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A Primer on Social Integration: Participation and Social Cohesion in the Global Compacts

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A Primer on Social Integration: Participation and Social Cohesion in the Global Compacts¹

The Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees seek to create international rules protecting migrants and refugees. Two separate Compacts are under discussion and are expected to be passed by the UN in early December 2018. While the prime public and political attention to the zero drafts of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees is focused on root causes and safe passage, the issue of integration is of great importance because it reflects the commitment of the states involved but also of civil society organizations². In particular, the Global Compacts draw our attention to the general issue of social integration—of migrants and non-migrants alike. They raise the bigger questions of the kind of society we wish to live in and how society should be oriented with respect to societal cohesion. In general, the Compacts remain rather vague concerning what migrant integration should look like, other than saying that the goal should be to “(e)mpower migrants and societies to realize full inclusion and social cohesion” (Global Compact on Migration, Objective No. 16) and to “... facilitate better conditions for refugees and host communities” (Global Compact on Refugees). Statements made in the wake of the discussion on the Global Compacts are sometimes more specific. For example, the “Twenty Action Points” of Pope Francis emphasize the contribution of migrants and refugees to immigration and emigration societies³.

This latter idea already points to the reasons why integration may be of essence not only for the social integration of migrants but also for the social integration of non-migrants—those people left behind and those receiving migrants. Migration and its consequences concern all, since we nowadays live in a “migration society”, even though only a minority of the world’s population undertakes cross-border migration. Migration and above all integration have emerged over time as crucial areas in which boundaries between groups have been consti-

¹ Presentation at the conference “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees”. The Church’s Perspectives on the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. 16 March 2018, Catholic Academy Berlin.

² Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Zero Draft. 5 February 2018 (https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180205_gcm_zero_draft_final.pdf); and Global Compact on Refugees. Zero Draft. 31 January 2018 (<http://www.unhcr.org/Zero-Draft.pdf>).

³ Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts (http://jrs.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/20-Action-Points-for-the-Global-Compacts.EN_.pdf).

tuted, contested and changed. Conflicts around integration have brought to the fore differences (heterogeneities) between categories, such as ethnicity, age, gender, religion, social class and so forth. The classical sociological question of how social integration is possible under the conditions of ever increasing heterogenization of society remains pivotal not only for social scientific analysis but also for imagining and organizing social life in general and for politics on the local, national and global levels.

Like all pivotal terms in science and the public sphere, social integration is fuzzy in its boundaries and has been attributed a variety of meanings. Much of the confusion around the term arises from the fact that we often do not distinguish such terms adequately between concepts of analysis or theory and concepts of practice. As a concept of analysis integration refers to the interaction of members in society so as to result in somewhat stable social configurations. As a concept of practice integration has been given many different meanings, ranging from outright assimilation of migrants, to majority-society rules, norms and lifestyles, to multicultural understandings which emphasize the cultural autonomy of all groups in society, minorities included. Nonetheless, as argued here, integration—in all these understandings—consists of two basic and related elements: participation and social cohesion. A partial understanding, such as the currently faddish focus on participation, would not do justice to the social fact that migration in national states in their current incarnation often raises contentious issues around cultural heterogeneities and a conflict around presumed national homogeneity. Such debates can be used to forge unity in diversity (*e pluribus unum*).

Given this multiplicity of meanings, it is useful to advance two propositions which help to shed light on the two sides of the coin called integration. First, there is the dimension of integration as participation: it refers to inclusion in relevant societal fields, such as education, employment and housing. The fundamental question here is how to enable participation in society. Second, integration can be understood as social cohesion enabling conviviality of groups in societies: it depends on the mutual recognition of groups (not the absence of power imbalances!), occurring in the context of the current transformation of society not only through globalization, of which cross-border migration is a visible element, but also through processes of individualization. Here, the crucial question is how to create unity in diversity in communities. Whereas the first question concerns processes of associative relationships (*Vergesellschaftung*), the second relates to communal relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung*).

Integration as participation always concerns the inclusion of migrants into fields populated by organizations and groups. In this case, integration of migrants is often seen as a reduction of deficits; for example, migrants need to learn the language of the country of (temporal) settlement. Seen in this way, integration only seems to concern the immigrant population. As a

counter-narrative to the deficit-understanding, various stories have emerged, among them “diversity” as a resource. In this perspective, the cultural capital of migrants—such as embodied social skills or certified skills—is viewed as an asset which can be used by organizations not only to manage difference but to also increase productivity (private sector), or to cater to new client groups (public sector). For example, in the private sector language competence of migrants with respect to their country of origin is made use of, along with their insider knowledge of how social interactions play out among their compatriots. In the public sector—think of hospitals and schools, for example—such skills help to better serve patients or students. Overall, the participation perspective conceptualizes migrants as minorities to be moved or moving from outsider positions into the established fold of society. It is an enabling aspect.

The dimension of social cohesion widens the participation perspective because it looks at the mutual recognition of the established and the newcomers. While, similar to the participation perspective, the ultimate goal is the erosion of socio-cultural boundaries which constitute unequal life chances between migrants and the majority populations, there is a crucial difference: it is not the social integration of migrants that matters most but the overall social integration of society, which includes all groups and elements. Particularly visible developments along these lines have been changes to naturalization law in many European countries. Interestingly, debates on citizenship in Germany in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, for example, did not simply deal with how best to integrate migrants but above all with the self-description of national society. In this latter case, there has been a move from an ethno-cultural understanding of nationhood to a Republican one, as manifested in *jus soli* elements introduced into citizenship law. This example suggests that even within a liberal nation state that guarantees and ensures the rights and responsibilities of its citizens, associative relationships depend on the symbolic imputation of community. Also, as changing understandings of nationhood indicate, communal relationships have indeed fundamentally changed in Europe and elsewhere.

Thinking along the lines of social cohesion, we are reminded not only of progressive trends, such as the liberalization of citizenship laws in some parts of the globe, but also past and current failures. Among the latter is the emergence and reproduction of social boundaries which serve to create unequal access to life chances, for example in the educational realm. Numerous longitudinal studies, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have established the disadvantages of children of many immigrants in Europe. In addition, the drawing of symbolic boundaries also matters greatly for life chances. We can observe that migrants were labeled along class as members of a working class during the

1960s and 70s, of primarily ethnic and national groups in the 1980s, and since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, of religious identity. The point is not that migrants should be considered victims of discriminatory labeling. After all, migrant associations have also been involved actively in pushing for religious boundaries, replicating geo-political trench lines. Instead, the main issue is how heterogeneities such as the ones just mentioned, but also others such as age and gender, have been used to categorize groups as not belonging and thus preventing their social recognition; hence the urgent question of how to overcome harmful categorizations.

To bolster a counter-narrative to the deficit thesis we may go as far back as paleo-anthropologists usually do—to the early stages of humankind in Africa—to an insight that also involves out-migrations. One of the central findings of this branch of research is that the capacity for knowledge exchange beyond local groups was the distinguishing characteristic of and constituted the human species in the first place. Knowledge exchange, for example, drove the evolution of tools. In other words, exchange beyond local groups is probably to be found among humans only. Migrations involve cultural exchange. Looking at the immigration side of human mobilities, it is the encounter of established groups with newcomers that has often resulted in social innovations. One may think of the Renaissance in Europe which allowed for another wave of philosophical, mathematical, medical and architectural knowledge transfer from Orient to Occident. In less spectacular ways, migrants nowadays frequently contribute to community formation by establishing (small) businesses. We find such cases, for example, in urban areas where declining neighborhoods are somewhat stabilized by immigrant businesses because they offer opportunities for social exchange.

It is essential that participation and social cohesion be thought of below, above and across national states in order to understand the interconnectedness of social interaction. This is quite obvious in the case of migration control and integration—exemplified by the “migration crisis” in Europe in the years 2015/16. Not all forced migrants were recognized as refugees in Europe; some of them were forcibly repatriated to the regions of origin, while others have remained but with very insecure legal status as persons allowed to stay only temporarily. In all these cases, integration figures in important ways. The integration of groups of people beyond and within national states can be thought of as communicating vessels or tubes (when the liquid settles, it balances out to the same level in all of the containers regardless of the shape and volume of the containers). Any kind of repatriation, for example, whether voluntary or forced via deportation, raises issues of re-integration. Given the background of quite restrictive refugee reception, which has become ever more restrictive over the past few decades, the increasingly temporary status of refugees forebodes poor prospects of integra-

tion. Together with the externalization of migration control through remote control in Eastern Europe, North, West and East Africa, these processes amount to policies aimed at avoiding integration altogether.

Against this background and the fact that a majority of persons in refugee-like situations has been in such a predicament for many years, it is worthwhile to think about the resources migrants and refugees themselves are able to muster. While integration is always local, the cross-border viz. transnational ties of mobile persons play a role. Any kind of public policy needs to start from here. With respect to forced migrants, the restrictive tendencies have triggered new ways of “organizing settlement. The “Refugia” proposal by Robin Cohen and Nick van Hear, for example, imagines a transnational polity for refugees. All members would receive a “Sesame” pass which enables security, identification and cross-border mobility between refugee camps, but also access to credit and entitlements (reminiscent of the Nansen Pass of the League of Nations). Such a transnational polity would not be a territorial state, although the rule of law of the respective host state would apply in addition to self-government by a potentially global parliament of Refugians. Financial sources could come from a sort of Tobin Tax on tourism and arms trade, not excluding remittances of Refugians. While such a proposal may sound utopian, the current dire predicament of forced migrants calls for innovative solutions.

What do these considerations suggest for the future direction of integration practices? In a nutshell, integration policy needs to move from currently quite reactive to more proactive positions. It is true that many politicians around the world see migration as the new normal. At the same time, they engage in reactive responses only out of fear of right-wing populist and demagogues gaining ever more votes. The conflicts are not primarily over the economic aspects of migration. We know that often migrants are “wanted” for economic reasons, to fill gaps or to allow for divide et impera strategies in labour markets. Still, class conflicts should not be underestimated, and their impact on life chances is most considerable. Above all, class structures provide the channels within which the essential public conflict lines run along whether migrants are culturally “welcome”. For example, it is above all cultural practices of migrants belonging to lower classes that are politicized and labeled negatively. A definite transition has to guide future policies—away from conceptions of a homogeneous national culture or traditions. Past-oriented lines of commonality need to give way to future-oriented projects of common rules which support conviviality of most different groups. Any references to alleged Judeo-Christian traditions or Islamic solidarity are misguided attempts to essentialize belonging to homogeneous blocs. It is rather the awareness of one’s own cultural sources in conjunction with emerging areas of joint action which give hope for the future. To put it

differently, conflicts around migration need to be moved from struggles around non-divisible to divisible goods.