Interview with Guido Rings: "We need intercultural solidarity if we want to survive and prosper in a world hit by ultranationalism"

Entrevista a Guido Rings: "Necessitem la solidaritat intercultural si volem sobreviure i prosperar en un món colpejat per l'ultranacionalisme"

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As a master's and Ph.D. student at Anglia Ruskin University in 2011, I recall the central message in lectures given by my eventual Ph.D. supervisor Professor Guido Rings was that we cannot underestimate the enduring strength of the legacy of colonialism in Europe and its influence on shaping contemporary attitudes towards immigration. Indeed, as I was completing my studies, I became increasingly aware of the negative rhetoric towards migrants in politics and right-wing press. In an attempt to placate the far-right of his party and address a growing threat from the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a discourse of 'othernising' migrants on the basis of their supposed rejection of 'Britishness' from former UK Prime Minister David Cameron in particular caught my attention. The result of this was tightening of immigration regulations, which culminated of course in the now-infamous Brexit vote of 2016. Almost a decade after my graduation, Professor Rings is currently Vice Chair for the Research Executive Agency of the European Commission and continues to work at Anglia Ruskin University at the level of Ph.D. supervisor. He still publishes widely in the field of Migration Studies and his recent high-profile book *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* (Routledge, 2016) and editorships in the fields of culture and identity (*iMex Interdisciplinario Mexico*) argue for increased intercultural solidarity in Europe as well as a strengthening of supranational organizations like the EU and the UN to offset growing nationalism. I got in touch with

Professor Rings to find out where he feels Europe stands today with regard to migration and get his comments on the continued rise of nationalism on the continent.

Stephen Trinder (ST): Why has immigration become such a central issue in European politics in the 21st century?

Guido Rings (GR): There are several aspects worth examining in this context. To start with, we have seen in the first years of the 21st century enhanced mass migration to Europe with a culminating point in 2015. This is partially the result of violent conflicts in some parts of the world, which can be linked directly or indirectly to US led invasions, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. From these countries Europe has received numerous and often particularly traumatised refugees, who keep coming because none of these countries can be considered politically or socio-economically stable, and human rights violations are reported very frequently. Another country worth mentioning is Libya, which has after the last US led military intervention in 2011 become yet another failed state, from where substantial numbers of African migrants embark on the dangerous sea journey to Europe. This links up to the combined impact of climate change and population growth, which is particularly noticeable in poorer regions in Africa, hence the significance of failed states like Libya as gateways for migration to Europe.

ST: So, you are saying that the US led military interventions are responsible for the development of migration to such a central issue in European politics?

GR: It is in my opinion fair to summarise that none of the above-mentioned interventions can ultimately – in the way they were conducted – be justified as absolutely necessary national defence, meaning I cannot see a *bellum iustum* anywhere. And that raises questions of individual political responsibility. For example, in an ideal world, in the case of the invasion of Iraq, the war-provoking actions of political leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair should be assessed by The International Court of Justice in The Hague. Of course, if The Hague came to the conclusion that these individuals are responsible for war crimes, then they should be sentenced accordingly. On the other hand, the impact of climate change, population growth, poverty and lack of opportunities, especially in failed states is a global challenge, which can only be credibly reduced at global level, and that is where the United Nations should take more leadership.

ST: But so far and unfortunately, the UN has not been particularly effective along those lines?

GR: Yes, and that brings us back to your first question, because the increasing power of ultranationalist populist regimes world-wide has in the last two decades further weakened supra-national organisations like the UN and the European Union. Take for example Donald Trump as representative of populist ultranationalism in the United States, who forced the US out of the Paris climate agreement and at the same time sanctioned ultranationalist policies in Israel, with which he delivered numerous blows to the UN. In parallel, ultranationalist regimes in Hungary and Poland, as well as extreme right-wing parties and related movements in all other European member states have weakened the EU to a degree that until now the union was not able to implement convincing policies for the management of incoming migrants and refugees. There are clear and robust ideas that could convert the so-called migrant crisis into convincing labour recruitment schemes for an aging Europe, for example by establishing national quotas and

enhancing support mechanisms for the reception of migrants, but these ideas continue to be blocked by ultranationalist politicians. And it is of course in particular ultranationalist politicians who construct immigration as a highly problematic issue in European politics in the 21st century.

ST: *In your book,* The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema*, you observed the rise of ultranationalist Eurosceptic and xenophobic attitudes in the European politics in the decade or so previous. Where would you say we are now in terms of discourse on migration and immigration in European politics?*

GR: Political and media discourses on migration are in the 21st century very much shaped by ultranationalist populism with absurd nationalist rebirth fantasies, which Roger Griffin (2013) – one of the world's leading professors on the dynamics of fascism– very convincingly summarises as "neo-fascist". Quite clearly, we cannot expect new fascists to wear black shirts or brown trousers and re-appear with small moustaches. Just like representative democracy in the US and Europe changes over time, fascism also adapts over time, especially to democratic pressures from outside and inside in order to come to power. For example, "America first" and "Britain first" slogans with related demands like "American jobs for American workers" and "British jobs for British workers" are clearly ultranationalist, populist and anti-immigration, and they remind of comparable slogans in Italian, German and Spanish fascist periods from the 1920s to 1975.

From a socio-economic perspective, these slogans make ultimately no sense at all –neither nationally nor internationally– in the context of aging post-industrial societies in the 21st century. The reputable London School of Economics has already published numerous studies on the impact of migration worldwide, which tend to come to one conclusion: immigration has been of major benefit for the economic development in the UK and beyond. Consequently, migration to Europe should be discussed as a central issue in European politics, but it should not be categorised at first and above all as a problem. The question is mainly, how can immigration be regulated more convincingly so that host countries can more effectively help migrants in need while at the same time supporting their own economies.

On the other hand, we should be prepared to disseminate, communicate and further discuss more widely, especially in social media, the mechanisms that have made ultranationalism so popular in the 20th century and now again in the 21st century. Since it ultimately led to two World Wars and, more recently, to a trade war between the US and China, but also to enormous instability at regional, national and global political level, it goes well beyond impacts of and on migration. Out of my perspective, a good starting point for that wider discussion is provided by evolutionary psychology. I am in particular thinking of recent studies –for example by Hobfoll (2018) and Clark & Winegard (2020)– on human tribalism as a potential driving force behind ultranationalist but also regionalist ethnocentrism.

We simply have to understand that most of human history was shaped by tribalism, for example in the stone ages that lasted roughly 2.5 million years. There is clear evidence that this continues to have a long-lasting effect on human organisations after the stone ages, which are only a few thousand years old, and especially paradigms of assimilation or exclusion as well as homogenous, separatist and essentialist concepts of society link ancient and contemporary tribes. Perhaps it helps to discuss the popularity of ultranationalist slogans like "American jobs

for American workers" and "British jobs for British workers" in that way. After all, most people in post-industrial societies reject tribalism as a thing of the past that they do not want to be associated with, while "nationalism" seems to enjoy massive popularity.

ST: *What are your thoughts on the same in particular with regard to Spain?*

GR: Spain has above all to be congratulated that it remained for several years astonishingly intercultural and humanist-liberal, while political landscapes in other European countries and the US were already fundamentally shaped by fierce neo-fascist anti-immigration rhetoric. In these years, I actually regarded Spain as leading example of contemporary interculturalism, from which I expected major impulses for further development of a more open and progressive European Union post-Brexit. Unfortunately, with the rise of Vox to the Spanish parliament in recent years and the development of strong links between Vox and the Partido Popular, populist ultranationalism –or shall we say monocultural tribalism– is now also in Spain gaining weight. Here as well, it is worth stressing that migrants are not the problem. If anything, they might be part of the solution to help the old aging US and European economies to perform significantly better. In a nutshell, it is time to overcome tribal structures. The stone ages with an average life expectancy of 35 years and out of our perspective overall really miserable living conditions cannot be a model for the 21st century, while intercultural solidarity could definitely be a very convincing way forward.

ST: *In 2010 and 2011, a number of European leaders including Angela Merkel came together to announce that state multiculturalism had failed. Can you describe what multiculturalism is? Also, why do you think it 'failed' and which approach should we take today?*

GR: Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron's speeches on so called failed multiculturalism reveal an understanding of multiculturality, in which peaceful coexistence between culturally different groups in one society appears to the be ultimate aim. Let us be clear: There is in principle nothing wrong with peacefully living next to each other as a first step towards a better society, but multi-ethnic, multireligious and multinational Europe has to go well beyond that by implementing policies that enhance living and working together. In this respect, we can actually learn from the basic concept behind international teams in highly successful global companies like Google and Microsoft. Just sitting or working peacefully next to each other will not lead to effective team work that has over the last decades triggered highly original and innovative outputs and will enhance more such outputs. Learning from each other is key, and it is the discussion and negotiation of new ideas with people from other business cultures that helps to achieve that. In social life, the principle is the same, although it is far less acknowledged: What we need in the European Union, but also well beyond that, is a contemporary intercultural approach, in which we accept that national and regional boundaries should be blurred to leave room for an enriching exchange of ideas and negotiation of identities.

ST: In your book, you suggest that film provides a space to humanise the migrant other and push back against monocultural representations depicted in media and right-wing politics, could you perhaps, with a few film examples, show how cinema does this?

GR: Sure, take Philippe Lioret's *Welcome* and Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* as a starting point. Both films elaborate on how isolated French characters in Northern France find purpose in life by helping an illegal migrant survive persecution by French police and spying French neighbours who happily call the police to get the migrant deported. In *Welcome* highly

indifferent swimming instructor Simon helps 17-year old Bilal, a Kurdish boy from Iraq, while in *Le Havre* aging Marcel is prepared to support pre-teen Idrissa. Ultimately, both films fight article L622-1 in the French Penal Code, which threatens to punish people like Simon and Marcel with jail sentences of up to 5 years and a fine of up to 30,000 euro for their humanist work.

It should be added that both films are ultimately very successful in that fight, especially *Welcome*. Lioret's film was not only shown in the French National Assembly but led to a very substantial and partially polemic debate about injustices in the French legal system, which was supported by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. In this context, parallels were drawn between the hunt for illegal migrants in contemporary Europe and the hunt for Jews, Resistance members and other opposition in French occupied Germany and the Vichy regime of the 1940s. Clearly, none of the films argues that the situation in the 20th and the 21st century is the same. However, it appears legitimate to draw on affect and transcultural memory in our approach to migrants and, in that context, accept also the parallels of persecution. In particular thanks to the popular pressure that mounted in the years after *Welcome* and was further enhanced through *Le Havre*, the French Penal Code was ultimately in 2012 amended by article L622-4, which excludes humanist interventions from such severe penalties and, instead, suggests to concentrate on what L622-1 was probably designed for in the first place –to fight people smugglers and other profiteers of human misery.

Welcome and *Le Havre* should consequently be considered as critical intercultural interventions, or intercultural laboratories that can have a very direct impact on social life. How exactly fictional narratives can develop successful intercultural interventions at structural level has been very convincingly elaborated by Neumann with focus on literature in *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Communication* that I edited for Cambridge University Press recently (2020), so I better leave these aspects to her and other contributors in that book.

Instead, I would prefer to briefly mention at least two other outstanding examples of critical interventions: Rachid Bouchareb's *Indigènes* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Fear eats the soul*. The former should be thanked for its contribution to change the French pension system, i.e. give WWII veterans from former French colonies the same pension rights as French veterans from the so-called motherland. *Fear eats the soul* has in an impressive manner highlighted the link in exploitation and marginalisation of larger parts of the population in each post-industrial society. This includes not only a wide spectrum of migrants, but women who suffer from pay gaps and are currently catapulted back into traditional roles during the Covid crisis. Other outsiders are aging people who tend to be exploited as free babysitters for example, but are otherwise often forgotten, especially when they do not fulfil that function anymore. While Ali in Fassbinder's film stands for the exploitation and discrimination of many migrants in a fully convincing manner, Emmi represents both the other gender and the aging part of the population. Fassbinder clearly wants viewers to recognise the link between all these outsiders and potentially also understand their own outsider role with a view to act on it. With growing precarisation, that outsider role is increasing further. Many immigrants but also "natives" form part of the new precariat, which Standing currently estimates at 20% of the British population, and there is a strong upwards trend that has to be stopped. I have elaborated in significantly more detail on that in my recent studies on Fassbinder's *Fear eats the soul* in Alkın's volume (Rings, 2017) and Gonzalez Mitján's *Limpiadores* in Dolle's volume.

ST: What does the future hold for migration to Europe?

GR: I hope for enhanced development of the EU to a much closer union, perhaps the United States of Europe (no problem with a different name), which fully accepts free movement of people within the EU and accepts that the benefits of immigration from beyond Europe tend to outweigh by far the challenges that are always linked to mass movements of people. On the basis of that understanding, a European permanent resident card system could be introduced, perhaps partially inspired by the Green Card system in the US, although with considerably easier access. Given current neo-fascist tendencies, we might only be able to achieve that through the introduction of a robust two-tier model. However, this model would have to be substantially different to previous two-tier ideas raised by the current Hungarian and Polish administrations for example. In particular, it could not mean all rights for members that undermine democratic structures and free movement of people.

Instead, I imagine a powerhouse pilot, in which countries that are fundamentally interested in a closer union sign additional treaties that bring immigration rules, national tax systems and military structures in line. Above all, the member states of that powerhouse would have to give up on the current veto system, to enhance the running of the new United States of Europe, and there must be a mechanism to exclude member states who do not fulfil the democratic conventions to which they agreed in the first place. This process will not be easy, but –because of the advantages and enhanced stability it is likely to bring- I could imagine that the pilot might start with countries like Germany, France, Spain, Belgium and Italy, and could ultimately incorporate most other European Union members. Latest at that stage, ultranationalist populist regimes can be excluded from the benefits of the single market. It is clearly unacceptable that countries like Hungary and Poland currently enjoy the benefits of that market and its support mechanisms, e.g. now in the Covid crisis, while violating the most basic democratic principles the European Union is built on and, at the same time, refusing to accept a quota for migration to Europe and even block free movement within the union.

Needless to say, that such an enhanced European Union could work very well with the new Biden administration in the United States, which has promised to overcome the tribal boundaries re-constructed by Trump. Together, a reformed EU and US might actually be able to push contemporary tribalism in many parts of the world back into the margins and enhance instead intercultural solidarity in global politics. Ultimately, we all need intercultural solidarity if we want to survive and prosper in a world hit by the climate change, we all contributed to. In this context, we also need a completely different approach to nature characterised by respect, but that might be a topic for another interview.

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