

Towards open borders?

Marli Huijjer, Amsterdam, 10 December 2014

'We cannot allow that the Mediterranean sea changes into an enormous graveyard!', Pope Francis said to the European parliament on the 25th of November. The thousands of refugees that each year knock at the doors of Europe should be accepted and assisted.

For a pope, who has little political power, it not a big thing to plea for hospitality and humanity. Yet, it is too easy to ignore his plea for more hospitality in this way.

In this lecture, I explore as a philosopher – and not as a jurist – what Europe and the world would look like if immigrants would get free access and could settle at will. What arguments could be given for open borders? With what kind of demands are Europeans and immigrants faced? Which objections can be made, and how to refute them? In short, I will do an audacious attempt to deliberate on the question whether the world would be worse of if the outer borders of Europe would be open.

First argument:

The earth belongs to the human species commonly. Philosopher Immanuel Kant argued in 1795 that no human being had originally more right to be at a certain place than someone else.

Kant is however not an advocate of open borders. His ideal world consists of a federation of sovereign states. His plea for hospitality is limited to the borders of the states and to a right to visit another state. Staying longer is not included in his hospitality concept.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt stated after WWII that this focus on the national state is disadvantageous for stateless people: they are nowhere welcome.

Today, Kants emphasis on the national state seems to be outdated: even for drinking a so-called 'Dutch' cup of coffee we are dependent on a multitude of non-European partners.

Political theorist Seyla Benhabib argues for a free association of communities (cities, citizen groups and so on) rather than an association of states.

The initial argument becomes broader: each human being should be allowed to become a member of another community than the one he or she is born in.

Second argument:

Each should be free to know other cultures, languages and populations. Internationalisation is high on the agenda of European universities and companies. Why should a look beyond one's own borders not be as beneficial for non-Europeans as it is for Europeans?

Reasons for inhospitality:

1. Fear for decline of the economy;
2. fear that the least well-off in Europe will become the worst well-off;
3. fear for mass immigration;
4. fear that language, culture and public order will be in danger.

These fears will be discussed and refuted in the lecture.

Third argument:

Freedom of travel and trade contributes to the peaceful co-existence of populations, groups and individuals.

Finally, open borders may seem something for the far future. Is that correct? Borders are already more porous than before, this process seems to be irreversible.

Let us, for this moment, agree with the pope and no longer accept that thousands of young refugees drown on their way to Europe.