



THE DEPORTATION MACHINE: AMERICA'S LONG HISTORY OF EXPELLING IMMIGRANTS

ADAM GOODMAN

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What kind of societies do we live in when we refer to millions of hardworking individuals — people who seek better life opportunities beyond where they were born— as “illegal,” as animals, as merchandise? What does it mean when public opinion or national governments demonize people for crossing borders ‘without bureaucratic authorization’ and then, after tracking them down and blaming them for any type of structural woe, treat them like canned sardines, like chickens in cages, like imported bananas, like something that is not a human being?

Historian Adam Goodman, in his book, *The Deportation Machine: America's long history of expelling immigrants*, offers compelling responses to these questions. The deportation machine, based on Goodman's arguments and evidence, could be described as a complex socio-political control tool that



has worked to exclude and separate individuals, families and communities, to the benefit of a few and to the detriment of millions. To the benefit of corrupt politicians and private corporations across international borders, to the detriment of human beings seeking better opportunities or trying to survive beyond their places of origin. Goodman distills the essence of this complex and variegated socio-political machine through outstanding and demanding intellectual, emotional, and physical work, which takes the form of a prominent book that we hope will one day be available in Spanish and other languages.

The deportation machine is a sophisticated device with the power to expel disposable labor and lives, causing suffering across national borders that has been openly sanctioned by nation-states with the “legitimate monopoly” to govern human flows under the current economic system of capital accumulation. According to Goodman, since the first decades of the 20th century federal officials in the United States immigration bureaucracy have had great discretionary power: “[t]he deportation machine that legislators and immigration bureaucrats established during these decades prioritized speed and economy over the constitutional right of people to due process” (29). The result creates a disproportionate effect on Mexicans. Goodman reports that there have been 57 million deportations in the last 125 years and Mexican nationals represent nine out of every ten deportees (6).

While carefully recounting the dark history of expulsion of immigrants from the United States, the book also charts the shameful cooperation and collusion of the Mexican government in the mistreatment and violation of the human rights of migrants in North America. Goodman’s introduction invites readers to understand the machine, causing us to deeply ponder a question: “What kind of nation is the United States?” But we are called to consider other questions such as: What kind of nation is Mexico? What does it say about our governments and communities if we ignore a machine that systematically enforces socioeconomic exclusion, reifies multiple forms of inequality, promotes forced displacement, and legitimizes violent political borders?

Through careful work in archives on both sides of the Mexico-United States border, Goodman demonstrates his skill as an international migration historian dealing with a transnational phenomenon (and what the media often calls an ongoing “humanitarian crisis”),¹ shining a light on the complicity of immigration authorities in the United States and Mexico. One example from Chapter 3 drives this observation home: in the 1950s, bananas from the Mexican state of Tabasco sailed on air-conditioned Mexican ships to the United States while these same cargo holds —unairconditioned due to the excessive costs— returned migrants to Mexico. Packed like sardines in a can and lacking the minimum conditions of human dignity on the two-day trip, ultimately tens of thousands of Mexican families shared this traumatic experience that included enduring the vomiting of fellow travelers, leading some to try to escape or end their lives at sea. The goal was to traumatize these migrants to deter future unauthorized migration.

Lest we believe this is just an anecdote of a distant and obscure past, this historical reality continues in other forms and is now present-day practice from the United States and Mexico to countries in Central America, particularly to Honduras, and other world regions. In October 2019, the commissioner of the Mexican National Institute of Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración or INM), when referring to the expulsion of more than three hundred people from India said: “it is a warning for all transcontinental migration that even if they are from Mars, we are going to send them to India, to Cameroon, to Africa!” (Kino Border Initiative, 2019: s/p).² After several civil society organizations questioned this statement, the INM commissioner apologized, but the damage was

¹ From our perspective this is not a recent phenomenon, particularly considering over three decades of limited and partial policies and laws not addressing the root causes of international migration or promoting the protection of human rights.

² See Kino Border Initiative (2019): “A Vertical Wall”: Immigration Enforcement in Mexico, available at: <https://www.kinoborderinitiative.org/mexico-enforcement/>

already done; it clearly demonstrates how undocumented migrants are not seen as human by certain Mexican federal authorities.

Furthermore, the policies of the Trump administration (2017-2021) reify this racist, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant perspective, with over four hundred actions against immigrants and migrant cross-border communities that will take years for the Biden administration to unroll. Adam Goodman in this book describes the way in which US state and non-state actors use internal borders to restrict mobility, effectively making non-American-citizens prisoners in their own homes (108). As the United States wrestles with its racist and xenophobic past and present, the migrant person is the rope in a tug of war. Stretched between national security and human security, the migrant's human rights, life, and livelihood hang in the balance.

Under the current López Obrador administration (2018-2024), contradictory discourses and policies towards undocumented migrants in Mexico remind us what Goodman explains in Chapter 2 about “coerced removal” during the Great Depression in Texas under Operation Wetback in 1954. When assessing this infamous immigration and deportation policy, Lieutenant General Joseph M. Swing, who was at the time the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) stated that:

“every effort was made to make the drive as humane as possible”, adding that “families were not separated” and “aliens with long residence in the United States who had established roots were not molested”. These claims, however, were false. Deportation's punitive nature would become even more apparent in the coming weeks and months as Operation Wetback moved further into the interior of the country. (62)

During March 2021 in the southern state of Chiapas, located on the border with Guatemala, the INM in collaboration with the Mexican army and the (recently created) Guardia Nacional launched an “Humanitarian Rescue Operation” (Operativo de Rescate Humanitario) for migrant children, youth, and women that took the form a military parade, clearly displaying guns and war equipment. Along these lines and at least since 2018, there is widespread evidence of Mexican authorities using humanitarian rhetoric to target, detain, deport, and separate migrants travelling with their families not only in border regions but along the migratory routes in the interior of Mexico. These discourses and policies are contradictory because they are presented by governments as humanitarian, reasonable, and sensible for the situation they are addressing, but in fact they are discretionary, discriminatory, punitive, and violent.

Adam Goodman shows in the book that as critical scholars and human rights advocates in close collaboration with organizations in civil society we are not facing an invisible or invincible machine. In every chapter, but most clearly in the fourth one, Goodman brings aspects of the machine to life. We are invited into the human experience of migration and expulsion using oral histories that paint compelling pictures. We learn about the physical pain of seventeen-year-old Porfirio Flores Pruneda (89-90), who was shot in the back while trying to escape from a detention camp; and Estuacio Maldonado Martínez (99-100), who after disembarking the boat in Veracruz, walked from Mexico City to his place of origin in the state of Tamaulipas (over six hundred kilometers). We could feel the frustration of Gustavo Ramírez (114), who was deported about seventy times as he simply tried to reunite with his family in the United States. Goodman also shares stories from the media that illustrate the fear of deportation in the everyday lives of immigrant families, such as the case of Alicia (124), a thirty-two-year-old undocumented single mother with two children born in the United States who had lived in California for eight years. We can only imagine the trauma of being dragged by the hair out of one's home during a raid by immigration agents, as recounted by Fernando Artunez (130), a witness of his neighbor's experience. Similarly, we can empathize with the insecurity felt by Socorro Martínez in

his own home, expressing that “the worst part was the humiliation [...] because they step on all your rights and there’s nothing you can do about it” (131).

Goodman’s research makes us wonder about a system that requires undocumented immigrants like Alberto and Raquel Hernández (127-128) to always carry twenty dollars hidden in their clothes every time they leave their house for fear of an unexpected deportation. We might feel invited to lament a society in which some cannot worship as they choose, highlighted in the story of María Vela Morales and Álvaro Núñez Hernández (132-133), who stopped going to mass on Sundays also for fear of being deported. We can also cheer for Javier García Bautista and Rosa Melchor López as they fight alongside their allies and lawyers for social justice (see Chapter 5). Through these compelling stories, we come see that Mexican migrants are some of the most valiant and persistent people in a country being held hostage by its racist and xenophobic history. Despite active manhunts, exploitative and inhumane treatment, racism, xenophobia, and coercion, Mexican international migrants have taken a stand for their own human rights and that of all migrants. Powerfully, Goodman quotes Peter Camejo, who says “All we’re asking for is that Latinos and Chicanos be treated the same way the 40 million Anglos that came over here were treated” (143).

The *Deportation Machine*, undoubtedly, is a critical and timely book that makes multiple contributions to the field of migration and scholarly understanding the role of the state in the promotion of anti-immigrant policies. Goodman’s investigation provides new insights into the history of exclusionary laws, from Chinese exclusion to its modern-day implications for Mexicans, Latino/as and Muslims. The greatest contribution Goodman makes to our understanding of this complex challenge is his framework that clarifies the three main mechanisms of the deportation machine: formal deportation, “voluntary” deportation (always with quotation marks), and self-deportation. The third mechanism, in particular, is a call to action for scholars and social justice activists alike to document and investigate this phenomenon and its effects in the past, present, and future. The trauma, fear, and anxiety that results in the decision to self-deport has been a feature of society since its inception and this largely misunderstood form of deportation is a critical pathway toward a fuller understanding of deportation writ large.

Goodman’s work is of interest to scholars, teachers, and researchers in academia around the world, to those working on international migration or in civil society organizations and social movements, but also to the general public. Perhaps more importantly, the book will contextualize this phenomenon for government officials on both sides of the border, from the immigration authorities in the United States, such as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (Customs and Border Protection), both in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), to their Mexican counterparts, namely INM and COMAR (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados) in the Ministry of Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación), other agencies connected to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores) or the US State Department, and even more broadly to other migration agencies across the globe that emphasize national security over human rights. *The Deportation Machine: America’s long history of expelling immigrants* invites us to see international migrants as human beings, with rights despite papers or punitive laws, with families, with dreams and plans; with vices and virtues; hungry, thirsty, and with multiple forms of strength. With dignity.