

# From Welcome to Farewell



**Germany, the refugee  
crisis and the global  
surplus proletariat**

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In the summer of 2015, almost overnight, Angela Merkel transmuted in international public perception from a brutal whip of austerity policies, relentlessly squeezing already impoverished populations in the crisis-ridden South of the European Union, to the last defender of the humanist values Europe likes to take pride in. Having been regularly portrayed with a Hitler moustache in countries like Greece, she now re-emerged as St. Angela, protector of the refugees. While Eastern European countries were busily erecting fences to stem the tide of unwanted intruders, and while the French state declared it sufficient to take in a mere 24,000 Syrians over the next two years, the head of the German government refused to give in to calls within her own party to limit the number of refugees, which was approaching one million (and eventually surpassed that figure by the end of the year). And just as the German hawkishness in dealing with the economic crisis of the Euro zone—seemingly irrational as it only deepened the recession—made observers resort to trivial psychology (was it maybe an exaggerated fear of inflation, deeply engraved in the German mentality, that drove those policies?), the willingness with which the German state, spurred on by its leader's now famous *We can manage!*, opened its doors while almost everyone else did the exact opposite, left smart journalists wondering if Merkel's biography (East German = victim of a Communist dictatorship = empathy for the persecuted) might provide a clue.

More critical observers, of course, suggested other readings. Some Marxists detected an “imperialist offensive” behind the German state's seeming humanitarianism, welcoming Syrians to gain more influence on the war ravaging their home country while at the same time pushing for “a European solution” to the refugee crisis which, given Germany's hegemony on the continent, could only turn out to be a solution in Germany's very own best interest.<sup>1</sup> Others focused more on the domestic situation, arguing that refugees are indeed most welcome in Germany, namely as fresh meat on the labour market at a time when many manufacturers are complaining about growing shortages of workers. In some cases, this line of interpretation feeds into a kind of left-wing nationalism that openly advocates “protecting” German workers from undue competition by foreigners. One prominent example is Sahra Wagenknecht, a high-ranking (and formerly Stalinist) politician of the parliamentary Left Party, who attacked Merkel's policy as a “total failure of the state” and came out in favour of limiting the influx of refugees as the “population's willingness to take them in has limits.” This earned her not only praise from the new right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), but also a brown chocolate cake thrown in her face by leftist activists at a recent party conference.

Regardless of their political implications, both readings contain a grain of truth but ultimately seem questionable. It is true that the right to asylum, far from being an immaculate expression of humanism, has always just as much served as an instrument of power politics. (According to a recent study, of the 233,000 refugees the U.S. accepted between 1956 and 1968, a mere 1,000 did *not* come from “communist” countries, to name but one example.)<sup>2</sup> And it is equally true that for capitalists, however much they claim that the ultimate goal of all their altruistic strivings is to provide jobs, full employment is simply a nightmare, as it strengthens workers’ bargaining position. Indeed, over the last nine months, representatives of German business have successfully pushed for lowering the barriers for asylum-seekers to enter the labour market. Still, both readings tend to underestimate to what extent politics, rather than following a consistent strategy, amounts to a hectic and highly contradictory muddling-through against the backdrop of growing global chaos. And what is more: if refugees are so beneficial for German capital and the imperial ambitions of its state, how is it that more recently the state-proclaimed “welcome culture” of summer 2015 has given way to very determined efforts to reinforce Fortress Europe?

Already in February, a conservative German newspaper noted with great relief that, though still not constituting quite the “cultural revolution” it was hoping for, Merkel’s announcement to Syrian refugees that, as soon as peace in Syria is secured, “We expect you to go back to your home country,” pointed at least to “a farewell culture complementing the welcome culture.”<sup>3</sup> Contrary to its image as the standard-bearer of European humanitarianism, the German government moved in this direction at the same time as it encouraged its citizens to give refugees a warm welcome. And of the tens of thousands of people who followed this call by giving free language lessons, providing food and shelter, and in many other ways—thus compensating for the near-collapse of the state’s logistics in the face of the massive wave of migration—only a tiny fraction objected to the new laws aiming to discourage fleeing people from heading for Germany in the first place. Asylum-seekers’ right to bring family members left behind in their home country has been curtailed. Those recognised as asylum-seekers have lost the freedom to choose their place of residency within Germany for three years. Deportations of those whose application has been turned down were facilitated and are now rising quickly. In general, the legal status of refugees has worsened.

Even more drastic are measures taken on the international level towards reinforcing borders. As human rights organisations keep pointing out, the deal signed with Turkey in March comes close to abolishing the individual right to asylum. This deal means that in exchange for billions of Euros and better prospects of acceptance into the EU, Turkey will prevent refugees from entering boats to Greece and will take back those who already did, thus keeping the misery



of immigrants at safe distance from European countries. Meanwhile, the EU's promise to accept one Syrian, flown out of Turkey in an orderly fashion, for every "illegal" immigrant deported back to Turkey from some Greek island has not yet materialised. And this deal with Turkey is now openly proclaimed as the blueprint for accords with a number of Arab and North African countries, offering substantial amounts of money, trade liberalisation, and other boons to those willing to do the dirty work of containing migration waves.

With the benefit of hindsight, Merkel's friendly gesture towards those traumatised have-nots being shoved around the Balkans like toxic waste appears as a simple emergency measure to stabilise a situation well out of control, buying time to work out a more lasting solution. Ironically, this solution turns out to be precisely the "Europeanisation" of refugee and asylum policies that Germany had itself flatly rejected only a few years back. Up until the current refugee crisis, the arrangement known as the Dublin Regulation put Germany in a quite comfortable position: asylum applications have to be processed by the country that applicants had first entered, which for obvious geographical reasons was, in the vast majority of cases, one of the Southern states rather than Germany. With the growing chaos in North Africa and the Middle East that followed the Arab spring, turning Libya and other former guarantors of repressive stability and secure borders into failed states, and thus enabling masses of people to try their luck and take a boat to Europe, Italy was the first country to see a massive increase in the number of arrivals. When the Italian government proposed sharing the burden by redistributing refugees within the EU, the other states, including Germany, rejected this idea. But just as Italy then stopped registering refugees, who could consequently move through Europe, so did Greece, when the influx via Turkey reached staggering heights. Given massive unemployment and tense social situations, both countries were hardly keen on new immigrants. By de facto suspending the Dublin system, they unilaterally created "facts on the ground." In the summer and autumn of 2015, the German state thus faced a simple choice: it could follow the trend towards unilateralist moves, or act as the hegemonic power on the European continent by making the seemingly generous offer to accept the refugees no one else would accept while at the same time working out a new way of managing the migration pressure. Now it is Germany that most strongly pushes for a system of redistributing refugees, a simple acknowledgement of the fact that the Dublin system has collapsed. Its success, however, seems doubtful, as Eastern European states in particular refuse to participate. While the economic crisis still lingers on and might return with a vengeance at any time, the refugee crisis has further exposed the fundamental contradiction of the European Union as a supra-national entity composed of nation states all following their particular interests.

What is more, the fact that behind the smokescreen of humanitarianism the German state has done its best to reduce the number of refugees making it to

Europe—of course, the deal with Turkey and similar moves are officially legitimised as mainly targeting supposedly ruthless human traffickers, thus keeping people from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea—has not prevented a massive resurgence of the far right. In its most vicious form, this has meant a drastic increase of racist attacks. According to official statistics, in 2015 the number of attacks on refugee homes has increased five-fold to more than 1,000. In addition, in many places grassroots initiatives by “concerned citizens” are trying to prevent the establishment of such homes. Then there is the ghastly phenomenon of Pegida (“Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident”), a crowd of paranoid citizens feeling betrayed by politicians, mainstream press, and basically the whole world, holding weekly anti-immigrant marches through Dresden. Finally, and most importantly, the already mentioned Alternative for Germany (AfD), founded in 2013 as an anti-Euro party calling for a return to national currencies, has gained a second life with the refugee crisis and recently secured double-digit results in several regional elections. While strictly neoliberal in its economic agenda, it has managed to attract workers and the unemployed in disproportionately high numbers. This brings us back to the question of the economics of migration in the current situation. Somehow, a relevant part of the lower classes seems to mistrust proclamations that migration, if limited and managed appropriately, is beneficial and even necessary for Germany. And the experts and think tanks paid for assessing what is good or bad for the economy do not seem to agree either.

Initially, the press was full of reports about how refugees could make up for the lack of skilled workers that employers complain about. The “Syrian doctor” became a sort of epitome of a supposedly well-educated workforce crossing the German borders. Leaving aside the question how real or exaggerated the lack of skilled workers actually is, as time went by it became clear that the level of education of the new immigrants is generally much lower than was first assumed. It is now estimated that for most of them it will take years before they find a job and that many won’t find one at all. In any case, billions of Euros will have to be spent on housing, education, and welfare. And the vast majority will most likely find themselves in the lower and lowest ranks of the labour market.

It is precisely for less skilled workers that the prevailing talk about Germany’s new job miracle must seem like a cynical joke. True, by today’s European standards, unemployment is relatively low and the total number of jobs has gone up. But it is by no means coincidental that employers and trade unions draw somewhat different pictures of the situation. In a paper about “refugees as a new reserve army for the labour market,” one unionist points out that, given the official figure of 2.8 million unemployed, the talk about labour shortages seems slightly surprising. Taking into account those who have given up looking for a job (and therefore do not appear in the unemployment statistics) as well as those who

involuntarily work only part-time, he concludes that the lack of full-time jobs actually amounts to roughly five million. Given that those affected most strongly by un- and underemployment are the less skilled and that the new refugees also tend to belong to this group, the scenario he draws up is one of “a significant increase of unemployment and competition on the labour market and thus a precariat divided along racist lines.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the demographic argument that figures prominently in current debates seems doubtful. Apart from the fact that the latest economic crisis, not foreseen by any notable economist, raises certain questions regarding the validity of so-called experts’ predictions, the standard projection of a huge demographic gap threatening “our wealth” in the future simply ignores rising productivity. As one dissident (though basically neoliberal) voice in the economists’ camp insists, the digital revolution now underway, fundamentally transforming industry as well as the service sector and making countless jobs obsolete, makes such projections quite questionable: “We can be happy if Germany shrinks, otherwise there would be way too many people without work as robots replace them.”<sup>5</sup>

In a very twisted and ugly way, then, there is a class dimension to the whole issue. While capital’s appetite for fresh labour power was hardly the *reason* for Merkel’s initial open-door policy, and even though its main representatives have fully endorsed the turn towards curbing the influx of refugees, it is a basic banality that capital and labour have sharply opposed interests when it comes to expanding the labour force, thus increasing competition among wage-earners. And the issue is, of course, not limited to jobs. Over the last ten years, the shortage of affordable housing, especially in big cities (the magnets that attract most migrants), has been severely aggravated by budget cuts. As goes without saying, it is not managers who will have to compete for increasingly scarce public housing. Just as their children’s schools, located in bourgeois neighbourhoods, will not be affected by new pupils who do not speak German.

One, often overlooked, consequence of this constellation of circumstances is that hostile attitudes to the newcomers are by no means limited to “ethnic” Germans. And that can hardly come as a surprise, as those hit hardest by un- and underemployment, low wages, and lack of housing are very often of Turkish, Arab, or other foreign origin. Asked about increasing competition on the labour market, an official of the federal job agency recently predicted that this will mostly be one “between migrants and migrants” (i.e. those who arrived decades ago or were born to immigrant parents, and the new refugees).<sup>6</sup> According to a poll, thirty-four percent of AfD voters in the cozy southern city of Freiburg had a “migration background,” far more than in the case of any other party. Beyond strictly economic issues, there is presumably also a psychological dynamic at work. Somewhat reminiscent of the 1920s, when acculturated German Jews observed

with great concern the growing influx of poor and more religious *Ostjuden*, interviews with people of Turkish and Arab origin show fears of being associated with the newcomers.<sup>7</sup>

To get the bigger picture, one has to keep in mind that despite all these frictions, Germany is still in a far better position to accommodate a large number of refugees than most other European countries. The downward spiral in which Greece has been caught for the last six or seven years is surely exceptional, but also in places like Spain, Italy, or even France, any talk about a need for fresh labour power seems quite off the mark, given persistent mass unemployment. While social conditions in many parts of Europe have deteriorated significantly since the onset of the crisis, those who are even much worse off used new opportunities to make it to a region that for them, despite its decline, still holds enormous promise. They could hardly have chosen a worse moment, but then, again, fleeing the war in Syria or the jihadists in Afghanistan is not much of a choice.

Ultimately, then, the picture points to the general tendency of contemporary capitalism to create a surplus of labour power, moving around the globe to the extent that they can but hardly finding a place where they would be welcome. The wars from which most refugees try to escape are themselves to a high degree the result of an explosive social situation marked by a shortage of jobs and mass misery, turning whole countries into gangland.<sup>8</sup> As miserable personifications of the global crisis, these surplus proletarians, arriving in Europe, remind those who still have a job of their own potential fate, triggering an aggressive turn to the nation-state. Proletarian nationalism is nothing new,<sup>9</sup> but with the expansion of the welfare state throughout the 20th century it gained a more immediate basis. When workers all over Europe line up behind anti-immigrant parties today, a major driving force is the fear that aliens might get something that they consider rightfully theirs.

Traditionally, many on the left have regarded nationalism and racism as instruments of the ruling class to divide the proletariat, as if the latter was not always already divided by objective conditions. Today in Germany, many of those who reject such an instrumentalist understanding fall into the opposite extreme. Celebrating migrants as some kind of *Ersatzproletariat*, they scorn the “racist German proles” and consider any attempt to *explain* proletarian nationalism as inevitably *excusing and justifying* it. Of course, defending open borders and rejecting the dominant distinction between legitimate asylum-seekers and illegitimate “economic refugees” is a fundamental principle of internationalism. When locals, be they “ethnic” Germans or second-generation immigrants, turn against refugees, there is no question which side to choose. But not taking into account the real consequences of a mass immigration of the poor will hardly



provide a basis for challenging the hostility it meets.

Those who do take them into account broadly fall into two categories. While the likes of the above-mentioned Sahra Wagenknecht wholeheartedly affirm the nationalist exclusion that constitutes the instinctive reaction of many workers, others with more humanist inclinations take recourse to the agenda of left Keynesianism: economic stimulus programs, job creation in the public sector, and shorter working-hours allowing the integration of more people are supposed to lower tensions between local and new immigrant workers.<sup>10</sup> Even though the German state currently still has the fiscal leeway for such an agenda, the proposed measures would directly or indirectly be a burden on capital's profitability and therefore, at least in the long run, come up against objective limits. Instead of reproducing the illusions the statist left harboured in the twentieth century, an adequate response to the current situation requires a sober assessment of the limits of the ruling mode of production, limits which the refugee crisis itself throws into sharp relief. In such a perspective, this crisis is one more indicator pointing to the obsolescence of the system of wage labour.

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## Endnotes

1. “Der humanistische deutsche Imperialismus kommt voran”, Gegenstandpunkt 2/2016.
2. “Welcome, up to a point”, The Economist, May 28th 2016.
3. Berthold Kohler, “Der Satz, auf den viele warteten”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, February 2nd 2016.
4. Lars Niggemeyer, “Flüchtlinge als neue Reservearmee auf dem Arbeitsmarkt?” (2016, available online).
5. Interview with the Swiss economist Thomas Straubhaar, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Feb. 29th 2016. Of course, Straubhaar’s rosy picture of the future (less people producing more thanks to technical progress) completely ignores the difference between wealth creation and value creation, as is obligatory for any respectable economist. As Marx has shown in Capital and Grundrisse, it is precisely by raising labour productivity that the capitalist mode of production undermines its own basis.
6. Interview with Detlef Scheele, Zeit Online, May 2nd 2016.
7. Though clearly a paranoid wing-nut, the well-known novelist Akif Pirinçi, born to Turkish parents and today one of the most vicious demagogues of the extreme right, might in some sense also testify to this phenomenon. After vulgar rants against Muslims at a Pegida rally he is currently sued for inciting hatred.
8. “Syria has been hit by the same social crisis as north Africa. Almost half of the population is under the age of 15; every year, 250,000 to 300,000 people enter the labour market, but the traditionally important public sector has frozen hiring for years. Even a couple of years ago a German thinktank remarked that ›the politically most dangerous‹ problem in Syria was the ›growth of the poverty belts around the major Syrian cities. [...] Syrian families arrive there on a daily basis unable to sustain their livelihood in the countryside‹ (Germany Trade and Invest)”. Friends of the Classless Society, “Postscript to ›Arab Spring in the Autumn of Capital‹” (2012), available on [kosmoprolet.org](http://kosmoprolet.org).
9. Trying to explain the catastrophe of 1914 unfolding before his eyes, the Dutch council communist Herman Gorter noted: “The national capital is indeed their [the workers’] enemy, but it is an enemy which feeds them. Thus, although the worker is only passively nationalistic, he is nationalistic and cannot help being nationalistic so long as he is not a real socialist. Because the nation, the nation’s capital, is the foundation of his existence.” Herman Gorter, “The Origins of Nationalism in the Proletariat” [1915], available on [libcom.org](http://libcom.org).
10. This is the solution the trade-unionist cited above proposes after correctly concluding that the current wave of immigration threatens to deepen competition amongst workers.



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