



Where are the Women?

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Reviews of books often reveal more about the reviewer than about the book. We bring to books, especially meaty new monographs in our own fields, the hope that we might find either some insight into the questions that preoccupy us or an elaboration of our own analyses. When our expectations are met, we write a glowing review, and when they are not, we range from the charitable to the disparaging. That said, my comments on *Operation Gatekeeper* by Joseph Nevins may be less about the book than about its usefulness to me. What I liked about the book is that it helped me think about the relationship between paradoxical social situations and the emergence of social categories, but its usefulness was sorely limited by the inattention paid to service work and the experiences of immigrant women.

I will begin with the part of the book that I found useful: the analysis of paradoxes and social categories. In the book, Nevins provides a contextual analysis of the emergence and significance of the category "illegal alien" and the consolidation of the US–Mexico border through Operation Gatekeeper. I found his understanding of the paradoxical nature of the context, and the links between this context and the emergence of the meaning-laden category "illegal alien", to be particularly interesting and useful. While he is certainly not the first to make an argument about paradoxes, I was able to see his point with great clarity, perhaps because of the careful attention he paid to the empirical context. Often when I read about paradoxes they seem like abstractions; here they emerged as material realities.

Nevins discusses at least two paradoxes present in the border between Mexico and the United States, and shows how both of them contribute to the hardening of categories and boundaries. The first relevant paradox is the coexistence of profound difference and increasing sameness and interconnectedness of Mexico and the US. Nevins explains, "The establishment and construction of the international boundary and its associated practices facilitated increasing sameness (in the sense of sharing and interacting) between Mexico and the United States while simultaneously heightening the sense of difference between the

‘Americans’ and the ‘Mexicans’ on the other side” (p 39). The paradox of sameness and difference exacerbates the importance of the boundary itself and legitimates state practices, such as Operation Gatekeeper, that enforce this boundary.

A second relevant paradox, this one internal to the United States, is between anti-immigrant nativism and the country’s history as a nation of immigrants. In the past, the paradox was resolved by emphasizing race as a marker of inclusion and exclusion. Nevins argues that although race continues to be important, the growing numbers of non-white citizens have eroded some of its legitimacy in resolving this particular paradox. In this context, legality has emerged as the new legitimate marker dividing insider and outsider, a marker that reinforces the power of the state.

Added to these two paradoxes is the changing relationship between an increasingly global economy and states. Whether Nevins sees this relationship as paradoxical, dialectical or merely tense is unclear and maybe not important. What is clear is that the relationship between the state and the economy has specific implications for international borders, which must be porous enough to allow for the free flow of goods and capital, and, if needed, workers, yet still be rigid enough to allow different states to govern on either side of the line. In his focus on crime and the drug trade, Nevins shows how state rhetoric of protecting citizens is mobilized to define the border despite its permeability to capital. The portrayal of Mexican immigrants as bandits, drug-runners and gang-bangers has been crucial to legitimizing Operation Gatekeeper. Thus the criminalization of all immigrants and the corresponding militarization of the border region, and the use of legal citizenship to mark the boundary between insiders and outsiders is, Nevins argues, the product of the state’s response to underlying paradoxes. That the authority of the state is itself vulnerable, in transition, and threatened by economic globalization only intensifies the resolve of the state within this zone of ambiguity.

I am distilling a very complicated argument here with the intent of illustrating Nevins’ interesting point that paradoxical contexts contribute to the formation of social and physical boundaries. It is a point that I am grateful for; since reading this I find myself looking at situations and tracing the link between paradoxes and ideological categories.

Nevertheless, I think that this analysis, useful as it is, is incomplete. It focuses on the state’s (masculine) role as the protector of its citizens from (male) invaders and ignores its (feminine) role as the provider of services (to women and children). In my opinion, the analysis of the construction of the “illegal alien” and the paradoxical context which has given rise to it can be strengthened by including the tensions surrounding access to social services, tensions felt most strongly by undocumented immigrant women.

Throughout the book, Nevins analyzes legality in terms of criminality; those in the country illegally are in violation of the law and therefore more strongly associated with criminality in general. This argument is interesting and useful, especially in discussing the lives of immigrant men, since men are most viewed and treated as criminals. Still, the analysis neglects a second important distinction between citizens and “illegal” immigrants: access to state services. Operation Gatekeeper was initiated in October 1994, one month before California voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition 187, which sought to deny many public services, including education, to undocumented immigrants. Nevins does discuss Proposition 187, particularly in terms of its political relationship to Operation Gatekeeper, but is unable to analyze its significance, perhaps because he does not consider the lives of immigrant women and the changes in the political economy of caring work.

Proposition 187 was officially about the rights of non-citizens to state support for social reproduction. Access to service became politicized at that time for a number of reasons: more women were immigrating and raising their children in the US so the demand for services was greater than it had been previously, the state was reducing its overall commitment to social support, and there was a growing market for low-wage personal service workers. In *Disposable Domestic*, Grace Chang makes a compelling argument that Proposition 187, together with changes in the welfare system, reduced the number of immigrants receiving aid and had the effect of increasing the ability of the United States to “capture the labor of immigrant men and women separate from their human needs or those of their dependents” (2000:11). Seeing this aspect of recent anti-immigration legislation requires a gendered analysis in two areas. First, the kind of labor “captured” from men and women is different; immigrant women are often employed providing caring labor (childcare, elder care, house-keeping) for citizen families. This means immigrant women must live very near their employers, often working in their homes. Second, separating the labor of women, especially mothers, from caring for their dependents, takes a different form than does the separation of men from their dependents. The costs of childcare mean that all working mothers, even immigrants, have an economic incentive not to work for extremely low wages. Social services, especially welfare, make it possible for poor women to avoid paid work and be with their children, in effect increasing women’s reserve wage.

Illegality, then, marks the border between those who can have some support from the state with social reproduction and those who must rely completely on their own resources. It also marks a boundary between those who have the option to turn to government anti-poverty programs and those who must rely on earnings, however meager. Creating a

category of “illegal aliens” ineligible for social services also creates a group of super-exploitable women workers, just in time to be hired to fill needs created by a restructuring state.

In sum, I think that Joseph Nevins has written a smart analysis of the paradoxes that have given rise to the US build-up of its southern border and the creation of the category of “illegal alien”. And while he mentions gender, immigrant women, and Proposition 187, it is the experience and representation of male immigrants that are at the heart of his analyses. It is an unfortunate oversight and in my opinion a significant one, since the conditions of immigrant women and the market for their labor is a central part of the formation of categories in the borderlands.

Reference

Chang G (2000) *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press