

Undocumented Fears: Immigration and the Politics of Divide and Conquer

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In 2006, Hazleton, Pennsylvania passed the Illegal Immigration Relief Act (IIRA) – a local ordinance that laid out penalties for renting to or hiring undocumented immigrants and declared English the city’s official language. Despite its location some 2,000 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, the IIRA put Hazleton at the epicenter of the immigration debate in the United States. Several major media outlets ran in-depth pieces on the ordinance, jurists watched the ensuing legal battle closely for its potential to set important precedent, and more than 100 locales and several states followed Hazleton’s lead passing similar exclusionary measures. Drawing on ethnographic research I conducted in Hazleton in the years following the IIRA’s passage and on the arguments I make in my forthcoming book on the case, this presentation will discuss how local ‘tough on undocumented immigration’ laws such as Hazleton’s exacerbate racial and economic inequality. More specifically, I will discuss how the politics surrounding this law represent a local-level version of many of the patterns we see in national immigration debates. Just as Latina/o immigrants in particular are often depicted in the prevailing discourse as ‘outsiders’ intent on ‘taking over’ the United States, in this case we see how officials drummed up support for the IIRA by using racialized imagery of ‘illegal alien invaders’ juxtaposed with idyllic portrayals of ‘Small Town, USA.’ Using an interdisciplinary framework, the presentation will describe how this is problematic on several levels. Most obviously, such rhetoric degrades Latina/o immigrants. It subjects them to increased discrimination and harassment, makes them more vulnerable to economic exploitation, and limits advocates’ ability to bring forth meaningful claims for immigrant rights. I argue that this particular framing of the immigration issue also harms poor and working class Whites. What the prevailing narrative does not reveal is that immigrants’ arrival – and indeed, local residents’ fears – happened in the context of a city suffering from demanufacturing. In order to remain economically viable, local developers have embraced state-level legislation that provides corporations with sizable tax breaks. As a result, warehouses, distribution centers, and, most prominently, a meatpacking plant have filled the void left by the manufacturing industry and not coincidentally attracted a large immigrant labor force. I will discuss how an embrace of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ community identity has diverted attention away from such economic realities. Officials instead used fears about immigrant criminality – despite recent *decreases* in crime – to explain why Hazleton is struggling. And on those occasions when city leaders did acknowledge economic hardship, they placed it, too, in a racial frame – claiming, for example, that immigrants, as opposed to corporations benefiting from tax cuts, are responsible for recent budget troubles. In contrast to most commentary on immigration that calls for top-down policy reform, the presentation will conclude with steps for taking action from the bottom-up. I argue that we need an active citizenry who partakes in deep engagement with the city’s past and present to protect immigrant rights and immunize our communities from these politics of deception.