Pragmatic humanism: the case of borders
Beukema toe Water, A.K.; Bouadi, Y.; Mahieu, R.

Published in:
Social housing - housing the social

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
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

² UNHCR, “More than 1,500 drown or go missing trying to cross the
Mediterranean in 2011,”
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.