The EU migrant debate as ideology

Social rights, obligations and responsibility in the capitalist welfare state

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Public debate in Sweden on EU migrants has become particularly divisive of late, reinforcing misleading notions of who is considered "deserving" of welfare and who "non-deserving". The authors appeal for a political community based on radically different principles.

In Scandinavian countries known for equality and the generosity of their welfare states, beggars have become a recurring feature of the cityscape. As camps of tents and trailers emerge, we are witnessing a type of poverty that many hoped never to see again after the passing of early industrial society. The poor are often members of the Roma minority and EU citizens, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria. [1] The poverty of this group is not new. But the eastern expansion of the European Union and the principle of free movement brought about the migration of poor citizens to Scandinavian welfare states.

Scandinavian municipalities are encountering new inhabitants who are deprived of social rights and without access to the social safety net that covers the majority population.

The poverty and exclusion of EU migrants [2] has caused debate. One dimension of this debate is anti-Gypsyism. [3] But the EU migrant debate revolves more around a matter of principle, namely the question of the “right to have rights”. Which individuals are, to paraphrase the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, not merely part of society but also recognized members of the social order that guarantees social rights? What set of obligations follow with the rights offered by a particular social order? In this essay, we discuss the debate on EU migrants as a problem related to dominating norms regarding social rights. We aim to demonstrate how these norms are rooted in the capitalist system in general and the logic of the welfare state in particular. A radical critique that recognizes the inherent limits of the capitalist welfare state reveals the need for movements of the Left to reconsider a political strategy that is limited by an idealized notion of the capacity of welfare states to combat inequality and the poverty of EU migrants.

The EU migrant debate and the welfare state as a normative order
Societies are more than an assembly of bodies linked in mutual dependencies. They are also cultural systems. Every society is constituted by historically unique formations of economic, political and social structures and power relations. These formations structure the social norms that dominate society. The EU migrant debate revolves around a specific set of norms, namely norms of reciprocity, i.e. established notions of which rights and obligations should follow from being a member of society. [4] We argue that such norms are absolutely critical, but relatively overlooked, aspects of the current debate on EU migrants in Sweden. When begging is described as an “unworthy” or an “unacceptable” source of income, it reflects underlying norms of what is expected from individuals who claim to be recognized by society as right-bearers. When local politicians or government officials argue that responsibilities lie with the authorities, this reflects widely held notions about who should guarantee every individual’s possibility to fully participate in society.

In the last few decades, research on the welfare state has sought to develop theoretical models for how norms of reciprocity emerge in modern societies. In one of the most influential works in the field, the German sociologist Steffen Mau argues that welfare states, through rules and regulations regarding eligibility and distribution, work as formal and large-scale producers of “moral economies”. [5] This concept was originally introduced by British historian E.P. Thompson. [6] Thompson claims that an analysis of norms of reciprocity is crucial to understanding the factors behind the recurring food riots in eighteenth-century England. These events did not automatically spring out of hunger and desperation. Rather they broke out when broad layers within the population found that elites had failed to live up to widely held norms about their social responsibilities towards the working classes. Thompson argues that these norms constitute the moral economy of society since they work as a form of invisible contract, as a cultural system of notions regarding what citizens have the right to expect from society, and are obliged to contribute to it.

In explaining how the welfare state produces moral economies, Mau combines Thompson’s concept with neo-institutionalist theory. In the spirit of economic historian Douglass C. North, [7] the welfare state is understood as an institutional order that constitutes the “rules of the game”, i.e. the formal rules, incentive systems and routinized practices that structure social relations between individuals and organizations. The emergence of the welfare state was characterized by intense conflicts between groups who fought for a welfare system based on contradictory principles. These struggles resulted in class compromises that were remote from the specific demands of single groupings. [8] But when the systems were established, a feedback-loop mechanism was activated that had repercussions for the norms of reciprocity among the population. [9] As we start to behave according to the guiding principles of a specific welfare system, these principles tend to become normalized and appear natural and just.

**Dominant norms of reciprocity in Sweden**

So, which norms of reciprocity dominate in a country like Sweden? Scandinavian welfare models are generally characterized as “universalist”. [10] In short, this means that every citizen in the country has the same right to a social safety net regulated by authorities and financed through taxes and employee benefit systems. A foundational element in the universalist welfare state is “the principle of the work strategy”. Historically, this
principle has had different implementations, but the basic idea is to adapt social security in terms of eligibility criteria and benefit levels so that it strengthens and maintains work incentives. [11]

We argue that the moral economy of the Swedish welfare state frames the EU migrant debate in ways that condition how the problem, as well as its solutions, are understood. The moral economy signals that the key to social rights is and should be citizenship and labour market participation. From this perspective, the poverty of EU migrants results from their home country’s inability or unwillingness to guarantee social rights to their citizens and to act against discrimination on the labour market. They are forced into begging which, in a society where wage labour dominates, is generally considered an “unworthy” source of income. Within the discourse of the moral economy two solutions appear as right and just. On the one hand, there is repatriation. Swedish authorities should put political pressure on the EU to promulgate sanctions on Romania and Bulgaria to force them to deal politically with structural discrimination against the Roma minority. When EU migrants return they should be guaranteed the right to work, which is considered key to other rights such as tolerable living conditions.

On the other hand, there is assimilation. From this perspective, Swedish authorities should evict EU migrants from tent and trailer camps, and encourage them to actively seek work in the formal labour market. Thereby, the EU migrants can become an assimilated part of the majority population. This standpoint is clearly spelled out by the political leadership in the Swedish municipality of Malmö. In a debate article, written as a response to EU migrants who demanded a halt to planned eviction from the settlement at Sorgenfri, they argue:

We welcome you to Malmö to try to find work and subsistence. You have the same right as every other EU citizen to find a lasting source of income during a period of three months. […] With this said, we must also apply the same rules for you as to other temporary residents in Malmö. It is not legal to establish settlements on someone else’s land without permission. The Environmental Department of Malmö assesses that the settlement at Sorgenfri risks being hazardous to your health and having a negative effect on the environment surrounding the settlement. [12]

Our point is that these two standpoints not only appear as the only realistic ones, but also as the only right and just solutions to this problem. Social rights and obligations are constituted in an institutional context where the moral economy of the welfare state is central. This institutional logic is elevated to a status of a natural order to which individuals and groups should adapt. Conversely, demands claiming that it is the system which must be transformed or calls for temporary special solutions appear as an unjust form of special treatment that risks undermining social cohesion.

We argue that this strand of welfare research says something crucial about the mechanisms behind the norms of reciprocity that structure the EU migrant debate. These norms appear so strong that they force themselves upon debaters, regardless of whether debaters step forward as advocates or as opponents of EU migrant’s rights. Those who call for a repressive strategy argue that since EU migrants are citizens of another
country, and they do not work or pay taxes in Sweden, they should not be entitled to the social rights provided by the Swedish welfare state. The advocates of EU migrants’ social rights argue that this group has been deprived of the right to work and that society should adopt policies to decrease the suffering that this has brought about. However, these different sides tend to share a long-term vision: the key to ending the poverty and exclusion of EU migrants is that they enter the labour market. Both standpoints stay within the boundaries of the established system and discuss the EU migrant issue as an anomaly, as an accident in the process of integration. Hence, both standpoints fail to recognize how this particular form of poverty and exclusion is a logical consequence of the basic principles of the welfare state and capitalism.

**On the critique of the moral economy of the welfare state**

Welfare state research convincingly demonstrates how the moral economy of the welfare state works as a normative framework regarding the right to have social rights. This having been said, we argue that this neo-institutional perspective underestimates the difficulties in resolving the “rights paradox” that EU migrants suffer. The seemingly simple and natural answer that they should be offered “regular jobs” and thereby exit poverty seems naive in the light of a radical understanding of what kind of system the capitalist welfare state actually is and the nature of the current crisis. In order to understand how this works the analysis must integrate complementary theoretical perspectives.

**Norms of reciprocity as mechanisms of exclusion**

A first step towards a fuller understanding is to examine the consequences of the moral economy of the welfare state and the role it plays in establishing and naturalizing a community based on equal exchange between individuals who are recognized as equals. To be included means to participate and to contribute; to be excluded means to stand outside of production, to not contribute to the GDP. This assumption is a central feature in political debates about “outsidership” during the course of recent decades. [13]

As the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss argues in his classical work *The Gift* from 1925, transactions of gifts and gifts in return - in welfare state terms, the taxation of work in exchange for risk spreading and social protection - contribute to social cohesion. [14] The problem that arises, of course, is when someone, for some reason, cannot contribute to the system, or when someone’s contribution is not recognized as valuable to the same extent as others. Systematic exclusion from the common economic sphere and from the labour market is indeed the reality for many Roma people within the EU, with migration and “begging” being the consequences.

However, there is also a more fundamental and underlying problem in the logic of reciprocity, which is revealed when someone “fails” to live up to expectations, or is accused of refusing to do so. Then the expectations of reciprocity are quickly transformed into a debt – which gives the “creditor” a potential position of power. As the American political scientist Kathleen Arnold points out in her discussion of the function of homelessness in relation to citizenship, the concept of debt plays a central part in the formation of the abstract political community. [15] But while E.P. Thompson emphasized the social responsibilities of elites, this logic of debt is increasingly used to single out the deserving from the undeserving, the worthy from the unworthy poor. In line with the
market’s prioritizing of utility, Arnold claims that our feeling of indebtedness towards the homeless – who in this case include Swedish citizens as well as people who do not hold a residence permit in Sweden – is rewritten into their debt towards us: “Our abdication of responsibility makes us witnesses to the spectacle of poverty, the exposure of the homeless to the elements, harassment, violence and arrests where the debt of the word Schuld can become guilt but it is a guilt that does not cease.” [16] Arnold continues: “We would like to make it a simple transaction with a beginning and an end, but this is impossible.” [17] Confronted with this seemingly endless responsibility, it seems easy to let feelings of guilt be transformed into scorn for what is experienced as the others’ incapacity to be economically independent. Arnold describes homeless citizens as “a political Other on a domestic level, against which the self-identity of the citizen can be defined”. [18] Homeless EU migrants and sans papiers, who live in Sweden but are denied social security numbers, can be said to confront a similar, and most likely a stronger, moralizing repudiation. In these cases the dynamic is intensified by a racist logic that essentializes the assumed differences of the “undeserving” poor.

“The Gypsy” as the nightmare of bourgeois society
Arnold’s discussion of debt demonstrates how the welfare state rests on a logic that systematically excludes those who for various reasons cannot live up to demands for returns. This exclusionary logic interacts with racist thought patterns, such as anti-Gypsyism, and reproduces cultural images of “others”. Anti-Gypsyism can be traced back over the centuries and should not be reduced to factors specific to modern society. However, racism must also be understood as a transformative system of thought, that adapts to the logic of present knowledge regimes and structural change. From this point of departure, we argue that anti-Gypsyism has a specific role after the emergence of capitalism and national welfare states, a role that becomes central to how the issues of begging and Roma EU migrants are discussed in contemporary Sweden. The German Marxist and feminist theorist Roswitha Scholz argues that the particularly modern form of contemporary anti-Gypsyism can be traced to capitalist conditions of existence termed value production and value dissociation. [19] Those who are identified as “gypsies” are forced to embody characteristics and ways of life that threaten the foundation upon which bourgeois society rests.

To explain Scholz’s line of reasoning we must begin with Karl Marx’s critique of political economy. According to Marx, capital should be defined as self-expanding value. A prerequisite for the accumulation of capital is the access to a commodity “whose use value possesses the quality of being a source of value”. [20] Furthermore, this commodity must have the capacity to produce more value than it consumes. The only commodity that has this quality is, again according to Marx, labour power. Hence, a central condition for the reproduction of capitalism as a historical system is to (re)produce access to labour power. In the section “So-called primitive accumulation”, [21] Marx analyses capitalist expansion in British society. He shows how the creation of labour power was an inherently violent process that required the establishment of the worker “free in the double sense”. On the one hand the worker must be recognized as legally free to sell his or her labour power. This means that the worker is free to sell labour power on a market without being attached to a single feudal lord or slave owner. On the other hand, workers must be “robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements”. [22] This fundamental condition determines “rule of law” as a central form-determination of the bourgeois state. [23] This
means that the state, through the use of repression and legal measures, works to remove alternative forms of supply that threaten labour supply. [24] It is ultimately because the state has this controlling function that it cannot accept either begging in public spaces or settlements on private property - not because of concern for those who beg in the streets or sleep in a trailer or in a tent. “The Gypsy” appears, through the stereotyped notion of a person who stands outside the labour market and the formal economy as unwilling to become “one of us” or to contribute according to the rules of the game, and is therefore portrayed as a bad role model for the “well-behaved” disciplined ideal worker that must be reproduced.

However, modern everyday life is full of activities that are encouraged despite not being part of the role ascribed to wage labour. Scholz argues that this is because total commodification would mean the collapse of a system based on general commodity production. This is why capitalist society is of necessity divided into a sphere of production, dominated by the law of value, and a reproductive sphere of value dissociation, dominated by qualities with female connotations such as care and nurture. Without the unpaid reproductive work that is carried out daily, capital would fail to reproduce labour power. In other words, the reproduction of capital requires activities based on principles opposed to those of the law of value. For this reason a crucial aim is to ensure that activities outside of value relations are adapted to serve the expansion of value, that is, to become an integral part of value production in the form of value dissociation. The function of the bourgeois state as “rule of law” must therefore, of necessity, be complemented by the function of the welfare state, i.e. a state that through various instruments links social rights and social security to activities in line with the inner logic of capital.

From the vantage point of value-dissociation the stereotype image of “the Gypsy” is one of an incomprehensible and therefore intimidating figure, and this is also the case in the EU migrant debate. EU migrants whose main source of income is begging disturb the capitalist order by being impossible to place either in the productive or in the reproductive sphere. They neither participate on the labour market nor are they involved in reproductive activities recognized as contributing to the common good. Rather, the EU migrant appears as “a figure who embodies a life beyond the disciplined bodies of the well-behaved workers”. [25] This figure is intimidating in the eyes of the “rule of law” since it cannot be isolated from the ethnic group. What is so shocking is that the life of “the Gypsy” appears on the one hand as bare life outside forced labour, reproductive work and social safety net and, on the other, as “outsidership”, unlike the unemployed, ill, young or old individuals who lack work ability, and does not seem to long to be subsumed under the relationship of value and value dissociation. Having said which, we want to underline that begging or other unconventional survival strategies should not automatically be regarded as subversive. Such an assumption lies dangerously close to the romantic but equally stereotyped idea of “the Gypsy way of life” as exotic, intriguing or as a “critique of civilization”.

So, what are the implications of this analysis of the bourgeois state as “rule of law” and welfare state for understanding the EU migrant debate? Let us begin by stating what it does not mean: we do not seek a reductionist explanation that traces the problem around EU migrants to the logic of the capitalist system. In line with Antonio Gramsci we regard the EU migrant debate as structured by “common sense”, [26] i.e. an historical bloc
constituted by shared notions of truths and that can be likened to an archaeological excavation site. Images of the Roma EU migrant are constituted by historical layers from different historical periods. Pre-modern forms of anti-Gypsyism and dominating norms in modern society coexist and coalesce. Together they interact as determinants of modern anti-Gypsyism. The EU migrant debate must therefore be understood in the light of the structural limits of both capitalism and the welfare state. EU migrants are constituted as a group within a specific historical and social context. The predicament of poor migrants within the EU is not only dependent on a society where social rights are connected to citizenship within a nation-state. It also requires an economic system that is founded on private property, generalized commodity production, money and wage labour. The poverty and multiple exclusion of EU migrants acquires meaning in relation to these historically specific facts, and we argue that the economic structure must be understood correctly if we want to understand why EU migrants are depicted as a threat, as an anomaly, that should be repatriated or assimilated. EU migrants provoke by managing to survive outside the activities that the capitalist welfare state naturalizes and exalts into a precondition for dignified life: wage labour and growth-promoting activities. When EU migrants are ascribed characteristics such as indecency, criminality, asocial behaviour, idleness and hedonism it is not so much (or at all) about actual features of this group. Rather, it reflects a quality of the capitalist system in itself, that is, the necessity to degrade all forms of life that threaten capital accumulation. Life “out there” must be unbearable and this is the ultimate reason why someone like Martin Valfridsson, who was up until recently coordinator of policies concerning vulnerable EU citizens for the Swedish government, is an advocate of “zero tolerance”: “you cannot give special treatment to specific groups in society”. [27] Again, we do not want to contribute to romanticizing ideas about the situation of EU migrants being subversive or inherently anti-capitalist. Rather, we want to problematize ideas about the welfare state as the only political form for combating social inequality, given its role in securing the reproduction of capitalist relations.

Welfare and social rights beyond the welfare state?

To sum up the argument so far: the EU migrant debate revolves around the question of who should have the right to social rights. The debate is structured by the moral economy of the welfare state that frames the way we think about how social rights and obligations should be distributed in society. The welfare state produces an ideological system that includes some groups as “deserving” and excludes other groups as “undeserving”. Roma minorities are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization, given modern anti-Gypsyist stereotypes about the social category of “the Gypsy” who, it is thought, refuses to participate in activities recognized as contributing to the common good in capitalist welfare states. We hope to have demonstrated how this problematic is an inherent feature of the welfare state that will not be resolved without threatening the capitalist relations that the welfare state is founded upon.

So, what does all this imply for a movement struggling for expanded social rights? A first question is how realistic solutions within the framework of the moral economy of the welfare state really are? The idea that the poverty of EU migrants should be combated through job creation seems fruitless. The moral economy of the welfare state emerged during a period that might prove to be unique during the history of capitalism. The golden age of the post-war era provided relatively good conditions for a strategy of
assimilation, and many European countries seemed to move towards full employment as well as expanded welfare systems. But the EU migrant debate takes place in radically different conditions. During “the Second Machine Age”, we witness an exponential growth in technological innovations, such that activities are automated faster than new jobs can be created. [28] This tendency, together with the current capitalist crisis, generates a situation where more and more people are out of work. Despite permanent mass unemployment, dominant policies continue to emphasize individual obligations to actively seek work and, through incentive structures, reproduce the fear of being unemployed or outside of the labour market. In such a political-economic situation the stereotypical view of “Gypsy” hedonism might appear like a contagious disease that risks spreading beyond the imagined border of ethnicity and infecting the broader population.

Furthermore, the idea that the state should intervene to guarantee the social rights of EU migrants and their assimilation to the labour market seems problematic. The EU migrant debate takes place in the context of a more long-term process of successive state withdrawal. [29] The structural changes of global capitalism that in popular terms are described as neoliberalism have increased the pressure on states to change their political orientation. A general consequence has been that the state and the public sector have withdrawn from public responsibility while an increasing share of welfare for marginalized groups is covered by civil society. From this perspective, the EU migrant debate about state versus civil society responsibilities is an integral part of a longer process of political change. Religious associations, extra-parliamentary political movements, charity organizations and networks of nurses and medical doctors have initiated crowd-funding to supply medicine and heating or trailers, offered medical treatment and counselling etc. However, many on the political Left do not discuss the organizing activities in civil society as a political reality per se. Rather, movements tend to stay within the frames of the moral economy of the welfare state. The apparently self-evident central actor is the state (i.e. Sweden, the EU, Romania or Bulgaria) and the goal is that the state will eventually “take responsibility” so that civil society can withdraw.

This lingering position is understandable given that the nation-state in general and the welfare state in particular has a key role in the establishment of just and fair systems for social redistribution, while civil society is associated with problems of special interest and paternalism. However, the position is problematic for several other reasons, not only because of the changed material/structural conditions discussed above. First of all, an idealized image of the capitalist welfare state is reproduced, an image that does not recognize the inherent limitations of capitalism discussed in this text. Second, the assumption that the state is the only institutional form that can guarantee welfare and social security is leading many on the political Left to neglect civil society as a political arena. A new political battlefield is in fact emerging in the vacuum that the state leaves behind. The battle revolves around which norms of reciprocity should guide the organizing activities of civil society. A key challenge for every social movement is therefore to develop forms for a successful struggle for hegemony and power over the structures in civil society. For the political Left, this battle is perhaps most importantly about ensuring that civil society is dominated by values associated with democracy, equality and solidarity rather than reactionary values of paternalism, kinship and cultural homogeneity. It all comes down to scrutinizing the logic of debt that structures the normative ideology of the welfare state as well as the principles of the (labour) market. Here, organizing within civil society may function as a social laboratory where commons,
occupations and the forming of new alliances can become embryonic forms for a political community based on radically different principles from those dominating the capitalist welfare state. A central task in such a battle is to establish solidary forms for organizing and mobilizing that establish and strengthen social bonds between groups that today are separated into “deserving” or “non-deserving”, and to establish conditions for EU migrants to come forth as political subjects that social majorities not only speak about but, in the end, speak to.

Footnotes


2. While the term "EU migrant" may refer to any EU citizen moving within the union, in Swedish discourse it has become something of a euphemism to describe groups of poor EU citizens from eastern Europe, temporarily living in Sweden and providing for themselves through street begging. The word is generally seen as a more neutral alternative to the more stigmatizing "beggars" or ethnically defined "Roma", though both begging and Roma identity are generally implicitly attributed to the group. It may be noted, though, that the word also builds upon a problematic understanding of "the migrant" as by definition a racialized and different figure. As we are analysing the debate in itself though, we retain this commonly used term.


8. Baldwin, Politics of Social Solidarity


10. This categorization appears in the theory of "welfare regimes" discussed in Gösta Esping-Andersen's influential work The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism, Princeton University Press, 1990, where he distinguished the social democratic universalist regime from liberal and conservative regimes. The universalist regime is not based on means
tests, i.e. where benefits are only accessible to individuals who are in particular need of them.


12. Carina Nilsson & Nils Karlsson, "Ni är välkomna att söka arbete och bostad" ["You are welcome to seek work and a place to live"], debate article, *Sydsvenskan*, 2 September 2015


17. Ibid.


22. Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 875

23. For a discussion on the "form-determinations of the bourgeois state", see Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 203ff

24. For an overview of this historical process of disciplining of workers, see Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton
25. Scholz, *Homo Sacer*


29. We understand this state withdrawal as not only being caused by ideological dogmas about the market's ability to allocate resources, but rather as a consequence of fundamental changes in material conditions. The welfare state was established in what is likely to be a parenthesis in the history of capitalism characterized by the complex and partly coincidental effects of the massive capital destruction brought about by both world wars; access to finite natural resources; and revolutionary technological developments as well as innovations in industrial production and distribution. When we analyse the role of the nation-state, we must consider these preconditions, which are fundamental for the "welfare society". See e.g. Harry Cleavers, *Reading Capital Politically*, AK Press, 2000 and the pamphlet from Centrum för marxistiska samhällsstudier [Centre for Marxist Social Studies] "Reformismens omöjlighet" ["The impossibility of reformism"], 2011.

30. This line of argument is represented by scholars such as the American literary scientist Kristin Ross in her book *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, Verso, 2015.