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Tearing Down Fortress Europe: Migration as Utopia

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Humans have always moved across regions and continents. Yet how that happens today is increasingly dystopian, heavily bound within the nation-state and capitalist logic. Even as migrants endure militarised, inhumane systems and are called a threat to Europe's "way of life", they are also courted as indispensable for the economy. Aleksandra Savanović invites us to step back and, shedding the confines of preconceived ideas about future and progress, imagine together a more utopian migration.

Migration is one of today's most powerful, and most entrenched, imaginaries. The word conjures up images of walls, borders, police, uncertainty, destitution, misery, and death. Migration is most commonly discussed as a menace, an unwanted but "necessary evil", a reluctant sacrifice offered at the altar of economic health.

Political discourse around migration is saturated with fear. Migrants are framed as both a crisis, a threat to our identity, here to "destroy our way of life", and as unfair adversaries in the labour market, here to "take our jobs". Encouraged by far-right narratives, which see migration as a symptom of today's globalised, free-rein capitalism, public concerns are directed first and foremost at the protection of national borders, to protect *our* way of life, *our* jobs. The rhetoric is nostalgic, longing for those good old times of (sovereign!) nations, family wages, and (white) male bread-winners – no matter that sovereignty, family wages, and decent jobs were only available to some.

To a certain extent, the European Union's policy reflects these sentiments. In fact, the term "European way of life" has emerged as the new official narrative of the EU since the 2019 European elections. Its approach is above all practical, forged through compromise among EU member states as (economic) liberals championing more "market" and diversity clash with social conservatives claiming to protect "traditional" – or supposedly non-capitalist – institutions like the family and nation, often alluding to ethnic purity. But even right-wingers must admit – although not explicitly – that without a steady influx of foreign labour, most EU countries would soon be facing economic collapse. They therefore accept immigration but want more filtering and fewer rights for immigrants. A scandal in Poland relating to hundreds of thousands of working visas being issued in return for bribes, which took place while anti-immigration party Law and Justice (PiS) was in power, is a case in point. The ostensible paradox is illusory.

A false dichotomy

The supposed dichotomy between capitalism and the nation-state – as that between family and capitalism – is a false one. As philosopher Nancy Fraser puts it, capitalism must be understood as an institutionalised social order on par with feudalism rather than solely a mode of production based on exploitation.[1] It could not exist without incorporating and relying on the existing systems of politics, nature, and social reproduction. It is nation-states that hold the "extra-economic means" – to use the terminology of Marxist political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood[2] – of political, judicial, and police/military power through which capitalism's supposedly independent economic "mechanisms" can be put to work.

The situation is no different in the context of a globalised economy. More than ever, global capital depends on the uneven development of nation-states. It “feeds on” the differentiation of social conditions among national economies and exploitable low-cost labour regimes. The nation-state is not an innocent bystander but the instrument of this differentiation.

Sociologist Melinda Cooper argues that economic liberalism and the new social conservatism in fact represent two sides of the same, capitalist, coin.[3] Drawing from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, she theorises that capitalism is constituted by an unrelenting movement to overcome its limits, to subsume everything under its law of value, and simultaneously by an equally powerful counter-effort to impose them. The migrant – as cheap labour – is thus produced in the interplay between the unrestricted reach of capitalism and the necessary confining borders of nation-states. In other words, the positing of the nation-state as foundational at the same time as (relatively) permitting migration and movement across its borders is what constitutes the migrant as cheap labour.

Dystopian outlook: Fortress Europe

Fortress Europe, or the Mediterranean graveyard, as an increasingly realistic vision and outcome of Europe’s migration policy, comes as a direct expression of this capitalism-inherent contradiction. Between “more market” and “more border protection”, the EU opts for both.

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The EU’s “historic” migration deal announced in June 2023 intends to strike a balance between the two. On the one hand, it introduces a new two-track filtering system, separating prospective and non-prospective immigrants right at the border: those deemed unlikely to be accepted are subjected to stricter procedures, more easily rejected, and shipped away to basically anywhere the country deems appropriate (including places with documented human rights abuses). On the other hand, the EU prescribes “mandatory solidarity”: the obligation to relocate some 30,000 successful applicants per year across the continent. Each country has the possibility to either take in migrants or pay 20,000 euros for each person they reject. The money collected would go into a common fund to be used to finance undefined projects abroad.

Though undefined, one may easily surmise what those projects are. During her visit to Tunisia with Italian far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in July, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised to “support Tunisia with border management”, for which the EU will provide 100 million euros. Similar funding schemes and agreements to outsource migration management and detention facilities abound. A report from 2021 found that the EU and its member states fund the construction of detention centres, conduct other detention-related activities (like the training of guards), and advocate for detention in 22 countries in the Balkans, Africa, Eastern Europe, and West Asia, thus emulating the heavily criticised Australian model, with the intention to eventually establish offshore processing facilities. The privatisation of migrant detention is already in progress.

The same goes for border protection. The EU funnels significant funds into bolstering personnel and installing sophisticated technologies at borders, including thermal cameras, motion sensors, drones, and sound cannons for surveillance and deterrence. Member states have so far built close to 1800 kilometres of walls on their borders, and the EU is under increasing pressure to start financing these endeavours.

Inside Fortress Europe, however, movement is encouraged and in some instances even idealised, praised as one of the EU's success stories (as in the case of Erasmus+). Whereas immigration from outside of Europe is set to destroy the "European way of life", intra-EU migration is seen as advancing it. Nevertheless, it is framed in similarly functional terms, to be conducted only when there's a need (i.e. when national workers are hard to come by).

Against this backdrop, calls for reform such as those proposing a drastic increase and expansion of circular migration schemes to encompass third-country nationals beyond those with visa-free travel (and intra-EU migrants) appear short-sighted, if not utilitarian and discriminatory. In this manner, liberal thinkers such as Branko Milanović propose schemes that could range from those presently existing in Gulf countries – where foreign workers have no rights whatsoever – to those that offer migrants a wider set of rights but only for limited periods of time.[4] Aware that his solution is bound to produce an underclass, he nevertheless prefers it to Fortress Europe.

However, the morally dubious perspective that discusses migration only in terms of what Europe "needs" is equally dystopian, not to mention that it fails to take into account the cost of all that "circulation" for those doing it or propose ways to approach the upcoming mass climate migration.

Progressive utopias

Fortress Europe certainly isn't the only dystopia out there. In light of the climate crisis, new concepts of communal life are cropping up everywhere. From Saudi Arabia's plan for smart city The Line to billionaire Peter Thiel's autonomous city "somewhere in the Mediterranean", the future looks grim. So what if we turn the tables? What if, instead of marching towards dystopia, we put on utopian lenses?

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The supposed "end of history" – the idea that humanity has evolved to its final political and economic system in capitalist liberal democracy, as "there is no alternative" – also meant the "end of future" in philosopher Franco Berardi's terms,[5] or the "end of utopia" in sociologist Rastko Močnik's.[6] It heralded the rejection of utopias, seeing them as dangerous projects, irrational and escapist, or even potentially totalitarian.

Underpinning this idea of the end of history is the modernist pairing of utopia and progress;[7] the marriage of utopian impulses with the view of history as a linear succession of stages, each better than the last. At the pinnacle of progress, no higher stages are to be found; there is nowhere further to go.

We now know that history never ended. In fact, we are living through its turbulent "return". We also know that utopias didn't end either. They simply got a sort of dystopian overhaul. We didn't stop imagining other worlds (there are plenty of worse worlds we can think of); we stopped imagining better ones.

Countering the modernist framing of utopia, the work of philosopher Ernst Bloch decouples utopias from the idea of progress. After all, the notion of progress is inseparable from various kinds of subjugation: patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation, to name just a few. Bloch sees utopia as a critical analysis of conventional constructions (or imaginaries) of reality, time, and the possible – a critical negation of that which merely *is* and a challenge to assumptions about what is possible and impossible

in the present. In Blochian philosophy, the future is open; it is presented not as a blueprint but rather as a direction, a horizon.

New horizons

Following Bloch in his search for non-progressive utopias, his insistence on the possibility of change and the role of subjects within it (as opposed to current trends of leaving human subjects out and counting on objects, nature, or technology), and his emphasis on processes – on the becoming, rather than on being – we could try sketching out other migration policy directions.

A place to start is turning away from utilitarian approaches that permit migration on the basis of need – like labour shortages or ageing populations – and, instead, taking a proactive, subject-centred view on migration futures.

A radical examination of what the EU is and should be about is indispensable to avoid the apartheid-shaped ditch we are headed to if Europe becomes home to a two-tier system of citizenship. What exactly are those "European values" so tirelessly vaunted? At the moment, it seems to be an arbitrary selection of characteristics Europe wants to be known for – like democracy, the rule of law, and economic prosperity – which omits inconvenient ones like domination, exploitation, colonialism, fascism, and the ongoing brutal treatment of migrants. Another trope, the need to preserve a European "way of life", a post-modern fascist favourite phrase and an official EU narrative, now acts as a suitable replacement for the overly problematic "blood and soil" justification. Identitarian reasoning is thus central to the EU's thinking on migration, which is therefore bound to fail.

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Moving away from a focus on ethno-nationalistic or even cultural bonds and instead building communities united around common goals – such as ecological sustainability, quality health care, and social protections – would shift the EU from a dystopian outlook to the realm of utopia. This scenario would also imply reconsidering citizenship laws – a step European elites seem unwilling to take.

Curiously, however, the Serbian government might.[8] Serbia recently adopted amendments to its citizenship law that would, if passed, allow immigrants and asylum seekers to receive Serbian citizenship after just 12 months of temporary residence. Responding to the move, EU officials warned that harmonising Serbia's migration policy with the EU's is essential for the functioning of the visa-free regime currently in place.

In their book *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow offer a convincing rebuttal of the common wisdom that human societies advance from one stage to another in a linear "progressive" fashion.[9] In fact, humans have shifted between hierarchical and egalitarian forms of organisation for millennia, consciously building and destroying social orders. Graeber and Wengrow identify three basic social freedoms: freedom to disobey; freedom to move away; and freedom to create and transform social orders. These are found across cultures and centuries, facilitating the ability of pre-modern peoples to leave behind – by transforming, destroying, or simply abandoning – social setups that have become inappropriate or unwanted.

In contrast to the modern (Western) concept of individual freedom, where to be free means to be self-sufficient and as such is insepara ble from private property, for the indigenous societies of America, individual freedom was embedded within structures of care; it implied that people permitted each other to live without fear of falling through the cracks. So why not re-examine the very foundations of our social environments?

What if, instead of investing in detention centres, we invest in elaborate social infrastructures that facilitate immigration by providing appropriate shelter, subsistence, and guidance? What if we use existing infrastructures not for profit-making but for humanity-saving purposes? What if we allow the creation of autonomous communities that develop their own avenues for migration among themselves? Dystopian avenues are already here, so why not try for utopian ones as well? What if we are no longer compelled to own but rather to take care of, to look after, to become custodians of our shared social and natural wealth? This future has no script. There's no certainty about how it goes. It's entirely open-ended.

Perhaps, then, the most crucial step to be taken lies in the realm of imagination, in an effort to radically challenge the notions of what is possible, to break away from collective, socially engineered, and subsequently naturalised ideas about what can and cannot be achieved. What happens next is in our hands.

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