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Deported Americans. Life After Deportation to Mexico

Beth C. Caldwell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019)

The United States has embarked upon a massive effort to deport non-citizens over the last decade. Under President Obama, the US increased its immigration enforcement efforts, targeting especially non-citizens with long-standing family and community ties in America. Some of these people do not have any legal status and are part of a population of approximately 11.3 million undocumented persons, while others legally reside on temporary permits such as green cards. In her book, Beth C. Caldwell focuses on Mexican nationals affected by this mass deportation campaign. She particularly sets out to trace the experiences of so-called criminal aliens – non-nationals convicted of a criminal felony and therefore subject to deportation. While excluding people with criminal convictions seems to be a good public policy, Caldwell notes that “the criminal alien label has been used to manipulate public support for detention practices that have consequences ... [that are] cruel and inhumane” (p. 6). The book aims to “push back against the narrative that frames the lives of ‘criminal aliens’ as less valuable” (p. 6). She does this by highlighting their deportation and post-deportation experiences and their struggles and resilience, as elaborated by themselves and their direct family members. Her provocative title *Deported Americans* points to the ongoing identification of deportees with America, and captures the inconsistencies between the legal definition of citizenship and people’s real-life experiences.

Caldwell documents the consequences of deportation through analysis of US immigration provisions and ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico. She used to work as a public defender in Los Angeles, where she first witnessed people facing removal as the result of an arrest or conviction, and she later experienced the deportation of her own Mexican family members. Caldwell follows deportees longitudinally, and relies on interviews with 112 deportees, fifteen spouses and twelve children throughout Mexico. She puts the narratives of a core group of six deportees at the center of her book, and documents how the lives of Gina, Edgar, Frank, Mike, Luis and Jose unfold in a truly unique manner.

Caldwell’s first chapter consists of a legal-historical analysis of deportation policies. Providing a balanced account of statistics, case law, and narratives, she shows how

deportation law has been shaped by demonizing and excluding racialized others in the US. Two persistent myths about Mexican immigrants, as invaders and criminal aliens, have effectively resulted in a legal framework that under-protects their rights. Immigration courts are distinguished by the lack of appointed counsel, no entitlement to appear in court to contest deportation orders, and a lack of judicial discretion for immigration judges. Although her focus on the influence of racism on immigration enforcement is important and necessary (see Catherine Lee's *Fictive Kinship* for a similar effort to document racial logics in US family admission policies), it would have benefited from a more intersectional understanding of race. For example, Caldwell mentions that most of her deported interviewees are men and most spouses are female, but does not analyze how racism intersects with gendered notions of threat and danger.

In chapters two and three, Caldwell documents deportees' experiences after arriving in Mexico, and their subsequent life trajectories in the months and years after deportation. She highlights that most deportees undergo culture shock upon arrival in Mexico, that most of them lack family ties there, and that they encounter barriers to social integration and experience stigma. Studying the politics of deportability in the European context myself, this chapter raised questions about the pre-arrival phase of deportation. Caldwell for example mentions how "those who are responsible for deportation seem to purposefully make the process more painful" (p. 50). I wonder how this relates to the wider literature on deportation, which highlights the importance of humanitarianism in exclusionary immigration enforcement (see, for instance, a recent essay by Balak Kalir in PoLAR). In a similar fashion, the role of the Mexican government in relocating deportees to their regions of origin could be further deepened in the light of the politics of what Aristide Zolberg called remote or externalized border control.

Chapter three narrates the consequences of deportation: severe mental health problems, difficulty rebuilding lives in Mexico and, for some, continued efforts to return to the US, risking detention, indefinite re-entry bans, and death. Caldwell holds that deportation cannot be equated with the US governments' intention of a permanent and irrevocable return to Mexico, as "even the most socially integrated deportees [...] report persistent struggles with the desire to go back to the United States" (p. 68). On the other hand, she highlights how people overcome some of the obstacles deportation creates, which shows their resilience in building successful lives in Mexico.

Chapter four shifts focus to the experiences of deportees' spouses and the consequences for their relationships. In this, she follows scholars such as Johanna Dreby, Cecilia Menjívar and Deborah Boehm, documenting the impact of deportation beyond individual deportees alone. The main aim of this chapter is to show how US citizen spouses can, simply because of their relation to deportees, lose many privileges attached to their citizenship. Chapter five similarly explores how the deportation of a parent affects American children. It documents deeply troubling consequences for children's wellbeing, parent-child relations, and educational opportunities. Both chapters reveal inconsistencies in the law and highlight the under-protection of family unity for mixed-status families.

In conclusion, Caldwell presents some solutions to the excessive harms she has shown deportation causes. She offers realistic juridical and legislative changes, especially highlighting two recommendations: 1) deportation should have the same juridical status as denaturalization of citizens; and 2) courts need to reconsider prior decisions that deportation does not compromise the right to marriage and the right to family unity. By centering her analysis on deportees' testimonies, Caldwell very convincingly shows how citizenship legislation and deportation policy paint a legal fiction that does not correspond with the lived experiences of Americans affected by immigration policy. Although her conclusion ends on a pessimistic note, I appreciate her efforts to try to reform legislation within the current political climate. Scholars looking for innovative theory-building in deportation studies may not be satisfied after reading this book, as it clearly sets out to accomplish another goal: giving voice to marginalized Americans and directing attention to the flaws in the immigration enforcement system. Caldwell's elegant writing helps her achieve this goal, and a wide range of scholars across disciplines studying the implementation of deportation policies and lived experiences of non-citizens will enjoy reading this book.