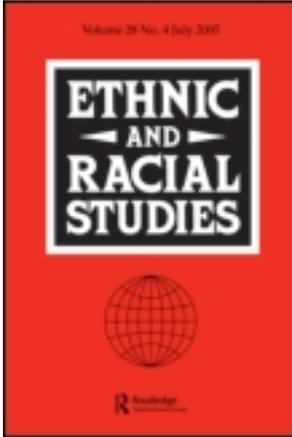


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Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion

Nicholas De Genova

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Abstract

Border policing and immigration law enforcement produce a spectacle that enacts a scene of ‘exclusion’. Such spectacles render migrant ‘illegality’ visible. Thus, these material practices help to generate a constellation of images and discursive formations, which repetitively supply migrant ‘illegality’ with the semblance of an objective fact. Yet, the more these spectacles fuel anti-immigrant controversy, the more the veritable inclusion of the migrants targeted for exclusion proceeds apace. Their ‘inclusion’ is finally devoted to the subordination of their labour, which is best accomplished only insofar as their incorporation is persistently beleaguered with exclusionary campaigns that ensure that this inclusion is itself a form of subjugation. At stake, then, is a larger sociopolitical (and legal) process of inclusion through exclusion. This we may comprehend as the obscene of inclusion. The castigation of ‘illegals’ thereby supplies the rationale for essentializing citizenship inequalities as categorical differences that then may be racialized.

Keywords: undocumented/illegal migration; border; spectacle; labour; race; nativism/xenophobia.

Introduction

Deportable non-citizens are pervasively subjected to myriad conditions of social degradation, globally. This is true whether the people in question are understood to be ‘merely economic’ migrants seeking employment, or as refugees seeking asylum and relief from any variety of natural, social and political calamities, whether as ‘illegal’ workers or the impoverished human refuse of ‘foreign’ disasters, pleading for clemency at the begrudging mercy of ever more austere social welfare bureaucracies. Indeed, the criteria for granting asylum tend to be so stringent, so completely predicated upon suspicion, that it is perfectly

reasonable to contend that what asylum regimes really produce is a mass of purportedly 'bogus' asylum seekers. Hence, in systematic and predictable ways, asylum regimes disproportionately disqualify asylum seekers, and convert them into 'illegal' and deportable 'migrants'. All such officially 'unwanted' or 'undesirable' non-citizens are stigmatized with allegations of opportunism, duplicity and undeservingness. The compulsive denunciation, humiliation and exquisitely refined rightlessness of deportable 'foreigners', furthermore, supply the rationale for essentializing the juridical inequalities of citizenship and alienage as categorical differences that may be racialized.

This social ignominy must be understood to be part of a larger sociopolitical production of migrant 'illegality'. Discursive formations that uphold and propagate the notion of migrant 'illegality' – more than mere 'consequences' of a more elementary (prior) violation – persistently serve as veritable conditions of possibility for the larger sociopolitical procedures that generate and sustain this 'illegality'. Such discursive formations must be understood to be complexes of both language and image, of rhetoric, text and subtext, accusation and insinuation, as well as the visual grammar that upholds and enhances the iconicity of particular fetishized figures of 'illegal immigration'.

These images and discourses supply the rationale for what I have previously depicted as the Border Spectacle, a spectacle of enforcement at 'the' border, whereby migrant 'illegality' is rendered spectacularly visible (De Genova 2002, 2005, pp. 242–9). Nevertheless, they are generated as the incessant and truly insatiable response to that same spectacle, as well. That is to say, material practices of immigration and border policing are enmeshed in a dense weave of discourse and representation, and generate a constant redundancy of still more of these languages and images (see e.g. Andreas 2000; Bischoff et al. 2010; Chavez 2001; Nevins 2002). The Border Spectacle, therefore, sets the scene – a scene of ostensible exclusion, in which the purported naturalness and putative necessity of exclusion may be demonstrated and verified, validated and legitimated, redundantly. The scene (where border enforcement performatively activates the reification of migrant 'illegality' in an emphatic and grandiose gesture of exclusion) is nevertheless always accompanied by its shadowy, publicly unacknowledged or disavowed, obscene supplement: the large-scale recruitment of illegalized migrants as legally vulnerable, precarious, and thus tractable labour.

In light of what the scene presumes to reveal and the obscene that it simultaneously conceals, the frail ideological dichotomy of 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' utterly collapses. The critical procedure that seeks to elucidate the spectacles of migrant 'illegality' thus provides a vital analytical tool for the sort of scholarship that aspires to avoid finally becoming merely one more iteration of the larger discursive formation that fetishizes 'illegality' as a given, taken-for-granted 'fact'.

Setting the scene: the Border Spectacle

Through the operation that I designate as the Border Spectacle, the law, which, in demonstrable and calculated ways, has in fact produced the terms and conditions for the ‘illegality’ of the migrants in question, is utterly naturalized and vanishes from view (De Genova 2002, 2005). I refer here to the enduring and durable hegemony of the body of immigration law (and its history of legislative debate and law-making) that has produced, for each ‘national’ state, the very premises and predicates of a whole regime of migrant ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’.¹ Immigration law’s pre-emptive and categorical stipulations of migrant ‘illegality’ tend to be reified as always-already established, immutable and unquestionable. The history of instrumental calculations and interventions of law-making literally vanishes from the analytical purview of most observers (including many scholars and activists who might otherwise fashion their scrutiny as ‘critical’). Likewise, the law remains effectively inaccessible and impervious to the would-be migrants who might seek to appeal to it or challenge it. The onus of ‘illegality’ thus appears to rest strictly and exclusively with those migrants who can be purported to have violated The Law, as verifiable through the mundane practices of enforcement. In place of the social and political relation of migrants to the state, therefore, the spectacle of border enforcement yields up the thing-like fetish of migrant ‘illegality’ as a self-evident ‘fact’, generated by its own supposed act of violation.

It is instructive to note that the Border Spectacle may be most extravagantly illustrated in the classic examples that cluster around the patrolling and policing of geographical borders, the physical frontiers of nation-state territoriality. Perhaps the most iconic of these is the vast land border between the USA and Mexico (to which my own original formulation of this concept explicitly referred; see De Genova 2002, 2005; see also Andreas 2000; Chavez 2001; Nevins 2002; Chavez 2008; Nevins 2008), or to the increasing prominence of images of the patrols of the high seas or rugged landscapes that are pressed to serve as the elusive and increasingly virtual (externalized) borders of the EU or Australia (see Huysmans 2006; Pickering and Weber 2006; Weber 2007; Andrijasevic 2010a; Karakayali and Rigo 2010; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). These spaces for the production of the spectacles of ‘illegal’ passage and ever-increasingly militarized interdiction become emblematic precisely, in the haunting phrase of Joseph Nevins (2002, p. 144), as ‘landscapes of death’, as well as zones that are inseparable from the accompanying experiences of rape, mutilation, disappearance and protracted irremediable trauma.

There is nothing about the Border Spectacle that requires its choreography of images to be so literally affiliated to the geography of border enforcement, however. In strict legal terms, 'the border' encompasses a much more variegated spectrum of spaces, and inevitably also includes the airports (or seaports) where migrants undergo inspection by immigration authorities – commonly as documented migrants or travellers first, with visas that later may be overstayed or violated. Therefore, it is not any specific constellation of enforcement practices (such as the admittedly more sensational militarized patrols of land and sea frontiers) that constitute the conditions of possibility for the spectacle of immigration enforcement at 'the' border, so much as the mere fact that borders are indeed enacted (and thus performed) through such practices. The mere fact of border and immigration enforcement systematically activates the spectacle of 'violations' that lend 'illegality' its fetishistic objectivity, and thereby severs the substantive social interrelation of migrants and the legal regime of the destination state. Just as much as the apprehension of surreptitious border crossers, a mundane inspection of documents, accompanied always by the interlocking threats of detection, interception, detention and deportation, may similarly generate a proliferation of spaces for the production of the Border Spectacle. Indubitably, the fetish of migrant 'illegality' assumes the semblance of something most palpable and resplendently verifiable when activated through seemingly devious acts of 'unauthorized' border crossing. But the grandiose, exquisitely visible spectacle at territorial borders is widely accompanied by a rather more prosaic multiplication of more discrete and relatively individualized occasions for law enforcement and 'transgression'. In this respect, the proliferation of heterogeneous forms of border enforcement supplies a crucial site for the renovation of diverse technologies of government, more broadly (Bigo 2002; Rumford 2006; Walters 2006; Weber 2007; Bigo 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). To the extent that the entirety of the interior of the space of the state becomes a regulatory zone of immigration enforcement, and as borders appear to be increasingly ungrounded – both internalized and externalized – the efficacy of the Border Spectacle in fact is merely intensified. As the border is effectively everywhere, so also is the spectacle of its enforcement and therefore its violation, rendering migrant 'illegality' ever more unsettlingly ubiquitous.

The Border Spectacle relentlessly augments and embellishes the mundane and diminutive human mobility of 'unauthorized' migrants and 'dubious' asylum seekers with the mystique of an obnoxious and unpardonable transgression of the presumably sacrosanct boundary of the state's space. But the ever-increasingly militarized spectacle of apprehensions, raids, detentions and deportations always accompanies

the banality of a continuous importation of ‘unauthorized’ migrant labour. All non-citizens, inasmuch as they are construed as such (whether as migrants or asylum seekers), are overtly figured in one or another juridical relation to the authority of a territorially defined (‘national’) state. In spite of their apparent figuration as strictly politico-legal subjects, however, all migrants – like all human life, generally – are finally apprehensible from the standpoint of capital as always-already at least potentially the embodiment of labour-power, the commodifiable human capacity for labour. Nevertheless, within the world social order of capitalism, there is a systemic separation between the locus of exploitation and the means of direct physical coercion, a separation in other words between the ‘private’ sector of the market and the ‘public’ authority of law and the state. Capital’s domination of labour requires this bifurcation of social life under the effective hegemony of a relatively durable distinction between the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’, whereby every state may be best understood to be a particularization of the global political dimension of the capital–labour relation (Holloway 1994). Hence, migrants are similarly figured as labour also from the expressly ‘political’ standpoint of state power. (This inclination to see all people as at least potential labour-power may be most pronouncedly true for parsimonious welfare states, insofar as they perennially devise to ultimately convert those dependent upon public assistance into properly productive, ‘independent’ citizen-subjects.) The state mediates the capital–labour relation through tactical deployments of law, policy and policing in a manner that ensures the relegation of diverse formations of transnational human mobility to a variegated juridical spectrum of ‘legalities’ and ‘illegalities’ (for a fuller discussion, see De Genova 2010a). The ‘illegality’ of ‘undesirable’ migrants, then, supplies a crucial feature of their distinctive, if disavowed, desirability – as labour for capital.

The spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’, practically and materially enacted through various forms of border and immigration law enforcement, rely significantly upon a constellation of images and discursive formations, which may be taken to supply the scene of ‘exclusion’. And yet, the more that the Border Spectacle generates anti-immigrant controversy, the more that the veritable inclusion of those incessantly targeted for exclusion proceeds apace. The ‘inclusion’ of these deportable migrants, of course, is finally devoted to the subordination of their labour, which can be best accomplished only to the extent that their incorporation is permanently beleaguered with the kinds of exclusionary and commonly racist campaigns that ensure that this inclusion is itself, precisely, a form of subjugation. What is at stake, then, is a larger sociopolitical (and legal) process of inclusion through exclusion, labour importation (whether overt or covert)

premised upon protracted deportability. If the Border Spectacle supplies a scene of ostensible 'exclusion' – indeed, if it fashions 'the' border as a veritable *mise-en-scène* of the larger dramaturgy of migration as a site of transgression and the reaction formations of (law) 'enforcement' – it nonetheless conceals (in plain view, as it were) the public secret of a sustained recruitment of 'illegal' migrants as undocumented labour. This we may comprehend to be the obscene of inclusion.

The obscenity of power

The conceptual distinction between scene and obscene may be excavated from Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) landmark theoretical excursus *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre (1974/1991, pp. 223–6) introduces this suggestive juxtaposition in his discussion of monumental space – the distinct varieties of spaces that may be identified with monuments. In Lefebvre's (1974/1991, p. 224) otherwise provocative and supple discussion, however, the dichotomy of scene and obscene is not elaborated in any detail, and remains synonymous with a kind of mutually exclusive opposition between 'prescribed' and 'proscribed'. Thus, monumental space for Lefebvre (1974/1991, pp. 225–6) is distinguished by its hierarchical affiliation of authority with the sacred, whereby the prescribed sacrality of the scene must be rigorously separated from the forbidden profane, the obscene. For present purposes, however, this sort of rigid binarism is neither productive nor illuminating – except insofar as it makes abundantly manifest that it would be misguided in the extreme to conceive of border zones as monumental spaces.

Notwithstanding its iconic status, border space simply does not abide by the characteristics of a monumental or ceremonial space. Indeed, rather than spaces where there is a rigid, rigorous and effectual segregation of what may or may not take place, borders are widely recognized in fact to be spaces of encounter, interaction and exchange, where – despite official prohibitions, officious policing and sanctimonious exaltations of the state's sovereign prerogative to exclude – everything is possible. This is precisely why the border so readily becomes a space of sovereign exception (Agamben 2003/2005; cf. Bigo 2006; Rosas 2006; Schinkel 2009), setting into stark relief what Susan Buck-Morss (2000, pp. 2–3) has called 'the wild zone of power' – 'a blind spot... in which power is above the law and thus, at least potentially, a terrain of terror.' (One need only contemplate here the brutal perversity of the mass-scale and systematic femicide in Ciudad Juárez, on the US–Mexico border.) But this constitutive indeterminacy at the liminal edge of the space of the state and law is also why the border may, in a more mundane fashion, reveal its own obscene

underside, including the perfect banality of ‘illegal’ migration. Hence, when one aspires to apprehend what is at stake spatially in border zones, the conception of a relation between scene and obscene must be rather more dynamic and nuanced; indeed, it must serve to discern how these two dimensions are inextricably linked.

My formulation of this notion of the scene (where border enforcement performatively activates the reification of migrant ‘illegality’ in an emphatic and grandiose gesture of exclusion) accompanied by its shadowy, publicly unacknowledged or disavowed, obscene supplement (the large-scale recruitment of illegalized migrant labour), is inspired by Slavoj Žižek’s elaboration of this conceptual scheme. ‘Power’, Žižek (1997, p. 34) contends, ‘is always-already its own transgression, if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement.’ In order for power ‘to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it.’ In this regard, Žižek (1997, p. 33, original emphasis) insists upon ‘the ideological and political significance of *maintaining appearances*’ for power discourses ‘whose efficiency depends on the mechanism of self-censorship’. The Border Spectacle enhances the efficiency of its own power precisely through this sort of obscene intimacy, whereby the ‘dirty secret’ concerning migrant ‘illegality’ – as its inherent and defining excess – may be occasionally revealed but must be generally guarded through sanctimonious acts of self-censorship and dissimulation. The Border Spectacle’s obscene supplement, the disavowed subterranean inclusion of ‘illegal’ migration – precisely because and by means of the emphatic and extravagant gesture of disavowal – sustains the public institution of border policing and immigration law enforcement and their avowedly exclusionary ideological edifices (see also Žižek 2008, pp. 168–70).

The scene of exclusion and the obscene of inclusion therefore are dialectically interconnected. Yet, like the peculiar inversion in which human affairs more generally appear as ‘material [thing-like] relations between persons and social relations between things’ (Marx 1976, p. 166), so the thing-like (reified) reality of migrant ‘illegality’ – as a social, political and juridical fact – pervasively and perniciously assists in the objectification of ‘irregular’ migrant workers. However, these mass-mediated operations of discursive separation – producing people as ‘illegal’ in utter isolation and disregard for the legal production of ‘illegality’ itself – systematically disorient and disarticulate the scene and the obscene with the superficial and incomplete language of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’.

The spectacle, state power and the obscene supplement

The formulation of border enforcement as spectacle derives crucial theoretical and analytical force from the work of Guy Debord (1967/

1995), regarding the society of the spectacle. In sharp contrast to Michel Foucault's (1979) 'spectacle of the scaffold' as the epitome of pre-modern sovereign power, Debord (1967/1995) posits his concept of the spectacle as a significant elaboration upon and extension of Marx's (1867, pp. 163–77) immanent critique of the fetishism of the commodity under capitalism. Building on Marx's (1867, p. 165) discussion of the hegemony of abstraction as mediating all social relations under capitalism, Debord (1967/1995, p. 19) argues that 'the social requirements of the age...can be met only through their mediation.' Thus, the spectacle for Debord is eminently modern. He identifies the overwhelming and unprecedented hegemony of image and appearance mediating all social relations, by which 'the whole of life...presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*' (Debord 1967/1995, p. 12, original emphasis). Debord (1967/1995, p. 12), again following Marx, emphatically privileges the visual dimension of such spectacular representation, elaborating further: 'The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.' The spectacle is 'the self-portrait of power' (Debord 1967/1995, p. 19). Nonetheless, Debord's theses are also abundantly concerned with the language of mass-mediated discourse. The spectacle is quintessentially characterized by the incessant redundancy of a garrulous monologue (Debord 1988/2005, Thesis VI; cf. Debord 1967/1995, pp. 17, 19).

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1967/1995, p. 19) contends that that 'the administration of society...now depends on the intervention of such "instant" communication.' In this respect, we may infer from Debord (1967/1995, p. 19, original emphasis) that state power itself has come to rely, both intensively and extensively, on the instantaneous propagation of mass-mediated public discourse and images, which is 'essentially *one-way*'. As the culmination of a capitalist social formation predicated upon the estrangement of labour and its separation for its products, Debord (1967/1995, p. 18, original emphasis) contends that 'at the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of *power*', and 'the social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is inseparable from the modern State, which...is the general form of all social division' (Debord 1967/1995, p. 20). In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1988/2005, Thesis II) retrospectively glosses the spectacle as 'the totality of new techniques of government' that accompanied 'the autocratic reign of the market economy'. Debord (1988/2005, Thesis V) further specifies the 'fusion of State and economy' as a principal feature. In order to adequately theorize the society of the spectacle, therefore, we are invited to comprehend its rampant fetishism as, in effect, a fusion of the fetishism of the commodity with the fetishism of the state. Like the commodity itself (in its mundane and ubiquitous

heterogeneity), the state (in its sovereign and homogeneous singularity) assumes the form of an alien power (for further exposition, see De Genova 2011; cf. De Genova 2010a).

The very existence of ‘the’ (modern) ‘State’ (and likewise, of each and every particular one) derives from the effective hegemony and apparent universalization of relations of production that assume the general form of a voluntary contract between two ostensibly free, equal and rightful owners of distinct commodities, engaged in a simple act of exchange whereby one (the owner of the means of production) purchases the peculiar commodity being sold by the other (who owns nothing but their capacity to work, their labour-power) (Marx 1867, pp. 270–80). In this defining feature of capitalist social relations – ‘the juridical relation, whose form is the contract’ (Marx 1867, p. 178), itself a ‘legal fiction’ (Marx 1867, p. 719) – all coercion appears to be absent. Overtly political relations of domination and subordination in the labour process itself are ordinarily secured as ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’, and ‘direct extra-economic force’ is reserved only for ‘exceptional cases’ (Marx 1867, p. 899). A separate and specialized state power arises as an effect of precisely this abstraction of ‘the political’ from ‘the economic’ (Holloway 1994). In this regard, the state is an instrumental feature of capital, its ‘political’ dimension. The organized means of violence must be kept apart, systematically held in reserve as a separate and apparently impersonal recourse for the maintenance of the Rule of Law.

And so it is with the direct and ‘extra-economic’ violence of border policing, whereby the sovereignty of the state and the superintendence of nation-state space are enforced by means of a permanent state of exception in which law may be suspended in favour of the facticity of uninhibited violence (Agamben 2003/2005). Nevertheless, borders operate as filtering mechanisms for the unequal exchange of value (Kearney 2004). Borders differentiate, sort and rank between those to be excluded in fact (deported) and those to be included (even if only as ‘illegal’ migrants). These inclusions of migrants and other non-citizens proceed only differentially, but they almost universally impose a susceptibility for deportation as a defining horizon. The terms of this ultimate possibility of deportation range from the immediate and categorical deportability of ‘illegal aliens’ to the conditional and contingent deportability that remains nonetheless a defining and enduring feature of the ‘legality’ of those non-citizens who have been ‘authorized’ (along with the requirements for their variegated subjection to routinized surveillance and subordination). There tends to be no ‘statute of limitations’ on the possibility for even a ‘legal’ non-citizen to be deported, provided that they are found to satisfy certain stipulated conditions. In this manner, deportability is profoundly disciplinary (De Genova 2002). Hence, beyond the purview of the

Border Spectacle's scene of exclusion, the inclusion of migrant labour is likewise profoundly normalized.

While the spectacle of enforcement is a persistent and pernicious reminder of the extraordinary vulnerabilities that suffuse the migrant predicament, workplace and community immigration raids and deportations in fact remain 'exceptional'. Even under conditions of 'illegality', therefore, the more repressive (plainly political) dimensions of migrant labour generally acquire the common-sense banality of merely 'economic' 'facts of life'. The fetishization of 'illegality' as an individualized transgression likewise serves to render it, in effect, a private affair, or more precisely, a privatized matter of sociopolitical disability. Indeed, what predominates in the everyday life experience of undocumented migrants is not 'direct extra-economic force' but rather, precisely the 'silent compulsion of economic relations'. Once within the 'interior' of the space of the nation state, 'illegal' migrants are presumed (like all other workers) to deliver their labour to market – freely, voluntarily and with no evident coercion. Of course, this normalization occurs only after they have either successfully navigated the militarized obstacle course of the Border Spectacle, or passed quietly from a prior status of tentative or tenuous 'legality' to one of peremptorily disenfranchised and almost instantaneously precarious 'illegality'. But for those who can elude detection and evade apprehension and deportation, there awaits, as their thankless reward, a protracted and indefinite social condition of deportability, and its attendant deprivations, which will supply the distinctive qualification of their labour-power. The exclusionary brashness of the Border Spectacle, then, is inextricable from its 'dirty secret', its obscene underbelly – the real social relation of undocumented migrants to the state, and the public secret of their abject inclusion as 'illegal' labour.

The Border Spectacle, as we have seen, conjures up the fetish of transgression at the ever-multiplying points of interception in an amorphous border zone where migrant trajectories may be interrupted. These humble migrant practices are produced as flagrant violations of the law, as the brazen acts of veritable outlaws, and thus as occasions for apprehension – literally and figuratively – which is to say, occasions for arrest and deportation, but also for fear and loathing. The Border Spectacle works its magic trick of displacing 'illegality' from its point of production (in the law) to the proverbial 'scene of the crime', which is of course also the scene of ostensible crime-fighting. Indeed, this criminalizing discursive excess is the chief attribute that founds 'the' border as the scene of exclusion. Yet, migrants' trajectories (and human mobility, generally) prevail – in spite of the accumulated pressures and violence of borders traversed and the vastly more expansive border zones inhabited indefinitely. Indeed, what is normal is the movement itself, the mobility of

migrants, as well as the concomitant routine ‘irregularization’ of them. Hence, there is the seeming paradox that the greatest theatres for the staging of border policing are in fact the real sites of a massive (obscene) inclusion of (illegalized) migrants.

In place of the palpable social and political relation of migrant labour to the state (a relation that is precisely obscene), border enforcement delivers the public, fetishized and spectacular verification of the migrants’ ostensible ‘illegality’. Indeed, if there were no border patrols or inspections, no border policing or passport controls whatsoever, there would still be migrant ‘illegality’ – because ‘illegality’ is an effect of immigration law itself, promulgating that some migrations be illegalized while others are constituted as lawful. However, we can only be made to believe in that ‘illegality’ – can only be made to take it seriously – once it appears as a thing-in-itself, reified as the supposed effect of the deliberate acts of a spectacular mass of sundry violators of the law, rather than what it truly is: a transnational social relation of labour and capital, an antagonistic political relation of conflict in the process of being fixed as a relation of subordination. Indeed, the phantasm of exclusion is essential to that essentially political process of labour subordination, which in fact is always a matter of (illegalized) inclusion and incorporation.

The task of labour subordination is, nevertheless, always and inescapably, preconditioned by the sheer subjectivity of labour. Labour subordination is grounded, in Žižek’s terms, by the inherent excess that is the creative capacity and productive power of labour. The requirement for subordination is occasioned in the first instance precisely by human labour’s distinctly subjective vitality (Marx 1867, p. 284). Thus, it is instructive to recall that the autonomy of migration and its politics of mobility precede and provoke the state’s politics of immigration control and its spectacle of borders, compulsively depicted as deplorably ‘out of control’ through a more or less permanent and routinized ‘crisis’ management.²

‘Illegality’ and racial abjection: citizenship’s obscene supplement

Obscenity is constituted not only by acts of concealment but also through gestures of selective exposure. Even as the state produces migrant ‘illegality’ as an obdurate and seemingly incorrigible ‘problem’, these enforcement spectacles nonetheless reaffirm repeatedly that there is indeed a subordinate reserve army of deportable ‘foreign’ labour, always-already within the space of the nation state, readily available for deployment as the inevitably over-employed working poor. Therefore, in a manner that in fact dissimulates state power, the Border Spectacle is also a spectacle of the state’s dutiful, diligent, more or less energetic, but ever-beleaguered ‘response’ to the

fetishized image of a 'crisis' of border 'invasion' or 'inundation'. The phantasmatic invasiveness, relentlessness and ubiquity of undocumented migration then serve to prefigure and summon forth the ever more intense and expansive irradiation of everyday life by the state.

The corollary discourses of 'human trafficking' and 'migrant smuggling' even authorize the state to gratuitously fashion itself as a paternalistic (indeed, patriarchal) 'protection racket' (Tilly 1985), whereby protection is not merely preserved for its own 'rightful' citizens but even for some of its migrant denizens, particularly women who must be rescued from the presumably intrinsic criminal excesses of 'illegal' migration itself (Chapkis 2003; Sharma 2003; Aradau 2008; Andrijasevic 2010b; cf. Nyers 2003). Given the sleight of hand by which the gendered discourse of 'trafficking' displaces the onus of 'exploitation' onto nefarious 'foreigners' and the 'opportunistic' infrastructure of undocumented migration itself, undocumented migrants are deemed to be in need of 'protection' – from one another. Moreover, the pitiful and helpless (feminized) 'victims' of migrant 'smuggling' serve to further corroborate the image of a shadowy population of docile and infinitely tractable migrant denizens.

In this respect, the scene of exclusion compulsively discloses and thereby exuberantly affirms, yet again, the obscene fact of subordinate inclusion, as if to subtly reveal or expose its own ostensible 'dirty secret'. Thus, it enhances the efficiency of its own most elementary gesture whereby migrants are figured as a menace, hereby complementing that spectral threat of their opportunistic agency with an allegation of their irredeemable incapacity for veritable (manly) self-determination, and thus, by implication, their incompetence for self-government and democratic citizenship. The exploitation of 'illegal' migrants is itself now refigured as merely the certification of what is taken to be their inherent and odious exploitability. Their subjugation becomes merely the index of an essential slavishness.

Hence, the politics of citizenship is transposed into an essentialist politics of difference. The unequal and invidious politics of citizenship, which is institutionalized in immigration law, produces migrant 'illegality'. The Border Spectacle, however, systematically renders that same 'illegality' effect to appear as a quasi-intrinsic deficiency of the migrants themselves, who may thereby be presumptively deemed undeserving of citizenship, inherently lacking.

In light of this transposition, every question of migration and border securitization – even if these are overtly differentiated in terms of 'culture' or 'national' origins – inevitably presents the concomitant question of migrants' racialization. Contemporary formations of transnational migration are only apprehensible in relation to an effectively global regime of capital accumulation, which is itself inseparable from the histories of European and Euro-American

colonization. Something that these apparently disparate imperial formations share, all the same, is the persistence of a global socio-political order of white supremacy. Historically, the planetary politics of colonial white supremacy always exceeded the boundaries of nationhood within Europe and supplied a supranational framework for European nationalisms to be formulated as a shared, albeit competitive, inter-colonial ‘civilizing’ mission (Du Bois 1999; cf. Balibar 1991, p. 62). Thus, the specificities of European colonial nationalisms were always encompassed and subsumed within a larger racial project of global white power and prestige. Contemporary post-colonial reformulations of these nationalisms as anti-immigrant formations may seem rather more parochial, but are no less predicated on this legacy of racialized inequalities (De Genova 2010b).

The protracted political crisis of subordinating migrant labour only exacerbates further – indeed, reconfigures anew – the already dire post-colonial vexations of race, national identity and citizenship. In this regard, it is crucial to consider Balibar’s (1993/2002, p. 82, original emphasis) proposition that the management and policing of borders establish and maintain ‘a world *apartheid*’, which institutes a ‘color bar’ that runs through *all* societies.³ Indeed, new dynamics of racialization and new formations of racism increasingly become inextricable from the social production of migrants’ ‘differences’ in ways that, as often as not (or rather, more often than not), dissimulate their racisms and dis-articulate ‘race’ and ‘immigration’, through a politics of nativism – the identitarian promotion of the priority of ‘natives’, on no other grounds than their being such (De Genova 2005, pp. 56–94).

The generic figures of ‘immigration’ and ‘foreignness’ suffice to reanimate race in terms that commonly, and perhaps increasingly, are articulated as nation – in terms of the ‘national’ identity of the ‘natives’. Hence, racist far-right parties in Europe tend to articulate their reactionary anti-immigrant populism, not only in terms of a pluralistic and differentialist incompatibility between their putative ‘national culture’ and the foreignness of migrants, but also in the idiom of the purportedly legitimate (democratic) politics of citizenship. Hence, they promote the priority of ‘natives’ under the overt rubric not of racial supremacism, but rather of the presumptive birthright entitlements of ‘the nation’ or ‘the people’. And so we have the British National Party, the National Front in France, the National Alliance in Italy, the National Democratic Party and People’s Union in Germany, and likewise, the Swiss People’s Party and the Danish People’s Party, among others.⁴ (Similarly, in the USA, for instance, the Minuteman Project deploys the parallel strategy of adopting an identity that signals an historical analogy inseparable from its patriotism.) In Belgium, the Flemish Interest, combining fierce

hostility to migrants and Jews with advocacy for Flemish self-rule, predictably makes its subordinated national identity explicit.⁵ Although some of these nativist movements may officially disavow their racism against migrants, many are quite crass and unabashedly racist: the emphatically 'national' gesture is transparently and unapologetically equated with belligerent anti-immigrant racism. Their nationalism, therefore, is not so much a screen that conceals their racism (although it may function in that fashion, in some instances); rather, their nationalism is itself overtly and unabashedly exclusionary, and it enunciates an anti-immigrant racism even as it may disarticulate race as such. For these movements, the mere affirmation of 'the nation' is an identitarian project that upholds the priority of the 'natives' against all presumed outsiders. In this respect, far-right anti-immigrant movements are merely the howling dogs prowling along the margins of the Border Spectacle's scene of exclusion. Indeed, regardless of whether they have or have not enjoyed mass appeal or electoral success, these nativist formations are an integral part of that scenery. But their frenzied barking and rabid growling, however sincere in their exclusionary exuberance, simply enhance the efficiency of the obscene inclusion of migrants as 'illegal' – and commonly, also racially branded – labour.

Notably, 'foreign' (and racially subordinate) deportable labour presents a striking analogy to racially subjugated 'minority' citizens. In their analysis of the Watts rebellion of 1965, Debord and his Situationist collaborators posited that impoverished African Americans served as 'a perfect spectacular prod', supplying the spectacle of a loathsome 'threat of . . . underprivilege [that] spurs on the rat race' (S.I. #10, December 1965, cited in Knabb 1981, p. 157). In contrast to such a threat of permanent marginalization and protracted un- and under-employment, however, the spectacular prod of the figure of the 'illegal alien' presents a predicament of unrelenting and unforgiving over-employment: super-exploitation. Furthermore, whereas 'native' racial 'minorities' tend to be affiliated with spatial immobility – the sort of intractable settlement iconically equated with 'ghettoes' and 'reservations' – migrants of course signal unsettling mobility. What the two have in common, nevertheless, is excessive misery, conjoined to the stigmata of racialized difference – reassuring the racial 'majority' (or even a racially diverse 'native' citizenry) that their own misery is not so bad after all. Furthermore, even as it appears to thus reassuringly affirm a naturalized chasm of social difference, the racialized embodiment of citizenship inequalities (associated with both 'native' racial 'minorities' and most 'illegal' migrants) nonetheless destabilizes the presumed certitude that such excesses of suffering could ever be reserved only for 'someone else' – the 'others'. Such a population condemned to an inferior social station – be it as

an effect of their ‘natural’ (racial) inheritance, their ‘alien’ (juridical) status, or both – is always also a signal of the prospect that ‘this could happen to you’ and ‘if you step out of line, you’re next.’ The commonplace racial branding of migrant ‘illegality’, in this respect, sutures the ‘exclusionary’ work of the Border Spectacle to a vertiginous spiral of inequalities that are deeply imbricated within the fabric of citizenship itself.

The deportability of migrant denizens evokes the always-already established (if obscene) fact of an at-least potential relegation of the world’s ‘citizens’ to their properly abject condition as ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1995/1998), concealing – and yet, simultaneously revealing and proclaiming – the universal disposability of all labour (De Genova 2010a). For Debord (1967/1995, p. 23, original emphasis), in the thoroughly alienating commodified universe of the spectacle, ‘all time, all space, becomes *foreign*’. Indeed, through the spectacle, ‘the commodity completes its colonization of social life’ (Debord 1967/1995, p. 29). The Border Spectacle’s spectre of an invasive ‘foreignness’ thus intensifies the degree to which all of life is rendered ‘alien’, whereby the polity’s scene of ‘citizenship’ may confront its own obscene condition of colonization.

In a devious and pernicious inversion, however, the figure of ‘the alien’ is mobilized as an alarming signal of estrangement and supplies the proxy for reactionary populist paroxysms of exclusionary animosity (directed nevertheless against the always-already included). As citizenship’s obscene supplement, the loathsome social condition of the ‘foreign’ and ‘illegal’ denizens merely presents the citizens with a refracted image of their own alien(ated) plight, and supplies them with a diversionary target.

‘Labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin,’ Marx (1867, p. 414) famously proclaimed. This classic racial watchword of anti-capitalist struggle is no less pertinent today than in Marx’s era. Here, however, we may refer to ‘Blackness’ not literally as an attribute of the ‘skin’ per se, but rather as the pre-eminent figure of racialized subordination within a regime of white supremacy.⁶ Thus, this is a more expansive and capacious understanding of Blackness as a sociopolitical category that encompasses the whole spectrum of racialized social identities produced as specifically not-white.⁷ Today, furthermore, given our global post-colonial condition, it has become increasingly common that labour ‘in a black skin’ presents itself also in ‘foreign’ clothing. Hence, a contemporary corollary to Marx’s axiom would seem to be: labour in the prison inmate’s uniform of citizenship can never emancipate itself where labour in the migrant’s garb of ‘foreignness’ is branded as ‘illegal’.

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Notes

1. I have elsewhere depicted this as the legal production of migrant 'illegality,' and demonstrate empirically how the history of revisions of US immigration law was tantamount to a mass illegalization of Mexican migration in particular (see De Genova 2002, 2005, pp. 213–49). However, the stakes of this essay are principally theoretical, and there is no pretense of demonstrating the argument with reference to any particular empirical case. The aim here is less to show something than to offer a critical perspective by which it may be possible to see something anew.
2. For various formulations of the concept of the 'autonomy of migration', see e.g. Moulier Boutang and Garson (1984), Moulier Boutang (1998, 2001), Mezzadra (2001, 2011) and Mezzadra and Nielson (2003, 2013); cf. Papadopoulos et al. (2008), De Genova (2009, 2010a, 2010c), Karakayali and Rigo (2010) and Tsianos and Karakayali (2010).
3. For related invocations of global 'apartheid', see Richmond (1994), Sharma (2006) and Nevins (2008).
4. Of course, there are important exceptions to these naming trends; nonetheless, the political discourses of other anti-immigrant movements are remarkably consonant with the more overtly 'national' and (national-)populist examples.
5. Similarly, the separatist Northern League in Italy promotes a sub-national politics of regional identity in concert with a broadly xenophobic agenda.
6. This category should not be confused with any supposedly 'objective' or 'natural' sort of (phenotypic, quasi-'biological') racial blackness that would predictably be attributed to people of African descent in particular. This, however, is not to trivialize the salience of the increasing global migration of Africans themselves.
7. Indeed, even for those migrants who do in fact come to be racialized as black, we must guard against naturalizing what is always a historically specific sociopolitical process of producing them as 'black'. The 'blackness' of racially subjugated migrants is therefore always something fundamentally new, to be continuously 'discovered' by migrants as they endure and confront the larger social forces working to produce them as racial objects and thereby also as (re-)racialized subjects, thus compelling them to 're-discover' themselves racially.

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