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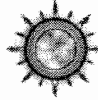

Crimes of the Continental Op: On Reading Joe Nevins' *Operation Gatekeeper*

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Joseph Nevins has written an excellent book in *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the Illegal Alien and the Making of the US–Mexico Boundary.*[1] In form and content, it is very much the kind of book I like: theoretically informed, richly detailed and multifaceted, and historical as well as geographic. It also demonstrates the geographer's craft of moving between scales (local, national, global) to illuminate processes, and the geographer's attention to territory, boundaries, and place in social process and ideological formation. In style, Nevins is admirably concise and clearheaded, if not flashy. He is no Mike Davis (who provides a glowing Forward), since he lacks the same rapier touch with metaphor, hyperbole, and unexpected conjunctures, and neither is this *Magical Urbanism*, a more journalistic account of life and politics along the borderlands. But Nevins has cooked up a thick, creamy offering of ideas and analysis with a long scholarly aftertaste.

What Nevins has done in this volume is to use the US government's program of the 1990s, Operation Gatekeeper, as an entry into a wider inquiry into the formation of the US–Mexico border, racial–national encounters across that boundary, and the confirmation of the territorial state through its powers of definition and repression. Chapters 2 and 3 are witness to the long process of border construction, with the latter refining the view by looking closely at the San Diego–Tijuana area. Chapters 4 and 5 bring on Gatekeeper as the bastard political child of US immigration policy and deeply sedimented white racism, with particular emphasis on the symbolic and legal branding of the Mexican migrant as an "illegal alien". Chapter 6, the pivotal chapter, unmasks the deplorable effects of this mass criminalization and repression along the vast space of the 2000 mile border. Chapters 7 and 8 finish up by stepping back to consider the more abstract character of the modern state and its power to define people through nationalist appeals, and the significance of renewed territorial chauvinism—the Gatekeeper State.

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Given that Nevins has written such an admirable book with such a comprehensive sweep, and since we agree on so much, I have to snap to alert to remember that the function of the reviewer is to offer critical commentary. This ought to be offered, I believe, as suggestions as to what *might* have been not what *should* be, since every author must pare and choose. I want to engage him on three general areas of theoretical and geographical concern, suggesting where he might have refined and strengthened the argument—based on my own knowledge of American and California historical geography, the politics of race and class, and the economic geography of the contemporary international state system.

Carving Up a Continent

Operation Gatekeeper begins with a critical tour of the formation of the boundary between the United States and Mexico (there is, after all, nothing to gate if there's no line of demarcation). This is focused on the colossus of the north, the USA. "The boundary's evolution is inseparable from American nation-state building", says Nevins (p 15). It begins with continental conquest (and the partition of Mexico in 1846), then moves to pacification of the border (against Apaches and bandits), and finally to control of migration (the Border Patrol comes into being in 1924). Yet, at the same time, there was a suturing taking place along the line as complimentary economies and politics emerged, both locally and nationally—such as railway transects at Arizona or the co-development of Tijuana as the "sin suburb" of San Diego and Southern California. "Given the strength and profundity of the trans-boundary links within the border region, cooperation across the international divide has long been a hallmark of border life" (p 44). So there are conflicting tendencies at work: national separation and the artifice of dividing what is ineluctably interwoven.

For good reason, the United States gets the bulk of attention here, although Nevins shows that Mexico has been an active participant in the solidification of the border over its long life. Nonetheless, Mexican state-formation is not given enough consideration, in my view. Mexico has been a full partner in crime and provocateur in all this, often tragically so, however much we wish to condemn the Great Blond Beast. Additionally, the rather linear trajectory of boundary consolidation Nevins describes must be counterpoised against swings between greater international integration and cooperation and times of division and conflict between the two nation-states.[2]

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Mexico was one of the first modern states—created by the wave of revolts against Europe up and down the New World—and had ambitions and potential that were more comparable to the US than the decrepit Spanish empire. That is why the Mexican–American War was a touchstone of US national

development, more important than is usually acknowledged (Horsman 1981). Mexico's ability to consolidate its independence was, however, prolonged, and the northern regions slid away (California almost broke free in 1830 by internal revolt and Texas succeeded in 1836); so when Santa Ana came to power, and tried to recover Texas, he helped trigger the ill-fated war of 1844.

Conversely, the successful era of national state-building under the Porfiriato (1876–1910) enabled the Mexican government both to strengthen its hold on the north and to increase the degree of integration with the United States through investment and railroads. Dias thus laid the basis both for the revolution of 1910–1917 and for the revival of Mexican immigration into the Southwest. The Mexican revolution, in turn, scared the hell out of the American government and the Nativist reaction, and not just because of border transgressions. It was lurid with anti-gringo sentiment (including sympathy with Germany in the Great War), as well as unleashing a torrent of out-migration followed by a good deal of intervention by the Mexican government in the affairs of its expatriates in the north (Sanchez 1993). Moreover, the follow-up nationalizations under Cardenas in the 1930s drove home the anti-capitalist fevers brewing south of the border.

Then came another reversal as the PRI fastened its grip on the country. Mexico eagerly joined the huge *bracero* program of 1944–1964 and installed the National Border Program and Border Industrialization Program in 1961 and 1964, all of which laid the basis for mass migration northward thereafter. The two states together created the new borderlands, patterns of migration and repressive apparatus. On the other hand, Mexico's disinterest, until recently, in the political integration of its émigrés played into the hands of the American reactionaries who eventually got Operation Gatekeeper to build up the wall between two conjoined peoples. This has therefore been an eerie dance between two closely linked nation-states, both with rulers who would trample people across the border beneath their boots.

Racing Against Class: The Politics of Alien-Nation

Operation Gatekeeper next turns to the recent era of immigration closure, following legislative twists and turns through the 1970s and 1980s to the attempted border lockdown triggered by California's Proposition 187 in 1994 (though he sorely neglects the 1965 Immigration Act that helped trigger the whole twisted tale). Nevins follows this with an interrogation of racism and identity in the United States going back to the nineteenth century, arguing that the flotsam of recent legislation is propelled by deeper currents in the heart of the darkness behind white-skin privilege and nationalism. He finishes this

part of the book by showing how the force of the state creates the very geographic crime of transgression of national space that it is called upon to "solve".

Now all this is true enough, as far as it goes. But Nevins misses a bet when he doesn't follow through on his own intuition that anti-immigrant hysteria is a creature of the powerful, not just a spontaneous vomiting of popular racist bile. That is, what he rightly attributes to the state—the ability to define the Alien Other and criminalize her—he fails to attribute to opportunistic political leaders, to the political Right more broadly, or to the ruling class in general.

For example, Nevins has the correct instincts about the importance of the local—San Diego and California—in the politics of exclusion leading up to Operation Gatekeeper. But he doesn't take it far enough. Politicians like Governor Pete Wilson and Ed Davis, and San Francisco based Howard Ezell, head of the Western Regional Office of the INS, played their parts in this drama to perfection. Nevins sees these people as surfing worsening public sentiment rather than vigorously stimulating it. Wilson, who drove Proposition 187, made a strategic move to the xenophobic right in 1993 based on his catastrophic fall in the polls and desire to position himself for a future presidential race against Bill Clinton. The point was as much about deflecting the fiscal crisis of California government onto the Feds and the Democrats, as it was about the alien invasion. Wilson hailed from San Diego, a race-conscious military and retirement town which had replaced Orange county as the west coast center of reactionary politics, but had been elected as a Republican liberal in 1992. His lurch to the right changed public opinion on "illegal immigration" dramatically, sending tepid polls for immigration controls shooting up over the course of 1993 and 1994.

The recent wave of national chauvinism must also be tied to the mighty swing in American politics to the right over the last 25 years. Nowhere does Nevins drive this point home, although he is well aware of it. It colors everything one can say about racism, nationalism and politics in our time. And this broad political and ideological shift has been propelled by a well-organized and richly funded movement led by the likes of the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Republican National Committee. This is only the latest in a long history of shifting political sands in the United States (and California), and should not be read (as Nevins tends to do) as an inevitable result of Nativism. Indeed, the latter has come on strong in this nation of immigrants only in certain periods of national crisis and righting supremacy: the Know-Nothings of the 1840s (turning on economic and ante-bellum tensions), the Workingmen's Party and anti-Chinese movement of the 1870s (turning on economic crisis in California), immigration closure in 1917–1923 (turning on world war,

Japanese imperialism, the Bolshevik Revolution, and Mexican Revolution), and deportations of the 1930s (turning on the Great Depression and mass unemployment). By contrast, the vast immigration of 1880–1915 did *not* trigger violent reaction given the Progressive tenor of the times, and the postwar liberal Democrats were able to reopen immigration in 1965 (which has been largely tolerated by the electorate despite setbacks like Proposition 187 and 9/11/01).[3]

Finally, there is the importance of class. While it has been salutary for race scholars to confront the pervasiveness of White Supremacy, and its deep embodiment in the white working class, it nonetheless remains true that there is a "ruling class" and that they generally rule on this as on other issues across the land. Nevins is too cavalier in his assignment of racism and chauvinist reactions to general popular movements rather than to the actions and intentions of the bourgeoisie (aka "the elite"). Indeed, he claims at one point that "Rather than counterpoising tolerance or pro-immigrant sentiment with anti-immigrant sentiment, we should see the seemingly dichotomous ideologies as part and parcel of a complex culture as well as an outgrowth of competing interests—namely those of labor and capital. While labor has at times favored strong immigration restriction, capital has largely championed an open door" (p 97). This is quite wrongheaded, and puts the onus squarely on the working class.

In fact, the hand of the ruling class is everywhere along the border and around immigration. On the one hand, capitalists largely *created* the border zone and stimulated Mexican migration with their railroads, mining investments, agribusiness demand for cheap labor, racetracks, and maquiladora export-platforms, among other things. On the other hand, the upper classes have been leading players in every racist and nativist impulse in US history: for example, the African slavery of the Southern planters, Federalist Alien and Sedition Acts, the anti-Irish Vigilantes of early California, imperialist cant against the Japanese after 1905, the military internment of the Japanese in 1942, the Los Angeles *Times* role in deportations and the Zoot Suit riots, Nixon and Reagan's War on Drugs and War on Crime, and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). Key facts of Proposition 187, which triggered Operation Gatekeeper, are that the California electorate of 1994 was hideously skewed toward well-off, older white people and the political leadership of the Democratic Party caved into the hysteria for no good reason. Indeed, as we've seen over the last couple decades, the debate over immigration has been as much *within* the ruling circles as involving organized labor and working people. And the position of the AFL-CIO has changed since the Rodino bills of the 1980s, to immigrant rights and immigrant organizing.

In short, the agency which Nevins rightly ascribes to the *state* to shape borders, migration, and identity, he refuses to ascribe to the

ruling class in any significant degree. A very popular post-Marxist position, but wrong all the same (regardless of how much control over the state one attributes to the capitalist class).

The Many-Headed Hydra of the State System

The last part of *Operation Gatekeeper* is where Joe Nevins really shines. This is his home territory, as it were, for he is above all a political geographer, and in the last three chapters Nevins can home in on the state and its power to define, limit and crush a people. For him, the nation-state is all about hardening borders, creating difference, and the despotism of legalism and criminality. And, frankly, it's hard to disagree. Moreover, Nevins shows real panache in his delivery of the bad news, with great phrases like "illegality creates illegality" and "the boundaries of modern territorial states are burial sites of history" (p 154). He might well have called chapter 6, "Fear and Loathing in the Borderlands".

It makes perfect sense to tie the tightening noose around the "illegal alien" with the trend toward the criminalization of everything in the contemporary United States. If anything, Nevins could have gone farther. He misses a chance to tie this discussion more directly to the War on Crime and War on Drugs (discussed in an earlier chapter) and to show how the Clinton Administration's legislative catering service of the mid-1990s served up a largely Republican stew of free trade (NAFTA), welfare "reform", Gatekeeper, and draconian crime laws. All of this was, again, part of the political triumph of the Right in the late twentieth century. Law and Order, Low Wages and High Fences versus Rights and Liberties, Well-being and Migration.

It would have been even more delicious if Nevins had made the same kind of connection he makes to the rise of the nation-state and the long arch of White Supremacy to the deep history of criminalization of the kind argued by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (1991 2000). They argue for a general and profound bourgeois interest in criminalization over three centuries, as a result not just of the instrumentalities and borders of the modern state but of the exigencies of the capitalist labor market and class control. This is especially true of historical moments of rebellion and liberation which have to be repressed, whether in the follow up to the English and French Revolutions or in the *revanchism* triggered by the 1960s and 1970s.

In fact, we might also see the reactionary impulse of Proposition 187, Operation Gatekeeper and FAIR as the expected response of the powers that be to what many call the "reconquista de El Norte"—a mass movement so profound that it has reunited Mexico and the United States *despite* all efforts to hold up the dike. (Indeed, as Nevins observes elsewhere, *Operation Gatekeeper* has, in fact, been a total failure, if the measure is to protect the US from the alien invasion).[4]

This "revolution on foot" has been a material force creating all subsequent action and reaction over the last quarter century, and its effects are far from over. The state and the ruling class, for all their powers, are not everything, in the end.

Returning to matters of state at the end of the book, Nevins is wise to up the scale of argument to the international state system. He offers a tonic to glib notions of globalization that have the market wearing down national borders and defanging the state. But there's very little evidence for this in North America, where the US colossus stands astride its neighborhoods and the globe. And the reaffirmation of national (and continental, in the case of Europe) boundaries against the immigrant tide is a fixture of neo-liberal globe.

What so much contemporary commentary misses is that the modern world is not just one of global markets but of an international state system. Nevins could have brought this out more firmly than he does, but his focus is on the US and its internal dynamics. A crucial dimension of it is that *all* states are implicated in the creation of the international system, mutually complicit in drawing boundaries and policing them, and in supporting each other's existence (US policy has always been especially respectful of this principal, *pace* Woodrow Wilson in 1917 or the rescue of Kuwait in 1991). The US and Mexico ought to have been better situated in this larger geographic scale of statism and nationalism.

Furthermore, this is a system that has been spiraling upward and outward since the seventeenth century. Nevins provides a thumbnail sketch of the rise of the modern state in chapter 7, but it is remarkably tame given his critical view of present-day state powers. For one thing, the rise of the state is, surprisingly, told as a wholly European story, as if the Americas hadn't played a fundamental, dialectical role in the expanding international system by breaking away in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (cf Anderson 1983). That is, frontiers count in history, and not just those between states but those of the expanding capitalist world system—in which the Americas were first and foremost. I should add that after the lively treatment of US expansion in chapter 2 or border repression in chapter 6, the succeeding story of the rise of the modern state is told with relatively little struggle or blood. Nevins seems to get sidelined by Modernization theory (p 155), when he ought to have been elbow-deep in the politics and passions of the American Civil War or the Mexican overthrow of Maximillian.

But Nevins recovers nicely in his concluding chapter, with jabs at the Gatekeeper State, Global Apartheid, and the pointless death of Jose Luis Uriostegua, a victim of exposure thanks to the longer border fences built by Operation Gatekeeper. In the end, he has put together a wise, forceful and elegant book that ought to be required reading in all courses on North America, political geography and globalization.

Endnotes

[1] Routledge 2002. The Continental Op is, of course, Dashiell Hammett's first modern detective anti-hero, on which all *noire* views of the dark side of civic life are based. Joe Nevins is our own geographic free-range investigator, taking us behind the crimes of the modern state, national chauvinism and the toll wracked up by border enforcement.

[2] See also below, my comments on swings in racialism.

[3] Indeed, the US is still more open to immigration and the mixing of peoples than Europe, despite its more conservative overall political cast. It would also have been good to tie together the gothic arch of White Supremacy than runs from Europe to the Americas over several centuries of expansionism and genocide.

[4] Indeed, it is much more of a regulator of labor conditions than an absolute barrier, as Nevins notes.

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