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Policing the moral boundaries of rights: conversations on migration, postcoloniality, race, and precarity

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At a time of increased security around migration and intensified public resentment against migrants across and beyond Europe, *Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*, boldly proposes to break from the insularity of migration scholarship by approaching migration in relation to forms of exclusion that cut across the migrant-citizen divide, such as those of the poor and the “precariat.” Additionally, the book highlights historical continuity in how rulers, and later modern states, have morally stigmatized and legally constrained the mobility of the poor, from the vagrant citizen to the colonial subject, to the postcolonial migrant. *Us & Them* focuses on Britain but offers precious generalizable lessons about the formation of (moral and not merely legal) boundaries of belonging and rights. It is a timely intervention for thinking through the multiple “crises” of Europe—the refugee crisis, the economic crisis, and the crisis of the EU project itself. More broadly, it is a timely intervention for discussing how and why, in the first decade of the 21st century, models of citizenship striving to deepen the horizontal ties within the citizenry, (see, for example, Kymlicka, 1995 on multicultural citizenship) have become stigmatized within dominant publics and policy circles in and often beyond Britain. The book inspires a similar discussion on the decline of models of citizenship extending rights to non-citizens (see Soysal, 1994 on postnational citizenship) as well as models of citizenship building supranational forms of belonging (see Favell, 2008 on European citizenship). Further, the book offers insights for developing a renewed language of rights and social justice that might effectively challenge the rising currents of nativist and racial (white) moralities of legitimate grievances and perceptions of fairness among growing segments of the British population, including the “national” poor or “precariat.”

Specifically, *Us & Them* develops the concept of the “community of value” to qualify the view of national communities as “imagined communities” that, despite internal inequalities, work to cement horizontal ties and to minimize vertical ones among their members (Benedict Anderson, 1991). Rather than downplaying difference within the national “imagined community,” the “community of value” promoted by the state is driven by multiple and intersecting exclusions both from within it (the ‘failed’ citizen, who is characterized in moral-economic terms with often racial undertones) and from outside it (the non-citizens). Entering and remaining within “the community of value” goes beyond legal status and requires continued proof of “worthiness” and sameness. For migrants, these categories are judged and defined morally before they are granted legally. For “failed citizens” moral judgment and exclusion trumps legal status.

The book also situates the formation of the “community of value” within histories of control over the movement of the poor within and across the metropole and the colonies. It traces institutional attempts to limit the movement of the poor to precolonial times, specifically to the vagrancy laws passed in the fourteen century, when “the idea of the poor as a threat to social order” replaced “the medieval religious notions of apostolic poverty as a holy state” (p. 15). It then maps how, in colonial times, “vagrancy became one of the ways that the poor [from the metropole] could be turned into the building blocks of Empire” (p. 31) while the mobility of non-white colonial subjects was restricted. Subsequently, in postcolonial times, the mobility of

these new migrants was subjected to scrutiny and control. In this sense, *Us & Them* historicizes migration, situating it in broader precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories of control over the movement of poor people.

How can we further untangle the multiple processes, which *Us & Them* convincingly argues are interrelated and central to our understanding of migration—colonial histories, racial formations, trajectories of precariousness and poverty, and conceptions of nationhood? Furthermore, how can we address the question of both historical continuity *and change* in the making and unmaking of moral-political boundaries of “the community of value,” and in the moral-legal forms of control and reception of migrants? While the book refreshingly outlines the connections and interrelations between migration, nationhood, race, and precarity, its emphasis seems to be on centuries-long continuities and “perennial” problems (p. 25) of sifting through moral and immoral types of poor people, and by extension, of deserving and undeserving poor migrant individuals. Less developed is a conversation about how and why the linkages between migration, race, nationhood, and poverty can—and often do—take distinct and changing shapes and intensities in different periods of time, in different geopolitical contexts, and for different ethnic, religious, and racial groups.

In this commentary, I outline possible conversations that emerge from reading *Us & Them* in light of recent works on: i) postcoloniality and global sociology; ii) migration, race, welfare, and national security; and iii) issues of scale in the study of precarity. These conversations aim to raise questions about how we can theorize and empirically trace differences and shifts in the linkages between migration, race, postcoloniality, and precarity. This theorization is particularly urgent at a time when, across the global north, protracted economic crises are accompanied with rising nativist and narrowly bounded nationalist movements, as well as with the increased conflation of the figure of “the migrant” and that of the “the terrorist.” By contrast, in the global south, increasingly complex and diversified emigration defies linear movements from former colonies to the metropolises and becomes entangled with more recent phenomena as climate change-related environmental degradation and new forms of imperial militarism.

Migration, postcoloniality, and the colonial present

Putting this book on migration in dialogue with works on liberalism, colonial rule, and postcoloniality is productive in at least three regards. First, the book implicitly and at times explicitly (see, for example, p. 20 on Locke and the protection of private property for those who are “industrious and rational”), supports the thesis that the illiberal and the colonial have always and inherently been bundled together within liberal thought (Mehta, 1999). This attention to the interplay between liberal, illiberal, and colonial practices and discourses is particularly important for understanding “the liberal governances of mobility” (Kotef, 2015). It also has implications for understanding the multiple exclusions within “the community of value” including the illiberal pockets of rule over certain segments of the citizenry, for example, the urban poor, whose relationship with the state is informed by coercive and at times militarized control rather than any recognition of membership or sameness. Thus, for example, Kotef (2015, p. 110) argues that liberalism is concerned with “the excessive” movement of “others,” discussing, for example, how, in his account of his travels in America, Locke “superimposed” race and class: “the poor and the indigenous American ... share one attribute that is central to their portrayal as a political problem: they move too much. Their movement presumably becomes surplus and, therefore, can no longer encapsulate freedom: it has become a threat to order.” Deepening the discussion about the coloniality of liberalism is a worthwhile project for opening up the sociology of migration, especially with regard to the distribution of liberal, illiberal, and colonial practices over different types of people, both in the metropolitan

core and in the former colonies. Yet, this type of conversation runs the risk of remaining overly abstract and I would say ahistorical.

A second fruitful conversation on migration and postcoloniality with the potential of empirically excavating the historical and structural relationships between “the forest” (Anderson’s metaphor for migrants’ countries of origin) and “the kingdom” (migrants’ countries of reception), is the one promoted by recent strands of “postcolonial sociology” (Bhambra, 2013; Go, 2013). For example, Bhambra (2013, p. 310) calls for taking seriously migrant and indigenous narratives that challenge the idea of migration as “a process both exogenous and subsequent to the formation of nation-states” as well as “the idea of political community as a national political order;” these ideas have been and still are “central to European self-understanding.” A focus on migrant experiences and voices would greatly help Anderson’s critical dissection of dominant public and policy debates. Perhaps even more useful for approaching the relationship between the metropolitan core, colonies, and postcolonial societies empirically and historically rather than in abstract terms, is Julian Go’s (2013, p. 25) application of “relational social theories,” such as actor-network theory and field theory, to explain historical processes that are usually understood as contained within the nation-state rather than globally. For example, Go shows how, far from being processes shaped by bounded “national” histories, the industrial revolution in England and the French Revolution were global processes cutting across the divide between the metropole and the colonies. Go’s argument about “the interactional constitution of social units, processes, and practices across space” can be fruitfully extended to the sociology of migration.

Thirdly, and in a related way, a global sociology of migration would need to discuss migration not only in relation to former colonies but also in relation to “the colonial present” (Gregory, 2004) in its various militaristic and warlike iterations. Much of the forced displacement today is produced by military occupations and wars that involved imperial powers. Trends such as the rise of Islamophobia and the conflation between “migrants” and “terrorists” cannot fully be understood in isolation from such imperial entanglements. “Foreign” wars are not disconnected from the increased militarization of law enforcement in the global north and migration offers a prism through which we can study militarism across scales of the global order. This is particularly important in light of Steinmetz’s (2003) poignant analysis of the expanded surveillance and militarism in the world: “the emerging condition [following the global financial crisis and recession] does not mark a return to the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state but rather a transition towards an enhanced police state. Security in the disciplinary, not the social, sense is the focus of current governmental activity.” Within this context of an “enhanced police state,” migration is bound to become conflated with “national security” concerns, perhaps more than in other periods of time.

Migration, race, the welfare state, and the security state

The book does not shun away from discussing the role of race in migration control. As Anderson (p. 47) puts it, “race, with all its contradictions and malleability, has not been left behind us but is invoked with new inflections in the present.” In a “colorblind” Europe, this is a bold endeavor. For example, writing before the decision to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum that took place in June of 2016, Anderson mobilizes race to explain the marginalization of Eastern Europeans. While Eastern Europeans are not marked racially in legal categories of migration, they have been morally inserted in a “degraded form of whiteness” that keeps them outside the “community of value” (p. 45). Anderson’s point about the interplay between migration and race is a precious opportunity for opening up a conversation about migration, race, and the moral boundaries for the rightful access to public

resources in comparative perspective; that is, in a perspective that compares both countries and different groups of people (noncitizens of different nationalities, “failed” citizens, racialized “minority” citizens) within countries.

I am mainly speaking about a comparative historical sociology of migration, race, and the welfare state along the lines of that developed by Cybelle Fox (2012) in the American context. In her *Three Worlds of Relief* Fox demonstrates how, in the United States, unlike blacks and Mexicans, European migrants were granted public assistance even when their legal status was unclear or undocumented. By contrast, for Mexicans, access to relief provision became a tool for deportation while, despite their legal citizenship, blacks obtained access only to stigmatizing and patronizing forms of public assistance. Put differently, different racial attitudes towards these three groups have played a crucial role in differentiating their access to relief provision and, in the process, have shaped the formation and size of the American welfare state locally and nationally.

This kind of comparative historical analysis would be very productive for understanding public debates about and policy changes within the welfare state in the UK and the broader European nations. We might ask the following: How has the presence of different migrant groups shaped the moral boundaries of relief provision? And how has the financial-economic crisis that has wreaked havoc on European societies for the last decade reshaped racial attitudes towards different groups, which have been excluded or barely included in “the community of value”? Will EU citizens from Western Europe maintain “the racial capital” (legitimate whiteness) they enjoyed over Eastern Europeans and non-European migrants in a post-Brexit UK? Or will they become a stratified group of migrants with differential positionality in relation to the moral boundaries of rightful access to public resources (with Northern Europeans in a better symbolic position than Southern Europeans)?

Along similar lines, a comparative historical approach to migration, race, and the security state is especially needed in the context of the global “war on terror” and the many, more or less declared, military interventions in the Middle East and Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa involving the United States and European countries. A historical comparison between different groups of migrants and political violence can help understand the permutations of liberal, illiberal, and securitized forms of reception. For example, Collyer (2005) shows how, in the UK, the debates about migration and security took different directions in the case of Jewish refugees at the end of the 19th century and Muslim refugees today. While Jewish refugees were associated with the political “threat” of the international anarchist movement, in their case “a strong liberal consensus” was formed to resist the implementation of restrictive legislation. A similar dynamic is missing today for refugees from Middle Eastern and Muslim majority countries whose perceived association with “Islamic threat” is mobilized for the implementation of restrictive legislation.

Migration, precarity, and scales of injustice

Grievances are meaning-laden claims (Simmons, 2014). They are about symbolic as much as material resources. Anderson’s framework of multiple exclusions from—and I would add differential inclusions within—“the community of value” is a precious conceptual tool for exploring intersectionality in the making of grievances, claims to rights, and perceptions of injustice. In particular, Anderson’s effort to connect migration with the global poor and the “national” poor resonates with other scholarly approaches seeking to produce conversations on migration, precarity, and “scales” of injustice. Two such approaches are Nancy Fraser’s (2010) intersectional approach to justice and Margaret Somers’ (2008) genealogical approach to citizenship. On the one hand, Fraser highlights how claims to material redistribution, symbolic recognition, and political representation are formed at different scales of our “globalizing

world”; some of them, for example are about transnational solidarity and redistribution of resources across countries; others are more strictly framed within the Westphalian order of nation-states. On the other hand, Margaret Somers focuses on the nation-state and argues that “market fundamentalism” has rendered certain groups of citizens (in her case poor African Americans) “stateless.” It is not that the state has broken its “social contract” with them. On the contrary, it is the “contractualization” of citizenship that devalues poor citizens and renders them “stateless.”

A dialogue between Anderson, Fraser, and Somers raises important questions about the formation of perceptions of injustice at the intersection of migration, race, and class. Can the global “precariat” find a shared language of rights and grievances? How can solidarities across different categories of citizens and migrants be produced? How do “good citizens” (members of the “community of value”) who feel that they do not receive from the state what they are entitled to symbolically (dignity) and materially (a good standard of living), think and feel about the world around them? Will “the community of value” within European societies further shrink under the weight of declining living conditions and geopolitical influences? What are the implications for the increasing number of globally displaced people claiming their right to safety and a better life within Europe? And, focusing on the UK, what are the implications for the sense of injustice felt by those EU citizens living in the UK who, until the Brexit referendum, did not think of themselves as “migrants” nor as members of an excluded global “precariat”?

For “a total sociology of migration”

The conversations outlined here point to the importance of developing what Abdelmalek Sayad (as early as the 1970s) called “a total sociology of migration,” a sociology of migration tinged with a keen sense of history as well as a relational approach to groups and place across scales of the global order. Two dimensions of Sayad’s “total sociology of migration” are particularly relevant here: first, in his essay “immigration and state thought,” Sayad (2004 [1999], p. 279) argues that migration’s “secret virtue” is that it offers “an introduction and perhaps the best introduction of all, to the sociology of the state.” Critically studying migration allows one to “see” the state through and beyond its own discourse about itself. Second, in his analysis of different generations of Algerian migrants in France, Sayad argues in favor of a sociology of migration that is global in its reach and research design; in other words, he calls for a sociology of migration that looks at processes within and across both the countries of origin and the countries of reception. As he puts it, those studies that do not consider “the conditions of origins of emigrants” operate on the partial view that the migrant’s “existence began at the moment he/[she] arrived in France” and “the implicit and explicit problematic of such studies” “is always the immigrant’s adaptation to the ‘welcoming’ society” (Sayad, 1977; Saada, 2000).

With its critical dissection of dominant media debates about migration in the UK, *Us & Them* heeds Sayad’s call for understanding migration as “state thought:” “thought that reflects the structure of the state.” At the same time, the book enriches this perspective by raising the question of the role of the media in influencing such debates. Do the popular and tabloid media portrayals of migrants merely reflect “state thought,” or do they, at least to a certain extent, influence publics shaping the direction of state policies about migration? These questions are not clear-cut either-or questions, but nevertheless, addressing them is crucial in light of the troublesome trend of sensationalist and emotionally-charged popular media scare-tactics, which regularly take the place of reasonable, rational, evidence-based, conversations about migration, the economy, and public safety.

As to Sayad's call for a global sociology of migration that is not merely centered on contexts of reception ("the welcoming society"), while calling for connecting "the kingdom" (in her case, the UK) and "the forest" (the many places from which migrants arrive), *Us & Them* focuses on the former more than the latter. While this focus allows Anderson to critically dissect media, public, governmental, and legislative interventions on migration in the UK, there are many conversations that I mention here, which could potentially stem from her work, if there were more engagement with the processes of inclusion and exclusion—the moral boundaries of "the communities of value"—that shape and are shaped by migration across the divide between the global north and the global south.

To sum up, *Us & Them* is a book that inspires conversations on migration, postcoloniality, race, and precarity that are crucial not only for a global sociology of migration but also for a global sociology in general.

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