

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Antoine Pécoud**, *Depoliticising Migration: Global Governance and International Migration Narratives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-137-44592-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-349-49589-4 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-137-44593-3 (ebook)

“International migration has risen to the top of the global policy agenda’ ... such a statement has today become so common that one almost feels embarrassed to formulate it once again” (p.2). This quotation forms the opening to Antoine Pécoud’s 2015 book *Depoliticising Migration: Global Governance and International Migration Narratives*, and whilst Pécoud’s embarrassment may be understandable, the prominence of migration as a site of political and policy debate continues to rise. As recent events across North Africa, Europe, and Australia suggest, international migration casts a long shadow over both geopolitical debate and domestic politics. Within this feverish political atmosphere, one Pécoud deems an “over-politicisation of migration” that borders on “hysteria” (p.126), it seems counter-intuitive to suggest that political dissent around migration has been shut down or subverted. It is precisely this claim that Pécoud makes in *Depoliticising Migration*, through exploring the production of migration as an issue of global governance that requires international policy responses. In examining this process, *Depoliticising Migration* critically illustrates how the embarrassingly “common sense” claim that migration is at the heart of the global policy agenda, has come at a significant cost for political debate and disagreement.

*Depoliticising Migration* is an engaging text that is both accessible and enjoyable to read. Part of the reason for its level of insight is the experience that the author brings to the text. Between 2003 and 2012, Pécoud worked in UNESCO’s migration program, helping experts, policy-makers and politicians learn about, and adapt to, the emerging challenges of migration at both domestic and international levels. Drawing on this experience, the book focuses on one tool of this learning process—International Migration Narratives (IMN). These represent “the growing corpus of international reports and publications on migration, by IOs [International Organisations] and other international entities” (p.3). IMN are, according to Pécoud, a “relatively new phenomenon” that constitute a “relatively coherent body of

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

knowledge and ideas, regarding both *what migration is* (trends, numbers, dynamics, etc.) and *what it should be* (through the elaboration of so-called policy recommendations)” (p.3). In studying the claims of IMN, this book critically explores both how knowledge claims about international migration are made, and how such claims serve to discipline the policies that surround international migration as a field of governmental intervention. Indeed, as Pécoud argues, IMN “call for apparently new and innovative immigration policies whilst at the same time negating the political nature of their object and the political implications of their recommendations” (p.5).

The book is based on an analysis of 15 IMN texts that give an insight into how the global governance of migration has been constructed since 2000. Reports are drawn from a range of international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme, the International Labour Organization, and the Global Commission on International Migration. In overviewing this corpus, Pécoud finds three key trends. First, a significant level of repetition between reports in terms of key terminology, framing of issues, and policy recommendations. This gives IMN a “high level of convergence” and means that the core differences between reports can often simply be the audience that they address (p.36), leading to a repetitive narrative that acquires “an authority whose main source is the constant repetition of the same message” (p.33). Second, reports focus on exploring how states and other international actors should coordinate responses to migration. This makes IMN both inward-looking, in that they seek to justify and promote the “global governance” of migration by nation-states and international organisations, and inherently conservative, in that they maintain and protect the interests of a system of governance centred on the prominence of the nation-state. Third, IMN lack clearly defined authors. They are often the result of “a complex thinking and drafting process, in which a wide range of actors and people are involved” (p.39). This abstracted process poses the question of “who is actually speaking through these reports” (p.41), as the views of international organisations, advisors, policymakers, and researchers become merged into a single narrative that conceals both individual views and critical disagreements. Importantly, Pécoud argues that this abstracted authorship is vital to

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the claims for authority and objectivity that IMN make in shaping migration policy: “[t]he anonymity of a text is a way of extracting it from the controversy that characterises ‘normal’ debates”, and in doing so “IMN claim a specific status, situated above the diverging arguments put forward by authors with different views” (p.41).

The importance of the convergence of views noted in IMN throughout this book, is that the primary purpose of IMN is to “guide policy-makers” (p.8). IMN play an active role in shaping international policy, Pécoud argues, through providing a common framework of shared ideas, concepts and terminology, that aid the process of bringing actors together (p.50). In this sense, *Depoliticising Migration* casts IMN as serving a pragmatic function in enabling policy discussions to occur. Yet, at the same time, IMN serve to maintain the claims to policy relevance, importance, and objective authority of those international organisations who influence the global governance of migration itself. It is for this reason that IMN should be of interest to critical geographers exploring the political closures of contemporary migration management. The reiterative nature of IMN have, as *Depoliticising Migration* shows, served to produce international migration as an important global issue and, at the same time, given rise to a feedback loop of policy recommendations and calls for international cooperation, that in turn demand further policy reports, further recommendations, and often legitimate the continued relevance of international organisations themselves.

*Depoliticising Migration* therefore sits alongside recent work that has critically explored the role of international organisations in migration policy (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Geiger and Pécoud 2014), and moves to utilise institutional ethnography within critical geography (Billo and Mountz 2015). To these studies, Pécoud’s book adds a focus on the discursive production, and circulation, of an international “common sense”—one that not only serves to reiterate and maintain the position of established actors and authorities, but also assumes that “migrants exist as a group of their own that would share no common characteristics with non-migrants” (p.86). In this divisive gesture, migrants and their mobility are discursively constructed as a “problem” that requires some form of response. In

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

presenting a narrative of “chaos or order” (p.89), IMN position a model of “managed migration” as the only practical and possible solution. In this context, management is about “filtering migration, or favouring ‘positive’ (or orderly, beneficial, etc.) migration while suppressing ‘negative’ (disorderly, chaotic, threatening, etc.) migration” (p.89). The significance of arriving at a filtering model of managed migration is that it does not undermine or destabilise the sovereignty of the nation-state. Crucially, “cooperation does not challenge sovereignty. It would on the contrary enable states to better respond to their own interests” (p.69). There is perhaps no better illustration of the complimentary nature of cooperation, sovereignty, and the interests of the state, than contemporary responses to the refugee crisis across Europe.

Critical geographers will thus take from this book a detailed analysis of how IMN are formed, how they help constitute the field of global governance surrounding international migration, and what effects their self-referential nature may have. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that Pécoud concludes that IMN are highly conservative: “while at first sight calling for an upheaval of migration policies”, they in fact “confirm the current—or ‘natural’—order of things” (p.120). Seen as such, IMN serve to facilitate the global circulation of labour and support neoliberal capitalism, whilst doing little to protect the rights of migrants within such a system, and doing even less for the rights of those outside a model of “productive” and “positive” migration. Whilst understandable, this conclusion does leave unanswered some questions that arise through the text, and so I want to conclude this review by pausing to reflect upon these and their importance for the critical arguments made in *Depoliticising Migration*.

First is the question of how “new” this form of discursive closure really is. Whilst the turn to a language of filtering, selection, and “managed migration” may have taken prominence since the late 1990s, the underlying desire for nation-states to employ migration control as a selective measure of population management has a far longer history, as William Walters’ (2004) account of “domopolitics” reminds us. Similarly, the turn in IMN to focus on “freedom” as a defining feature of migration governance—reflecting “a form of freedom that

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

is strongly monitored, supervised, or ‘managed’ by governments” (p.116)—also has a series of antecedents within the governance of mobility. As Hagar Kotef (2014) has recently shown, movement and its moderation were historically central to the emergence of liberal modes of governance. Processes of selection, disciplining, and the liberal management of mobility, thus have a long historical lineage and in part it is this political history that IMN draw upon in making claims for the liberal governance of migration. *Depoliticising Migration* does not suggest that IMN are creating entirely new discourses of governing migration, or are the first attempts to do so. However, our understanding of how such narratives come to resonate in the present would perhaps have been furthered and deepened with a stronger sense of the historical context on which they build.

Second, in response to the closures of IMN Pécoud concludes by briefly arguing the need to repoliticise debates around migration without falling prey to their “over-politicisation”. This is accounted for by opening greater scope for the discussion of alternatives and explicitly avoiding a framing that sees migration “problems” in isolation. Rather, repoliticisation demands the ability to connect questions of migration into wider analyses of contemporary politics, neoliberal economics, humanitarian responsibility, and labour market restructuring. This form of repoliticisation is attractive, but I was left with the question of whether IMN would, or could, play any role in such a repoliticised debate? If IMN simplify and narrow issues down to specific, and often technical, problems out of a pragmatic necessity to influence policy, then are they by nature ill-suited to the task of articulating an approach more politically progressive, socially just, and radically antagonistic than simply “better” managed migration? And if IMN are unable to serve such a task, then where might we look for counter-IMN that may gain political traction? Counter-narratives certainly exist, from “no borders” arguments to alternative models of citizenship (Bauder 2016; Varsanyi 2006), but they rarely gain access to the circuits of policy influence and exchange that define IMN.

Considering further the politics of the book, I would also suggest that whilst illuminating on the nature of IMN and their role in shaping governance, the book is less adept

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

at drawing out the mechanisms of depoliticisation that underpin that role. Discussions of depoliticisation in varying forms have become significant in geography in recent years, most notably through literature on “post-politics”. There are undoubtedly some echoes of this frame of analysis in *Depoliticising Migration*, especially in how IMN are seen to manage the contours of debate and how they construct policy “problems” that require specific and often managerial interventions isolated from their wider context. Similar arguments have been made in post-political discussions of urban policy (Dikeç 2007; MacLeod 2013), environmental sustainability (Swygendouw 2010), and asylum (Darling 2014). Yet, despite these connections, *Depoliticising Migration* actually says relatively little about the politics of depoliticisation. The book’s penultimate chapter addresses the issue of depoliticisation, but largely avoids the wealth of recent work across the social sciences that analyses, empirically explores, and conceptually challenges how “depoliticisation” might be understood as an inherently political process (see, for example, Darling 2016). This matters because depoliticisation is not an uncontested term, nor is it an unproblematic one. Without a fuller discussion of depoliticisation itself, the reader is left unclear as to whether the depoliticisation effected by IMN is effective, whether it does indeed shut down alternatives as proponents of a post-political thesis might argue, or whether depoliticisation is an incomplete process that fails as often as it succeeds.

Finally, given the author’s background within UNESCO, it is surprising how little detail is given to the process of conceiving, constructing, and editing the reports that make up IMN. In the introduction, the book is described as “a necessarily self-reflexive project” (p.3), and in the conclusion we gain a brief glimpse into the often contested construction of these narratives (p.126), but between these two poles the process of creating the building blocks of IMN, and how this constitutes a *political* process, is left largely silent. Whilst the book does not set out to ethnographically analyse the workings of international organisations such as UNESCO, given Pécoud’s undoubted insight from working within this field for so long, further detail as to how these organisations practically relate to IMN would have been both

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

useful and illustrative of the politics *behind* narrative construction and its depoliticising tendencies.

In summary, *Depoliticising Migration* is a thought-provoking, and timely, text. In illustrating the closures of policy imaginations when confronted with recursive loops of self-authorisation, vested interests, and the dominance of nation-state sovereignty, Pécoud reminds us of the need to maintain a focus on the critical nature of alternatives. And at a time of considerable upheaval in the politics of migration, where violent exclusions seem unrelenting, it is all the more important to explore ways to politicise and repoliticise migration. In offering a starting point for such discussion, *Depoliticising Migration* is a valuable contribution to critical scholarship.

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# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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