

Book Review

Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders



Adam McKeown

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The most significant contribution of Adam McKeown's magnificent book, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, is its definitive assault on the presentist and empiricist tradition that pervades scholarship on migration across the disciplines. Working against this tradition, McKeown sets out to historicize and denaturalize those innocuous, innocent, mundane categories that serve as the stable assumptions and provide the ground for most migration analyses: assumptions of the existence of nationalized state borders; of clear definitions of the migrant, the immigrant, and the emigrant; of uncontested, pre-existing individuals; of dehistoricized migration bureaucracies; of unquestioned definitions of state sovereignty held to embody control over (im)migration; or of firm, unchanging distinctions between freedom and coercion. After reading this thoroughly researched and wide-ranging book, it will be impossible to proceed with migration (or, indeed, other) analysis secure in the comfort of stable categories.

Melancholy Order is organized as a deceptively simple inquiry: It seeks to historicize the striking international standardization of an institutional structure that currently governs the global migration regime. To do justice to this simple inquiry turns out to be an enormously complex task that leads McKeown to analyze migration in a range of different registers: as entangled in the making and remaking of international law; as a site for the production of modern individual identity; as embedded in the protocols and procedures of the bureaucratization of identity; as a key domain that shapes current, normative understandings of state borders; as the nexus for the standardization of what would count as the "international"; as formative to distinguishing such salient categories as "free" and "unfree" persons; as enmeshed in discourses of civilization, race, and colonialism; as a critical locus in (re)definitions of state sovereignty; one could go on. In McKeown's analysis, these

seemingly disparate strands in the making of a certain international and global formation—that include as much its unquestioned socio-political or ideological verities as they do its institutional and bureaucratic structure—can be traced to the debates, contestations, and regulatory mechanisms that converge and cohere around the management of Asian exclusion from white settler colonies, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The particular racial or civilizational imperative that informed such exclusion, as McKeown shows, exists not as a remnant, awaiting excision, in such specific sites as some legislative mechanisms of white settler colonies. Rather, especially with diffusion of similar practices and the inculcation of similar norms around the globe (a process described especially in Chapters 7, 11, and 12), it is enduringly embedded in current understandings of international law, of state sovereignty, of bureaucratization, and of the overarching logic of expert regulation.

Though I am attempting here to synthesize McKeown's arguments, the book, in fact, covers so wide an array of concerns that it resists neat summation. A difficulty evident also in McKeown's introduction that is unable to provide a simple synthesis. In part, this results from the negligible attention to positioning the book within existing scholarship. While a truly impressive wealth of scholarly literature is cited, there is little discussion of the substance of the arguments of other scholars. Given this lack of orientation, reading the text, especially Part II, is not an easy task. When McKeown attends to such concerns, as in his discussion, in Chapter 2, of how "Asian migration" has been understood within migration scholarship, he gives us brilliant and path-breaking analyses: Chapter 2, "Global Migration, 1830–1940," is distinctive and provides an explicit engagement with how scholarship has tended, qualitatively, to understand Asian migration as an infrequent phenomenon; outlines the serious, quantitative, empirical errors generated

by and confirming these understandings; and, coming full circle, shows how such empirical (mis)understandings, in turn, sediment the qualitative view that Asians were “place bound” even as mobile, migrant Europeans embarked on journeys, particularly to the New World. This latter migration would not only produce the modern world, but also the template of “global” formations that would later simply radiate outward to incorporate more of the globe. Importantly, McKeown here does not eschew quantitative analysis, compiling, instead, new estimates which show that Asian and European migrations were roughly equivalent in numerical scale. Combined with analysis developed further in various parts of the book, McKeown very persuasively both argues that there was no structural or economic necessity for Asian exclusion and shows how “[m]igration patterns were segregated into regions even as the economic forces behind migration grew increasingly integrated around the world” (44). In other words, McKeown offers a thoroughly nuanced analysis of how globalization processes are, simultaneously, integrating and segmenting and cannot—or should not—be understood in purely economic terms, as is frequently the case.

Another reason the book resists easy summation is its attempt to combine an avowedly Foucaultian approach with analysis not easily reconciled with such approaches. A Foucaultian approach is evident, most especially, in Part III, which details the formation of a migration bureaucracy and its deployment of a range of techniques that Foucault characterizes as disciplinary power. But more traditional historiographic approaches are also in evidence, most especially, in Parts I and II, that, for instance, frequently resort to a notion of “prevailing ideals”—such as those regarding *laissez faire*, notions of the individual, or the meanings of freedom—as the pre-existing cause, and thus the explanation, of a certain outcome. Such explanations are sometimes necessary to the argument; at other times they are perplexing, particularly in a book that so effectively details the material practices and processes that simultaneously

embody and produce new realities, new forms of subjectivity, and new forms of subjectification. For a book that already gives us so much, it is unfair to ask that it also provide a reflection on complex issues of historiography. Rather, what McKeown’s study shows is the necessity for broaching issues presently largely segregated in the domain of philosophy of history. This necessity is made evident due to the numerous registers in which McKeown places his analysis, thereby raising urgent questions of the conceptual categories through which historical narratives are composed and explanations are secured.

There is much to learn from a book of such daunting scope and scale, even as there is much to debate. What is clear is that with *Melancholy Order*, McKeown has given us a book that is brimming with innumerable new directions for scholarship and is by far the smartest book on migration in a global frame to emerge in recent decades. It will set the agenda for future research in a field desperately in need of more thoughtful and thought-provoking analyses that can take up the daunting challenge of historicizing the making of the global in ways that are not geographically parochial, theoretically vacuous, and empirically thin.

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NOTES

1. If this is the watershed moment, McKeown’s analysis covers far more, stretching from a discussion of international law from the sixteenth up to the twentieth centuries to the adoption of the “points based” system of migration control in countries like Canada and Australia in the late twentieth century.

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