

Comment

Fortress Europe

Amongst the discounted books recently on sale at a well-known Oxford bookshop was a volume dealing with the Cold War. So rapidly do circumstances change, that what was once a concept forming the political philosophies of continents is now a subject of mere historical interest. The nomadic commentators on public, diplomatic affairs have moved on in search of another key phrase with which to characterise and justify the prejudices of the great, whilst hiding the inadequacies of the simple. One symbolic feature holds the kaleidoscopic images of recent changes in focus: the collapse of the Berlin wall. Nobody who saw the happy crowds flowing through the abandoned check-points could fail to be moved at the exuberance and hope written on their faces; an optimism which subsequent German economic difficulties has failed to crush. The demolition of the wall articulated an instinctive desire for a more integrated community of nations, which would encompass the free movement of populations. Instead, it has disclosed that Europe is not one but several continents, and that its clearest dividing line is drawn between the rich and the poor.

The expansion of Europe, involving treaties of association with the former Communist bloc countries and a closer union between the EC and the countries of the European Free Trade Association, has also involved, on the part of most member states, a reconsideration of their immigration procedures. It could be argued that the wall may have fallen in Berlin, but it has been built higher around the shores of what is becoming 'Fortress Europe'. In almost every country in Western Europe the influx of refugees from poorer parts of the world, now including Eastern European countries, has prompted an increase in obvious racist activity at the brutish end of the political spectrum. Meanwhile, the British government has been making it more and more difficult for individuals to claim asylum here; amongst those to be rigorously excluded henceforth are 'economic' refugees. It is perhaps fortunate that these tests were not applied at other points in our history, since the ancestors of many ministers in the present cabinet, not to mention certain members of the Royal Family, would have been deprived of the benefits of life in Britain. Even those whose forbears, in time of depression energetically 'got on their bikes' and looked for work, could by extension be stigmatised as descendants of 'economic' refugees. Such stringent conditions of entry will not apply to enlightened havens of tolerance like the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, which will still welcome 'economic' refugees, in the shape of the wealthy who are forced to flee the totalitarian zeal of the mainland tax

inspector. Wealthy ex-dictators may apply for refugee status and be accommodated as political exiles at the courts of their former patrons, but poor people who suffered under them must stay at home and take their medicine; if they can afford it.

In 1970, in an address to the Commission of the European parliament on Health, Paul VI drew attention to the plight of migrant workers within the European community. The most pressing problems, he claimed, were presented by immigrants from Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. The pattern of integration, since then, has not been uniform throughout the continent; the demand for cheap labour has subsided somewhat since recession, whilst the growth of a service-economy and the development of mass unemployment, now eases the problem of domestic recruitment of low-paid workers. Part of the stimulus behind recent immigration legislation is a widespread fear of massive 'economic' migration from eastern European countries. An excessive anxiety to preserve Western European economic stability runs the risk of projecting the violent ethnic and religious rivalries of the Victorian slum onto the contemporary political screen. We are in danger of making prejudice respectable, having made greed an ideal.

Pope Paul, in 1970, reminded the members of the European parliament that European institutions were intended to focus an ideal that was sometimes complementary to, and critical of, that represented by national governments and parliaments. The bounds of the European ideal, at some points, march closely with those of Christianity. Justice and peace figure largely in the message of the incarnation. The terms of the gospel charter include a welcome to the stranger and a refuge for the homeless. Many of the parables turn on the dramatic inversion of the standards of the earthly kingdom. We are often reminded that we shall be judged not only by what we have achieved, but also by the sufferings and oppression of those through whom we have achieved it. Those who follow the gospel path laid out by Jesus the refugee child cannot collude in a policy which is content to foster distinctions in nature where none exist in grace. There is nothing dishonourable, grasping or unworthy in seeking work to support your family and educate your children. More people have left this country over the past decade than have entered it. Those who come to receive from us also come to give, the experience of history shows that in such pluriform and tolerant societies prosperity increases and culture thrives. The contrary message of the Berlin Wall reveals that fortifications exclude, but they also imprison, breeding atrophy and corruption.

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