



Tony Kushner. *The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys, 1685 to the Present*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. ix + 318 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-6640-5; \$34.65 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-6641-2.

Reviewed by Julian S. Tangermann (Leiden University Institute for History)

Published on H-Migration (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Saskia Bonjour



Off to Britain!? Immigrant Journeys, Collective Memory, and British National Identity

Migration is all about moving. Remarkably, however, the actual act of moving, the journey itself, has received little scholarly attention within migration history. The journey has not been conceptualized as an analytical category and the journey's effects on the host society have barely been a subject of inquiry. Tony Kushner's *Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys, 1685 to the Present* aims at changing this by putting the journey center stage. In this broad study covering several centuries of British migration history, a plethora of migrant groups and their journeys are analyzed and compared by the author with the goal of determining how and why they form part of British collective memory or are absent from it. Kushner's ultimate objective is to show that over time, British national identity has been influenced not only by migrants themselves but also by the narration of their journeys. Thus, the heart of his study is "the interrelationship between migrant journeys and Britishness" (p. 6).

To assess this influence, Kushner starts with two introductory chapters on context and theory. First, he discusses the British debates on immigration, asylum, and racism in order to show how the British and the Other were constructed in these debates—in short, how Britishness was constructed through the lens of immigration. The second chapter presents the theorizing and conceptualization of the "journey," including a meticulous typology of journeys, their narratives, and the tropes that are employed in the narrative process. Intriguing is the

idea that the only legitimate pathways for migrants into the imagined British community are certain blueprints of journey narratives that involve references to slavery and persecution and often mystify moves that were at least partially driven by social or economic motives as a process of refuge seeking. These narrative strategies are of major importance for the acceptance of migrants: "Migrant journeys that do not fit within this template prove particularly difficult to become part of collective memory. As a result, they are confined either to oblivion or to alternative, marginalized narratives" (p. 42).

In each of the three empirical chapters, Kushner analyzes a known and commemorated journey and then juxtaposes it to the study of one case that is not part of British collective memory. The combinations seem uneven at first sight: the Huguenot refugees of the seventeenth century are contrasted with Volga German transmigrants coming from South America in the nineteenth century; the *Kinder* who were saved from Nazism are opposed to the Jewish refugees on board the *St Luis* who were denied entry to Britain at the same time; and the *Empire Windrush*, the iconic symbol of the arrival of post-colonial immigrants to British society, is juxtaposed with the countless voyages of stowaways and others who entered the country in nonofficial ways after the war. However, this comparative method helps Kushner to understand the mechanisms of memory work, i.e., why one group is remembered and the other forgotten.

For example, in the chapter contrasting the Huguenot refugees with the Volga German transmigrants, Kushner demonstrates that the movement of the Huguenots was not only one of refuge but also one of economic and social enhancement. However, with time passing (and especially in recent decades), the narrative of refuge became prominent. It was also used in a very specific way by the host society, namely, to model the “perfect immigrant” against which all new migrant groups would be measured. Altogether, Kushner assesses the image of the Huguenots as one that has been subject to considerable memory work after their arrival, which has slowly incorporated a distorted image of their movement into the British collective memory.

The small group of Volga Germans arriving in Southampton in 1879, in contrast, was sentenced to oblivion by subsequent British collective memory. In this case, the local population and politicians of all parties alike reacted according to the anti-alienist atmosphere of the time, labeling the (temporary) immigrants “dirty, lazy, helpless and useless” (p. 110). Their being “matter out of place” made subsequent memory work forget their stay—a huge contrast to what happened with the Huguenot narrative over time (p. 116).

Although the six cases examined by Kushner are in themselves perfectly studied, two inconsistencies stand out in the overall analysis. First, Kushner is incoherent when it comes to connecting the concept of the journey to the construction of Britishness. For example, about the Volga Germans we learn a lot of factual information: from where to where and how they traveled, as well as how they were received by the British society of the time. We learn nothing, however, about the impact of the non-narration of their journey on British identity. That is not so for the Huguenots. Here Kushner traces the change in narrative of their journey and shows how this change

in narration actually yielded a change in British identity. These are two very different forms of research: the former gives us an account of a historical process, while the latter is a study of the reception history of certain narratives of journey. Only the latter actually adheres to Kushner’s initial research intention of describing the memory work on the journey that influences Britishness. The reader is left with the feeling that what Kushner in fact wants to do is to rescue from oblivion those groups that he juxtaposes to the well-remembered ones. The second inconsistency that the study contains is Kushner’s disregard of emigrant journeys altogether. If his aim is to show that the narration of journeys and Britishness are closely interconnected, at least imperial journeys of out-migration should be part of the picture.

This criticism on Kushner’s theoretical setup, however, is not at all to discredit the masterly work he has done by introducing two conceptual lenses that seem valuable beyond his study. First, Kushner shows how one can analyze memory work on certain migrant groups and what consequences this has for subsequent societal reactions toward newcomers. His method may serve as a template for historians analyzing the development of discourses on certain immigrant groups over a longer period of time. Second, Kushner offers a rich theoretical concept of the journey that goes beyond the mere movement from A to B. By conceptualizing the journey as the interplay between the “physical and the non-physical in embarking upon, experiencing and remembering journeys” (pp. 72-73), and by understanding it as a symbolical and metaphorical transformation in narrative terms, he is able to excavate the tropes used in the writings about journeys. The concept, thus, allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that migrants and their societies of settlement use to construct pictures of one another—an insight needed beyond the British case.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-migration>

Citation: Julian S. Tangermann. Review of Kushner, Tony, *The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys, 1685 to the Present*. H-Migration, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40695>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.