

Global Perspectives

The final section of this book offers a global view of migration. It would be paradoxical in a volume like this one to simply limit ourselves to geographical regions—they are no less of an artificial creation than the national borders that, we argue, have played too important a role in shaping historical enquiry. The following three chapters show how thinking about migration through national borders can reshape our understanding of the modern world.

The first contribution, Julian M. Simpson’s ‘Migrant Doctors and the “Frontiers of Medicine” in Westernised Healthcare Systems’ looks at the work of migrants as a defining feature of global healthcare, pointing to how population movement is closely connected to the way the world economy functions. As in other parts of the economy, migrants in medicine are disproportionately represented in roles that are constructed as undesirable. Any productive discussion about migratory movements needs to incorporate an understanding of the social and economic function of migrants in modern economies.

In ‘The Right to Asylum: A Hidden History’, Klaus Neumann argues that revisiting the history of the right to asylum (claimed by individuals) and the right of asylum (as bestowed by states) can bring to the fore different ways of thinking about present responses to movements of refugees. Neumann suggests that a productive way forward can be found in a renewed focus on the rights and needs of refugees—and by paying less heed to emotional responses and presumed impacts (positive or otherwise) on nation-states.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Donna Gabaccia asks ‘Will the Twenty-First Century World Embrace Immigration History?’. She offers a reminder that scholarly work is also the product of the social and cultural environment that it is produced in. This book has aimed to show how migration history can contribute to our understanding of the world. It is worth remembering that this will only happen if and when there is a climate that allows a global body of work to develop. This means that the process whereby history can inform policy and public debate is two-way: scholars can seek to make their work relevant but ultimately for their work to make a difference, there will need to be a shift in policy-makers’ attitudes towards immigration and its role in national narratives. Starting these conversations, and taking our place in public debates, is, however, ultimately an optimistic and potentially transformative action.