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Keep it straight and simple, also with respect to migration: a comment on Streeck's "Between Charity and Justice"

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Wolfgang Streeck's essay „Between Charity and Justice: Remarks on the Social Construction of Immigration Policy in Rich Democracies" (2018) contains a wealth of intriguing insights on recent debates on immigration in Germany and other advanced capitalist countries. His sharp, witty and stimulating piece focuses on the views of what he calls a "liberal-libertarian left". Indeed, there are problematic aspects to the liberal left discourse on migration, which he unerringly detects and comments on in his inimitable scathing style. Streeck should be commended for the courage of his convictions. For a "left case against open borders" predictably provokes a controversial debate, as Angela Nagle recently (2018) experienced.

Streeck's essay makes three main arguments. First, it highlights several inconsistencies in the usual immigration-friendly stance of the libertarian left. In a nutshell, the position of the libertarian left is one of Christian mercy instead of the classical left stance of social progress. Second, it does not shy away from naming the problematical consequences of increased migration for receiving societies. These include, inter alia, the very high costs incurred (particularly if compared to other humanitarian options for helping migrants), the challenges these inflated costs pose for the welfare state, the risk of increased segregation between groups within the domestic population as well as criticism regarding population engineering. Third, it points out that migrants have to be seen as strategic actors. This fact is systematically overlooked by left wing accounts that portrait migrants predominantly as victims of unfortunate circumstances.

Wolfgang Streeck has made a very important contribution to the left debate on migration. Yet I wonder whether his arguments are articulated in the most persuasive fashion. In order to achieve the maximum polemical impact against "leftist liberalism", Streeck makes use of a diverse and rather disparate set of insights ranging from the discussion of Christian traditions to biopolitical concerns. However, such a broad assault on the left liberal migration discourse must necessarily address several empirical issues that cannot be dealt with in a comprehensive manner and, therefore, can become a matter of contestation as well. Take, for example, his claim that "interests in population engineering are in fact powerfully present in any immigration policy" (Streeck, 2018, 13) that is linked to German debates about immigration and the open borders episode of 2015, which implies that the latter has been motivated by biopolitical concerns. This may or may not have been the case, but it would require a more thorough substantiation than simply a few quotations from a political outsider (Thilo Sarrazin) and a former finance minister (Wolfgang Schäuble). Similarly, on the issue of segregation, Streeck claims that "official police forces strike tacit

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agreements with informal community leaders, on the Chinatown pattern, leaving it to them to maintain order in exchange for case-by-case cooperation where red lines are crossed" (2018, 11). Again, no information is provided about where exactly such a pattern can be found and how frequently it can be observed in contemporary European societies.

In my view the focus should be less on highlighting all possible inconsistencies in our colleagues' arguments, but rather on developing our own position based on making explicit our own normative assumptions, carefully analysing the available empirical data and articulating our policy conclusions. Although like Streeck I am neither a political theorist nor a specialist on migration, I will make both a normative argument and derive some policy prescriptions from it.[1] Moreover, it would be important to avoid getting side-tracked on to other related issues. If our concern is with left positions on migration, my suggestion is to take into account the effects of the latter on the less fortunate in our societies, instead of devoting our attention to issues of cultural homogeneity, for instance, a typical concern of right-wing discourses.

In order to substantiate my point, I will first provide some evidence regarding the negative effects of certain types of cross-border migration on some weaker groups in the receiving countries. Based on this brief survey I will discuss some broad normative measures on how to give weight to the legitimate concerns of inward migrants against the latter groups. Finally, I will outline some political implications for the formulation of future immigration policies. Similar to Streeck, I too exclude the uncontroversial issue of the need to provide asylum for political refugees and will, therefore, focus primarily on the issue of labor migration, besides delving briefly into the issue of migration arising out of humanitarian crises.

Cross-border inward migration and labor markets for the less advantaged in rich societies

Wolfgang Streeck begins by taking issue with the liberal stance on large-scale migration adopted by large sections of the left in rich societies. And he is right to do so for a simple reason, namely the negative repercussions of such migration for the weakest in these societies. While additional migration may have broadly positive connotations from a macroeconomic perspective – e.g. by way of additional demand by migrants, or by public investments to cater for their needs – it does not necessarily have positive effects on all social groups within the receiving society. Even leaving aside the potential competition for social benefits and, even more importantly, for scarce affordable housing in metropolitan regions, less advantaged groups are subjected to increasing competition on labor markets due to migrants. More specifically, domestic social groups with qualification levels similar to those of the new entrants are more likely to suffer from such increased competition.

Among the most systematic studies of the labor market effects of large-scale migration is the one conducted on the so-called "Mariel boatlift crisis" in 1980, when some 125.000 Cuban refugees migrated to Florida within six months and settling primarily in the Miami region, thus making it a perfect "natural experiment" for studying the effects of migration. The comprehensive empirical study by the Harvard economist George J. Borjas (2017) demonstrates that this large influx of migrants in a short period of time had a serious impact on the wage structure of the domestic population with a similar level of qualification. The majority of refugees were high school drop-outs. After their arrival, the wages of high

[1] Needless to say that I consider this reply as a case of "public", not one of "professional" political science (Nölke, 2017a). For a detailed discussion of my views, see Nölke (2018a, 2018b).

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school drop-outs in the Miami region shrank by 10% to 30% over a ten year period, a dramatic decrease unlike any witnessed elsewhere in the United States. Moreover, wage depression due to migrants affected only low-skilled workers, whereas those with higher levels of qualification were not affected at all. These findings for the Miami region are corroborated by an extremely comprehensive general study on "The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration" by the US Academies of Science (NASEM, 2017). Here too, the impact of immigration on the wages of the domestic population varies according to level of education. While weaker groups within the domestic population, earlier immigrants and native-born high school drop-outs suffered a negative impact on their wages from the new wave of immigration, other groups did not have to bear any negative consequences (NASEM, 2017, 5).

For European rich economies the best "natural experiment" on the effects of large-scale migration on the less advantaged can be documented in the context of the opening up of the Austrian labor market for migrants from Eastern European EU accession countries in May 2011.[2] A systematic study of these effects demonstrates that migrants were willing to work for much lower wages than domestic labor, or even in the informal sector altogether, which lead to lower wages – or even unemployment – for Austrian labor with low levels of formal qualification. This affected especially sectors such as construction, gastronomy, hotels and other services with low skills requirements. According to a comprehensive study on these developments, negative effects on the local labor market are more severe, if many immigrants enter the labor market in a short period of time, and are especially detrimental, if immigrant labor has a low level of formal education, given the already difficult labor market situation in this segment of the labor force (Schweighofer, 2014).[3]

Taken together, the empirical evidence on the effects of large-scale migration on the labor market of formally less qualified segments of the population in rich societies indicates that the latter have very good reasons to be concerned about such developments, given that this type of migration usually brings large numbers of workers with a similar qualification profile. The already less advantaged have to bear the brunt of the negative effects of a sudden influx of migrants, whereas the socio-economic position of the better-off section of the domestic workforce is not negatively affected at all. In fact, it may even have positive effects due to lower wages in some service sectors, such as domestic servants, restaurant workers or food harvesters. This should make for a clear case against large-scale migration in left discourses, given that championing the cause of the less fortunate members of society is an important goal for the left.

Some might argue that the empirical data described above is only valid in a situation, where weaker participants on labor markets are not sufficiently protected by adequate social regulation, such as high minimum wages, or comprehensive coverage by collective wage-setting agreements. This is probably true. However, decades of increasing inequality and stagnating wages in the lower deciles of the income distribution are a good reason for being highly skeptical about even a small likelihood of the realization of these conditions in the foreseeable future.

[2] In contrast to the UK, for instance, Austria (and Germany) imposed in 2004 a seven year ban on labor migration from the new accession countries. Large-scale labor migration from the East European accession countries to the UK arguably was among the prime drivers for the Brexit vote in 2016 (Nölke, 2017b).

[3] For additional empirical material on the unwelcome effects of migration on domestic wages in some segments of the workforce in Germany, see Hassel 2018.

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Layered obligations as one normative point of departure for left migration policies

Other participants in left discourses on migration would probably accept the need for the protection of the domestic less well-off as a prime task of the left, but would also make the point that in a global perspective most migrants also belong to the less well-off and, therefore, would have an at least equally strong claim for support. Thus there would be a conflict between these two obligations for the left in rich societies. How can we solve this conundrum?

Despite decades of debates on this topic in political theory, there is hardly a consensus on this issue with regard to the appropriate course for political action. Until this fraught matter is resolved satisfactorily, my suggestion would be to turn to the pragmatic concept of "layered obligations" coined by the British author David Goodhart (2013). Goodhart argues against radical universalism, i.e. the claim that we have equal obligations to every human being on the planet. From such a perspective, which is at least implicitly popular in left liberal migration discourses, the protection of weaker sections of our domestic population against unrestricted immigration of those who are even worse off cannot be justified. Against such a radical universalism Goodhart argues that we have a hierarchy of obligations, starting from our family, to our local community and then to the people living in our nation-state and only after that to the rest of humanity.

What shape might a future migration policy take keeping in mind the above considerations and the broad thrust of Streeck's argument? Clearly, such a policy would not result in a claim for completely open borders given that the social protection of the weaker sections of our society on the labor market and in the social security system would be impossible without borders. Consequently, a restrictive policy on labor migration would be necessary until we are able to ensure that such a development does not lead to a further weakening of the situation of those less well-off domestically. Were the latter issue to be solved, for example, through full employment, decent minimum wages and comprehensive coverage of labor relations through collective agreements, labor migration could be handled in a more liberal manner.

The struggle for social progress in the domestic arena will take a long time to achieve these goals. In the meantime, we still have a degree of obligation towards the less well-off in other countries. However, a more cost-effective and socially less destructive way of supporting those people – compared to the option of cross-border migration – would consist in improving their lot in their own home countries. Again, this involves several courses of action. For want of space let me briefly mention only two priorities here. In order to meet the needs of those forced to migrate due to a humanitarian crisis, increasing the budget of the relevant United Nation institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Program should have absolute priority. An increase in these funds will help many more people abroad than spending the same amount on supporting refugees in rich economies (see also Streeck, 2018, 9-10). At the same time, my suggestions is to reduce incentives for further migration from poorer economies by changing our economic policies to accommodate the needs of these countries. For example, foregoing the imposition of our liberal economic models on developing economies through deep integration trade agreements would prevent the destruction of domestic industry in Africa (Claar & Nölke, 2012, 2013). Similarly ending the current series of Western military interventions abroad would obviate the need for refugees from, e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, to seek security and livelihoods in Europe.

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To conclude, I agree with some of Wolfgang Streeck's arguments about left discourses on migration policy. However, I am not sure whether a broad essayistic assault on various features of this discourse is the most compelling way of dealing with the issue. In order to maximize the impact of our critique of this discourse, I suggest focusing on one specific aspect of increased cross-border migration, i.e. its impact on the weaker social strata of the receiving societies. Given that large scale-migration in a short time period has a clearly negative impact on social groups with similar levels of qualification in receiving societies – and that most of this migration so far comprises of people with a rather low level of formal education – I would suggest that the left in rich countries pursue a twofold policy. On the one hand, it should advocate a restrictive policy on labor migration until and unless comprehensive social reforms first safeguard that such migration does not undercut the wages, and worsen the situation, of the less well-off in receiving economies. On the other hand, the left should also work towards reducing incentives for migration by advocating a less aggressive economic and military policy towards migrants' countries of origin as well as by increasing adequately the volume of assistance for humanitarian emergencies.

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