

McKeown, Adam: *Melancholy Order. Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*. New York: Columbia University Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-231-14076-8; 472 S.

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Perhaps more than ever before, we live in a situation in which, as Hannah Arendt stated in her article „We Refugees“ (1943), „passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even income tax receipts, are no longer formal papers but matters of social distinction“.¹ As we know today, during World War Two the absence of (or rather possession of the wrong) documentary proof no doubt had fatal consequences for numerous individuals and social groups. Yet the effect of identity documentation on social distinctions has a long history. In his superbly written book the historian Adam McKeown shows, how many principles of border control and techniques for identifying personal status were developed from the 1880s to 1910s through the exclusion of Asians from the white settler nations. Migration control, as he argues in his study, did not develop out of a logical or structural necessity of the international system, but „out of the attempts to exclude people from that system“ (p. 3). By the 1930s these practices had become universalized as the foundation of sovereignty and migration control for all states within the system. The basic assumption of the book, namely that the techniques designed to control Asians evolved as „the template for practical workings of general immigration laws in the white settler nations, and ultimately around the world“, is convincingly developed throughout the book. By the 1920s, the appropriation of these laws by particular nations were not inspired by practical needs but rather „by the need to produce the documentation expected by other nations and to live up to international standards of a well-governed nation state“ (p. 13).

By taking international identity documentation and migration control as a starting point for writing a global history, the author focuses on the documentation of status and the formulation of the border as a site of control. McKeown is less interested in the global

development of medical inspections and technologies of physical identification which have already found attention in recent scholarship. Also, he pays little attention to the national public debates and political coalitions. And instead of taking race as a key category, he focuses on „civilization“ and the technical discussions of law and administration in order to elucidate that seemingly neutral vocabulary can redeploy principles of hierarchy and discrimination even as it claims to overcome them. In a Foucauldian vein, he analysis the microphysics of power and institutions that actively produce knowledge and individual identities, especially through the disciplines of examination, enclosure, and standardization. Yet, he goes beyond a Foucauldian approach by localizing this power in a global framework. Also, he argues, migrants were not only the objects of monolithic state regulation, but one of the diverse elements that created the knowledge and regulation of mobility.

By writing the history of the globalization of borders the author rejects long-standing assumptions prevailing in scholarship on globalization: For one, rather than understanding borders as static and unitary on the background of the flows and expanding dynamics of globalization, McKeown reminds us that migration and the consolidation of an international system of nation states have developed hand in hand over the past two hundred years. Therefore flows and borders are always in tension which ultimately also form the source of „historical dynamism“. Second, he rejects the linear model of globalization gradually diffusing into the world. Following a growing trend in scholarship on the history of globalization, he traces „the mutual interactions“ of people and ideas expanding beyond the nation-state and pays attention to the entanglement of flows and borders. These complex trajectories of globalization are accompanied by mutually constitutive processes of homogenization and differentiation. Finally, in the global histories of flows and movements, the consolidation of states and borders is often interpreted as a backlash against nineteenth-century globalization, and as a retreat into

¹ Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*, in: Hannah Arendt, *The Jews as Pariah*, New York 1982, pp. 55-65.

protectionism, nationalism, and racism triggered by the changes and challenges brought about by human interaction. Such an account, the author argues, is limited since „the flows of information and power that helped to establish these borders were inseparable from the knowledge and practices that facilitated and guaranteed the flows of goods and peoples in the first place“ (p. 6). The flows were only made possible through institutions which created predictable custom laws, adhered to standardized means of diplomatic and commercial interaction, implemented international agreements and other means.

In 360 pages Adam McKeown provides an enormously rich and densely contextualized account on the history of border control and international identity documentation. In part one, he traces the rise of mass migration and new processes of regulation up to the 1870s. One of the main arguments of this chapter is that the mass mobility of „free“ migrants has been inseparable from the emergence of new forms of control, with threads of power extending from ideologies of world order and inequality, to national borders, through charitable organizations, transportation companies, brokers, and migrant businesses, and down to the surveillance of individual bodies. Part two and three deal with the legal and practical enforcement of modern migration control. Firstly, McKeown shows how the principles of modern migration control evolved out of the restriction of Asian migration to the white settler nations towards the end of the 19th century. The concept of the nation and „civilization“ replaced the individual as site of the „universal“ rights, and the border marked the limit of where such rights needed to be recognized. Secondly, he stresses the importance of the United States for the enforcement of new principles of border control through the administration of the U.S. Chinese exclusion laws at the turn of the twentieth century. These chapters deal with the creation of an institutional trajectory for modern migration control in a world of nations and individuals. The last part of his book tracks the global diffusion of these principles and practices during the early twentieth century. The diffusion of the principles of border control, he argues, could not have been

achieved „if the cultural and social ground had not been prepared to accept the basic legitimacy of border control“ (S. 295). Protest movements against the establishment – such as the Chinese anti-American boycott of 1905 or Ghandi’s satyagraha movement in Africa – only managed to target specific aspects instead of the general principles of migration control.

Despite his strong and convincing arguments certain questions remain up for debate: For example, during the 19th century millions of European state-sponsored and often more or less indentured labourers reached Latin America, Australia, and other countries; also there were millions of colonial soldiers in unfree conditions sent across continents as well as different types of „informal“ indentureship existing in white frontier regions in western North America. Australia or Siberia were examples of colonies created by deportation of convicts followed by state-assisted migration. Therefore the conceptualization of Asians as the prototype of „unfree“ labour migration does not seem completely convincing. A closer reading of the meaning of free and unfree migration may be necessary as well as the question of how such definitions overlapped with historical reality.

On a very different note, although the perspectives and experiences of migrants themselves are hard to come by, one wonders what this would have looked like in the face of the power of official definitions and the pervasive need of documentation. Also, how does the picture look in relation to other ethnic groups, especially since racialized responses to immigrants were a prevalent signature of the time? Here McKeown offers only sparse information. Yet, whereas a number of important books by historians such as Erika Lee or Lucy Salyer have dealt with legal and popular debates concerning immigration law as well as delineating the responses and resistance of the Chinese immigrant community in the USA², the focus of McKeown’s book offers a view that stretches well beyond the confines of US and other national histories and offers com-

² Lucy E. Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers. Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law*, Chapel Hill 1995; Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates. Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, Chapel Hill 2003.

pletely new insights into the topic. It therefore provides a highly important and invaluable contribution to the often US-centered perspectives concerning migration control and Chinese exclusion.

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