
Rethinking borders through migration

Interview with Bridget Anderson

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OEm Conversations With 27

outubro de 2021

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Keywords Migration, mobility, borders, citizenship.

Título Repensar as fronteiras através da migração

Bridget Anderson é professora de Mobilidade Migratória e Cidadania na Universidade de Bristol, e diretora do instituto de investigação Migration Mobilities Bristol (MMB), tendo sido anteriormente diretora de Investigação no Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), e professora de Migrações e Cidadania na Universidade de Oxford. O seu trabalho explora as relações entre migrações, raça e nação, historicamente e no mundo contemporâneo, com particular ênfase na precariedade, flexibilidades do mercado de trabalho e direitos de cidadania. Bridget Anderson é autora de *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Controls* (Oxford University Press, 2013) e *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (Zed Books, 2000).

Palavras-chave Migrações, mobilidade, fronteiras, cidadania.

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Emigration Observatory (ahead OEm) – Before exploring your work, we would like to know how you gain interest in the subject of migrations. Could you tell us a bit about what led you to your PhD thesis on migrant domestic workers?

Bridget Anderson (ahead BA) – I walked backwards into academia... when I left university I volunteered with a Philippines solidarity group, and then moved from that to working with undocumented domestic workers – mainly, but not exclusively Filipino. I wrote a short book calling for regularisation and a visa route. It was published by the Anti-Slavery Society and called, to my shame, “Britain’s secret slaves”. Ugh! The book included a chapter that described what was known about the situation of migrant domestic workers in Europe, and I realised that there was a big gap in knowledge and in political organising. Somehow – and I really can’t remember how this happened – I got money from the European Commission to research this, but they said that they would have to give the money to an institution and not me directly (fair enough!) and someone suggested I do it as a PhD. So my introduction to academia was very instrumental.

OEm – In a TEDx Talk you asked us to imagine a world without borders: that borders are not neutral. Could you please talk a bit about it?

BA – National borders are typically spoken of as if they are a kind of tap, or a literal wall, that lets certain kinds of people in and out. But actually they are not neutral, they are highly productive. Most obviously they produce certain kinds of people – “migrants” – and certain kinds of relationships. They also construct understandings of race, skills, gender, family relations and so on, understandings that have significance for everyone and not only those controlled via immigration laws.

OEm – When you propose people to imagine a world without borders, you also ask them to try to be utopian, to think outside of the box. If you were asked to do this, what would be your answer?

BA – Borders are the architecture that maintains the nation state form, so a world without borders (as compared to a world of open borders) is a world where there are no nation states. It will also be a post-capitalist world – a world where people are genuinely free to move or to stay will have to enjoy levels of equality that simply are not possible when capitalist relations dominate. To make this less abstract, though still utopian, it might be easier to think of it as a world without citizens – which does not mean without political and social relations – and a world without workers – which does not mean without work. “Citizenship” and “worker” are the tools and labels that some of us can deploy to claim rights, and we are consequently very attached to them. But they create large shadows – the undocumented migrant, the informal labourer, the wife. We can catch hints of what a world without these categories would look

like in practices and relations that we can see looking from those shadows including relations and practices of solidarity. But they are also apparent in relations we take for granted. Friendships for example – the granting of friend visas would be a good step towards a world without borders. You see I've drifted away from borders, but this is because a world without borders is a totally different world.

OEm – One of the things that is often seen in your work is the necessity of reconsidering the basic category of migrant, the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy, and “failed citizen”.

Why does this necessity exist?

BA – I guess I've started to answer this in the last question. The challenge is that citizenship does give access to some rights, for some people in some states, and it has very powerful rhetoric and politics attached to it. Citizenship is seen as a good thing and as something (a legal status, but also a social membership and responsibility) that should be rolled out to everyone. But I want us to look more critically at what citizenship offers in practice. If you are (black and poor) in the US for instance, citizenship doesn't protect you from being executed by your state; in the UK it doesn't mean you have access to welfare benefits as these are hedged about with all kinds of disciplinary measures. This is not to say that citizenship is worthless – it can give vital protection against deportation, though that is being eroded – but it is limited. Critiquing citizenship is not an end in itself, it is to ask whether the political investment that people put in citizenship is really worth it. Immigration controls are represented as there for the protection of citizens, but how protected are citizens by states? I'm interested in “failed citizens” – people who have the legal status of citizenship but who are deemed not “good citizens”, because they just don't measure up in some way to the way that citizens are supposed to be – because they aren't in paid employment, because they've committed crimes, because they are negatively racialized. I think attending to marginalised citizens can help expose the costs of dividing citizens from migrants, and legal citizens from deserving contributors with a view to asking what are the political projects that can bring migrants and citizens together, not in solidarity, but in common interest?

OEm – You said “the virus also exposes the mechanisms that promote and maintain inequality within as well as between states”. Could you please explain a bit more about what you mean by that?

BA – There are so many ways – I'm sure your readers will have observed this themselves in many different contexts. For example: how mobility controls were enforced with increased

ethnic profiling, racist identity checks, and use of force;¹ the increase in the working day of many women as they picked up hours of additional schooling and caring often on top of regular work; the disproportionate deaths among migrant communities, in part because of their concentration in low waged, essential, front facing work. All of these are exacerbations of already existing ways that people are made vulnerable.

OEm – Do you think that the concepts of “community of value” and “migrant of value” were enforced, or are going to be enforced, by the pandemic?

BA – Yes, but for the community of value I suspect there’s a lot of variation between places on how it’s played out. For example, whether wearing a mask is seen as socially responsible or evidence you are siding with the oppressive state varies a lot. And of course the migrant of value = “essential worker”. It reminds me of Vivian Zelizer’s ideas about the economically worthless and emotionally priceless. Certain types of low status work (performed of course not only by migrants) were acknowledged as essential, but that didn’t change either the pay or the temporariness of visas – essential yet disposable workers.

OEm – Regarding mobility within the European Union, where there is free movement, there are, however, other borders than the legal ones, such as special conditions for access to the welfare state. To what extent do issues such as “national wealth” end up generating racism, even in a place where there are no barriers to movement?

BA – This is a complicated question to unpack! My starting point is that rulers have long sought to control the mobility of the ruled, and more particularly of the poor who are ruled, and that this has been going on since before national borders. In Europe this was manifest in early vagrancy statutes that tied feudal serfs to masters and to land. This is not only where I would identify the origins of immigration controls (which attempt to control the mobility of the global poor/low waged), but also provides the contexts for national welfare states. Indeed, claiming social assistance often has implications for the mobility of citizens. So it isn’t surprising that, when the mobility of the European poor/low waged was no longer controllable via immigration, it became controlled through welfare mechanisms. What your question points to is firstly the dynamic connection between race and class – so some people are not properly white because they are associated with poverty and a kind of degraded whiteness which makes their whiteness visible. True whiteness is not visible – in the UK the “white working class” are visible, but the “white middle class” are not. And racism is also imbricated with ideas of the na-

¹ This has been documented in <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR0125112020ENGLISH.pdf>

tional. The nation calls on ideas of belonging and ancestry that, like it or not, are entangled with race and ethnicity. And of course, “national wealth” – what is that, other than to say “this is ours”. But in our globalised world, whose inequalities have been so shaped by histories of colonialism, how can wealth be national? It just doesn’t make any sense in practice, and politically it is an effort to enclose.

OEm – In your article “Capability, care, and personal assistance”, you say that “starting from the world as it is means starting from injustice that is embedded not only in personal relations, but in histories and institutions”. In here, you were referring to the capability theory being a non-ideal theory of justice, but do you think that your line of work, when focusing on the issues of migration, also follows that line of thought? By this I mean if you think that in order to achieve a just society, is it necessary to overcome all the barriers in our mind-set that were engraved by the occidental society?

BA – I’m impressed that you dug out that paper. Yes, I do think that’s right and it’s even bigger than that – it’s our emotion set, our imagination set, our ways of living. But that’s supposed to be hopeful and not a counsel of despair. There are so many ways of being in the world, so much is possible and it’s important to hold on to that because we make our futures by what we think is within the realms of the possible, – it has to be possible before it can move to being realistic.

[Interview by e-mail, on September 17th, 2021, edited for publication on October 2021.]



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Series	OEm Conversations With, 27
Title	Rethinking borders through migration: interview with Bridget Anderson
Author	Carlota Moura Veiga
Publisher	Observatório da Emigração, CIES, Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
Date	October 2021
ISSN	2183-4385
DOI	10.15847/CIESOEMCW272021
URI	

Cite as Moura Veiga, Carlota (2021), "Rethinking borders through migration: interview with Bridget Anderson", *OEm Conversations With, 27*, Observatório da Emigração, CIES, Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa.
DOI: 10.15847/CIESOEMCW272021

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