

Reflections

Conditional welcome and the ambivalent self – commentary to Gill

JUSSI P. LAINE



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This brief reflection is written from the standpoint that much of the witnessed suppression of welcome derives from either a lack of fully understanding, or misunderstanding, the reasons for and circumstances of the perceived crisis, as well as of the histories and motivations of the people who have arrived in Europe in great numbers. Rather than simply depicting the governmental perspective in opposition to that of the people, the argument put forth here is rather that the reactions to this extraordinary situation have been torn at best, and it is the mounting polarization, rather than the immigrants as such, that are putting Europe's democracies, social model, cooperation as well as values to the test. The anxieties caused by immigration have become intertwined with deep insecurities triggered by originally unrelated societal changes, whereby the question of the suppression of welcome has a lot to do with the difficulty in finding an appropriate balance with one's own benefits, preferences of association and responsibilities towards others. Efforts need to be taken to debunk tenacious false narratives about migration, and to provoke debate in a fashion that will lead to a nuanced understanding of the root causes and motivating factors behind the migrant flows, as this would enable us to take proper action in addressing them.

Keywords: welcome, identity bordering, ontological security, refugees, values

Jussi P. Laine, University of Eastern Finland, Yliopistokatu 2, Aurora (P.O. Box 111), FI-80101 Joensuu, Finland. E-mail jussi.laine@uef.fi

Introduction

In his essay on the suppression of welcome, Gill (2018) contemplates how genuine, spontaneous welcome could be preserved under the widespread pressure of statist and nationalistic logics and demands. The essay functions as ideal discussion starter, rather than seeking to provide clear-cut answers to the complex phenomena under scrutiny, as it turns our attention to a number of crucial questions in desperate need of a holistic examination. In this brief response to his insights, I will highlight the significance of the processes of identity bordering and the psychological need for ontological security in seeking to address Gill's inquiry into what extent should states be engaged in efforts to organise welcome, given their place in the international state system that underpins exclusionary and subjugating border control in the first place. This brief reflection is premised on a standpoint that much of the witnessed suppression of welcome derives from either the lack of fully understanding or misunderstanding the reasons for and circumstances of the perceived crisis, as well

as of the histories and motivations of the people who have arrived in Europe in great numbers. Thus, while Gill's essay explored the question, what is welcome and how is it suppressed, my aim here is to unravel who is welcomed and why others are not?

Gill's (2018) intervention makes an important recognition in stating that there has been a disjuncture between the policing-oriented government policies and the more welcoming popular sentiments towards refugees. Indeed, in addition to the survey commissioned by Amnesty International (2016) that he refers to, a more recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2018) found that a majority of people in several European countries support taking in refugees and disapprove of the way the EU has addressed with the issue. While the logic Gill follows based on this realisation is compelling and genuine, it is necessarily not enough to capture the entire picture, as the reactions have been multifarious, at times inconsistent, rather than a simplified juxtaposition of welcome or unwelcome would lead us to believe.

Extraordinary situation, extraordinary measures

Undeniably, the EU as well as a number of its member states have indeed prioritized policing, surveillance, and border securitisation over its own commitments to asylum, assimilation, or human rights protections in their responses to the recent surge of migrants (cf. Bilgic & Pace 2017). Yet, the EU continues to be deeply divided over the matter, and the debate within individual Member States have been far from uniform. Despite the prevalent securitisation focus, individual, yet very influential politicians have shown even unexpectedly welcoming attitudes to refugees. While the hard liners, perhaps the most noticeably Orbán, Salvini, Le Pen and Kurz, have certainly dominated the picture with their blunt anti-immigrant stands. For instance, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel defended her "open door" migration policy actively and the Prime Minister of Finland, Juha Sipilä, outlined that Finland should set an example to the rest of Europe on migration increasing the number of refugees it was willing to accept. To prove his point, Mr. Sipilä offered to give up his private residence for refugees to use.

Gill's (2018, 88) further assertion that the "[g]overnments were either unwilling or unable to carry out the wishes of their electorates, who supported greater liberalisation of border controls and the delivery of more aid to those who had been displaced," seems appealing yet somewhat disproportionate. Alongside the widespread humanitarian approach amongst the people that he describes, expressions of xenophobic, nationalistic, if not racist mind-set, have neither been rare. The nationalist and far-right parties have made significant electoral gains across Europe and less formal anti-immigration movements have become widespread. Rather than simply depicting the government perspective in opposition to that of the people, the argument put forth here is rather that the reactions to this extraordinary situation have been torn at best and it is the mounting polarization, rather than the immigrants as such, that is putting Europe's democracies, social model, cooperation as well as values to the test. Thus, a key question to unravel is how come the same phenomenon can trigger so different reactions in different people? That is, why welcome is not the same for all?

What most seem to agree upon is that the witnessed recent influx of immigrants into Europe has been extraordinary. As Andersson (2016, 1060–1061) explains, the prevalent emergency frame, in repeatedly presenting the migratory situation as an "unprecedented crisis", does not only enable a two-faced reactive response of humanitarian action and more policing, but also project these two in opposition to one another. This is illuminated, for example, in the way how the rescues are often thought of in opposition to border security, despite the recent trend whereby an increasing integration of these responses within a common emergency frame has become reality (Cuttitta 2014; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). Nevertheless, the argument put forth here is that particularly the public, but also ensued political debate, has not only sought to pit the pros and cons of immigration against one another, but revealed also something much profounder about the host societies. The anxieties caused by immigration have become intertwined with deep insecurities triggered by originally unrelated societal changes, such as the precarisation of the labour market and a dissolving social security. Consequently, little about the immigration debate has actually been about immigration itself, but rather about internal societal changes that have left many feeling left behind and frustrated. In this

equation, anonymous immigrants have come to serve as an easy target for enraged, emotional gut spilling, lacking both clarity and rationality.

What is needed is debate, which, without pre-judgment, seeks to bring clarity to the complex phenomena we are facing. Instead of a 'refugee crisis', it is commonly argued that the EU faces a management crisis – and a lack of political will – as it struggles to cope with the increased uncertainty and anxiety caused by this era's turbulent and unpredictable environment, where constant multiple crises have become the new normal, challenging European societies' response capacity and resilience. The offers of a strong nation state as a solution for the perceived chaos have resonated well with the consequential public discourse in many EU member states, whereby the original idea of open borders has become effectively shot down (Ahtisaari 2017). A more thorough assessment of the situation reveals that call for stricter border enforcement and control cannot be taken simply as an attempt to close state spaces, but rather to filter and sort out the people crossing them to those who are considered welcome and those that are unwanted. Thus, we are also witnessing a crisis of cultural encounter, for the underlying criteria on which basis the sorting is done and the inherent politics of difference they imply to carry clear elements of identity and normative, if not civilisational, bordering. Furthermore, the prevalent situation reveals that black and white categorisation of a border as either open or closed is distorted, for borders are not the same for all and the ability to cross them depends on a lot on who we are and to where we are perceived to belong.

A conditional welcome

Whereas the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon (2016) called the unprecedented surge of migrants to Europe, a 'monumental crisis' that would require a response based on 'monumental solidarity', the EU and many of its Member States in particular turned however to the end-of-pipe solution of closing their borders in an attempt to restrict the incoming or transiting movement of people. These practices, in the context of the strength of anti-immigrant movements across Europe, conveyed an image of immigrants as a threat not just to our land, but also culture, identity, values and conventional ways of life. Within such narratives, refugees and asylum seekers – if not all immigrants – tend to be constructed as deviant or alien to the host society (Gilbert 2013) challenging not so much the control over space but the social glue that is believed to hold a society together. When framed as a threat, migration becomes a security issue, as something that needs to be combatted, inflicting in turn an impression of borders as protective, yet at the same time vulnerable, walls safeguarding the inside from a perceived threat from the outside (Laine 2018).

The major question Gill (2018) turns our attention to is to what extent should states be engaged in efforts to organise welcome, given their place in the international state system that, he states, underpins exclusionary and subjugating border control in the first place. Indeed, states' right to control their borders and decide who should be admitted and who should not are often taken for granted as a legitimate aspect of their political self-determination. In the recent past, this right to exclude has been coercively enforced in many instances around Europe and harsh measures have been implemented against immigrants who fail to satisfy the legal requirements for entry. From this perspective, a state's legitimate right to freedom of association entitles it to choose whether or not to admit immigrants; that is the freedom of association also entitles one to refuse to associate with others (Wellman 2008). Studies have revealed that in general, European citizens have a strong preference towards refugees with a similar religious background and higher levels of education, and the greater the expected economic benefit leads to the greater the acceptance (Banksak et al. 2016). The Visigrád states in particular, have formally articulated a strong preference for taking Christian refugees before others.

The recent surge of migrants has, however, made exploring the grounds for the right to exclude ever more necessary given the intrinsic moral and ethical concerns that it implies. These concerns appear in a different light, if instead of the usual retroactive responses, we consider the root causes of the migrant flows. Immigration, particularly that of an irregular kind, is seldom driven by mere wanderlust, but rather brought about by the disparities of wealth, peace, and political freedom across the world. Not everyone is entitled to work, live or even visit wherever they please, but our mobility

and thus our chances in life remain largely determined by our place of birth. While people have always migrated and moved around, the idea that we are from a certain place remains etched into our minds so profoundly that it seems difficult to challenge. This fundamentally arbitrary fact together with the artificial lines on a map need both to be rethought, if indeed we take it that there is a migration *problem* or *crisis* to be solved.

A key reason why welcome has been suppressed and refugees opposed may be attributed to widespread and intrinsic not-in-my-backyard or not-my-problem attitudes. Such perspectives suggest not only a hollowing out of the very values upon which the very idea of Europe is commonly considered to rely upon, but also seem fundamentally distorted. The moral obligation towards others, particularly the displaced, stems not only from a humanitarian principle, but is also based upon the realities of today's interconnected world (Benhabib 2004). While high moral value has been assigned to national borders and state sovereignty, and protecting human rights and dignity does involve also respect for the self-determination of states, we are no longer simply a part of isolated national communities detached from the broader developments of today's networked global society. The suppression of welcome seems particularly self-centred if we consider that some of the conflicts, which have driven people from their homes, such as those in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have been affected in various ways by the foreign policy decisions of the United States and many European powers (Betts 2015). The universal human right to leave any country and to return to one's country is in the end rather meaningless without the right to enter another state (Cole 2000).

These developments are indicative of how the states and their borders continue to function in the postmodern era of post-national polices and non-territorial flows. We have witnessed an apparent fracturing of the EU surface, as member states respond with local policies restricting and scaling back their openness in response to public pressures. The witnessed regression into state-centric thinking has not only weakened the EU's integrationist momentum and social model, but implies also, as Betts (2015) maintains, that states' commitment to asylum has become increasingly conditional. Accordingly, I argue, the question of the suppression of welcome has a lot to do with the difficulty in finding an appropriate balance between our and their rights. That is, to what extent can one prioritise one's own benefits, preferences of association and responsibilities towards one's co-citizens before those of immigrants, particularly refugees?

The value of our values?

Looking at the situation even more from the perspective of an individual, the concept of ontological security is revealing in that it draws attention to the need of an individual to enjoy a stable and whole existence in reality, as opposed to anxiety and a loss of meaning that could threaten everyday experiences and self's integrity and identity (Laing 1960). It relies on a sense of trust in the continuity of the social order, a disruption in the conscious awareness of which can provoke anxiety, paralysis, and even self-fragmentation. To be able to go on and maintain the stability of one's self-existence amidst the turbulent and unpredictable environment, individuals seek continuous affirmation on their meaningful presence and self-narrative as well as a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be (Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006). In an existential sense, an ontologically secure person has a stable and unquestioned sense of self and of his/her place in the world in relation to other people and objects, while an ontologically insecure person does not accept the reality or existence of things, themselves, and others (Giddens 1991; Hewitt 2010). A focus on ontological security is of use here when the suppression of welcome is being discussed for it allows us to tie the logic of security to the production and reproduction of identities. Following Mitzen (2006), ontological level security dilemmas, such as one many felt at the sudden surge of refugees, often posed in terms of challenging the conventional social glue perceived to hold 'us' together, may actually reinforce the sense of being and identity of the actors involved. This is to say that in confronting otherness, rationality may be overridden in the search for continuity, even if this might compromise the values and norms otherwise held dear.

The insights presented above hardly provide answers to the set of questions Gill (2018) concluded his essay with, yet in addition to emphasising the complexity and multifacetedness of welcome, the

aim here has been to underline that welcome is not about mere admittance or something that can be determined by a particular policy. Efforts need to be taken to debunk tenacious false narratives about migration and to provoke debate in a fashion that will lead to a nuanced understanding of the root causes and motivating factors behind the migrant flows, and that would enable us to take proper action in addressing them. A key part is to break away from the dominant migration-security nexus by pointing towards the opportunities welcoming migrants can bring and elucidating them as valuable resources, rather than a burden, or 'ills' affecting the body of 'national' societies.

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