Immigration is re-entering the political agenda. And so it should be, thinks Mike Ticher. But it's world migration which is the most pressing issue. And in this respect the West has a serious case of bad conscience.

If the Statue of Liberty were being built today, an inscription which wanted to express the same sentiments as the original could be much shorter. It could simply say: "Give me your economic migrants". But of course it wouldn't. Like all Western countries, the US is now doing its utmost to prevent the huddled masses ever having a chance to breathe free, to the extent of building large fences along various parts of the Mexican border and sending back thousands of refugees fleeing the chaos in Haiti.

The break-up of the Soviet empire, at a time when borders between European Community states are becoming increasingly irrelevant, has led to increasingly strident calls for tougher migration laws in EC countries. The rise of the extreme Right in France and Germany in particular has been closely identified with campaigns against migrants, both legal and illegal. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, 18,000 Vietnamese refugees await forcible repatriation by the British government, with another 41,000 yet to be classified as either 'political' or 'economic' migrants. Since 1988, 80% of those screened have been put in the 'economic' category and therefore denied the chance to migrate to a third country.

The unashamed racism of those calling for an absolute halt to migration in Europe has tended to obscure some of the more complicated issues involved. Yet the dimensions of the problem, and in particular the questions it raises about the New World Order, demand a response which goes beyond mere outrage at the behaviour of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his cronies.
The scale of migration from East to West is no figment of their imagination. 500,000 a year are now leaving the Soviet Union alone, while Germany estimates that 200,000 people have entered the country illegally from the East in the past year, quite apart from those who have applied for political asylum (another 200,000). The TV pictures of thousands of Albanians attempting to enter Italy last year provided graphic evidence not only of the numbers of people trying to escape the ex-socialist countries, but also their desperation to do so.

Such massive flows of migrants are the inevitable result of the proximity of countries with vastly different standards of living, combined with the relaxation of controls on freedom of movement in the old Eastern bloc. The fact that the number of people applying to come to Australia dropped significantly with the onset of the recession indicates how intimately migration is linked to the international economy. It is the changing nature of that world economy which has led to most of the ironies, inconsistencies and hypocrisies with which the immigration stances of Western countries are now riddled. A few of these deserve specific mention.

Countries like Australia and the US which, in the past, have made a virtue of economic migration (or even elevated it to a national myth) now require capital and specific skills, rather than labour. Hence the pressure on their governments for policies which encourage the immigration of those who are perceived as potential producers of profit, rather than consumers of services. Anyone bringing in US$1 million is now entitled to automatic residency in America, with citizenship granted after five years. With only 6% of its population now overseas-born, America's immigration policy has become more a question of ‘Give me your well-fed, your successful businessmen yearning to invest, your individuals with their own personal space...’

Italians, of course, made up a large proportion of those deserting Europe for the US (and Australia) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Now, however, Italy's own changing economic fortunes have made it the favoured destination, first of a steady stream of North Africans, then of the Yugoslavs and Albanians. The efficiency with which the latter were dispatched last year suggests that the Italians are unlikely to feel any urgent historical responsibility when it comes to accepting such 'wretched refuse'.

The same could certainly be said of Britain and France, whose immediate immigration problems stem largely from the consequences of their withdrawal from Empire. Britain’s Nationality Act of the early 1980s severely curtailed the rights of entry of its former subjects, while it has been the first country to introduce fines for airlines which bring in migrants with invalid documents. Such is the zeal
of the British government in discouraging unwelcome arrivals, that Home Secretary Kenneth Baker last year became the first British minister to be found guilty of contempt of court, after defying a judge’s order not to deport a Zairean refugee until his claim for asylum had been properly assessed.

In France, the ‘moderate’ right has capitulated disastrously to the siren song of Le Pen’s National Front as they jockey for position for the next presidential elections. Former President Giscard d’Estaing’s reference to an “invasion”, and Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac’s comments on the “smells” of immigrants have become notorious. The French fear most of all the burgeoning populations of their former North African colonies, and Giscard (among others) has suggested that in future French nationality, and therefore right of residence, be determined by parents’ nationality rather than place of birth. With the advent of free movement within EC borders the prospect of, for example, Turkish ‘guest-workers’ from Germany (who have no rights to permanent residence there) crossing the border to have their children in France is not one which appeals much to the French.

But it is the thought of refugees from the ex-Soviet bloc which particularly animates most EC governments. Having abused these countries for decades for refusing their citizens the right to freedom of movement, the West is now desperate to prevent them from exercising it. Their intention is to create a ‘Fortress Europe’, with more or less unlimited movement within the EC, but fiercely patrolled borders around it. Following a meeting of 27 European countries in October of last year to agree on guidelines for stemming migration from Eastern and Central Europe, French Interior Minister Philippe Marchand confirmed: “From now on, France’s external border is more Germany’s border with Poland and Italy’s border with Yugoslavia than the German/French or Italian/French borders”.

Germany’s frontline status makes the situation particularly acute there. It has been the most generous country in Europe in terms of allowing requests for asylum to be heard (even though only 5% of them are eventually accepted)—France, the next largest recipient in 1990 had only 56,000 applications compared to Germany’s 200,000. But the appalling incidence of racist attacks on foreigners, in both Eastern and Western Germany, has already frightened the Kohl government into speeding up the processing of applications, herding the asylum-seekers into large camps, and proposing to amend the constitutional right to asylum.

The unmistakable trends in all these countries towards ever greater restrictions on entry raise questions not only about immigration policy in individual countries in the short-term, but also the nature of the new international order following the collapse of the post-war East-West dichotomy. In ALR 133 (October 1991), Diarmuid Maguire suggested three (related) interpretations of what the New World Order might actually mean: a more stable system achieved through East-West co-operation; the global triumph of capitalist democracy; and the future dominance of the United States. Without disputing the basic validity of this characterisation, I would argue that the issues raised by the migration question undermine at least the first two elements of this, and suggest a further dimension to the New World Order.

Firstly, the sudden rise of parties of the extreme Right in Europe threatens to be more than temporary. The election results in Belgium in November 1991, the upsurge of neo-nazism in Germany, continuing successes of the National Front in France and the enthusiastic commemorations of Franco’s death in Spain all suggest that the permanent stability of Western European democracies should not be taken for granted. The more optimistic conceptions of the New World Order could tolerate a certain amount of instability and uncertainty in the newly-democratised states
of Eastern Europe, but if the West is supposed to have 'won', extremism and turmoil in its bastions of capitalism and democracy hardly set an encouraging example to the rest of the world. Migration has already proved to be, at the least, an issue capable of inflaming passions far removed from ideals of ever-burgeoning peace and security.

Secondly, massive flows of migration indicate another possible characterisation of the New World Order—the replacement of the East-West division not with global harmony and stability, but with a new division, along North-South lines. In this interpretation, it's not just Africa, most of Asia and Latin America, but also the constituent parts of the Soviet Union and most of its former allies in Eastern Europe which would have to be counted as belonging to the 'South'. Judging by the present state of their economies this is far from being a fanciful suggestion. It's only by ignoring such gross (and ever-widening) economic inequalities that Western leaders can deceive themselves that the collapse of communism has brought about 'the end of history' or the dawning of a new era of peace, prosperity and democracy for everyone. Immigration policy is where such noble sentiments collide with reality.

The implications of such a conclusion are that if the West is serious about turning the New World Order into something more meaningful than simply its own economic and military hegemony, it will have to stop wavering on assistance to the ex-Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (not to mention the rest of the 'South') and commit itself to full-scale aid and assistance. The Italian government implicitly recognised this with their offers of aid to Albania in exchange for the Albanians preventing the departure of any more nightmare cargoes across the Adriatic. By contrast, the shameful refusal of the US to resume aid or trade with Vietnam, on increasingly incredible pretexts, promises no long-term solution to the refugee crisis in South-East Asia. Their pitiful offer of an additional US$600 million in emergency food aid to the Soviet Union at the end of January belied all of George Bush's fine words about "an opportunity that may not come again in our lifetime". Russian deputy prime minister Gennady Burbulis estimated that Bush's offer would be enough to feed the ex-Soviet Union for approximately 10 hours.

Perhaps the crucial difference between US and European attitudes is not the relative wisdom of their governments, but the frightening proximity of the European 'South' to its affluent neighbours, and its sheer size. The demise of communism in Europe has, if you like, moved the borders between the North and South much closer. Previously, with the exception of Mexico and the United States, they shared no significant common land frontier. That development should serve to concentrate minds in Western Europe, and to force its governments to reflect on the consequences of suddenly acquiring such undesirably mobile neighbours.

Perhaps the choice facing the West (or, more accurately, the North) can be summed up by an analogy to another country where recent change has been seen be part of the emergence of the New World Order: South Africa. The North can be thought of as equivalent to an affluent white suburb in Johannesburg. Despite its prosperity (or rather because of it), the inhabitants feel the need to severely curtail the rights of entry of outsiders. They may be allowed in to work, but not to live. Security fences, alarm systems and ferocious guard dogs are thought to be necessary to secure property and the safety of the population. The dominant ideology favours unbridled capitalism and rails against the evils of the communist system which it perceives itself to have triumphed over. Yet the theory of the free market has to be thoroughly bastardised by strictly regulating the movement of labour, because of the gross inequalities of living standards between the insiders and the outsiders.

As the inequalities widen, the privileged few have a choice. They can retreat further into the laager, becoming ever more security-conscious and paranoia about those outside. The presence there of the 'other', the threat to their way of life, is a constant spectre to be raised by those on the extremes whose motive is pure racism. Alternatively, they can attempt to do something to redress the economic imbalance before the misery outside the gates and the repression and intolerance inside become unbearable.

The analogy is crude, but not without some validity. The fear of economic migrants and the measures taken against them are an indication of the limitations and contradictions of the 'triumph of capitalism'. While the impending freedom of movement within the EC is trumpeted as the last word in level playing-fields, Vietnamese refugees rotting away in camps in Hong Kong, having risked drowning, sharks and pirates on their perilous sea journeys could be forgiven for thinking that they had fulfilled Mrs Thatcher's old dictum of 'getting on their bikes to look for work'. The North-South idea of the New World Order, with the economies of the North increasingly intermeshed with each other, but ring-fenced against the South, explains why their efforts are not appreciated by the developed world. It's Soweto for them.

Merely stating that it's in the North's own self-interest to do what it can for the remnants of the Soviet empire doesn't do away with any of the practical problems that entails which, of course, are legion. But as the US toys with isolationism, the sheer numbers of people attempting to flee the endless political and economic turmoil in the ex-Soviet Union should be a recurrent reminder of the fragility, and even absurdity, of the principles supposedly enshrined in the New World Order. If they are not, rather than extending democracy to people in the rest of the world, we may find ourselves having to defend it against them.

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