



Racialized and Gendered Mass Deportation and the Crisis of Capitalism

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Abstract

By the time President Obama leaves the Oval Office there will have been 3 million deportations from the United States during his eight years in office. This sum is 50 percent more than the total number of all deportations prior to 1997, and far more than any previous U.S. president. I argue in this essay that the confluence of four factors in recent years has created the conditions for mass deportation from the United States: (1) nearly all deportees are Latin American and Caribbean men; (2) the rise of a politics of fear in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; (3) the global financial crisis; and (4) the potential that mass deportation creates for corporate profit-making. I place this argument in the larger context of race and ethnicity in the capitalist world-system.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Immigration, Deportation



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Immigrants who have lived in the United States for decades, have their children and grandchildren in that country, and who have no connections to their country of birth can be arrested in their homes, taken to a detention center, and summarily deported without legal representation or due process. This denial of basic rights and the targeting of one racialized group fit neatly into a critical race perspective on U.S. immigration policy. But, how does it fit into the larger world-historic context?

Ramon Grosfoguel (2015), among others, has argued that race is an organizing principle of the international division of labor. Some workers transgress this global hierarchy by leaving their countries of birth and coming to the United States to labor as undocumented workers, where they find themselves at the bottom of the domestic labor hierarchy. When the threat of deportation looming over these workers becomes a reality and undocumented workers are deported to their homelands, they are pushed out of the bottom of the employment hierarchy in the United States and into the labor markets in their country of birth, where their options for survival are much more limited. In this fashion, deportation reinforces the racialized international division of labor as well as the racialized hierarchy of the domestic labor market.

Mass Deportation, the Aftermath of 9/11, and the Great Recession

In the post-9/11 context, a construction of the dangerous immigrant has emerged, and this construction is gendered male and racialized as a Latino criminal (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013) or an Arab terrorist (Naber 2006). People perceived to be Arabs have been victims of hate crimes and other forms of harassment due to the conflation of Arabs and terrorists.

However, relatively few Arabs have been deported from the United States since 9/11 (Golash-Boza 2012). Instead, state policies alleged to combat terrorists have largely targeted Latinos. Mass deportation is a form of state repression based on stereotypes of “criminal aliens” that appears to disproportionately target Latino and Caribbean men. In 2008, there were 10.4 million undocumented people in the United States, 4.1 million of them were women, and 80% were from Latin America or the Caribbean (Passel and Cohn 2009). Any non-citizen can face deportation, but undocumented immigrants are most at risk for deportation. Although 20 percent of undocumented immigrants are *not* Latin Americans, these immigrants account for less than 2 percent of deportees. And, although 40 percent of undocumented immigrants are women, they make up only 11 percent of deportees. Notably, the percentage of male deportees increased from 76 in 1999 to 89 percent in 2012.¹

¹ The Office of Immigration Statistics provided me with removal data by sex between 1998 and 2011 and published this data for 2012.

This escalation of deportations targeting Latino men has been carried out in the name of making the United States safer—both from “criminal aliens” and from terrorists. Notably, the stated mission of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), according to its website, is “to secure the nation from the many threats we face,” and a substantial portion of the DHS budget has been dedicated to deporting Latinos who pose no obvious threat to the nation. These “controlling images” (Collins 2004) of black, Latino, and Arab men as threatening have served as discursive fodder for the implementation of state repression. If people in the United States did not live in fear of terrorism and of crime, it would be more difficult for the state to justify spending \$30 billion a year on mass deportation.

Scholars of global capitalism argue that the current crisis of capitalism is a new one—and that it was caused by the transnational capitalist class having reached its limits: nearly all corners of the globe have been incorporated into global capitalism (Robinson 2014; Sassen 2014). The financial activities of investors and speculators led to a collapse of U.S. financial markets in 2008, which was at the core of the most recent crisis of global capitalism (Robinson 2014). The escalation of mass deportation in the United States is one instance of the state’s repressive response to the crisis.

In the aftermath of the crisis, we have witnessed a shift towards more interior enforcement of immigration laws. With the slowdown in employment, fewer immigrants have attempted to enter the United States, and thus there have been fewer border apprehensions. Immigration law enforcement officers in two branches of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) carry out deportations: Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). CBP is only authorized to work up to 100 air miles from the border; most interior enforcement falls to ICE. In 2002, ICE apprehensions accounted for 10 percent of all DHS apprehensions. By 2011, that figure was nearly 50 percent. There was an abrupt rise in interior apprehensions in 2008.

This shift from 83,969 ICE apprehensions in 2007 to 319,934 ICE apprehensions in 2008 is a consequence of the implementation of the Secure Communities Program and the consequent rise in interior enforcement. The Secure Communities Program is a deportation program that mandates coordination among federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in immigration law enforcement and has been decried by immigrant rights organizations for creating fear in immigrant communities. The program’s implementation at the very height of the Great Recession in 2008 makes it a telling example of heightened state repression in a time of economic crisis.

Who Profits?

While some have pointed to the opportunities opened up for profit making by mass deportations, it is difficult to substantiate the claim that corporate profit is the primary explanation. It is clear, however, that certain sectors bring in enormous profits from mass deportation. It is also clear that corporations have spent millions of dollars lobbying for legislation that would enhance these profits.

The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA)—the largest private prison contractor in the United States—was awarded its first government contract in 1984. The CCA reported substantial profits during the 1990s. The company was doing so well that at the end of the twentieth century it began to build speculative prisons—“excess prison space for inmates who did not yet exist” (Wood 2007: 232). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, rates of incarceration leveled off and the CCA faced serious problems of overcapacity and mounting debt. By 2001, CCA had 8,500 empty beds and was over a billion dollars in debt (Wood 2007). As states had cut back funding for prisons the CCA looked to the federal government. Its federal lobbying expenses increased from \$410,000 in 2000 to \$3 million in 2004. These efforts paid off, primarily because of the rise of immigration detention in the aftermath of 9/11.

In 2009, Congress passed a bill that included a “detention bed mandate.” This mandate requires immigration detention facilities to fill 34,000 beds each day with non-citizens awaiting deportation or an immigration hearing. In 2009, 49 percent of ICE immigration beds in the United States were in private detention facilities. After the implementation of the quota, this percentage went up to 62 percent (Carson and Diaz 2015). Between 2008 and 2014, CCA spent ten million dollars on lobbying related to immigration detention and immigration reform. This lobbying paid off, as the company’s annual profits increased from \$133 million to \$195 million in this time period (Carson and Diaz 2015).

The rise in detention has been accompanied by a rise in deportations. Countries that receive deportees have responded to this flow by finding ways deportees can be put to use. One of the uses of deportees is as skilled laborers. Call centers in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic are replete with deportees. They answer phone calls from people located in the United States and often earn only \$100 a week. Having lived in the United States, they speak English and are familiar with U.S. culture. Their cultural competence is an asset since the majority of callers are from the United States. The state of Baja California in Mexico, by way of example, has about 35 call centers that employ 10,000 people, nearly half of them deportees (Spagat and Millan 2014). Overall in Mexico, the call center sector doubled between 2005 and 2010, making it a \$6 billion industry (Wessler 2014).

Conclusion

Understanding mass deportation requires a consideration of the political economy of racialized and gendered state repression. This consideration renders it evident that mass deportation reinforces the racialized dimensions of the international division of labor that Grosfoguel emphasizes. And, although Dunaway's essay in this symposium argues against the notion of global apartheid due to the rise of the BRICs, a look at mass deportation renders it evident that the sustainability of a system whereby workers in one country earn \$10 an hour and those in a neighboring country earn \$5 a day is dependent upon the enforcement of national borders. Mass deportation is crucial to the maintenance of global apartheid—a system where (mostly white) affluent citizens of the world are free to travel to where they like whereas the (mostly non-white) poor are forced to make do in places where there are fewer resources. As Dunaway points out, there are many affluent non-whites for whom borders pose no problems. However, global apartheid is not dependent upon the same strict racial divisions that undergirded apartheid in South Africa. Instead, mass deportation reinforces the limited mobility and enhanced vulnerability of black and brown labor alongside the rise of non-white billionaires who are happy to reap benefits from this marginalized labor. Global apartheid would not be feasible without deportation, as deportation is the physical manifestation of policies that determine who is permitted to live where.

About the Author

Tanya Golash-Boza is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Merced. Her most recent book is *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor and Global Capitalism* (New York University Press, 2015).

Disclosure Statement

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