

CHAPTER 28 Border, Scene and Obscene

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The social degradation and even fanatical castigation of deportable noncitizens (and undocumented migrant labor, in particular) require as a crucial condition of possibility the perpetuation of discursive formations that repetitively and persistently incite us to believe in the reality or truth of migrant “illegality.” All discussions of the sociopolitical condition of migrant “illegality,” even those that purport to be critical of it, are inevitably implicated in this larger discourse and the reproduction of its vexed premises. It is for this reason that this essay insists that the terms associated with the dubious distinction between migrant “legality” and “illegality” be signaled with quotation marks, as persistently and repetitively as the discursive formation itself renders these with the semblance of ready-made “facts.” 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 iconicity. They may be understood to be an integral part of the larger sociopolitical production of migrant “illegality.” These languages and discourses of “illegality” supply both the rationale for, and also the incessant and truly insatiable response to, what I have previously depicted as the Border Spectacle (De Genova 2002; 2005: 242–249). The Border Spectacle is a spectacle of *enforcement* at “the” border, whereby the specter of migrant “illegality” is rendered spectacularly visible. The material practices of immigration enforcement, then, must be understood to be enmeshed in a dense weave of discourse and image, and furthermore generate a constant redundancy of still more of these discourses and images. Through this same operation, the law, which has in fact produced the “illegality” of the migrants in question, is utterly naturalized and vanishes from view. In place of the social and political relation of migrant labor to the state, therefore, the spectacle of border enforcement yields up the thing-like fetish of migrant “illegality” as a self-evident and *sui generis* “fact,” generated by its own supposed act of violation. An ever-increasingly militarized spectacle of apprehensions, detentions, and deportations lends migrant “illegality” the commonsensical air of a “natural” fact, to accom-

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pany the banality of a continuous *importation* of undocumented migrant labor. Thus, the Border Spectacle relentlessly augments and embellishes the mundane and diminutive human mobility of migrants with the mystique of an obnoxious and unpardonable transgression of the presumably sacrosanct boundary of the state's space.

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 migrant labor). 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.

This formulation of border enforcement as spectacle derives crucial theoretical and analytical force from the 1967 work of Guy Debord, regarding what he deemed to be the society of the spectacle (Debord 1995). Significantly elaborating upon and extending Marx's immanent critique of the fetishism of the commodity under capitalism (Marx 1976: 163–177), Debord identified 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*” (1995: 12, emphasis in original). For Debord, the ascendancy of the society of the spectacle ensured that “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation” and tends to reduce all social life from its already estranged and atomized condition to the sheer passivity of utter spectatorship. Debord, following Marx, emphatically privileged the *visual* dimension of such spectacular representation (1995: 12), elaborating further: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” Nonetheless, Debord's theses were also abundantly concerned with the *language* of mass-mediated discourse. The spectacle is “the self-portrait of power” (1995: 19), quintessentially characterized by an incessant monological tyranny and garrulous redundancy, “a sort of eternity of non-importance that speaks loudly” (Debord 2005: Thesis VI; cf. 1995: 17, 19). With recourse to both image and discourse, the spectacle achieves “a concrete inversion of life,” “a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force” (Debord 1995: 12, 13). It manifests itself as a specious totality, a unified self-representation of the world of estrangement, prevailing over that world (1995: 22). For Debord, the spectacle perfects the alienating isolation and separation of human energies and endeavors through a debilitating onslaught of images and abstractions to be passively contemplated, and works to induce “a generalized autism” (1995: 18, 22–23, 153).

The spectacles of migrant “illegality” thus rely significantly upon a constellation of images and discursive formations, which may be taken to supply the *scene* of “exclusion.” And yet, the more noise and heat generated from this sort of anti-immigrant controversy, the more that the veritable *inclusion* of those incessantly targeted for exclusion proceeds apace. Their “inclusion,” of course, is finally devoted to the subordination of their labor, 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, “integration” as compulsory “assimilation,” labor *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 more or less permanent recruitment of “illegal” migrants as undocumented labor. This we may comprehend to be the *obscene* of inclusion.

My notion of the coupling of the scene and obscene of borders is inspired by Slavoj Žižek’s more general elaboration of this conceptual scheme. As Žižek contends, “Power is always-already its own transgression, if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement” (1997: 34). In order for power “to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it” (1997: 34). In this regard, he insists upon “the ideological and political significance of *maintaining appearances*” for power discourses “whose efficiency depends on the mechanism of self-censorship” (1997: 33, emphasis in original). 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 scene of exclusion and the obscene of inclusion therefore are inextricably and dialectically linked. 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: 166), so the thing-like (reified) reality of migrant “illegality” – as a social, political, and juridical fact – pervasively and perniciously assists in the *object*-ification of undocumented or “irregular” migrant workers. However, these mass-mediated operations of discursive separation – producing people as “illegal” in utter isolation from and with total 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.” It is here that the critical procedure that seeks to identify the *spectacles* of migrant “illegality,” and to elucidate their fundamental dynamics, provides a vital analytical tool for the sort of scholarship that may itself avoid finally becoming merely one more contribution to the larger discursive formation which fetishizes “illegality” as a “natural” fact.

SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE AND THE SPECTACULAR STATE

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 United States and Mexico (to which my own original formulation of this concept explicitly referred), 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 European Union (see Andrijasevic 2010; Karakayali and Rigo 2010). It is instructive to note, however, that there is nothing about the Border Spectacle that requires its choreography of images to be so literally affiliated to the *geography* of border enforcement. 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 with visas that later may be overstayed or violated. Passport controls in the United Kingdom’s international airports, for instance, make this point rather flamboyantly, announcing repeatedly in imposing lettering that one is indeed positioned at the United Kingdom’s Border in spite of one’s physical location deep within the geography of the country’s interior. The same is true of the international high-speed rail transit stations where passengers, located physically in France or Belgium, are informed of their paradoxical presence at the UK border and subjected to the authority of British immigration officials. 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.

Indeed, it is possible to go further and say that borders are truly *activated* through such practices of enforcement and thus are animated in the first place by the mobility of the travelers and would-be migrants themselves (Karakayali and Rigo 2010). Therefore, a mundane inspection of documents, accompanied always by the interlocking threats of detection, interception, and detention, 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 surreptitious, 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 (Rumford 2006).

To the extent that the entirety of the interior of the space of the state becomes an unmitigated regulatory zone of immigration enforcement, and as borders appear to be increasingly ungrounded and internalized, the efficacy of the Border Spectacle in fact is merely intensified. Borders that seem increasingly diffuse are not thereby diluted but rather reconfigured in ever more condensed and potent forms. 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.

In *The Society of the Spectacle* of 1967, Debord insistently clarifies that the spectacle is more than a mere apparatus comprised of the “mass media” as means of communication, and contends that these are “only its most stultifying superficial manifestation” (Debord 1995). Nonetheless, Debord argues (again, following Marx 1976: 165) that “the social requirements of the age . . . can be met only through their

mediation,” and that “the administration of society . . . now depends on the intervention of such ‘instant’ communication.” In this respect, we may infer from Debord that *state power* itself has come to rely, both intensively and extensively, on the propagation of mass-mediated public discourse. This is fundamentally so because all such instantaneously circulated mass mediation is “essentially *one-way*” (Debord 1995: 19, emphasis in original). Yet, if it is “a visible negation of life” – indeed, a negation that “manifests itself as an enormous positivity” which “*has invented a visual form for itself*” – the spectacle is effectively the culmination of a capitalist social formation predicated upon estrangement and separation, and remains “a product of real activity” (1995: 14, 15, emphasis in original). Thus, “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” (1995: 18, 20, emphasis in original).

In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in 1988, Debord retrospectively provides a concise summation of the society of the spectacle, as he had originally depicted it in 1967: “the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government that accompanied this reign” (Debord 2005: Thesis II). In this subsequent reformulation, Debord further elaborates “five principal features: incessant technological renewal; fusion of State and economy; generalized secrecy; forgeries without reply; a perpetual present” (2005: Thesis V). In order to theorize adequately 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. As Marx demonstrates, with regard to the commodity, “What on the side of the worker appeared in the form of unrest now appears, on the side of the product, in the form of being, as a fixed, immobile characteristic” (1976: 287). Likewise, state power institutes itself as “an imaginary sovereignty . . . infused with an unreal universality” (Marx 1978: 34), and may appear as “power” in general (or in any case, as the final and decisive power) only by gathering together and objectifying the innumerable and diverse potentialities of living labor’s restless subjectivity (cf. Bonefeld 1995; Holloway 1995). The multiplicity of specific forms of concrete laboring activities only achieve a semblance of universality – as “abstract labor” – through their generalized commodification and the materialization of their value-form as money (Marx 1978: 125–163). Likewise, the state acquires its own illusory universality only as a similarly alienated and fetishized reification of precisely the real universality of the abstraction of human labor (once it has been subsumed within the effectively global regime of capital accumulation).

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 her capacity to work, her *labor-power*) (Marx 1976: 270–280). In this defining feature

of capitalist social relations – “the juridical relation, whose form is the contract,” itself a “legal fiction” – all coercion appears to be absent (Marx 1976: 178, 719). Overtly *political* relations of domination and subordination in the labor process itself are ordinarily secured as “the silent compulsion of economic relations,” and “direct extra-economic force” is reserved only for “exceptional cases” (Marx 1976: 899). A separate and specialized state power arises as an effect of precisely this separation and abstraction of “the political” from “the economic,” ultimately allowing for an effectively *global* market to be fractured systemically into a political order of *territorially delimited* (“national”) states (Holloway 1994, following Pashukanis’s *Law and Marxism* of 1929 (Pashukanis 1989)). In this regard, the state is an instrumental feature of capital, and in usurping for itself the elemental and generative (productive) power of living labor, it manifests precisely the “political” dimension of the capital-labor relation itself. Whereas the sheer vitality of human life manifests itself diminutively as an infinite plenitude of particular instances of labor-power in the marketplace, it acquires a rarefied yet spurious unity – as “Power,” seemingly pure and simple – only when it is gathered and reified in the state (De Genova 2010). 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 routinized 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 (Agamben 2005). In this regard, borders operate as filtering mechanisms for the unequal exchange of value (Kearney 2004) – filters that 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 noncitizens likewise proceed only differentially, but they almost universally impose terms that 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 of unforgiving surveillance and subordination. Hence, beyond the purview of the Border Spectacle’s scene of exclusion, the inclusion of migrant labor is profoundly normalized. Even if the spectacle of enforcement is a persistent and pernicious reminder of the extraordinary vulnerabilities that suffuse the migrant predicament, workplace immigration raids and deportations remain in fact “exceptional.” The machinations of state power and the compulsions of the law are rendered effectively invisible by the spectacle’s fetishization of “illegality” as individual transgression. Even under the relatively extraordinary circumstances of undocumented migrant workers’ “illegal” status, therefore, the more coercive (and plainly political) dimensions of their particular condition as *migrant* labor generally achieves the commonsensical banality of a merely “economic” “fact of life.”

Indeed, what predominates in the everyday life experience of undocumented migrants is precisely the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx 1976: 899). Once within the “interior” of the space of the nation-state (however obscene their inclusion), undocumented (or previously documented and subsequently illegalized) migrants are presumed (like all other workers) to deliver their “unauthorized” labor to market – freely, voluntarily, and with no evident coercion. But 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.” For those who can elude detection and evade apprehension and deportation – and especially for those who can withstand the severities of an “illegal” border crossing – 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 labor-power.

THE BORDER SPECTACLE, THE NATIONAL FRONT(S) AND RACIAL ABJECTION

The brazenness of the spectacle relies upon unrelenting mass mediation, publicity, and exuberant display to manifest itself as a specious unity, “an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute” (Debord 1995: 15). Yet, as in Marx’s classic account of the thing-like reification of relations between people, the spectacle remains inevitably accompanied by the *invisibility* – again, hidden in plain sight – of the real social relations of (alienated, exploited, and subjugated) life. The exclusionary brashness of the Border Spectacle, similarly, 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” labor.

The persistent humiliation, compulsive denunciation, and exquisitely refined rightlessness of deportable noncitizens (and “illegal” migrant labor, in particular) supplies both the rationale for, and also the constant and truly insatiable response to, the Border Spectacle. The spectacle of border enforcement conjures up the fetish of transgression at the ever multiplying points of interception in an amorphous border zone where migrant trajectories may be interrupted and produced as occasions for apprehension – literally and figuratively – which is to say, as arrest and deportation, but also as fear and loathing. Thus, 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 crime-fighting – indeed, the scene of exclusion. Yet, migrants’ trajectories – and human mobility, generally – prevail in spite of the accumulated pressures and violences of borders traversed en route or more expansive border zones inhabited indefinitely (and this is so for the great majority of migrants). Indeed, what is *normal* is the movement itself, the mobility of migrants, as well as the concomitant routine illegalization of them, but this requires the spectacle of law enforcement that transmutes every migration into a putative violation and transposes the border zone (which finally encompasses the full extent of the space of the state) as an ostensible crime scene. Hence, the seeming paradox that the greatest theaters for the staging of border enforcement and immigration law enforcement are in fact the real sites of a massive inclusion of migrants. Their illegalization supplants and displaces their putative exclusion with their obscene inclusion.

In place of the palpable social and political relation of migrant labor to the state (a relation that is precisely obscene), border enforcement delivers the public and

spectacular verification of the migrants' ostensible "illegality," a fetish which appears to be a self-generating, self-evident and thing-like fact. Indeed, if there were no border patrols or inspections, no border policing or passport controls whatsoever, there would still be migrant "illegality." We can only be made to believe in that "illegality," however, and to take it seriously, once it appears as a thing-in-itself, reified, fetishized, as the deliberate acts of a spectacular mass of sundry violators of the law, rather than what it truly is: *a transnational social relation of labor and capital*, an antagonistic relation of conflict in the process of being fixed as a relation of subordination. Indeed, the phantasm of exclusion is essential to that process of subordination, which is always inherently a matter of inclusion and incorporation. Nevertheless, the task of labor subordination is always and inescapably preconditioned by the sheer *subjectivity* of labor. Labor subordination, in Žižek's (1997) terms, is grounded precisely by the inherent excess that is the creative capacity and productive power of labor. The requirement for subordination is occasioned in the first instance precisely by human labor's distinctly subjective vitality (Marx 1976: 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 control and the spectacle of border zones depicted as deplorably "out of control."

Even as the state produces migrant "illegality" as an obdurate and seemingly incorrigible "problem," however, these enforcement spectacles nonetheless reaffirm repeatedly, if obscenely, that there is indeed a subordinate reserve army of deportable "foreign" labor, always-already *within* the space of the nation-state, readily available for deployment as the inevitably overemployed 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 phantasmagorical 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 as our self-anointed savior and redeemer. Moreover, 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) 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 (Andrijašević 2003, 2007; Aradau 2004, 2008; Chapkis 2003; Sharma 2003; cf. Nyers 2003). Given the sleight of hand by which the gendered discourse of "trafficking" displaces the onus of "exploitation" on 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 this flesh trade likewise 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 subtly to reveal or expose its own ostensible "dirty secret." Thus, it enhances the efficiency of its own most elementary gesture whereby migrants are figured as menace, hereby complementing that spectral threat of their opportunistic agency with an allegation of their

irredeemable incapacity or incompetence for veritable (manly) self-determination. The exploitation of “illegal” migrants is itself now refigured as merely the certification of what is alleged, if only by implication, to be their inherent and odious exploitability, their subjugation merely an index of their essential slavishness.

In light of this transposition of the politics of citizenship into an essentialist politics of difference, every question of migration and migrant deportability and their securitization more or less immediately presents the concomitant question of their *racialization*. There is no way to comprehend adequately contemporary formations of transnational migration (and hence, also deportable labor) apart from their relation to an effectively global regime of capital accumulation, which is itself inseparable from the histories of nineteenth-century European and Euro-American colonialism, and the twentieth-century eclipse of that colonial world order with the ascendancy of an ostensibly anticolonial US imperial formation. One of the key features which these apparently disparate configurations of protracted planetary inequalities of wealth and power share, all the same, is the persistence of a global sociopolitical order of white supremacy. Thus, the protracted political crisis of subordinating migrant labor only exacerbates further – indeed, reconfigures anew – the already dire postcolonial vexations of race, national identity, and citizenship throughout “the global North,” and increasingly, well beyond. In this regard, it is crucial to consider Balibar’s proposition that the management and policing of borders serves a “*world-configuring* function” (2002: 79, emphasis in original; cf. Hindess 2000; Walters 2002), as “instruments of discrimination and triage,” globally differentiating individuals for capital in class terms as those who alternately circulate “upwards” or “downwards,” while simultaneously establishing and maintaining “a world *apartheid*,” which institutes a “color bar” that no longer now merely separates “center” from “periphery,” or North from South, but runs through *all* societies (Balibar 2002: 82; emphases in original).¹ 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 disarticulate “race” and “immigration,” through a politics of *nativism* – the promotion of the priority of “natives,” on no other grounds than their *being* such (De Genova 2005: 56–94).²

The generic figures of “immigration” and the diffuse politics of “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 increasingly tend to articulate their reactionary anti-immigrant populism in the idiom of the purportedly legitimate politics of *citizenship*, which promotes the national priority of “natives” under the overt rubric not of racial supremacy 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 in Germany along with the German *People’s* Union, and similarly, the Swiss *People’s* Party, the Danish *People’s* Party, the *Popular* Party in Portugal, among others.³ In Belgium, the *Flemish* Interest (or Bloc), which combines fierce hostility to migrants and Jews with advocacy for Flemish self-rule, predictably makes its subordinated national identity explicit.⁴ In the United States, the Minuteman Project deploys the parallel strat-

egy of adopting an identity that signals a historical analogy inseparable from its US patriotism. Although some of these nativist movements may officially disavow their racism against migrants, however, 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. In this respect, they are merely the howling dogs prowling along the margins of the Border Spectacle’s scene of exclusion. Indeed, they are an integral part of that scenery. But their frenzied barking and rabid growling simply enhance the efficiency of the obscene inclusion of migrants as “illegal” – and racially branded – labor.

CITIZENSHIP, SCENE AND OBSCENE

In an important sense, “foreign” (and commonly, also racially subordinate) deportable labor nonetheless 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. No. 10, December 1965, in Knabb 1981: 157). In contrast to this sort of threat of permanent marginalization and the subordinate status enforced through protracted un- and underemployment, however, the spectacular prod of the figure of the “illegal alien” is that of a predicament of unrelenting and unforgiving overemployment, superexploitation. What the two have in common, of course, is excessive misery. What they further have in common is the stigmata of racialized *difference*, reassuring the racial “majority” (or, alternately, the racially heterogeneous but still unequal polity of proper “citizens”) that their own misery is not so bad after all, while also simultaneously unsettling the presumed certitude that such excesses of suffering could ever be reserved only for someone else, the “others,” a population condemned – be it as an effect of their “natural” (racial) inheritance, their “alien” (juridical) status, or both – to an inferior social station. 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 obscene fabric of citizenship itself.

Deportable (migrant) labor, therefore, conceals within it – and yet, simultaneously *reveals* and proclaims – the universal disposability of *all* labor. And inasmuch as, under capitalism, labor is but the most commonplace and ubiquitous objectified, alienated, and fetishized form of *life* itself (in its active practical expression as open-ended creative capacity and productive power), so must the “irregular” and *deportable* labor of global capitalism’s multifarious transnational migrant denizens signal the ultimate disposability of human life in general, on a planetary scale (De Genova 2010). The deportability of migrant denizens re-invokes the always-already established fact of an at-least potential relegation of the world’s “citizens” to their properly abject condition as “bare life” (Agamben 1998), and thus their abandonment to one or another status as de facto refugees, whether stateless (i.e., at the mercy of local formations of

coercive violence as well as the global administrative regime of “the world community”) or state-*ful* (i.e., exposed to and utterly unprotected from the recriminations of state power).

If, for Marx, the commodity assumes the appearance of “an *alien* power” to those who have produced it (1965: 115; emphasis added), then, for Debord, in the thoroughly commodified universe of the society of the spectacle, “all time, all space, becomes *foreign* to them” (1995: 23, emphasis in original). Indeed, “the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (Debord 1995: 29). The Border Spectacle’s specter of an invasive “foreignness” thus enhances and intensifies the degree to which all labor and all of life is rendered “alien” and estranged, whereby the citizenry experiences its own condition of colonization. In a devious and pernicious inversion, however, the figure of “the alien” is mobilized as an alarming signal of alienation and supplies the proxy for reactionary populist paroxysms of exclusionary animosity (directed against the always-already included). Reflecting upon slavery in the United States, Marx famously asserted that “labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (1976: 414). Today, given our global postcolonial condition, it has become increasingly common that labor “in a black skin” presents itself also as labor in “foreign” clothing. Hence, a contemporary corollary to Marx’s axiom would seem to be: labor in the prison inmate’s uniform of citizenship can never emancipate itself where labor in the migrant’s garb of “foreignness” is branded as “illegal.”

NOTES

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- 1 For related invocations of global “apartheid,” see Nevins 2008; Richmond 1994; Sharma 2006.
- 2 In this manner, the promotion of the priorities of “natives” may even masquerade as an avowedly “antiracist” politics of redress for “native” (racial) “minorities” – a nativism, so to speak, “from the left”; for an extended elaboration, see De Genova (2005: 68–79; cf. Balibar 1991: 15).
- 3 The most prominent exceptions to this trend are the Progress Party in Norway, the Freedom Party in Austria, the Republican Party in Germany, and in the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn’s List and the Party for Freedom.
- 4 Similarly, the separatist Northern League in Italy promotes a subnational politics of regional identity in concert with a broadly xenophobic agenda.

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