

Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal by Aviva Chomsky. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-8070-0167-7.

Immigration continues to divide Americans. Commentators endlessly debate the issue on television and radio programs, in newspaper and magazine op-ed sections and through social network platforms. President Barack Obama recently announced a new executive proposal that would tackle various immigration issues the legislative branch has failed to address, which prompted immediate legal and political challenges from Republicans. In *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal*, Aviva Chomsky, traces the historical roots of this contemporary discourse. Through detailed analysis, Chomsky provides a powerful account that positions these current issues and debates as a long, polemic struggle since the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Chomsky, prior to writing this book, spent time in the field. She worked with a humanitarian organization on the United States-Mexico border and interviewed individuals recently deported from the United States. Chomsky then observed judicial proceedings in Arizona. These experiences prompted Chomsky to begin the process of untangling the conflicting web of US immigration policies. As a result, she attempts to break down the dehumanization of immigrants.

In promoting the idea of denaturalizing illegality within the context of the national immigration discussion, Chomsky writes within a historical framework. Three major themes emerge from her research. First, Chomsky explains how the word “undocumented” has become synonymous with “criminal.” Second, Chomsky associates the United States’ need for cheap manual labor (i.e. agriculture, construction, etc.) with US foreign policy. Third, Chomsky uses major historical events and policies to document the systematic discrimination against non-White immigrants.

Chomsky illustrates how, historically, White privilege guides American policy towards immigrants. Chomsky presents thorough descriptions of laws aimed at limiting European immigration into the United States during the 19th century. Chomsky then illustrates how immigration legislation passed in the 20th century continued the exclusionary practices, calling special attention to policies implemented after 1965 when the United States imposed further stipulations for legal entrance. These policies resulted in the construction of Mexican and other Latin American immigrants as “illegal.” Chomsky argues undocumented immigrants’ “technical illegality... is but a small part of a system that has worked to control their movement and their labor for hundreds of years” (p. 70).

Despite these laws aimed at preventing immigrants from entering the United States, Chomsky draws attention to confusing government programs and policies that require the skill sets of immigrants. Since the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, agriculture in the United States has relied heavily on

Mexican and Central American immigrant labor. The Bracero Program (1942-1964), for example, recruited millions of Mexicans to the United States to work as seasonal farm laborers. Chomsky also describes the impact of more recent economic changes in the United States, such as extensive governmental deregulation, that have led to an increasing number of immigrants transitioning from agricultural work to manufacturing and service sectors. Today, the life of the undocumented immigrant, once in the United States, is filled with economic and legal uncertainty. Even immigrants with protected statuses (such as those granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)) “exist in a state of ‘permanent temporariness’ or ‘liminal legality’” (p. 90).

Despite the in-depth focus on the legal and economic contexts, some readers might be discouraged by the lack of attention on the educational context. Chomsky could study the educational experiences of immigrant Latin@s in the New Diaspora. Since the 1990s, immigrant Latin@s have moved to states such as North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Maine, and Indiana. As the Latin@ population has grown exponentially, public schools have struggled to appropriately respond to their instructional needs. School data from the New Diaspora frequently show how Latin@ students are lagging behind African American and White peers in high school graduation rates.

In addition, Chomsky could focus on the political system by breaking down the influence of the two-party arrangement and how it contributes to the immigration debate. Both Republican and Democratic politicians often use loaded and racially coded language that frames undocumented immigrants as invaders, anti-American, free loaders, and dangerous. Latin@s have created political organizations (i.e. La Raza Unida Party, Young Lords) that have tried to enter the political dialogue. However, mainstream politicians often disregard these organizations or only engage in dialogue with them in exchange for political capital. With Republicans controlling both legislative houses and a Democratic president pushing his own initiatives, it is vitally important to redirect the current national debate on immigration. *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal* serves as a starting point for researchers. The historical analyses, as well as the examination of economic policies encouraging this human rights issue, serve as an important framework for future research.

References

Chomsky, A. (2014). *Undocumented: How immigration became illegal*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Reviewers

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