

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Us and Them? Bridget Anderson on Migrants and Nation-States

Ethics Matter

Bridget Anderson, Stephanie Sy

Transcript

STEPHANIE SY: You're listening to Ethics Matter. I'm Stephanie Sy, and I'm speaking with Bridget Anderson, professor of migration and citizenship, and research director of the University of Oxford's Center on Migration Policy and Society. She is the author of *Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Controls*.

Bridget, thank you so much for being with us.

BRIDGET ANDERSON: Thank you.

STEPHANIE SY: I want to start with this word "migrant," which has come to mean a term encompassing refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, as well as people who are just looking to move countries for economic reasons. What does the word "migrant" mean to you?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: I do think that "migrant" is a very difficult word, not least because it tends not to be used of people like me. It tends not be used of professors or bankers and financiers. You will find that British people in Hong Kong or Europeans in many African states are referred to as expatriates rather than migrants. So I think that it has a very particular connotation, and I think it usually means basically somebody who is imagined as hard-up, low-skilled, and/or desperate, as we see now with the [Syrian refugee crisis](#).

STEPHANIE SY: So is that word a construct and in some ways a cover for discriminating against certain groups?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: It definitely is a construct. In some ways, I think—speaking as an academic who has spent most of my life in migration studies—that one problem is that, really, this is a policy term that has become an analytical term. That's kind of quite tricky in some ways. I think you have the same kind of issue with words like "criminal." This isn't to say that it is not valid to research and talk about migrants, but I think we have to be very careful in terms of the ways in which we reify them and make them into certain kinds of subjects. Sometimes being a migrant—that is, a non-citizen—matters and sometimes, actually, it is of secondary importance.

STEPHANIE SY: Part of your focus is looking at immigration controls and keeping migrants out. I want to look at that historically for a second. My understanding is for nation-states it hasn't always been about building fences to keep people out, but in fact to keep people within a nation's borders. Talk about that.

BRIDGET ANDERSON: If I was going to locate the origins of immigration controls, I would, first of all, locate them even before the construction of borders to keep people in and look at the ways in which people's mobility was controlled within a realm, within what we would now call a state, but a few

centuries ago would be within a kingdom or within a feudal overlord.

I think if you actually look at the control of vagrancy and the mobility of the poor in early modern Europe—if you are looking at the 14th century, I suppose, and onwards—then you can see a remarkable similarity to the ways in which immigration controls now operate and are imagined. The fear was that people were leaving their lords, their feudal masters. They were selling their labor—that is, there was a risk to the labor market—but also to what we would now call social cohesion, because you had masterless men. You had people who were uprooting or upending the way that society was supposed to be, which was a feudal society, by leaving the lands and leaving their lords.

So I think, once we start seeing immigration controls as being about controlling, first and foremost, the mobility of the global poor, then we can see, well, the mobility of the poor has actually always been controlled, or that it has always been sought to be controlled. Actually, looking at vagrancy and sometimes the forced mobility of, say, transportation or indentured labor, and indeed slavery, I think we can start making connections between those and contemporary attempts to control migration.

STEPHANIE SY: Let's dig a little deeper into that part of it and the control of a labor force. In fact, you write in one of your essays that the word "state" actually derives from the term "stasis," or immobility. What about what you just talked about when it comes to the slave trade, when it comes to the maintenance of a proletariat, as you have called it? What about that led to passports and stricter border controls, to eventually keep foreigners, if you will, out?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: I suppose one thing I would say to that would be that, of course, as we can see in the contemporary world, very often it's not so much that foreigners are kept out as that they are kept subordinated either, even when they've got legal status, by being tied to their employer, for example, or by not being able to leave a certain region or sector of employment, or by being undocumented. One of the things that I am interested in looking at is the ways in which contemporary immigration controls are basically strongly imagined as being about protecting the national labor force, but also, specifically, the national low-wage, so-called low-skilled labor force. There are certain jobs where it's imagined, "Well, anyone can do that job, and therefore we have to give priority to the national labor market first."

However, the problem with the ways that immigration controls function is that they very often, in fact, serve to make migrant labor more desirable than national labor by tying them to their employers, by making them dependent on their employers so that they might be more reluctant to complain, and certainly to take industrial action. So although the rhetoric is that immigration controls protect the national labor force, actually very often, I think, they don't do that at all; they create a more desirable workforce than the national workforce is.

STEPHANIE SY: When you talk about the economics and the way that is playing into these very fiery debates happening in countries about immigration, there are utilitarian arguments that you hear on both sides of the debate—those who worry about job losses to citizens and an overburdened welfare system, for example, on one side; and those, on the other side, who say ultimately a lot of countries could benefit economically from allowing more migrants through their borders. Who is right?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: What I think is interesting about that dilemma, that argument, which I think you have captured very nicely, is that when you look at who makes those arguments, it is quite interesting to see that it's the opposite, the flip side, of the people who would normally make those arguments. By which I mean that actually what you quite often have is people on, let's say, broadly, the political left, who would have a strong focus on social justice, harnessing the language of efficiency and productivity to call for greater tolerance of migrants; and you have people on the right, who are normally concerned with getting people off welfare benefits and who are not necessarily renowned for their concern about protecting the welfare state, talking about the importance of the welfare state and

protecting the working class. So there is a kind of interesting inversion there that I think is useful to think with.

I wonder whether, really, some of the arguments about productivity and efficiency are, in the end, not necessarily helpful. First of all, because, as any economist would tell you—and I'm not an economist—the "lump of labor fallacy," the idea that there are a certain number of jobs that go around an economy and that need to be separated and shared out, has proven to be, actually, a nonsense. So the idea that one person's job gain is another person's job loss, I think, is very misplaced.

However, on the other hand, the idea that migrants are more efficient or harder workers than local people is, I think, also misplaced.

So in a way, I think we have to start going beyond these kinds of arguments, particularly since, when you actually talk to citizens, a lot of the time, really, the anxiety is not so much about the economy, but is about questions of nationality, culture, and feeling; sometimes people talk about feeling overwhelmed or worry about what's happening to their imagined national heritage. I think, in that regard, often the economic arguments are perhaps a kind of obfuscatory smokescreen for avoiding talking about these other underlying questions.

STEPHANIE SY: So let's talk about that and the nationalism we are seeing arise, certainly in the United States and other countries in Europe that have seen real migration and the issues accompanying that. You talk about an "imagined national identity." What do you mean by that?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: Goodness, where do I start?

First of all, I think we have to think carefully about the relation between the nation and the state. The two are often conflated. And yet, in fact, there are many states which are not nation-states. In fact, people would probably say the United Kingdom is not a nation-state. It actually has several different nations within the same state. So I think we have to think about the difference between the nation and the state, and then think what we mean by nation in a contemporary globalized world, and about the relation between nation and race, and the relation between nationalism and racism, which isn't to say that all nationalists are racists or that if you believe in nations, then you are necessarily a racist. But I think we have to think carefully about how one becomes a member of a nation, as opposed to becomes a member of the state, and how open our ideas about national communities are.

I'm always rather disturbed when, certainly in the United Kingdom, people talk a lot about second- and third-generation immigrants, by which they never mean people that are racialized as white; they always mean people that are racialized as black and minority ethnic people. I think that shows us that there is certainly in the public discourse here in the United Kingdom—and I would say more generally in Europe—an idea that the nation is a white nation and anyone else is a migrant, even if they have been a citizen and their parents and grandparents have been citizens.

So I think there is a real challenge that needs to be addressed when thinking about questions of migration, racism, and whiteness within Europe.

STEPHANIE SY: I think that's a great point. I myself am the daughter of Asian immigrants. I was born in America, so I'm American, but I often have wondered, growing up, if I was somehow less than American, just by virtue of being a minority in this country.

There is such a hysteria, too, when you talk about immigration today. Is that a stand-in for something else—for racism, for xenophobia, or just for the sort of territorialism that we see in all animals, including, and perhaps especially, human beings?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: I think it is a stand-in. I think racism matters. But I don't think it is only a stand-in for racism. I think there is a tremendous sense of anxiety and a sense of powerlessness about the way that the world is going, both in terms of the economy and the lack of accountability even in liberal democracies.

I think that the lack of control over immigration has come to be a stand-in for the lack of control that many people feel that they have over their lives—the growth in precarious work, lack of security, the idea that your old age is going to be tough, and what's going to be happening to your children. I think it's easy to blame migrants for that.

Where I would sort of disagree maybe, or where I would be interested in talking more with you about, would be about the question of territorialism and whether that is natural or not. In a way, I think the relation between human beings and where we live is a very complicated one, and I think is a very rich one, and has the potential to be all—it can be played in lots of different ways, as it has historically all over the world. In a way, I think that is perhaps where we start to need new thinking and to bring together perhaps some of the political practice and political theory, where I think migration offers some really useful and interesting insights.

On the one hand, when we are looking at migration, we are endlessly being asked, "What are we going to do?" I was speaking at an event a couple of weeks ago that was organized by the European Commission, where I had to speak to the title they had given me, which was "Why Did Research Not Predict the Syrian Refugee Crisis?" We are being asked these very tough and clear empirical and policy questions, on the one hand, and being expected to speak to this policy agenda, which is a very urgent one.

However, on the other hand, there are all sorts of really deep political questions that I think must now be put on the table, particularly the nature of the political communities that we live in. I think there is a need for vision, as well as policy recommendations. I think that this is something where academics have to perhaps engage more directly with policymakers, and indeed people who are politically active, in reimagining the ways in which human beings relate to themselves and to the place where we live.

STEPHANIE SY: That seems to have a moral underpinning, what you are talking about—the way we treat others, the way we view our territory, whether there should be such a thing. Is it a moral argument that you are making for a world without borders?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: Is it a moral argument? I suppose, in the end, it is a moral argument.

One of the reasons—and perhaps this is to go back to your previous question —I think that one of the reasons that there is this hysteria about immigration is because there are a lot of poor people in the world. You know, I think a lot of people in relatively wealthy countries, including Europe and the United States, even if they are hard-up—and especially, maybe, if they are hard-up—will be looking at other countries of the world and seeing "actually, it's really tough there. Even if it's bad here, it's really tough there." That's a scary thought, that there is so much poverty and so much inequality in this world.

I think it's completely understandable that people who perhaps, themselves, already don't have much, even though they are living in a wealthy, liberal democracy, feel that they need to hold onto the little that they have when confronted with the enormity of this inequality.

STEPHANIE SY: So what would it mean if—let's say there was a world without border controls—what would it mean if anyone from a poor or less advantaged country could come to a wealthier country and receive full welfare benefits?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: Well, a world without border controls, in my imagination, is not the same

capitalist world that we live in today. If we tomorrow were to lift all border controls, I could foresee a sort of distressing and destructive race to the bottom.

So I think that the vision for a world without border controls has to be a much bigger one, and it has to be a world where there is far more equality between states, where there is also not just equality between states but equality between individuals, where perhaps we have a minimum global income, for example. Then, if people want to be able to move from one place to another because they are interested in seeing what life is like in Burkina Faso, then that's okay; they can move.

As I say, I would see this as the kind of vision that we need to work out and work towards, rather than this is what we're going to do tomorrow.

STEPHANIE SY: I imagine when you go and you speak to important policymakers, like you just described, all of that must sound perfectly sound and reasonable. Especially from a moral, humanistic standpoint, it seems logical. But these are policymakers, as you point out, who are looking for solutions today. How does your vision of the world offer real solutions and resolutions to the debate that countries are having about migration?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: You have to think about it on different levels. Very often people have—the debates about migration and asylum today, they are not the sort of broad brush strokes that we have been talking about. When you talk to policymakers, they have very specific policy questions and they have very specific parameters within which they can work. I think that I would see my role as supporting them in thinking through the different options that are pragmatically available and on the table, and look at what is the most just solution in that particular kind of concatenation of events.

However, I think that it's important to always bring the broader context, but also the different temporal dimension, to the table—to think, okay, so there is the particular policy question that you have today, and that's an issue for you, and going forward into the electoral cycle; however, let's also take a longer view about where we want to be in 10 years' time, in 15 years' time, as well as in my, perhaps utopian, 100 years' time, 200 years' time. I think we have to think about those different temporal dimensions.

I think also we have to think about who we mean by policymakers. Of course, it's one thing to talk to national government policymakers or to European policymakers. There are also local government policymakers. But then there are also people like trade unions, even national trade unions and European-level trade unions, who I think are also important policymakers, actually, and who are, I would say, kind of doing the groundwork for the kinds of imagining of different types of political community that I think we can begin to develop. So I think, in a way, we, as academics, as scholars, have to work with people that are engaging with these very tough issues on the ground. But that is by no means just policymakers.

I'll just give you an example. We held a really interesting workshop here a couple of weeks ago, where I was bringing people together to talk about begging, because of my interest in vagrancy and the control of mobility of citizens and non-citizens. We brought together historians and political scientists and local government people and various others, charities, including the police. Two police officers there just really got so excited in the discussion they had with the political theorists. They were really kind of keen on exploring how what they were doing what was related to the ideas of [Hobbes](#) and [Locke](#), and really saw this as an insight into their own thinking and their own responses to the work that they were doing on the streets.

I think giving people those tools and then kind of pushing them once they have the tools—I think it's long-term work, but I definitely think it's worth doing.

STEPHANIE SY: It's interesting. Earlier in your answer you used this word "imagine," and I couldn't

help but think of [John Lennon's song](#) and, of course, the line "Imagine there's no countries."

Bridget, is it a pitched battle that we are seeing today between nationalists—perhaps self-serving, perhaps for territorial reasons, whether human nature or not—and progressives, who share the vision of one world, of no countries? In that way, is it a fight for the soul of how we are as a human race?

BRIDGET ANDERSON: In some ways, I would like to think that that was the terms of the battle. However, I think the problem is that most people, I think, have been affected by—it's very difficult to think outside the nation-state box, it's very difficult. It is, in a way, almost a pervasive kind of value. You don't have to be a nationalist, a sort of rabid nationalist, to still think within the nation-state box.

In many ways, as you intimated, if we are looking at kind of pragmatic policy responses, that is the box within which you have to think. So I would say that actually there are a few people who are sort of saying, "Well, maybe we need to be more like John Lennon," but not very many at the moment.

However, I do think that the nation-state form is creaking very badly and is really not fit for purpose. I was talking about this to somebody the other day, and he said, "Yes, yes, it's an archaic form." I was thinking afterwards, "But it's not an archaic form, because if we say that, then that suggests that it has been longstanding, whereas actually in many areas of the world, if we are thinking about the way that nation-states have been rolled out globally, their global rollout is relatively recent."

So we are not really talking about an archaic form. But I think we are talking about a form that just really is not working for a lot of humanity, in lots of different ways. I think we do need to think about new ways, and we do have to be imaginative in thinking about political communities.

I wish I had the answers, but at least I think that we need to start the beginning of the political conversation about the new ways that are possible.

STEPHANIE SY: Bridget Anderson, professor of migration and citizenship, and research director of the University of Oxford's Center on Migration Policy and Society. She is also the author of *Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Controls*.

Bridget, thank you so much for your time and for joining us on Ethics Matter.

BRIDGET ANDERSON: Thank you, Stephanie.

Audio

Underlying people's economic fears about migrants taking their jobs are much deeper anxieties about nationality, culture, and race, says Bridget Anderson, professor of migration and citizenship at Oxford. The nation-state is simply not working for a lot of humanity, and we need to come up with new ways of thinking about political communities.

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