discussion over migration taking place on the international stage, and now represented in the People Flow debate initiated by Demos / openDemocracy [6].

In that discussion, American policy advisors have been coming to appreciate the approach of a conservative French thinker and Le Figaro essayist who has helped them prepare the ground for a militarisation of migration control.

As early as 1994, Yale professor and military expert Paul Kennedy [6] wrote in the Atlantic Monthly: Many members of the more prosperous economies are beginning to agree with Raspail's vision of a world of two camps, separated and unequal, in which the rich will have to fight and the poor will have to die if mass migration is not to overwhelm us.

Such statements signalled the willingness of many in the international community to sacrifice life for the sake of defending the status quo of social injustice, inequality and exclusion.

Moreover, while these arguments may be couched in terms of an appeal to some of our more irrational fears, they have some substantial background reasoning to back them up.

Freedom of movement versus managed migration

It is widely believed that globalisation means an increase in mobility and migration. Worldwide, migration is strenuously debated. Frequent warnings are issued that as many as half of Moroccan young people or 50 million Russians wish to move north or west respectively; others simply equate global population growth with future migration pressure. As a result, asylum or migration crises are generated and migrants scapegoated in countries as different as Germany and the UK, Australia and Malaysia [6], Libya and Argentina, Nigeria, Kenya and most recently the Ivory Coast [6].
Irregular migration in particular, sometimes appreciated as cheap labour but more often invoked as a term used to defame undesirables, is increasingly perceived as posing a major threat to the world order and to the integrity of nation states.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and other sources estimate that there are up to 33 million illegal immigrants worldwide, four times the population of Sweden.

In the last decade, migration has been likened to some kind of resistance, a revolution of expectations to The Barefoot Revolution (Club of Rome) and to an action against poverty (Galbraith). Every migration study has its near-obligatory references to the wishes, dreams, expectations and demands of immigrants. Migration is increasingly regarded as some kind of a social movement towards global social justice.

Yet any single-perspective emphasis on migrants as victims no more helps us to understand the phenomenon and the deeper meaning of the antagonism which is beginning to emerge to full view, than attempts to distinguish between refugee, internal or border-crossing migration and general mobility.

A. Sivanandan is surely right to point out that the situation of refugees, displaced persons, guestworkers or those moving internally from poor villages to a shining metropolis, are all in some way related to the same socio-political-economical problematic. They are all, one way or another, uprooted by the politics of globalisation in its many facets.

In response, national governments and international organisations are quick to agree that migration needs to be regulated and managed in an orderly fashion. A whole string of international conferences, such as Managing Migration in the 21st Century (Hamburg 1998) or the International Symposium on Migration: towards regional cooperation on irregular migration (Bangkok 1999) have been deployed to identify and analyse perceived problems and prepare the ground for the required response.

Meanwhile, few international agreements, stability pacts, bilateral action plans or contracts omit some reference to migration and the necessity to jointly contain it. Since neo-liberalism and its accompanying utilitarian principles play such a dominant ideological role within the industrialised world, it is no surprise that both now also inform migration policy.

However, apart from a relatively short period of time from 1973 to 2000 when migration control appeared to be aiming at zero migration, this people flow has in fact simultaneously been analysed as vital to economic growth. US history and the Mexican-US maquiladora industry, the German Ruhr region, the post-war boom, the industrialisation of the Gulf states, the economic success of global cities or the south Asian growth triangle, all provide clear evidence of this.

Thus, while migration policy is closely associated with population and labour market policy, it is also intimately related to foreign policy and wars. It has many facets, ranging from containing the movement of the poor to the centres of wealth, to its opposite; the recruitment of migrant labour to accumulation centres. It can equally demand the expulsion of surplus people from their native soil or the blocking of escape routes from war or ecological disaster.

Migration has been analysed for its potential as a precondition to economic growth as well as a threat to capitalism and accumulation; which is why, throughout history, in this particular chapter of mankind's continuous wrestling over access to territories and resources, recruitment and containment are so closely related.

Migration and the market

In its 1999 Tampere summit, the European Union (EU) and its member states decided to modernise immigration policy in three directions: containing asylum migration, fighting irregular migration, and opening up new migration channels to migrant workers. In 2002, the Seville summit added a fourth goal, extending the influence of European migration policy to all other countries of origin or transit.
The EU’s integrated approach aimed to combine its solutions for internal problems such as ageing societies; a dearth of certain professionals; and a lack of internal labour market mobility, or economic slow-down; with attempting to get a handle both on what are perceived to be migration pressures, such as the business of trafficking, and immigration’s more positive aspects.

Since the 1999 summit, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK began modernising their immigration policy accordingly, by introducing green cards, increasing the quotas for foreign workers, and signing contracts with guest workers or allowing the number of work permits to rise. Economic migration, until recently a term used to discredit asylum-seekers, rapidly acquired a more positive connotation.

However, these governments did not confine themselves to a selective opening up of borders, but at the same time they strengthened a major rationale for exclusion: namely, economic considerations. In so far as market laws had become a driving factor in migration politics, the result was the outright rejection of those for whom there is no demand on the labour market.

Schemes such as the point system of the US or German green card used to assess the human capital of an applicant, or the Daily Telegraph’s call for a ‘quality control’ of future immigrants are clear on this point. Once again it is the ‘unwanted’ and the ‘surplus people’ who suffer from the unrestrained brutality of economic laws.

Of course this effect follows notoriously racist patterns of behaviour, so that it is the populations of the Black, Asian or Slavic world that are perceived as a threat to world order, the fabric of social hierarchies and developed economies. For many of these people, stuck in poor, exploited or robbed parts of the world, it soon becomes a matter of life and death.

Modernising the European migration regime

Yet in comparison to others, the European migration regime remains the most advanced. From its beginnings in 1985, a cluster of measures together formed the cornerstones of a supranational approach to migration; the extension of the Trevi group’s responsibility towards migration issues, the Schengen agreement, the Dublin convention, the ’harmonisation’ of asylum politics, and in 1999, the Amsterdam Treaty creating a ‘single area of freedom and security’.

A whole range of agencies with names like the Ad Hoc Group Migration, the High Level Working Group on Migration, the Strategic Committee on Migration, clearing centres on asylum and on border crossing (Cirea, Cirefi), or the Working Community Police Cooperation with Middle East and east-central European countries have been set up; many of them rather secret and not accountable to democratic control. All of them are concerned with asylum, migration, illegal immigrants, trafficking and border crossing.

The core of the EU’s Schengen states, France, Germany and the Netherlands (and more recently the UK and Spain) have pushed for a more proactive and preventive outreach approach. There have been four aspects to this.

First, in the 1990s, the concern of these states was to create a tight border between themselves and their eastern European neighbours, ensuring that membership of the EU was made dependent on the implementation of the Schengen accords.

Second, the EU was keen to reach bilateral agreements such as the Barcelona Declaration with all its other neighbouring states bordering the Mediterranean sea, or with those who are now outside the EU’s new external borders; a category including Yugoslavia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Third, the EU aspires to a common understanding with the Americas through the EU-US action plan, and an Interregional Frame agreement between the EU and the Mercosur states of Latin America.
Fourth, the EU targets any other relevant regions or countries of origin and transit. The ASEM Ministerial Conference on Cooperation for the Management of Migratory Flows between Europe and Asia; in April 2002 perfectly illustrates the commitment to integrating ten major Asian governments into EU migration policy concepts.

A concrete tool in tackling migration is provided by a series of European Action plans in Albania, Morocco, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Afghanistan. These titles are somewhat misleading as the plans also embrace any other relevant neighbouring or transit country. Action Plan Iraq, for example, places considerable emphasis on Turkey and on migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh through these countries. Albania has been identified as a major transit route now replacing migration from the east.

Another new tool in places like Moscow, Bangkok and Sarajevo, is to deploy European police and immigration officers and policy advisers at foreign airports and in the headquarters of border guards.

Meanwhile, the EU’s major development policy document, the Cotonou Convention, successor of the Lome Convention, targets all African, Caribbean and Pacific states (ACP). Drafted in 2000, the EU Seville summit agreed to add a paragraph on migration control and the readmission of migrants, into bilateral agreements over development policy, technical cooperation or trade.

The ASEM-EU agreement makes it equally clear that migration control is an important element; and precondition for good bilateral relations. If all else fails, the EU has agreed to establish a final line of defence by integrating the military alliance Western European Union (WEU) into its structure, setting up a paramilitary force of 5,000 officers, to be deployed in containing massive population movements; for example.

However advanced therefore, the EU approach to immigration is an aggressive one, which does not hesitate to use blackmail over development aid or threats of military intervention to spread the shockwaves of forced compliance throughout the wider world. But it is not the sole agent at the level of transnational cooperation and planning.

Transnational migration control agencies

Strategies for an international migration regime; and global migration management; are the fashionable new phrases in international politics today. What has been learnt about the regulation of finance and goods, and the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in particular, will serve as a blueprint for global migration politics as well.

In fact, a General Agreement on the Movement of People, equivalent to those on Transport and Trade (GATT) has already been proposed. It is argued that since nation-states are crumbling while global traffic increases constantly, and borders have become so porous that relying on the control of external borders has ceased to work; a more flexible system of control must be found. The move is therefore towards a comprehensive regime that covers the whole process of migration from the countries of origin, along the pathways and through any country of transit, to its final destination.

Any such approach inevitably lies well beyond the scope of nation-states, which have instead identified the need for supranational and transnational organisations. These include the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugees and Migration Policies (IGC), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and to some extent the International Labour Organisation (ILO), together with various think tanks and standing conferences.

The IGC, set up in 1985 when the previous Intergovernmental Committee on Migration turned into the IOM, is a small, informal and secret forum of sixteen members; for the exchange of information and the planning of innovative solutions and strategies. The IGC, possibly the central think tank in migration control politics, is the prime candidate for the source of such key international strategies and rallying cries as the protest calls against human
trafficking), and even illegal migration. Its organisational roots lie in the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in Vienna, which also hosts the secretariat for the Budapest Process, synonym for the extension of the European migration policy eastwards.

The main agency however is the IOM, set up in 1951 as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration. The name has a troubling precedent in the Intergovernmental Committee which was founded in 1938 as a result of the Evian conference, which so disastrously failed to rescue European Jewish refugees from what was to come.

In fact, the IOM, although next door to the UN in Geneva, was always intended to offer an economic counter-agency to the humanitarian UNHCR, set up the year before.

The IOM has recently become a rather complex transnational agency, dealing not only with migration policy design and implementation, the movement and often return of people, but also with the disarmament of guerrillas in Kosovo, Congo and Angola; the formation of a civil administration in Kosovo; the medical screening of emigrants accepted for settlement in the US and Canada; and the scheme which compensates non-Jewish victims of Nazi slave workers.

But its main focus remains migration management. The IOM prides itself on having moved 11 million people since its inception: 450,000 people in 2000 alone. The focus is on the return of unwelcome migrants to war-torn destinations: Kosovo, northern Iraq, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan.

The IOM has divided the world into nineteen regions for these purposes, each headed by a regional migration headquarters in capital cities such as Brussels, Rome, Budapest, Helsinki or Bangkok. Its field offices are the outposts of a global migration warning system, that feed back to countries of destination knowledge about migration movements, patterns, networks, and supporters.

Thus, the IOM exports the European model of migration control to other parts of the world, such as West Africa, where the IOM and the Economic Community of West African States are to establish a Migration Statistics Unit...that would improve understanding of migration issues and help establish effective migration programs and policies. The same has been going on in Latin America with the Puebla process and in south-east Asia with the Manila process, each synonyms for regional migration regimes.

The IOM not only concentrates, accumulates and in return spreads the latest thinking on migration control policy and technology around the globe (in its capacity building programs). It also offers a comprehensive approach consisting of a combination of migration discouragement schemes (information seminars); the erection of border control posts, building and running detention camps, the subsequent removal of unwanted migrants (voluntary return schemes) in UK, Germany, Netherlands and many other countries; and the recruitment of any extra labour required (such as from Equador to Spain).

Global migration management or global social justice?

The world has moved beyond 18th and 19th century patterns of final immigration to underpopulated continents, or to places where it was deemed acceptable to forcibly displace the indigenous people. Post-1945 concepts of guest or migrant workers who were expected to return once the economic boom was over have failed, but not before forcing countries such as France, the UK or Germany to accept their role as multi-ethnic societies.

However, the new German immigration law makes clear in its introduction that this mistake should not be repeated. The IOM and EU now accept global migration as a fact while insisting on its orderly management. Recent schemes in Germany, the UK, Italy or Spain reveal a preference for just-in-time migration that responds to short-term economic demands over long-term settlement. Current trends in immigration management however are more likely to reflect a hire-and-fire policy. The result will be the flexibilisation of populations, rather than an immigration policy.
The same trend contains some strategies reminiscent of Keynesian attempts to domesticate and thereby control social conflict, by integrating the working class and its demand for better wages and living standards into capitalist growth. Such a strategy, adapted to migration policy, aims to distinguish between productive and unproductive elements of migration movements, turning the former into a driver of economic growth.

The forcefulness with which the EU, the US and the transnational agencies dominated by them enforce their concepts of immigration control simply gaining the compliance and obedience of third countries through political, economic, financial means, even including military force – reflect a hegemonic strategy that is little different from classical imperialism.

This becomes clear in the context of the broader politics of immigration, when the EU or the IMF think aloud about how to respond to demographic crisis in the west, and the need for up to 75 million immigrants; the scale of the planning operation involved here would be immense and worldwide. While the concept of replacement populations has been widely rejected, the need for immigration of specific populations still stands and involves processes of selection. In such an eventuality, migration policy also turns into a significant population policy process.

But the current planners of global migration and population politics today are also learning a lesson from the Nazi approach to population within the European space: one which draws on the concept of the value of a population in terms of its health and productivity, and which understands the links between migration and other major contemporary phenomena; genocide, starvation, displacement, population management, the social question, demographic issues, and the overall social productivity of capitalist societies.

There is, after all, a worrying equilibrium between those who are deported from Europe each year; about 350,000, plus an unknown number of those leaving voluntarily because of deterrent policies; and those who are recruited on foreign labour schemes.

In this light, migration politics reveals itself as a way to run the UK plc or Deutschland AG; a strategy of social engineering to rationalise and to recompose the population, in a similar way that a workforce might have been approached in the past. But the transnational nature of this politics brings an altogether new quality to migration control.

The purpose of keeping the unwanted out; and that means the majority of the world’s population; requires a global system of deportations and removals, UN-controlled safe havens; refugee and internment camps, Pacific prison islands like Nauru; and armed border guards. These are the peculiarly millennial symbols of inequality, injustice and the politics of exclusion, whose redress is long overdue.

It is then no surprise that a growing number of scholars question the legitimacy of policies of inclusion and exclusion on grounds of immigration regulations, and call for rethinking concepts of membership and citizenship under conditions of globalisation. Equally, activists demand the closure of detention centres, an end to deportations, and a recognition that no one is illegal; leading to the creation of open borders, involving the abolition of all immigration controls, and amnesty for those without official documents.

At the heart of a just order lies a fair relation between individuals and communities, and of sedentary and mobile populations. But an ethically acceptable and truly liberal approach, in order to do justice to moral equality and individual freedom, inevitably includes the right to exit and access, hence a principle of freedom of movement. Any restrictions, unequal treatment or exclusion can only be interpreted as a form of tyranny imposed by the privileged inside a system upon the disadvantaged outside.

To satisfy both standards requires a global realisation of basic rights and basic goods, for example a form of basic income and a form of cosmopolitan membership, temporary citizenship or globally obligatory and enforceable universal rights. Both would replace the need to migrate by the free
choice to migrate, and would therefore certainly also reduce migration pressure. Combined [6], these measures have the potential to reconcile the sedentary and the mobile and would mark the only true way to global social justice and equality.

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