

Posudek oponenta habilitační práce / Opinion of the Habilitation Thesis

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Habilitační práce The Boundaries of Belonging: Symbolic Boundary Work Among Immigration Activists in the United States

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Text posudku (rozsah dle zvážení oponenta)

The work is focused on social movements, organizations and individual policies responding to immigration to the United States. The author assumes that the relatively wide range of associations and groups at the national, state and local levels in the US can be divided into two mutually antagonistic groups, a group that appeals to strengthen the rights and freedoms of migrants and a group, which in turn calls for strengthening the controls of migration flows. In her habilitation theses, the author explore the ways in which these two factions, which she refers to as the immigrant rights (IR) and the immigration control (IC) social movements (SMOs), engage in symbolic boundary work, which includes blurring, crossing, maintaining and shifting. She looks at the ways in which moral and legal criteria interact in these processes along three dimensions – family, citizenship, and values.

For fulfilling her goals, the author used a wide range of methods including a content analysis of the virtual social networks, the web pages of the statements of the individual IR and IC institutions and their social events in the form of protest appearances and other activities. She also studied the reflection of their activity in the legislative and executive endeavour of the state apparatus. At the same time, she tries not to evaluate the individual groups and movements. As she says: “I have decided not to label either movement as “anti” or “pro” immigrant. My goal in this study is to reveal the culture structures that both movements put forth, not to pass judgement on them.”

The core of the work is particularly the chapters Family Matters, Price of Citizenship and Evaluating Values, where the author shows how the IR and IC SMOs work with the theme of the reunification and separation of the families of immigrants, with the theme of equal rights of immigrants, discussions on granting citizenship to legal and undocumented migrants and with discussions on the ethical values in the formulation and application of American legislation in relation to migrants. The last chapter of the work Symbolic Boundaries in Action then sums up in which form in the discussions and also in everyday practice the boundaries between immigrants and citizens of the USA are created or blurred.

The work is indisputably innovative and surprising. For instance, already in that the concept of culture plays a central role in it, which is on the decline in current cultural anthropology, and its connection with the concept of borders, which is on the other hand currently very

widely articulated. The work is also interesting for its comparative focus. The methodological grasp of the issue nevertheless brings a whole range of questions, the answer to which or consideration would make increase the quality of the work further.

The first question, which would need to be clarified, is the sample and explicit creation of the two opposing opinion groupings. The construction of the sample is not clearly justified in the work. It is also not clear why the IR and IC are represented differently in terms of number. As the author states significantly more material was collected from the area of IR activism. So the question offers itself of why that was the case. Are the movements asking for great migration control less numerous? Are these groups worse organized and recognizable? The author states that the sources requesting greater immigration control are more uniform. Can she explain why that is? Is the numerical representation of the individual SMOs connected with the ideological spectrum in the USA? The author says that she excluded organizations, which are blatantly anti-migration (p. 26). Did she also exclude “blatantly” pro-migration organizations?

The individual chapters are based on originally compared cultural phenomena. Particularly the theme of a different conception of the child in immigration family provides very interesting observations. However, from the ethnographic point of view I see here in the introduction to the chapter the claim that family unity is generally a priority for migrants to be simplistic. A number of people migrate precisely to avoid the family’s influence. A number of migrants also disrupt family unity by their migration. However, the central theme of the chapter, the opinions of the individual SMOs on the resolution of the situation when a child is born to irregular migrants in the USA, then acquire American citizenship and one or both parents are subsequently deported, it is a very interesting problem. This problem does not arise in the Czech Republic, because children born in this way in the Czech Republic acquire the citizenship of the parents and in the case of deportation quite logically follow the parents to the country of origin. Birthright citizenship tables entirely different questions from the ethical perspective.

Also the chapter devoted to the value orientations brings a number of questions. This chapter plays a significant role in the work, because as the author says: “considerations for maintaining or blurring a boundary between unauthorized immigrants and Americans are overwhelmingly moral”. With this chapter, the author also builds on an extensive tradition of research of value orientation, which was elaborated already in the 1940s in American cultural anthropology. In the case of the analysis of the argumentation of the IR and IC groups, we however run into the question whether it is possible to so clearly separate “American” and “universal” values in comparing the individual discourses as the author attempted to do. I see the setting out of values such as justice, equality, dignity, and respect as “universal values” and those such as freedom, fairness, and opportunity as “American values” (p. 146) as goal-directed. As is after all shown in the next text, the individual values blend in the argumentation of the IR and IC SMOs. The question then arises whether the separation of the values into American and universal is necessary at all.

Despite the indisputable value of the work, I can find several methodological problems in it. Relatively often, the position of the individual SMOs generally towards migration and to unauthorized migrants is not clearly separated here. The chapter on family and citizenship is rather focused on undocumented immigrants, whereas in the chapter on values the author pays great attention to migration in general without pointing that out. Connecting the position to immigration and the positions towards undocumented migrants can be misleading. It is

manifested also in the subchapter “Measuring ‘success’: the potential implications of symbolic boundary work”, when the laws of the individual states aimed at the limitation of undocumented migration are labelled by the author for instance on page 201 as anti-immigration. I personally believe that the position to violating the residence status and the position to migration are connected only very loosely.

It should also be clarified terminologically whom the label “immigrant” applies to. In terms of rights and obligations, I personally see as a distinct legal division whether: 1. The individual is a citizen of the USA, 2. He/she is a member of another state and lives on the territory of the USA legally or 3. Whether he/she is a member of another state and his/her stay on the territory of the USA is unauthorized. It should always be clear on which category of the three the author is discussing in the work. If an immigrant acquires citizenship of the USA, I assume that he/she has the same rights as any other citizen of the USA. However, it arises from several places in the work that there is a category here of “native born”, who are in an unequal, privileged position in relation to the other groups of the population of “foreign born”. The fact is that the work does not reflect that a large group of the citizens of the USA are also immigrants (in the first generation) and very often does not reflect that all of the immigrants living on the territory of the USA are not undocumented migrants. As with the investigated social movements, the author in this way also manipulates the boundaries between large groups of people. These manipulations cannot be avoided entirely, but considering that this is an academic study this manipulation should be transparent to the highest possible degree.

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis „The Boundaries of Belonging: Symbolic Boundary Work Among Immigration Activists in the United States“, by Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky is certainly an interesting and useful professional achievement. It *fulfils* requirements usually demanded on habilitation theses and I recommend it as a basis for habilitation procedure in the field of sociology.

Praha, dne 10 August 2016