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# Immigrant Resistance in the Age of Trump

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When Donald J. Trump ran for, and won, the presidency, a key part of his platform was the constant vilification of immigrant, and especially undocumented, communities. His campaign speeches often featured racist tirades, including his insistence that Mexico is sending “bad hombres,” and his call for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” Nearly a year after his election, changes in immigration policy under the Trump administration have been profound, even in light of the devastation that the Obama administration wrought for immigrants and their families. The most repressive of these changes include a vast expansion of the groups prioritized for deportation,<sup>1</sup> a more aggressive arrest strategy at places previously considered safe,<sup>2</sup> a plan to hire fifteen thousand more immigration agents,<sup>3</sup> a broad ban on refugees and even basic travel (including from several majority-Muslim countries),<sup>4</sup> and the creation of an office of Victims of Immigrant Crime Enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

### ***As immigrants face a dramatic escalation of repression, an immigrant rights movement finds itself at a crossroads . . .***

Most recently, Trump directed his Attorney General Jeff Sessions to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, initiated under President Obama in 2012. With that announcement, eight hundred thousand young people who had received short-term deportation relief and work authorization now face a return to their lives as undocumented individuals. In sum, the trajectory of the Trump

administration has been a solidification of U.S. enforcement first policies, based on a racist and xenophobic platform that frequently invokes long-held narratives about migrant criminality and economic burden.

The rise of Trump has provoked unprecedented mobilizations across social movements in response to the vile rhetoric that often accompanies Trump’s justification for his bigotry. Yet, in this response, many advocates have failed to tie the current era to previous decades of anti-immigrant policies, and are often complicit with simplistic narratives of American identity, too often a flattening of immigrant life into one-dimensional narratives that seldom reflect its complex and dynamic realities. As immigrants face a dramatic escalation of repression, an immigrant rights movement finds itself at a crossroads with regard to both a struggle for internal unity and the need to strengthen coalitions with allied organizations.

### **Immigrant Rights Organizations’ Disparate Roles and Tendencies**

To speak of a single immigrant rights movement is to ignore the many diverging experiences and interests within immigrant communities in the United States—even among undocumented immigrants. Some organizations, such as the National Immigration Law Center, American Immigration Lawyers Association, and the Immigrant Legal

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Resource Center, play an important role in defending migrants in detention. And at the helm of litigation to challenge Trump's policy are groups like the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the American Civil Liberties Union.<sup>6</sup> Policy reformers, too, such as the Migration Policy Institute and the Center for American Progress, have challenged Trump's policies, most often by providing demographic and legal analyses to confront dominant narratives of criminality and fiscal drain.

Meanwhile, thousands of formal nonprofits and informal networks provide the bedrock of immigrant resistance to Trump. This work is carried out by advocacy organizations, such as the New York Immigration Coalition and the various rapid response networks in communities across the country, poised to respond to immigration enforcement activity. In addition, there are decentralized volunteer-run organizing networks that rely on digital communication, such as Movimiento Cosecha, launched in the summer of 2015 and aiming to create a "nonviolent movement fighting for permanent protection, dignity, and respect for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States," while leveraging "the power of immigrant labor and consumption."<sup>7</sup> Student groups, too, have taken the lead, particularly United We Dream, made up of over one hundred thousand immigrant youth and allies, and fifty-five affiliate organizations in twenty-six states.

Transnational immigrant rights groups have also started to connect the concerns of multiple constituents. For example, Alianza Americas led the Save TPS (Temporary Protected Status) campaign after it was announced that the Department of Homeland Security would reduce the allotted time in the United States for Haitian TPS holders down to six months—and was considering the elimination of the TPS program altogether. As the security of DACA became more uncertain, the group issued calls to both Save TPS and Save DACA.<sup>8</sup> The importance of this shift was to reject the exceptionality of "DREAMers" while also embracing the rights of immigrants such as their parents.

Similarly, when the Trump administration formally and predictably sidelined the beleaguered Deferred Action for Parental Accountability

program, which had been stalled in the courts, many in the immigrant rights movement resumed a call for legalization for all. When DACA was rescinded in September 2017, immigrant student groups such as United We Dream balanced a nuanced message between calling for the passage of a renewed DREAM Act and a rejection of racist enforcement-first provisions, while continuing to push for a solution that would benefit their families, too.<sup>9</sup> For example, in a statement to this end, the Orange County Immigrant Youth United group issued a call to "fight to keep the (DACA) program alive" but also "continue to fight for the community members that are not covered under DACA." They resolved, "We will continue to fight for our community members with criminal convictions and will not throw our parents under the bus to make ourselves more deserving."<sup>10</sup>

Beyond calls for federal reform, immigrant rights activists in the Trump era have had to contend with the long-standing role of local police in facilitating enforcement actions. The sanctuary city debate, which had been beleaguered even during the Obama era in the wake of several high-profile crimes by undocumented individuals, became front and center once again when the Trump administration began threatening to pull funding from cities that refused to cooperate. Meanwhile, New York City Mayor de Blasio announced local funding to provide legal support to those immigrants caught in the Trump immigration dragnet, while also refusing to extend this public support to those convicted of 170 different crimes.<sup>11</sup>

**... [D]espite Mayor de Blasio's ardent statements in support of DACA, dozens were arrested for blocking traffic in protest of the program's termination.**

Activists responded critically to the legacy of local broken windows policing efforts that made immigrants more vulnerable to detention and deportation, despite declarations of sanctuary city status from several jurisdictions such as New York City.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, despite Mayor de Blasio's ardent statements in support of DACA, dozens were arrested for blocking traffic in

protest of the program's termination.<sup>13</sup> Immigration enforcement efforts targeting Central American schoolchildren considered a deportable threat have also received the full cooperation of existing school police presence, to the indignation of civil rights groups.<sup>14</sup> These actions raise critical questions regarding the role of the police in sanctuary cities.

These advocacy organizations have employed a wide array of tactics including a now routinized, even predictable, series of annual May Day rallies demanding congressional action. These rallies—albeit smaller than in 2006 when the proposed Sensenbrenner bill, which would have criminalized efforts to assist undocumented immigrants in need of food, housing, and medical services—turned out an unprecedented number of advocates to the streets, took on a new sense of urgency in 2017 following Trump's election. As the Trump presidency has progressed, activists have adopted a range of creative tactics with a strong social media component. Following the rescission of DACA, a group of "DREAMers" joined by Coloradan immigrant rights activist Jeanette Vizguerra initiated a fast at the capitol building in Washington;<sup>15</sup> meanwhile a crowd gathered in front of Trump Tower to denounce the program's termination.<sup>16</sup>

***Some groups . . . count on well-worn appeals to immigration as central to the country's founding, while others argue that this perspective erases America's racist history of African enslavement and Native American genocide.***

Such immigrant resistance in the Trump regime represents a continuation—albeit an amplification—of decades of work. This new era, however, is also characterized by intensified repression against immigrant rights activists. In March 2017, for example, migrant dairy worker activists Enrique Balcazar and Zully Palacios were arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) while leaving the Migrant Justice office in Burlington.<sup>17</sup> Both immigrant rights leaders were ultimately released following an aggressive public advocacy

campaign by groups, including the National Education Association.<sup>18</sup> That same month, DACA recipient Daniela Vargas was detained after speaking at an event organized by the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance.<sup>19</sup> She, too, was released, with a deportation order still in place, after an ultimately successful community and social media action campaign.

Immigrant organizations seeking to respond to the increased demonization of immigrants and augmented threats to their daily lives have found themselves diverging in the following ways:

1. Some groups continue to count on well-worn appeals to immigration as central to the country's founding, while others argue that this perspective erases America's racist history of African enslavement and Native American genocide.<sup>20</sup> These critics also argue that this sort of selective history-telling also hinders valuable alliances with communities of color.
2. Some organizations hew closely to a depiction of the "exceptional immigrant," singularly law-abiding, especially hard working, and an asset to, rather than a drain on, the economy, while others challenge the notion of the exceptional immigrant on the grounds that it holds immigrants to an unfair and unrealistic higher standard.<sup>21</sup> This nearly unreachable standard, advocates argue, not only implicitly pits "good" immigrants against "bad" immigrants but also sets immigrants in opposition to all poor and criminalized communities and invokes a problematic narrative of anti-blackness.
3. Immigrant groups also differ on the extent to which they are prepared to reject ubiquitous forms of Islamophobia in the name of homeland security. However, the rallying cry "No, Ban, No Wall" originated with the airport protests after Trump's initial "Muslim Ban" executive order, reflecting a significant development in Muslim–Latinx solidarity.

These ideological disparities can also be seen among artists who engage on these issues. For

example, last summer, in the wake of his award-winning musical *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda released a video heralding how *Immigrants Get the Job Done*, which detailed the economic centrality of immigrant labor and brilliance. While most individuals lauded the piece, more critical voices in the immigrant rights movement rejected the well-intentioned attempt to render immigrants as one-dimensional inevitable successes, incapable of failure.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, artists such as poet Yosimar Reyes and illustrator Julio Salgado have offered a more complex version of queer undocumented life, in particular. Social media series such as *Dreamers Adrift* (co-created by Salgado and Jesús Iñiguez, core members of the collective CultureStrike<sup>23</sup>) have created a “media platform for undocumented immigrants to tell our own stories in a creative and humanizing way that mainstream media was failing to do.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the hash tag #UndocuJoy, a campaign of Define American, combats “victimizing representations of people who are undocumented by flooding the media with authentic images of happiness.”<sup>25</sup>

### Strengthening Alliances

Perhaps a further consequence of the Trump presidency, and its crude and unflinching brand of racist nationalism and xenophobia, has been the clarification of the collective interests of various communities in the face of blatant white supremacy. While by no means new, the unfiltered barrage of insults and refusal to outright denounce displays of racial violence (as became plain in the days after the deadly Charlottesville terror attack in August 2017) has presented a strategic opening in this regard.

Even though some tone-deaf liberal commentators continue to appeal to “universalist politics” and eschew what has been disparagingly called “identity politics,” this does not seem to be the direction in which social justice organizations are moving.<sup>26</sup> Epitomizing this trend were the signs declaring “Black Lives Matter” and “No Human Is Illegal” waved side by side during the Destroy the Confederacy protest in downtown Houston in August 2017.<sup>27</sup> And on the two-year anniversary of the death of Sandra

Bland, who was violently detained during a traffic stop and later died in detention, scholars and activists have drawn a very clear connection between the police violence experienced by black women and other women of color, including immigrants, and the LGBTQ community.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond university campuses, coalitions of immigrant rights organizations, Black Lives Matter groups, and Trans Liberation activists have been visible, even if not in the mainstream. For example, key leaders such as Jennicet Gutiérrez have been critical to tying the bigotry of the Texas Senate Bill 3 “Bathroom Bill” to the racist intents of the Senate Bill 4 “Sanctuary Cities Act,” and were at the forefront of resistance against the narrow formulation of DACA and the campaign to End Trans Detention.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Immigrant groups . . . differ on the extent to which they are prepared to reject . . . Islamophobia in the name of homeland security.***

Yet, within the immigrant community, much work remains for a full-throated rejection of the well-entrenched narratives of Islamophobia in the name of homeland security. Trump’s initial Muslim ban prompted scores of protests at major airports (an innovative new tactic) and a deployment of legal advocates to help shepherd travelers out of detention. High-profile crimes against mosques, assaults on hijab-wearing women walking home from prayers,<sup>30</sup> the murders of a Muslim teen,<sup>31</sup> and two engineers perceived to be Muslim just getting a drink at a bar<sup>32</sup> have prompted swift responses from policy advocacy groups such as the Council on American–Islamic Relations and high-profile activists such as New Yorker Linda Sarsour. In the wake of these changes, and through efforts to advocate with local officials around support for immigrant communities, more unified struggles between Latinos and Muslims are arguably emerging.<sup>33</sup>

Immigrant rights leaders such as Chaumtoli Huq have thus issued a call to the labor movement to broaden its concerns beyond the “white working class” and also “to [be] prepared to protect and support each other as workers and fighting Islamophobia, [which] should be seen

as an integral part of . . . the larger tussle for democracy."<sup>34</sup> However, at present, the alliances between unions with largely Latino memberships and other groups representing largely Muslim workers are tenuous. Some unions have fought for basic religious accommodations, such as prayer time; at the same time, they have demanded wage increases for their diverse membership in places like Seattle.<sup>35</sup>

Even so, while unions readily champion the economic utility of immigrant workers, the proclamations of the national labor federations against Islamophobia<sup>36</sup> have more slowly trickled down to individual affiliates, who are slow to respond in the wake of attacks against their Muslim members.<sup>37</sup> Some exceptions, however, are important to note. For example, in a historic statement of solidarity, the president of the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation declared resistance and solidarity with immigrants under attack.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in response to the murder of two good Samaritans responding to an attacker who targeted two young girls of color while screaming anti-Muslim rants, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 called for the strengthening of anti-fascist and anti-racist organizing in an open letter to their membership and the Portland community, while also rejecting an escalation of policing as a potential solution.<sup>39</sup>

Even within unions with large white male memberships, where labor leaders have sometimes been neutral to enthusiastic about the Trump administration's stance on immigration, resistance has emerged. One of the clearest examples of this pushback has been in the building trades, where leaders courted Trump and his promise to build a wall and reduce legal immigration. When Trump delivered a speech at the North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU) Legislative Conference in April 2017,<sup>40</sup> several members of a diverse Southern California local protested with #RESIST signs.<sup>41</sup> They were predictably met with "boos" and were kicked out for doing so.

Activists have also responded critically to the legacy of local broken windows policing efforts that make immigrants more vulnerable to detention and deportation, *even in* the context of sanctuary narratives. They have called on the labor movement to stand more boldly in solidarity

with immigrants facing deportation. Some immigrant rights activists have called on the AFL-CIO to expel police unions, who are seen to "staunchly defend [bad cops and fight] reforms with inflammatory rhetoric."<sup>42</sup> This demand came on the heels of calls to expel the National Border Patrol Council (NBPC), which represents fourteen thousand Border Patrol Agents.<sup>43</sup>

## Strategic Alliances and the Radical Flank

Within these various tactics and narratives, there has been a combined, multipronged effort of resistance to the anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration. Yet, in each, there are tensions between "inside the beltway" approaches, which favor legislative solutions and legal challenges that focus on a narrow set of victories (like the DREAM Act and DACA), and more radical efforts, such as grassroots mobilization and direct action campaigns. Coordinated efforts, like United We Dream's National Institutions Coming Out Day,<sup>44</sup> have been a way to communicate resistance to the White House, while also holding local schools and universities accountable to the needs of their students. And, beyond the petitions and declarations, there have been more aggressive shows of support, such as the dozens of Harvard professors recently arrested to protest the DACA rescission.<sup>45</sup>

The resurrected version of the sanctuary movement, which has roots in the 1980s Central American solidarity movements and even further back to slave abolition, has long been in place through the Obama administration. However, a more far-reaching version of sanctuary has emerged in some circles, calling for "sanctuary in your city, in your home, in your church, in your school, from detention, from deportation, from displacement, from police violence."<sup>46</sup> This more emancipatory view of sanctuary highlights the irony of sanctuary cities, which "position themselves as a bulwark to protect undocumented residents' rights," while "in reality they leave ample opportunity for immigrants to be swept up by the deportation machine."<sup>47</sup> It also goes beyond the—arguably paternalistic—model adopted by many faith-based organizations of offering sanctuary to an innocent facing deportation.

Within the mainstream immigrant rights movements, disagreements over tactics have emerged, with some students going as far as to risk arrest, detention, and deportation, sometimes even as an intentional strategy to organize in detained spaces.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the vestiges of resistance to Obama's "deporter-in-chief" legacy have laid the groundwork for continued resistance in detention centers. For example, the July 2017, hunger strike at the Adelanto detention center in San Diego County was in protest of "excessively high bail, inadequate medical care and bad food."<sup>49</sup> Yet, these tactics are a critical tool for groups organizing in communities under threat. In Philadelphia, for example, grassroots organization Juntos has launched a "Community Resistance Zone" campaign aimed at training residents "block by block" on how to resist proposed mass immigration raids like the Trump administration's recently announced "Operation Safe City."<sup>50</sup>

### All of Us or None of Us

When the DREAM Act was first introduced in 2001, it relied largely on a narrative of "DREAMer exceptionality," or the idea that college-bound immigrant youth who have not experienced criminalization are worthy of citizenship, while millions of others are not. In defiance of such exclusionary strategies advocated by the centrist liberals and conservatives, the radical flank of the immigrant youth movement is increasingly rejecting the notion that legalization for some must come at the cost of the criminalization of many others.

In September 2017, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer declared that they had reached a tentative agreement with President Trump that could protect DACA recipients in exchange for Democratic support for the expansion of border security. When Pelosi returned to her home district to hold a press conference, she was surrounded and confronted by dozens of immigrant youth from a Bay Area coalition called the Immigrant Liberation Movement. These young activists rejected her invocation of both the label and the frame of DREAMer exceptionality, shouting her down with chants

of "We Are Not a Bargaining Chip," "All of Us or None of Us," and "All 11 Million." When an activist speaking on behalf of the protest said, "you have the audacity to tell us that you have been fighting deportations . . .," Pelosi asserted, "Yes . . . Yes, I am"; she was countered with a chant of "You are a liar."<sup>51</sup>

**... [T]he radical flank of the immigrant youth movement is increasingly rejecting the notion that legalization for some must come at the cost of the criminalization of many others.**

While immigrant youth who shut down the press conference made it clear that they trusted neither Pelosi nor the White House, Pelosi reiterated to the media that Trump could be trusted to support legislation protecting DACA recipients and went as far as saying that the president was "sincere and understanding."<sup>52</sup> In a *Meet the Press* interview, Pelosi also revealed that the compromise rested upon Democratic support for the hiring of ten thousand additional officers at the border.<sup>53</sup> Less than a month later, on October 8, Trump reneged on the so-called agreement reached with Pelosi and Schumer and released what have been widely characterized as hard-line demands that include funding for construction of a border wall and a brutal crackdown on sanctuary cities.<sup>54</sup>

While the radical flank of the immigrant youth movement continues to be denigrated by those still wedded to the frames of exceptionality and criminality, these recent events demonstrate its growing prescience and power. As Iván Ceja, a DACA recipient and founder of UndocuMedia, says, "We are no longer those cute little Dreamers who wear the caps and gowns . . . We're grown up. We're critically assessing the situation."<sup>55</sup> It is this generation of movement leaders, who in many ways face a bleaker future with bigger obstacles, who are radically redefining immigrant resistance in the age of Trump. In desperate times, an embattled immigrant rights movement can draw much hope and courage from the lucidity of their vision, the depth of their convictions, and their

uncompromising resolve to fight for all eleven million.

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