

# Between Mexico and the United States

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Ana Raquel Minian, [Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration \(2018\).](#)

When it comes to immigration to the United States in the twentieth century, there is little question that Mexico has been *by far* the most important sending country. Colonial conquest and domination, geographic contiguity, cultural links, wealth differentials, state policies on both sides of the border, and the pressing needs of Americans and Mexicans have made it so. We have yet to come to terms with the full significance of the impact of twentieth-century Mexican immigration on the United States' demographics, politics, economy, society, and culture. What we do know, however, is that U.S. immigration law took form in the twentieth century in significant part to encourage, restrict, manage, and respond to migration from Mexico. Since the 1920s, border control has largely concentrated on the United States' southern border. Mexicans have peopled all of the myriad legal categories into which twentieth-century immigrants have been slotted: non-immigrants, temporary workers, legal immigrants, and "illegal" immigrants. The debate over undocumented migrants, it scarcely bears mention, rages in Trump's America, and the xenophobes' target is Mexico.

Ana Raquel Minian's important book, *Undocumented Lives*, provides crucial context to the figure of the Mexican undocumented migrant. Although her story begins earlier and continues after, Minian's focus is on the period from the mid-1960s, when the *bracero* program ended, to the mid-1980s, when the U.S. government extended an "amnesty" to undocumented migrants but also closed the U.S.-Mexico border, making what had hitherto been a back-and-forth circular migration of the undocumented between the two countries much more difficult. *Undocumented Lives* covers a vast range: state policies in Mexico and the United States; explorations of the everyday lives of undocumented migrants and their communities in both countries; and the strategies undocumented migrants employed to win rights and protections for themselves in the United States. One of its goals is to represent undocumented Mexican migrants to the United States as "in between peoples" of a sort, fully incorporated in neither country, suspended in a state of rejection by both, but nevertheless forging a precarious identity. In what follows, I discuss three important contributions of the book and offer some observations about each.

First, as part of its attempt to represent Mexican undocumented migrants as "in between peoples," *Undocumented Lives* shows how state policies and practices on *both* sides of the border have produced the Mexican undocumented migrant. Minian argues that, even as the United States sought to manage Mexican migration by proliferating legal and illegal statuses under immigration law, the Mexican government altered its policies towards its own migrating citizens. In the early twentieth century, the Mexican state sought to deter out-migration, seeing its population as a resource. When it did support out-migration to the United States, especially as part of the *bracero* program, it was primarily because of the benefits that returning migrants would supposedly confer on Mexico. As Mexico's mounting economic problems made it clear that there were few opportunities for returning migrants, however, the government altered its position. By the 1970s, Mexican officials had come to understand (and rely on) out-migration to be a critical safety valve for the country's socio-economic difficulties.

This is an important insight. However, while Minian's characterization of Mexican undocumented migrants as rejected by both countries is compelling, it might also have limits. How might we situate her

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characterization in relation to the ways in which other sending countries imagine and instrumentalize their emigrating populations, whether as a “brain drain” or as heroes earning money in hard currency or as the release of a safety valve or as social problems to be removed or as a combination of all of the above?

Mexico’s attitude towards its emigrating citizens, one suspects, might not be that unique. Neither does Mexico’s failure to incorporate its poorest citizens into polity, society and economy—something Minian emphasizes to support her argument—distinguish it from many countries. Most poor countries, to say nothing of many richer ones like the United States, fail in similar ways. Is it appropriate to represent a failure to extend the social safety net as tantamount to a rejection of citizens? More to the point, it is not so clear that Mexico *did* reject its emigrating citizens. Unlike a country like Cuba that makes it difficult for its outgoing nationals to return, there is no question that Mexico was always willing to abide by its international law commitments and take its citizens back. Indeed, the Mexican government was often quite vocal in arguing for the protection of its nationals in the United States. It is also surely a detraction from Minian’s reading that the Mexican undocumented migrants she discusses never ceased to claim Mexico in all kinds of ways, which suggests that they did not necessarily see a lack of opportunity in Mexico as equivalent to a rejection by Mexico.

*Second, Undocumented Lives* offers important insights into the lives of Mexican undocumented migrants vis-à-vis the communities they left behind in Mexico and those they formed in the United States. Some of Minian’s insights are familiar from other studies of undocumented (and other) migrants in the United States: their relationship to public spaces, their sense of being trapped, their experiences of exploitation and fear, their participation in fraternal organizations contributing to the renovation of their communities “back home.”

Minian’s most fascinating insights (at least for this reader) are those relating to the interplay between U.S. immigration law and border control, on the one hand, and the shape of migrant communities in Mexico and the United States, on the other. Minian argues that, so long as circular migration between the United States and Mexico was relatively easy, undocumented migration was overwhelmingly male and straight. Married men were under special pressure to leave because they had dependents to support. Minian’s side argument that queer Mexican men were less likely to migrate—offered up as a correction of sorts to the conventional narrative of queer migration to the anonymity of non-familiar and urban settings—is intriguing but raises too many questions to be taken as a major sociological observation (relatively small sample size, the difficulty of knowing how many homosexual men were likely to get married, attitudes towards homosexuality in Mexico at the time, etc.).

But Minian’s main point is that the migration of married men bore consequences for the wives they left behind: such women were compelled to restrict their outdoor activities for fear of being tainted with the brush of marital infidelity. The absence of Mexican men thus reinforced patriarchal control of women by their absent husbands and other males in the community. Gradually, however, the situation changed. The end of the *bracero* program in 1964, combined with the institution of country quotas for Mexico, increased the number of Mexicans entering the United States “illegally.” Even so, while border control remained light, circulation across borders remained a viable option for men. But the closing of the border in the mid-1980s as a consequence of heightened immigration control changed the nature of Mexican migration and hence the structure of communities on both sides of the border. As the circulation of male migrants became harder, the incentive for women and children to migrate grew. Thus, Minian argues, it was the Reagan-era “amnesty” for undocumented migrants combined with tightening of border controls that led to the wholesale transplantation of Mexican families to the United States. Minian’s sophisticated sense of the dialectic between restriction and migration, reminiscent of the work of immigration historian Mae Ngai, is one of the great strengths of this book.

Finally, Minian devotes considerable attention to the strategies that Mexican undocumented migrants employed to win greater rights for themselves in contexts ranging from workplace rights to education for their children. Their struggles brought about a gradual alteration of attitudes among U.S. labor organizations, Mexican American organizations, and the Mexican government itself. Interesting in this regard is how Minian characterizes what a socio-legal scholar might call Mexican undocumented migrants' "rights consciousness." In her telling, many Mexican undocumented migrants seem to be imbued with the sense that their long presence and hard labor in the United States—in short, their contributions to U.S. society and economy—entitle them to rights and protections. This is consistent with how many immigrant rights advocates have represented, and continue to represent, the claims of the undocumented. However, as Minian surely knows, a gulf yawns between undocumented migrants' own sense of entitlement and the attitudes of those opposed to undocumented migrants, a group with considerable power in the United States today, who insist upon a kind of foundational illegality associated with the act of crossing the border without authorization that should entitle undocumented migrants to nothing.

How might this gulf be narrowed? One way is clearly to make the xenophobic camp realize that illegal presence does not in and of itself imply a complete absence of rights and protections. To endorse the extreme xenophobic position would be to go against principles at the core of the United States' legal and political traditions. But neither does illegal presence in and of itself confer the full panoply of rights. In this regard, it might be interesting to learn more about undocumented migrants' complex relationship to legality, how they respond to the charges of those opposed to them, how they characterize the claims of other migrants (especially more recent arrivals), and how, as a result, we might think about the broader question of how political and legal claims come to be associated with territorial presence.

Minian has written a significant book that covers a vast range of topics and mines a variety of sources. While showing how state policies produce individuals and communities, it humanizes the figure of the Mexican undocumented migrant at a time when xenophobic rhetoric in the United States is at its height. *Undocumented Lives* deserves a wide readership.

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