

Sigurd Skirbekk:

## **The Immigration Debate:**

### **A Question of Moral, Science, Ideology, Myth or Belief?**

#### ***B. The Immigration Debate: Only a question of moral and of fighting racism?***

We could have expected that the demographic and ecological challenges would be a common reference point for everyone making public statements about migration in recent years. In fact, this has clearly not been the case. Not in Norway and not in very many other Western countries.

A striking aspect of this debate has been the character of problem statements, particularly in the major public-oriented media. Instead of presenting statistics and information from many sources, the typical focus has been on single individuals, easy to identify with. The moral issue can then be seen as a choice between good and evil in particular cases, not as dilemmas between alternatives and processes that are never entirely good.

Another characteristic aspect of the debate has been the general references to racism and anti-racism, two symbols with various meaning, but always with connotations to the bad and the good. Those who can say that they represent anti-racism while their opponents represent racism, have given themselves a superior moral position. Such a position can of course be used for guiding the debate as well as its conclusions.

The debate on migration should have included a range of subjects. Migration have consequences for demography and ecology, cultural patterns and family forms, economic differences and technical means of moving, employment prospects and legal decisions. Against the backdrop of this multifarious reality, the fundamental terms of the predominant debate about immigration appear to be conspicuously confined.

When arguments in public debates do not represent the view of experts, this could be because they rather represent an overwhelming public opinion. But that is certainly not the case regarding this debate. Migration policies have rarely been voted on. The closest we can come to a determination of the popular will is various opinion polls, with comparable questions from the same period.

In 1994, the German periodical Focus pointed to opinion polls taken in Germany, France and England in which 55, 52 and 50 per cent, respectively, felt that their countries accepted too many immigrants.<sup>1</sup> There are corresponding figures for the Scandinavian countries. From Norway we have a representative study from 1987 which showed that 51% of the people felt that the country should accept fewer immigrants; 25% felt that politicians should stick to current practice, while only 8% wanted to accept more immigrants.<sup>2</sup> A similar study in Sweden, made a couple of years later, showed that 54% of Swedes felt that too many people were immigrating to Sweden.<sup>3</sup> A later Gallup poll in Denmark showed that 59% of Danes wanted to limit immigrants access to their country.<sup>4</sup> In later studies the figures have varied somewhat; but there have always been more people who have favored a restrictive policy than those who favored liberalization.

The extent of recent immigration cannot be explained on the basis of popular opinion. So the next question is this: can it be explained on the basis of a superior insight among groups that have dominated the debate in the public media? If so, the arguments in favor should not be falsified by empirical data or represent obvious logical self-contradictions.

Several types of argument have been used to legitimate a liberal immigration policy. In some contexts, immigration has been explained in terms of the need for labor. But economic calculations have not shown migration to be exclusively beneficial, either for the industrialized or the non-industrialized countries<sup>5</sup>. Nor has economics been the most important reference in which the politics of migration have been contested.

Other arguments have stressed moral obligations. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since immigration issues involve many kinds of moral dilemmas. The striking thing about morality in the migration debate, however, is the fact that the choices seem to be presented as a choice between good and evil points of view. The alternatives are perceived as compassionate or harsh, depending on the way the fates of specific individuals are highlighted.

There is reason to believe that this kind of moralizing will distract us from the crucial challenges; this is because morality is viewed one-sidedly from an individual perspective. The demographic challenges and the cultural conflicts are generally excluded from such a perspective, as are the dilemmas involving individual and social considerations.

Granted, it can often be claimed that a commitment to individual humanitarianism is both an investment in future peace and an understanding between peoples. Liberal immigration regulations are assumed to be consistent with a generous policy of foreign aid, despite the fact that migration often involves a brain drain from the underdeveloped countries. Nevertheless, some contend that the most diverse values ( such as human rights, economic growth, ecological responsibility, population control, women's liberation and political peace ( will, in some way or another, all move in the same direction.

It is difficult to find fault with the good intentions in these references. Nevertheless, they often betray a limited range of knowledge on the part of many protagonists. There is nothing to indicate that all the positive values with the status «politically correct» would have coexisted harmoniously in some utopian future society. Ecology and unlimited rights for human beings are simply irreconcilable. It is not so that a policy which prioritizes human rights and generous humanitarian aid will necessarily promote the development of individual societies and peaceful relations between societies, even though spontaneous aid may distinctly benefit many individuals. If we one-sidedly promote measures that reduce mortality, without reducing the birth rate at the same time, we could wind up promoting an overpopulation that merely exacerbates the situation for generations to come. Given time, debt forgiveness and a realistic alternative to self-preservation could have had a more humane effect than the unflinching emphasis on human rights that was adopted in the 1940s in order to protect citizens against authoritarian regimes.

It is paradoxical that the only developing country of any size that has been able to stabilize its birth rate to around two children per woman, is China. And as Virginia Abernethy, among others, has pointed out: China did this because the Chinese authorities were forced to solve the problem on their own terms, without waiting for foreign economic support or for foreign relief of their population pressure ( yet also without having to reckon with a strict foreign scrutiny of the way the UN's norms for human rights were practiced.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the dominant understanding of the problem has been based on superior morality or underhandedness, the most prevalent reference, in some sense or other, has involved the contrast between racism and anti-racism. Political organisations and the editorial boards of the media, have taken it for granted that opposition to present-day immigration policies is somehow linked to racism.

This linkage has been so strong that we could speak of predominant problem-defining circles as «the anti-racial front». Even though spokesmen for such a front may vary in many ways, their concerted front against racism has been a unifying hallmark. This suggests that we should take a closer look at the intellectual status of dominant anti-racist arguments.

## References

- 1 *Focus*, Berlin 6/1994, p 73. ( Cf. also international references to opinion polls on immigration in Birch, Anthony H. (1989): *Nationalism and National Integration*. Unwin & Hyman, London and in Brimelow, Peter (1995): *Alien Nation. Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster*. Random House, NY.
- 2 *MMI* (Published April 18, 1987).
- 3 *TEMO* ( Published March 18, 1991).
- 4 *Berlingske Tidende* [a Danish daily newspaper], August 12, 1990.
- 5 Borjas, George J. (1999): *Heavens door: immigration policy and American economy*. Princeton University press, N.J.
- 6 Abernethy, Virginia (1995): *Population Politics. The Choices that Shape Our Future*. Plenum Press, London and NY; cf. especially ch. 16, 17 and 21.

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