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Sentiment Towards Migrants Visualized

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In her piece “Refugees Welcome?”, Leti Volpp, Professor of Law at University of California, Berkeley, highlights the power of visual representations of migrants, by tracing how an image on a traffic sign became an iconic symbol of different understandings of human flight in the U.S. and Europe. Often in academic literature scholars explore how words that are used to describe immigrants construct perceptions of deservingness or undeservingness. Volpp takes a different approach by bringing our attention to a seemingly mundane traffic sign and its different usages over time. Through her analysis of the various iterations of the symbol, Volpp discusses how migrant categories, namely undocumented immigrants and refugees, have been constructed and what these perceptions mean for our understanding of rights and membership.

Beginning in 1990 the California Department of Transportation (“Caltrans”) started erecting traffic signs along the Interstate-5 Freeway around San Diego, close to the U.S.-Mexico border. This yellow road sign has the text “CAUTION” in all caps and a silhouette of a man, woman, and child running (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Sean Biehle, Prohibido, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

While originally intended to merely be a traffic sign, such displays are not simply about traffic control and safety. A sign’s influence goes beyond the site of the sign, influencing the general discussion and becoming taken-for-granted understandings (Hermer and Hunt 1996). As Volpp argues, these signs were important in sending messages about the people depicted in the image to drivers, perpetuating broader perceptions around undocumented immigrants. Further, in fact, while government statistics show that migrant deaths did decrease in number on the I-5, as well as the number of crossings, it was not a result of the signs. Changes in border strategies that “let geography do the rest” directed migrants to the rough terrain of Arizona, leading to a dramatic increase in annual deaths at the border overall.

Many of these signs were not only labeled with “Caution,” but labeled in Spanish with “Prohibido” as well (Figure 1). Volpp notes that the Spanish and English text are not direct translations of one another. “Prohibido” – prohibited, forbidden, barred, restricted – is indubitably meant for the migrant, who is assumed to be Spanish speaking, and assumed to be undocumented. Such language signals that migrants, specifically ones crossing the southern border, are not welcome in the United States. On the other hand, drivers seeing this sign “assume that ‘illegal immigrants’ are not just a traffic hazard, but a generic danger against which they are being cautioned” (7). This road sign let citizen drivers know that border crossers are a threat, and they let border crossers know that their presence is forbidden.

This image originally designed for traffic signs has since been adopted and modified in various ways. Volpp therefore continues her article by analyzing various alterations of the now familiar portrayal in the United States and in Europe. In the U.S., this image has been used by both opponents and sympathizers of undocumented immigrants. For example, Volpp argues that the reformulation of the image in Figure 2 warns viewers of the negative consequences of offering amnesty to undocumented immigrants. Multiplying the original image in the “After the Amnesty” portrayal reflects nativist fears that they are arriving in masses and hordes, giving birth to “anchor babies,” and threatening the nation-state.



Figure 2. Image downloaded from <http://the-american-catholic.com/2014/01/31/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-leaders-of-the-house-gops-embrace-of-amnesty/> in January 2017 by Leti Volpp.



Figure 3. Kevork Djansezian, Immigration Activists Demonstrate in Los Angeles, Getty Images.

In contrast, in Figure 3, the three migrants are redesigned as “Dreamers,” named after the DREAM Act which would provide a pathway to citizenship for young immigrants who came to the U.S. as children “through no fault of their own.” While this is a sympathetic image, it also reinforces the idea that there are more deserving and less deserving undocumented immigrants. (Many undocumented youth have therefore resisted the Dreamer label.) Volpp notes that the image is a direct mirror-image of the original Caltrans sign. She writes: “It suggests that the undocumented immigrant of the original traffic sign is a Dreamer -- that perhaps the young girl being yanked by her mother to safety in California in the 90s has now grown up to graduate from college; or perhaps that all undocumented immigrants are Dreamers, imagining a better future. The image, particularly with its heading of “CAUTION” may also be read to signal that Dreamers are not a quiescent population but an emerging political force: watch out!”

Lastly, Volpp discusses the ways in which the Caltrans silhouette has spread to other parts of the world, specifically looking at the context of Germany. Volpp finds that Germans adopted this image and replicated it on banners across the country, but with a radically different message (Figure 4). In the place of “Caution” and “Prohibido” is “Refugees Welcome.” She argues that the contrast in migrant reception between Germany and the United States is apparent when we examine the numbers. Germany admitted 1.1 million Syrian refugees in 2015, whereas the U.S. has resettled approximately 18,000 Syrian refugees. Reflecting the “Refugees Welcome” sign, a phrase was coined to describe the noticeable warmth with which Germany initially approached the ‘refugee crisis’ - “Willkommenskultur” or “welcome culture.” This is not to say that negative perceptions of migrants have not emerged in Germany. Volpp also elaborates on different ways that the “Refugees Welcome” sign has been modified as well to reflect the sense of fear and threat that also pervades German discourse, now associating refugees with violent crime and with terrorism.

Volpp illuminates how the CalTrans sign has been used to represent undocumented immigrants in the U.S. and refugees in Germany. Volpp ties the story about how immigrants are represented to the discussion about how refugees and undocumented immigrants are perceived in the U.S. Both groups share many characteristics, yet they occupy two very distinct categories in the minds of the American people. “Illegal immigrants” continue to be seen solely as those crossing the southern border for economic reasons, even though many of them come to escape life-threatening violence and persecution. (Moreover, the majority of the undocumented in the U.S. are now individuals who have overstayed their visas, not those who have walked across the border without inspection.) “Refugees” on the other hand are presumed to be those who have crossed oceans in order to flee political persecution. Volpp argues that it is difficult for any Latinx migrant to be seen and treated as a refugee due to these prevailing perceptions. Volpp contends that the misrecognition of migrants due to these constructed distinctions is a significant issue, because it has tangible implications for the kinds of government support individuals are able to receive. Central American and Mexican refugees running from severe hardship, because they are represented as “illegal” and “prohibited,” are obscured and denied support, unable to access U.S. refugee protections. By examining an iconic image that began as a traffic sign in California, Volpp demonstrates how visual representations of migrants reflect understandings of human migration across different national contexts, and who is recognized as deserving of state protection and rights.



Figure 4. Google search result by Leti Volpp.

References

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About the Author

Esther Yoona Cho is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and Graduate Fellow at the UC Berkeley Institute for the Study of Societal Issues. Prior to joining the doctoral program, she worked on education research at the Social Science Research Council and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development. She holds a B.A. in International Comparative Studies from Duke University and a Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her intellectual journey has been motivated by her passion for understanding and eradicating stratification structures that disenfranchise immigrant and refugee populations. As a scholar, her broad research agenda centers on invisible stigmas and intersectional identities. Her current project, as such, explores intersections of race and illegality by examining the camouflaged community of Asian undocumented immigrants. Her published work has been featured in the Russell Sage Foundation Journal of Social Sciences, the Asian American Law Journal, and the New York Times.