

Immigration in a time of "Democratic Deficit" Alan Rowan

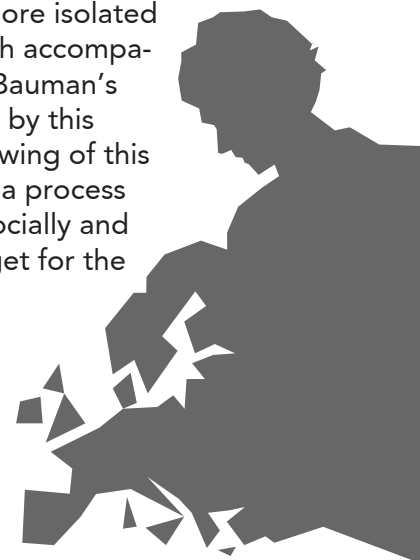
The idea that Europe actually needs inward immigration - and rather urgently - is not new. Thus, for example, Zygmunt Bauman (2012) citing the then President of the European Foundation for Progressive Studies, Massimo D'Alema, several years ago pointed out that the European population could shrink over the coming 40 years by approximately 100 million due primarily to falling birth rates. In this context, D'Alema argued, approximately 30 million newcomers would be needed if the European economy is to avoid significant collapse and its cherished standard of living is to be preserved. That the European population is also aging, further complicates this picture. According to the US Census Bureau's International Data Base one in five Western Europeans were over 65 in 2014 - a figure that is predicted to rise to one in four by 2030 - thus placing increasingly acute demands on the economy as a whole, as well as in particular, on services like health and social care.

Though differences exist between countries (e.g. Ireland's birth rate remains relatively high), and within Europe migration is a further factor, there is general agreement that Europe is currently facing challenging demographic changes. In a context of global population growth, Europe's population, and particularly its working age population, is declining. Thus, one may wonder, why is it that immigration today is generally seen as a great danger rather than a welcome asset?

One answer concerns the changing nature of the symbolic in a world of hyper-consumption. Thus, on one side, we notice how the contemporary subject is increasingly captured by a jouissance that isolates and fixes him to a solitary and anonymous drive satisfaction, while on the other, symbolic structures and values are weakened and loose traction. Here for example, political institutions and governments, in a globalised, financialized and quantified world, simply do not have the sort of importance or decision making power they once had, and "global reach" on issues such as the rule of law, fair taxation and the redistribution of wealth (including geographically) seem far away.

This has created what one can call a "democratic deficit". Namely, the alienation and erosion of citizens interest in the political, low turnout at elections, a weakening of bonds between people who share the same material environment, and with this, the creation of psycho-social spaces vulnerable to colonisation by extremist ideologies. Here traditional "party politics" increasingly evokes apathy, even animosity, among a voting population who experience inter-party politics more as a charade, a "self-interested game" on which one cannot rely, based on minor policy differences that have little real impact on the structure of most people's lives. While the call for a new type of politics has been made, and new political parties have emerged (e.g. in France and Spain) it remains unclear if such developments, respecting a diverse citizenship, can lead to an increased societal sense of shared cohesion and purpose - one that must simultaneously be both local and non-local (i.e. have a global perspective). A crucial challenge here of course, in any politics that seeks to reinvest the notion of "the common" or common good, is that such a possibility also depends on finding new and creative ways to operate, without and beyond appeal to the grand narratives and master signifiers/semblances of previous times.

AnchorIt is thus in this context that one must situate the "othering" of the immigrant and with it the contemporary forms of anxiety aroused by "the stranger". Subjects today are more isolated in a world where, as Lacan predicted, we see the rise of the object to its social zenith accompanied by lives that are increasingly less stable, less continuous, more "liquid" to use Bauman's term. A key paradox here is that the subject is both soothed and also made anxious by this ever-growing abundance of industrial objects, and one can suggest, it is the overflowing of this un-worded anxiety into the social bond that has the power to hook the subject into a process that "others" the immigrant. At its most simple, the unspoken for immigrant (e.g. socially and politically) becomes a reason, a pseudo-explanation, for the subject's unease, a target for the irreducible of the death drive.



Antonio Gramsci, commenting on his experience of Europe in the 1930's, wrote: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear".ii There can be little doubt that something of this crisis is with us again - albeit in a contemporary form.

i Bauman, Z. (2012). Times of interregnum. Ethics & Global Politics. Vol. 5, No. 1, pp 49-56

ii Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from Prison Notebooks. [Ed. & Trans. Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith]. P276, Lawrence & Wishart, London.

