
Reviews

Eurostars and Eurocities: free movement and mobility in an integrating Europe by A Favell; Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, 296 pages, £55.00 cloth, £19.99 paper (€63.30, €23.00) ISBN 9781405134057, 9781405134040

In this book Adrian Favell pushes the boundaries not just of European nation-states but of academic publishing; the author invites the reader to consume it as if it were a novel (that is, read it through from beginning to end and not ‘gut’ it as academics tend to these days to see what, if anything, new it might say, or to see whether they are in the bibliography). I took Favell up on his invitation and was duly rewarded by one of the most readable academic studies I have come across for many years. Despite its studied refusal to promote its scholarship by reinforcing every assertion with a duly Harvard-referenced set of more or less relevant authors in parentheses, this is a highly ethical and researched piece of work. Its gestation period was long (1998–2007 it appears) crossing not one but two Research Assessment Exercise census dates—which would presumably have caused raised eyebrows at the British university (Sussex) where Favell started his project. Such a considered manuscript would therefore probably never have emerged had the author not followed his subjects and become a ‘free mover’ around Europe (and then North America and Japan). Like his subjects—free-moving trans-European professionals—and as befits a migration specialist, Favell has not stayed long in any one place. This unsurprisingly is a book with an agenda, with a sympathy towards the European project, and one which identifies strongly with its subjects, many of whom emerge as friends; yet its conclusions provide a fairly stark reality check to those who think there is a new European class of carefree, young professionals. Alternatively, eurosceptics will find comfort that in many ways the nation-state remains the container for cradle to grave sustenance (at least in those parts of Europe where there remains a welfare state). I am reminded in reading this book of one of the all-time greats of ethnographic writing—Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labour* (1977)—in which, having given a powerful exposition of how the education system is failing working-class kids (rather than the other way around) and explaining why his savvy respondents eschew education for labour, in the end the people he questioned wish that perhaps they had worked a bit harder at school as the realities of ageing, insecurity, and unskilled labour begin to hit home. Favell may not agree with this reading, but this is no uncritical hagiography of the new European middle classes, although at times it may appear that it is going in that direction as yet another interview over a glass of Jupiler beer in Brussels is recounted.

Favell sets out to understand the dilemma at the heart of European integration, which is that, for most European citizens, their sense of well-being and identity, as well as their material base, lies in the nation-state—albeit in different ways (Esping Anderson, 1990); yet, at the same time, these national cultures are a source of frustration and oppression to them, and so Europe offers liberation. Thus, whilst they are materially comfortable (and, in the case of the northern and particularly Nordic countries, very comfortable) in their national habitus, emotionally and occupationally the ideals of the European project offers a more attractive embrace. Favell argues that there are seriously large numbers of young professionals in some of Europe’s sexiest cities—it is estimated, for example, that there are approximately 200 000 French people in London. One of the most important drivers for this has been the European Union’s Erasmus/Socrates programme of student mobility, which has encouraged students across the Union to spend part of their studies at another university in another nation-state. This programme has been successful beyond its wildest dreams, and many of its alumni have become the free movers who are the subject of Favell’s study. They have followed the classic route to the big cities—where ‘Stadt Luft macht frei’ (‘city air makes men free’)—from small-town Europe and, whilst often only intending to stay a year or two, have often remained much longer enjoying good salaries, gaining big-city skills, and freedom from family and small-town obligations. Many have formed emotional relationships (gay and straight)

across national boundaries and find living in a third-party nation without having to get work permits, visas, and the other paraphernalia of international migration intensely liberating. All of this, of course, comes at a price: despite the best intentions of the framers of European convergence law, they find themselves excluded from many formal welfare benefits in their adopted city, they can lose their rights to benefits in their home states, and they lack the informal knowledge and contacts which give access to affordable housing. For the most part they form few friendships or relationships with 'natives', and, despite being adamant about not being 'expats', it is quite clear that in the centres of the new Europe their friendship groups are almost exclusively drawn from 'people like us'. Favell shows that the downsides begin to impose themselves as they get older and begin to think about children: where to educate them, how to afford childcare, where to buy a house, and what about their pensions? However, in these neoliberal times these are the increasing dilemmas of the enlarged but increasingly embattled middle classes writ large in the gentrified cities of much of Europe. Whilst they may still find it easier to navigate the welfare and health systems of their home countries, it is not clear that life will in fact be much better back home.

This then is a book with a mission: to understand the new Europe. It is, however, also a story about a new and potentially transnational middle class. It is not just a story of euro enthusiasm—it is one of budget airlines and high-speed trains. The first word of the title is no accident: few can dispute the excitement that Favell imparts when, in one hour fifty-five minutes after leaving central London your train pulls into the middle of Brussels with only the order in which the language of the train manager's announcements are made having changed (although the tunnel stops even the Brits from blathering into their mobile phones for the rest of the carriage to hear). Equally, one can only be struck standing in the arrivals hall at London Stansted Airport by the number of unknown and unpronounceable names in Eastern Europe from which the Ryanair flights are arriving with plumbers, au pairs, and others prepared to work long hours for low wages in London and across the United Kingdom. Almost everywhere in Europe is now within two hours of home (if you do not count the deadtime spent in security checks at airports), which makes it feasible to move around and stay in touch—including going home for the dentist or the doctor (the views of Favell's respondents on the NHS make salutary reading in the run-up to a British general election).

Favell provides a serious piece of social scientific research and this book would, I suggest, be a good one to make a case for the ethnographic method. It is based around sixty interviews (or conversations perhaps) with a range of free movers (how they described themselves was one of their biggest concerns) in three European cities: London, Amsterdam, and Brussels. The cities were chosen to represent three different aspects of Europe: its most globally connected city, sometimes seen as the capital of the neoliberal world; its most tolerant city; and the bureaucratic heart of the European universe. What emerges is perhaps somewhat surprising in that Brussels comes across as the most liveable of the three cities—cheap housing, an easy cosmopolitanism which is able to exploit the language settlement between French and Dutch speakers, good food, and an acquiescent bureaucratic infrastructure (despite sometimes draconian formal rules). Amsterdam—everybody's favourite city—in which English is the lingua franca and anything goes, comes across as anything but to the non-Dutch. You cannot get cheap housing unless you are prepared to illegally sublet; however well you learn Dutch you can never speak it well enough; and if you get invited out to somebody's home in the evening, do not expect to get fed. London is in most respects a complete nightmare: expensive, frenetic, hard to get around, drowning in alcohol, and forget about health and schooling! Despite this, Favell's Eurostars, of course, experience the Eurocities as impossibly addictive, and many find themselves living there long after they had originally intended to return home.

One of the strengths of the book lies in its approach—it is well written and delightfully easy to read, the arguments are made and contextualised without a lot of academic noise (but are, at least in the areas I have any knowledge of, impeccably well informed), and the sources are used immaculately to add to the argument. More often than not when reading contemporary social science, I find myself skipping the quotes because all they do—at best—is illustrate the story being told by the author; not in this case—here they help to make the argument,

and it is often an argument between point and counterpoint. Each chapter ends with a two or three page synoptic transcript from one of Favell's respondents, which relates to the subject matter of the chapter and is, in each case, an added incentive to reach the end of the chapter and keep reading. The chapters themselves are a mix of geography and sociology—some are about the three cities, others are about migration, integration, and alienation (to choose three themes from memory); and the chapters are interwoven in ways that enable the reader to maintain interest in their substantive subject matter whilst Favell paints a picture of life in the fast lane of the new Europe. In reality, of course, it is not really the fast lane: the subjects are not the superrich but are, for the most part, a new and often struggling middle class. Even the expats working for large multinational corporations (Unilever was one of his supporters) who do not have to worry about health, housing, or schooling are continually negotiating dilemmas about children, partner's careers, or ageing parents back home—often in two different countries. It is often tempting to think that these are but minor problems, but what really comes across is that the problems of the new middle classes are universal and not that different from employed people everywhere in these changing neoliberal times—most have little job security ('as good as your last assignment'), no security of tenure, no pension. Whilst the subject matter is the new Europe, it is actually a story of the new global capitalism in which some of the nation states are hanging on to their welfare provision like the Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke. Read in this light, the book might be seen as the companion to Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant's *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1999). There is a relentlessly upbeat enthusiasm to Favell's narrative which can be read either way, but whatever you do, read this book!

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