

“Self-Deportation as Neoliberal Cautionary Tale”¹

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In January 2012, Mitt Romney explained his position on immigration at a Republican primary debate in Florida, stating he favored policies of *self-deportation*, “which is when people decide they can do better by going home ... because they don't have legal documentation to allow them to work here.”² When Romney made this statement, people in the audience laughed. How can a person conduct upon himself an act of forcible removal? But for anyone who has followed the recent spread of restrictionist immigration policies across US states, “self-deportation” is familiar shorthand for an approach to immigration control called “attrition through enforcement.” This approach promotes policies, such as Arizona’s HB1070, which attempt to make living conditions so unbearable for unauthorized immigrants they choose to leave. Policies of self-deportation, though shocking, are not radical innovations. Rather, they are entirely consistent with the neoliberalization of immigration policy, which began in the 1980s. Neoliberalism is a philosophy of political and economic life, which posits that “human well-being can best be achieved by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by individual liberty, free markets, and free trade.”³ Thus, neoliberal policies assert the primacy of individual freedom and personal responsibility as the hallmark of a functioning society. The brainchild of economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, who were inspired by 19th century liberalism, neoliberalism has spread across the globe through policy reforms affecting a wide range of social processes, including migration. In this column, I unpack the neoliberal logic that informs attrition through enforcement through a discussion of the rhetorical appeal and effects of the term “self-deportation” and the arguments made for its associated policies.

This term has been popularized by Republican strategist Kris Kobach, who has helped author several attrition-through-enforcement policies, HB1070 among them. He has also advised the Romney campaign and contributed to the GOP platform on immigration, which backs a policy of self-deportation.⁴ The use of term “self-deportation,” instead of “attrition through enforcement,” exemplifies a rhetorical tactic often employed by political strategists: re-baptize policies with pithy names that make appeal to “commonsense.” Think of the “death tax.” The commonsense appeal of “self-deportation” rests in the way this term, and the defense of its associated policies, harmonize with the neoliberal valuation of individual liberty, discussed above. Specifically, champions of attrition through enforcement argue it is more humane than mass deportations because it gives people the freedom to choose deportation on their own terms. The problem with deportation, then, is not the processes of migrant criminalization discussed in various ways by Rosa, Cotter, and Paz, in this month’s *Anthropology News Language and Culture Blog*, but rather too much government intervention in the removal process. The

commonsense appeal of such arguments is fortified by the US national imaginary, which pictures US strength as rooted in independence and self-reliance. Stephen Colbert indexed this imaginary in a spoof of self-deportation, animated by his alter-alter ego Esteban Colberto, who claimed self-deportation empowers him “to know I can throw myself out by my own bootstraps.”⁵

As arguments for self-deportation rely on the already naturalized and nationalist assumptions about individual liberty, any dispute of self-deportation is, consequently, rhetorically positioned as not only irrational, but un-American. At the same time, these arguments help recast the complex processes involved in deportation as matters of personal choice and, thus, personal responsibility. Such recastings are part of the logic of neoliberalism, one rhetorical effect of which is to position actors who do not comply with policy as morally suspect. In this case, any unauthorized migrant who does not choose to self-deport as constructed as making a conscious choice to willfully defy US immigration law—a positioning that furthers the on-going criminalization of unauthorized migrants.

One particularly disturbing effect of the success of such arguments is that they produce warrants for massive expansions in state policing—in this way, neoliberal policies are less about the reduction of government intervention and more about the channeling of that intervention into the policing of “unwanted” populations.⁶ Most self-deportation policies require state officials to act as enforcers of immigration law, turning encounters between immigrants and officials of the state (police, bureaucrats, teachers) into immigration checkpoints.⁷ This increases not only the quantity of events of policing; it pushes such events into new realms of social life (driving, renting a home, etc.).⁸ HB1070, for example, requires police to check the immigration status of anyone they have “reasonable suspicion” to believe is an unauthorized immigrant. Yet, it does not define what criteria should be used to determine such suspicion. This creates a space in which existing connotations between the category “illegal alien” and certain migrants, especially those from Latin America, can lead to the discriminatory enforcement of these laws.⁹

The expansions in policing legitimated by self-deportation policies place enormous strains on state and municipal budgets; these strains open the door to the privatization of enforcement. This possibility is consistent with another key facet of the logic of neoliberalism, which is that government policies should create the conditions of possibility for the emergence of new markets. Consider mass incarceration. Largely as a result of the US “war on drugs,” there are so many people imprisoned in the US—more than in any other country in the world—that states cannot afford the costs of incarceration. As a result, an increasing number of states are outsourcing incarceration to for-profit companies to cut costs.¹⁰ If policies that require state officials to enforce immigration law stay in place without a concomitant expansion of state budgets conditions will be produced for private companies to play a role in immigration enforcement. For-profit prison companies have already begun taking over the building and management of immigration detention centers.¹¹ The privatization of government services then creates incentives for corporations to shape future policy in order to protect their profit sources.

The term “self-deportation” has its origins in a critique of such perverse excesses. In the fall of 1994, as residents of California debated Proposition 187, an important precursor to self-deportation policies, a mock political action group called Hispanics Against Liberal Takeover, run by a Dr. Daniel D. Portado, produced a satirical political radio advertisement. This advertisement championed Proposition 187 by explaining the benefits of something called “self-deportation.” Daniel D. Portado is the alter ego of comedian Lalo Alcaraz.¹² The appellation “D. Portado” is a play-on-words invoking the Spanish word “deportado” (“deported”). Alcaraz and his co-writer Estaban Zul coined the term “self-deportation” to critique the cruel absurdity of

Proposition 187. However, after their advertisement ran, then California governor Pete Wilson took up the term in earnest. In an interview with columnist William Safire in November 1994, Wilson defended Proposition 187, making a claim Romney echoed years later, “If it is clear to you that you cannot be employed ... you will self-deport.”¹³

In March 2012, TV host Rachel Maddow unpacked this discursive history to make the point that “this idea of self-deportation is a joke.” But self-deportation has already become a mainstream policy approach, in part, because of the ways it logically extends the on-going neoliberalization of immigration policy. This process relies on appeals to commonsense, of which the earnest uptake of “self-deportation” is part. This uptake produces an inverted voicing that transforms a once incisive critique of attrition through enforcement into a serious appeal for it. So, the joke is not on Romney, as Maddow would have it, but on anyone who does not take self-deportation seriously.

ENDNOTES

¹ Many thanks to Colleen Cotter, Leila Monaghan, Alejandro Paz, and Jonathan Rosa for the stimulating dialogue that expanded my insights. Thanks also to my research assistants Allison Martinez-Davis, Emily Brown, and Robin Young for their work on this piece.

² http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-01-24/news/30657385_1_mitt-romney-illegal-immigrants-deportation; viewed 9/17/12.

³ Harvey D. 2006. Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*. 88(2):145.

⁴ <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/244635-gop-platform-calls-for-more-arizona-style-immigration-laws>; viewed 9/17/12.

⁵ <http://www.alternet.org/hot-news-views/stephen-colbert-hammers-mitt-latino-outreach-and-self-deportation>; downloaded 9/26/12.

⁶ Wacquant L. 2010. “Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare, and Social Insecurity.” *Sociological Forum* 25(2): 197-220.

⁷ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/456/reap-what-you-sow?act=1#play>; downloaded 9/20/12.

⁸ De Genova NP. 2002. Migrant “illegality” and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:419–47.

⁹ Dick HP. 2011. Making immigrants illegal in small town USA. Special issue. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 21(S1):34–54.

¹⁰ Thompson HA. 2010. Why Mass Incarceration Matters. *Journal of American History* 97(3): 703-734.

¹¹ Wilder R. 2007. Detention Archipelago: Jailing Immigrants for Profit. *NACLA Report on the Americas* May/June: 19-24.

¹² <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/the-deep-comic-roots-of-self-deportation/>; viewed 9/17/12.

¹³ *ibid.*