

Desmond King, *The Liberty of Strangers: Making the American Nation* (Oxford University press: New York, 2005)

Desmond King wrote an ambitious work in which he attempts to provide a new way of looking at the migration history of the US, and at the way in which minority groups have positioned themselves (and have been positioned) throughout history, up to roughly the 9/11 attacks. The book is divided into two parts. The first part investigates the effects and the reaction of the American public and government to mass migration in the nineteenth century. This migration was mainly centered at large, industrial urban centers. It also explores the emancipatory and exclusionary effects of world war I and migration during the interbellum. The second part starts by doing the same thing for world war II as it did for the first. It then attempts to argue that the position of minorities in the US was largely dependent on the way the US wanted to present itself to the outside world in the cold war period. Because it was, King argues, looked at as hypocritical for the US to claim to support anti-imperialism abroad, while maintaining an essentially imperialist attitude to its many ethnic groups at home. Finally, it connects the civil rights movement of the sixties with many later developments and attempts to provide solutions to the social problems the US faces, the best of which in King's view seems to be affirmative action. The core argument of the book is that the US has since the nineteenth century pursued the idea of an individualistic one people nation state that would - with for example proper education - assimilate different cultures into a single 'American' melting pot culture. This was, however, in practice never the case and US society is still dominated by (ethnic and national) groups.

*The liberty of strangers* is interesting because it uses a new method of looking at migration history. Rather than drawing connections with the early modern period, it starts in the nineteenth century when migration and integration attempts were rapidly intensifying. It deals with a history of group based social politics, rather than one of cosmopolitan individualism, and in doing so provides an interesting (if somewhat unnuanced) view of American social history. Its final chapter, which at times takes a more political approach than an academic historical approach, can provide food for thought for historians working in the field of social history. (how much distance should they keep from the implications of their historical works for popular politics?) While this book is a must read for social historians that want an alternative view of their field, political and cultural historians will find that King at

times leaps into their field as well. For economic historians there are, however, not many new things to be found in the book. King's work is generally accessible enough for consumption by the general educated public and many will find the final chapter more interesting than a distant and careful examination of the second half of the twentieth century. The book could therefore prove to be a new way of writing history and generate new attention from political activists in historical works.

King's heavy multiculturalist ideological basis and his anti-cosmopolitan views have a profound influence in *The liberty of strangers*. While his basic argumentation is sound and his new approach enlightening, he tends to simplify things that should not be simplified. He for example almost entirely neglects the impact of social class on disunity between the various ethnic groups discussed. He also suggests a historical continuity in the segregation of ethnic groups from American society. According to King, American minority groups went from being segregated by the majority population to segregating themselves from society as a whole. He names separate black graduation ceremonies as an example. He leaves out however, that there are today much more people with a disadvantaged background in public positions of power in the US than ever before. By neglecting this, and by also underestimating the individual capacity for people from minority backgrounds to act without consent from the group they belong to, King denies these groups and the people belonging to them the agency that is due. These problems are mainly found in the last (and longest) chapter. Here King seems to attempt to strike a balance between continuing his historical analysis and calling for political action to end injustice. This approach does not work out very well in this case, especially when King seems to neglect using historical distance at times. An example of such a lack of historical consciousness, is when he attempts to justify governmental reparations for slavery in the US, by making a comparison with the victims of world war II internment camps. These US citizens of Japanese descent were held against their will till the end of the war and in 1990 the survivors received an apology from president Bush and \$20000 in reparations each. This comparison holds in almost no way whatsoever. Firstly, the difference in time between these events and the reparations would be 140 years vs 45 years respectively. More crucially, only the survivors of the Japanese abuses were paid, and there are obviously no slavery survivors after so much time. King needs to use ethical arguments for activist stances like this or at the very least proper historical comparisons.

Further criticism of *The liberty of strangers* can be found in a review article by David Reimers.<sup>1</sup> Reimers is first of all critical of King's underrepresentation of social class, generational differences and 'regionalism'. He is especially critical of the second part of the book. He notes that King spends almost no attention here on Catholics, Jews and European immigrants in general. This is especially striking because these groups do not fit in King's central argument, since a lot of them did assimilate into a melting pot culture. He also says that King does not properly describe how the various ethnic groups, such as Latinos and African Americans, were treated differently from each other by the (white, Anglo-Saxon) majority culture. This reviewer must note however, that King does excellently describe this difference with regard to how 'newcomers' were treated as opposed to the first Americans by the majority culture. Reimers ends his review by stating that King chose an interesting subject, but that his analysis should have been far more complex.

*The liberty of strangers* is a very interesting book and while it - especially the final chapter - is controversial at times, this can only be beneficial in challenging the way in which not just social historians, but all historians operate. If the reader keeps in mind that differences within and between the ethnic groups described by King and the historical comparisons between large periods he draws are lacking at times, one can have an excellent history of American multiculturalism at his or her disposal.

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<sup>1</sup> D.M. Reimers, 'The Liberty of Strangers: Making the American Nation. By Desmond King: review', *The Journal of American History* 92-4 (2006) 1525.