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The limits of liberalism, and the limits of critique

Adrian Favell

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Review of Bridget Anderson. 2013. *Us and Them: The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, xii + 209.

Migration studies has been curiously absent in British sociology. Unlike in the US, where the basic terms of debate on immigration and its effects have been set by paradigmatic oppositions between heavyweight sociologists – names such as Alejandro Portes, Richard Alba, Doug Massey, Mary Waters, Roger Waldinger, Saskia Sassen – migration studies in the UK has long been carried by other disciplines. There are a few exceptions, of course, but there is nothing like the massive prominence of sociologists as there is in British ethnic and racial studies, for example. The first virtue of Bridget Anderson’s *Us and Them* is to have written a book of migration theory and policy analysis that should engage directly mainstream UK sociologists of citizenship, exclusion, poverty and race.

At the same time, *Us and Them* hauls a politically charged, and quite distinctly British sociology, infused with a gender, race and de-colonial studies sensibility, deep into the heart of international migration research, which has not always done a good job handling the challenge of critical social theory. Anderson heeds the call for what I have called elsewhere a “rebooting of migration theory”. Standard debates over immigrants and immigration politics – over numbers, borders and control, over naturalisation, citizenship, integration and multiculturalism – reproduce an unthinking methodological nationalism. This assumes the primacy of the nation-state-society as a stable, receiving sovereign unit, and then treats migrants as peripheral anomalies and demographic noise, to be excluded as foreigners or absorbed as citizens. Rather, as underlined by the “mobilities turn” in the social sciences, when spatial movement is recognised as the norm and condition of all human life – and especially modernity – the constitution of all familiar spatially stable institutional structures in society needs to be recognised as historically contingent, changeable and inherently political—the thing to be explained rather than assumed. Anderson takes this insight (the work of John Urry and Tim Cresswell might have been mentioned) and puts the question of population categories and political bordering, that is, the very units of politics – the nation-state-society and the empowered citizens that allegedly constitute it – at the heart of the analysis.

Using both a historical narrative of citizenship and inclusion in the UK and the analysis of contemporary policies on immigration, criminality and poverty, Anderson shows how present-day preoccupations with defining the wanted and unwanted international migrant, and the path to integration and becoming a “good” citizen that they should follow, are but a variant of historical constitutions of the national “community of value”, which has and still does, variously exclude the vagrant, the underclass, the morally dissolute, and the criminal, from full and recognised membership. In doing so, Anderson unlocks a vital new perspective on the moral constitution of contemporary society, in which “citizenship” no longer designates equal membership across a unified and bounded population, but rather a selective process of shifting borderings, which decide in law, policy and democratic politics who “deserves” to be able to vote, to claim welfare protection, to enjoy liberties, or to have a decent standard of living. The way we treat immigrants and asylum seekers, in other words, is just the thin edge of the wedge. Migrants are easier to designate “undeserving” non-members than nationals, because they were arbitrarily born poor elsewhere on the planet; they are easier to exploit in our economy for the same reason. Nationals, born here on this soil to automatic citizenship, have hitherto relied on a residual claim of equality for all co-nationals, to at least claim political voice and some degree of redistributive inclusion (democracy and the welfare state). The emerging politics of “us and them” in the 21st century – which, of course, is returning society back to Victorian if not feudal notions of political membership – is now selectively stripping away the legitimacy of these claims for growing numbers of the marginal and excluded within the national population.

This alarming T.H. Marshall-in-reverse nexus of ideas is applied chapter-by-chapter to a series of typical immigration policy arenas, in which the borders between easily excluded migrants and ripe-for-exclusion marginalised nationals are steadily being blurred. These are the “dangerous politics of immigration control”: not (only) the usual argument about being mean to needy foreigners at the border or ignoring their human rights, but more broadly an essentially Foucauldian politics of discipline and control which, in categorising immigrants as “good” or “bad” workers and putative citizens, enables the powers that be to generate similar modes of governance over *all* nationals as workers and citizens, thereby creating the benchmarks of performativity that drive the nation forward. The chapters thus unfold through narratives and close analysis of regressive change in law and policy in the UK on naturalisation, labour market demand (“migration management”), integration, deportation, trafficking, and domestic work. The finger is mostly pointed at the New Labour years, with continuity under the Coalition government of 2010. The book reads as a litany of betrayals of the rights and equalities imagined as inclusive and expansive by Marshall, in the name of shoring up a fictive idea of national cohesion, moral/democratic community and national economic performance, at a time when globalisation and its manifold mobilities has transformed the economy of this same national “unit” into a porous, hyper-networked, space of flows.

Unusually, Anderson does not label this slide “neo-liberal”, as of course countless other similarly positioned critical works on contemporary politics and economy do—at least not that often. David Harvey is mentioned, but there is no clear Marxist thrust to Anderson’s analysis, despite its world systems views on global inequalities and colonial exploitation. Rather, Foucauldian logic seems to be the underlying

infrastructure, although the laughing bald Nietzschean is only tantalisingly present in the text; just a hint towards his analysis of “governmentality”, without much exposition. In terms of other theory, the book is actually refreshingly absent of the over-wrought referencing of so many poorly digested continentals – those unblemished white male heroes (nearly always French and Italian) of critical and decolonial theory – Antonio Negri, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière – that drive other works in the field of “critical migration studies”. On this point, Anderson stands in positive comparison to others making similar arguments: the widely debated work of authors such as Nicholas de Genova, Thomas Nail or Sandro Mezzadra. In many respects, this accessibility is a great quality; Anderson’s writing is crisp and clear throughout, with impeccable empirical exposition of law, policy and data trends that would not be found so convincingly in these other author’s works. Yet I want to insist here on exploring the theoretical infrastructure of the book in part because it is so underspecified in Anderson’s writing.

Her target clearly is liberal thinking and liberal philosophy. She pinpoints the illusion of “self possessive” individualism, the liberalism which believes that the combination of rights bearing citizenship and free economic exchange can, under certain “just” conditions, lead to more emancipation and (some kind of) equality for all, rather than, inevitably, always, growing inequalities, gender domination or – the typical default critique – colonial slavery. Clearly, the UK is not heading in any progressive direction today, on any of these points perhaps, although with rising middle classes worldwide, the debate about global inequalities is an empirical and complex one, not one to be adjudicated exclusively on reductive Marxist terms. Much of what Anderson writes is stated more reasonably as an exploration of “tensions” within liberal democracy— and, yes, any good liberal would respond that, precisely, liberalism is a philosophy of tension and imperfection, of Isaiah Berlin’s crooked timbers, of J.S. Mill’s experimental consequentialism, of Marshall’s tentative incrementalism—not the top down “neo-liberal” utopias of Friedrich Hayek imposed in the name of “liberalism” today. There is, frustratingly, no engagement with serious, older liberal classics such as these; nor with barely any recent liberal works on immigration and citizenship—so no Michael Walzer, no Charles Taylor, no Will Kymlicka, no Bhikhu Parekh, and only a little Joseph Carens. Comparative historical sociology on nationalism and citizenship is also absent: there is no attempt to engage with the alternate Weberian paradigm of Rogers Brubaker and Christian Joppke; no trace of Ernest Gellner, although Benedict Anderson makes a late appearance, and the benevolent influence of the Oxford/Warwick sociologist Robin Cohen can be felt throughout. Instead, a swingeing critique of the legacy of Locke, Smith and Kant is mainly carried by references to works of UK critical philosophy scholars (Phil Cole, Laura Brace), and a very light touch social history. More substantially, there seems to be an influence of the decolonial heroes, David Theo Goldberg and Charles Mills; and of the feminist scholarship of Carole Pateman. The critique, then, obviously tends towards the standard relational/positional one: that one man’s rights and autonomy is inevitably another (wo)man’s domination and servitude; and that one white man’s citizenship is inevitably another black man’s slavery. This dogmatism is not the tone of the book – Anderson is a humanistic and open minded, activist scholar – but fundamentally the political implications of her work are hugely pessimistic and over-determined. Only a couple of pages at the very end contain anything like an alternate political vision: the vague hope that a critical work like this, and its “unmooring” of people, nation and state, might assist in the release of an emancipatory politics of “global imaginaries

and reclaimed histories”; that there is a multitude of “shared imagined futures and pasts”, awaiting us somewhere beyond the despairing *Guardian* op-eds and the closing of national borders everywhere. And, for all this, we have the racist liberal men to blame: once upon a time, Locke, Smith and Kant, with their universalist apologetics for colonialism; now those politicians with their think tank quotes and falsely progressive pieties—from David Blunkett to Gordon Brown, David Cameron to Nick Clegg.

I’m exaggerating, but only a little. This mode of argumentation in “critical” British social science of the last twenty years is so familiar as to be unquestioned, polemical orthodoxy (consider, for example, superstar UK sociologists like Imogen Tyler or Bev Skeggs). Both the damning of New Labour and its continuities, and the romantic promise of socialist internationalism somewhere over the rainbow are overworn tropes. British sociology, in particular, in all its patent impotency, has been so long fueled by its self-righteous fury at the “neo-liberalism” of New Labour; with the subsequent analysis of its horrors on immigration, race, welfare, poverty, austerity, housing and policing suggesting that everyone must have been living all these years in something little different to Pinochet’s Chile. Well, one should be careful what one wishes for—if one wants one’s analysis to be factually true. My point is not to defend the miserable legacy of those years, or deny that some of the critique is true, but rather to ask how our tools of analysis must start to be more sophisticated in their understanding of political philosophy *before* we do indeed find ourselves living in a society in which liberal democratic values have been extinguished—as they have been sadly for decades in the corridors of many UK sociology departments. After Brexit and Trump, what do we say now? On one reading of Anderson, it might just be a shrug and a glib, “Told you so!”. Foucauldians everywhere are rubbing their hands with cynical glee that their worst nightmares are now coming true: as liberal democracy is extinguished again, as it was in the 1930s between resurgent neo-fascism and Marxist alternatives in the real world—and not just in theory text books. But that only begs the question. Was everyone living already in Pinochet’s Chile in the era of “managed migration”, “points based selection” and “free movement of EU workers”?

Here, some of the clear limitations of Anderson’s UK-centric analysis become clear—the lack of any kind of comparative perspective to enable an evaluation of what has really happened in the UK. How we might begin to distinguish again more or less progressive differences and possibilities, now lost, within the politics tried out between New Labour, the Coalition years, and the Post-Brexit regime; or whether her framework would be a useful heuristic, and equally damning, if it considered immigration politics in France or Germany, where capitalism is regulated differently, or the US, where the state has far less control over borders or informality? The inability to recognise and assess empirical variation is a feature of Foucauldian work in general, as much as it is all those Marxist scholars who use “neo-liberalism” as a simplistic shorthand for the ubiquitous evil of “capitalism”, then, now, here, there, and everywhere.

One thing absent from the book is any sense of how positive recent economic migration has been in the UK—in its dramatic cosmopolitan effects on society, as much as its largely beneficial driving of its highly internationalised economy. In a book all about discipline and control, servitude and inequalities, there is no sense of

how much more open to migration and social change Britain was during this period than any of its neighbours—or how much more attractive as a destination. This is partly because Anderson does not deal with the effectiveness in the UK of the EU’s core principle of non-discrimination by nationality, which drove a post-national stake into both discriminatory employment practices and ideological illusions of economic sovereignty during the era of open free bordered EU migration to the UK. The institution of EU citizenship is for her just another iniquitous differentiation; designed almost by definition to exclude non-Europeans, and sharpen their disadvantage. Yet the super-diversity it heralded was transforming race, culture and nation at all levels, enabling the UK to move towards the kind of genuinely post-post colonial, global society in which entitlement to equal treatment in a job interview or access to a house rental would never depend on one’s nationality, whether signalled by skin colour or passport. That is, of course, all over now, after the referendum. And – as some radical voices such as Kehinde Andrews have said – Brexit is also a big step backwards for the diasporic claims of British BAME (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic) groups, as much as the Europeans it will disenfranchise. Nationality, in England at least, has clearly been re-racialised as white ethnicity; not least, the day Nigel Farage unveiled his infamous poster of asylum seekers, and Jo Cox was murdered in the streets of West Yorkshire. And so the UK speeds backwards: towards a purely colonial view of the world, and the privileged claims of the democratic “British people” over rights, equal treatment and anyone seen as a foreigner.

My criticisms relate to paradoxes found in critical works on migration, nationalism and globalisation, that very little work anywhere is addressing. They do not invalidate the insights of the book, nor its thorough and sometimes shocking assessment of specific trends in UK immigration policy. Bridget Anderson’s *Us and Them* is an essential contribution that enlarges significantly the potentials of migration studies and general political sociology. It deserves a wide audience well beyond its UK readers, who will recognise only too well its gloomy assessment of the last few decades. Anderson is absolutely right that the “unmooring” of our closed, methodologically nationalist assumptions about society, populations and democratic legitimacy is crucially needed. With dark times to come, her work may provide an even more accurate diagnosis of the near future than it has of the recent past.

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