



2017 Sheehy Skeffington School on Social Justice and Human Rights October 7th 2017

Borders and Belonging, Migrants and Membership: putting the human back into Human Rights

The choice is between “a generous Europe based on human values” or one that has within its borders “racism, xenophobia, exclusion and people trying to make political capital out of those fleeing death” - President Michael D. Higgins.

The 2017 Sheehy Skeffington School takes place in a context of the greatest displacement of peoples worldwide since the second world war. This has created huge insecurity, uncertainty and division among the peoples and governments of Europe. Some favour a generous humanitarian response and firm adherence to Europe’s human rights tradition, based on an understanding that forced mass migrations are often caused, or contributed to, by political, economic and environmental policies of first world countries and supra-national corporations. Others advocate intensified border security and increasingly nationalist and xenophobic responses, evocative of a ‘Fortress Europe’ agenda.

Successive Irish governments have had an approach to immigration which maintains asylum seekers in direct provision and limits visas for migrants, while simultaneously appealing to US administrations to remedy the position of “undocumented” Irish. Opinion polls suggest many Irish people find the process of intercultural change difficult but also indicate discomfort with intolerance. This perhaps reflects our own, often tragic, history of emigration, and the clear parallels between those dying on unseaworthy vessels in the Mediterranean and on ‘coffin ships’ in the Atlantic less than 200 years ago.

There is a pressing need for cooperation and inclusive dialogue on how best to address the challenges and opportunities presented by migration. This requires addressing significant alienation across Europe and protection of labour rights of migrants and all workers, including migrants. The UN Sustainable Development Goals’ 2030 Agenda (SDGs) link human rights provisions to strategies for eradicating poverty and inequality. We need to discuss how they can be best utilised to build engagement at local and community, national and international levels and ensure that the UN ‘Compacts on Migrants & Refugees’ currently being negotiated reflect them. The Government’s Migrant Integration Strategy needs more targets, indicators and funding to do this.

If Ireland wants to avoid the migration policy mistakes of some European countries and promote an approach based on human rights and equality in the face of Brexit, racism and hostility to immigrants, we must listen to migrants and draw on global work which recognises the multi-dimensional nature of migration, aims to address its root causes and uphold the rights of everyone forced by circumstances to flee their homes in search of a better life.

There is much to discuss. We hope you will join us on October 7th.