

# A World Without Borders - The refugees' movement and responses in the European Union

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Who now remembers [Reem Sahwil](#)? A Palestinian teenager who, in 2011, had arrived in the German coastal city of Rostock from a Lebanese refugee camp, Reem was among a group of school students addressed by Angela Merkel in July this year. She explained to the chancellor that her family was facing deportation.

In response, an unmoved Merkel [replied](#), "Politics is hard sometimes. There are thousands and thousands more in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. And if we say 'you can all come here,' 'you can all come over from Africa,' we can't cope with that." When Reem burst into tears, Merkel hesitated momentarily, tried to hug her, then awkwardly stroked her arm. The hashtag #merkelstreichelt (Merkel strokes), along with images mocking the petting chancellor, went viral.

It was a peculiar and pathetic scene, but in a sense unremarkable. Merkel leads the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a party that (with its Bavarian twin, the CSU) has for decades constituted the chief organizing center of anti-refugee bigotry and Islamophobia in the country. In 1980-81 the CDU-CSU instigated a campaign that branded refugees — many of whom were fleeing civil wars in Lebanon and Ethiopia and a military coup in Turkey — "bogus" and "welfare-scroungers."

Similar initiatives followed in 1986-87 and the early 1990s; the latter was orchestrated from the office of CDU general secretary Volker Rühe. Each campaign brought harsher restrictions on asylum seekers.

Germany [implemented](#) Europe's most far-reaching "third country rule," which excluded asylum-seekers who had entered from countries deemed safe — including all of its neighbors. It [extended](#) a visa requirement to all major refugee-producing countries and enforced it through "carrier sanctions" — the imposition of punitive fines and costs on airlines that transport anyone lacking the required visa. These policies, later implemented across the European Union (EU), [prevent](#) most refugees from taking air routes, forcing them to undertake hazardous journeys by sea.

In the same period, Germany constructed camps for asylum seekers, encircled by high fences and with living conditions designed to dishearten and humiliate. The policy was pioneered by Lothar Späth, CDU premier of Baden Württemberg, who promoted it with [these words](#): "the African bush drums should be signaling: Don't come to Baden-Württemberg, you'll be put in a camp." The lucky few who, against the odds, were granted refugee status were prohibited from working for at least a year — again, a CDU policy.

Each anti-refugee campaign was accompanied by a spike in racist violence, including pogroms against asylum seekers' hostels (most famously in Hoyerswerda and Rostock) and racist murders (e.g., of Turkish immigrants in Mölln and Solingen), as well as a resurgence of strident völkisch nationalism.

In the 1980s this gathered around the question of how to heal Germany's "sickly" national identity, and connected to the formerly taboo concept of *Überfremdung* (to be "overrun by foreigners," a totemic term used by nationalists from Max Weber to Joseph Goebbels). The *Überfremdung* discourse, championed by the chair of the CDU parliamentary group, Alfred Dregger, branded particular groups of immigrants as "non-assimilable," and was aimed in particular at those of Islamic faith. Dregger established his power base in Hesse, where CDU governments of the present century have continued to pass policies in his spirit, notably [banning](#) civil servants from wearing the veil.

This was the party within which Merkel rose, and her views on immigration and race fit squarely within its tradition. In 2010 she weighed in on the issue of immigration and the "integration" of Germany's Muslim minority, proposing to a meeting of her party's youth wing that the ideal of multiculturalism had "[failed utterly](#) ." "We feel tied to Christian values," the chancellor [evangelized](#) . "Those who don't accept them have no place here."

In the heady days of mid-September, Merkel's monocultural zealotry from 2010, and even her July encounter with Reem Sahwil, appear hazy memories from a benighted, bygone era. Under her leadership, Germany has positioned itself as one of the most generous of EU states vis-à-vis the refugees arriving through the Balkan corridor — many of them Muslims. Today, refugees [name their children](#) after Angela Merkel.

What explains the apparent about-face?

Above all there is the refugees' sheer determination, and the social movement behind them. At certain points they effected a remarkable transition from what Sartre called a "serial group" (navigating their way to Europe, individually and as families) into a "fused group" (forming themselves into a social movement to collectively negotiate the hurdles of the journey).

For [Slavoj Žižek](#) , the movement exhibits an "enigmatically utopian" pathology. The refugees have asserted "their dreams as their unconditional right," demanding that the authorities provide them not only with "proper food and medical care but also transportation to the destination of their choice . . . as if it were the duty of Europe to realise their dreams — dreams which, incidentally, are out of reach of most Europeans."

But if the refugees are driven by utopian longing, so what? As a critical review of Žižek's piece [has asked](#) , "What kind of Lacanian tells someone that they should effectively abandon their desire for something just because it's not attainable?"

In truth, far from pressing presumptuous demands that the states of Europe furnish them with transport, refugees for the most part made their own way, bought their own tickets, and then, when prevented from traveling, some came to act as fused groups: tackling border patrols, marching along motorways, and so on.

In [Hungary](#) , when the authorities eventually provided buses, some groups of refugees reacted in the customary manner of social movements: factions formed and debated what the authorities' intentions were. Should we believe their word — that the buses will take us to Austria? Or is it a deceit — are we about to be schlepped off to internment camps? In the end, they boarded. But this was the wager of desperate realists, not of entitled and cosseted utopians.

The refugees' movement found a welcome and welcoming echo in a collective response in Europe. For a public sphere accustomed to a drip-feed of xenophobia (and even refugee-phobia), the outpouring of solidarity and charity came as an epiphany.

In Germany, the uprush of fraternal love was particularly marked. It signaled a desire to face down

chauvinism: the CDU-led campaigns mentioned above and, more recently, a three-pronged racist thrust, comprised of Islamophobic and racism-fringed political parties (like the Freedom Party and Alternative für Deutschland), a street movement rallied by Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization Of Europe ([Pegida](#)) , and a wave of [attacks on refugee shelters](#) — still cresting as I write this — manifested in every level of belligerence from the daubing of Nazi symbols to arson.

Merkel, it appeared, was [jumping on the bandwagon](#) of public opinion. Around 40 percent, even as much as 60 percent [according to some polls](#) , strongly supported a policy of welcoming refugees in the hundreds of thousands. But there is more to her move than that. Merkel is a canny operator and no slave to polls. Why, then, did she grasp the issue?

The answer can be addressed at three registers: party/government, state/EU, and political economy. The first concerns the CDU and its current position as the lead party in Germany's grand coalition. Merkel has attempted to steer the CDU along the center of its accustomed channel. To keep its compulsively racist wing on board has required some tacking, but, for reasons outlined below, Merkel has tended to support a comparatively expansive immigration policy.

Moreover, with the nation's reputation abroad suffering from fascist and other Islamophobic violence, Merkel sensed that a rebalancing moment had arrived: that the pro-refugee mood offers an opportunity to set markers, to prevent the CDU from drifting further to the racist right, and to consolidate her leadership. A consequence has been the restoration, in liberal circles abroad, of her reputation and that of her government, which had been dented by its handling of the Greek crisis.

Machiavelli's lesson on whether it is better [to be loved or feared](#) — the prince should choose fear, but apply it thoughtfully and take care "to escape hatred" — may be clichéd, but it contains a truth that Merkel appears to be following.

The second register concerns the EU and Germany's role within it. The movement of refugees has brought two pillars of EU integration, [Schengen](#) and [Dublin](#) , to the point of collapse. (And these are not secondary issues. Control of population movements is a cornerstone of modern state power.)

It is a perilous juncture for the EU, and it comes alongside the crisis of the euro. For Berlin, however, the moment of danger brings opportunity. "If we show courage and press on, a European solution will become more achievable," Merkel declared in the Bundestag, and warned her European partners that failure would cause [fundamental](#) harm to the EU.

The twin crises of Dublin and Schengen have seen Berlin occupy the high ground, [seizing the opportunity](#) "to make others bend to its will." In the short term, the Germans [plan](#) "to shame and bully their European partners into sharing the refugee burden" through an ad hoc system of quotas. Later, EU refugee and migration policy will be redrafted, providing an opportunity to redesign the union itself.

Against a backdrop of images of refugees encountering a welcome in Munich in contrast to violence in Hungary, hesitation in France, and hostility in Britain, Merkel's démarche, her decision to adopt a different position to most EU leaders, [will help ensure](#) she gains the upper hand in the coming negotiations.

In the medium term, Germany's leadership position within Europe will only survive if it remains the largest economy, but [that prospect is under threat](#) .

Here we arrive at the third register: demography. With a [low fertility rate](#) (1.4 children per woman, compared with 2 in France and 1.8 in Britain), Germany's population, according to [European Commission projections](#) is set to shrink from over eighty million in 2013 to around 70 million in

2060, even as the UK's rises from 64 to 80 million.

The percentage of Germans under 15 is forecast to fall to 13 percent, among the world's lowest, and the country [is rapidly going gray](#) , and no amelioration is in sight: one research institute estimates that German businesses [will be](#) short of around two million skilled workers by 2020, and nearly four million by 2040.

The absence of mass immigration, the skills shortage, and, over the longer term, the rising dependency ratio, threaten to [choke Germany's economic growth](#) . The neighboring states of Central and Eastern Europe [cannot supply](#) labor on a sufficiently large scale, for their populations are in decline too.

Hence the pressure to repurpose refugees as economic migrants. [According to Der Spiegel](#) , the German business community "views the recent influx of refugees as an opportunity to help companies grow and ensure long-term prosperity. Many are calling for bureaucratic red tape to be lifted so that new arrivals can enter the labor market faster."

Such lobbying was apparent long before the recent "refugee crisis," and, under pressure from the Confederation of German Employers' Associations and corporate giants such as Daimler, the government has repeatedly amended ordinances and legal provisions to facilitate a more rapid integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the labor market. The refugees, urges Social Democratic Minister of Labor Andreas Nahles, must be [fast-tracked](#) into work.

In short, what we're witnessing is Berlin taking advantage of a charitable impulse towards refugees to rejuvenate and expand the German workforce. The blurring of the distinction between refugee and "economic migrant" is often assumed to be a product of the motivation or experience of the incomers themselves. In fact, the blurring is inherent in the structure of contemporary world order and is strategically deployed by states.

What social-theoretical concepts exist to make sense of these developments? Žižek has offered his thoughts. Refugees, he writes, "are the price we pay for a globalised economy in which commodities — but not people — are permitted to circulate freely. The idea of porous borders, of being inundated by foreigners, is immanent to global capitalism."

It is an odd claim, in its juxtaposition of refugees with porous borders, and its assumption that refugees and globalization belong together (when in fact many large-scale refugee movements of the last century coincided with periods of de-globalization). But what interests me is the link it posits between capitalism and porous borders.

This echoes a common motif in the literature on globalization and migration: "business" is footloose and fluid; the movement of capital stimulates that of labor; their interests therefore lie in its mobility; capital shifts and mixes populations across the globe.

The dialectics of migration, in this conception, are threaded through the dichotomy of states and capital. In an inversion of Hegel, the itinerary of civil society is seen as universal, that of states as particular. As one standard textbook [puts it](#) , "Economic pressures push for openness to migration while political, legal, and security concerns argue for greater control."

Elsewhere, Žižek [has proposed](#) that "a resuscitation of the 'critique of political economy' is the sine qua non of contemporary communist politics." It is a useful manifesto. But its application to international migration reveals a picture at odds with Žižek's.

To simplify, I'll deal only with the dominant form of migration: labor, the circulation of labor power.

For the law of value to operate, labor power must in principle behave as a commodity, and this, in turn, implies universal mobility. “Indifference towards specific labours,” as Marx [put it](#) , “corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.”

Wage labor is universal, generalized labor. In the abstract, it is unrestricted in its activity and movement, it can attach itself to any and every employer. In reality, however, workers are not alike in the face of capital. Actually existing workers have to be reproduced, and labor power exists in the form of particular people with specific capacities. If it is to yield a surplus, strategies for administering its production and circulation are indispensable.

One regulator of the supply of labor is the “reserve army” of the unemployed. It is the fluctuating outcome of two tendencies of accumulation: capital is driven to produce an ever-greater mass of surplus value that, to be realized, demands greater quantities of labor power; equally, capital tends to make human labor (relatively) superfluous. Other forms of regulating the supply, price, and attributes of labor, as well as managing workers’ conditions of life and work, are assumed by the state.

In this regard, states mediate two quite distinct “economic” pressures: to preserve and cultivate the workforce, and to maintain the supply and mobility (and “flexibility”) of labor power, dismantling local obstacles to its circulation and establishing structures for the creation of the standardized and interchangeable workforces that are essential to the capitalist division of labor.

The management of social reproduction often comes up against the imperative of the free mobility of labor — a collision that finds expression in the twin poles of bourgeois political thought: liberalism, with its accent on free mobility, equality of opportunity, and universal rights, and conservatism, with its emphasis on social stability and control.

The two regimes — broadly, the free circulation of labor and social policy — clash in detail but they share a common basis.

Viewed from the side of labor, workers engage in a tug of war over the value of their labor power and the rules and norms governing labor mobility and the condition of the reserve army. They may press for labor-market “rigidities” to protect conditions, and seek to counter the destruction of what David Harvey [calls](#) “traditional support mechanisms and ways of life” by establishing islands of solidarity: “support systems and elaborate coping mechanisms within family and community.”

They also “roam the world seeking to escape the depredations of capital, shunning the worst aspects of exploitation.” Of course, capital takes advantage of “perpetual search by workers for a better life,” orchestrating labor mobility to suit its needs, but migration nonetheless reflects and reinforces workers’ expanding material and cultural horizons.

In addition to these concrete manifestations of subjectivity, workers, insofar as they are free, possess formal, abstract subjectivity: they are constituted juridically as legal persons and owners of property (their labor power).

Workers’ organizations have historically been at the forefront of struggles for the extension and deepening of citizenship rights, as well as “social rights” to welfare provision, but the systems of rights, legal authority, and citizenship are simultaneously the juridical clothing of structures of exploitation and domination.

Citizenship and civil rights are not universal goods but rather the property of states, which mediate mechanisms of surveillance and social control, utilizing citizenship and rights as instruments to



divide, privilege, and manage populations.

From the US Constitution to Joseph Chamberlain's "Natal Formula" (which imposed proficiency in a European language as a hurdle for admission to Australia in order to maintain its "whiteness" without formally transgressing the principle of equal standard) to the denial of rights to "undocumented" immigrants, liberties are selectively administered by states. Though formally universal, in practice they are wrought in particular, discriminatory ways.

That citizenship and parliamentary democracy expand the substantive capacities of workers and their organizations while buttressing the "economic" relations that shackle them to capital has shaped labor movements.

Historically, workers have pressed for an extension of the civic and political rights allowed to the privileged classes. Such rights, however, are constituted by states — their realization involves an invitation of workers as individuals into the body politic. The rise of institutions of citizenship and democracy integrated workers into a cross-class "[imagined community](#)," a process that constructed immigrants as "others" — or even as "deviant," an object of social control.

Thus, immigration control evolved into a central pillar of state sovereignty, with the state the arbiter of who belongs — its power exhibited in its setting, changing, and policing of the rules; its building of walls and pulling them down; its ongoing redefinitions of who is in and who is out, of who is an "economic migrant" and who is a "refugee," which "ethnicities" are welcomed, which are treated as deviants.

In this, the late nineteenth century was a decisive period. It saw the coalescence of imperialist expansion, the hegemony of "scientific" racism, the reconstitution of polyethnic hierarchies on the basis of the nation state, increased state supervision of industry and welfare, and the emergence of the "social question."

Against this backdrop, the creation of infrastructures of national belonging offered a means of institutionalizing class struggle around issues of labor-market management, above all through immigration control. By administering labor-market discrimination against foreigners, states could claim the mantle of protector of the domestic workforce.

Regulation of national labor markets represented the attempt by states to counter insurgent internationalism — as witnessed, for example, in the mass participation of Irish workers in Britain's New Unionism, or the setting up of the First and Second Internationals — by drawing lines of demarcation between nationals and non-nationals. August 1914 is [widely remembered](#) as the death of internationalism in the European labor movement, but relatively obscured is the contemporaneous shift from a comparatively internationalist approach to immigration towards support for controls and labor-market "primacy for nationals."

These ideas reverberate today — for example in Bernie Sanders's objection to the idea of open borders [because it risks](#) "doing away with the concept of a nation state." Or consider Žižek. On so many issues he is the iconoclast, the advocate of the utopian wager, holding in withering contempt the milquetoast "anticapitalists" who cavil at this or that "excess" of the system but whose implicit goal is merely to "regulate" it, restrained by their refusal [to question](#) "the liberal-democratic framework within which these excesses should be fought."

Yet on immigration control Žižek exemplifies that same refusal to question the "framework." He criticizes open-border advocates for their radicalism and calls on the EU to . . . well, to do what comes naturally to it: to "impose clear rules and regulations" on its migration regime, to refuse

refugees permission to choose their country of destination, and to insist that they adhere to “the Western European way of life.” These rules, [he adds](#) , “should be clearly stated and enforced, by repressive measures . . . where necessary.”

For the liberal-democratic mainstream the crisis is one of “refugee flows,” to be solved by immigration control and a robust defense of the “Western European way of life.” But surely the opposite is the case. The crisis is a manifestation of that same “way of life,” as exhibited in the role played by Western European states in eviscerating Iraq (and thereby [helping create](#) the conditions in which ISIS could grow), and of the system of immigration control.

That system, pace Sanders, empowers employers through its processes of stratification by country of origin, reinforcing hierarchies of “race,” and keeping those without documents in a condition of perpetual subordination — since 2005 more migrants in the US [are given](#) the status of “illegal” than all of the various legal statuses combined. The resulting divisions may be naturalized and expressed in terms of culture and national stereotypes, but they are produced by immigration control and have the additional purpose of disciplining citizen-workers, fostering resentment and competition rather than solidarity.

Open borders is a practical proposal, based not only on ethical but also on political, social, and economic grounds. Most people most of the time don’t want to move countries — their cultural coordinates and social and kinship networks are at home. More importantly, the opening of borders is no discrete demand for an abstract right but dovetails with broader processes of revolutionary change, a “reinvigorated struggle for the commons.”

In its absence, the infernal cycle of migration policy continues: sluice gates are opened a little then slammed shut. In Europe, following the early September spasm of border relaxation the dial has swung back to control. Hungary’s razor-wire Iron Curtain has been fully unfurled. Germany has [temporarily closed its borders](#), and has announced plans to replace pocket money for asylum seekers with benefits in kind, to refuse all asylum applications from the Balkans, and to impose a five-year reentry ban on those who were denied asylum.

Merkel [has announced](#) (in a rare alignment with Zizek) that those immigrants permitted to stay “must be clearly given to understand what rules prevail in this country. The creation of milieux will not be permitted.” A prominent CSU parliamentarian has gone so far as to [call for](#) the deportation of Syrians, on the grounds that “even Syria contains habitable regions.”

The Left, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, is resisting these attacks, organizing to welcome and assist refugees and demanding that states release the needed resources. In the long run, such efforts will be drops in the ocean unless the currently widespread but diffuse revulsion against the immigration control regime is consolidated into a norm, a disposition, a social movement.

**Gareth Dale**

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\* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>