

EuVisions met **Thomas Faist**, Professor of Transnational Relations and Development Studies at Bielefeld University, in January 2018, on the occasion of the event “[Dieci anni di Mondi Migranti. Uno spazio per la ricerca sulle migrazioni](#)”, hosted by the University of Milan.

Giulia Bistagnino: I would like to start by asking you to elucidate a key idea proposed during your *lectio magistralis*, namely the “liberal paradox” and its relationship with the welfare question. Could you explain how this tension influences contemporary politics within the EU?

Thomas Faist: Once cross-border migrants have made it into the territory of liberal states, there is a paradox between efforts adhering to human rights on the one hand and those controlling the migrant population on the other hand. This has been called the ‘liberal paradox’. Externalization of control through ‘remote control’ of immigration countries in emigration countries – in the case of EU member states in North and West Africa, for example, ensures that this liberal paradox is not activated, at least not to the full.

Restrictive policies in themselves, such as trying to keep migrants from reaching the shores of Europe, harden the image of migrants as potential economic competitors.

At first sight, this could also apply to what I would call the ‘welfare paradox’, which holds that there is a tension between social rights for all on the one hand and the deregulation of social and labour rights and standards as part of a liberalizing global economy on the other. One may surmise that a decrease in immigration leads to fewer forced migrants competing with established non-migrants for public services and jobs. Yet the depiction of (forced) migrants as exploiting generous welfare states and competing in labour markets does not necessarily depend on high and increasing numbers of mobile border-crossers.



The Representative of Libya addresses during the Panel discussion on the Role of local authorities in promoting inclusion of refugees and migrants, Palais des Nations. 8 May 2017.

Restrictive policies in themselves, such as trying to keep migrants from reaching the shores of Europe, harden the image of migrants as potential economic competitors. Most of the opposition to asylum-seekers in Europe nowadays comes from those authoritarian political forces who openly advocate the exclusion of “others”, for example, right-wing populist parties.

The externalization of control has a clear effect on the liberal paradox: if migrants do not make it into the immigration countries and/or if migrants can be expelled because their fundamental human rights can be taken

*care of someplace else (in countries of origin and transit),
the state does not need to address politically this
unwanted and unwelcomed forced migrant “surplus”
population.*

In a nutshell, the externalization of control has a clear effect on the liberal paradox: if migrants do not make it into the immigration countries and/or if migrants can be expelled because their fundamental human rights can be taken care of someplace else (in countries of origin and transit), the state does not need to address politically this unwanted and unwelcomed forced migrant “surplus” population. With respect to the welfare paradox, the effects turn out to be more ambiguous. More restrictive migration control will even feed the culturalization of forced migration, defining forced migrants as the “other”. It also leads to portraying ever more categories of asylum-seekers and migrants as illegitimate refugees and undeserving recipients of social rights.

Welfare states and the “liberal paradox” – An interview with Thomas
Faist
By Maurizio Ferrera and Thomas Faist



From left to right, Marco Minniti, Italian Minister of the Interior, and Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner for Migration

One may suppose that, however unintentionally, remote control contributes to the securitization of migration control (that is, the perception that migrants are a security threat, physically and to the welfare state), and – very important – does not necessarily assuage the feelings of threat exploited so skillfully by various political parties and movements across Europe and North America. Moreover, as events in recent years seem to suggest, in extending control afar and thus minimizing the number of migrants arriving, the externalization strategy has not helped to convince EU member states to cooperate in the distribution of the initial costs of protecting refugees

GB: Do you think the “liberal paradox” can be overcome? How? In particular, do you think that strategies of migration containment, based on an enhancement of the partnership between Europe and Africa and aimed at reducing inequalities and creating enticements for

migrants to stay in their countries of origin, can be considered successful in solving the paradox, as Emmanuel Macron has recently suggested?

TF: One of the main motivations of international organizations such as the World Bank, supranational entities such as the European Union (EU), national states or NGOs to sponsor economic development via financial remittances of migrants is to reduce the volume of cross-border migration from the global South to the global North, for example, from Africa to Europe. Over recent years politicians across Europe have often claimed that higher levels of economic development (measured by per capita income and/or increased human development symbolized by lower infant mortality and higher rates of literacy) would eventually lead to a decrease in international migration.

Needless to say, levels of income are an insufficient proxy to determine emigration rates – other proxies such as civil war or structural economic problems have to be also considered. But the inverted U-curve suggests that it is not the poorest countries not the poorest segments of the population which are the most likely to move across national borders.

Migration scholars, however, insist that—while this expectation may be borne out in the long run, considering demographic transitions and economic transformations—increased economic development correlates highly with increased international migration, expressed in concepts such as the “migration hump” or the “inverted U-curve”. As the latter term indicates, emigration is relatively low from regions with low or high levels of income whereas it is higher in those from an intermediate range. Think of countries such as Turkey or the Philippines which are sort of middle income countries when viewed globally and which have experienced relatively high rates of out-migration over the past decades.

Needless to say, levels of income are an insufficient proxy to determine emigration rates – other proxies such as civil war or structural economic problems have to be also considered. But the inverted U-curve suggests that it is not the poorest countries not the poorest segments of the population which are the most likely to move across national borders.

Nonetheless, seen in the long run, Macron tends to be right: higher levels of economic development work to decrease emigration rates somewhat. Although creating jobs points to an important driver of migration, it is not a panacea because it does not address the underlying root causes of cross-border migration from the global South to the global North which consists of political and economic structural inequalities.

GB: Another issue which has dominated European political debates in the past years concerns migration within the EU, and in particular the problem of transnational welfare among Member States. The relevance of the problem can be easily spotted in the fact that restricting access to social benefits by mobile EU citizens has represented one of the most important problems discussed during the Brexit debate. How do you evaluate such problem? What role should be assigned to European and national institutions? Can a bottom-up approach constituted by social movements be effective in changing the debate about welfare provisions among the EU and help fostering an idea of Social Europe?

TF: There is a clear hierarchy between various types of migrants with respect to legally sanctioned access to social rights and services. At the top tier are those migrants who are now sedentary. This is so because it usually takes a while to get full residence and employment rights for EU citizens in other member states. The tier below is composed also of EU citizens in other countries but those who could be called circular migrants. Often, the rules regulating the transfer of contributions are complex. In short, this setup favours one-time migration, not repeat migration across the borders of EU member states. In the third tier we find non-EU citizens, that is, extracommunitari who, as a rule, do not enjoy freedom of movement and have limited access to labour markets. Politically, this freedom has been rejected by critics to mean the free movement of unemployment and poverty.

Welfare states and the “liberal paradox” – An interview with Thomas
Faist
By Maurizio Ferrera and Thomas Faist



Given this hierarchy of (non-)citizen access to social rights and services in the EU, it is essential to look at the underlying causes for conflicts over transnational social rights. Where social protection and migration are concerned, there is at present no prospect of harmonization of status between third-country citizens and EU citizens, because national welfare states are not prepared to relinquish control over their employment markets and social protection systems to supranational institutions.

Member states do have the ability to exercise control over individuals from third states, however. In this way, they use migration control and sometimes also naturalization policies vis-à-vis third-country nationals to regulate their respective labour markets and, hence, working conditions, wage costs and (social) citizenship.

This is easily illustrated by the example of freedom of movement for workers. Argentinians of Italian descent may adopt the citizenship of their ancestors; they then have the option of settling not only in Italy, but in any other EU member state. Survey evidence on naturalization processes in Italy finds that better opportunities for moving to other countries was the second most chosen reason for wanting to obtain Italian citizenship. In these and similar cases, other member states have no control over the mobility of workers according to citizenship. What constitutes an employee, for example, is increasingly defined and determined by the EU Commission. Member states do have the ability to exercise control over individuals from third states, however. In this way, they use migration control and sometimes also naturalization policies vis-à-vis third-country nationals to regulate their respective labour markets and, hence, working conditions, wage costs and (social) citizenship. Access to national citizenship thus becomes an indirect instrument for controlling labour markets and access to social rights.

GB: In your *lectio magistralis*, you have stated that a dominant theory on the transnational social question is lacking: nowadays, no theory represents what socialism represented for the social question in the 19th and 20th Century. What role do you envisage for ideologies and political narratives in contemporary European politics in shaping the future of European integration?

TF: Indeed, in contrast to the nineteenth century, alternative scenarios for the future seem to have multiplied. Nowadays, socialist and communist theories – including Marxism, anarchism, syndicalism – have been complemented by, among others, postcolonial, postnational, feminist, and postmodern perspectives. All of this means that the vertical hierarchies of class have to be complemented by the horizontal disparities of race, ethnicity, gender and additional heterogeneities.

Nowadays, even in postmodern approaches, the concern with inequalities but also with capitalism and democracy has not disappeared. Nevertheless, in order to be useful for tackling the contemporary social question which has both a vertical and horizontal dimensions, one has to decouple class from the previously assumed sovereignty of allegedly objective economic interests. Yet this needs to be done without dissolving it into identity politics or reducing it into a concoction of language.

The pluralisation of theories help us to think of the (re)production of inequalities in more complex and adequate ways. In the classic version of the social question in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, this agent clearly was a (social) class – the proletariat, in opposition to the bourgeoisie. Nowadays, even in postmodern approaches, the concern with inequalities but also with capitalism and democracy has not disappeared. Nevertheless, in order to be useful for tackling the contemporary social question which has both a vertical and horizontal dimensions, one has to decouple class from the previously assumed sovereignty of allegedly objective economic interests. Yet this needs to be done without dissolving it into identity politics or reducing it into a concoction of language. In order to defend the European project and to include a stronger social dimension, we need to avoid both a single-minded focus on identity politics and policies which usually end up in us vs. other politics and a backward-oriented politics on class to the detriment of other heterogeneities.

GB: Finally, in the last years, we have been experiencing a strong form of distrust and backlash against globalization, the political and economic elites, the EU, and we have seen the rise of populism in Europe. Do you think these phenomena constitute only a threat to the stability and future of the EU or also an opportunity to reform the Eurozone and the European Union?

TF: One of the most important contemporary expressions of culturalization and racialization in Europe has been right-wing xenophobic populism. After all, migrants and refugees are the most visible sign of the second modern globalization and the concomitant social transformation. Anti-immigration feelings among the dominant population’s electorates have

been fostered and exploited by parties mobilising tensions related to growing inequalities not only in material wealth but also power between “the elites” and “the people”.

We should not forget that right-wing populism at first sight appear as a corrective to the current market liberalizing regimes in Europe. Yet such a view is deceiving. In reality, right-wing populists are the beneficiaries of market radical, neo-liberal policies of many member state governments.

Certainly, anti-immigrant and more broadly anti-minority populism is related not only to migration but also to the loss of state legitimacy and, economically, nationalist protectionist trade and currency policies. We should not forget that right-wing populism at first sight appear as a corrective to the current market liberalizing regimes in Europe. Yet such a view is deceiving. In reality, right-wing populists are the beneficiaries of market radical, neo-liberal policies of many member state governments. What is worse, they seem to extend these same policies and couple them with nationalist, protectionist and xenophobic elements. I do not yet see an emerging left-wing populist alternative, except in nascent forms such as Podemos in Spain.

Photo Credits CC [Hartwig HKD](#) / [UN Geneva](#) / [Dimitris Avramopoulos](#) / [cantfightthetendies](#)

Authors: Maurizio Ferrera – Thomas Faist