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Effects and consequences of labour migration

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The terms differ - 'Selective Migration' in France, 'Managed Migration' in the UK, 'Labour Migration' in Germany - but call it what you will, central to the debate is the idea that we are moving away from the zero immigration of Fortress Europe into a new era of liberalised immigration controls. Yet, the truth of the matter is that the Fortress Europe approach that characterised the end of the twentieth century is, today, not so much abandoned as refined.

If, then, we are to intervene effectively in the labour migration debate, it is essential that our perspectives are holistic, rather than partial, international rather than local. And this entails an understanding of several related issues. First, that a new dispensation toward labour migration is just one element within the EU's strategy of global migration management. Second, that the erosion of refugee and humanitarian conventions is a direct consequence of global migration management. Third, that the current demonisation of settled migrant workers (often linked to the war on terror) is also linked to policies of global migration management. And the benchmark for any interventions should be social justice, human rights (particularly for refugees) and civil rights (for settled migrants).

But what exactly do I mean when I use the phrase global migration management? The debate around labour migration comes amidst EU anxieties about its labour force and whether it is flexible enough to compete effectively in the global market. According to the European Commission, the EU needs about 20 million immigrants in the coming 25 years in order to be able to compete economically with the other big world economies. Hence global migration management has emerged as a philosophy within which skills shortages are addressed - in the interests of business, and through the intervention of the market state.

A direct consequence of the EU's managed migration programme is the division between 'good immigrants' (who form an orderly queue and enter through legal routes), and 'bad immigrants' (who jump the queue and seek asylum). For global migration management is not just a philosophy within which skills shortages are addressed but has emerged as part of the strategic response of the powerful nations of the First World to the economic and social dislocation engendered first, by the break up of the former communist zone of influence and, second, by 'the impact of globalism's insatiable demand' on Second and Third Worlds for 'free markets and unfettered conditions of trade'.

Displacement of people and refugee movement are direct consequences of globalisation - and demand the reappraisal of humanitarian law from the perspective of managed migration. First, they militarise the borders (via the EU Border Control Programme instigated at the Seville Summit of June 2002). Second, they criminalise the act of seeking asylum (via anti-trafficking initiatives which render the desperate act of seeking asylum as not only criminal in itself but complicit in international crime). Third, they erect target-driven deportation programmes which lead to a conveyor-belt system of removals, countless human rights abuses and illegalities under international law. And, finally (and we are moving to this stage now) they remove the problem of asylum, by removing asylum seekers altogether. Hence, the move towards 'offshore processing', the talk of 'immigration gateways' in neighbouring countries such as Libya. Hence, the promotion of refugee camps in regions of origin from which refugees can be

warehoused until conflicts are resolved, with a chosen few being selected for resettlement in Europe under an Australian-style quota system.

As new labour migrants are targeted, States also intervene to ensure the existing labour force adapts to the temporary flexible working practices demanded by the globalised economy. Dismantling of the welfare state, accompanied by labour reforms, impacts harshly on all workers, but for settled migrant communities, many with vulnerable status owing to the inequities of citizenship laws, the future is more precarious still.. Now, we find that the causes of poverty, unemployment and disadvantage within 'immigrant' communities is blamed on the immigrant's culture, with theories of 'cultural deficit', similar to those in the US before the Civil Rights movement, emerging

The labour migration debate also begs the question, as to what sort of labour migrant we want - ones that are culturally similar to us or ones that are culturally different. Hence the demonisation of Europeans of Turkish, Moroccan, Pakistani descent, hence calls for 'an end to immigration from alien cultures' (Helmut Schmidt)' or the end to 'immigration by submission to immigration by choice' (Nicolas Sarkozy). All European states are now clamping down on the rights of existing migrant communities, particularly marriage rights and family reunification. As the popularity of the extreme-Right grows, the mainstream parties seek to neutralise the anti-immigration parties by speaking to the fears and prejudices of its electoral base. But the long-term effect is the collusion of mainstream parties in the demonisation of vulnerable groups and the shifting of the centre of gravity to the right on matters of race and immigration. The long-term result is racism - which ultimately threatens the very social cohesion that the European states need if they are compete in the global market.