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Europe: The reconstruction of the Free World

A borderless Europe may seem like a distant prospect at the moment. But as struggles for universal access to the global commons beyond the nation−state intensify, it is bound to become a necessity, say Ulrike Guérot and Robert Menasse.

In political psychology, even schizophrenia is normal. When citizens of any state are at home, they want to know that their state borders are defended and policed as rigorously as possible. But when they travel abroad, they want borders to be as porous as possible, and ideally invisible. They don't want to be held up at borders, but they want others entering their country to be stopped at the border and preferably sent back. At their destination, they want to experience the "Other" as "an interesting different culture", but at home they perceive the "Other" as a threat to "our culture".

The sudden disappearance of borders can spark euphoria, as we saw with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and indeed of the rest of the Iron Curtain, but citizens want the borders back again when it appears that the people from "over there" want to come over here looking for work. They drive "over there" themselves if it's cheaper to buy stuff there, but they don't understand it when people want to come "over here" to earn more. When they want to claim their human rights, concerned citizens can quote chapter and verse to prove these are "universal"; but in the face of claims by others, they want to fence them off as being only part of national law.

This is what passes for "normality" nowadays.

Historically, however, political borders are anything but normal. On the contrary, the system of political borders, which today are generally regarded as normal and which are once more being constructed and defended, is the historical exception, and in the foreseeable future it will be regarded again as a short and untypical historical interlude.

The borders that bind

The so−called *four freedoms* (the freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital) are the greatest post−war achievement of the European integration project; however, they are not a new phenomenon in European history, but only a step towards the restitution of historical normality: an absence of borders was the natural state of affairs in Europe from the Middle Ages until well into the nineteenth century.

In the Middle Ages, the German Reichstag, or Diet of the Imperial Estates of the Holy Roman Empire, was a peripatetic assembly that gathered together the German Prince−electors in different European cities from Luxembourg to Prague, not all of which lie within the *borders* of today's Federal Republic. Medieval students followed their teachers from Rotterdam as far as Bologna. Cultural, culinary, linguistic, religious and geographical borders, certainly, but not national ones, were important and palpable in Europe, but these cultural borders did not divide: on the contrary, they bound Europe together.

Even topographical borders such as rivers or mountains were not able to divide homogenous cultural regions: the Basque people live south and north of the Pyrenees, the Tyroleans south and north of the Brenner Pass. The Rhine, on the other hand, never became the national border of France. And it was possible to travel from the heartlands of the Habsburgs through Bohemia and Moravia to Galicia on tracks which, for hundreds of kilometres, crossed *no borders*. Before 1914 you didn't need a visa to travel by cab from Paris to Moscow, changing horses in Berlin, as Stefan Zweig observed. Nor was it then necessary to change money −− neither guilders nor thalers −− and nor did one leave Europe if one took the coach from Vienna to Lviv and stopped over in Budapest. "Before 1914", wrote Heinrich Mann, "'abroad' was just a figure of speech".

Moreover, what we conceive of today as a "passport" has only existed since 21 October 1920. That was when the League of Nations defined what should be in a passport and how it should look in order for it to be recognized by the world's states as a travel document enabling the crossing of borders. The preamble to the League's definition of an internationally−recognized passport is interesting (but sadly forgotten): namely that the introduction of the passport had only *provisional* validity until the "complete return to pre−war conditions which the conference hopes to see gradually re−established in the near future".

To think of today's borderless "Schengen Area" as a unique historical phenomenon, an absolutely revolutionary achievement in the recent European history of integration, is therefore misleading. On the contrary, it is important to remind people that a borderless Europe was, for hundreds of years, accepted as the normal state of affairs, simply so that we can talk about what this *European area* should be *today* −− namely, what it always was: a palimpsest of borders, which actually aren't borders at all, but which merely defined the cultural regions that have always created out of the cultural *diversity* of Europe *a single European* space.

To remind ourselves of this is also important in order to be able to discuss how the European area can and should manage the refugee crisis.

European history −− and today's European reality

If Europeans knew European history, rather than assuming only what they now know to be normal, then it goes without saying that they would wish to *re−establish* the historically *normal state of borderlessness* in Europe that endured for hundreds of years and which was only brutally and bloodily destroyed in the twentieth century by the two world wars −− by Europe's "second Thirty Years' War". But the EU today is distancing itself at great speed from precisely that option, and not just in the wake of the so−called refugee crisis, which is being exploited as an opportunity to revisit the darkest chapter of modern European history, with border controls and border fortifications, even with the construction of fences and walls within Europe. In

fact, in European discourse, to see the EU as a project whose founding purpose was to Europeanize Europe again and to overcome the nation−states, is an ambition that was already abandoned some time ago. There are many reasons for this: the contemporary political elites are too young to have understood the founding purpose of the European project, but they are too old to be able to imagine anything other than what they are used to −− the national system in which they have made their careers. And what they know for certain is that they are only elected in national elections, which is why they must maintain the fiction of national interests in order to rally the support of their electorates for their offices, though not for the European project.

The refugees are now intensifying this regression at the European and the national level. If a European solution to the refugee issue is not in sight −− neither with regard to the repartition of refugees within Europe, nor, as a minimum, to common defence of the external borders, as is often called for −− and if in addition a common and coherent European foreign policy has yet to be realized, then all that remains is the *flight* to *national withdrawal*; which, however, is available in practice only to those European states without an external EU border, for example Germany or Denmark. But Greece or Italy, or the countries on the Balkan route −− whether EU members or not −− have no choice: they will be overrun by refugees whatever they do to prevent it. Because as long as the EU doesn't decide to lay barbed wire across Mediterranean beaches, or to turn back refugee boats with armed force, the sea border of the EU to the south cannot be "defended": the EU cannot cut itself off from the Mediterranean −− which, it is worth remembering, is in cultural historical terms, as the *Mare Nostrum*, the quintessential European sea −− and from whose trade routes the EU most certainly does not want to cut itself off.

The question today is therefore: how in the future will it be possible on an organizational level to deal with the fact that Europe wants and needs open borders for trade, but not for people? The fact is that the border closures which have already taken place, and those that are to be expected, within the EU may affect (and threaten) lorry traffic −− and thus business, production, trade and consumption, and ultimately our living standards −− and that closed borders mean quantifiable bottom−line costs; that just−in−time management and efficient inventory control are only possible if lorries are not wasting time held up at borders; all of this is now beginning to dawn on the economic ministers of the member states. But a border that is open to lorries and at the same time closed to refugees is not possible. The only realistic option that remains for the EU is to open up −− it will have to share its space and its place with the "others": with the people who want to come to Europe.

Merging asylum rights and civil rights

There are, at this moment, 60 million people fleeing war, hunger and destitution around the world. The USA, Australia and Canada, each of which only grants asylum to around 10,000 refugees each year, have effectively withdrawn from the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, which stipulates that the community of nations has a shared responsibility towards refugees, and that every refugee is entitled to asylum. Social welfare entitlements for state citizens arise out of civil rights; basic human rights to shelter and to welfare provision arise out of the right to asylum, independent of citizenship −− and both shelter and welfare are increasingly merging into one. Everyone has a right to a homeland and to security. In times when many are forced to become nomads in search of a new home, the decisive question becomes: how can this process be organized without conflict and in a way that is humane for all?

The Belgian author and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray coined the expression "sharing the world" as a modern extension of Kant's "right to universal hospitality", which assumes that all people are born equal and therefore have an equal right in principle to live anywhere in the world. Given this human right, states cannot define a territorial right of abode for people. In the future, the challenge must therefore be to organize extra−territorial democracy and to realize the promise contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: that the recognition of human rights should be independent of any specific "state citizenship".

The coming climate catastrophe, with all the consequences of the global reduction in fertile soils, will put nation−states under even greater pressure: they will be unable to maintain their insistence on territorially−based statehood as a privilege which enables them to reserve land within their state borders for *their own* citizens (and for millionaires who buy their way in). This applies to the European area as well. So it's about the global *right to a homeland*; about *universal access* to the global commons beyond the nation−state; about providing a homeland for all in times of permanent migration.

In the future, everyone must have the right to cross national borders and to settle where they want, especially since *for everything else except people*, the globalized world is already one single system of networks, of permeability and of borderlessness: from pipelines to broadband, through high speed trading in financial markets to product supply chains, everything has in practice already functioned for a long time unhindered by national borders. The challenge now is to reflect this fact in a new political institutional system. What is needed is to develop a *political* form out of the diverse and many−layered global network, instead of fencing off national *enclaves* that cannot be justified in Kantian terms. What is needed is for *homelands* to be *bound together*: this must include bonds in both legal and normative senses. Legal bonds tie everyone to one constitution; normative bonds enable the participation of all in whatever affects all. Everyone has a stake in the system, and everyone contributes to it.

What is needed is the free organization of "*Otherness*" in a legal system of obligations, in the words of Luce Irigaray; that is, a novel form of direct *connection* between the *local/regional* and the *global* beyond the state, and thus a merging of asylum rights and human rights. This leads to the creation of an unlimited transit area. In the future, it would no longer be the salvation of ethno−cultural homogeneity by homogenous populations that would count as "European", but the dissolution of borders as limits to homogeneity. This creates a gigantic space of potential in which real life plans and modes of living *exist alongside one another*. Sociology teaches us that segregation is also a form of tolerance. Against this background, the question arises of whether the current EU refugee policy is the correct one, focused as it is on integration, which carries with it the risk of large−scale social unrest.

Giving space to the "Others": Cities for migrants?

Let us look back into recent history to seek inspiration from solutions that have already proved to be sustainable: what did the European migrants do who emigrated to the New World in their masses during the famines and political crises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries −− the Irish, the Italians, the Balts, the Germans ... ? They built *their cities* there anew.

Detail from Johannes Vingboons's image of New Amsterdam in 1664, the same year it was renamed New York. Source: Wikimedia

Across America we find cities with names such as New Hannover, New Hampshire, New Hamburg, and so on. In Little Italy in New York, the Italians occupied an entire district. It didn't occur to anyone then to divide families, or to place them in separate accommodation, or to haggle over family reunification. Nobody was given asylum−seeker status, or received state money, or had to commit to language courses or even to a *Leitkultur*, a dominant national culture. The European refugees simply arrived in a new homeland and reconstructed their *old* homeland there. We can learn from that.

What if refugees in Europe were to be allocated building land neighbouring the European cities, but at a sufficient distance to maintain "*otherness*"? That would create a space of potential in which real life plans and modes of living could exist alongside each other. In this way, New Damascus and New Aleppo, New Madaya and so on could arise in the middle of Europe. Or New Diyarbakir or New Erbil and New Dohuk for the Kurdish refugees. Perhaps also New Kandahar or New Kunduz for the Afghan refugees, or New Enugu or New Ondo for the Nigerian refugees. Europe is large (and will soon be empty) enough to build a dozen or more cities for new arrivals. We don't need to stress over integration. We don't need to cram the refugees into our −− sometimes dilapidated −− suburbs or into the −− sometimes sprawling and desolate −− no man's landscapes in the countryside between them. We don't have to concentrate them in refugee homes to be burnt down to warm the hearts of patriotic nationalists. We don't have to play off their rights to housing and work in their new homeland against housing and jobs for the lowest quartile of our own society. We don't need to rub up against each other and rub each other up the wrong way. In short: we don't need *integration*. We respect "*otherness*" −− and we let new arrivals be in their "otherness".

The new arrivals then look after themselves, in accordance with their culture, cuisine, music and social structures. They recreate their cities in Europe, their squares, their schools, their theatres, their hospitals, their radio stations and their newspapers. And EU law applies to everyone. And that is important: *Aequum ius*, equality before the law −− for old EU citizens as well as for new arrivals. Instead of *Leitkultur*, *civic rights* for all.

Europe gives building land as support for getting started −− improved land, that is, land already connected to infrastructural services such as energy, ICT and transport, but otherwise free for development by the new arrivals. All the money that we now give out for integration and language courses, for fences and border protection, for security and policing, can be given by Europe to the refugees to help them make a start. As urban construction is not a quick process, Europe, with the support of the UNHCR, can help to begin with by providing temporary dwellings −− that is, exactly the kind of container dwelling that is provided now. Town planners who are involved with refugee camps and who have researched them report that *refugee camps* soon turn into *towns*, as long as the refugees are left in peace. Building towns seems to be

human nature. In Lebanon, the carefully positioned and rigidly aligned UNHCR containers were moved around and re−positioned after only a few weeks. Big thoroughfares and small side streets emerged −− for example, the main street in one Lebanese refugee camp was christened the Champs Elysée. Out of nothing, trade began to take place, and little boutiques sprang up; street−smart handymen and amateur mechanics built mopeds out of scrap; suddenly there were little theatres and dance festivals. Experts say that in less than six months a refugee camp turns into a town.

Imagining new worlds

In short: what is needed is a multi−coloured Europe, proximity with respect, an *alliance of alterity* under the same European law, a creative network of diversity.

Over time, the residents of the different towns would mix together quite naturally. The new arrivals would make their way to the nearby "European" towns to work. Or they would open their boutiques there, sell what they produce there. Nobody would need asylum−seeker's support. The residents of the older indigenous towns become curious. The new arrivals have different and interesting food, and an unknown spice or two. Artists come to look, to paint and to write poetry. Hipster cafés spring up. Students seeking cheap accommodation rent flats to share in New Damascus. Then come the first love stories, and then the first children. Then the first visits from parents. Three generations later −− that's how long it usually takes −− the children of the children of the first generation of new arrivals have learned the language of the new homeland −− simply because it's more practical. Another hundred years later, it will probably only be the town's name −− like New Hannover, or Paris, Texas, or Vienna, Virginia in the United States today −− that reminds people that its founders came from a different world.

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