

Many Middle Passages – Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World

Edited by

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One and a half decades ago Paul Gilroy reminded many scholars in his seminal *The Black Atlantic – Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) that for people of the African Diaspora the dawn of modernity was not an experience of progress and liberation but of bondage and dehumanisation. Furthermore this study was instrumental in focusing many scholars' attention to oceans as spaces of linkage and encounter rather than separation and thus inspired a number of studies focusing on oceans. Being part of this sweep of oceanic history the authors of *Many Middle Passages* aim at a new perspective on the history and presence of forced migration and labour, and its role in the development of our contemporary globalised society.

With its provocative title this book provides a global perspective on forced migrations and includes Edward Alpers' chapter on the African slave trade in the Indian Ocean, Iain McCalman's contribution on Livingstone's struggle against the slave trade in lake Nyassa, James Warren writing on the Sulu sultanate in South East Asia, Nigel Penn on German soldiers transported to the Cape, Cassandra Pybus' description of the first, and Emma Christopher's of the second fleet transporting convicts from Britain to Australia, Clare Anderson recounting the sufferings of Indian convicts sentenced for 'transportation' by British authorities, Scott Reynolds Nelson focusing on forced drafts of Chinese and Irish labourers during the American Civil War, Evelyn Hu-DeHart on the trade of Chinese coolies to Peru, Cuba and Australia, Laurence Brown delineating the Melanesian Labour Trade, Julia Martínez depicting the horrors of the forced transportation of women and children across the China Sea.

Framed by an introduction by the editors and an afterword by Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd the title's reference to the Middle Passage is explained as not only referring to this aspect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade but as serving as a concept that allows comparison of these widely dispersed examples and their linking to contemporary forms of exploitation.

Being mostly historians, but also sociologists and activists fighting today's slavery, the authors use the sources that seem obvious for this subject, i.e. maritime registers, colonial documents, court files, crew members' notes or correspondence and most of all former slaves' personal accounts. Actually it is interesting to note how many of the contributions are framed by or based on individual stories or experiences, illustrating the growing appreciation of this approach among historians. This would make this book a very approachable read were it not for the subject. The 'Making of the Modern World', we are confronted with, is an account of treacherous and violent kidnappings, overcrowded, stinking ships strewn with vomit, tormented human cargoes dying of dysentery, scurvy or the brutalities of their guards, people being thrown overboard, an ever present cat o' nine tails, work under the most inhuman conditions, and finally forced assimilations, resistance, suicide or escape. In London we are led into overcrowded cells with convicts dying of illness or hunger, entering the harbour of Cape Town we are presented with the sight of pierced, severed heads and tortured bodies on the city walls, Sydney is depicted as a cave harbouring some downtrodden Britons under the terror regime of a sadist governor, and the Chinese sea is indeed an ocean of continuous exchange – of opium and teenage prostitutes.

These all-too-well-known images of seemingly archaic brutality are probably not the ones that would come to most readers' minds when thinking about the 'Making of the Modern World' – and this is one of the title's provocations, inviting readers to remember the omnipresent violence that shaped the organisation of global labour division. But what exactly the authors mean by 'Modern World' remains vague. Obviously they situate its making in the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries and connect it to our time, but we are not told what its characteristics are.

More important than this question is the even more provocative main title and the understanding of 'Middle Passage' as a concept encompassing a wide variety of forced migration and labour. As a symbol of the historical catastrophe that created the African Diaspora, the Middle Passage denotes a main motif of the collective memory unifying people of the Black Atlantic.

It may be thus quite disturbing for many readers to find under the heading of Middle Passage the story of Livingstone 'discovering' Lake Nyassa and thereby laying the ground of the abolition of the slave trade across this lake, a tale that although critically written, strikingly reminds one of British colonial self-representation. Probably even more strange a choice would be the voyage of an educated man from a village near Bayreuth in Southern Germany to Cape Town as a Middle Passage. Sure, he sailed on a ship with German soldiers, forced into dubious contracts by the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, suffering violence, suicide, madness, and other terrible things comparable to aspects of a slavers voyage, but still the comparison seems awkward.

This is lamentable especially as the Middle Passage as a concept and its reference to the trans-Atlantic slave trade is thoughtfully discussed in the introduction and the afterword. The concept is linked to the rise of capitalism since the sixteenth century that brought people from Europe and Africa forcefully to other continents. It takes the Atlantic slave trade as an example to study other social and cultural transformations that resulted from the transport of people. It focuses on the comparable experiences of slaves, indentured servants, transported convicts, and other coerced migrants. It includes ships, prison cells and other places of bondage as part of these middle passages – even for those labourers who were nominally free. The Middle Passage is therefore understood not only as a maritime metaphor but as “the structuring link between expropriation in one geographical setting and exploitation in another” (p. 2). The authors stress that they are aware of the uniqueness of chattel slavery referring to its incomparably high numbers of persons that suffered from its terrors.

Keeping this in mind many arguments are actually in favour of such an extended usage of ‘Middle Passage’: Shortly after the end of the slave trade there existed a contemporary awareness of the comparability of the slaves traded and the felons transported from Britain to the penal colony in Australia. Some of the latter suffered under conditions worse than slaves because the captains were paid beforehand and had thus no special interest in delivering their human cargo. A crew member making this comparison experienced both Middle Passages (the trans-Atlantic and the one from Europe to Australia) and his comparison was done at a time when the slave trade was not yet a trope for something inherently bad. Critics of the transport of convicts used even abolitionist rhetoric, but the abolitionists who fought slavery were less interested, probably fearing for the success of their cause (chapter 6). For the era after slavery the authors show how the continuously existing plantation economies still in need of (forced) labour found ways to guarantee this in a brutal way comparable to slavery, catering for Europe’s growing taste in exotic goods, and how the expansion of Europe’s empires continued to displace people in the centuries to come.

Indeed, the different contributions’ focus on the Middle Passage as a common concept allowing for comparison gives this a book a coherence only seldom achieved by edited volumes. A more profound reference to the concept’s indebtedness to the Afrodiasporic experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade not only in the introduction and afterword but throughout the book would have made the use of this concept even more convincing. Authors would then not have missed on reflecting on the incredible irony that a ship transporting forced labourers in Melanesia was named ‘Uncle Tom’ (p. 188), or – and this is a real lapse – failed to refer to Gilroy’s Black Atlantic that informed so many studies over a wide range of disciplines.

Still, some authors acknowledge the importance of the experience of people of the African Diaspora and in quoting Toni Morrison they are not denying the wound that has been inflicted on those people, but they add a reminder that this wound continues to be inflicted everyday on people everywhere on this globe. There is an activists' perspective; consequently the authors stress the continuities from the eighteenth century to our time. Hu-Dehart for example compares the way recruiters of forced labourers used strategies like subcontracting and outsourcing to present-day practices in the globalised world economy (p. 169). Martínez shows the continuities of Chinese trade in women and children from colonial times until today – and dares to discuss the fuzzy boundaries between voluntary and forced labour in the recruiting of sex workers: people may freely enter a contractual relationship but find themselves in the situation of violent suppression soon after. And most importantly the authors remind us that today more than 27 million people live as slaves, more than ever before on this planet.

And exactly this is the important issue, that makes this book a valuable read not only for people interested in world history or in the history of slavery and other forms of forced labour but also for scholars in Cypriot studies working on migration and especially trafficking and sex work in Cyprus. They may find it helpful to embed their work in the wider synchronic as well as diachronic perspective that this book has to offer.

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