

The German Dream: Neoliberalism and Fortress Europe

ÉRIC FASSIN + AURÉLIE WINDELS

NEOLIBERAL XENOPHOBIA

During the first half of 2015, as Syriza came to power vowing to resist the dictates of the Troika, the EU contemplated the expulsion of Greece from the Eurozone. That was before Alexis Tsipras's political turnaround following the July 5 bailout referendum. A "Grexit" may still be on the table today, however, at least for the IMF.¹ Despite their Prime Minister's compliance, today and in the current context of the "refugee crisis," the Greeks are again under a threat of suspension from the Schengen zone. The same country finds itself at the intersection of the two major European crises of our time.

Of course, one should not conclude that Greece is the problem. In fact, it may be misleading to speak of a "Greek crisis": both crises are crises not only *in*, but also *of* Europe. However, the question remains: is such a repetition a mere coincidence, or is there a strong connection between economic and immigration policies? The answer is complicated by the fact that Germany is also at the intersection of both developments, although in a different role: the German Chancellor's political handling of the refugees looks radically different than her dealings with the Syriza government. The media marvel: *Kaiser Merkel yesterday, Mutti Angela today?*² As the question takes a different shape, an answer becomes more complex: What is the nature of the link between the reign of neoliberalism and political xenophobia in Europe?

In many countries, from Hungary to France, anti-immigration parties have kept growing in the last decade while denouncing the European Union. But in response, during that same period, mainstream political forces throughout the continent (not only openly conservative parties, but also many voices that still claim to be progressive) have generally tried to salvage neoliberal policies by co-opting xenophobic ones. Today, "Fortress Europe" and the neoliberal Union are often two sides of the same coin. Apart from Germany, it looks as if political xenophobia were the price to pay for neoliberal policies: first, in reaction, as their unintended consequence; and second, as a deliberate concession to disgruntled voters from parties in power. Both critics and supporters of neoliberal Europe, including former social democrats, seem to favor xenophobic policies, thereby reinforcing the belief that these shared values have to do with national identities.

That the free flow of capital should result in restrictions on the circulation of workers is somewhat paradoxical. Indeed, the logic behind political xenophobia is certainly not economic: various reports produced by international institutions (from the United Nations Development Program to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) have long pointed out that European economies need more migrant workers, not fewer. As a consequence, it is

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1. On February 11, 2016, Poul Thomsen, head of the IMF's European Department, who oversees the Greek bailout, wrote in a blog post: "A plan built on over-optimistic assumptions will soon cause Grexit fears to resurge once again and stifle the investment climate." See: "IMF Warns of Renewed 'Grexit' Fears Without Credible Greece Plan," Bloomberg Business, February 11, 2016: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-11/imf-warns-of-renewed-grexit-fears-without-credible-greece-plan>

2. On April 19, 2013, The British historian Dominic Sandbrook published an article in the *Daily Mail* suggesting the term "Kaiser Merkel." For "Mutti Angela," see, for instance: "Mother Angela: Merkel's Refugee Policy Divides

not unusual, though still remarkable, to see employers support their undocumented workers when they go on strike to defend their rights.³ Neoliberal capitalism knows no borders – neither for capital nor for labor, if outsourcing is any indication. It should thus come as no surprise that political xenophobia needs to be explained *politically*. It cannot be accounted for in economic terms, or simply according to the cultural logic of national identity.

It is worth remembering that, not so long ago, some of the supposedly progressive promoters of neoliberalism in Europe, far from emulating anti-immigration activists, actually supported immigration. This was true in Britain: starting with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted on the positive economic impact of (selective) immigration (though more and more at the expense of asylum-seekers). This was also true in Spain, both under the conservative José María Aznar and even more with his opponent José Luis Zapatero: in 2004, only weeks after the Madrid bombings and the elections that brought him to power, one of the new Prime Minister's first acts was to grant amnesty to about 700,000 undocumented workers. For this neoliberal socialist in Spain, even more than for the New Labour leader in Britain, embracing immigration was yet another sign of a modernity that transcended nationalism in the European Union.

To this day, Blair insists that opening Britain to migrants was no “mistake”: “In 2004 the economy was booming,” recalls the former Prime Minister in a 2015 interview, “and we had a requirement for skilled workers from abroad.”⁴ But his voice does not resonate any longer; his argument seems to belong to the past. Neoliberalism has renounced supranational modernity in the hope of alleviating national populisms. What happened? Politically, 2005 was a turning point in the European Union. It all started in France, when the European Constitutional Treaty was rejected by referendum on May 29 – three days before the Dutch also voted against it. Some voters, especially on the right, opposed the treaty in the name of national sovereignty; but others, in particular on the left, refused it on the account of its neoliberal policies.

France's then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, immediately transformed his party's defeat into a political opportunity for the right. He decided to interpret the vote as a referendum against unbridled immigration – rather than against the dismantling of the welfare state, market deregulation, and widespread unemployment. According to Sarkozy, the European Union offered the best protection of national identities against migrants. His response to the Euroscepticism of French voters, which amounted to an updated version of a Europe of nations, thus avoided any soul-searching concerning economic policies. The fact that his interpretation served to propel him to the presidency in 2007 certainly helped convince other European leaders that, in order to preserve neoliberal policies while escaping popular anger, political xenophobia provided the best solution.

In Britain, Gordon Brown's promotion to Downing Street in 2007 facilitated the shift to this form of neoliberal populism. In Spain, Zapatero did attempt to resist the pressures of his counterparts, but not for long. The new European consensus against migrants became apparent with the 2008 European Pact on

Europe,” *Der Spiegel*, September 21, 2015: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/refugee-policy-of-chancellor-merkel-divides-europe-a-1053603.html>

3. See, for instance: “L'implication de la société : Démarches d'employeurs,” in *Cette France-là*, volume 1, January 2009: <http://www.cette-francela.net/volume-1/descriptions/article/l-implication-de-la-societe-3>

4. “Tony Blair Insists: EU Immigration Was Not a Mistake,” *The Telegraph*, March 16, 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/tony-blair/11473737/Tony-Blair-insists-EU-immigration-was-not-a-mistake.html>

Immigration and Asylum – a French initiative. As a result, despite the previous rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands, a new version (the Treaty of Lisbon) was thus ratified at the European level in 2009 (this time, the only referendum took place in Ireland; the treaty was first rejected, but the problem soon resolved thanks to a second vote). Europe has since been cemented by its common policies, not only in the economic realm, but also concerning immigration: after 2005, political xenophobia has defined the Union just as much as economic neoliberalism.

COMPASSION AND SELF-INTEREST

While the Greek crisis only confirmed this form of neoliberal rule in the most dramatic fashion, the refugee crisis has shaken the foundations of Europe's immigration policies. Of course, the first explanation that comes to mind is the sheer magnitude of this population transfer. Indeed, numbers matter: TV footage of crowds crossing borders or packing train stations have certainly struck a chord in public opinion and in public discourse. However, the issue is not purely quantitative, it is also qualitative: the nature of this wave of migration questions the usual justifications of xenophobic policies. A declaration by the socialist Michel Rocard, quoted innumerable times since the French Prime Minister first pronounced it in 1989, epitomizes this double logic, which has long prevailed not only in France, but throughout Europe: “we cannot welcome all the misery of the world.”⁵

The first implication is indeed quantitative. Were “we” to accept some of “them,” “they” would all come: an invasion would inevitably result from this “open door” (or, in French, with another telling metaphor, this “*appel d'air*”). Never mind that refugees are not exactly the white man's burden: rich European countries have actually taken in far fewer refugees than poorer ones, such as Turkey hosting more than 2.6 million people (Of course, this has not prevented the EU foreign policy chief from reminding President Erdogan of his country's moral, if not legal, obligation to let in Syrian refugees.). Relative to their population, even Germany cannot compare with the efforts of Lebanon and Jordan. The reality of asylum in Europe should not be characterized as “*all* the misery of the world.”

Never mind that refugees are actually reluctant to come to France. The most embarrassing demonstration of this lack of enthusiasm occurred in the city of Munich. This is where, in February 2016, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls proclaimed that “we cannot welcome any more refugees.”⁶ But one wonders: was not his display of “firmness” meant to make people forget that in the same city, in September 2015, the French refugee agency (OFPRA) tried to recruit a meager 1,000 Syrians to come to France, only to convince a few hundred? To this day, only 5,000 have applied for asylum in France (1.3% of the total in the EU). This is not exactly a new phenomenon: the awful situation in Calais, where migrants are concentrated in dire conditions while enduring brutal harassment by the French state, reinforced by local authorities, is also an indication that France is no “Eldorado” for the “wretched of the earth.” After all, their hope is not to stay in the country, but to cross the Channel.

Regardless of numbers, this frequent French reference to an Eldorado

5. Moreover, the President-to-be Nicolas Sarkozy adapted the following declaration during his 2007 campaign: “[The Left] doesn't want to see the impossibility to welcome, with dignity, all the misery of the world,” he stated in a meeting in Toulouse on April 11, 2007.

6. “French PM Rejects Permanent Quota System for Refugees,” Reuters, February 13, 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-idUSKCN0VM0NI>

is crucial in another way that helps to understand the common European logic. It implies an economic argument against immigration premised on the opposition between compassion and self-interest. There is indeed a widespread assumption that Europe cannot afford the luxury of generosity – notwithstanding the positive economic contribution of foreign workers (whether undocumented or not) to European wealth. Today, however, the refugee crisis complicates the story as it revives a distinction that had almost been forgotten, at least in certain countries, between “economic migrants” and “asylum seekers.” In the years of the 2000s, the suspicion about the latter kept rising as they were suspected of actually belonging to the former category: “fake” refugees were supposed to be “true” economic migrants.⁷ For example, even in a context of war, French media and public officials spoke only of migrants, not refugees – at least until the recent crisis. It took the heart-wrenching picture of a body of a three-year-old child on a beach in Turkey to rekindle, albeit briefly, any potential for compassion.⁸

Nevertheless, recent developments should not be mistaken for a mere reversal of the logic that has long prevailed. Reason is not giving way to passion, nor calculations to emotions, nor realism to idealism. Arguably, in a more fundamental way, the terms themselves have shifted. On the one hand, granting asylum is neither a matter of generosity nor of self-interest; it is a legal obligation, or at least, it is supposed to be one. Human rights are not a luxury; they are fundamental principles inscribed both in international and in national texts. On the other hand, the recent waves of refugees do not fit the familiar stereotypes on migrant poverty. Studies have long shown that migrating from Africa requires some resources, and thus excludes the poorest, but to no avail. However, this stereotype has recently changed: today, Syrian asylum-seekers are perceived as superior to Roma migrants (although the latter, and not the former, are Europeans). They are expected to be engineers, lawyers, and medical doctors – not beggars. Aylan could have been “our” child, as much as “theirs.”

As a consequence, there is a new *interest* in refugees, in a double sense: for reasons, of class they seem less foreign than other migrants; at the same time, they appear economically worthwhile. Compassion and self-interest need not be in opposition any longer. At least, this is true in the case of Germany: in dealing with the refugee crisis, despite serious resistance in her own country and even more within her own party, not to mention the opposition of other European governments, East and West, Angela Merkel has tried to maintain a German exception within Europe for as long as possible. This qualitative shift has to do with the quantitative one. From the start, the Chancellor has avoided minimizing the influx. On the contrary, she has insisted on the fact, first, that the numbers would be high and, second, that the effort would be long. As a result, the initial choice could not be half-hearted; it had to be irreversible. Once you welcome a million refugees, it becomes difficult to go back and claim that it is impossible to take in “all the misery of the world.” You have to succeed, and thus prove that what you have undertaken is possible. The logic has to shift.

However, most interpretations of this political choice have not shifted: they either focus on the moral argument or on the economic one – in terms either of compassion or of self-interest. Analysts have often emphasized the cultural

7. Tony Blair was one of the main European leaders to politically use the concept of “fake refugees.” On April 22, 2005, for example, the British PM proposed to “tighten the asylum system further” in order to be “fair to those who genuinely need asylum and who use the correct channels.”

8. On September 2, 2015 the shocking image of a drowned three-year-old Syrian migrant, Aylan Kurdi, upsets Europe. The young boy lying facedown on a Turkish beach brings visibility to the desperate plight of refugees. A wave of sympathy for refugees in civil society, triggered by Aylan’s picture, compels responses from governments in Western Europe. The slogan “Refugees Welcome” goes viral, especially in German.

and historical reasons underlying this moral stance, rooted in the German past (from the Protestant heritage to the Nazi and the Communist regimes). While some have applauded the Chancellor's unexpected fortitude, especially in the face of rising political hostility, many on the right have argued that her strategy is unrealistic, both economically and socially (let alone politically). Conversely, others on the left have dismissed her alleged benevolence: the real motivation, according to this perspective, has to do with the demographic needs of an aging Germany, or even with calculations regarding the price of labor in the workforce. Few have taken seriously the recent shift in political logic: it still appears that Merkel is either a cynic, or an idealist.

DREAMS OF EMPIRE

Obviously, it remains difficult to reconcile the two sides of recent German policies – the cold rejection of the Greeks and the warm welcome of the refugees. Are they not in stark contrast? Paradoxically, Yanis Varoufakis has joined those who celebrate “the moral nation.”⁹ The former Syriza Finance Minister starts out by rejecting the facile skepticism of those who look for ulterior motives. “That there are benefits from immigration is beyond dispute – except by racists.” However, if this is equally true elsewhere in Europe, “why is it only Germany and its people that took enthusiastically to welcoming refugees?” Because of “one of Germany's grandest gifts to humanity: the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.” Indeed, “Kant's practical Reason demands that we should undertake those actions which, when generalized, yield *coherent* outcomes.”

Why should Varoufakis, of all people, flatter the Germans in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*? Of course, his ironic, albeit serious enthusiasm has to do with the Greek situation: regarding that other crisis, “what should Berlin do? An excellent start would be to apply the same Kantian principle which has been evident in the case of the refugee crisis.” This tongue-in-cheek argument for “universalisable” policies is directed against the (supposed) German incoherence; the text makes a plea for a “moral” coherence: *do unto the Greeks as you do unto refugees*. But this plea for coherence begs another question: could Germany's apparent contradictions make sense within the framework of a new logic? The point is not to establish how “sincere” (or “insincere”) the Chancellor may be, but rather to understand both versions in political terms.

What if economic intransigence and moral generosity were but the two sides of the same coin – just like “Fortress Europe” and the neoliberal Union have been for at least a decade – but only in a different political “currency”? Our argument is that this common logic has to do with the improbable emergence of a German Empire within Europe. After the Second World War, the reconciliation of France and Germany became the foundation of the European project.

From the beginning, what was to become the EU developed around this axis. However, the balance of power has changed: it has now become quite clear that Germany leads while France follows. This was manifest during the Greek crisis, perhaps for the first time, and the same Varoufakis confirmed it publicly when he quoted Michel Sapin, the French Finance Minister, who confessed: “France is not what it used to be.”¹⁰ One can also think of the recent Norwe-

9. Following the German Chancellor's welcoming remarks in regards to the refugees, Varoufakis expressed his views in an Op-Ed in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* titled, *Die moralische Nation*, “On German Moral Leadership”: http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/deutschland-die-moralische-nation-13799629.html?printPageArticle=true#pageIndex_2. For an English translation see: <http://yanisvaroufakis.eu/2015/09/14/on-german-moral-leadership-english-version-of-op-ed-in-sundays-frankfurter-allgemeine-zeitung/>

gian television fiction *Occupied*: when the EU takes control of Norway, via the Russians, the French Commissioner turns out to be but a mouthpiece for the Chancellor.¹¹ Of course, Germany has been economically powerful for a long time; but only recently have the political consequences of this state of affairs been fully acknowledged.

The comparison of Merkel to Bismarck, the current Chancellor to her nineteenth-century predecessor, as the media frequently did during the first half of 2015, suddenly implied a remarkable change of perspective: in Germany, the popular daily *Bild* openly called on July 7 for an “iron Chancellor” whose helmet, along with the name of Bismarck, evoked the unabashed glory of the Empire.¹² But how could Germany reclaim an imperial status without reviving frightful memories of old wars – as was the case in France? This is where the refugee crisis plays a crucial role: far from entertaining nationalist themes reminiscent of a painful past, especially in Germany, Merkel’s policy has stood firm against the xenophobic and racist themes developed throughout Europe, from Hungary and Poland to France and Britain. Her open-arms attitude is the exact opposite of the scapegoating encountered elsewhere, or remembered from the first half of the twentieth century.

This new Empire is thus a far cry from the old one. In 2013, Ulrich Beck published *German Europe*.¹³ In this short essay, the German sociologist denounced the “Merkiavellian” strategy of the Chancellor: the crisis of the euro gave her an opportunity to seize power and become the Queen of Europe. “The new grammar of power reflects the difference between creditor and debtor countries; it is not a military but an economic logic. Its ideological foundation is ‘German euro nationalism’ – that is, an extended European version of the Deutschmark nationalism that underpinned German identity after the Second World War. In this way the German model of stability is being surreptitiously elevated into the guiding idea for Europe.” One could easily argue that this book anticipates the 2015 Greek crisis that finally transformed economic into political power.

In the context of the refugee crisis, our understanding of a “German Europe” has radically changed. Another German sociologist, Heinz Bude, explained in 2015 that Germany was now “Europe’s America.”¹⁴ The point was not any longer that all European countries had to become like Germany – in particular in the implementation of austerity policies, such as those imposed upon the Syriza government. The idea was now that Merkel had to lead Europe, whether she wanted to or not. The argument resonated powerfully with the refugee crisis, although it then took on a slightly different meaning: the German rule did become the German exception. In what Bude calls a “society of fear,” contrary to Pegida and other anti-immigration and Islamophobic political forces, the Chancellor does not play on fear. On the contrary: on New Year’s Eve 2015, she made it clear in her address to the German people: “I am confident that if we handle it right, the current major challenge of the arrival and integration of so many people will also present an opportunity in the future.” The subtitles available in Arabic only underlined her confidence.

In this new political economy of affects, desire replaces fear. For Europe’s America, the “German dream” means that the country, just like the United States in the days of Ellis Island, can and will welcome “the wretched of the

10. <http://mondediplo.com/2015/08/02varoufakis>

11. *Okkupert* (“Occupied”) premiered on the Norwegian channel TV 2 on October 5, 2015. The show has been purchased by channels in the UK, Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Estonia, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg and is available online in Australia, the United States, India and Canada.

12. <http://en.enikos.gr/media/32016,Iron-Chancellor-needed-says-Bild.html>

13. *German Europe*, Ulrich Beck (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013): <http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745665399>

14. “Uns geht es beängstigend gut,” An Interview with Heinz Bude, *Frankfurter Hefte*, 2015: http://www.frankfurter-hefte.de/Archiv/2015/Heft_04/Artikel_April_2015.html?arcnav=

earth.” Naturally, this is why it attracts them: refugees “love” Merkel. Germans finally transcend their historical guilt, and at long last, become desirable – if only because their own generosity makes them feel good about themselves. The new, unexpected desirability of Germans, in their own eyes as well as in those of the others, profoundly transforms the connotations of the word “empire.” This is most remarkable in Merkel’s mantra: “*Wir schaffen das!*” (“We can do it!”). Such a slogan not only exudes confidence, it also implies that economic power is the foundation of the “German dream.” This is how generosity and self-interest are related.

What the Germans are offered by their Chancellor is self-esteem: thanks to Merkel’s moral stance, they increase their value, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world. This logic of self-appreciation is at the core of neoliberal subjectivation, as philosopher Michel Feher demonstrates in his work. Indeed, one could argue that there are two symmetrical versions of national self-esteem: one negative, and the other positive. According to this distinction, weak neoliberals, like the French, are tempted by fear. Hence the politics of resentment, such as racism and xenophobia: whiteness is the last, negative resort of national self-esteem. On the contrary, Germans are strong neoliberals. This is why they open their doors and welcome refugees: they can afford it; therefore, it is their moral duty. This is the positive, Kantian version of self-esteem. The “German dream” is thus a way for Germans to claim a “universalisable” identity: they can escape the fate of the past and project themselves in the future. Now is their turn to claim as their own the famous line by Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”

THE GERMAN NIGHTMARE

Many will object to this apparently naïve presentation: is not the “German dream” but a shared illusion? Why not call it, simply, imperialist propaganda? It is true that this neoliberal dream is more like a myth – precisely like the “American dream.” It is not unreal, though. It may turn into a founding myth that defines the future of Europe, along with the subjectivities of Europeans. Nevertheless, one can easily point to the discrepancies between the dream and the reality of German policies. First, welcoming refugees did not change the sorry plight of economic migrants – although it did affect their administrative definition: in order to make room for Syrians, Germany immediately categorized Balkan countries as “safe,” thereby excluding these migrants from the status of refugees. The new politics of desirability leaves out “economic migrants,” no matter what this distinction may empirically represent.

Second, the influx of refugees only reinforced the European determination to sort migrants as they enter Europe. There have been attempts to share the load of the new refugees. This would actually undermine the Dublin Treaty that requires refugees to apply for asylum in the country they first enter. But the main feature of current policies is still the so-called “hotspots,” that is, the sorting structures conveniently located at the Mediterranean margins of Europe. “Fortress Europe” has certainly not been dismantled. Along with the pressure

against Greece, threatened with exclusion from the Schengen zone, the effort to pay off Turkey to stop refugees within its own borders, and to even ask for the support of NATO in order to prevent the boats of migrants from crossing the Aegean Sea, only confirm Fortress Europe's fortification. Today, two children, like Aylan, drown daily. How many will tomorrow?

Third, in addition to these important qualifications, the political support for a policy that opens the door of the country to (Syrian) refugees has progressively eroded, including in the Chancellor's own party. This is especially true after the attacks against women in Cologne, as well as in other cities, by men who were mostly migrants, though not recent arrivals in the country. Ironically, these events coincided on New Year's Eve with Merkel's address. Of course, it has been established that they were mainly from North Africa; Syrians did not play a major role in the story. But facts barely affect representations. Despite the insistence on the distinction between "economic migrants" and "refugees," the two have been used interchangeably in the public discussions of the Cologne events. Will Merkel's policies survive such a blow?

For all these reasons, the German dream may seem, if not a complete illusion, or an actual nightmare, at the very least strongly compromised – from the very beginning, in the summer of 2015, and even more so in 2016. Even if its failure were to be confirmed, that is, even if Merkel's original impetus, and the arrival of over one million refugees in Germany, did not result in a real, lasting change of perspective, and at long last a questioning of "Fortress Europe," Germany's experience would still be worth meditating. For the goal of this discussion about the "German dream" is not to embrace it. The goal is also not to join a chorus of unexpected approval of Germany's battle against the legitimate government of Greece in order to mitigate the expected disapproval among progressive critics of Germany.

There are at least two reasons to pay attention to what might or might not, in the end, turn out to have been a mere parenthesis. On the one hand, it helps to understand the new logic of empire: while power is still the primary principle, winning hearts and souls may be the second – that is, *making power desirable*. On the other hand, it encourages us to realize that there is nothing inevitable about the current equation of "Fortress Europe" and the neoliberal Union. It has not always worked this way, and it will not always work this way in the future. There may not be anything more important, for the critics of neoliberalism, than to avoid falling for its ultimate trick: let us remember that there are always alternatives. Political xenophobia is not the necessary consequence of neoliberal policies. Unpacking the two may help to fight them both, since the belief that they are inevitably linked contributes to their political success. This, in the end, is what might be learned from the European tale of two crises.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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