

Two Faces of Liberalism: Migration between Hope and Crisis

(Corinna Mieth, Ruhr-University Bochum)

In the so-called refugee crisis in Germany in 2015, a widespread cosmopolitan humanitarian solidarity intuition led to open borders for a certain amount of time that was contrasted by a scepticism referring to the effects this would have on the economic, legal, cultural and political stability of the country.

In the first part of my talk I will refer to the tension between the arguments for solidarity and for stability in the philosophical debate on migration within political liberalism. Liberalism appears as two-faced here: Defenders of open borders argue on moral grounds: Once we assume in tradition of Kant and Rawls that every human being has equal moral worth, there is no sound moral reason to exclude immigrants. (Carens) On the other hand, defenders of closed borders will refer to the right of political communities to political self-determination (Walzer) and to stability arguments like social trust in institutions or the preconditions for the maintenance of social security systems (Miller) in order to defend restrictions on migration. But closed border defenders agree on the special status of refugees who should be granted access, and open border defenders agree on a stability-argument as ultima ratio: once migrants threaten stability they can be denied access. If democratic stability is considered a precondition to realize cosmopolitan moral ideas (Christiano), there is a moral reason to restrict immigration once it endangers it. What remains a blindspot here is the fact that democratic stability in the sense of the functioning of democratic institutions is dependent on democratic cohesion: the way these institutions are sustained by citizens and political parties.

In the second part, I will therefore examine what democratic cohesion is and how it can be achieved. Whereas social cohesion refers to what keeps groups together, democratic cohesion refers to a shared understanding of democratic processes and the willingness to accept their results. I will not focus on the widespread assumption that migrants might pose a threat to liberalism, but on the citizens and political parties within liberal democracies that might threaten democratic stability by the way they deal with the tension between solidarity and stability. The notion of cohesion is ambivalent: the more cohesion within societal groups or political parties exists the less democratic cohesion beyond groups might be there.

How do we achieve more democratic cohesion? My proposal in the third part is to go beyond the static Rawlsian model that assumes a consensus of reasonable doctrines. I propose - not as an alternative but as a supplement - to go back to the model of a modus vivendi that allows a dynamic conception of democratic compromise. Compromise seems a useful tool within liberal democracies once the tension between the more progressive form of liberalism that argues for open borders and the more communitarian form that emphasizes shared democratic values have to come to terms with each other in order to develop liberalism as a project within time.

In the last part, I will discuss two objections against this approach: the justice-objection and the participation-objection.