

## Open Migration and the Politics of Fear

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**ABSTRACT** *In Spring 2007, an exchange took place on an international online research and reflection network on the Great Transition Initiative, concerning the prospect of including the concept of open borders in its vision of a humane and just global future. The excerpts that follow share elements of that dialogue, edited for flow, from the original exchange stimulated by the comments made by Brian Murphy from *Out of the Shadowlands: A Report on an International Learning Circle on Migration & Citizenship* (Murphy, 2006) and the Canadian organization, *Inter Pares*.*

**KEYWORDS** *citizenship; identity; terrorism; US; human rights; transformation*

### **Out of the Shadowlands**

While the prophets of globalization have long promised a world without borders, it is clearer than ever that if I use my Canadian passport I can go anywhere, but if I were to use a passport from a Latin American or African country, I will find it much more difficult, if not impossible. And if I travel without documents, I am 'illegal' – a non-person – and will be caught up in a world in which I am without formal existence, without rights, and at mortal risk every day. Even the current members of the (international network the Great Transition Initiative <http://www.gtinitiative.org/>) remain differentiated by the extent to which we are able to travel with ease, or are subject to suspicion and harassment as we pass through the checkpoint. For many, visa problems do not refer to our credit rating! How much more vulnerable are those without status, already beyond the margins of citizenship and identity.

*Out of the Shadowlands: A Report on an International Learning Circle on Migration and Citizenship* (Murphy, 2006), was prepared for the Canadian international social justice organization, *Inter Pares*. Starting from the experiences and dilemmas of those working locally and internationally with people on the move – economic migrants and people uprooted by war and other catastrophes – the report is a critical exploration of the political viability of a campaign for global open borders. It also looks at the cynical politics of fear in the epoch of the re-newed national security state and total surveillance regime, now justified under the slogans of 'the war on terror', and how this impacts all citizens, and most particularly people on the move, either as economic migrants or as forcibly displaced persons and refugees.

There is a pressing need to elaborate an ethos of a world where migration is normal, legal, safe, and administered coherently and humanely. A vision of a transformed future must address this issue more directly and radically.

### **Transforming migration**

In early 2006, an unprecedented mass mobilization of migrants and their supporters took place in the United States, and has now become a significant political force. In Canada, the abuse of human rights and civil liberties in the name of national security has become a major political issue; there is a groundswell of mainstream popular resistance to the excesses of the security forces and border agencies in dealing with landed immigrants and naturalized citizens, as well as asylum seekers. Similar mobilizations have been seen elsewhere as migration and migrants become an issue that is defining the early twenty-first century quite as much as the environment (indeed, the two issues are intricately linked).

At the same time, the anti-immigrant faction in North America, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere, with its underlying white supremacist ethos, has also gained a new momentum in the past decade, and this xenophobia and fear is not unique to the OECD countries. In various supremacist and purist guises, it affects virtually every country and the entire world. In some countries, we are seeing a new layer, which some have dubbed the 'greening of hate'. This is the trend within the deep environmental movement to identify overpopulation as the cause of apocalyptic environmental degradation and advocate control of immigration – indeed, coercive population control itself – to protect the ('pure' and 'natural') environment. In the context of the pre-eminence of national security and the widespread perception of clear and permanent threats in which migrants are intrinsically implicated, we have all the elements of Fortress World – that is, global apartheid.

Between 3 and 5 percent of the world's population – upwards of 200 million people – are currently on the move outside their place of origin. Many of these would have preferred to stay where they were if they could. Another untold number

would move if they could, but can not. Many simply are looking for better opportunities, as human beings have done for millennia. These numbers are bound to increase.

As the Report concluded, global citizenship, universally applied within communities, between communities, and among communities, should affirm the simple concept that every person has the right and freedom to move if they wish, with the corollary that each person has the right and freedom to stay where they are if that is their desire. Equally important, global citizenship should be rooted in a base level of universal human rights common to all, including the 'portability' of these rights no matter where a person may move.

How can we include this in our imagination and 'vision' for the future?

### **Some of the questions**

1. Should nation-states have any right to restrict immigration in any way even if every person has a general right to emigrate to any country of their choosing? For example, could they impose a tax on immigrants to their country to pay for the costs of social services that the immigrant might require? Could immigrants be required to have sponsors in their new country? Could such sponsors be required to be financially responsible for the immigrants they sponsor for some period of time? Could immigration be restricted by type of professional training?
2. Even if world citizens could emigrate to any other country, is it not true that, in practice, this 'right' could only be taken advantage of by those who could afford it? Is that equitable?
3. Should new immigrants to a country be allowed to avail themselves of various social services such as public education, health care, etc., free of charge? If so, is that equitable for the citizens of the country to which they emigrate?
4. Should there be a uniform world policy as to how soon new immigrants could become citizens of their new country, with voting rights, etc.?

### Open migration

My starting point is that if it were agreed that we want to move toward open migration policy globally, these issues, among others, would need analysis and debate nationally and internationally and would be resolved intelligently through this process.

The efficacy of global open migration does not depend *a priori* on the specific resolution of these issues; rather, the effective resolution of these issues depends first on whether we decide that we want to go in this direction, because it is in the interest of all the people of the planet, including ourselves, and because it is sane and healthy to do so. Virtually any issues can be resolved if society decides that it is in its interest to achieve a specific policy or goal.

Any transition in human affairs and the ethos of human stewardship of the planet would include, inevitably and fundamentally, a transition in how we conceive of borders, of 'the other', of identity and of privilege, whether national, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, class, or whatever. How to conceive and achieve this transition would be a matter for intense consultation, discussion, debate and will probably unfold in an iterative process over time and involve trial and error.

That said, I do have some tentative responses to the questions raised.

*Should nation-states have any right to restrict immigration in any way even if every person has a general right to emigrate to any country of their choosing?*

I think states have a right and a responsibility to administer migration across their borders. The issue of whether it would be necessary or appropriate to establish a category of restrictions within a 'regime of rights' would be a matter of analysis and international negotiation – the key would be that the 'restrictions' and how to administer them be agreed to internationally.

*For example, could they impose a tax on immigrants to their country to pay for the costs of social services that the immigrant might require?*

I think that a system of fair taxation is entirely feasible, and would be best administered if it was incorporated within the tax system applied to the general population; this is already the case with landed immigrants in most countries. This would, however, be an income tax, and (where applicable) a property tax, not a tariff, not a head tax or a fee-for-service. In all of this, we need to distinguish between people who migrate temporarily and people who migrate with the goal of permanent immigration. Conditions would be specific to the circumstances.

The issue of 'payment' of costs would have to be rooted in a critical analysis of the economic benefits that migrants bring to host countries, along with the costs. Most countries in the global North depend upon migrant workers and permanent immigrants, and their ongoing viability as nations will be critically determined by radical changes in immigration policy (and attitudes), as Western Europe (and Japan) will understand very soon as they are well-past negative population growth already. In general, migrants are a net economic plus, and the exception is largely in those places where – and the extent to which – movement is forced or restricted and rights are curtailed.

The conclusions documented in the Inter Pares report assume that open migration would be omni-directional. A global open migration policy would make universal what is already the reality for the rich everywhere; we would merely be extending the privilege – that is, making what is now a privilege ('private-law') a universal right.

*Could immigrants be required to have sponsors in their new country?*

They could, but I do not think it should be a *sine qua non* requirement. It bears analysis as there is quite a long experience now with programmes for sponsored refugees, and in family class reunification programmes, and the plus and minus of such strategies could be easily assessed.

*Could such sponsors be required to be financially responsible for the immigrants they sponsor for some period of time?*

As I say, the existing experience needs analysis.

*Could immigration be restricted by type of professional training?*

I would say no. That is not open migration, and is based on assumptions that proponents of open borders challenge.

*Even if world citizens could emigrate to any other country, is it not true that, in practice, this 'right' could only be taken advantage of by those who could afford it? Is that equitable?*

No it is not equitable. But certainly it would be so much *more* equitable than the current reality that the issue is moot. Open migration is not a panacea for all issues of justice and equity. It would, however, be a radical transition that would promote increasing equity for those who are able to avail themselves of the opportunity, and their dependents and communities in their place of origin. And along with other transformations that such a transition would imply, nothing to sneeze at!

Note that the report also emphasizes the right and opportunity for people to *stay* in their own places – a choice I believe would be the predominant one, and open migration would enhance the viability of this choice, not hinder it.

*Should new immigrants to a country be allowed to avail themselves of various social services such as public education, health care, etc., free of charge?*

A transition in global justice and solidarity would imply universal public education and health care in all countries, as is already the norm in most developed countries in the global North today, and should be the norm globally – including in the US. An enlightened policy of progressive taxation and social benefits that extends to migrants and immigrants seems entirely feasible.

This is virtually the reality in Canada now. Legal migrant workers even pay a form of unemployment insurance and health insurance. Any state could extend existing services to include migrants arriving within enhanced migration/immigration. We could pay for these things in large part by eradicating irregular/illegal migration, cutting the policing and incarceration costs, and expect employers to administer their payroll legally, including deductions for the public system.

*If so, is that equitable for the citizens of the country to which they emigrate?*

Certainly, at least to the extent that things in those countries are 'equitable' now – which of course they are not. But open migration and the de-criminalization and regularization of migration will at the very least make it very much more equitable for those migrants already in place, and for those on the move, and it will make it even more so for those who follow. An assumption behind all this is that open migration is economically, socially, and culturally a sane and healthy thing to promote and that the benefits in the long run are universal.

*Should there be a uniform world policy as to how soon new immigrants could become citizens of their new country, with voting rights, etc.?*

Yes.

### Fears

Specifically, concerns were raised in the discussion about people's legitimate security fears post 9/11. What about increased security checks, stiffer visa requirements, and screening as tools to disable transnational terrorist networks?

The strategic issue of how to communicate this vision is complex. The perceptions on 'the war on terror', and attitudes toward 'security' issues, vary widely from place to place. I think the US is quite unique in how these issues are seen – and there is increasing polarization on the issues even within the US. Communication strategies have to deal with people as they are and where they are. But the strategy will have to be transformative.

A critical issue lies in what are considered 'legitimate security fears'. My experience in Canada – where my work includes action on domestic and international threats to civil liberties as a result of anti-terrorist legislation – and in my long experience in international cooperation and solidarity, is that neither the extent, or nature, nor object of such fears are universal. Difficult as it is for many Americans to understand and accept, it is widely felt that the greatest single threat to security, both personally and in general, is the

United States itself, not only in its (over) reaction to perceived 'security threats', but in its self-absorbed, and clearly counter-productive 'pre-emptive' aggression to meet its own geo-political and geo-economic goals.

Also – and again I know that this is difficult for many US citizens – the terms 9/11 and 'post-9/11' do not signify the same way to all people of the world. For most, post 9/11 signifies the firestorm that has *followed* that tragic day more than the day itself, which was not so world-historical to people already experiencing a virtually permanent cataclysm in their lives and places long before September 2001.

We have to move beyond the politics of fear and misplaced security concerns, and this is part of the 'communication' that is required.

Change is in the wind, everywhere, including in a very profound way in the United States where these winds are blowing strongly, and from where leadership for change has already emerged in the burgeoning migrants movement and its allies – as opposed, for example, to Europe, which, in spite of marginal activism, still has its collective head in the sand in a very dangerous way.

### Europe and migration

Even if European CSOs are more connected on these issues transnationally, and internationally, with solid connections within South–North networks of common cause, this is not reflected at the official governmental and inter-governmental level, and the general zeitgeist within the population. I think that in continental/hemispheric America, migration and immigration are accepted among the broad population as natural, good, and necessary in a way that has not been incorporated in a broad-based way in Europe – which is not to deny ongoing polarization on the issue among some elements in North America (and South) who exploit racism and exclusion in cynical populist politics as elsewhere.

Promotion of immigration is official policy in Canada, the US, and elsewhere in the hemisphere, acknowledged as an essential good that needs to be encouraged and promoted for economic and social viability into the future. The debate is lar-

gely how to manage it, and in whose interest. I think that the response in Europe to the phenomenon of migration, even since 2001, has been more reactionary than in the US – and the rest of the Americas – which has a long history of transformative migration. The metaphor of Fortress Europe cannot be extended by analogy to North America; the phenomenon is different, and the challenges for advocates are not entirely parallel.

I see in the US a unique popular movement emerging among immigrants and migrants that I do not see elsewhere (including in Canada). This migrants' movement is ahead of the traditional mainstream CSO advocates who have long fought the immigration/white supremacist struggle but now are running to catch up with the people. This 'people's' movement is resonant with migrant activism and advocacy in Meso-America (Mexico and Central America) and also inspired by other transitions going on in Latin America from Mexico to the Southern Cone.

Another trend I see – and in this I would include Canada – has been a tremendous surge in civil-liberties/human rights action to defend those caught in the burgeoning security state apparatus that is being rationalized with anti-immigrant/terrorist rhetoric. I also see this in Europe but I sense that the road is steeper, and that the attitudes that have to be transformed are deeper and more intransigent, in Europe, for historical reasons.

I think the very viability of Europe, and the nations of Europe, is at stake, but this fact is not yet at the core of the natural discourse. The future of Europe will depend on how Europeans come to accommodate the fact of its inexorably declining population replacement index, its reliance on immigration to maintain viable societies, and the inevitable (positive, healthy, and natural!) transformation of society that is taking place, and will continue to take place. I have seen little in the official government and multilateral discourse that acknowledges this reality; to the contrary, the official political discourse is backward, cloying, and short-sighted at best, and at worst – which is too often – dangerously reactionary and provocative.

## Terrorism and migration?

As a matter of honesty, legitimacy, and compassion, it is important that we acknowledge the real risk of terrorism (even as we try to put these risks into perspective) and communicate empathy for people's fears (even as we try to convert fear into progressive action). Could a macro-terrorist event kick the global trajectory into a *Fortress World* that would make the current scene, with all its conflict and misery, seem relatively benign? Has Bush *et al's* 'ominous' path heightened this possibility?

What though is the real risk of terrorism?

- believe that the risk is infinitesimally less, and far more complex, than is promoted in the cynical politics of fear, fuelled by significant elements within the political class and the media;
- the actual risk is negligible in absolute terms on any given day for a person no matter where sitting or standing in the whole wide US, compared to the ten or twenty (small) statistical risks everyday simply by being an adult alive in America in 2007 (the same is true for a person standing in London or Paris);
- the risk that any American experiences is less by several degrees than that of counterpart in a score of countries around the globe, and this is true even when the American in question is in the other's country (as guest or occupier); and
- to the extent that the risk does exist, current 'security' policies, and the 'war-on-terror', have no prospect of mitigating or reducing it, but rather clearly have increased the risk, and will continue to do so.

The controversy is far less about the reality than it is about whether it is politically tenable to *state* the reality clearly.

What is lacking is clarity.

I empathize with a person's fear – my child, or my friend, or my neighbour – that there are

monsters in the shadows, or the dark closet, but I do not then affirm those fears by saying that because she is afraid, there must be monsters. Rather, I look closely at my own words and behaviour to make sure that I am not helping to create the monsters in her mind, and take action accordingly. Then, I help her understand the very real experience of 'felt' monsters – including sharing my personal experiences with fear. And I try to help her to develop the skill to distinguish the (extremely rare) monster she might encounter, and the far more common demons we create in the politics of our own collective imagination – demons that, when we let them possess us, can turn us into the very monsters we fear, or at least their monstrous victims.

History teaches much...

In terms of the danger of a macro-terrorist event, I share this trepidation. It is possible. And even the (remote) possibility – as with nuclear stupidity satirized in *Dr. Strangelove* – raises the 'Fortress world' scenario. The current trajectory of US policy heightens that risk, and the US is not acting alone; Canada is complicit and standing by, as are most of the OECD nations, and the United Nations itself.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that millions are already experiencing what amounts to 'macro-terrorism', whether in Iraq where, for example, the extended exposure to depleted uranium from the bombs and bullets used in Gulf War I, and now Gulf War II, match anything a major city in America (or Europe) would face if there should be an event like a 'dirty bomb'.

Think Fallujah. Or Afghanistan, or Sudan, or the DRC, or even recently, Lebanon, where the villains are not 'terrorists' – an unclear nomenclature at the best of times – but governments and their proxies. The scenario is already unfolding and unless we acknowledge the moral symmetries, there will be little we can do to avoid escalating outcomes.

## Reference

Murphy, Brian K. (2006) *Out of the Shadowlands: A Report on an International Learning Circle on Migration & Citizenship*, Inter Pares, December 2006, available at <http://www.interpares.ca/en/publications/reportsandpresentation.php#migration>.