

Book Review: Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City by Alice Bloch and Sonia McKay

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/06/07/book-review-living-on-the-margins-undocumented-migrants-in-a-global-city-by-alice-bloch-and-sonia-mckay/

Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City captures the lived experiences of undocumented migrants in London as well as the views of their employers. **Alice Bloch** and **Sonia McKay** not only show the challenges faced by those living without documentation, but also explore current legislation and policies that are shaping these experiences. **Gayle Munro** recommends this book for clearly articulating the lives of undocumented migrants at a time when the legislative net is tightening around the wider experience of migration.

***Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City.* Alice Bloch and Sonia McKay. Policy Press. 2016.**

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The lived experiences of those migrants from Bangladesh, China and Turkey who have 'undocumented' status in the UK are the focus of this book. *Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City* captures the voices of undocumented migrants living in London as well as those who employ them. The book clearly articulates the challenges faced by those negotiating life under a set of restrictions imposed by (a lack of) immigration status, couched within a presentation of the legislation and policy that governs such a status, the motives behind migrants' decisions to come to Britain, the nature of 'undocumented' status and the impact that has had upon all other aspects of life.

Living on the Margins also demonstrates the diversity between, but also within, the different 'ethnic enclaves' employed as case studies, and highlights how tensions within the countries of origin can be replicated through the experience of migration. The main industries of employment upon which Alice Bloch and Sonia McKay focus their analysis are the restaurant and takeaway sector, construction, retail and manufacturing. The writers acknowledge that they have not accessed other, arguably even more marginalised, sectors, such as domestic servitude or sex work (partly as these sectors have been discussed in other projects) or those fleeing domestic violence whose relationship breakdown can essentially render them 'undocumented'.

The inclusion of such groups may have resulted in a different angle on some of the analysis, most obviously in the areas of exploitation and agency.

The ways in which the authors present the narratives of their respondents highlight a number of dichotomies or ambiguities within the lived experience of being or becoming an undocumented migrant, especially in the context of an increasingly unforgiving political and legislative environment surrounding immigration. The isolation and loneliness that often characterise the status of being 'undocumented', for example, and the ways in which work can overwhelm other aspects of life are articulated alongside discussion of migrants' social networks. By framing the analysis through a social network lens, the writers more clearly highlight the seclusion and work-dominated nature of so many 'undocumented' lives.

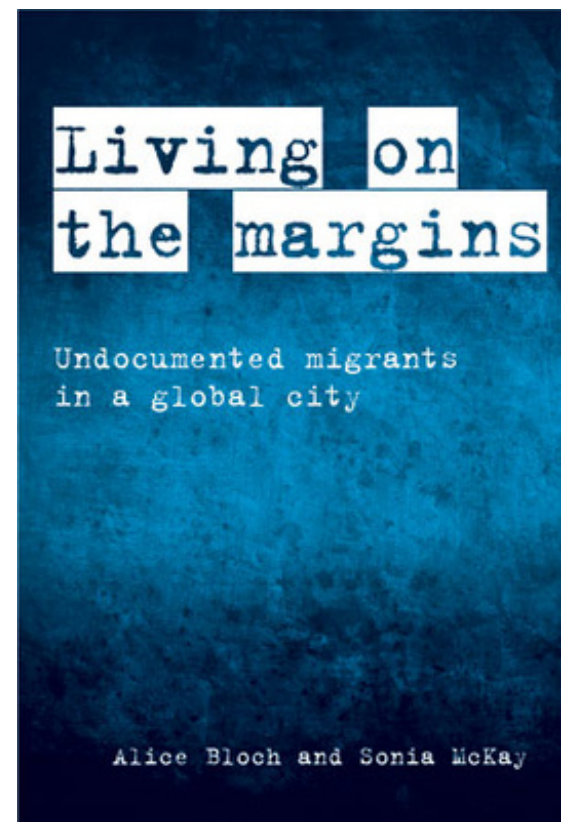




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Another ambiguity raised through respondents' experiences is how familial bonds can generate complex dynamics of obligation, guilt and reciprocity, which can serve, on the one hand, to benefit the individual job-seeking migrant, but conversely can also trap an undocumented worker in a cycle of low-paid and exploitative employment, bound by the expectations of family ties. A third ambiguity highlighted throughout the study, especially through the dual methodological approach of interviewing both migrants and those who employ them (who may also have previously experienced an undocumented status), is the portrayal of employer motivations for employing staff who may have a less than straightforward migration status. Chapter Five details, for example, how some employers articulate solidarity with undocumented migrants and can express their political or humanitarian position through the act of offering work to someone without documentation.

The state's role in the governance and (non-) protection of undocumented migrant workers is described by the authors as 'ambivalent' (29), but it could be argued that such a description suggests a more benign approach to undocumented status than indicated by immigration-related legislation, especially the recently passed [Immigration Act 2016](#), which aims to reinforce immigration control in daily life. Indeed, much of the book highlights how previous immigration legislation has already taken steps to normalise the control of immigration in fundamental aspects of life – including housing, education, access to healthcare and ability to travel – thereby further restricting the lives of those with irregular immigration status. By introducing the threat of deportation into so many areas of daily life (27), the precarity of life as an undocumented migrant, combined with enforced periods of limbo, is deliberately reinforced in a less than ambiguous manner by immigration legislation (see page 172 for a particularly poignant example of the impact of such enforced limbo and the inability to travel following a family bereavement).

At the outset, Bloch and McKay discuss their methods and some ethical considerations of conducting their fieldwork, mainly focusing on individual respondents and researchers. It would also, however, be interesting to explore from an ethical viewpoint questions around any potential relationship between the study as a whole (and others like it) and the development of policy and enforcement action by the authorities. One part of the book discusses, for example, the steps taken by employers to avoid possible sanctions imposed for employing an undocumented migrant worker. The role and potential impact of an agency such as the [Gangmasters Licencing Authority](#) within the sector would also be an interesting question to consider in more detail.

Through its clear articulation of the voices of those it seeks to understand, *Living on the Margins* is to be recommended for the ways in which it deconstructs the experiences of undocumented migrants. The study sheds light on a number of aspects of being and becoming 'undocumented' through its presentation of the motivations behind migration decisions and how migrants can gain the status of being undocumented; its critique of the disconnect between lived experience and the bureaucratic nature of 'categories' of migration; the motivations of employers and undocumented workers; and the holistic nature of the status of being undocumented, which dominates over all aspects of life. The implications of the findings of this study are likely to be reinforced as the legislative net tightens around the experience of migration in general; the book is therefore recommended for those seeking to understand the impact which the experience of being and becoming 'undocumented' can have upon someone who has sought to make a life in Britain, especially when read in conjunction with other studies that focus on the experiences of undocumented children and young people (for example, Bloch, Sigona & Zetter, [Sans Papiers](#)) and those trafficked into exploitation (see Pearce, Hynes & Bovarnick, [Trafficked Young People: Breaking the Wall of Silence](#) as well as multiple publications by Bridget Anderson, Julia O'Connell Davidson and Gary Graig).

Gayle Munro holds a PhD on the experiences of migrants from the former Yugoslavia to Britain from University College London (Geography, 2015); an MA in Politics, Security and Integration from the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL (2002); and a BA Honours in French and Music from Royal Holloway, University of London (1998). Gayle is currently Research Manager at The Salvation Army. Gayle is writing in a personal capacity and the review does not represent the views of The Salvation Army as an organisation. [Read more reviews by Gayle Munro](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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