Gender, Inequality and Borders[1]

Valerie Preston

Valerie Preston, Geography Department and CERIS – Toronto, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3, Email: vpreston@yorku.ca

Gender, Injustice, and Borders

Harald Bauder argues that border controls are incompatible with the Canadian state's commitment to the "moral equality of all human beings," (p. 167) and the rule of international law. Drawing on moral philosophy and Marxist political economy, he challenges common rationales for the Canadian state to implement discriminatory and exclusive immigration policies. While acknowledging that border controls underpin the Canadian economy, he proposes that a 'borderless' world would facilitate progressive social change and enable Canada to become a truly liberal democracy.

Although many of the criticisms raised by Bauder are well known (Abu-Laban, 1998, 2001; Burstein, Hardcastle and Parkin 1994; Li, 2003; Simmons, 1998), his analysis reveals how the changing geography of border controls is heightening inequitable treatment of immigrants and refugees. The geographical extent of surveillance, enforcement, and interdiction have expanded as the number and scope of immigration policies and regulations have increased. Expansionary policies affect all immigrants and refugees adversely, but their impact is most pronounced for working class, visible minority, and female immigrants and refugees. This commentary explores geographical contradictions in current policies and the ways they heighten social inequalities in the settlement experiences of immigrants and refugees. Using selected examples, I emphasize how policies contribute to gender inequalities. The examples illustrate the unequal treatment of Canadian residents that violates Canada's claim to be a liberal democracy.

Geographical Contradictions

Bauder's analysis highlights geographical inconsistencies in border controls that arise from the disjuncture between economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances and contemporary policies. His citations of international conventions governing migration and refugee protection that grant the right to leave a nation state without guaranteeing migrants the right to enter another nation state are good examples. The United Nations conventions on refugees and migrants were crafted in the aftermath of World War II by states committed to maintaining their national sovereignty. The conventions emphasize an individual's right to leave a nation state, a right that was denied victims of the Nazi regime and residents of the former Soviet Union and East Bloc. When the conventions were written, the number of migrants was small, so governments of the nation states that signed the conventions were willing to provide social and legal protections to the migrants and refugees that they admitted.

As the number of migrants and refugees increased, many states acted to keep out potential migrants. States have tightened visa requirements and limited the entry of migrants, but their efforts to exclude migrants extend well beyond the policies considered by Bauder. Border controls are being implemented distant from the geographical boundaries of nation states and deep within them (Heyman, 1999; Massey, 1999). Through international agreements, nation states are engaging in interdiction at ports of entry far from their borders, while intensifying enforcement of laws against undocumented migrants within their national territories. Many affluent nations such as Canada also try to reduce the number of refugee claimants by funding international aid organizations to serve displaced persons near their places of origin (Hyndman, 2000). The geography of the border is shifting with enforcement and interdiction taking on multiple forms at multiple locations (Heyman, 1999). With this geographical shift, the nature and impact of border controls extends far beyond the legal location of the border that Bauder emphasizes.

The shifting geography of the border arises in part from the contradictory forces framing immigration policies. Economic imperatives to facilitate the movements of goods, capital, and information conflict with the heightened desire of many states to restrict the movements of people across their borders (Heyman, 1999; Massey, 1999). The events of September 11, 2001, have aggravated these contradictory impulses in Canada. Policy makers and bureaucrats must also contend with public concerns that immigration should be tightly controlled. Public concerns must be balanced with lobbying from many groups who are interested in facilitating the entry of specific immigrants (Hardcastle, Parkin, Simmons and Suyama, 1994). Observers have suggested that, in this context, immigration policies will become increasingly selective and will be enforced harshly (Heyman, 1999; Massey, 1999). We can expect tighter controls and more extensive borderlands, rather than the borderless world that Bauder advocates.

Inequality and Difference

The geographical extension of the border combined with heightened enforcement is also magnifying the differential treatment of immigrants and refugees. Several analysts have noted the class biases in immigration policies (Abu-Laban, 2001; Li, 2003; Simmons, 1998). For example, affluent business class immigrants may purchase a visa while

working class migrants are excluded by virtue of their limited education, skills, and financial resources.

Current policies also magnify inequalities based in gender and race that intersect with and constitute class. Policies that extend interdiction well beyond the border reinforce social inequality in Canadian society. As one example, the vast majority of immigrants who enter Canada under the live-in caregiver program are women of colour (Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997). The women entering Canada through this program are subject to intrusive regulations that require they work as caregivers in the homes of their employers for two years to obtain permanent residence in Canada. Once they are permanent residents, many women try to return to the professions for which they had trained abroad. Although foreign credentials create barriers to finding appropriate and remunerative employment, many former caregivers also report that their work experience as live-in caregivers is viewed negatively by potential employers (Pratt, 1999; Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997). The employment experience required to obtain permanent residence in Canada impedes subsequent integration of these women of colour in Canadian society.

Somali women have also experienced the challenge of being immigrant women of colour in a period of heightened enforcement of the border (Israelite, 1999). As refugee claimants from a country suffering civil war, Somali women were often unable to obtain the official documents needed to become permanent residents once their claims to refugee status were recognized. They waited in legal limbo as recognized refugees but without permanent residence in Canada. Employers were often unwilling to hire them because of their temporary work permits, so many Somali women depended on social assistance for their incomes. Many reported discrimination in the housing market where landlords were reluctant to rent to women of colour on social assistance who were also newcomers with large families (Murdie, 2002).

Even among immigrant women who are affluent and well educated, gender and racial inequalities are sources of oppression, witness the stories of astronaut wives (Man, 1997; Waters, 2001). After migration from Hong Kong, many women abandon successful careers to help their children settle in Canada and to establish permanent residence while their husbands continue to live mainly in Asia. Perceiving discrimination on the part of employers who do not value their foreign work experience, many women withdraw from the labour market to concentrate on their domestic roles. Some live isolated and unhappy lives waiting to fulfil the residence requirements for Canadian citizenship that will enable them to resume their previous lives abroad (Preston and Man, 1999).

The foregoing examples illustrate the importance of considering how border controls affect substantive aspects of citizenship as well as its formal aspects. Economic success in Canada is one indicator of the extent of immigrants' full participation in Canadian society. Recent census information confirms Bauder's assertion that immigrants participate on an uneven economic playing field. The experiences of immigrant women are particularly troubling (Statistics Canada, 2003a). Immigrant women are doing worse than immigrant men in the labour market. Although unemployment rates have fallen for immigrant and Canadian-born workers of both sexes, immigrant women are still relatively less likely to be employed when compared with Canadian-born women and the disadvantage has not returned to the levels prevailing in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2003b). The significance of immigrant women's economic difficulties is underlined by the recent

increase in the proportion of immigrant families with low incomes that occurred at the same time as the proportion of Canadian-born families with low incomes declined. The causes of immigrant women's economic difficulties are still under investigation, but the three examples illustrate how the extension of border controls combined with heightened enforcement may impede economic integration and, thereby, reinforce gender, race, and class inequalities.

Geographies of Inequality

By drawing attention to the geography of contemporary border controls, Bauder highlights the inconsistencies between Canada's official ideology and its practices as an immigrant-receiving nation. Long-standing social inequalities in Canadian society emerge intact from his analysis, as they have in previous critiques of immigration policy (Abu-Laban, 2001; Li, 2003; Simmons, 1998). His analysis draws attention to the evolving geography of the border that heightens inequities in the treatment of immigrants, reinforcing gender, class, and race inequalities in Canadian society. The 'borderless' world is an elusive goal. Geographical analysis that draws attention to the contradictions inherent in selective and exclusionary immigration policies has the potential to reduce social inequality, Harald Bauder's ultimate aim.

References

Abu-Laban, Yasmeen. 2001. The future and the legacy: globalization and the Canadian settler-state. *Journal of Canadian Studies/ revue d'études canadiennes,* 15: 262-276.

Abu-Laban, Yasmeen. 1998. Welcome/STAY OUT: The contradiction of Canadian integration and immigration policies at the millenium. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 30: 190-211.

Bakan, Abigail B. and Stasiulis, Daiva. 1997. *Not One of the Family, Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Burstein, Meyer, Hardcastle, Leonie, and Parkin, Andrew. 1994. Immigration management control and its policy implications. In Howard Adelman, Allan Borowski, Meyer Burstein, aand Lois Foster (eds.), *Immigration and Refugee Policy, Australia and Canada Compared*. Carlton, Vic.: University of Melbourne Press, pp.187-226.

Hardcastle, Leonie, Parkin, Andrew, Simmons, Alan, and Suyama, Nobuaki. 1994. The making of immigration and refugee policy: Politicians, bureaucrats and citizens. In Howard Adelman, Allan Borowski, Meyer Burstein, aand Lois Foster (eds.), *Immigration and Refugee Policy, Australia and Canada Compared*. Carlton, Vic.: University of Melbourne Press, pp. 95-124.

Heyman, Josiah McC. 1999. Why interdiction? Immigration control at the United States-Mexico border. *Regional Studies*, 33: 619-630.

Hyndman, Jennifer. 2000. *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Israelite, Neita K. Herman, A., Alim, F. A., Mohamed, H.A., Khan, Y. and Caruso, Lynn. 1999. Waiting for 'Sharciga': Resettlement and the roles of Somali refugee women. *Canadian Women's Studies/ cahiers des femmes,* 19: 80-87.

Li, Peter S. 2003. *Destination Canada, Immigration Debates and Issues*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Man, Guida C. 1997. Women's work is never done: social organization of work and the experience of women in middle-class Hong Kong Chinese immigrant families in Canada. *Advances in Gender Research*, 2: 183-226.

Massey, Douglas S. 1999. International migration at the dawn of the twenty-first century: the role of the state. *Population and Development Review*, 25: 303-319.

Murdie, Robert A. 2002. The housing careers of Polish and Somali newcomers in Toronto's rental market. *Housing Studies,* 17; 365-380.

Pratt, Geraldine. 1999. From registered nurse to registered nanny: discursive geographies of Filipina domestic workers. *Economic Geography*, 75: 215-236.

Preston, Valerie and Man, Guida. 1999. Employment Experiences of Chinese Immigrant Women: An Exploration of Diversity. 19:115-122 *Canadian Women's Studies/ cahiers des femmes*, 19:115-122.

Simmons, Alan. 1998. Racism and immigration policy. In Vic Satzewich (ed.) *Racism & Social Inequality in Canada*. Toronto: Thompson Education Publishing Inc., pp. 87-114.

Statistics Canada 2003a. *Earnings of Canadians: Making a Living in the New Economy* 2001 Census: Analysis Series, Catalogue no. 96F0030XlE2001013. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Statistics Canada 2003b. *The Changing Profile of Canada's Labour Force* 2001 Census: Analysis Series, Catalogue no. 96F0030XlE2001009. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Waters, Johanna L. 2001. *The Flexible Family? Recent Immigration and 'Astronaut' Households in Vancouver, B.C*. RIIM Working Paper # 01-02. Vancouver: RIIM Centre of Excellence.