Essay

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Migration Policy – An Oxymoron or a Management Project?

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Abstract: Arguably, standardization is a key concept in contemporary global society. Not only has standardization facilitated worldwide trade of goods and services, but it has also made people amenable to similar work situations and to the production and consumption of similar products and similar information across countries. Harsh regional and national migration policies negate these effects of globalization and reflect instead a – unrealistic – managerial ideal of order. It is suggested that legislators who seek to transform states into nation states mistake states for organizations. They take an instrumental approach to citizens and migrants and see the declaration of human rights as an insignificant mission statement.

Keywords: globalization; migration policy; migrant; organization; standardization; trade

In 1947, in the aftermath of the Second World War, 25 states agreed to cooperate on tariffs and trade. The intention behind their general agreement – “GATT 1947” – was to take advantage of the combined world resources and stimulate economic growth. Standards of living should improve, and full employment be ensured. Some eighty years later, the World Trade Organization (WTO) comprises 164 member states. The objectives remain the same: to raise living standards, create jobs, and improve people’s lives by means of trade (WTO 2023a, 2023b).

Another type of progress, that of defending the integrity of every human being, featured in the 1948 United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its explicit purpose to never again allow atrocities like those of the past war. More than 50 member states were present when the declaration was adopted (although eight abstained from voting; United Nations 2023a). Some eighty years later, the Declaration has been translated into more than 500 languages (United Nations 2023b). Numerous government and non-government organizations have been
established to supervise the enactment of the rights and to report on deviations from its principles.

In this essay, I start from the observation that the political leaders of the 1940s took the entire world as their field of engagement. Having experienced the shortcomings of states that acted in their own interest, they sought to create a better world through cooperation and universal principles for human attitudes and behavior. But although their principles are often referred to as vital guidelines for economic development and human interaction – in global society, organizations have been privileged compared to human beings. Whereas ideas of globalization allow organizations to settle where they find best, in global society, people should remain in the states where they were born.

On the following pages, I describe how different attitudes to organizations and humans have shaped international and national policies. Conflicting arguments justified global trade on the one hand and harsh migration policies on the other. I ask the question how these policies – and the ruthless treatment of migrants that they implied – were motivated. The arguments were reconciled, I suggest, by the recognition that states were mistaken for organizations. This allowed legislators to treat migrants as abstract entities, like the employees, or “resources” that organizations hire. To celebrate ideals of human rights and human dignity became unproblematic, when these ideals were seen as aspirational, like organizational visions, mission statements, or “core values.”

As I understand it, legislators in many European countries and other parts of the world have used the same (conflicting) arguments to justify liberal trade and harsh migration policies. In this essay, however, most of my information comes from Sweden; its development and policy changes.

1 Some Characteristics of Global Society

Globalization has been defined as a process of economic integration, where international trade makes national economies become part of one economic system (Ortiz-Ospina et al. 2018). But this term may also refer to attitudes and ideas that travel around the world and provide humans and organizations with similar rationales for their behavior (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, Meyer and Bromley 2013). And there is likely a relationship between the two – so that trade relationships affect not only economic welfare but also peoples’ approach to life in its entirety.

I discuss global society in terms of trade (the market economy) and organizations (the organizational economy). In both instances, I argue, standardization, has played a decisive role. Further, standardization has shaped people’s perceptions, attitudes,
and behavior and facilitated exchange of ideas, experience, and knowledge across borders (internationalism).

1.1 Trade

The main and often used argument for international trade has been the idea of comparative advantage. Nations should specialize – they should produce the goods and services which they can produce relatively better than others and buy other products from places with other comparative advantages. With trade, every nation may profit from its specific relative advantage, and overall economic growth will follow (WTO 2023c).

Before 1800, international trade never exceeded 10 percent of total global production. A first wave of globalization (which was largely due to colonialism) ended with the First World War, when nationalism led to a collapse of international trade. After the Second World War, however, there has been a steadfast increase of trade volumes and trade relationships. In 2014, the sum of exports and imports across nations amounted to over 50 percent of the total global output value. Trade over long distances was stimulated by technological innovation and lower transportation costs (Ortiz-Ospina et al. 2018). Specifically, the introduction of standardized container shipping was pivotal for inexpensive transportation (Rybczynski 2006).

The expansion of trade seems to validate the comparative advantage thesis, for in the past two centuries (from 1820 to 2015) gross domestic products have increased (at 2011 prices) by over 90 percent (Roser et al. 2023). Although most people in the world are poor, living standards have improved worldwide, and the share of the world population living in poverty has declined (Roser 2021; Schoch et al. 2022). Consequently, there is a strong belief that trade benefits economic growth and the reduction of poverty. The World Bank (2023) explicitly cautioned against all types of protectionist subsidies:

Exporters of food and other key goods must refrain from imposing restrictions in times of crisis; importers should permanently reduce or eliminate import tariffs to ensure adequate supply in good times and bad.

Other organizations are similarly convinced of the benefits of liberal markets for goods and services. For example, the objectives of the European Union agree with those of the WTO but are more ambitious. The EU wants a more modern, open, and influential WTO that cooperates with non-members and seeks to incorporate developing countries into the organization (EU 2023a).

In other parts of the world, there are agreements on deregulated trade among states, although not always as comprehensive as that of the EU. For example, Mexico,
the U.S., and Canada have formed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and New Zealand and Australia are engaged in a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement (ANZCERTA). There are agreements on tariffs and trade among the South American countries, and states in Southeast Asia cooperate to stimulate economic growth and social progress (Frivärld 2023). Moreover, the member states of the Group of Twenty (G20) cooperate on diverse issues related to economy and finance (G20 2023).

In sum, contemporary global society is built on the idea that the principle of comparative advantage and the elimination of border controls lead to economic welfare. There is a persistent and widespread trust in the benefits of liberal global trade, commonly referred to as the market economy. Sweden is a paramount example of how wealth may coincide with the liberalization of trade.

1.2 The Swedish Example

The economic welfare of Sweden corroborates the free-trade presumption. Sweden’s gross domestic product hardly increased at all until the late 17th century, when Sweden was industrialized, railroads built, and the school system improved. Trade was liberalized in parallel, and exports and imports increased from around 1870 to the First World War. After WWII, GDP per capita has increased steadily, though at somewhat variant rates. In 2018, it was estimated to be 5–6 times higher than in 1945 (Ekonomifakta 2023a). In the past 40 years (1983–2022) exports of goods and services have increased by 1000 to 2000 percent and imports at about the same rate (Statistics Sweden 2023). In 2022, Sweden counted as one of the richest countries in the world (Ekonomifakta 2023b).

The view that free trade benefits economic welfare has been uncontested over the years irrespective of governments. Within the public sector, the explicit purpose of one government agency, the National Board of Trade, is to stimulate international trade (Kommerskollegium 2023). The Swedish state and the private sector cooperate to help Swedish companies expand abroad and make it easier for foreign firms to establish business in Sweden (Business Sweden 2023).

In Sweden, as in other countries, political leaders have insisted on economic growth. But the main growth triggers were the entrepreneurs and the businesses and other organizations that they established and whose interests they promoted through expansion and ever more efficient production.

1.3 The Idea of the Organization and the Organizational Society

When comparative advantage has been the key argument for international trade and cooperation among nations, the idea of the organization relies on efficiency
related to the production of specific goods and services. Organizations have been described as a rational solution to problems of coordination and control (Barnard ([1938]1968), or as an efficient way to avoid competition, reduce transaction costs, and eliminate the uncertainty and the many cumbersome negotiations that markets require (Coase 1937). Within organizations, an instrumental type of managerial rationality based on measurements may lead to drastic productivity increases, as Frederick Taylor ([1911]1998), for one, demonstrated.

Organizations are created by humans and modeled on the corporeal person – they can talk, make decisions, act, own property, even express feelings. Consequently, they have been granted legal status as independent “persons.” Like humans, organizations, are liable to claim that they are unique (although they are similar in many respects). Organizations specialize. They produce different goods or services, in different places and for different markets, set different prices, or market their production in different ways (Holmblad Brunsson 2008).

An idea of management is tightly coupled to the idea of the organization – to the extent of being included in this very concept (Brunsson 2013). Irrespective of how things turn out in practice, there is a presumption that management is instrumental in helping organizations become successful. When one management method proved to be dysfunctional, managers have been eager to try a new method (e.g. Abrahamson 1996; Carson et al. 2000).

Yet there are distinct differences between organizations and human beings. Most importantly, organizations are social constructions, and their borders are largely imaginary, defined – perhaps – by an accounting system with man-made rules that many have accepted as appropriate.

Moreover, the ethical ideals of organizations are different from those of humans. Whereas human beings should be patient, gentle, good, faithful, meek, and temperate, as St. Paul the Apostle recommended in his letter to the Galatians (5:22–23), organizations should give priority to their own interests (Fayol [1916]1949). Their production may or may not promote social welfare and sustainability – and people’s views on which production best contributes to a positive development vary. Many organizations adopt environmental, labor, or other standards as tokens of social engagement and connectedness, but their commitments should promote organizational goals (e.g. Carroll and Shabana 2010). Moreover, and contrary to humans, organizations should boast of their social engagement and other accomplishments. They should impatiently look for opportunities to change their production, suppliers, or markets. An ambition to grow may well combine with murder. However, egoistic organizational behavior is couched in a business type of language, where terms such as marketing and competition have positive connotations (Brunsson 2017).

The post-WWII economy has witnessed a continuous growth of multinational organizations (MNCs), and production by large business firms have come to
dominate global society (Feldbaum 2017). In the global economy, the market economy and the organizational economy are intertwined, and organizations benefit from political initiatives to eliminate border controls. The prevalent idea of comparative advantage allows them to transfer knowledge, routines, and employees (under certain conditions), or their entire production from one country to another, and to profit from this freedom. The interdependencies of local economies and the integration of the world economy grow in parallel.

1.4 Standardization

The international standardization organization, ISO, described standardization as the epitome of intelligence (2023):

Standards are the distilled wisdom of people with expertise in their subject matter and who know the needs of the organizations they represent – people such as manufacturers, sellers, buyers, customers, trade associations, users or regulators.

Standardization has proved a powerful means of facilitating international trade and large-scale production. There are standards for – for example – quality and management, the environment, health and safety, energy, and IT security. Because numerous new organizations have been created to define and monitor the standards, the proliferation of standards further reinforced the organizational economy (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). In addition, the Fayolist proposal that there are management principles that apply to all types of organizations, irrespective of their production, helped create a perception of organizations as abstract entities (concepts). Within organizations, professional ideals that prevail across organizations support their further standardization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The same is true of management ideals that seek to create order through organizational culture or specific core values (Alvesson, Blom, and Jansson 2021).

In sum, free trade and large organizations that produce standardized goods and services have been successful means to integration. Globalization (and urbanization) has led to conspicuous similarities among different parts of the world. For example, large cities with heavy traffic and elegant dress stores may appear identical. There are supermarkets and teenagers dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and sunglasses. Ikea stores sell identical Swedish-named sofas, toys, and cutlery. Only nature – trees, insects, or the Arctic ice – was neglected in the persistent strive for economic growth and human welfare (Starik 1995).

Which is the role of standardization for human beings in this world of global trade and global organizations, where, arguably, large organizations have absorbed society (Perrow 1991, p. 726)? Are people also standardized – or should they be? In the
next section, I identify four circumstances that make people similar (standardized) across borders.

1.5 The Standardized Person

The idea of liberal trade and freedom for organizations to move across continents did not leave people unaffected. First, and most conspicuously, people consume identical goods and services. International trade, inexpensive transportation, and advanced communication technology have made the same consumer goods, services, and information available across continents. Cars, clothes, preserves, technological equipment, health advice, lifestyle coaches, or university courses in management are accessible to anyone with sufficient economic resources. Whether, or to what extent, artifacts make an impact on people’s attitudes and behavior is an open question. As a minimum, such artifacts probably help them feel at home in many parts of the world.

Second, many were trained by organizations, work in organizations and are members of international organizations. Due to a bureaucratic ideal of efficiency by means of fixed authority structures and routines, organizations are similarly organized and managed (Fayol [1916] 1949; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Perrow 1991; Weber [1947] 1964). Managerial ideals of rationality, organizational culture and specific core values create homogeneity among organizational members (Thompson [1967] 2003). When employees or other types of organizational members are induced to adopt attitudes and behavior prevalent within their organization, their personal characteristics become less important: In the eyes of managers (and perhaps themselves), they are commodified as “resources,” “assets” or the even more abstract “labor” (Polanyi [1944] 2001). People who join an international organization because they sympathize with its mission are already standardized to a certain extent. Over time they may adopt more values that these organizations stand for and be further standardized.

Third, global platforms, owned by global organizations, allow individuals to communicate across countries and continents. The world wide web recognizes no geographical borders. Hence, the giant Metaverse (2023) described international exchange in terms of empowerment: “Giving people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” Because they expose people to similar, even identical, consumer ideals, digital platforms standardize human behavior worldwide (Zuboff 2019).

Fourth, the very idea that people are “individuals” endowed with human rights and expected to take responsibility for their own lives and the choices they make (and should make) contribute to their standardization. Somewhat incongruously,
organizations that prescribe how people should think and behave, or seek to protect their liberty to be authentic selves, also support standardization. They imbue people with ideas of self-worth and appropriate (woke) attitudes. A socially constructed idea of what individuality means in global society does not leave people unaffected. Large organizations disseminate the idea of “the individual,” shape people’s preferences and integrate them within the organizational society (Meyer 2010; Perrow 1991; Zuboff 2019). But contrary to organizations, humans are still physical beings, made of “flesh and blood.”

In sum, people all over the world have been exposed to similar, even identical stimuli as they became organizational creatures, were exposed to similar ideas of individual rights, and allowed global firms to collect all types of information about them. It seems obvious that free trade and dominant organizations do not only provide economic growth and welfare but influence the everyday lives and attitudes of most people, irrespective of where they live, or which religion, if any, they practice.

In addition to the standardization that follows from free trade and dominant organizations, there have been numerous political and civil initiatives to promote international exchange of knowledge, ideas, and values.

### 1.6 International Exchange and Cooperation

Over the years, there has been a general presumption that face-to-face encounters enhance an appreciation of foreign attitudes and culture. Like organizations, many have been encouraged to interact across national borders. This is true of members of civil or religious organizations who meet at international conventions or, like the scouts, at jamboree camps. It is true of university students, who are encouraged to study abroad, and of scholars who meet at international conferences and whose status depends on their international networking. And it is equally true of artists, musicians, authors, journalists, and other professionals within the cultural sector. In all these instances, international exchange has been seen as a vital national interest to be sponsored by governments.

Whereas civil, scholarly, or cultural exchange is often specialized, the free movement of workers within the European Union, which the Union has proclaimed as one of its four freedoms, constitutes a more comprehensive type of permanent exchange which parallels that of trade. The European Parliament (2023a) has declared the freedom of EU citizens (and citizens from a few other countries) to move and reside in the whole EU territory a success and a source of “European collective prosperity” (p. 5). To further facilitate cooperation and stimulate economic
growth remaining barriers, which mostly concern services, are to be removed (European Parliament 2023a).

But despite the economic welfare and other advantages that, arguably, emanate from the EU experience of reduced border control, the EU and other affluent states have proved reluctant to welcome citizens from countries outside their borders. When migrants are considered, the argumentation has been the very opposite of that of comparative advantage. Rather than regarding migrants as already integrated in the world economy (and standardized to a certain extent), legislators have been prone to base their policies on the notion that the inhabitants of one region or state are different from those of another.

2 Migration Policies

Normally, legislators formulate policies that concern situations within their specific jurisdictions, such as the organization of health care, education, or taxes. Migration policies, in contrast, are to regulate circumstances over which these legislators have little or no authority: wars, terrorism, abuse, national catastrophes, famish, and poverty in distant countries. Therefore, a migration policy issued by legislators in one region or state is an oxymoron, a combination of contradictory terms, as anomalous as a policy for the weather.

Yet the presumption that migration policies are legitimate measures of regional or state control has become institutionalized. By now, a migration policy is a normal ingredient in the arsenal of policies that legislators feel entitled to adopt. Basically, such policies are to discriminate among those who ask to cross state borders; select some and reject others.

Criteria for selection and rejection varied over the decades. At times, blunt aversion led legislators to bar people from certain regions. This was the case in the late 1900s, when the Congress in the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which should bar immigration from China. More recently, U.S. President Trump banned immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries and started to build a wall along the U.S. Mexican border (Goodman 2020). Idea-based arguments for migration policies appear more subtle but have been based on the same type of argumentation. When the Swedish Parliament adopted its first Aliens Act in 1927 there was a widespread belief that races should be kept separate. Ten years later, when it had become apparent that many refugees persecuted by the Nazi Germans needed protection, Parliament based its restrictive attitude on the argument that antisemitic attitudes and movements must be kept at bay (Lindberg 1973).

Migration policies of the 2000s focus less on those to be expelled and more on those entitled to live within specific geographical borders. They are based on the
view that the economy is non-dynamic and that, contrary to the idea of internationalism, cultural exchange should be avoided. Thus, it is argued that no one region or state can handle any number of immigrants. A limited number of work opportunities should be secured for the citizens. Or cherished cultural values must not be invaded by foreign attitudes or traditions. Whereas the pursuit of free trade is based on an idea that (allegedly) proved successful, harsh migration policies tend to disregard this knowledge, as well as any experience of successful immigration in the past, and rely instead on apprehensions for the future, when a massive influx of migrants is believed to occur (Malmer Stenergard and Roswall 2023).

Here, I use the migration policies of the European Union and Sweden to characterize migration policies of the 2020s in the “Global North,” including Australia and Canada (Mountz 2020). Right-wing nationalist parties in Germany, Italy, France, Poland, and the Netherlands have received strong popular support (Dagens Nyheter 2023a). Typically, these parties (and the Conservative party of the UK) advocate policies like the ones I describe in the next two sections.

2.1 The EU Migration Policy

The enthusiasm that the European Parliament demonstrated with respect to the free movement of EU citizens does not appear with reference to migrants from non-European countries. The objective of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum that the EU Commission presented in September 2020 was not to facilitate migration across borders, but rather the opposite: to strengthen the EU borders and prevent “irregular” or “undocumented” migrants from crossing them. (The terms irregular and undocumented refer to people who do not have permission to stay, work, or study in an EU country and thus are seen to have no legal status.) At the EU borders, migrants should be subject to a pre-entry screening procedure and channeled to the right type of procedure. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, should supervise the borders and fight human smuggling. A common EU system for returns should be based on partnerships with third countries, and voluntary returns stimulated (European Commission 2020). (Later, a “return coordinator” has been hired to create common European return procedures; EU 2023b.)

Further, all member states must take part in a system of solidarity, sharing the responsibility for refugee and other types of migration. Countries unwilling to accept immigrants might compensate for their stance by contributing financially to the costs of the new migration and asylum system, for example by helping finance the special task force on the Greek island Lesvos, or the new border or return procedures. The Commission described this option of sponsoring relocation and returns as a “solidarity mechanism” designed to help create predictability within the migration
and asylum policy domain (European Commission 2020). Critics pointed to disastrous living conditions outside the European borders and called the migration policy a new iron curtain “around the periphery of an arbitrarily defined European space” (Ash 2023).

2.2 The Swedish Migration Policy

A harsh EU attitude served to both legitimate and restrict political initiatives in Sweden. When, in 2015, Sweden had received close to 163,000 asylum seekers, out of which more than 35,000 were unaccompanied minors, the “migration crisis” was defined as a Swedish crisis, and the prime minister declared that Sweden needed “time out” (Regeringen 2015; Värmlands folkblad 2016). Temporarily reinforced border controls were established, and a temporary law stipulated that residence permits were to be issued for three years only (SFS 2016:752). With time, both initiatives became permanent. In November 2020, the Government prolonged the border control law for the thirteenth time (Europaportalen 2020).

The main arguments for the new migration policy adopted by the Swedish Parliament in June 2021, were comparisons and deterrence. Sweden should not take unproportioned responsibility for asylum seekers compared to other European countries. A harsh migration policy should make Sweden less attractive to migrants from countries outside the European Union (prop. 2020/21:191). Consequently, Parliament decided on one of the strictest migration policies in Europe (Delmi 2022).

The Swedish policy should conform to the policies of other European countries. Because neither EU law, nor other regulations to which EU members must adapt its legislation required permanent residence permits, temporary permits should be the rule. But as before, refugees resettled from a third country according to international agreements and after a government decision should be exempted and receive permanent residence permits (prop. 2020/21:191).

The conservative government installed after the 2022 general election took an even harsher approach to migrants. Internal border controls should be reinforced, the prerequisite for residence permits and citizenship should be harder, and the “return process” intensified. Instead of accepting 5,000 refugees from refugee camps, Sweden should accept only 900. These and other initiatives were to make it difficult for migrants from countries outside the European Union to move to Sweden, and even deter them from at all approaching the Swedish boarders (Tidöavtalet 2022, SOU 2020:54, prop. 2023/24:1) The requirement for well-paid immigrants, or immigrants with higher education, should be less restrictive, however, because Sweden must be competitive as a “research nation” (Tidöavtalet, p. 36).
In line with the ambition to discourage migrants from approaching Swedish borders – and the paramount catchphrase “order” – the Government planned to increase the number of places in detention camps, establish “return centers” and “arrival centers” where all asylum seekers should be lodged, intensify the “return process,” enforce harder requirements for work permits, restrict the rules for family reunion, and introduce language and other tests for citizenship (prop. 2023/24: 1). In addition, there were plans for making citizenship provisional and making it mandatory for public civil servants to report irregular inhabitants to the police.

The argumentation for not accepting those in dire need of protection has been one of victimhood. In this case, the victims were not those seeking a place to settle, but the authors of the migration policies. They pointed out that Sweden already accepted many immigrants, that immigration would disrupt a well-functioning administration and distort order as well as cherished national values. Victimhood came with additional references to the past; Swedes were poor not long ago; the citizens were entitled to their present wealth because their ancestors had endured hard work. (See Illouz 2023 for an in-depth account of how elites rather than the underprivileged become victims.)

In sum, legislators who introduced harsh European and Swedish migration policies built their policies on the presumption that people within a specific geographic area share unique values which must be protected. Their reaction seems anomalous in a globalized world, where standardization had become a prominent feature of many social spheres. In the next section, I discuss the idea of national values.

3 A Strategy for Nationalism

It makes sense, I believe, to distinguish countries from nations, and nations from states and nation states.

If a country is defined as a distinct geographic space, surrounded by borders to other adjacent countries, a nation, in contrast, comes with connotations of human cohesion. In a nation, people are standardized in the sense that they believe – rightly or wrongly – that they have certain values in common which make them unique relative to other people (Anderson 1983). Because national borders are culturally constructed – and imaginary – rather than physical, countries and nations do not necessarily overlap.

A state is a territory-based jurisdiction defined by laws that citizens, other inhabitants, and sometimes visitors must follow. Whereas state borders normally (but not always) coincide with the borders of a country, there is no intrinsic correspondence between nations and states. A nation may belong to one or more states, and a state may include one or several nations.
The idea of a nation state implies that the political leaders are active in making a country into one nation, which corresponds with the administrative and economic responsibility domains of the state. When successful, it may produce a type of “official nationalism” where nation and state merge (Anderson 1983, p. 83). However, the idea of a nation state blurs the distinction between a nation constructed by values and social bonds and a state, which is a hierarchical and legal arrangement for creating order (Ahrne 2021).

(This classification finds support in everyday language. You may love, be homesick for, and even die for your country, or for your “homeland,” and perhaps for a nation, but not for your state, or a state disguised as nation.)

The fact that legislators in many states adopted their own migration policies may be understood as a strategy to transform countries into distinct nation-states. By alluding to the existence of national values in need of urgent protection, they disowned the integration and standardization that followed from globalization (while simultaneously favoring international trade). Instead, they revitalized the idea of the nation and aspired to standardize their citizens accordingly. (In fact, national values were often fabricated by certain interest groups; see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992.)

Certain migration-policy initiatives demonstrate that state and country borders do not necessarily coincide. For example, the Swedish Government argued in favor of placing its “return centers” in some other, non-European country (Dagens Nyheter 2023b). It implied that the geographical borders of its jurisdiction might expand and include activities in territories far from Sweden. (Similar types of colonialism have been discussed in Denmark Great Britain, Germany, and Italy, and perhaps in other states as well.)

Which are the values that make people in global society so different from one another that closed regional and state borders are motivated? In the next section, I contrast formalized values imposed by legislators with values that emerge from surveys.

### 3.1 European and Swedish Values

The EU values, which were awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2012, are based on the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 and the EU Charter of fundamental rights of 2012. They concentrate on individual rights and the rights of EU citizens and celebrate human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights (EU 2023c).

Because Sweden is a member of the European Union, obviously, Swedes must embrace the values that this organization has formulated. That is unproblematic, because the Swedish constitution has a similar focus on the citizens: *All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people* (SFS 1974:152, Ch. 1, art. 1). In the Instrument of
Government, it is affirmed that Sweden is a democracy where the rule of law is important. The freedoms that the citizens should enjoy are recounted, and human rights are included through reference to the European Union and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom (SFS 1974:152, Ch. 2, art. 1, art 19).

In addition to the constitution, six core values have been formulated to guide the Swedish public sector. They are similarly principle-based and relevant for most democratic countries: democracy, lawfulness, objectivity, free formation of opinion, respect, effectiveness and service (Statskontoret 2023).

Values that were not stipulated by regulations and phrased as principles have proved difficult to specify. When informing immigrants about Swedish values, the Migration Agency has been general and cautious. In its introductory course, the Agency described democracy, equality and respect for human rights as Swedish values. It suggested that trust in government authorities and love of nature were values that Swedes typically embrace. In other respects, the Agency left it to others to describe these values: “Many who visit Sweden appreciate its cleaness,” “Some find Swedes inhibited and difficult to approach” (Migrationsverket 2021, translated from Swedish).

Values that have become incorporated into legal or other formal documents coincide with and may incite, even constitute, the idea of individuals as abstract, standardized entities (cf. above). Surveys, such as the World Values Survey (2023), approach the topic of values in a more pragmatic way. They describe non-formalized values of real-life persons and give more precise answers to the question of national values. Like the citizens of other countries in “protestant Europe” or in English-speaking countries, Swedes are little concerned with religion, family, or ethnocentrism. They care for the environment, are eager to promote gender equality and are tolerant of foreigners and LGBTQI persons. A desire to participate in economic and political life is another characteristic of their values, defined as secular-rational and instances of “self-expression.”

The relevance of these values became evident in 2015, when many migrants arrived in Europe and German Chancellor Angela Merkel proclaimed Wir schaffen das (“We can handle this”; Wikipedia 2023a). The same fall, the message “Refugees Welcome” met the migrants on many Swedish railway stations. Eight years later, Swedes traveled to the Ukrainian border to supply refugees with clothes and other necessities and to provide transportation to safety (Engblom 2023). Yet values that denote trust, generosity, or engagements are absent in contemporary migration policies. Instead, integration – or the lack of integration – has been described as the major problem, signaling an unsatisfactory standardization of individuals.
3.2 Integration

In the Budget Bill for the fiscal year 2024, the Swedish Government referred numerous problems in contemporary Sweden to inadequate integration (prop. 2023/24:1, vol. 1, p. 29, translated from Swedish):

By now, problems of integration affect society in its entirety. There is residential segregation, overcrowding, unemployment, dependency on payments from the social security system, health problems and poor school achievements, crime and exposure to crime, honor oppression, insecurity, and violation of the rights of young people.

The Government found the solution to all these problems in harsher border control and fewer immigrants. Though language skills, employment and a sufficient income were generally believed to be crucial, other requirements for integration remained hazy and were left to the immigrants to define: “It is the responsibility of all long-term residents in Sweden to become part of society,” the Government declared (prop. 2023/2024:1, vol. 1 p. 31, translated from Swedish).

This approach to the idea of integration impregnated the public debate: Ministers and others used “integration” in a reflexive sense, implying that integration is a characteristic of the person, and that people must integrate themselves. It presupposes a binary classification of people – some are integrated, and some are not – and supports the assumption that there are values which only integrated people embrace. Non-integrated persons, in contrast, become suspects, even criminals. The Government referred to (abstract) immigration but allowed for an interpretation where most (real) social problems emanate from (live) immigrants stereotyped into an abstract, though coherent, group of (dubious) people. But multiculturalism remained the official policy goal (prop. 2008/09:1).

Despite the insistence on integration, many legislative initiatives of the past few years rather encouraged immigrants not to engage with local values or skills. In Sweden, temporary residence permits signaled to both immigrants and their potential employers that they may soon have to return to their “home country.” Restrictive rules for where immigrants were allowed to settle, an intensified “return process,” and the many arrival, detention, and return camps served to effectively separate migrants from other inhabitants (Brunsson 2024).

Neither citizens, nor immigrants have strong incentives to establish lasting relationships with those whom they do not expect to meet further. The inadequate-integration argument, therefore, was incompatible with the harsh migration policies that were simultaneously implemented. In the next section, I suggest that the basis for harsh migration policies has not primarily been inadequate integration but a managerial approach that mistakes a state (or a group of states like the EU) for a large organization.
4 A Managerial Approach to Migration

Most people are reluctant to leave their country. And when they are forced to leave, whether because of persecution, poverty, or natural catastrophes, they are likely to settle in the nearest safe country that will accept them (European Parliament 2023b). As of 2022, out of 108.4 million forcibly displaced persons, 58 percent were internally displaced. They did not move to another country, but to some other place within their country. This was true also of war-stricken Ukraine, where 5.9 million out of 11.5 million displaced people remained in Ukraine (UNHCR 2023). Consequently, low- and middle-income countries received some 75 percent of all displaced people. “People stay as close to their countries as possible,” UNHCR observed (p. 11).

Legislators in western European countries (or the “Global North”) who insisted on harsh migration policies ignored the fact that those who seek asylum in distant countries have very good reasons not to return to the countries they recently left. Accordingly, migrants who have been forced to return, and many of those classified as voluntarily returned, are intent on further migration. Migration has become a circular phenomenon (Delmi 2021; Röda Korset 2021). This observation disavows the expectation that there are unsurmountable national traits that motivate closed geographical borders. It supports, rather, the conclusion that people are similar – or “standardized” – enough to live in many countries.

“Among those who agree to return voluntarily, few want to go back to their country of origin,” a government committee noticed (Delmi 2021, p. 168, translated from Swedish). Legislators who enforced “return processes” nonetheless may seem ruthless, even inhuman. Their decisions seem to undermine their simultaneous celebration of human rights but make sense, if one presumes that legislators mistook a state (or a conglomeration of states, like the EU) for an organization. Below, I try to clarify how a managerial approach to migration may make harsh migration policies appear motivated and just.

4.1 States as Organizations

There are obvious – but misleading – similarities between states and organizations. I identify six instances where states appear to be similar to – but are different from – generic organizations. In all these instances, a managerial approach to migration allowed for harsh policies and a ruthless treatment of migrants.

Order. Organizations are obsessed with the idea of order. Order is the very essence of management, and management is a vital ingredient in the social construction of organizations (Brunsson 2017). By now, it is common knowledge that, in
practice, organizations are far from orderly. Management is characterized by “brevity, variety, and fragmentation,” as Henry Mintzberg ([1973]1980, p. 171) famously phrased it, and managers struggle to make sense of their bewildering environments (Scapens 1994). The perfect order, as presented in management textbooks, has proved unrealistic (Holmblad Brunsson 2007).

Despite this insight, order has been a conspicuous feature of the EU and Swedish migration policies. When insisting on order within their jurisdictions, legislators ignored the fact that they have little influence over global developments. They disregarded the oxymoron nature of any idea of regional or state migration policies, however. Like managers, they saw it as their prerogative to accept only migrants whom they believed conformed with state interests.

**Hierarchy.** Organizations are non-democratic. Rights, duties, and privileges are unequally distributed among organizational members. At various hierarchical levels, there are managers to take responsibility for organizational decisions. Managers have higher salaries and are presumed to be more valuable to the organization than other members (Holmblad Brunsson 2002).

States are also hierarchical, and some inhabitants undoubtedly contribute more than others to welfare and state income. In modern democracies, however, legislators are to be elected by the citizens, who have equal rights to vote and take part in public debates irrespective of their economic or other circumstances. Formally, the hierarchy is reversed compared to that of organizations, with the citizens at the very top.

With harsh migration policies an organizational type of social hierarchy was implanted within the state jurisdiction. A new type of class society was constructed where place of birth (or parents’ place of birth) and type of residence permit determined the right to participate in public decision making. Different categories of inhabitants were granted different rights to health care, education, and social welfare. Citizenship was to be conditional and depend on the qualifications of the applicants (Regeringen 2023). The migration policies, therefore, had implications not only for immigrants; the very structure of the state came to resemble that of an organization.

**Control.** Organizations may control, supervise, reward, and punish their members (Brunsson and Holmblad Brunsson 2009). They may take an instrumental view on their members and force those who are no longer seen to benefit the organization to leave. States are entitled to even sharper interventions: they may use violence and incarcerate some of their inhabitants. But they cannot easily expel citizens that they dislike. Unlike managers in organizations, who may trust that members whom they discarded be cared for by the state or some other organization, legislators must accept that most citizens are entitled to stay in the country where they were born regardless of their competences or contributions to social welfare. States cannot see
their citizens as “assets” exclusively but must recognize an inherent human worth. They must acknowledge that effectiveness, if this concept is at all relevant, takes on other connotations than in organizations.

With respect to migrants, however, legislators did not recognize any intrinsic human worth to be considered within the framework of their migration policies. They accepted their right to decide the fate of others as a matter of course and included close supervision of migrants in their migration policies. Moreover, they disregarded the fact that states are geographically bounded. Unlike organizations, states cannot shut down their activities and move or start anew in another place. Because states exist in an environment of other states, return processes are feasible only on condition that some other state is willing to receive those who were not accepted as immigrants. In that case, migrants’ country of origin might be regarded as yet another organization to which migrants can be sent.

Migrants who found that they were not accepted anywhere were shuffled off to the “shadow society” created by harsh migration policies in many countries. In Sweden, difficulties to enforce return processes incited legislators to make the reception of immigrants a condition for foreign aid and to plan for return centers in other countries (Tidöavtalet 2022, p. 44, p. 33, Dagens Nyheter 2023b, see above). Like managers, who negotiate with (for example) suppliers, they widened the scope of the migration policy and included topics that used to belong to other policy areas.

**Loyalty.** For managers, the interests of the organization should be the number one priority. Members who no longer contribute to organizational goals should be forced to leave the organization (Fayol [1916] 1949). Legislators who implemented harsh migration policies argued along similar lines: They disregarded the fact that they must harbor citizens irrespective of their perceived loyalty and adopted an instrumental view on migrants whom they expected to assess like presumptive employees or other types of presumptive organizational members. Until they had proved their worth as assets, migrants – and asylum seekers particularly – might be regarded as a problematic collective for which legislators had little or no responsibility and which therefore had best be removed.

Whereas members of private hierarchical organizations should follow directives from their managers, in the public sector, civil servants must simultaneously consider the wider interests of citizens and other inhabitants (Bendix 1947). However, the negative attitude to migrants did not only concern legislators but infused the entire government administration. Consequently, civil servants at the Migration Agency and the Swedish migration courts followed Government directives and intentions but disregarded their duty to care for the migrants. They argued, for example, that the interest of regulated migration superseded that of children’s right
to live with two parents, or that it was safe to travel to Afghanistan “in individual cases” (Upsala Nya Tidning 2020a, 2020b, 2023). The treatment of migrants became ruthless, when loyalty to the state replaced empathy for the individual migrant.

Borders. As noted, the borders of socially constructed organizations are imaginary and mostly hazy. Yet managers may decide who should be accepted as organizational members. State borders that define a country, in contrast, are physical arrangements. There are poles or fences even in remote, uninhabited areas. Nevertheless, legislators have little control over who are included in their jurisdiction. People were born, die, emigrate, and age, and the size and structure of the population change accordingly.

Legislators who made migrants a separate category of inhabitants used physical borders to make entrance into their jurisdictions difficult. They sought to alleviate their “burden” of migrants by sending them outside their jurisdictions and by discouraging migrants from at all approaching the borders. While insisting that Sweden is a democratic country, they violated democratic principles, which demand that those affected by a law should be permitted to take part in the decision-making process (Carens 2013; Näsström 2021). A ruthless treatment of migrants followed from their argument that migrants belonged somewhere else.

Budget restrictions. Most organizations depend for their survival on incomes that cover expenses. States, too, depend on acquiring sufficient resources for their undertakings. In contrast to organizations, states do not depend on customers or voluntary contributions; they require that citizens and other inhabitants pay taxes. Only in rare instances did states go bankrupt and even when this happened, it did not threaten the existence of the states (Wikipedia 2023b).

When implementing harsh migration policies, legislators in the EU and Sweden emphasized costs, administrative overload, and “responsibility” rather than likely contributions of migrants, or the benefits of multiculturalism. Their attitude parallels that of managers, whose task it is to scrutinize each additional expenditure regardless of which total income they expect.

To summarize, states may resemble organizations, but important characteristics make them different from organizations. Legislators who adopted a managerial approach to migration relied on the similarities – rather than the differences – between organizations and states. Their harsh migration policies led to a ruthless treatment of migrants.

There are also instances, where organizations and states deploy the same management techniques. Specifically, they tolerate inconsistencies between abstract values and policies.
4.2 Tolerance for Inconsistencies

Managers who sought to impose some unique culture or specific “core values” on their organizational members came up with formulations that were similar across organizations, mere platitudes (Alvesson, Blom, and Jansson 2021; Brunsson 2005). Obviously, organizational cultures, if they exist at all, do not emanate from the top of organizational hierarchies (or management consultants).

States, too, may claim to possess a unique culture. As shown, legislators were no more successful in this respect than managers in organizations. The values that they proclaimed did not help distinguish Europeans or native Swedes from other people but might apply to any decent, allegedly democratic country and be respected by all decent (standardized) inhabitants in those and other countries. But legislators who aspired to make their states into nation-states also referred to additional nostalgic, though unspecified, nationalistic emotions to which they related their migration policies and ruthless treatment of migrants (as when the Migration Agency argued that the interests of the state were more important than those of a migrant child, see above). In Sweden, inadequate integration of those who were born abroad or had foreign-born parents, was an argument for not accepting refugees. By implication, non-integrated inhabitants threatened something that was genuinely Swedish – although it proved difficult to specify which these cherished values were.

General principles for how humans should be treated, like those of the universal declaration of human rights, are as abstract as those of state cultures (though visionary rather than nostalgic). In this case, however, legislators decoupled their migration policies from the principles that they honored. There were numerous reports on instances where human rights were neglected (e.g. Hillert 2021; Holmgren and Vesterlund 2021; Röda Korset 2021, 2022). The Migration Agency and the migration courts were reported to have mistrusted information from asylum seekers. They misinterpreted the Aliens Act, ignored the Convention on the Rights of the Child and neglected the rights of LGBTQI asylum seekers (Eckerman and Fridell Anter 2023; Gröndahl 2023).

Harsh migration policies coexisted with the promotion of international exchange across social sectors. Not only was the right of EU citizens to move freely within the EU territory seen to foster social welfare, but this was true of many kinds of cultural, scholarly and other types of international exchange (see above). Legislators’ negative attitude to migrants did not alter their positive attitude to foreigners – and numerous public agencies were engaged to stimulate tourism (Tillväxtverket 2024).

Like formulations of organizational visions, mission statements, or core values, human rights and an appreciation of international exchange were value statements
that legislators might separate from their policy decisions. Their attitude and behavior parallel those of managers in (large) organizations, where the rhetoric of top managers may be decoupled from organizational activities. (For example, many business firms declared that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine they no longer sold their products to Russia. They did not acknowledge that they had found means of circumventing their own policy and in effect gave priority to their economic goals; Dagens Nyheter 2023c.)

To summarize: Human rights were celebrated but decoupled from migration policies which negated these rights. Instead, migration policies were coupled to (vague) nationalistic values. International exchange was celebrated and coupled to policies to further such exchange but decoupled from migration policies. As a result, people were treated differently depending on whether they were classified as migrants or placed in some other category of inhabitants (or visitors). Legislators who mistook the state (or a conglomeration of states) for an organization and adopted a managerial approach to governance accepted the coexistence of contradictory values and policy initiatives.

5 Eighty Years Later

In this essay, I asked the question what motivated harsh migration policies. I observed that, allegedly, the rights of organizations to move and settle at liberty has led to welfare worldwide (however insufficient and unequal). Migrants, in contrast, have increasingly been subjected to “return processes” that force them to go back to the countries they just recently found that they must leave. I suggested that a dominant organizational society and the ubiquitous presence of management ideals induced legislators to see states as organizations and governance as yet another type of management. This approach allowed them to treat migrants like presumptive employees or other types of organizational members. The analogy with organizations is only partially valid, however, and their migration policies have led to a ruthless treatment of migrants.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the political leaders of the 1940s who argued for free trade and reduced border control made auspicious decisions for the decades to come. As noted, the liberty of organizations to decide on their own location has spurred global development and welfare.

With respect to humans, they were less generous – and less successful. Though permitted to leave and return to their country, people who are not accepted by any other state must move and reside within the borders of the state to which they belong (article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; United Nations 2023b). These restrictions have given rise to huge bureaucracies and much-debated
migration policies in many countries and over the decades. Most importantly, millions of people have been deprived of their right to lead productive and meaningful lives.

Had the decision makers of eighty years ago granted organizations and humans the same right to move and reside as they find best, an enormous amount of commotion and suffering had been prevented. The very idea of migration policies had been regarded as an oxymoron.

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