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Revisiting US Electoral Impacts on Migrants after "The Great Moving Right Show"

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In "Borders that Bend," César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández delivers an eye-witness testimonial account of the growing encroachments of border policing on mobile lives.[1] The Ohio State law professor flew from Mexico City to Denver on the eve of the US presidential election in fall 2024. He was diverted at the Customs and Border Protection Checkpoint (CBP) and sent to a secondary screening area for a paperwork renewal, where he spotted a border officer interrogating a young girl of no more than six years old. "'Have you ever been arrested,' the officer asked the little girl. The little girl did not move." Her face was frozen in fear. The officer repeated the question, demanding a reply. "Answer his question," her father said. "The little girl turned back toward the desk, lifted her head up at the face sticking out above the glass partition and said as if in response to a defensible question, 'No.'" Satisfied with her answer, and that her father had deferred to the absurd power imbalance, the officer handed back their US passports across the desk, and the family of American citizens were free to return back to their homeland together. "They had navigated legal limbo," confirms García Hernández.[2]

Such testimonials exemplify that borders are not simply made but also remade as the law of the border continues to bend and extend its reach. Moreover, the rules of jurisprudence take a different shape in this exceptional space with almost no juridical oversight. At the twenty first–century border, naturalized and native-born citizens are now subject to interrogations about their legal backgrounds and to possible arrests without legal representation and even before they are old enough to possess a criminal record or enter kindergarten. Legal power operates differently in

the borderlands, particularly with respect to the presumption of innocence. But if border exceptionalism lacks judicial oversight, then which presidential administration should be held accountable? After all, the law of the border is particularly susceptible to political changes. According to such a view, we also cannot rule out the possibility that the increase in border security rhetoric expressed on the 2024 campaign trail was justification enough for CBP officers to implement new levels of policing and scrutiny of migrants at border checkpoints even before Americans cast their ballots in the voting booths. Kristi Noem, now Secretary of Homeland Security, capped off her campaign stunts targeting migrants by wearing a camouflage ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) bulletproof vest on an empty New York City sidewalk at dawn. "We are getting these dirtbags off the streets," Noem remarked in her publicity video. More recently, *The Guardian* has reported that ICE has actively engaged in its own public relations campaigns to create "a mirage of mass deportations. [...] Ice press releases have reached the first page of Google search results."[3] But what exactly is the relationship between representation and immigration, and how might researchers on migration face a new set of challenges to track the enforcement of mobile lives as the political terrain continues to shift beneath our feet and move to the Right?

On the matter of representation, US border historians can look across the Atlantic and learn from Stuart Hall's observations about incendiary election talking points. An immigrant himself, born in Jamaica, Hall reflected that ever since arriving in Britian, "I experience my life as sharply divided into two equal but entangled, disproportionate halves."[4] His memoir *Familiar Stranger* chronicles how his racial positioning changed when he made the journey from one island in the British Empire to another:

> I arrived in England bearing my navy-blue British passport, the document which proved definitively that, although not properly a citizen, I was a "subject" of—and subject to— the British Empire and the Crown. ... It was only later, when migration to Britain increased, that "black" became politicized. That was when, for Caribbean people, our sense of belonging to the extended British family was brought sharply into question.[5]

This shift in the treatment of Jamaican migrants—first categorized under the minority diminutive of colonial subjects, later marked as outsiders by skin color—forms a pattern of double exclusion produced in "the closing days of the old colonial world."[6] Accordingly, when Hall talks about the foreign enemy from within he is not interested in inciting further hatred against the most vulnerable, nor invested in reiterating stigmatizing labels, but more fundamentally he seeks to locate and expose the historical conjunctures that make possible certain representations of migrants to appear in public discourse.

In his 1979 British election postmortem "The Great Moving Right Show," Hall rethinks how the radical right came to wield the power of representation during Margaret Thatcher's rise to power as British prime minister. "No one seriously concerned with political strategies in the current situation can now afford to ignore the 'swing to the Right.'"[7] This catchphrase had been bandied about by British journalists and activists, but what did it really mean and how must cultural theorists properly account for such a seismic shift? "We may not yet understand its extent and limits, its specific character, its causes and effects," Hall admits. "But the tendency is hard to deny. It no longer looks like a temporary swing in the political fortunes, a short-term shift in the balance of forces."[8] One of the most devastating aspects of this political shift concerns how the loss of available progressive futures was accompanied by a loss of memory. A kind of historical amnesia swept across England. Political journalists writing copy for the daily newspapers failed to set the record straight. Worsening financial pressures make the national press increasingly prone to live in the moment with "short political memories. They forget how frequently in recent history a sharpening of the contradictions has led to 'settlements' and solutions which favoured capital and the Right, rather than the reverse."[9]

Perspective is quickly lost as the entire political spectrum lurches to the Right—a sentiment shared by my professors, who many decades later would lean on their lecterns at the front of the classroom and lament the dismantling of political possibilities and social programs in the wake of the twin colds of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Only now can I begin to fathom what these changes meant. I sense mostly powerlessness as the global order teeters almost certainly on the verge of another generational change. On the border front, the challenge is to document this historic transformation and ward off the total amnesia that will otherwise accompany the next "Great Moving Right Show." We must gain enough historical perspective to demonstrate both the representational terms and limits of a right-wing worldview that sees the country, as millions do, as under attack, with migrants posing an existential threat to the very fabric of the nation.

Like President Trump, who rallied support using the narrative of migrant criminality as a distraction from resolving the inflation crisis and housing crisis, Margaret Thatcher recognized the political advantages of stigmatizing immigrants during Britian's economic crisis. Daniel Trilling's 2013 article "Thatcher: The PM Who Brought Racism in from the Cold" reminds us that although "the Conservatives had taken a hard line on immigration since she became leader in 1975," it was Thatcher's comments about immigrants "swamping" England that "reintroduced a racist discourse to mainstream politics that had been confined to the far-right fringe for a decade."[10] Public support for Thatcher subsequently surged in the polls. Yet for Hall the analysis must expand beyond simply verifying that this strategy worked; we must also apprehend the contradiction that made it possible. "Representation here has to be understood as an active and formative relationship," Hall explains. It organizes the class, constituting it as a political force."[11] Everything depends on the representational

strategies used to evacuate the centrist territory to constitute and target political scapegoats that reorganize patterns of attention. Thatcher performed this magic trick on several fronts, targeting immigrants of color from the "swamps," and she also conjured up the "image of the welfare 'scavenger', a well designed folk-devil" fashioned as a vulnerable target to attack.[12] Divisive rhetoric split apart the working class, dividing and conquering workers, pitting them against each other, rather than allowing them to congeal as unit. Because of these "magical connections and short-circuits," the radical right, Hall argues, was similarly "able to establish between the themes of race and immigration control and the images of the nation, the British people, and the destruction of 'our culture, our way of life.'"[13]

We find similar targets on the US campaign trail. Yet what is significant about Trump's inflammatory remarks, like his hysterical suggestion that Haitian migrants had violated a national taboo by eating cats and dogs, is not simply that this representation was patently false, but more fundamentally that this rhetorical trick operated on the basis of what Hall describes as "genuine contradictions" within the social order. Society's most vulnerable are constituted as a danger in right-wing discourse because that vulnerably threatens to expose the high stakes at play in the struggle for representation. What Hall is saying is that this rhetorical trick must be understood to have a dialectical structure. The representation itself is patently false, but the economic conditions that precipitate it operate "on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies. It wins space there by constantly drawing on these elements," reorganizing their public appearance, and in doing so "it changes the field of struggle by changing the place, the position, the relative weight of the condensations."[14] Trump did not wish to address the ways in which immigration policies and ICE raids have threatened the very existence of immigrants in public, causing genuine economic and social hardships, so instead his far-right rhetoric draws together these forces under the mythical narrative of migrant criminality—something alien to be rooted out and deported in order to occupy and take back command of the social order. Perhaps, then, it's not so much that the terrain on which we once stood no longer exists, but instead that we need to reclaim the representational practices necessary to gain back ground at these sites of historical conjuncture. Hall reminds us "[t]his is exactly the terrain on which the forces of opposition must organize, if we are to transform it."[15]

Notes

1 César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, "Borders that Bend," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 23, no. 5, (2023 [2024]): 115–45.

2 García Hernández, "Borders that Bend," 138.

[3] Dara Kerr, "US Immigration is Creating a Mirage of Mass Deportations on Google Search," *The Guardian*, Feb. 4, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/06/ice-us-immigration-deportations-google

[4] Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today*, January 1979: 11.

[5] Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Duke University Press, 2017), 14.

[6] Hall, *Familiar Stranger* 10.

[7] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 14.

[8] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 14.

[9] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 14.

[10] Daniel Trilling, "Thatcher: The PM Who Brought Racism in from the Cold," *Verso Blog*, April 10, 2013, https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/1282-thatcher-the-pm-who-brought-racism-in-from-the-cold

[11] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 16.

[12] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 17.

[13] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 19–20.

[14] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 20.

[15] Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 20.

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