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Matthias Hoesch & Lena Laube (eds.)



Derek Denman

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The Microphysics of Deportation**

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Comment on William Walters: The Microphysics of Deportation

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Abstract

This paper comments on a talk given by William Walters at the 2018 ZiF Workshop “Studying Migration Policies at the Interface Between Empirical Research and Normative Analysis”, September 2018, in Bielefeld. Walters’ paper is available under doi: 10.17879/95189425134.

Keywords

Deportation; Michel Foucault; empiricism; deportation resistance

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I was thrilled when Lena Laube and Matthias Hoesch asked me to comment on William Walters’s work. I have long admired his creative mode of inquiry that is engaged with and informed by, but never constrained by, Foucault’s political thought. This is a fascinating and tremendously rich paper continuing this mode of inquiry. It seeks to correct the sense one gets from much of migration studies that border crossings are material, yet deportations are not, and in doing so, it gives us a sense of the texture of power at its most elemental.

The first part of my comments will focus on how the paper speaks to questions that structured the workshop, that is, the relation between the field of the empirical and the normative. I suggest that the paper, through its focus on the microphysics of

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deportation, proposed by Walters and building on the work of Foucault, implicitly approaches these questions in a novel, productive way. This part of my comment is intended more as a framing that I hope can contribute to discussion. I will follow that with a few questions about what the paper means for migration studies and the ways it can inform the politics of deportation resistance.

Empiricism

I want to suggest that what we find in this paper is a kind of empiricism from a different philosophical tradition than what has implicitly framed many of the conversations thus far. A microphysics of deportation does not posit a notion of “theory” that is subsequently to be checked against a reified “reality,” and then seek to bridge the chasm between these seemingly incommensurable domains. Rather, microphysics might be described by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, influenced by Hume, Spinoza, and James, as a kind of *radical empiricism*.² Rather than separate “theory” and “reality,” radical empiricism attends to the specificities of *sensations* and *stimuli* fundamental to the phenomena of experience. It builds concepts from this sense-experience, albeit sometimes provisionally and experimentally. These concepts are not without ethical commitments, that is, if we understand ethics to mean our way of being in a complex, turbulent world that often resists systematization. *Data here is sense-data*, that is, the specific ways that bodies of detainees are handcuffed, moved through the plane, and strapped to seats—what Walters calls the political anatomy of deportation. Sense data further includes the gestures, postures, training, and interactions of the escorts. Finally, it entails the way that space and time are organized at their most granular level, as departure, arrival, and reserve. It is an account of the workings of power smaller than the scale of the subject. It registers the sensations of discomfort, fatigue, distress, confusion, and fearfulness, which Walters characterizes eloquently as “seizing but also calming, hurting but also soothing” (164). Notions of sovereignty, the State, and exclusion are replaced by a focus on techniques, logistics, and infrastructures. That is not to say that the prior terms are irrelevant; rather, it is to suggest that sovereign power and exclusion are subtended by a whole material apparatus that must be accounted for to understand these macro-political domains.

This kind of empiricism is not only an accounting of sensation but also an inquiry into the documents that define the body of the deported as an object of

² See Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

government. The reading of these reports offered by Walters is significant in a few ways that I want to highlight.

First, reports capture informality. We see the events and relations that possibly are not supposed to exist—subject to regulation and/or prohibition—yet prove constitutive to the very process of deportation. The reports offer a glimpse not only into the letter of written law, but the ways in which administrative procedures are maintained through consistent informal interactions and even, potentially, small legal transgressions. A question to Walters here: What did you find in terms of informal practices? Did you come across particular informal routines that were not prescribed, nor located in other official documents, but repeatedly appeared in inspections? Of particular interest would be repeated acts of misconduct by guards and escorts that were officially prohibited but under a microphysical approach inseparable from the air deportation process.

Second, the reports cannot be taken at face value. Their anodyne language of so-called “restraint” conceals force and containment working at an intimate level. Furthermore, they have absences that need to be investigated as well. Specifically, the absence of structural racism, and indeed, the fundamental incapability of the reports to address it. Instead of seeing racism inhabiting the entire deportation proceeding, the reports reduce it to an interpersonal interaction corrected through revised training and recruiting practices.

Normativity and Ethics

Faced with reports that do not fully disclose the condition they describe, Walters gives us a sense of what to do when our data set may be haunted by ideology, hegemony, or governmentality. He suggests reading reports in the “particular register” recommended by Marx in *Capital* for reviewing the reports of factory inspectors (168). By doing so, we would see the concept of a “forced removal” in a different light, as what Walters, in an earlier version of his paper, calls “the materialization of struggles over the right to remove and the right to remain”.

This brings me to my next question. For Marx, the working day gave us a glimpse into the relation between collective labor, a protagonist of sorts for Marx, and collective capital, its opponent. We can look at the ways in which the day has been subdivided into work, rest, and leisure to see not only the specific relations of any particular worker to their boss but also the condition of labor in its entirety. For Walters, the “right to remain” is placed in this position. My question here is if Walters has given us a new protagonist in the pursuit of migration justice, that being the “right

to remain.” This is not a single subject or individual, just as collective labor is irreducible to any particular laborer. Instead, the “right to remain” would be something like the aggregate of all the power relations driving against the possibility of deportation. A related question might be how do we “scale up” from the microphysics provided? How do we decipher the conditions of power at macro-scales?

Finally, I have a question about the role of pilots in deportation resistance. The paper closes with the spectacular example of the “Stansted 15” attaching themselves, as a human anchor, to a deportation flight. The other moment in recent memory when deportation flights became visible was through reporting in December 2017 on German pilots who refused to carry out deportations to Afghanistan. This was first characterized as an organized act of resistance to the German deportation regime, but follow-up reporting clarified that there was no evidence that this number was any higher than the normal level of refusals by pilots to transport passengers who appear agitated and might lose control during the flight.³ While not the act of civil disobedience it was first reported to be, the story did reveal the fragility of air deportations and, what Walters calls in the paper, the cabin as “a delicate environment that calls for active management” (174). Determinations regarding this delicate environment are made by pilots. While the story of a large-scale political action turned out to not be accurate, it did reveal that the pilot is a critical node in the infrastructure of deportation. So the question is: Is this a possible site of resistance to air deportation or was this a false hope?

³ Jörg Luyken, “No, German Pilots aren't Defying Their Government by Refusing to Deport Asylum Seekers,” *The Local*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.de/20171207/no-german-pilots-arent-defying-their-government-by-refusing-to-deport-asylum-seekers>.