Women's Studies International Forum 46 (2014) 5–12

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Nations, migration and domestic labor: The case of the UK

Bridget Anderson

Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, 58 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6QS, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 4 February 2014

SYNOPSIS

Immigration controls serve a crucial symbolic function of delineating the nation and the people, the boundaries of 'Us' and 'Them' and state legitimacy is, through immigration policy, linked to ideas of nation building and preservation (Honig, 2003). Labor migration policy is not simply an instrumental response to the needs of employers but highly symbolic and politically contested terrain that assumes intense public significance. This is particularly evident in the case of domestic workers, who are embedded in the family, the 'heart of the nation'. This paper explores the ways in which migration policies on domestic work not only produce a subordinated workforce, but reflect and construct ideas about family, work, and Britishness, with a particular focus on two visa types: domestic worker accompanying an employer and au pair visas.

Introduction

In 2002 Wimmer and Glick Schiller famously alerted us to 'methodological nationalism,' 'the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world.' They argued that mainstream social science was infused with methodological nationalism, and that the study of migration in particular had been limited by this. The significance of the study of 'transnational communities' lay in this epistemic move away from methodological nationalism rather than in the identifying of new objects of observation (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). They were absolutely right to identify the importance of de-naturalizing the nation state, and to point out the ways in which intellectual work and research participates in the construction of the categories of state, nation, migrant and citizen. In this paper, I want to consider the implications of this for research on migrant domestic workers, but I also want to argue that resisting methodological nationalism doesn't mean we should not take the nation seriously. On the contrary, we must acknowledge its importance in order to see beyond it.

Nationalism is integrally related to the projects of race and gender, which all are permanently 'under construction.' How ideas of the nation are linked to states' naturalization policies has received some attention, but much less has been paid to how these are linked to states' discourses about their immigration policies.[1] In the UK, social relations are increasingly dismissed by social policy: those in receipt of housing benefits are required to move from neighborhoods where they have lived for years if their rent is deemed too expensive, single parents are being required to look for work and so on. What matters in an age of austerity, it seems, are questions of economic costs and benefits. Yet national social relations have increased prominence. So government rhetoric dictates that employers' principal consideration should not be the most efficient, profitable worker, but whether or not they are British — though of course immigration policy is more complicated because of EU citizenship. In this paper I want to consider how policies on immigration contribute to nation building in the UK. More particularly, I'm interested in how policies on immigration and domestic work reflect and reproduce ideas about Britishness, Britain, the family and work. This is a complementary approach to the research that argues for the importance of both acknowledging the UK's need for domestic workers and understanding why it is that this demand is met so overwhelmingly by migrant women. I'll

0277-5395/$ – see front matter © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.01.005

begin by considering the relation between immigration, states and nations, and the production of 'us and them,' looking at how this is manifest in UK policy documents. I'll then examine the two UK visas that have been available for domestic work, looking at how they encapsulate certain assumptions about domestic work in the UK, about the relation between family and work, and ideas of equality, slavery and freedom.

States, immigration and nation

Nations are imagined as groups of people who share a common culture, language and history. They are, as described by Benedict Anderson, 'imagined communities' because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' Because of their association with history and with kin, there is a strong element of ethnic myth around nation-ness, whether the promotion of nation as nationalism is in opposition to colonialism, or in opposition to the perceived intrusion of ethnic outsiders.

Despite its sometimes archaic feel, the nation continues to have resonance in contemporary liberal democracies. States are represented as having to act in the 'national interest,' which is imagined as different from the interests of the state per se. It is important to recognize that when it comes to immigration policies, states must be seen as prioritizing the interests of the 'nation' and 'the people' in ways that go beyond simply a response to the demands of capital. Notoriously, in 2009, then Prime Minister Gordon Brown coined the phrase 'British jobs for British workers'. This was taken up by a wide range of political actors, including elements of the trade union movement and Far Right parties. Its logic underpins immigration policy and rhetoric, which constructs migrants as a residual labor force, to be tapped only when states lack the skills or otherwise cannot fill particular vacancies. Of course in practice it is not easy to say what is a 'British job' given the complex and multinational relations of global capital. 'British worker' is equally tricky, particularly as those with settlement status and EU nationals must not be discriminated against because of their country of birth. Nevertheless the call reveals that 'national interest' is bound up with 'national identity' as much as with GDP and balance of payments. Immigration policy is not only functional but a highly symbolic and politically contested terrain that assumes intense public significance.

Liberal theorists who are concerned with justifying immigration controls often point to the importance of borders for delineating the 'community.' They argue, for instance, that political and legal institutions embody values that atomized individuals cannot generate themselves (Miller, 1995). Importantly, modern liberal democratic states portray themselves not as arbitrary collections of people hung together by a common legal status and/or simply by common descent but as communities of shared value. Nation states are therefore not just legally constructed but are *communities of value*. One political challenge for liberal immigration states is that the way in which people are legally constructed, (i.e. formal citizenry, as those who cannot be refused entry or deported because their claim to belong is recognized) cannot be translated to fit the powerfully imagined category of the community of value. There is tension between the idea of belonging to 'the people' by birth and belonging as a result of upholding certain values. The Good Citizen is in part constructed by immigration and citizenship law (Honig, 2003), but by a whole lot more as well. The details are clearly context dependent, but the Good Citizen is law-abiding, hardworking, white, and heterosexual. They are liberal sovereign selves that are independent but rooted in a community, a community that is, importantly, unchallenged by gender, race and class relations. Not all natural born citizens are Good Citizens.

Citizenship acquisition by migrants is symbolically important because it is a moment when the state, acting in the 'national interest,' is seen to actively influence the composition of the population on the territory of the state and in the heart of the nation, when the borders between 'us' and 'them' are revealed as unstable and therefore all the more important to fix. Thus one moment where the (purported) key values of state membership can be discerned lies in the requirements laid down for admission to citizenship. What states require of naturalizing citizens (such as lack of a criminal record, knowledge of the state's history, commitment to certain values, use of the language, ethnicity) offers a picture of the normative content of citizenship. The non-citizen who is allowed access to citizenship must be the right kind of person.

Good citizenship is not only asserted through naturalization processes, but also through controls over entry and exit. Attention to the borders of immigration and citizenship reveals how 'we' make sense of 'ourselves' (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2012). The state must be seen as ensuring the entry of the right type of person and excluding others, most obviously the terrorist, but also low-skilled workers, those who cannot integrate, or who do not make the right kind of contribution. As authors like Sara Van Walsum (2008), Mae Ngai (2004) and Eithne Luibhéid (2002) have brilliantly demonstrated, gender and sexuality are important components of this fixing. Only the 'right' kind of women, mothers, daughters, and workers can be allowed entry onto the territory and into citizenship. The myth of 'common origin,' the imagining of the nation as family writ large, the role of women as reproducers of the nation and as bearers of cultural authenticity, and their role in the 'backward look' to tradition and the past, have been the subject of a sophisticated literature on the complex and mutually constitutive relations between gender, ethnicity and nationalism.

Care work and labor migration

In this way, states are constrained in their responses to the demands of capital and capitalism. States cannot be seen to straightforwardly deliver low-wage, disposable migrant labor to employers, because of the demands of nationalism. Immigration controls aren't simply instrumental responses to the needs of capital, but are important to state legitimacy, which is, through immigration policy, linked to ideas of nation building and preservation. The call 'British jobs for British workers' is a normative demand, calling upon the state to recognize immigration and nationality as the crucial and defining factors in determining who ought to have access to employment. Importantly, it also acknowledges, even if