

Belonging

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Belonging is often associated with a search for a sense of being at home. It is, however, more than an individual state of mind: our ideas of belonging connect us to each other, and to the social worlds we inhabit in quite specific ways. The dictionary tells us that to belong, we need to ‘fit in a specified place or environment’. It is not enough to just *be* in a particular place; one must *fit* in and, in order to fit in, one must be seen to belong by others. Belonging is, in other words, *relational*.

Lurking within ideas of belonging, then, is the idea that some do not belong: ‘s/he is a stranger, and doesn’t belong here’. This is especially the case for ideas of national belonging. Nationalism uniquely sets *limits* to belonging (Anderson, 1991). Nationalism not only creates an ‘us’ with a sense of being ‘at home’, it also creates a sense that there are persons who not belong. David Morley argues that a nationalist discourse ‘allows us to imagine that we do not have to share our space with anyone else unless they are of exactly our own kind by virtue of consanguinity’ (2000). The legitimacy for subjecting those said to ‘not-belong’ to differential treatment under the law or to outright exclusion is created by such ideas. ‘They’ should not, ‘we’ feel, have the things (rights, entitlements or even a sense of belonging) believed to be exclusively ‘ours’. Nationalist ideas of belonging, thus, draw lines of *difference*. Such lines are drawn not only between nation states but *within* nation states.

‘Nationals’ and ‘foreigners’ exist not only in separated national territories but, in reality, coexist within any nation state. Nationalist imaginations work to construct hierarchies *between* people differently classified as either ‘nationals’ or ‘foreigners’ within any given nation state. Those constituted as ‘foreigners’ can include those with varying legal statuses of ‘migrant’ (‘permanent resident’ to ‘temporary foreign worker’ to ‘illegal’) as well as co-citizens seen as not ‘fitting in’.

The process of sorting out who belongs and who does not is not a natural, timeless process. Nor is it random. Nationalist ideas of belonging are historically situated in a global context of capitalist competition, and they are informed by the intertwining of normative – and normalizing – ideas of ‘race’, gender and sexuality with those of ‘nation’. Hence the idea that any given ‘nation’ can best be defined through ‘genealogy’, ‘bloodlines’, and ‘family ties’. The very first national controls were highly racialized, gendered and sexualized. They also favoured the free movement of elites, particularly the bourgeoisie, over workers. Indeed, state restrictions against free human

mobility were central to the creation of nation states and to the creation of national belonging (Mongia, 1999). Indeed, it was only as monarchical or imperial states became *nation* states – a process begun in the late 18th century and, arguably, only secured at the end of World War II – that state sovereignty and societal membership came to be *defined* by border controls. Consequently, in contrast to new ‘national subjects’, ‘migrants’ came to be thought of as not belonging and, therefore, as not having the ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt, 1951).

The growing number of regulations and restrictions against human mobility enacted by nation states over the past century or so have helped to produce the view that human migration is always already pathological. In today’s world of nation states, there is a deep sense that migration – and those classified as ‘migrants’ – produce nothing but crises. Tellingly, this (state) category does not include *everyone* moving across national boundaries, but usually only those who come to be seen as ‘foreign’ to the ‘nation’, those whose lives have been devalued by the close association of the ideology of nationalism with the ideologies of racism, sexism and heterosexism. Nationalist ideas of belonging are particularly and profoundly dangerous for these persons, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status.

Such ideas are, however, very helpful to some. Along with producing certain people as national subjects, national ideas of belonging produce a group of persons who can be treated in ways that would be deemed unacceptable – illegal even – were they applied to those ‘belonging’ to the ‘nation’. For example, those categorized as ‘temporary foreign workers’ are tied to their employers in conditions not unlike those of indentured servitude, conditions considered illegal when applied to ‘citizen’. The consequences of denying ‘migrants’ mobility, labour, social, and political rights – and the consequence of the glaring lack of solidarity between ‘migrants’ and citizen workers – is that those classified as ‘foreigners’ receive lower wages and less social services. They are also subjected to a relentless degradation of every aspect of their being. Far from trying to keep ‘foreigners’ out, then, nation-state immigration and citizenship policies are best viewed as a means of ensuring the *subordination*, oppression and heightened exploitation of those imagined to not belong. From the perspective of the state and employers, ‘migrants’ are best wanted as *unwanted* (Hage, 2000). Nationalist ideas of belonging do not protect ‘nationals’ or ‘citizen workers’, as they are thought to. The fact is that the global system of capitalist

competition depends on there being persons who can be made to work for lower wages or under more dangerous conditions. Restrictions on human migration are one, very significant, way that this competition is organized. It is indeed difficult to overestimate the significance of ideas of national belonging and the differences that they materialize to the capitalist world economic system and the political formation of nation states within it.

The route to ending this cut-throat competition does not lie in the erection of more borders against ‘foreigners’ but in the *elimination* of borders. We cannot indulge in the fantasy that states (or vigilantes) can stop human migration: there are too many good reasons for people to move, and no amount of walls or guns or vitriol is going to prevent this movement. Instead, by enacting a

world in which we all equally belong, we might – all of us – be in a stronger position to protect ourselves from ongoing displacement, dispossession and our resultant impoverishment.

References

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