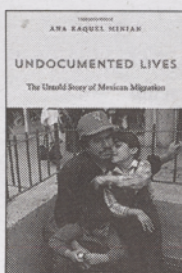


Author peels back the sordid layers of immigration policy



Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration by Ann Minian. Harvard University Press

BY MIKE WOLD
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Based on interviews with Mexican migrants, “Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration” challenges many common assumptions in the immigration debate, particularly the assumptions coming from the political right about why people migrate – with or without proper papers – and why they stay once they’ve arrived. Author Ann Minian examines the ways that economic and social policies on both sides of the border have increased migration from Mexico to the United States, starting in the 1960s, when migration from Mexico began to increase dramatically.

Until the 1960s, it wasn’t even a misdemeanor for Mexican nationals to be in the United States without papers; it was only a violation of an administrative code. There were no quotas on the numbers of immigrants from Mexico. Undocumented immigration from Mexico had been accelerated in the 1950s by the *bracero* program that recruited Mexican farmworkers for temporary work in the United States. That program familiarized large numbers of Mexican farmworkers with the higher wages to be made across the border. At the same time, the demand for farmworkers was much greater than just those provided under the program. Consequently, many Mexican workers came to the United States without papers.

Then in the 1960s, the Mexican government opened up its economy to agribusiness and foreign corporations, reducing price subsidies and tariffs designed to help Mexican farmers and small businesses. It cut social programs at the same time. It became harder to be a farmer or a worker in Mexico; unemployment rose and farmers moved to the cities and towns to look for ways to make a living. Previously, the Mexican government had seen its unemployed workers as a potential development resource and had discouraged migration to the United States. Now it

considered unemployed Mexicans a “surplus” population.

About the same time, U.S. immigration “reform,” designed to encourage more immigration from southern and eastern Europe and to limit immigration from newly independent black nations in the Caribbean, as well as from Latin America, put a quota on the number of Mexicans who were allowed to come to the U.S. In the case of Mexico, the quota was only about half the number of Mexicans who had already been coming to work in the states every year. The inevitable result was that Mexicans who couldn’t qualify for entry came without papers.

Minian uses interviews with migrants from a number of communities in Mexico to understand the forces that persuaded them to migrate during this period in the face of increasing sanctions against coming without papers. Agricultural wages were falling in Mexico and there was also social pressure from family members and their communities for farmworkers to find work, including going north to work in the United States. In order to avoid social unrest, Mexican authorities moved from a policy of discouraging migration to one of tacitly accepting and even supporting it as a way of reducing the numbers of unemployed workers.

For the mostly male farmers, going to work in the U.S. was a way to support a family and also assert their dignity and worth in a society that treated them as surplus. It was not an easy decision. It meant living for months or years away from wives and children and facing constant fear of arrest and deportation. Most Mexican women were reluctant to migrate to the U.S. Not only was the crossing more dangerous for women than for men, because of the risk of sexual assault, but socially conservative Mexicans tended to consider the United States a bad place to raise children.

The migrants, feeling they didn’t have a secure place in either Mexico or the U.S., formed associations both for mutual support and to provide economic assistance to their home communities, partly in the hope that

someday Mexico would be a place where they could have a secure existence.

Then, in the 1980s, the United States government decided to crack down on “illegal” immigration. In a perfect example of unintended consequences, migrants who weren’t able to become legal, permanent residents could no longer risk returning to Mexico every year. Coming back to the U.S. had become too expensive and dangerous. Many decided to stay permanently and brought their families north without papers rather than face permanent separation. The U.S. became what a popular Mexican song called a “cage of gold” – needing to make a decent living, migrants felt trapped here.

Written as a sociological study of migration from the 1960s to the 1980s, “Undocumented Lives” helps us understand the historical background of the current immigration debate.

Minian debunks the simple tropes used by the right to demonize migrants. She shows why a punitive approach to undocumented immigration is both ineffective and cruel in the face of the economic and social realities of migrants’ lives. She reminds us that mass migration, whether from Mexico or other countries, is driven by policies created and enforced by elites in a global economic system – policies that give people a choice between being victimized by poverty or repression and risking their lives for a better future.

Courtesy of Street Roots’ sister paper, Real Change News in Seattle.



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