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The deportation mess: a bureaucratic muddling of state fantasies

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Blog

The Deportation Mess: A Bureaucratic Muddling of State Fantasies

29 Oct 2014

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Guest post by *Barak Kalir*, Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Barak is currently leading the ERC-funded project ‘*The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Implementation Interface*’ that seeks to compare the implementation process of deportation regimes in Israel, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, Indonesia, and Ecuador. You can follow Barak on Twitter [@barakito](#).

In the past four weeks alone, the Minister of Justice and Security in the Netherlands was blamed for deporting failed asylum seekers with severe medical conditions to countries in which their health treatment cannot be guaranteed; the chief of the national police in Melilla, Spain, was charged by a judge for illegally performing ‘pushback’ operations of migrants into Morocco; and the Israeli High Court ordered the dismantling of the biggest detention center and revoked a recent law that permitted the imprisonment of asylum seekers for one year without trial. I could go on providing more examples from other countries that illustrate the formal and informal mess that overwhelmingly characterizes the running of modern state deportation regimes.

A useful starting point in understanding this mess is a realization that modern deportation regimes are based on fantasies. Fantasies, to be sure, are the imagining of improbable things. Rather than a provocative statement, this is, alas, an accurate depiction of a harsh reality—a harsh reality because like all good fantasies, deportation fantasies, while having no basis in reality, are, to paraphrase William Isaac Thomas, ‘real in their consequences’ for many illegalized people.

Deportation regimes are fundamentally based on the fantasy of a purified nation, on the ability of states to ‘clean up’ the nation by expelling from their sovereign territory those ‘contaminating’ Others who entered and/or reside in an irregular manner. This is a double-headed illusion. States not only lack the intelligence, infrastructure, and other human and material resources to detect, detain, and deport all irregular migrants, but also cannot prevent the entry of new migrants who will eventually be categorized as ‘illegal’ and deportable. Not even Singapore, a city-state located on a small island, enjoying great resources and advanced surveillance technologies of limited maritime borders, can (or wants to) prevent the phenomenon of irregular migration.

Deportation regimes are not only based on fantasies but they create them as well. Most menacing perhaps is the fantasy of protecting the nation-and-state from the hazards of irregular migration. Here again the illusion is conspicuous, not least because there’s little to protect from. Different studies (see [here](#) and [here](#)) have repeatedly debunked allegations about links between irregular migration and criminality, and between migration and fiscal or monetary loss for the national economy. Much to the contrary, irregular migrants turn out to be largely law-abiding and a source for economic growth.

Huge costs are involved in the efforts of states to keep their deportation fantasies alive. The first and most important one is the human cost: the unnecessary suffering that’s inflicted on irregular migrants for merely lacking the ‘right’ documents. Fearing arrest, detention, and forced expulsion, irregular migrants suffer piercing anxiety and many undergo traumatic experiences before, during, and after their deportation. There’s also the enormous cost of financing the deportation infrastructure and personnel. In some countries, hundreds of millions of euros are invested in deportation each year, and the average investment per ‘successful’ deportee is easily in the tens of thousands of euros.

The fantastic dimension of deportation regimes is strikingly revealed when one considers that in spite of huge investments, deportation regimes colossally fail in achieving, according to their own logic, their ‘cleaning up’ goal. And while states claim that deportation regimes have a deterrent and preventive effect on irregular migration, there’s no evidence for such claim. The absurdity rooted in these fantasies begs the question: why do so many states opt for maintaining



IN 2012, A GROUP OF ‘FAILED’ ASYLUM SEEKERS (WHO ARE DEPORTABLE BUT CAN’T BE DEPORTED, MOSTLY FOR LACKING PASSPORTS) SET UP TENTS IN A DESERTED SCHOOL IN AMSTERDAM. THEY BECAME VISIBLE. A FEW MONTHS LATER, THE COURT ORDERED THEIR EVACUATION. THE POLICE ARRESTED MANY ONLY TO RELEASE THEM IN THE FOLLOWING 24 HOURS. THIS IMAGE CAPTURES THE OVERALL CONFUSION, AS BOTH POLICE AGENTS AND MIGRANTS SEEMED UNCERTAIN AS TO THE GOAL OF THE EVACUATION. (SOURCE: INDYMEDIA)



A DEPORTATION OPERATION BY US IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (SOURCE: ALJAZEERA)

monstrous albeit non-achieving deportation regimes?

Some recent excellent studies (see for instance [De](#)

[Giorgi 2010](#) and [Papastergiadis 2006](#)) point us in two main directions. First, the economic ‘follow the money’ trope emphasizes the production of a new lumpenproletariat that services neoliberal national economies. Second, the culturalist trope highlights the Othering of noncitizens as a way to sustain a much older fantasy, that of the unified nation that is cared for by a strong state with a powerful coercive but legitimate and even just apparatus.

Without disputing the significant explanatory capacity of these two tropes, I’d stress a third direction that is less linear and straightforward in its implication. I believe that the present forms of many deportation regimes around the world are the result of a bureaucratic mess and an uncoordinated process of muddling. Formally speaking, deportation regimes should be seen as an amalgam of manifold and often contradictory decisions, directives, and regulations that have been made over time by changing governments, ministries, and multiple state institutions. Rather than there being a positive accumulative effect and an orderly collective institutional memory regarding division of labor and tasks, there’s more often than not a legalistic jumble and procedural chaos.

The allocation of responsibilities and budgets is constantly changing among various ministries and institutions that are charged with executing certain tasks in the deportation process. Think here about ministries of security, justice, health, education, social welfare, transportation, and more. Think also about institutions like the police, immigration and naturalization, courts, penitentiaries, social work, and hospitals—not to mention the numerous and intricate ways in which states work with private companies, intergovernmental bodies, NGOs, and other civil-society organizations in processing deportations.

Adding to this deportation mess is a notable implementation gap between the opaque amalgam of policies and institutions and the complex system that’s charged with executing them. In most countries one can talk about a deportation maze, and it’s by now difficult to discern whether this implementation gap is the outcome of, or the reason for, the prevailing deportation mess. It’s clear, however, that many actors in the deportation field exercise vast discretionary power in interpreting policies and acting according to their own understandings, routines, and traditions. The messiness of the ‘[migration apparatus](#),’ to follow the term and argument that Gregory Feldman has developed, allows too often and too easily for the production of social indifference and ensuing violent practices against illegalized migrants in the name of the protecting states.

It’s safe to assert that most politicians, policymakers, civil servants, and even many civil-society actors have lost the plot when it comes to the managing of deportation (fantasies). They rarely have full knowledge of the history of deportations as a tool of biopolitics in their country, they’re unable to critically consider alternatives for deportation, and they can neither account for the investment in, nor the justification for, the present structure of their deportation regime. This autopilot mode that characterizes much of the work of those managing deportation regimes is related with the power of fantasies in providing everyone involved with a sense of accomplishing an important and taken-for-granted task, and an urgency to ‘get the job done.’

To unravel the deportation mess, we need to study it historically in its progression and ethnographically in the ways that it’s

de facto being shaped by the practices and views of those involved in it. This is one of the prime goals of an ERC-funded project entitled ‘The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Implementation Interface.’ In the next five years we’ll study the work of civil-servants and civil-society actors who manage deportation regimes in Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, Israel, Indonesia, and Ecuador. You can read more about the project [here](#).

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