Pragmatic humanism: the case of borders

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Published in:
Social housing - housing the social

Citation for published version (APA):
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One could say that the little community that formed at the Beursplein in Amsterdam tried vigorously to be an ideal “social society.” It offered hope and social inclusion as well as shelter and food. As has been discussed in the previous text “Homeless,” from the start this community naturally attracted marginalized people from the surrounding area, including the red light district. The social needs from the outcasts of society were putting too much pressure on the fragile new infrastructure of the camp. While the camp was originally meant as a forum for political change, it became preoccupied with the supply of mental healthcare, shelter, and food for those who needed it.

The question of how to cope with these needs became one of the main topics on the agenda of the General Assembly. While at first there was a focus on how to accommodate these needs, as time passed people started to question whether this was indeed possible. At one point it was even proposed to build a wall around the camp to shelter it from this social demand. Fortunately, this proposal was not accepted. However, the incapacity to create a sustainable situation did contribute to the demise of the community. The amount of time that the “social goods”—the aforementioned hope, social inclusion, shelter, and food—were actually discussed, led to some of the people, who wanted to use their energy for global political goals, to declare themselves to be the “true” occupiers. They started to remove others who did not contribute to these goals from the Beursplein.

This publication—compiled with clear humanist intentions and created in the wake of the all-encompassing wave that ranged from the financial crisis to the Arab Spring—addresses the question of the possibility of what we might term a “social society.” One basic principle of this volume, found in the introduction, is that for a society to be social it must embrace the idea that safely living together in equality is a right to be afforded by all members of a society. This theme of internal equality of basic rights, which are shared by all, has been a major theme in political philosophy. However, the situation that occurred in Occupy Amsterdam shows how the concept of a social society justified by referral to the intrinsic equality of all is problematic. It forces us to be aware that no society includes all people. Any society that offers certain public goods at a greater level than surrounding societies will attract outsiders to such an extent that it will not be able to provide those services on the same level any longer. Nonetheless Occupy did attempt to be a society open to all, offering food, shelter, and mental healthcare to a greater extent than the rest of Amsterdam—services which soon became in too high a demand. Therefore in this moment of rupture we were directly confronted with an observation that comfortably stays in the background of our daily lives: in order to have an inclusive society we inevitably need some mechanisms of exclusion.

In the center of a united Europe, it may sometimes seem as if we live in a borderless society, because our borders have shifted to the south and east of Europe. They are yet further removed as border controls are exported to countries outside of Europe. The southern border of Europe begins in northern Africa. The Sahara forms a first natural geographical barrier that separates Sub-Saharan Africa from the Mediterranean. The only road that connects the two regions is heavily guarded by Morocco. It is here in Western Sahara, occupied by Morocco, that we find the only real southern gate in the wall of Fortress Europe.

Northern African countries form a second barrier to Europe. These countries are confronted with immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa that make it through the Sahara and have Europe as a final destination. Before the Arab Spring the dictators of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia imprisoned or deported these immigrants, thus averting their arrival in Europe. Since the Arab Spring these “outsourced” migration checks have become less effective and the influx of immigrants and asylum seekers has increased tremendously. This resulted last year alone in a record number of people (more than 1500) drowning in the Mediterranean while attempting to reach Europe.2

Thus because of the Arab Spring, Europe is confronted with the fact that its social composition relies on structures of exclusion that are not evidently visible but are there nevertheless. And so the Arab Spring and the Occupy experience similarly confront us with the slumbering question regarding the borders

of our society. There is a major difference between the two experiences. In Occupy the issue was widely discussed and became a central question within a democratic decision-making process. People were forced to engage critically with ethical questions. In Europe the mechanisms of exclusion still remain hidden from sight. Even with all the mistakes that Occupy made, as previously described, it did force most of us to rethink the concepts of exclusion and the role that participatory democracies in the future could play in this. Being able to address these questions within open, deliberative, mechanisms is the true litmus test of a participatory democracy.