
BOOK REVIEWS

Franklin Obeng-Odoom

**Global Migration beyond Limits: Ecology, Economics,
and Political Economy**

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, 288pp., \$166, hardback.

Reviewed by Jock Collins

Franklin Obeng-Odoom begins his new book, *Global Migration beyond Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Political Economy*, with this sentence: ‘Migration is the new normal in the world’. It is interesting to read this book at a time that non-refugee global migration flows have slowed down to an unprecedented level because of the COVID-19. The author cites Michael Fisher’s argument in *Migration: A World History* (2014) that no pandemic has ever permanently halted migration to conclude that ‘there could be no better time to analyse the mass migration question’. As the wheels of global migration slowly gather speed in Australia and other countries, it is hard to disagree.

Using case studies of diverse migration flows from and into Africa, the Middle East, Australia, Europe and the Americas, Obeng-Odoom seeks to resurrect the relevance of the mid-20th Century scholars Gunnar Myrdal and Karl Polanyi to understanding contemporary global migration dynamics. Specifically, the book focusses on how migrants and migration transform both sending and receiving countries, with the case studies demonstrating how this is reflected at different scales in the global system. A key point of departure in this analysis is the complexities and contradictions of global migration, with its forces and dynamics highly institutionalised, gendered and ethnicised.

The author mounts a persuasive argument against the critics of migration who argue that migration and migrants harm the economy, the society and the environment. Important issues such as global inequality and environmental crises are not necessarily migration related, Obeng-Odoom argues, but are rooted in rigid institutional arrangements and unequal

global relations. A key argument of this book is that an understanding of global migration could be part of the solution to these problems: 'Studying migration, then, could become another evidence-based approach to analysing and possible resolving, global long-term inequalities and socio-ecological stratification' (14).

Obeng-Odoom argues that there is a gap in understanding *internal* migration flows and dynamics in the literature on *international* migration. He correctly identifies the key weakness of conservative migration discourses and research as being their conceptual focus on the individual rather than on group and institutional dynamics. Neoclassical economics bears much of the blame for this narrow individualistic focus. Obeng-Odoom sees an alternative and more productive approach to understanding global migration in the literature of institutional economics.

The mass outflow of Ukrainian refugees to Poland and other countries that we have witnessed in the past year have outnumbered – by a factor of four or more – that experienced when Germany and other countries received more than 1 million refugees from the Syrian conflict in the middle of the last decade. This highlights the critical and ongoing importance of refugee flows – mostly undocumented asylum seekers fleeing conflict and persecution – to contemporary global migration dynamics. Obeng-Odoom argues that 'neither war nor financial speculation is a sufficient explanation' for these flows which arise 'from a particular inequality-based rentier system of institutions aggressively pursued by a US-led West against a resistance Global South in the Middle East and North Africa region' (16). The corollary of this argument is that existing proposals to address the so called 'refugee problem' – such as Australia's mandatory incarceration and offshore processing of boat people – are questionable. It could be added that, from an ethical point of view, these policies are indefensible, highlighting how migration and refugee flows have been elevated to key points of political schism in countries across the globe.

Most immigrants settle in metropolitan areas of their host society. Obeng-Odoom's point of departure here is the negative attitudes towards migrants that arise out of the additional pressure migrants put on the infrastructure of cities. We have seen this strongly in Australia, with immigrants blamed for every urban problem: from rising house prices and pollution in the air to congestion on the roads and overcrowding in schools and hospitals. Obeng-Odoom takes an interesting case study in this cities chapter: Lidcombe in Sydney's western suburbs, the location of the largest

cemetery in Sydney and probably the nation. I have a disclosure to make here: I was born in the Lidcombe and grew up in the next-door working class suburb of Auburn, so I have witnessed the transformation in the economic character and ethnic composition of the area over the past seven decades. In this chapter, Obeng-Odoom begins with the changing political economy of the metropolis of Sydney, zooming in to look in detail at the political economy of the *necropolis* of Lidcombe. Structural change reduces manufacturing jobs and increases services jobs in the area. Unemployment is higher in Lidcombe, the proportion of workers who are labourers is higher and the proportion who are professionals and managers lower than the state average. Incomes are lower and less people own their own home.

Lidcombe and Auburn have been transformed from a mainly white working-class neighbourhood in the 1950s to 1970s – many working on the NSW Railways, like my father – to a very cosmopolitan neighbourhood today. The Ukrainian church, built in Lidcombe in the late 1960s, symbolized that increasing number of immigrants arriving from the Baltic states and other areas of Europe, including the Ukraine and Croatia. The area today has a high concentration and visibility of Turkish and Middle Eastern Muslim immigrants, attracted by and leading to the establishment of the Auburn-Gallipoli Mosque in 1999. The changing ethnoscape of Lidcombe is reflected in the public schools in the area. Here Obeng-Odoom looks at Lidcombe Public School which, at the 2016 national census, had students from 45 different language backgrounds.

In this chapter, and throughout the book, Obeng-Odoom's application of Polanyi's concept of *transformation* becomes a strength. Just as the churches and mosques changed the suburban landscape, so too did the immigrant entrepreneurs whose restaurants and shops have transformed the Lidcombe streetscape with cultural and linguistic iconography, smells and sounds that have made being there a very different experience than three or four decades ago. Today, a Koreatown is emerging in Lidcombe as Korean immigrant entrepreneurs open more shops along John Street and Joseph Street on both sides of the Lidcombe railway station.

Global migration is largely about global labour mobility. One of the contradictions of globalisation is that in the pathway to peak globalisation – which I date to the election of Donald Trump - the success in freeing international constraints on the mobility of capital and goods was never matched on the labour side. This is because with labour migration you get

migrants as neighbours: it is here that the contradictions surrounding the racialisation of migrant labour begin to bite. Obeng-Odoom looks at the case of Afro-Chinese immigration and relations to explore these contradictions.

The big change in Australia's immigration dynamics over the past two decades has been the rapid growth in temporary migration, which grew to exceed permanent migration by a factor of three or more to one. Obeng-Odoom's case study here is the largest component of Australia's temporary migration intake – those on temporary student visas - who attend the University of Sydney. Here the contradictions of the racialisation of immigrants reappear. Australian universities depend critically on international student income, as starkly evident once COVID-19 slowed these student intakes, but their experiences of racism in employment and in seeking accommodation undermines the quality of their education and work experiences. Wage theft and other forms of exploitation of temporary migrants – students, working holiday makers and temporary skilled migrants – is widespread, according to many reports by the Australian Fair Work Commission. This is the Achilles' heel of Australia's migration dependence, an experience that resonates around the globe.

Global Migration beyond Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Political Economy is an important contribution to the literature on global migration. What impresses is how Obeng-Odoom roams across continents to probe the many aspects of global immigration. His gaze moves from the global to the national to the city and to the suburb and neighbourhood. His institutionalist focus enables him to highlight the incapacity of neoclassical economic theory to understand the complexities and contradictions of global migration and permits his book to offer critical insights blinkered from the gaze and discourses of the conservative critics of immigration. Particularly useful is Obeng-Odoom's use of the Polanyian concept of transformation to show how migrants, refugees and asylum seekers across the globe transform their lives and the lives and places of their host community under the constant but uneven shadow of racialisation.

Anitra Nelson

Beyond Money: A Postcapitalist Strategy

Pluto Press, London, 2022, 224pp., \$44, paperback.

Reviewed by Stuart Rosewarne

The collapse in the market value of cryptocurrencies should put to bed what has been paraded as the Holy Grail, a safe haven for parking money, if not the youthful elixir that liberates capital from the intrusive forces of global banks and the state to enable its ever-increasing value. The proponents of bitcoin, and its growing offspring, claimed to be avoiding the risks that have been such a feature of state-sanctioned currencies. Exuberant youthful investors and financially literate retirees have looked to cryptocurrencies as an instrument that could free them from the uncertainties of the volatility in global capital markets. Even central banks have been contemplating endorsing and normalising cryptocurrencies as a store of value that seemed to have a built-in inflator, as well as a medium of exchange. Now, this contemporary manifestation of Marx's Moses and his prophets - and they are overwhelmingly 'his' - has largely been shattered, although many of its adherents are reluctant to abandon the ship.

Anitra Nelson's *Beyond Money* is a timely intervention in our understanding of the evangelical zeal with which cryptocurrencies have been embraced. However, her book extends well beyond a simple critique of this modern construction to expose the anomalies of money throughout the economy and society. Nelson observes that a society that is founded on money-based exchange engenders transactional social relations, based on the anonymity of its actors and predicated on the temporal immediacy and anti-social phenomenon of money. Moreover, the essence of this system of exchange is bound up in the expansion of the money base. For anarchists and libertarians, those vociferous critics of the state, cryptocurrencies hold out the promise of providing a store of value that emancipates us from the power of global corporations and state-controlled central banks. Nelson's critique goes further, reminding the reader of the alienating effects of a social system in which the desire to expand money holdings is unfettered, creating a veil that hides the forces driving ever-growing social inequities and ecological degradation.

Beyond Money questions the contention that money, as a universal equivalent, resolves the tension between money ‘functioning as a unit of account, a medium of exchange, and a store of (exchange) value held or lent, borrowed and repaid’ (p.17). Unpacking this, the most distinguishing feature of cryptocurrencies is revealed: this money form has no underlying or inherent value. Rather, the exchange value is set by the issue of tokens and the associated speculative trading. While the *Beyond Money* research project predates the recent collapse in the market value of cryptocurrencies, it exposes the lie of cryptocurrencies as objective bearers of value, able to hold their value or, better, inflate their value.

An immediate task in confronting this lie is to question the efficacy of proposals that present the market as an arena in which ecological contradictions of the capitalist market system can be resolved. Efforts to establish ecological or energy value as the bases for constructing ‘green’ exchange systems to secure sustainability are rightly dismissed. They are said to rest on the assumption that there can be some commensuration of the value of the multiple complex forces that constitute the ecological system and which can be traded. This example provides one illustration of the misplaced allure of the market as the means for securing progressive outcomes. Similar critiques of this false premise are echoed in feminist reflections on the ‘wages for housework’ campaign that sought to manufacture some sense of equivalence between paid work in the public sphere of the political economy and regenerative labour in the private sphere. The *degrowth* movement is also questioned for its folly in advocating technological solutions while retaining money as the lubricant for organising exchange, thereby falling into the trap of privileging assets and doing little to check the capital accumulation imperative.

The critique breaks through this veneer of money-founded stability and goes beyond to outline the numerous initiatives that have been designed to construct communities, postcapitalist formations, that can escape the prison of money essentialism. Drawing on Silvia Federici, the case for ‘commoning’ as a liberating pathway is reiterated, and this provides the entrée to an excursion that provides an array of concrete examples of social formations whose essence is underpinned by the determination to forge social systems not defined by the pursuit of money. A combination of standpoint perspectives, ecofeminist, socialist and anarchist, have framed postcapitalist visions posed in terms of commoning, of community initiatives resetting the world in terms of shared, self-sufficiency and glocal standards. A jam-packed couple of concluding chapters explore the

different approaches of Indigenous communities and a swathe of other groups - the Zapatistas, Kurds and Rojavan collectives, the proselytising of Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano, the anti-capitalist movements launched during the Spanish civil war – all determined to build a world not fashioned on money. *Beyond Money* is an ambitious and wide-ranging excursion, entertaining the possible, drawing on a personal journal, supremely optimistic in its ambition. It is determined not to be captured and soft-spoken in the face of capital's hegemony.

The uncertainties and contradictions that are such pervasive features of contemporary capitalism have catalysed enthusiasm for cryptocurrencies as a liberating force. The promise of this salvation agent inviting escape from the reliance on money as a means for securing and measuring wealth is on the precipice of being torn asunder by fundamental contradictions that are embedded in the money-driven accumulation imperative. Despite the study having been completed before the cryptocurrency meltdown, *Beyond Money* is prescient in exposing the illusion of money, and more so the unregulated money that defines cryptocurrencies, as providing a solid and stable foundation. The stories of commoning indicate that we can be liberated from subordination to the money imperative, albeit such formations are relatively few. Clearly, more work is necessary on charting just how we build on these lessons to challenge capital's hegemony.

Ben Schneiders

Hard Labour: Wage Theft in the Age of Inequality

Scribe, Michigan, 2022, 208pp., \$33, paperback.

Reviewed by Kieran Pender

Hard Labour, the first book by journalist Ben Schneiders', seeks to understand and explain the deeply problematic phenomenon of wage theft. Why is it that some of Australia's largest and most prominent companies are seeking to rip off the lowest-paid, most-vulnerable workers? How is it that the system is allowing them to get away with it, unless brave workers speak out to dogged investigative journalists? And what can be done to fix this sorry state of affairs?

Schneiders begins with context. In recent decades, Australia has become a nation of inequality. We have not been this consistently unequal since the 1930s. The top 1 per cent of Australian households control more wealth than the bottom 60 per cent (more than 15 million people) combined. The pandemic has only made things worse. This ‘whirring, self-perpetuating inequality machine’ is bad for our society and democracy.

The author acknowledges his intellectual debt to French economist Thomas Piketty, whose work on inequality provides the platform for *Hard Labour*. But a dense economic tome the book is not. ‘Rather,’ Schneiders writes, ‘it seeks to provide some of the finer-grained detail of how inequality has increased, and how power relations have evolved between those with and those without wealth and power.’

Inequality is the cause *and* consequence of the steady undermining of labour regulation that has allowed wage theft and other forms of worker exploitation to flourish. A nation that once enjoyed a living wage for all and strong employment rights, buttressed by a healthy union movement, has experienced four decades of deregulation and privatisation, together with the erosion of workplace protections and labour-movement decline.

This trend began under Labor governments in the Hawke and Keating era and was turbocharged by John Howard. Even the contemporary *Fair Work Act*, enacted under Rudd in response to the Coalition’s rights-stripping WorkChoices platform, ‘carried over much of the neoliberal baggage of the previous 20 years’. It is extremely difficult to lawfully strike in modern Australia. Unions once represented half the workforce; they now represent just over one in 10 workers. ‘We’re losing, and we’re losing badly,’ one union leader tells Schneiders.

Hard Labour is, in effect, a portrait of the consequences. Schneiders is an empathetic narrator and uses his platform to recount the human toll of Australia’s current workplace paradigm. Munir, a migrant worker in outer Melbourne, forced to work despite COVID-19 spreading within his workplace. Karki, a temporary visa holder from Nepal, working 80 hours a week at Rockpool, the height of Australian fine dining, and paid for only half of them. Burak, a Turkish student killed in an accident while working for UberEats in Sydney, only for his family to be denied a death-benefit claim. Jamon, a Malaysian computer engineer working on Australian farms and earning \$3.50 an hour.

Schneiders uses these tragic human stories to illustrate wider structural problems. There are some rays of hope. Schneiders spends a chapter

(‘Duncan vs Goliath’) on the wage theft scandal at Woolworths, where a Brisbane trolley operator named Duncan took one of the biggest companies to the Fair Work Commission for underpayments – and won. Scandalously, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, one of Australia’s most powerful unions, had rubber-stamped enterprise agreements that left workers at major supermarket chains and fast-food outlets significantly worse off. Woolworths was just the beginning, with total underpayments across SDA-covered workplaces totalling more than \$1 billion.

But, more often, overcoming these injustices can be impossible for individual workers, often in a precarious migration situation, fighting ASX-listed companies or private equity firms headquartered in offshore tax havens. Except in the rare circumstances when the Fair Work Ombudsman takes an interest or Schneiders is on the case, workers are left alone to fight their battles through an inaccessible legal system.

Hard Labour concludes by considering solutions. ‘None of this will be easy,’ Schneiders admits, as he canvasses law reform, more robust regulatory authorities and a resurgence in grassroots organising. He highlights the good work being done by the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union, established as an alternative to the SDA. If there is one criticism of *Hard Labour*, it would be that this section is underdone – there is more to be said about the changes needed to address the rampant exploitation Schneiders so powerfully chronicles.

But that is a minor quibble over what is otherwise a remarkable work, based on a decade of remarkable reporting. It is a damning book that exposes the toothlessness of our industrial relations system and the impunity with which multinational corporations exploit vulnerable workers. And it is a cry for action, for reform and change that might see Australia buck the global trend of increasing inequality.

For those who believe in a fairer Australia, Schneiders has done a great service. *Hard Labour* should be required reading for all those in positions of power. ‘It is a monumental task to rebuild the power of workers, to create democracy at work, to establish a more equal society, and to change society from below,’ he writes. ‘But there is no alternative unless we want to live in a society of rising precarity, insecurity and inequality.’

An earlier version of this review was published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on October 15, 2022.