

The Political Economy of Migrant Labor Why the Border Can Never Be “Secured”

By Frank Bardacke

Call it the Political Stupidity Index (PSI). It is the difference between the words the politicians say and the way we actually live. It recently hit near record highs, causing a general to faint as he gave sworn testimony about the prospects of the current imperial war, and prompting a national shudder as pictures of doomed gulls soaked in oil sat alongside articles in which the president assured us that some day soon the Gulf Coast would be better than ever. But the PSI topped out this summer in what passes for public debate on immigration reform, where the words at the top have nothing to do with life at the bottom.

The June spat between Arizona Senator Jon Kyl and President Obama centered on the question of whether our border with Mexico should be secured before something called “comprehensive immigration reform” takes place or border security and reform have to be achieved simultaneously. None of the words mean much. The border cannot be secured. Obama’s steep increase in the number of federal agents who patrol the southwest corner of the country has only served to drive up the price of coming across, both the money people pay and the dangers they encounter.

Here in Watsonville, California, a predominantly Mexican farm town nearly 500 miles from the border, the price of coming to the U.S.A. is common knowledge: \$3,000 to be driven past a corrupt border patrol agent at an official port of entry, or \$1,500 to be guided on a three-day walk through the Arizona desert. Special deals are also bandied about. You can get a ride from a small town in Michoacán to Watsonville, eating well and staying in safe houses along the way, for \$7,000; for a bargain price of a thousand bucks, you can take a dangerous eight-day walk farther east of the regular desert routes. That detour is required by the presence of drug cartels that seem determined, people in Watsonville complain, to drive out the independent coyotes, both the honest guides and the cheap chiselers, and to make border

crossing a big, corporate business.

The forms of payment vary. Usually the money is due when people arrive in Watsonville. Sometimes part of the money is paid in advance, the rest due on completion of the journey. A lucky few get to pay by the month after they get here, although interest rates are sometimes high. On at least one Watsonville strawberry farm, people can work off their debt with payments taken out of their checks, along with social security and other deductions.

It is all regular, ordinary, and well

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known, and that’s what drives up the Stupidity Index. Despite what may be said in the public debate, people know that there is no way to stop Mexicans coming to the U.S.A., as long as Mexico remains poor and the U.S.A. relatively rich.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform is another fraud, especially when it is offered by liberals as a way of limiting illegal immigration. Consider the two main proposals: “a path to legalization” and “a guest worker program.” Providing undocumented workers with a procedure through which they can fix their papers would make life easier for millions of people, but it would also put more pressure on the unsecurable border, as poor people in Mexico would figure that if they could only get here, eventually they would be legalized. This is not a theoretical supposition. It is exactly what

happened after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, where legalization prompted increased migration.

The guest worker program – a bad idea all the way around – also would increase the number of undocumented people in the U.S. Again, there is a historical precedent. During the Bracero Program, the last major use of guest workers, thousands of braceros ran away from their camps and escaped into the general population. Called “skips” by the Border Patrol, by the early 1960s they constituted a significant problem, and, along with the introduction of the cotton-picking machine in Texas, the increasing number of bracero strikes in California, and liberal pressure on Congress, the “skips” were responsible for the Bracero Program’s demise.

With the Mexican population of the U.S. much larger and more widespread now than it was in the early 1960s, skipping out of a new guest worker program would become a popular enterprise. The only plan being offered to prevent it is complete computerization of the legal status of all workers, plus sanctions against employers who hire the undocumented. But that technological pipe dream is already going up in smoke here, in Watsonville, where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement pressure on employers has resulted in more companies, some of them quite substantial, hiring workers off the books and paying them cash money.

This is not to say that all is fine in Watsonville, or that Obama’s 25,000 federal agents and National Guard troops on the border, coupled with the drug cartel attack on independent coyotes, don’t cause undocumented locals some real hardships. Folks suffer on the new long treks through the desert, although I have not yet heard about anyone destined for Watsonville who died en route. Many other people are trapped here, like an ex-student of mine who was unable to visit his dying father in Michoacán because he couldn’t afford the exploding re-entry price. Not being able to get back to his job would have meant that he could no longer send money home, money that would be the main support of his soon-to-be-widowed mother.

All of this, however, has less to do with the words politicians speak, the walls they build, or the troops they dispatch to the border than with state of the Mexican

and U.S. economies. The end of the housing boom in Watsonville, for example, has thrown a different kind of light on border problems. During the boom, a few hundred Mexican workers built a couple of thousand new homes and multiunit condos on the outer edges of our town of no more than 50,000 people. Most of those workers were undocumented, recent immigrants from the traditional sending communities of Michoacán and Jalisco. For a few years, they made pretty good money – up to 1,200 dollars a week for several months of the year.

But bust followed boom, and currently one out of every 11 houses in Watsonville is in some stage of foreclosure. Consequently, new construction has come to a halt, and most of the immigrant construction workers are out of work and unable to get unemployment benefits. In a similar situation at the start of the Great Depression, under pressure from the immigration police and blamed for the bad economy, many unemployed laborers went back to Mexico, returning to the U.S.A. after Roosevelt's victory. That, however, is not much of an option now, for the same reason that my ex-student couldn't go see his father one more time. Moving back and forth across the border according to fluctuations in the job market is prevented by the high cost of crossing. So, "securing the border" has meant more undocumented people staying in the U.S. when otherwise the current Great Recession might have prompted them to return home, at least for an extended visit.

What do people do instead? They are on the road in the U.S.A., following the informal grapevine about where they can find work. Or they go to work locally in the strawberries, but, as they are unskilled at farm work, they earn less than half of what they made building houses. They double up and triple up in homes, apartments, and garages, perpetrators or victims of various schemes to get by. They hold on and hope for better times.

A few have returned to Mexico, where they are just as unemployed as they were here. I know of one construction worker, another ex-student of mine, who after going home returned to the U.S. working as a coyote. (I hope a decent one.) I am told that the most obvious job opportunity for a young man in Michoacán who has lived and worked in the U.S. and, therefore, knows his way around a bit

is to work for La Familia, taking drugs across the newly acquired desert routes.

In the park across the alley behind my house, a group of young men play pickup basketball three or four days a week. Most of them attend some classes at the local community college; two of them attend the local State University, one hoping to make the basketball team. The best player is Jario Cervantes, who has a classic long, lean basketball body, a quick first step, and a consistent fall-away jump shot.

Several months ago, Jario took his father's pickup truck, drove 20 miles and million light years away to the upscale tourist playpen Carmel By the Sea, and walked into the local branch of the Bank of America. He waited in line to see a teller, and, when his turn came, he pretended to have a gun under his shirt and quietly demanded that the teller give him her cash. As she was passing out the money, he apologized for frightening her; meanwhile, she was hiding a GPS device among the bills.

He left the bank, his crime apparently unnoticed, and returned to the truck for the drive home. On the way, he got confused and took a wrong turn through Monterey before he got back on the right road home. Twenty police cars from four different police jurisdictions followed the GPS signal and stopped him 45 minutes after he left the bank. He immediately confessed, explaining that he needed the money to help his dad pay the family mortgage. When his case came to trial, the DA pressed for two years in State Prison. The judge decided that six months in the county jail and five years probation would be enough.

Jario's story does not register in any public debate. His circumstances have no impact on public policy. But a political structure cannot long survive when the official political language has no way to describe life as it is really lived. The way I see it, only two questions remain. How long is long? And how many lives are going to be ruined before the edifice falls?

CP

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doubt, we passed each other unwittingly from time to time in the Kings Road: I in the long, dark navy velour overcoat, velvet trousers, borsalino hat, chiffon scarf I affected at that time, Ben in the tweed suits made for him on Savile Row and shoes handstitched in St. James. Somewhere around the birth of this century, Ben gave them all to me, and, since we are the same build, I wear the her-ring-bone Scotch tweeds and the brown brogues often amid the winter chills of Petrolia, sometimes wondering that if I keel over in the road and some stranger finds me and looks at the label on the inside pocket, he'll see "Huntsman & Sons Ltd. B. Sonnenberg 5.6.69" and launch off into some surreal farce of confused identity of the sort Ben loved.

The alumnus of Savile Row and Wilton's, of the Boulevard Haussmann, of Malaga back in the day, was no whimsical dabbler. He was that best mix – serious and radical about politics and art in a fashion that never forfeited lightness of touch (though, to my chagrin, he had no feeling for Wodehouse). He was in at the ground floor with *CounterPunch*, giving money to former co-editor Ken Silverstein to help get the newsletter going and then agreeing to become our counselor, listed as such on the masthead on page 2. It meant a lot to us to have him displayed there. To him also, I hope. Jeffrey St. Clair had the pleasure of watching in Ben's sitting room the spectacle of Al Gore stalking George Bush in that fatal debate, and had an enjoyable long-term phone connection to Ben. Later, for our website, he began to write his brilliant little reviews of movies newly released on DVDs – often of the great directors of his youth, Antonioni, Rosellini, Bresson.

This spring I felt I hadn't seen him for too long. We seemed to be talking less. I feared for his health and jumped on a plane and spent a long weekend in New York. I entered that bedroom in which I had spent so many delightful hours, its paintings and prints in their familiar spots, and here was Ben, not sinking at all but in good voice, his eyes a gleam. A dinner with him and Dorothy, Mariam Said and JoAnn Wypijewski was a tumult of laughter and political sallies. And then, three months later, he was gone – taken off by an infection he was too weak to battle. His hundreds of friends were unprepared when he slipped away, sur-

rounded by Dorothy and his daughters. Of course, I comfort myself with the thought of that last trip. I look fondly and sadly at his suits, the books he gave me along the autograph letter from Zola on my wall. Privileged is the person who has had such a friend. CP

Ben's Class

By JoAnn Wypijewski

I first laid eyes on Ben in 1980, from a distance. He was well dressed and using crutches, the kind with the metal arm bands, which for some reason had always scared me. As a child, I had imagined the person using them not as weak or lame but as unusually powerful – the crutch translating as a necessary restraint, like a muzzle on a bad dog. Ben loved dogs, especially bad ones, but I didn't know that then. I didn't know much of anything about Ben as he walked into *The Nation* offices that day except that he was someone I didn't care for at all. It was his own fault. He had published two essays in the magazine presenting himself as a selfish, moneyed cad, cavorting in Europe in the 1950s and '60s. These were titled "Lost Property," and I didn't puzzle much over the "lost" part. I was very young and very certain. I had a bit of a class chip. I had never exchanged a word with Ben, but I knew this: I wouldn't like him.

More than a decade later, when *Lost Property* was published as a memoir and the careless fellow who occupies most of the book had become my beloved friend, his re-creation of so much of his own past in the least appealing light struck me as a riddle. For Ben there was no riddle. "I wasn't very nice," he said. But Ben was mischievous even about himself. Keen for gossip and the kernel of truth it contained (and the merest kernel might be all that remained of any other whispered story once it passed through Ben's imaginative circuitry and puckish retelling), he took the gossip of his life – the clothes and acquaintances and sex, the money and entitled insouciance – and used it in a kind of lighthearted argument with himself.

Ben loved women. He loved their styles and their stories and their legs in high heels. He loved language and pork and political sparring, so long as there

were jokes and kindness among the company. Almost as much as the dog he loved the goat – featured as the colophon for *Grand Street*. His truest expression, it seemed to me, was beatific with a strong wicked streak. He radiated, without apparent effort, an extraordinary fineness of feeling. Maybe that was just the phenomenon of referred acuity, the heightening of some senses in the absence of so many others. Maybe it was a performance; there was always a measure of that.

Delight was a sensation that Ben cultivated, which is why his magazine, *Grand Street*, was so wonderful. He started it to delight himself and to put money in the pockets of writers he loved, and from there it produced concentric circles of pleasure. Every issue was beautiful to look at: the paper, the type; beautiful to hold, the weight and size of it; appealing to a classical sensibility, high minded but with quirky treasures and a radical bent.

Grand Street had the added attribute of putting money in the pockets of literate but poor young women. Almost everyone who worked for Ben was a woman; for a while, beginning in 1981, I was one of them. I proofread galleys of the magazine. My first conversation with Ben was over commas and semicolons. I had written him a rather precise note about the shocking lack of distinction between the two in a piece by Ted Hughes, and he had phoned to tell me that, upon reviewing the argument, Hughes had declared that, indeed, I had a most exquisite sense of punctuation. It was like some absurdist sketch – the timbre of Ben's voice swinging between a question and a song, the subject serious on the matter of rhythm and syntactical relations but comic in its arcana, comic in my desire to be taken seriously and in Ben's mix of gentle fun and appreciation. This, after all, was a man who regularly corrected other people's grammar and recently mourned that the English-speaking world seems to have thrown the rulebook out the window in its ninnyish use of "can't help but."

Embedded in that first conversation was also a little drama about class. Copy editors are on the bottom rungs of any editorial operation. A *Nation* editor once dismissed us as having "the mind of a stamp collector." Ben wouldn't rank people in automatic hierarchies, and anyway a stamp collector might be interest-

ing. He didn't pretend to be blind to the way class works because it had worked for him. It had given him the freedom to be curious even about an otherwise invisible girl like me, who was desperate not to be invisible and who got the work only because she knew a girl who knew a girl who knew Ben. A few years passed before I actually met him, but it was *Grand Street* that upended my foolish certainty about the man I had mistaken for his character of himself, and *Grand Street* that made me curious.

The last time I saw Ben was in May. His great friend Michael Train told me how doctors had said that Ben could live many more years just as he was. It had been more than two decades since he couldn't turn pages, or turn at all. Michael said that Ben took the news of promised longevity wearily. It made sense, but Ben strove not to project weariness. Some combination of natural dazzle, pure will, ritalin, art, work, friendship and the tender-flinty love of Dorothy Gallagher kept him up. He, him and Dorothy, made the hard thing look easy. Now that he's dead, there's not a lot of comfort in thoughts of liberation. Ben

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