BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Ellen Van Damme

Leah Cowan begins her book with one key question “Why break down borders?”, to which she formulates an answer and plan of action for those who work in policy, politicians, and all other citizens of the United Kingdom (UK). Cowan starts from the premise that “no human is illegal,” further drawing on the UK’s exploitative history of occupation, extractivism, and enslavement, in order to build her argument in favour of abolishing borders. By making cross-references between modern policies and historical events, she shows how knowing (or failing to recognize) the history of a country in relation to migration is crucial to understand (or failing to understand) contemporary conflicts and subsequent migration flows. Although the focus lies on the UK, parallels are drawn with other countries, such as the United States, that have similar histories and implement similar harsh anti-migrant policies.

During the post-Second World War era (1948–1970), people from Jamaica and other Caribbean countries were “invited” to the UK to help rebuild the country. Recognized as the Windrush generation, as well as colonies of the British Empire, they arrived to the UK as citizens of the country. Ultimately, families were ripped apart as a result of this project, which aimed to fill in the voids of highly needed labour in the UK. Even more tragically, after building lives in Britain, the Windrush generation’s labour was dismissed, family reunion became restricted, and calls for deportations to the Caribbean were made more prevalent for some migrants. This labour migration and (earlier) enslavement directly enriched the UK, as “the profits which were extracted from slave labour were invested back in Britain—through the construction of banks, factories and canals which helped industrialisation to flourish” (Cowan 2021: 3).

Although borders are often seen and claimed as necessary to protect people, Cowan argues that they are “indisputable sites of violence,” (Cowan 2021: 1) unnatural, and cause harm to those who are in most need of protection from violence. As such, Cowan discusses the issue of borders and migration from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989), demonstrating how, throughout history, white patriarchal imperialists set up, enforce, and control borders to oppress other (often Black Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC)) people. For instance, Cowan
posits that women from working-class backgrounds may experience border violence differently, noting how “migrant women in particular face oppression along intersecting axes—they experience xenophobia and misogyny, and these experiences are compounded for women who are also people of colour, queer, trans, disabled and working class.” (Cowan 2021: 36) Borders create a sentiment of othering, whereby people who have (legal) access to cross the border are set apart from, and favoured over, those who do not. This further fosters the already existing problem of racial bias (Eberhardt 2019). Further, media plays an important role in the process of othering, and the building of borders. For example, violence by BIPOC or migrants is attributed in the media to their ethnicity or descent, whereas for white criminals “media outlets are quick to perform the most elaborate mental acrobatics to create three-dimensional narratives for their actions.” (Cowan 2021: 70) The truth decay (Kavanagh and Rich 2018) has indeed caused the blurring of the line between facts and opinions, creating “accepted ‘truths’ about migrants communities” (Cowan 2021: 51). Thus, media representations of migrants create public opinions and subsequent policy making regarding migrants and border control.

In line with other authors who wrote about the “invisibility” of migrants (Estrada 2021; Smith 2003), Cowan tries to make people with a migration background visible in all their aspects. While stories of migration lean towards demonizing migrants, Cowan highlights the active contribution of migrants in negotiating more protections and guarantees on the work floor for all. Although, this should not be the main focus, given these arguments can easily tip over in the argument that migrants are only welcome when they can “contribute” to the country’s economy, which glances over the fact that “Britain . . . has historically done most of the ‘draining’ of resources from other countries.” (Cowan 2021: 43)

Border mechanisms such as strategies for deportation and failing to relay rights to migrants further invisibilize migrants. Other mechanisms, as seen through actors, such as police forces, immigration officers, and landlords, also participate in the silencing of migrants. In the same vein, girls and women of colour who become victims to sexual violence are much less likely to speak up than white girls and women (who are already not likely to talk about sexual harassment). Moreover, girls and women of colour are less likely to speak up about sexual violence at the hands of a man of colour, out of fear of even further stigmatizing their community. This raises the impression of the villain man of colour assaulting innocent white girls (without downplaying these girls’ experiences), and silencing the experiences of victimization of girls of colour.

Cowan provides us with various practices for breaking down borders, including discussing colonial history in the school curricula; expressing solidarity with deported migrants through direct action; supporting decolonization, which
includes “the breaking down of borders and these systems of oppression,” and starts with “decolonizing our minds”; and, rethinking what we perceive to be “universal truths,” hence reanalysing our “Western ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism,” (Cowan 2021: 138–140) to name a few examples. As Cowan concludes: “By thinking beyond the fabricated limits of the racist state, we can build up from the soil. This involves constructing radically loving ways of living with each other and the earth. Together, we can break down borders.” (Cowan 2021: 150)

Leah Cowan gave many reasons as to why we should break down borders and linked the abolition of borders to other abolition movements, such as those related to prisons and the police. Moreover, the issue with borders became even more pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example when the Trump administration misused the implementation of Title 42 to keep migrants out.1 What it all boils down to is that while borders are designed and enforced under the guise of protecting people, Cowan shows us how borders are indisputable sites of violence that only further reinforce inequality through violence and restriction.

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Note


References


