

MAJA SAGER

# An interview with Bridget Anderson

## Abstract

In the interview Anderson is discussing the migrant as a political and analytical category and the need to think across the categories of citizen and migrant to challenge the exclusion of the latter group – but also to highlight the interconnectedness of processes of social exclusion and marginalisation across the citizen/non-citizen divide. Anderson also reflects on current developments in Europe and the UK in regards of Brexit and the growing support for fascist and extreme right populist movements and political projects.

Keywords: migration, citizenship, welfare, racism, social justice

BRIDGET ANDERSON ÄR professor i migrationsstudier på Bristol universitet i Storbritannien. I sitt arbete utforskar Anderson kritiskt frågor om arbete, medborgarskap, kön, rasism, migration och effekterna av gränsdragningar och kategoriseringsprocesser. Bland Andersons senare publikationer hittar vi *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Controls* (2013) och antologin *Citizenship and its Others* redigerad av Anderson tillsammans med Vanessa Hughes (2015). Intervjun med Bridget Anderson genomfördes i samband med en gästföreläsning vid Sociologiska institutionen i Lund i januari 2017.

*Maja Sager [MS]:* In your work you often return to the need to reconsider the basic category of the migrant in studies of migration. Can you say a bit more about that?

*Bridget Anderson [BA]:* Yes, firstly the problem is *who* do we mean when we talk about migrants? I suppose that is a question for academic scholarship, it is a question for lawyers, it is a question for activists, and also for data. I think that when you try and pin it down to real people, it becomes a quite problematic category. US bankers in Britain for example, or prince Philip, are not thought of as migrants, even if they are subject to immigration controls. I mean if you think about the European royal families, half of them have moved across national borders, yet they are not thought of as being migrants. What this says to me is that there is something about the term migrant that signifies *problematic mobility*. Ultimately the way in which some mobilities are racialised, classed and seen as problematic is what defines who are called

migrants. Even in the defence of some mobile populations this kind of definition seems to be reproduced, like when EU commissioner Reding responded to a letter in which some member countries complained about “EU-migrants” and their access to welfare benefits, and she focused in her response on that they called them migrants, when they are *not* migrants but mobile citizens.<sup>1</sup> That calling these people migrants would be like calling apples pears while they are actually really different categories. In that way, the idea of *migrants* as a problem was reinforced, when these people were so to say defended against being labelled as such. And also then how malleable, how fuzzy that border between the migrant and everybody else is.

So all this means, I think, that we as researchers have to think carefully about how we make research and the ways in which we are also complicit in creating these categories. Because who do we mainly look at? Some people do look at US bankers or British migrants in Spain, but in general we tend not to. So that is, on the one hand, something we need to be aware about, but then, on the other hand, I don't know if we want to loose the term either through saying that everyone who moves is a migrant – because then what does that term mean? Basically I think we have to use it but precisely and with care, and think about *when* and *how* we are using it.

Another central intervention in relation to the concept of migrant is that we have to think about the overlap between migrant and citizen. The processes that characterise the control of migration are not neatly limited to a presumed category of migrants. As an example, we can see in some of the outcomes of the so called Localism Act which was established in the UK in 2011 and meant that local authorities got a lot of control over who they provide with social housing.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this local authorities developed their own social housing allocation policies, and in a lot of them you see how they are describing a lot of social problems as connected with migration. What is interesting is that the migrants here are actually British citizens who are crossing the boundaries of the local authority. And the requirements that are made of these so-called migrants, are very often not so different from the kinds of requirements we see imposed on actual non-citizen migrants. Most obviously a residency requirement, so you have to have been resident for a certain period, but also behavioural requirements, I mean really things like demands on losing weight, going to the gym, doing voluntary work if you are unemployed. It is quite shocking really, the way in which British citizens in this way are disciplined through similar processes as migrants are, because their mobility is seen as problematic. These behavioural demands have their parallels in the demands put on people in the processes of naturalisation.

*MS:* So, these demands on losing weight, taking care of one's health, etcetera, is that explicitly formulated in these policies?

1 Reding, V. (2013). Main messages: citizens' dialogue in Sofia, European Commission press release 23 July 2013. Available from <[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-13-655\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-655_en.htm)> [17 February 2016].

2 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents>

*BA:* Well, it depends on the council, but in some cases yes, it is explicitly put like that.

*MS:* Yes I see how that really underscores what you said, that the definition of migration have come to be “problematic mobility”, even when it is just about crossing council borders. I think that if you are on social welfare in Sweden it is also difficult, or at least not straightforward, to move wherever you want inside of Sweden. I mean if you wanted to move from one council to another it is not obvious that you have the right to do that if there is no special reason for you to move.

*BA:* I think that is really interesting, I mean obviously a lot of my work is on the importance to study immigration controls, but also there are a lot of ways in which the mobility of citizens is constrained and citizens are differentiated along their control over their own mobility.

I think that the welfare state is a very important mechanism for example we can see that in the control of EU mobility. Now that you can not control EU mobility through the tools of migration control, there are instead attempts made to control it through access to welfare. I think it would be worthwhile to look back to the histories of control of mobility at the intersections of welfare provision and repression: like the original parish relief, poor relief, if we look at how that was managed across Europe. There are some legacies between that and what is happening today.

*MS:* I guess this observation is valid too in in relation to compulsive mobility. Again, as an example from Sweden, when you have been unemployed for a certain period, you are pressured to widen your search area, and in the end you need to apply for jobs in the whole country, and I think that is something that is discussed on the level of the EU as well – how to move people to jobs. So it is not just about stopping migration.

*BA:* Yes, that is interesting, I think in the UK you need to be prepared to travel something like one and a half hours in order to get a job. So if you are a migrant, then you are problematized for being too mobile, really you should be staying at home. But if you are a citizen, then you are not mobile enough!

I am interested in looking at those kinds of constraints and putting those into conversation with immigration laws and practices because I think it is really interesting work that can be come out if that. I think that using a lens of mobility can help us to approach an analysis that is less hang up on migrants, and that works against that divide between citizens and migrants – while still also keeping the state in there. I think such an approach can help us making important connections that could be politically relevant.

One of the things I have been thinking about is the way in which the welfare state has been called upon in Europe in relation to debates on migration. The idea that migration and asylum rights are a threat to the welfare state is often central. If you compare to the US where Trump is saying that migration is a threat to jobs, in Europe it is not jobs but instead the welfare state that is understood as threatened by migration.

As if the welfare state was something totally separate from migration! I mean, the history of the welfare state, especially in Britain, is so closely connected with global and colonial histories. The funding of the original British welfare state basically relied on the profits extracted from the colonies. It has not just sprung fully fledged from the labour of British nationals on British soil. And if you think about migration and welfare in that context, you start to wonder what people are thinking! I mean, especially when it is migrants from those colonies, the children of the people who contributed to the welfare state, who come here and are treated like that.

So it is something about the imagined histories of welfare states, but also some kind of idea about how contemporary welfare states are funded. I do not know these processes in detail, but I know that in my head, and I think generally in public debate and in people's minds, there is this idea about the welfare state as a kind of piggy bank that we put our money in. And then when we retire or have a problem we go to that piggy bank and we take that same money out, with the idea that we basically have saved it. But of course that money has been invested, and, I suspect, as the profits do not just come from anywhere some people might have not done very well out of those investment. So I think somehow that this powerful imaginary of what the welfare state is something we need to think about.

*MS:* So you are saying that in other areas of economy it is acknowledged that the economy is linked globally, but the "welfare state money" is seen as kind of made by "us" for "us".

*BA:* Yes exactly, that money is seen as strictly national! And this is not my area of expertise, but I really do not think that is how it works, and I think it is actually really important in people's imagination.

So I think that in the current context we are always being told that basically it is a zero-sum game in which what is bad for migrants is understood as good for citizens. I mean, that is my impression that people seem to think that is this case. But analyses that go across these divides can help us to see that is not the case, that immigration and mobility controls are not necessarily good for citizens but have effects on them too. We need to start excavating connections between migrants and so called citizens. I mean, I talked about the instability of the term migrant, but as that *Localism Act* shows, citizenship is also an unstable term. And when we recognise that both the two categories of citizen and migrant are unstable I think, we can start finding new commonalities, and probably also new contestations and contradictions, and new tools with which we can start to say that it does not have to be a zero-sum game. Actually we can be in a situation where things can be better for migrants, so called migrants, *and* things can be better for citizens, so called citizens.

*MS:* When you talk about these things I think about the concept of the precariat. While for most people introduced through Guy Standing's work<sup>3</sup>, I first encountered it in Spain in social movements trying to mobilise along the lines of what you are saying – to build coalitions and crossovers between labour rights and migration rights movements, and between undocumented migrant workers and citizen workers. What do you think about that concept, is it something that could catch what you are saying here now, about these shared grounds across the citizen/migrant divide?

*BA:* Yes, in relation to that I would like to start with centralising work and the approach to work. The status of being a "worker" has long been critical not only to access certain welfare benefits, but also to be recognised as a "good citizen", as someone making a contribution towards society. Basically this approach to work, as something that defines one's social status, is an attitude held by both the left and the right. Being a 'citizen' is associated with being a 'worker'. And I think that this understanding of work is a profound problem. Not being this kind of contributor can result in social exclusion, and this is something that can connect different kinds of exclusions, including the exclusions of "migrants" and "unemployed".

You know how a lot of people always are complaining about those who are on benefits and are described as not being bothered to get a job. But as the work available is increasingly insecure, antisocial and alienating, maybe the ones located outside of the labour market can be understood as the revolutionaries! I mean, with the kinds of technology we have been developing I just can not see that full employment is going to happen. And even if it does, then it is not going to be full employment in great jobs. We see that in the UK, where they keep on saying that there is less unemployment now, and yes, unemployment is going down but that happens through zero hours contracts and precarious jobs going up.

So, I actually do think that we need to put demands for universal basic income, social housing, free health care and free education at the centre. I think those have to be the demands, rather than starting with full but precarious employment. So the reason I am saying this is that, whereas I do think there is some purchase in that precarious organising, I think it is really difficult. I think that it is asking a lot of people to not be in competition one against another if you are really on the edge of destitution. I will give you an example. One of the things I always found really challenging in the field of domestic work was that there is a huge hierarchy based on nationality. You can see when working with people, with multinational groups, that there is a lot of distancing between national groups through claims about being cleaner, better workers or of 'more caring nationalities'. And of course, if those kinds of claims give some groups a little bit of an edge on the labour market it is hard not to use it. I am not trying to defend that, not at all, but I suppose that it is an example of where I think that it is actually very difficult to work against these boundaries. So I guess I am a bit sceptical about how far we can really go with that kind of ideal of consciousness via the precariat.

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3 Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: the new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

*MS:* So, you mean that we can not put it on the ones who are already in the most vulnerable position on the labour market to raise above these boundaries?

*BA:* Yes. But having said that, I also think that there are times, spaces, contexts, groups, where it *can* work. I am not saying it should not be tried, but I think it is very context dependant. But as a kind of over-arching formula that will ‘solve everything’, I am sceptical. Even though I would like not to be sceptical.

*MS:* In the context of this kind of move towards thinking across citizens/non-citizens boundaries, how do you think we could address possible specific needs or vulnerabilities of migrants who are fleeing from war and persecution? How do we both work against these kinds of divides, while also paying attention to the vulnerabilities and the risks that, for example, people who needs to cross the Mediterranean are exposed to? Both on the way and at their arrival in Europe, in the labour market, in relation to deportability and so on?

*BA:* That is a really good question, because I think it is important to recognise that people do have particular vulnerabilities, and that not all mobilities are equivalent. And some of that increased vulnerability, I would say actually a lot of it, is the result of state practices and policies. Not only, it is also about different forms of racism and, of course, the kind of logistics of life, not knowing stuff, not speaking the language, and the histories of trauma and difficulties of travel that people bring with them. So yes, we need to think about, and work with, the different causes of why life is particularly difficult for certain people who are on the move. But then these different causes are never separate; they all kind of reinforce each other. So, we need to pay careful attention to different effects and combinations of these factors, how some of them are played out in particular ways for migrants, but also how some, like racism, are experienced also by citizens.

Actually I think we need to do much more work on that specific issue, because the study of racism has largely been kept apart from migration studies and the relationship between immigration and racism has been very crudely understood. Basically the debate has been limited to either an understanding in which “immigration controls are racist” or the opposite idea that “immigration controls are not racist”. It is somehow reduced to that, and that in turn is based in a similarly poor understanding in public debate about what constitutes racism. Basically people understand racism as meaning only when someone is “thinking that negatively racialised people are inferior biologically”. That means that it is impossible to have a conversation about it, just using the word racist is impossible because it is understood only as this terrible, but limited, thing.

*MS:* Do you mean that it is seen as censoring people if you call them out as racist?

*BA:* Yes. And it is also understood as a purely moral position. Like it is about individuals being moral or immoral, rather than being an institutional and historical phenomena that we all have to deal with here. Not just some people because they

are ‘bad’, but everyone has to deal with it. And how that then feeds into migration. I think that new movements like Black Lives Matter actually can be quite important as a mobilising force in that way.

*MS:* In your work you have also argued for a kind of no-borders position. Could you tell me a bit about that, and also how that position in a more theoretical analytical version relates to no-border activism?

*BA:* Well, I can not see how there could be just immigration controls. But let me start from another angle. I heard a shocking statistic the other day; how much do you think you have to earn to be in the top one percent of global income? It is 44 000 US dollars, which I think is like 30 000 Euros. So that is very low, and it is the top one percent! If you are earning the minimum wage in the UK, you are in the top eleven percent. I am not saying that if you earn that amount of money you are rich and that people should be happy with that! I am saying that I think that is what Trump and Brexit is about. It is about these immense inequalities, but also about the erosion of privilege of the global north. Our welfare states and our earnings have largely been cushioning us from the immense global poverty and inequality there is. And actually, that is scary, you look out at all those billions of people and, maybe especially if you do not have very much, you start thinking “oh my god, it could actually be much much worse”. I honestly believe that there is more than enough for us all to have sustainable lives. Obviously the real problem, to put it crudely, is the eight people who own half the world’s assets. That is what the problem is, and I think that migration brings that inequality, that global inequality, into our society, forces us to confront it, and that is what is scary about it. And that is why it has become such a tough issue, because it is not really about immigration. It is about global inequality, and that is also why I think that national solutions are not going to sort that out. The welfare state is exactly that: an attempt to solve it on a national level. But it is not possible to maintain that anymore. So I think that we have to accept that borders are actually basically not just. Ultimately they are about stopping all of this inequality from appearing, and that is why I think we need to put migration at the heart of social struggles. I do not mean that migration in itself is the only social issue to care about, but it has to be at the heart because it is always used to derail progressive political projects. I think the right have used migration very effectively for that purpose, and the left has often just tried to come with reassurances, saying that “actually not many people are going to come”, or “they will contribute to the economy”. But that does not really work, and so what if a lot of people come?! I mean, I know it is not as simple as “so what”, because the way in which society is organised currently, there is a risk that it actually would be a race to the bottom. I am not saying that open borders by itself is the answer, but it is a way of foregrounding global inequality and to say that all of these questions are interconnected and we can not just look at migration as a separate thing. In terms of activism I think that what this shows is that we have to think and work much more politically about our forms of knowledge production. We can not keep only produc-



ing knowledge in the academy, we have to find new ways of knowledge production and ways of working with people outside the academy. We have of course particular contributions we can make as scholars, but other sectors do too.

Actually, in a couple of weeks I am talking to my local Labour Party about how to talk about migration on people's doorstep during the election campaigns. What are we going to say when people open their door and say that they are worried about immigration? And I am thinking, well ok, I believe in no borders, but if I say that to these Labour Party activists there is no way they are going to take that to the door step. So I have been thinking of what I can say that is going to be useful, and I do think that we need to preface the issue of migration with the kind of numbers I mentioned before; if you earn more than 20 000 Pounds, then you are in the top one percent; eight people alone own more than half the world's assets; six of the countries that Trump has banned are being bombed by the US. We need to set migration within that context, and underscore the ways in which these interconnections matter! Trying to show those connections to people and then learning from their response, I think is an important starting point when it comes to just approaching any potential voter in the street or on the door step. So listening attentively to their responses to these questions, and seeing how we can then build arguments from that. It is a small step but I see that as the kind of things we need to start doing.

I might try and produce some kind of information pack or something, because the labour activists always say to me that they need facts in their conversations with people. But I am not convinced that it is facts people want, because you know for a long time we have been meeting emotion with facts and it can only go so far, so we have to think also about other ways to engage with people. Stories, new frames, contexts and so on.

*MS:* In relation to the discussion on no border, you mentioned earlier that many people's main concern lies with the protection of the welfare state. How do you envision an alternative basis for rights and something similar to welfare access that would go beyond citizenship and border controls?

*BA:* Yes so that would be universal basic income. Of course, then the question is "what does universal mean"? I was having this discussion the other day, and the person I was talking to was asking what we would do about immigration controls if we had universal basic income. I think that, if we were introducing a universal basic income in the UK, we would have to start with having it all over the board, but don't have it for people who enter say the first six months. Of course, you would have to guarantee that newly arrived people would have the minimum, that they were able to eat, have shelter, have health and education. I am not saying they would be completely out of the net, but I can see that there might be a problem if we were to introduce universal basic income sort of 2020 as policy and we still are in this world that we are in.

So this is my attempt to be realistic. When I am prime minister that is what I would do! But, joking apart, I know I do not need to present a ten-step programme for how to transform the world, but I think it is important to think about concrete suggestions



too. I think that we sometimes tend to be caught in a cycle of critique. There is, for example, security studies and there is critical security studies; there is race studies and critical race studies; migration studies and critical migration studies. I am concerned that we do not get beyond critique. Now, in an era of Trump and populism, it is just not enough with critique. And that is where this question of new forms of knowledge production comes in, because, I think as intellectuals, we are posing critique, that is our job, so we need to work with other people in order to move the conversation on. Because I think that there is a moment now in which we are going to demand the reestablishment of the liberal institutions that we have been criticising, and I really believe that we have not been asking for enough, all along, we have not been asking for enough! Now is not the time to fold down and be like “oh Obama was actually really great!”. No, it was never good, it always contained these seeds, and now we have to demand something better, and in order to work out what those demands are we need to sit down with people and have these deliberations and conversations. Actually, just to get back to the beginning, that is why breaking down the citizen/migrant dichotomy is a useful thing to start with.

*MS:* Thanks, and this last question you probably already addressed in your other answers, but I wanted to ask you to reflect upon what is the next thing we need to do in the critical studies of borders? What are the next issues we need to explore in this era of Trump, Brexit and growing support for fascism and extreme right populism in Europe?

*BA:* Well there is so much, but one issue that we have looked at a lot in studies of migration that is related to fascism and populism, is the question of “who constitute the people?”. That question is emerging in so many different forms at the moment. It was highlighted for me after the Brexit vote when Nigel Farage came out the next day and said that the “real people” had spoken. So the *real* people, which means that other people are what? Not real people? And why are they not the real people? You know we have seen these kinds of turns in so many ways in politics— in the UK I think – and I think academics have a lot to say and contribute to these debates. But it needs to get out there and become part of normal conversations rather than just stay inside academia. There were two obvious groups who were not part of “the people” here, one was the politicians and one was intellectuals. You know we really are *not* the real people, which is a very effective silencing actually. That approach to intellectuals makes it really hard to intervene in debates. And while we need to be humble, I also think that we have to find a way of not being silent, to find a way of saying that actually we *must* be part of this conversation. We are not going to claim to have all the answers, but we have something to say.