

Deportation

Nicholas De Genova

Deportation is a term that has no distinguished pedigree in the history of political ideas and legal concepts. Unlike citizenship, for instance, which derives from a hallowed history of philosophical debate and political practice concerned with the proper relationship of individuals to the public life of a larger community, deportation has no such exalted genealogy. As a figure of law-making and law enforcement, of course, the practice of deportation will always be found to have a history. But there is something distinctly nondescript about the term, perfunctory even, which underscores its status as a kind of understated, largely unexamined fixture of statecraft.

To de-port is suggestive of an undoing. In effect, etymologically, the word's origins would indicate a carrying away, a removal, a disposal. A still more euphemistic and sanitized contemporary bureaucratic synonym for deportation is, indeed, removal. When conducted on a mass scale, deportations have historically been similarly euphemized as 'population transfers'. With this proliferation of banal language to describe what can only be experienced in fact as a rather coercive if not violent dislocation, however, we begin to appreciate that we are in the midst of what Hannah Arendt famously designated 'the banality of evil' (1963).

As is well known, Arendt invoked this notion with regard to the unsettling 'normal'-ness of the high-profile Nazi technocrat Adolf Eichmann, during his trial for 'crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes'. 'It would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster.... The trouble with Eichmann,' Arendt explains, 'was precisely that so many were like him ... neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal'. Devoid of any 'diabolical or demonic profundity,' Eichmann's very pedestrian thoughtlessness 'predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals' of his epoch. This was possible, furthermore, because, in Arendt's account, despite Eichmann's evident culpability for repeated and systematic criminal acts, 'he had no motives' apart from 'an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement' within a large-scale bureaucratic organization dedicated to administrative mass murder and genocide, for which criminality and injustice had become 'legal'. In other words, the banality of Eichmann's particular evil derived from what Arendt deemed to be 'the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy': the dehumanizing reduction of individuals into 'functionaries and mere

cogs in the administrative machinery'.

Notably, given his instrumental role in the perpetration of the so-called Final Solution, the particular evil in question was precisely inseparable from Eichmann's superintendence of the mass deportation of European Jews to their eventual extermination. Indeed, this is what chiefly characterizes deportation in its more contemporary connotation as the prosaic and procedural (individualized) expulsion of non-citizens – that it is pervasively institutionalized as a merely administrative measure. Hence, something that can only be experienced by the non-citizen subjected to it as a profoundly punitive iniquity operates as an utterly routine and mundane recourse of states 'removing' (or disposing of) their ostensibly unwanted, undesirable, unwelcome foreigners. Thus, deportation has the air of a purely administrative corrective: some people are deemed to be 'out of place'; they must be 'removed'.

Ensnared within the pompous gestures of 'national' sovereignty and a state's prerogative to enforce its own legal order, the desultory deportation of non-citizens sustains a dissimulation of the more elementary fact that some people's lives are plainly judged to be disposable. This may not ordinarily take the form of deliberately and forcibly shipping people off to their literal deaths, but neither is that consequence an implausible or improbable result of some deportations. In a recent study of deportation in the United States, for example, legal scholar Daniel Kanstroom provides case histories of immigration judges who can be found to explicitly admit that they are sometimes sending medically vulnerable deportees to almost certain death simply because 'that ... is the law of this land' (2012). More generally, however, deportation always entails the enforcement of a dire and usually abrupt separation of an individual non-citizen from all the material and practical coordinates of her day-to-day circumstances, the actual life and livelihood that she has been engaged in sustaining and cultivating, as well as all the immediate and affective human relationships of which these are made.

A non-citizen's susceptibility to deportation – her deportability – therefore involves a deeply existential predicament that is defined by the grim prospect of being coercively removed from the space of the nation state where she has otherwise sought to make a life. The always unpredictable possibility of deportation becomes a defining horizon for her life. This prospective disposability within and across the bordered spaces of states, furthermore, enforces a protracted condition

of vulnerability to the recriminations of the law, and consequently, a complex and variegated spectrum of ways in which everyday life becomes riddled with precariousness, multiple conditionalities, inequality and uncertainty. In this respect, deportability is also a temporal predicament that renders one's way of life and one's life projects to be always relatively tentative and tenuous, vexed with precautions and often overshadowed by a diffuse but persistent terror – the fear of detection, apprehension, detention, and expulsion. Yet, these more or less torturous conditions of life for those who are compelled by circumstances to make their lives beneath

the horizon of the possibility of deportation have been made ever increasingly normal – ‘terribly and terrifyingly normal’ (to recall Arendt’s phrase) – within our modern global ‘deportation regime’ (De Genova and Peutz, 2010).

References

Arendt, Hannah (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin.

De Genova, N. and Peutz, N. (2010) *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Kanstroom, D. (2012) *Aftermath: Deportation Law and the New American Diaspora*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

.....

