

Aviva Chomsky, *Undocumented: How Immigration became Illegal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. 246 pp. \$16.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8070-0167-7.

“Immigrant rights are human rights (Preface).” In *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal* Aviva Chomsky argues that being undocumented is only illegal because we made it so. She contests the “Latino threat narrative” and instead explains that this is propaganda used by the government and politicians to divert people's attention from things like climate change, social inequality, and economic issues (101). She argues that for this to happen, the government had to criminalize “undocumentedness” so that the populous would have a reason to discriminate against Latinos immigrating from Mexico. She also speaks about how the dual market system has become a mainstay of our economy, and how it allows some to move up in society by keeping others down.

According to Leo Chaves, the “Latino threat narrative” is the idea that immigrants are a threat to national security and the American way of life (101). It implies that Mexicans want to take back the American Southwest, that they have too many children and drain American resources, and that they refuse to learn English and acculturate to American ways. Chomsky argues that this narrative does not hold true. In her chapters on working, she explains that the agricultural system that feeds the US could not exist in its current form without immigrant labor. “Given the way the agricultural system currently works,” she observes, “farm labor is so precarious and so harsh that only displaced migrants, the majority of them rendered illegal by US laws, are willing and able to carry it out (128).” Similar types of harsh, low paying conditions occur in the meatpacking and construction industries that are historically significant employers of immigrant

labor. So instead of the narrative being that immigrants threaten the American way of life, the truth is that they ensure it.

So why is this narrative so prevalent? Well, as Chomsky explains, “Politicians and talk-show hosts have zeroed in on the issue to whip up audiences and support (100).” Politicians use this issue to get votes, and others use it to get more views and higher ratings. More insidious though is that politicians and the government are actively using the narrative for “the more subtle purpose of channeling national anxieties about social inequality; environmental crisis; economic downturn; lack of access to jobs, housing, healthcare and education; deteriorating social services; and other real issues facing the US population away from their real causes (101).” So, instead of allowing the American people to speak about and get to the bottom of real issues that the country is facing, they instead work to divert such questions using the issue of immigration as a scapegoat. Also, by promoting this narrative of the undocumented being criminals, it makes it easier for people to discriminate against undocumented people since they are now “illegal” and thus criminal, rather than merely non-citizen residents. The stronger this narrative becomes; the less likely people will try and change the status quo.

This ties into Chomsky’s argument that the reason that “undocumentedness” was made illegal was to allow discrimination against immigrants based on something other than their race. She expands on the argument of Michelle Alexander, who explains how, to keep the racial caste system created in the days of slavery alive in a modern post-WWII world, “a new system of legalized discrimination was developed (14).” Alexander argues that in order to keep the African Americans in a second-class status, something other than race had to be criminalized, because once they are in the criminal system, it is possible to strip them of their rights as citizens based on their

criminal status. It also allows prisons to make a lot of money. “Immigrant enforcement creates jobs in the prison system,” writes Chomsky, “which in 2011 employed eight hundred thousand people and cost some \$74 billion (101).” This new system never directly discriminates based on race. “Instead it criminalizes people of color and then discriminates on the basis of their criminal status” (14). Chomsky argues that the ideas behind the criminalization of African Americans can be applied to undocumented people as well. “The categories of “Mexican” and “Latino,”” she writes, “have been racialized in the United States, and the category of illegality is heavily associated with the category of “Mexican,” whether this is understood as a nationality, an ethnicity, or a race” (15). It is considered culturally natural and acceptable for people to discriminate and express fear based on criminality where it would not be acceptable to do so based on race, but as Alexander and Chomsky point out the system itself already discriminates based on race.

Why then does the government go through so much effort to criminalize and discriminate against these people? Well, beyond maintaining the status quo, this process of discrimination through criminalizing keeps the undocumented vulnerable and in a second-class status in society. This second-class status allows for things like the dual labor market in which some people, especially the undocumented, work very harsh jobs with little pay or benefits in order to keep certain goods and services cheap, which helps to make possible the upward mobility of other people. This is a new issue as it used to be that people would farm enough just for themselves to eat and maybe some to trade. Only in the twentieth century has it been considered a privilege to work. Not all jobs are created equal, however, and the most challenging jobs, such as farming, carpentry, landscaping, meat packing, or being a nanny were often taken by immigrants because others did not want them. With immigrants taking care of most of the jobs that feed the nation and

those that are time-consuming, citizens can have more time to work on other things that may help them improve their societal status. While this system may provide upward mobility for some, it does it on the backs of those with no mobility. This prosperity on the back of poverty is perhaps the defining social feature of the twentieth century.

How does Chomsky suggest tackling the problem? She says people must be open in speaking about the truth about the undocumented, and not just repeat the same narrative they have heard for years. It will take people changing their ways of life as well. For as Chomsky states, “although cultural strategy is a very important way to raise awareness and open a real debate about immigration policy, we also need to address the root global and economic factors that have contributed to today’s problems” (207). She believes that this is possible. “In the most immediate terms,” she writes, “we as a society created illegal immigration by making immigration illegal” (207). If society made this problem, then society can come up with an answer fix it, and possibly improve the world while they are at it. After all, people must remember that “immigrant rights are human rights” (Preface).

Chomsky does an excellent job of informing people about immigration and immigration history. Her view seems a bit narrow, but this may be because she has written other books on related subjects. She also does not always connect her ideas as clearly as she could leaving people at times to try to read between the lines. This book would be useful in the hands of anyone with a general interest in immigration history. It would be especially beneficial as an introduction for those students that are college undergraduates who need or want to learn about the history of immigration. Used as an introductory tool, it could raise students’ interest since it is history that is

also relatively current and may resonate with them more strongly than a traditional history text. It would most likely not lend itself as a useful tool for the graduate history scholar.

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