

2013

Living "Illegal": The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration

Nicholas M. Gulan
DePaul University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo>



Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gulan, Nicholas M. (2013) "Living "Illegal": The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration," *Diálogo*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol16/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Diálogo* by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Living “Illegal”: The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration

BY MARIE FRIEDMAN MARQUARDT, TIMOTHY J. STEIGENGA, PHILIP J. WILLIAMS AND MANUEL A. VÁSQUEZ.
NEW YORK: THE NEW PRESS, 2011. 336 PP. ISBN 978-1595586513

Ignorance is not always bliss, especially when the very subjects of a debate guided by misinformation and exaggeration are human beings who are doing everything in their power to live in a system that is set up for them to fail. *Living “Illegal”: The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration*, suggests that individuals who are ostracized from communities, or treated as something subhuman, face obstacles that push them into a frustrating cycle of poverty and disempowerment. The authors, two professors in religious studies and two in political science, provide readers with an alternative understanding of the role “unauthorized immigrants” play, as well as the many challenges they face living and working in the United States. The book’s greatest achievement is the hope it provides for creating a more just and welcoming society. For those who wonder what allies unauthorized immigrants have in the unbalanced fight for recognition and acceptance, the book suggests influential organizations, like the Church, are leading the fight on behalf of those heavily discriminated.

In a well-researched effort that aims to correct the many misperceptions that exist on the topic of “illegal” immigration, the authors mix facts and statistics with warm anecdotes highlighting the many struggles faced while living in the United States. They contend that much of the debate surrounding the topic of “illegal” immigration is guided by hyperbole and, at its worst, represents a gross misunderstanding of the immigrants’ intentions. Certainly, a major initiative of the book is to not only educate those who are opposed to “illegal” immigration, but to also give the very subjects of the debate a human face. It is therefore instructive that the first order of business is to challenge the terms “illegal” or “undocumented,” opting instead for “unauthorized.” Far from being a semantic distinction, the authors argue for understanding of immigrants as working human beings, a redefinition necessary “to move the public conversation beyond the polarizing frames” that emotional images of illegality create (9).

In process of a historical assessment of migration to the United States, the authors suggest that the global

economic system and related structural policies have at times opened the door to migrant flow, only for later policies to slam the same door shut, leaving untold numbers of immigrants in a rather permanent state of impermanence. Prevented from fully adapting to life in the United States due to their status, and recent changes, the immigrants are also in many cases unable to go home for fear of not being able to return to this country and the work that enables their families to survive. The tension that exists between immigrants and native citizens is at times palpable, particularly in communities such as Jupiter, Florida, and towns in Cobb County, Georgia, which serve as case studies. It is both remarkable and inspiring to read the stories of hardworking persons who, against tremendous odds, seek to build better lives for themselves and their families. Through carefully detailed stories of strife and perseverance, the authors lay waste to stereotypes that distract opponents from engaging in meaningful discussion about the difficulties and dehumanization experienced by unauthorized immigrants.

Whether an opponent argues that “unauthorized” immigrants choose not to assimilate, that they are destroying the fine fabric that makes up this country, taking jobs away from native citizens, or draining social services that are meant for lawful and taxpaying citizens, the authors of *Living “Illegal”* detail an unwelcoming and sometimes hostile environment in which unauthorized immigrants must navigate. In addition to correcting many of the above fallacies, the authors present numerous examples of the undue pressures these immigrants face as a result of not being welcome in the communities in which they live and work. Ironically, it is this imposed isolation from societal engagement that blinds opponents from seeing how unauthorized immigrants want to (and often have) become part of the American fabric. It becomes clear that little recognition is made of the work ethic, civic participation, and law-abiding nature of these individuals.

Churches, however, are shown to provide helpful avenues. Despite only one chapter specifically addressing the Church’s participation and leadership with and for

immigrants, it is the most inspirational and hopeful section of the book: "Picking Up the Cross" discusses the Church's role in not only creating a safe haven and encouraging interethnic solidarity among parishioners, but the chapter also illustrates the challenges unauthorized immigrants face outside parish walls, and issues a call for a moral rethinking of human relations that extend beyond economic or political arguments. Noting that "churches can offer an important resource to overcome the negative myths about unauthorized immigration" (178), the examples demonstrate a healthy interaction between members of diverse races and ethnic backgrounds. Case studies at two churches in Georgia show how native residents pray and interact with the immigrants, and "walk a while in their shoes" (177), developing an understanding of the latter's difficult challenges living and working in the U.S. These also show that churches provide a venue where U.S. social and civic skills are learned, facilitating adjustment to American society, and fostering a welcoming environment that helps build or restore confidence among newer arrived immigrants.

Living "Illegal" will have a transformative effect on the reader. For those who subscribe to a belief that "unauthorized" immigrants are social pariahs, this book will challenge and reverse these and other notions. The book will deepen the understanding of those who are sympathetic by providing rich stories that instill hope, while suggesting that much work needs to be done to address continued struggles. The knowledge gained from reading this work will help move the debate forward in a constructive manner.

NICHOLAS M. GULAN
DEPAUL UNIVERSITY