

“Borderlines: The Edges of US Capitalism, Immigration and Democracy” by

Daniel Melo. Book Review.

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In *Borderlines*, Daniel Melo exposes the unjust, inhumane and downright absurd position of immigrants in the United States, and offers an explanation for it. The arguments are not entirely novel, but here they are elaborated, substantiated and brought together. **At the same time, the book is a little short considering the breadth of its topic. Many arguments and facts cited as evidence could be elaborated further, and though citations are provided for factual claims, the reader is sometimes left to take it on faith that the claim is explained better in the source.**

Melo’s central thesis is that US immigration policy is primarily motivated by the need to use vulnerable immigrants as a source of low-cost labour—and that this follows inevitably from the logic of capitalism. Thus, in order to change the situation, capitalism itself must be confronted.

Borderlines examines the situation through three lenses: historical, contemporary and theoretical. The book contains several distressing stories of how individuals have been inhumanely treated by the US immigration system.

Historical Context

In Melo's recapitulation of Karl Marx, the logic of capitalism leads to a situation in which the capitalists' endless quest to reduce costs comes into direct conflict with the fact that the workers whose incomes they are perpetually reducing are also the consumers to whom they need to sell their products in order to generate profits. This is where the cheap labour of immigrants comes in. In the early years of US history, it was indentured labourers who were treated as commodities to be sold. They were later replaced by Africans imported as slaves. Now it is migrants who serve this economic function, denied human value even as their work maintains the economy.

Racism and xenophobia have clearly played a role in generating anti-immigrant sentiment, but that is not the end of the matter. From the beginning, a tension has existed between the need for cheap labour and xenophobic sentiments that would lock immigrants out. Historically, immigration policy has used racial divisions opportunistically, or else ignored them. But xenophobia and the exploitation of cheap immigrant labour entered into an unholy communion with a bill introduced by white supremacist Senator Coleman Blease in 1929, which made unlawful entry a misdemeanour and entering the country after having been deported a felony. This enabled migrants to be targeted and blamed while still being used as workforce—with the additional convenience to their employers of being able to hold incarceration over their heads. It also made immigration into a moral issue, making it easy to frame immigrants who broke these rules as criminals, thus lending a supposed justification to their ill-treatment while maintaining the

polite illusion that everyone was being treated fairly under the law.

Meanwhile, the reality was that immigrants made for a perfect source of freely exploitable labour, since they lacked rights, were easily replaceable and were unable to organise.

According to Melo, the very idea of the nation-state was conceived as an answer to capitalists' need for economic unification. Even the framers of the American Constitution, according to political scientist Michael Parenti, were influenced by the need to establish property rights to protect their class interests against the majority.

US imperialism, whether in the form of military or economic intervention, has also helped to create the conditions for the exploitation of immigrants by rendering the countries of Latin America poor and unstable. Melo does not claim that this is by design, or even call it a result of the logic of capitalism as such; rather, he frames it as an accident in which one aspect of capitalism (imperialism) happens to support another (exploitation of cheap labour).

The idea of the nation-state generated a need to distinguish citizens from non-citizens, and define rights according to citizenship—in clear contradiction of the Enlightenment principle of universal human rights. Indeed, citizenship itself can be defined in terms of the legal rights it confers. If, as some have argued, non-citizens have no constitutional rights, then the constitution in question is clearly not based on universal rights. This contradiction is particularly evident on the US southern border, where Border Patrol, Melo

claims, can do almost anything to immigrants, up to and including killing them with no questions asked. Border Patrol has killed [97 people](#) since 2003 with almost no prosecutions.

Immigration Today

Once immigrants have entered the country, their position continues to be precarious. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the war on terror and the PATRIOT Act paved the way for immigrants to be treated as suspicious outsiders and potential terrorists. Today, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—an agency created after 9/11—increasingly uses its power to suppress dissenting migrant voices. Melo argues: “If terrorism, at its core, is ‘the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political change,’ ICE commits an act of terror daily.”

Melo is critical of the use of enforcement to combat terrorism. A public display of harsh treatment of immigrants by the state—while the growing threat of white nationalists goes largely ignored—is not making anyone safer, he claims. Efforts to combat terrorism may even serve to create it, or at least an illusion of it: “[O]f the hundreds of people charged with terrorism-related cases since 2001, researchers discovered that *all but four* of the high-profile domestic terrorism plots leading up to 2014 ‘were actually FBI sting operations—plots conducted with the direct involvement of law enforcement informants of agents, *including plots that were proposed or led by*

informants.' (emphasis mine [Melo's])." Melo argues terrorism will only be effectively prevented through an understanding that inequality is its main engine.

The criminalisation of migrants also feeds the prison-industrial complex—a system that is ridiculously inefficient for any purpose other than transferring taxpayer money to the rich through the private prison system, Melo argues. He writes: "It costs \$30,000 per year to incarcerate someone, an amount that, ironically, the US could pay to an individual to stay in their birthplace and sit on her hands for an entire year and she would be exponentially above the global poverty line."

Melo notes repeatedly that the dehumanisation of immigrants and non-citizens and the denial of their rights also undermines the rights of citizens: the prison-industrial complex feeds on citizens as well as non-citizens, while racist police violence, like violence towards immigrants, has gone largely unchecked, he writes. Surveillance technologies and techniques employed against immigrants can be repurposed to target citizens, gathering data on them even without a specific "probable cause." The gig economy reproduces the same kind of insecure status suffered by immigrants. Meanwhile, citizens who have tried to offer the most basic humanitarian help—leaving out water to prevent immigrants from dying in the heat, for example—have been charged, absurd as it may seem, with crimes such as "human trafficking," as in the case of Scott Warren, a member of the humanitarian group No More Deaths. (**Warren was subsequently found [not guilty](#).**)

Part of the false image created around immigration, designed to make the system seem just, is the idea that prospective immigrants need only “get in line” in order to be admitted legally. Therefore, the argument runs, entering the country illegally is a choice they make simply because they don’t want to wait their turn. In reality, the legal paths to immigration are very exclusionary and arbitrary. For example, **while** a US citizen may petition for their Mexican sibling to gain a visa to the US, the waiting time for such a visa is currently [over twenty years](#).

Melo also argues that ideology has played a major role in determining who is granted asylum, ever since the days when it was granted routinely to those fleeing Communist countries but arbitrarily denied to others whose need was just as urgent.

Ideology also enters the picture through the role played by immigration judges. In the San Francisco area, Melo claims, the odds of denial varied from 9.4% to 97.1%, depending on which judge heard a case. (A [report](#) from 2017 confirms these numbers over the last six years as of then.) Melo argues, however, that this does not imply the system could be fixed simply by recruiting better judges, since the rule of law has been eroded so severely: the fact that these judges have such broad discretion is part of the problem. Due process should take the form of the constraint of state power by democratic forces; but “under the present material conditions of capitalism” it is merely a matter of following procedure in order to lend a veneer of legitimacy to the

status quo while justifying economic inequality to the masses.

This system, argues Melo, maintains the illusion that the system itself is just, while it is the immigrants who are abusing it—choosing to commit criminal acts because of their poor moral character, while stealing work from the natives. In reality, it is the system that is unjust: immigrants maintain the economy while enduring the humiliations of a system rigged against them. In addition, it is a misconception that undocumented immigrants are burdening the social security system: in fact, as Melo points out, they are not entitled to any social security benefits, but nonetheless pay through their taxes for the benefits of others.

Possible Solutions

According to Melo, since all of these problems are corollaries of capitalism, they cannot be rectified through an effort to make the current system work better, or simply to treat people more humanely. While some improvements can be made within the system, real change will demand something more.

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme provides a pointed example of how trying to tinker with the system is insufficient, and may even backfire. While it offered some relief to immigrants when it was active, when the direction of policy changed under the Trump administration it became a liability to those who had provided much of their personal information to an agency that was suddenly willing to hand it over to ICE to

be used against them.

Melo also argues against the ameliorative potential of protectionism. Its costs alone would be enormous: the estimated \$500–600 billion it would cost to remove most undocumented workers would pale before the dramatic loss in GDP and tax revenues that would inevitably follow. Secondly, protectionism would do nothing to improve the status of native workers, since it would fail to address the problems that result from the oppressive nature of the capitalistic system itself.

Despite his emphasis on the inevitable role of this system in creating the conditions that lead to the exploitation of workers, and thereby of migrants, and on the futility of reforms designed to make it more humane, Melo emphasises that the system has been constructed by humans and can be changed by them. But any meaningful change must take place on the level of the system as a whole: the very idea of nation-states as they now function, and of citizenship as the basis of rights, must be reimagined in a more humane and democratic direction.

As a concrete consequence of this project, Melo defends the idea of open borders. Given that, according to his book, the current exclusionary immigration system seems to be predicated on unrealistic and cruel ideological assumptions, and that its only rational purpose is the exploitation of workers, this does not seem unreasonable. Of course, any radical change may have unforeseen consequences. Melo concedes that problems will emerge, but,

oddly, insists that they will be solvable. But, despite the many unknown unknowns, rebuilding the system on a rational and humane basis seems preferable to continuing to prop up a corrupt status quo.

Borderlines makes a detailed case for Melo's view of the US immigration system. Many of its claims are, of course, arguable. Nonetheless, it makes a case that deserves a much broader public hearing. The dehumanising conception of immigrants as a contaminating, socially corrosive force has recently gained far too much ground: its sinister history has little to do with morality or the real world.