

History, Memory and Immigration Controls

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Can history and memory be mobilized as part of the struggle against immigration controls? If so, how? What does the historical literature have to say about passports, immigration bureaucracies, the international nation state system, and the global regulation of migration? Who is the ‘migrant’? In *Deportation is Freedom! The Orwellian World of Immigration Controls*, Steve Cohen calls for a Museum of Illegal Immigration to remember those who fought immigration controls, and those detained and deported. It is an intriguing idea, especially when contrasted with existing museums of immigration. Like the historical literature, museums may pre-suppose that migration is a problem, and work to (re)construct sedentary populations – and singular ethnicized identities. They are often nation-building projects, turning potentially threatening ‘migrants’ into ‘immigrants’.

Our historical retrievals, like our social movements, need to do more than remember. Important as that work is, we also need to grasp how controls came to be – and why it is that history is so often naturalized and forgotten. What if we argue that the movements of people – in all their range and complexity – make up the foundation of world history? Julia Clancy-Smith, in her re-conceptualization of Europe and North Africa from the standpoint of people and mobilities, writes against the grain of a long tradition in historical production that has been shaped by a deep sedentarist bias, a focus on the nation state as a primary unit that largely assumes border controls rather than explaining how and why they came to be. The rich classics of anti-colonial historiography – a potentially important resource for conversations on the origins of immigration controls – have not always been able to adequately account for migrant figures that do not fit the binary of colonizer/colonized. There is an important historical literature that exposes the racist, class-biased and patriarchal character of modern immigration regimes, and tracks the administrative strategies for keeping people out of (or in) diverse settings. But it does not necessarily help us understand how exclusion came to be fundamental to modern practices of sovereignty, law, identification – and to notions of modern freedom.

Here is where recent historical research might contribute to re-thinking migrant justice projects – and indeed to troubling the category of migrant itself. While the history of immigration controls on a *global* scale is complex, they are, in fact, surprisingly recent, and not an inevitable outcome of international arrangements among political communities. Certain kinds of controls over mobility do have a long history, but rulers were initially

far more concerned to control *exits* rather than *entries* into territories, the better to ensure a source of labour. And there is an important relationship between contemporary controls enacted at *national* borders and earlier forms of *local* mobility control aimed at the poor and ‘vagrants’.

Yet, modern immigration controls are of a different character and scale. They were (and continue to be) foundational, for the consolidation of the nation and notions of sovereignty, and for *making the boundaries of the international system itself*, even including who is imagined as capable of individual freedom and civilized government. Immigration controls arose in the context of Atlantic slavery’s aftermath and in direct relation to complex debates over the indenture of South Asian and Chinese labourers and the meaning of ‘free’ labour and ‘free’ migration. In the process, ‘free’ migrants were distinguished from Asian ‘coolies’/indentured labourers and the enslaved – those supposedly without the self-governing capacity that entitled them to mobility rights. Thus, liberal notions of freedom and of mobility were centrally articulated against the figure of the naturally unfree Asian. Moreover, the association of the enslaved and the indentured with *private* control and with brokers who assisted their movements, further constituted them as ‘unfree’ as, increasingly, all actors but the nation were de-legitimized when it came to the facilitation (or not) of movement.

Linked to this was the principle that a self-governing nation ought to be able to exercise the absolute right to control who entered and what happened at the border – to draw the line at the so-called uncivilized, the non-white, the economically dependent, and all those in the grip of ‘traffickers’.

Historians broadly agree that, between the 1880s and the interwar period, most of the key elements of the current immigration control regime were developed and extended on a global basis. The post-independence states that emerged soon after World War II largely failed to challenge this regime and often contributed to its consolidation. Today, this state of affairs remains largely taken for granted, and migrants are ‘illegalised’ on a grand scale and often depicted as criminals or trafficking victims – or both. But any historical analysis must attend to how diverse modes of resistance – clandestine migration, smuggling, anti-deportation campaigns, legal challenges, boycotts, use of fraudulent papers, anti-colonial resistance to mobility controls within the British Empire – *also* shaped the architecture of controls. Within the British Empire, several dramatic challenges led by

anti-colonial Asians in the early 20th century had as their outcome the entrenchment of the principle that white settler nations such as South Africa and Canada had the sovereign right to admit or exclude – thereby ending the principle of free movement without a colour bar within the Empire. Resistance to immigration controls frequently shifted how they were administratively deployed, often making them less overtly racist, so that challenging them frontally became far trickier because so much was left to the ‘discretion’ of officials and bureaucracies. By examining the history of immigration controls, *together with* the fascinating archive of resistance to them, we have a renewed resource for challenging distinctions of ‘legal’/‘illegal’ and ‘citizen’/‘alien’; for radically re-imagining our relationship to space, place and

one another; and for challenging borders, nations and the institution of citizenship.

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