

Book Review

Who are the ‘Us’ and who are the ‘Them’?

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Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control, Bridget Anderson, 2013, 224 pages, Oxford University Press, 978-0-19-969159-3.

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There are ‘good’ citizens and ‘bad’ citizens; there are ‘good’ migrants and ‘bad’ migrants. The imagined divide between the good and the bad, Anderson argues in this outstanding book, matters more than the line between citizens and migrants in the contemporary debates about immigration in the U.K. The U.K. public is worried about the undeserving welfare-dependent citizens who are too lazy to look for jobs, as much as about the greedy migrants who steal jobs. Just like migrants have to prove to be valuable in order to be officially admitted, citizens are increasingly expected to be productive to enjoy rights. ‘Failed’ citizens such as criminals and teenage mothers are seen as less deserving than hardworking migrants. Thus the dangerous politics of migration control: it may erode the basic notion of citizenship and undermine equality in the national community. While tighter migration control often justifies itself as a means of protecting national solidarity, Anderson argues that it may achieve exactly the opposite.

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Weaving historical comparisons into sharp observations of fast-changing realities, and combining imaginative interpretations with solid empirical analyses, the book is both nuanced and powerful. For instance, a concise analysis of the incumbent government's goal of reducing 'net migration' disentangles the multiple historically constituted contradictions in the politics of migration control. The government adopted the banal statistical term to present its policy as scientific and raceless, while actually aiming at placating sometimes racist public concerns. More complex than this are the discrepancies between the migrants in statistical data (foreign born), the migrants as managed by policies (foreign nationals), and the migrants of public concerns (e.g. Muslim population and asylum seekers). The British colonial history and the post-colonial citizenship law resulted in a large number of foreign-born U.K. nationals. They made up more than 40 per cent of net migration statistics at the end of 2009 (p. 53), but they are not subject at all to migration control. We should therefore not be surprised if the policy fails, but we should be fully alert that the ineffective policy can be highly and dangerously consequential, as it may create misperceptions about history and reality.

This book is compelling because the author's intellectual sophistication directly results from her deep understanding of what happens on the ground and her engagement with on-going debates. It does not take theorisation as an aim in itself, but precisely because of this, it theorises the best. The punches are clever, and all the punches hit something out there. The sharp insights are always firmly grounded in specific problematics, yet always lead to larger questions beyond migration. All students of migration studies should read this book at least once.

Possibly as a result of the author's deep political engagement, the format of the book is slightly unusual. It focusses on a single country but covers diverse topics, ranging from the historical vagrancy regulations to citizenship laws, to current policies on labour migration, settlement, naturalisation, deportation, human trafficking, and domestic workers. It differs from the more fashionable practice that focusses on a particular type of migration but examines it transnationally. Anderson's

book reminds us that real politics remain stubbornly national, and at the same time know no boundaries between policy domains. International migration as a *phenomenon* is indeed transnational and global, but it becomes a particular *issue* only in particular local and national contexts.

The subtitle of the book, ‘The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control’, is thus brilliantly conveyed. The main title raises another set of fascinating questions. With the question mark, Anderson decidedly challenges the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but, nevertheless, she seems to suggest the anxiety for such a divide is integral to the politics of migration control because such a binary is indispensable to maintain ‘the community of value’: ‘Central to my argument is that modern states portray themselves not as arbitrary collections of people hung together by a common legal status but as a community of value, composed of people who share common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behaviour expressed through ethnicity, religion, culture, or language—that is, its members have shared values’ (p. 2). But for me the book says something more interesting and insightful, albeit implicitly.

The book shows that what underlines current debates is *not* the cleavage between the in-group and the out-group, but a set of universalistic principles. Everyone, regardless of their racial, national and socioeconomic backgrounds, can be judged against these principles, and everyone can be located in different positions in a single continuum of value. It is inclusive and differentiating. Good citizens can slip to the bad side of the continuum when they fail to live up to these principles, and non-citizens can become deserving citizens if they prove their virtue. Universalistic principles are by definition abstract, and there are always large grey zones into which both citizens and migrants fall. These citizens and migrants need to be constantly tested. It is such universalistic principles that make it possible for citizenship and migranhood to be mutually constitutive. The British public anxiety about human trafficking as analysed in chapter seven is a case in point. Anderson suggests that ‘[t]rafficking enables “us” to congratulate ourselves on the freedom and rights within the British economy, and to respond morally and emotionally to the gap between us

and them, between privilege and suffering' (p. 152). But the 'us' here is not a stable population; it is instead a (superior) position in the moral continuum. The victims of trafficking, as Anderson points out, are subjects of 'pity rather than fear' (p. 141), and could be treated like citizens, while the traffickers and employers, foreign or local, are evils. The notion of 'harm prevention' that underlines anti-trafficking movements 'equates compulsion for the good of others with compulsion for your own good' (p. 158). The horror of trafficking does not remind the public of any specific Britishness, but evokes feelings for the entire humanity. The trafficked victims are not *Others*; they are junior selves. (The similar reactions towards trafficking and child abuse should not be a surprise.) Trafficking became 'a rare patch of common ground between NGOs, activists, and states' (p. 137) precisely because of, not despite, it being an exception. The imagined extreme conditions - the raw violence on biological bodies - enable a straightforward application of universalistic morality without being complicated by other considerations. The anxiety about trafficking 'turns "us" into moral actors, able to respond to the inequalities that are in our midst as well as far removed. We are moved by the plight of forced labourers and slaves, and are thereby enabled to access the moral high ground' (p. 154). In comparison, debates about labour or even marriage migration, for instance, cannot be as simple.

Universalistic moral concerns may have been the cause of the depoliticisation of trafficking and border control in the mainstream representation. Anderson makes a strong case about how anti-trafficking discourses leave out larger political institutions and power relations: 'We can condemn employers' threats to reveal undocumented migrants to the authorities in order to ensure their obedience, yet not question the mechanism of control itself....Concern with trafficking focuses on borders and immigration controls while missing the crucial point that immigration controls produce relations of domination and subordination, thereby leaving state responsibility for the consequences of this completely out of the picture' (p. 154). Trafficking and borders are depoliticised not because the divide between us versus them is too rigid or absolute, but on the contrary, because the division is subject to high moral principles,

and as such the border and the nation are relativised as instruments in the service of moral principles. The concrete issues that are responsible for trafficking in the first place—immigration control, international inequalities, variations in labour relations, economic deregulation—are moved into the shadows. Life, especially tragic life, becomes a fairy tale of morality.

I therefore wonder whether the phrase ‘embodiment of value’ might be more accurate than ‘a community of value’ to describe how the British public (or elite) imagine the nation. The notion of a community of value privileges community as the ontological basis of value, and sees value as a feature of the community. The image of ‘embodiment of value’ privileges value, with the nation being a form of its realisation. An embodiment is fluid, open and constantly changing. (Looking from a global perspective, the U.K. has been distinct for being relatively open to foreigners rather than being exclusive.) When the nation is imagined as an embodiment of value, the public opinion leaders are representatives of the embodiment and guardians of principles rather than community members. Community members perceive each other according to the tangible relations among them, representatives of the embodiment are judges who position themselves beyond and above the game. Community life is messy and cannot be easily judged; guardians of holy principles do not want to live in communities.

Such an imagination of the nation may be specific to the U.K. British colonialism was as much about bloody violence as about moral teaching. (Reclaiming the ‘morality’ of the western, primarily British, expansion is the main point of the recent revisionist global historiographies as championed by Niall Ferguson and others.) Britain’s transformation from an empire to a nation was relatively peaceful and civilised as compared to the colonial expansion, and this has been again attributed to its commitment to universalistic principles by liberal historiographies. The global position of the postcolonial U.K., primarily as an integral part of the U.S. hegemony, enables it to continue seeing itself as an embodiment of universalistic ethics as opposed to an ordinary nation whose

fate is subject to specific and contingent geopolitical conditions. This is not to say that the UK is free from specific geopolitical conditions, but that it is able to present such calculations in a language of universality.

If politics is about contestations over the distribution of resources among heterogeneous populations and is thus, by definition, contradictory, universalistic principles and the perspective from a transcendental third-eye are anti-politics. Politicisation is predicated on the explication of specific sociopolitical positions—positions of different groups within a nation as well as the position of the nation in the world. It is true, as Anderson established, the categories of Us and Them can never be fixed. But don't we have to identify, and even construct 'us' as a social force in order to politicise life? Can we develop a productive political life without articulating, and sometimes even essentialising, the self? As much as I admire all the intellectual projects of deconstruction, I wonder what they offer to life. The problem here is not that the U.K. public develop a sense of Us; the problem is that the Us is disembodied, ungrounded, de-historicised and socially empty. It is a subjectivity without the subject. It is not 'real'. In this condition, debates about trafficking are inevitably driven by concerns about value instead of by facts, by moral alarms instead of institutional analysis, and by emotional outrage instead of evidential scrutiny. It is not wrong to regard selves as moral actors. But it needs to be thought through what kinds of things in history have made the group of people into Us? Where does the Us stand in history and in the global politics? Nor is it problematic to pursue moral principles. But it must be remembered that any principle has to be carried out by specific groups of people in specific contexts in specific ways. Whom can we ally with, based on what strategies and actions? Instead of moving away from Us, we may need to take Us very seriously. We may have to confront the question who is the Us, or rather, what kind of Us we want to construct. Get the Us real. This can be an important step in repoliticisation.

I wish the subtitle of the book included U.K./Britain (or more precisely, metropolitan England), and the text was more careful to avoid the impression that the U.S., which is

mentioned occasionally, is basically the same as the U.K. While white men are no longer imagined as the only subject capable of entering disembodied contractual relations—which imaginary was crucial for the classical liberal thought as Anderson reminds us (pp. 146-7), the U.K. and the U.S. remain the only two nations whose experiences can be readily abstracted into general theories, so much so that the country names can be comfortably kept invisible. We may appreciate the broader significances of the U.K. experiences better if we understand its specificities more. What Anderson describes seems to resonate with developments in other parts of the world in different ways. The U.S. handling of immigration is regarded by many as a success because its weak welfare provision and deregulated economy across the board render migration integration policy unnecessary. Only the fit will survive and the ‘undeserving’ migrants as well as citizens will disappear somehow. The Singapore government has been accused of privileging ‘global talents’ at the cost of its own citizens. Japan under Abeconomics is now tightening up welfare provision to citizens while opening new channels to welcome foreign talents. In what ways can the analyses on the U.K. be applied broadly, and more importantly, how should we locate the U.K. experiences historically and globally?

Anderson’s book is also a timely invitation for deep historical research on migration. Her historical discussion is extremely illuminating, but as she is primarily concerned with contemporary debates, in some places she tends to evoke history as analogies instead of as social processes. For instance, the revisits to the vagrancy regulations in Tudor England certainly help raise important questions about current migration control, but the actual relation between the two remains unclear. The contemporary debates as analysed by Anderson could happen in any country with or without similar histories. Anderson’s analysis of colonial history is most convincing precisely because it demonstrates clearly how the current British laws and notions on citizenship are shaped by that particular history, sometimes in surprising ways. Not all political ideas and practices travel across time, and when they do, few take direct flights.

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This book will be a classic in migration studies and beyond. It teaches us so much, and urges us to think so much more. We should congratulate ourselves for having another book that shows to the world why scholarship matters and what kind of scholarship matters.

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