

The Politics Classroom
2022.05: Migrant Youth in the United States
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In the Classroom: Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez, History, UIC

Professor Floros:

In 2018, Americans were horrified by images of children being ripped from their parents' arms at the southern border of the United States. Toddlers placed in cages for days. Border Patrol agents admitting that they were not permitted to pick up and comfort at crying children. Stories of abuse and sexual assault of teens in detention facilities. The US government losing kids and not knowing where they were. Deportation of parents while children remained in the United States. The Trump administration was rightly castigated for family separation and no tolerance immigration policies. Trump officials, and Trump himself, argued that the Obama administration engaged in similar policies. What very few people discussed was that these policies were not new to Trump, Obama, or even the 21st century. The United States has a long history of separating families and incarcerating immigrant children. That history will be the subject of today's conversation with UIC historian Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez. So let's get started in The Politics Classroom, recorded on February 9, 2022.

Intro Music: "Three Goddesses" by Third Age

Professor Floros:

Welcome to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Kate Floros from the Political Science Department at the University of Illinois, Chicago. You can find me on Twitter @DrFloros. My guest in the Classroom today is Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez. Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez is a Bridge to Faculty postdoctoral research associate in the History Department at UIC. She received her bachelor's degree in both History and the Philosophy of Ethics, Law, and Politics at the University of Nevada, Reno, and her Master's and PhD in History at Columbia University. She has many awards and honors to her credit, including earning the Truman Fellowship in 2014. She is the author of many articles of public scholarship in Time, The Washington Post, and Teen Vogue, among others. She coedited a book in 2015 called "The Country I Call Home: Stories of Growing Up a Citizen in Every Way but One." Her recent scholarly publications include articles on Mexican child migration in the mid-20th century, the rise of migrant youth detention and family separation, and the history of 20th century child migrants. Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez will teach a course for the History Department in the fall 2022 semester on childhood and race in US. History. Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez, welcome

to The Politics Classroom.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Thank you so much, Kate, both for the invitation to be here and also for that really generous introduction. I'm really honored to be here and to share some of my insights and experiences with undergraduates at UIC and others.

Professor Floros:

Thank you. I really appreciate that. So I think it's important for students to understand that the career path of most people isn't always straightforward and uncomplicated, so I ask all of my guests to share their story. So what got you interested in the history of immigration and child migration specifically, and what led you to choose a career in academia rather than a different career path?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Both really great questions. On the origins of my interest in history...I would say that there were two main reasons that brought me to this discipline. One is intellectual and the other is deeply personal. On the intellectual side of it, when I was in undergraduate at UNR, I came to college thinking that I wanted to go to law school. I thought I wanted to be an immigration attorney. A lot of people around me thought that because my intellectual interests were in immigration and law that it was the obvious choice for me to go to law school.

Professor Floros:

Okay.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I had a history professor at UNR. When he realized that those were my interests, he encouraged me to read Mae Ngai's "Impossible Subjects," and when I read that book, there was a lot that made sense to me not only about my own personal family history, but also about what I was seeing in the news, what I consider to be really important humanitarian immigration dilemmas. The reason that so much made sense to me is because I understand almost all immigration problems as historically rooted. I don't think that we can divorce them from their historical context, and I think that to do so actually gets us into a lot of problems, which I'm sure I'll talk about more detail in other insights that I share about my research. But yeah, reading Mae Ngai's "Impossible Subjects" made me realize that there was this model in front of me for how I wanted to explain the origins and the consequences of certain immigration dilemmas.

And on the personal side, I grew up as the US citizen, daughter of two formerly undocumented Mexican immigrants and

my parents immigration, our family's poverty, our interactions with the US immigration regime really impacted my life despite the fact that I had US citizenship. I would say that because of my parents' undocumented status, my own childhood was curtailed. I had to grow up really young. And I know that this will resonate with a lot of other children of immigrants, whether they were born with US citizenship or not because often, as the ones who grew up in this country, we become the translators, the cultural brokers, we become the secretaries, the lawyers for our parents. So I didn't get to enjoy a lot of the privileges of childhood that maybe other youth who belong to families that maybe did have full US citizenship and every member of the family or those who had a different class background than me could access. So once I got to college and I was exploring different disciplines and of course coming across books like Mae Ngai's "Impossible Subjects," I started realizing that I wanted to understand what the impact of a family's immigration is on children, but also what the child-centered consequences of US immigration exclusion are. And that's how I came to the study of child migration in history.

Professor Floros:

Wow, that's really interesting. So part of your experience was that, if I understand correctly, at 16 you became homeless when your parents separated. So how long before you were able to find more secure housing and how were you able to continue to excel academically under those circumstances?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

My adolescent homelessness was probably the most formative experience of my life. It's the reason why I am the person that I am today. It also was one of the most difficult and painful moments of my life, if I'm being completely honest. I was homeless for a few months because all of the, I guess just to sort of put it in context, all of the structural forces that impacted my family's life and my day to day life, whether it was my parents immigration status or our poverty, they weighed really heavily on my father and impacted his ability to provide for us. And so because of that, unfortunately, that impacted how he treated the women in my family: me, my mum, and my sister. So I became homeless as a result of my father's choices, although it probably wouldn't have mattered too much in the end, because shortly after I was kicked out of the house, my dad lost the house that we were living in. And at that time, the only thing in my life that was providing me some level of fulfillment, some escape, was both school and the extracurricular activities that I was doing at the time. I really loved theater as a kid, and I did a lot of after school theater and being on stage and being able to inhabit different characters, they allowed me to envision different

possibilities for myself. And I was desperate, and I mean absolutely desperate, to no longer be poor, to no longer be homeless. And so I made sure that even if there were these really painful experiences happening around me, that I would do my best to try to maintain my grades and my involvement in my after school activities so that I could go to college and just effectively create distance between myself and my family situation. So for me, school was the escape. It was how I was going to get out of my situation. And that's ultimately what motivated me, was to no longer experience housing insecurity or poverty.

Professor Floros:

I grew up kind of solidly middle class. I had no concept of the effects of poverty. I mean, that's just the simplistic way to say this, but it wasn't until I came to UIC that...I found out that one of my students was actively unhoused while she was in my class. And I was just so amazed at her, I don't even know what, her ability to focus on what she needed to do. And she ended up getting this amazing job that paid ridiculously more than any professor could dream of making. She ended up doing very well, and I was very happy to hear that.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I think a lot of us will all react differently to the adversity in our life because there are people like me and your student, but there were also a lot of students around me who maybe were not experiencing homelessness although much after high school, I realized I learned that there was at least one other student who was going through this. But all of this is to say is that I don't think that my experience is particularly unique or anomalous in terms of the hardships that I experienced being poor, growing up with parents who didn't have immigration status, having experienced domestic violence at home. I mean, these issues plenty of other high school students experienced this, and I think, unfortunately, it's true that there are students who, in those moments, those situations can be so overwhelming that I think for others, it's difficult to focus on something like school as a motivating factor. I was really lucky at the time because my friend's parents took me in after a few months of being without housing. And so because of that, I didn't have to look into services.

Professor Floros:

You attended the University of Nevada, Reno, and you're a first generation college student, I think, in your family. So did you know what you were doing when you applied?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

No. Actually, my story of housing insecurity plays a role in

this because I took the SAT and the ACT while I was homeless. So as much as I could focus on what was going on in school, a standardized test that no one in my family had ever taken, didn't know what it entailed, that was an entirely different situation for me, and I didn't do well on them. So I applied to lots of different colleges when I was a high school senior, and I did so with very little information, knowledge, insight about the process.

Professor Floros:
Sure.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

So I did the best that I could with what I had at my disposal, and I chose to go to UNR because at the very least, I knew that I would be able to pay an instate tuition rate and that it would be cheaper than going out of state. But I ended up showing up with \$90 in my bank account and also very little knowledge about how to succeed in college because no one in my extended family had finished college. I was the first person in my immediate family to finish high school and go to college. And in my extended family, I had a cousin who started college at some point but never finished, so there wasn't anybody that I could go to. And my parents...my dad started high school and didn't finish it. And my mom only has a middle school education, so it was a pretty lonely experience, at least in terms of my family.

Professor Floros:

Well, you seem to have done something right, because you ended up being a Truman Scholar. You were a finalist for the Rhodes Scholarship and something else. So were you just super tenacious about seeking out opportunity? And you're naturally brilliant. What advice would you give to students, I guess I'm asking, who are in a similar situation about college hacks that might help them improve their likelihood of finishing with success.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Well, I really appreciate all your compliments. They're very kind. When I started college, I was very tenacious because I had to be. I had no money. And so it's funny, when I first started, I was applying to lots of scholarships, so I didn't get a lot of scholarship money as a high school senior. And part of that had to do with how poorly I had done on my standardized test. So once I started college, I started reapplying to things. And that's where I started seeing success with funding. But a lot of it had to do with the fact that I desperately needed the resources. And when it came to a lot of the activities that I was involved in, I guess I've always been someone who is really motivated by my interests and by the contributions that I hope to leave on

this society. And in a way, I didn't do them having in mind, I don't know, like graduate school or fellowships. They were the things that sustained me, like emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. So in the beginning of college, I still did a lot of theater. I actually used to teach theater to kids at local Title I elementary schools. And I used it as a way for me, it was like a mechanism of social justice. It was trying to teach kids what theater did for me when I was homeless. So at the time, I think I would have just explained it as like, I wanted to fill my time doing the things that I thought were important that sustained me. And in a way, too, I think I was healing from what had happened in the last couple of years of high school and by trying to figure out my intellectual interest in class, trying to pursue the activities that I really enjoyed. That in and of itself was healing. At the time, I don't think I had this broader sort of logic about why I was doing all of that.

Professor Floros:

Like I said, the reason why I asked all these questions about people's journey is because I think a lot of students don't have a plan. I think it's good to hear that while you're figuring it out, that's okay, and you can still enjoy success. Not having everything figured out exactly the day you step into university does not mean that you can't become successful through your efforts.

So you went from the University of Nevada at Reno to Columbia. So what was it like going from a state university to the Ivy League?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

The learning curve was really difficult on me going from the University of Nevada, Reno to Columbia, but I'm talking about a sort of social and cultural learning curve. The work was intellectually difficult, but that was something that I had long learned how to cope with, how to get through. And now that I'm at UIC and there are all these resources about how to approach teaching and how to do so in an inclusive manner with a growth mindset. I didn't realize there was a term for it. For a long time, I really believed, if I don't understand something now, I will understand it later if I work at this. I had always believed that I could get smarter over time. So intellectually, what was going on at Columbia is challenging. And I didn't come in with the same academic background as my peers because I didn't have advanced graduate training, and I didn't come from a peer institution. The vast majority of my peers either had advanced training in history already or came from a peer institution or both. If they had already gotten a master's degree at Harvard or at Oxford or somewhere similar, and

they could marshal the academic language, the sort of, like, social, the way that you interact with professors and academics, they did that, at least from my perspective, so seamlessly. And that's where I started to become really panicked about my place at Columbia in ways that I wasn't at the University of Nevada, Reno, because even though when I was at UNR, it was a predominantly white institution, I don't know what the demographics are now, but at the time, there were very few of us who were Latinx. There were even fewer black students on campus. I don't even think I ever met an indigenous person while I was there who went to the institution. But at the very least, I had a couple of mentors who had already been really well-versed in the issues of first generation students, those who come from working class backgrounds. It was a very different experience at Columbia, where my peers were the children of famous academics, the children of lawyers, or other kinds of professions that don't exist in my family. So there was a lot of cultural shock, and I actually got really depressed in my first year at Columbia. It was really, really challenging for me, but socially and culturally, intellectually, of course it was difficult. But I think I've long known how to get through that.

Professor Floros:

That's so interesting. I almost dropped out after the first week of graduate school because I didn't know what JStore was, and I had been out for five years. It can be intimidating, but...

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I also didn't know what the heck that was. I remember I kept hearing a term called historiography my first year. I didn't know what the heck that was, and we had to write papers on historiography. I was very confused.

Professor Floros:

What is historiography? I don't know what that is.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

There are debates about history.

Professor Floros:

Okay.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I mean, it involves historical content and the events of history, but it's more about the arguments that historians then make about history.

Professor Floros:

Okay. Interesting. Okay. Is there anything you want to say

about why UIC appealed to you as a place to come for this postdoctoral fellowship?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah, I was so excited when I saw that there was a postdoc at UIC and Latinx history. And you have no idea how many people sent me this ad. I mean, I got it in, like, multiple emails, and people were bombarding me with this ad. It was really sweet. The reason, I think, has a lot to do with what is so very obviously like, a good fit for me and what attracted me to the institution. First and foremost, the fact that it is a Hispanic-serving institution and has so many both first generation and also Latinx students at the institution makes it a really exciting place for me to be a researcher, a professor, and a mentor. As somebody who has really benefited from mentors in my life, I want to make sure that I'm around a student population that I really care about and whose research interests and professional trajectories I can help nurture with the background that I have. So the makeup of the student population is the first thing that was really exciting to me. And I guess related to that, the makeup of the city of Chicago, there's a really vibrant and rich history here of Latinx people in Chicago, particularly Mexican people. Some of it actually makes its way into my research.

Professor Floros:

Okay.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

The department that hired me, I mean, there are scholars in this department who I had admired before, who I didn't know personally. So, honestly, it's just such an honor to be in the same department as people like Adam Goodman and Elizabeth Todd Freeland. I honestly can't believe that they're my colleagues. And there are so many people across the university doing such amazing work in immigration studies that is not only groundbreaking in the scholarship, but also really community engaged. And that's probably the third reason that really attracted me to UIC, is that I get the sense that scholars here are not only interested in impacting conversations within their academic circles, but they're also interested in speaking to the public or engaging practitioners and others.

Professor Floros:

Okay, great. So thank you so much for sharing your personal story. That's wonderful, and we're glad to have you at UIC.

Music break: "Vamos" by Matt Wigton

Professor Floros:

You're listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and you can reach me on Twitter @DrFloros. My guest in the Classroom today is Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez, a Bridge to Faculty postdoctoral research associate in the History Department at UIC.

I want to turn to your research. A lot of your research focuses on child migration from Latin America and the Caribbean. The children have been coming to the US, both with adults and unaccompanied, for decades from all over the world. My first question is a little broad, but why might children come to the United States unaccompanied, both historically, and are the reasons the same today that they would have been in the late 1800s, early 1900s?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I am a historian of the 20th century.

Professor Floros:

Okay.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

While I have a pretty comprehensive understanding of child migration in US History across various geographies, I specialize in 20th century Mexican and Central American child migrants. And when it comes to the Central American kids, the large groups of them didn't start coming into the late 20th century. But the reasons for child migrants coming to the United States were really varied and diverse. They depended on where they were coming from and the time period that they were coming in. But often it had a lot to do with educational opportunity, trying to achieve family unity if they had parents or other family members who are already in the United States. A lot of unaccompanied teenagers came for work opportunity. The children that I study in particular, they came to work on farms because for most of the 20th century, particularly in the post-WWII period, Mexicans predominated among agricultural labor. But it wasn't just adults who were working on those farms. Children were also recruited for that work or came on their own accord because they wanted to help provide for their families that they left behind. It's a little bit similar to what I was talking about in my own family story. Like, these are young people from whom childhood is shortened. They are forced to take on responsibilities that more privileged families would reserve for those who are legally considered adults. But in this case, unaccompanied youth. They invert age hierarchies that are traditionally found in families, and they take on a lot of adult responsibilities, including work opportunity. But there are also other factors aside from these, like fleeing

civil wars. That's what Central American children were doing in the late 20th century fleeing conflict in their countries that was exacerbated by US interventions and coming to the United States in search of safety and refuge. A lot of those reasons for children's migration, they still predominate today. Children come for family unity, for safety. Children still also come for work, which I think is something a lot of people don't know. There are, unfortunately, unaccompanied youth who, because of the way that the border has been militarized and lawful avenues to migration have been closed off, children and also adults, although of course, I focus on children will sometimes have their labor exploited in work sites, and they get labor trafficked. So it's also part of my research.

Professor Floros:

I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the differences between migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. And your previous answer kind of talked about all three of those different categories, but they're treated differently under law. So if we could just talk for a couple of minutes about what the differences are. My understanding is that when we talk about economic migrants, we're talking about folks who are leaving their homeland in the hopes of economic opportunity somewhere else versus asylum seekers who are fleeing some persecution based on their identity or beliefs, and they face danger in their home country versus refugees who are fleeing because of either something like war or natural disaster but hope maybe someday to go back to their home country. Is that even remotely close? And...

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah.

Professor Floros:

Okay. And why are they treated so differently under law?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah, it's a great question, and I do think you're right. It's really important to understand how not both the law but also I've noticed that, like, policymakers and even the public, they differentiate these three categories, and they have their sort of like definitional distinctions. You're right. There are people who are seen by both law and also policymakers and the public as economic migrants because they come to the US, it is said, of their own volition. They come here voluntarily because they're looking for economic opportunity.

And then there are those who are asylum seekers. The only thing I would add to your definition is that asylum seekers, as opposed to refugees, they are already at a US port of

entry or at the US border outside of a port of entry, and they are seeking admission. They're already at our boundaries, whereas refugees are abroad, and they are often fleeing the same circumstances asylum seekers are. And here I'm talking about how the law, policymakers, and the public would differentiate these.

Refugees could be fleeing the same circumstances asylum seekers, but they are abroad, and they get resettled while they are away. So they don't ask for permission to enter the US at its boundaries. They get resettled by the UN, by large humanitarian agencies. So their admission is facilitated for them while they are either in their country of origin, or they might have already fled to a different country but are asking for permission to come to the United States. But a lot of these lines between who's considered a migrant, who's considered an asylum seeker, and who's considered a refugee are really murky.

And there's a big discussion among people in critical refugee studies about how sometimes the US weaponizes these distinctions in order to try to either deny admission to certain groups of people or provide and hasten admissions to these groups. So in the late 20th century, for example, when Haitians were fleeing a US-backed regime, they came to Florida on boats, and the United States accused them of being economic migrants in order to prevent them from accessing the protections afforded under asylum and refugee law. Whereas at the time, there were Cubans who were fleeing the Communist revolution, and the United States treated them more often as bonafide refugees and asylum seekers.

So all that is to say that there are people who come to the United States who are accused being economic migrants because the US doesn't want to afford them the privileges of asylum or refugee protection. But sometimes there are asylum seekers and refugees who also have in their mind economic opportunity, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Poverty in and of itself is very violent. But poverty doesn't count as grounds for asylum. Neither does a climate of generalized violence, despite the fact that people who come from those climates might have really morally and ethically compelling reasons for wanting to migrate, but they will be called economic migrants.

Professor Floros:

Yeah. Oh, US government. <sigh>

Okay. Well, and there's a long history of states denying education to migrant children. Often the excuses that the children and their families failed to meet residency requirements of the state. They didn't live in the state

long enough to qualify for education. What is your understanding of the justification behind that? Is it that they wanted the kids to be able to engage in labor or they wanted to discourage families from migrating and just have single men or whatever? Do you have a sense of kind of what was motivating these efforts to deny things as basic as education to children?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Educational deprivation of migrant children have lots of goals in mind. A couple of them you totally nailed on the head. One of them was that if the US government offered free public education to the children of undocumented immigrants, they thought that that would encourage entire families to immigrate to the United States without authorization and to settle here permanently. And because they saw them as something akin to likely to become public charges, they didn't want to encourage long term family immigration that would become dependent on the US government for its day to day survival. That's how they saw it. Well, there was a really famous Supreme Court case in 1982 that was precisely about this issue because in 1975, Texas created a law to either charge undocumented families exorbitant tuition for their kids to attend school, knowing they wouldn't be able to pay, or they just outright allow districts to exclude undocumented children from their schooling. It was an experiment in immigration deterrence. They figured that these laws would discourage entire families from settling permanently in the United States.

Now, there is another reason, which is one that you mentioned that if the children of undocumented parents get educated, acquire professional and analytic skills to leave low-wage labor, then the US would no longer have this supply of both cheap but also deportable labor, which in and of itself also has a long history the labor exploitation of migrant workers. So there was a sort of a labor rationale to the educational deprivation of migrant youth.

Professor Floros:

In the Progressive Era, there were many efforts to kind of preserve childhood as this time of innocence, etc. And part of that was creating laws that limited the amount and type of labor that children of certain ages could take part in. But those laws tended to exempt agriculture. So allowing child labor in agriculture and not in other fields. Now, when I learned about this, I was told this was because of family farms. And so Joey could work on his parents' farm and that wouldn't be breaking the law. But reading some of your writing makes me wonder if this was also a way to keep children out of school, migrant children out of school and working in the field alongside their parents.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yes. So I actually examined a lot of the advocacy around how the 1938 child labor ban was written on its agricultural exemptions in particular. There was a lot of discussion around the family farm situation because there is sort of this idea that the United States is like 19th century idea that the United States would be made up of a bunch of small, self-sufficient family farms and that to ban child labor on farms wouldn't allow children to help their parents on their farms. So there was a discussion around this. And while the official rationale around excluding agriculture from the protections of the anti-child labor ban, they actually had it more to do with black children than anything else because there were a lot of black children who were working on southern farms at the time. But right just a few years after the 1937 act was instituted, the demographics of the United States agricultural workforce became overwhelmingly Mexican. And even in the early 20th century, there were already Mexican children working on farms. And I'm pretty confident that migrant children's work on farms didn't enter the Congressional debate over exempting agriculture. But on the ground there was knowledge of Mexican children working on farms. And after 1937, particularly during World War II and just immediately after, when there was a large scale migration of undocumented Mexicans to the United States, in that migration, a lot of children were also working on farms. And the fact that the national child labor ban exempted agriculture from its provisions allowed a lot of agricultural capitalists to exploit Mexican children's labor in particular.

Professor Floros:

You just mentioned that the child laborers that folks had in mind when they exempted agriculture were black children who were working on southern farms. And it seems from someone who is not a scholar or expert in immigration policies that it is impossible to separate race and immigration because there are all of these...okay, so one, the Chinese Exclusion Act, right? We don't want Asians to come. Then the Immigration Act of 1924 set national quotas based on, I don't know if it was the 1870 or 1880 population of the US. So that preferenced British and Northern European places. The Immigration Act of 1965, which I always thought was super great because it removed national quotas until I read your research, when I learned that while it removed the quotas on Asians and Southern Europeans, it actually imposed national quotas for the first time on migrants from the Western Hemisphere, which had not previously been part of the national quota system. You've mentioned the differential treatment between Cuban and Haitian migrants. Is immigration just an extension of white supremacy?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah, immigration law was designed, to put it plainly, to try to keep the United States white. A lot of US immigration policy was built around that logic, and the deportation and immigrant detention regime were built on the backs of immigrants of color. And they have firmly white supremacist logic attached to them. Yeah.

Professor Floros:

So when it was mostly European migrants who were coming, they didn't do this detention to the extent that they did once they were dealing with migrants of color in larger numbers?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I forgot exactly what percentage of it it was, but most European immigrants who came through Ellis Island were admitted into the United States. Very few of them were deported. Very few of them were confined on Ellis Island. There were some stories of that nature, but they were rare and anomalous, and a lot of them came before the invention of the passport and visa system. It was what immigrants of color in the late 20th century encountered was a very different, very militarized southwestern US border, a slowly developing immigrant detention infrastructure, and by the late 20th century, a pretty well-oiled deportation machine that, of course, the students are interested in. They can read Adam Goodman's "The Deportation Machine" on immigration laws and the ways that they created racial hierarchies in the United States. Everything that I know about that comes from Mai Ngai's "Impossible Subjects."

Professor Floros:

Okay, let's talk about the militarization of the borders. What's up with that? There's also the issue of the militarization of just regular police as well. But was this a function of some actual need to have more lethal force and detention capability, or was this perceived threat of brown people that led to this?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Well, both the invention of the Border Patrol and also the militarization or the hardening of the US-Mexico border, both of those were projects rooted in racial violence. Both were created and developed to police what white policymakers saw as a sort of crisis of undocumented migration. I mean, they called it other words, more pejorative words that I won't use. But it was their reaction to a perceived crisis of people that they criminalized that they saw as inherently devious and as threatening to US society and its safety nets, too. So the border militarization...There's a lot of

talk about how the US formally institutionalized in the 1990s this prevention through deterrence policy that the Border Patrol instituted. But in my research, I find that in practice, the border started to get militarized decades before then in a way that mirrors modern border hardening and militarization. I think it started with the Nixon and Carter administrations because there were leaders of the Immigration Naturalization Service, the agency that predated the Department of Homeland Security, that asked for weaponry and technology left over from the Vietnam War to be brought to their policing of the US-Mexico border. A lot more tactical gear, overtime pay, additional Border Patrol agents in those years of the 20th century, during the Nixon and Carter administration. And this was also the years when more and more children were crossing the United States-Mexico border with human smugglers because of how hardened the border has become and how few, if any, legal avenues of immigration they can pursue, they have no other option but to hire guidance across the US-Mexico border and enter without inspection.

Professor Floros:

Right. Okay, so let's talk about the rise of the coyote. These are the folks who are basically trafficking people across borders through established smuggling routes, and they charge exorbitant fees to shepherd people into the United States. So is the movement of people from Mexico and Central America, has that always been facilitated by kind of middlemen to match these folks with farms or whoever needed the labor, and now it's just skeezy because it's illegal and they're exploitative? Or has it always been exploitative?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

It's been exploitative and an unscrupulous line of work for a really long time, ever since the advent of the Border Patrol, since there were people who had to guard the US-Mexico border, and it became increasingly difficult with their presence to just cross the border and have no one see you. Smugglers have been used by immigrants to transport them to the United States, but they started getting used probably in significant numbers during that post-World War II period, at least in comparison to how often they were used prior to that. But when they started getting used in really large numbers was after 1975, because after 1975, I think it was somewhere around 70% of immigrants who had a smuggler who helped transport them. So it was the majority of immigrants post-1975 who had somebody guide them across the border.

And the main reason that human smugglers, known as coyotes or polleros, the reason that they can sort of mislead people about their services and defraud them in some cases, is

precisely because there aren't lawful avenues for them to come into the United States because immigrants have to cross in a clandestine manner. It makes all of these agreements happen sort of behind the shadows. And this can lead to really devastating human rights violations where people will either be subjected to violence on their journey or they can end up trafficked in the United States. So part of my research traces the origins of undocumented youth who were trafficked onto farms by their smugglers in the late 20th century.

Professor Floros:

So they were coming to reunite with family, but they ended up working on farms?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

So some definitely wanted to reunite with family and flee the circumstances of their life in either Mexico or Central America. There were others who wanted to work, and there are youth who agreed, who had terms that they agreed upon with their smuggler to transport them to a site of employment. But those terms were almost never met for the user were trafficked because they were promised pretty good wages. They were promised equipment. They weren't supposed to be responsible in some cases for the cost of their passage. But once they showed up to their work site, they learned that they would be placed in this really coercive and violent situation of debt peonage, where essentially they had to pay back the debt that they owe to their smuggler for the transportation. And it was impossible to pay that debt because the price of it would get inflated by the time they show up to their work site. They would add interest and they would deduct money from their paychecks for all the food that they provided them. The housing, if there was housing, sometimes either was no housing, and youth would have to literally sleep in the open air of the orange groves of the farms. Their living conditions and their work conditions were really inhumane and abysmal for the youth who got traffic and the adults, because there were also adults who experienced this.

Professor Floros:

So what happened to those kids that if they could never get out of debt, what happened?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

There were some youth who fought back. They would run away from the farms where they were trafficked. Some of them would manage to get help from legal aid societies, and they actually sued smugglers and their employers. But what happened often when they would sue is, and this actually has to do with the part of my research that studies child

detention in the late 20th century, is that they would actually get detained and put in either like a county jail or a newly formed immigrant detention center because the US government wanted them to testify against their smugglers. And in those...because the US government at the time thought that that's how they were going to address the undocumented migration that was happening at the time by taking to court smugglers, because that's what they saw as responsible for this new period of immigration. But what would end up happening in those cases is that youth would get detained for weeks at a time, and often they ended up getting deported, while smugglers would just pay for bail and leave within a few days. And the employers would often evade legal responsibility because of either how well-connected and influential they were or of course, because they actually had access to representation and to judges who were complicit in this exploitation, in that they had ideas about migrant youth that were racialized and criminalizing, so they would side with employers rather than those who were exploited.

Professor Floros:

Speaking of judges, every time the idea of turning away asylum seekers at the border is, I mean, things that I've heard include, well, if we let them in, they won't show up for their court date. Even if they show up for their court date, the system is so backlog, it will be years before their date comes up. Why are there not more immigration judges? That seems to me to be a step towards the solution. Right? If the problem is the courts are overwhelmed, why are we putting money into the people with guns and not the people with black robes and gavels?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

I don't know the answer to this either.

Professor Floros:

Okay.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Although what I can comment on is the fact that the same reasoning that was being used to confine smuggled or traffic child migrants in order to force them to testify against their smugglers, was the same rationale that's used today was that if we don't detain them and have them in government custody, they'll never show up to government hearings, which is actually false. There's a lot of both, like, social scientific literature and evidence from nonprofits and legal providers that immigrants do, in fact, in high rates, come back for their immigration proceedings if released from immigrant detention.

Professor Floros:

Okay, so let's talk about kind of the last, I don't know, ten years of immigration at the southern border. The policies of detention and family separation. This was seen as another deterrence strategy. Right? We'll put them in jail and we will take their children away from them, and then that will keep people who haven't come yet from coming at all because they don't want to face these outcomes.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Right.

Professor Floros:

Okay, so can you talk a little bit about (a) was it effective? Does it actually deter people? And how is this program legal in the United States to tear their children away from their parents?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

The first thing that I want to say in response to the very tragic events in recent immigration news are that history shows us that immigration deterrence doesn't work. The policymakers have believed in it for a very long time with very little evidence, and they have peddled the sort of fantasy that if we invest efforts in trying to deter families from coming here in the first place, like doing things like threatening to detain them, threatening to separate them from their family members, that they won't come in the first place. But people are suffering from really desperate circumstances, and their desire for survival is far more powerful than whatever the US government puts in their way because people are fleeing really harrowing circumstances that range everywhere from political instability in their countries of origins to the different forms of violence that they face in their countries. I mean, people flee because in many cases, especially in the cases of, say, like Central Americans or Haitians who are fleeing their countries of origins, if they don't, they likely might not survive in their countries of origin. The United States has been experimenting for a long time too in trying to injure child welfare as a way to achieve immigration deterrence.

Professor Floros:

To injure child welfare? What do you mean by that?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah, I guess, like, to put it in more simpler terms, harming kids in order to try to punish parents, immigrant parents. And I think that's what they were doing with family separation. If we threatened that we're going to take your kids away, if we try to injure children's welfare, then the

parents won't make the decision in the first place to immigrate with their kids or to send their kids on some kind of harrowing immigration journey will threaten child detention if you send your kid here.

Childhood innocence has also been weaponized against immigrant families, to actually harm immigrant families. And that's what the Trump administration did when saying we're going to separate children from their families in order to protect children, because criminal and neglectful parents are actually putting kids in harm's way by bringing them to the United States on these immigration journeys. So my research tries to look at how the United States has tried to essentially harm children to achieve immigration deterrence, to deter people and discourage them from coming to the United States without authorization.

Even the story of educational deprivation is an example of this because it's seen anyways in the 20th century that one of the rights of childhood is access to schooling. That's why these, like, progressive era child savers tried to create compulsory school attendance laws. But the state of Texas reasoned in 1975 that if you deny education to the kids and parents won't make the decision to come. That sort of logic follows its way into either family detention or family separation.

Professor Floros:

But it doesn't work.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

No, it doesn't work. People will still come, even, like in these early months and years of the Biden administration. Like, there was news pretty early on in the administration that when accompanied children, we're still coming to the United States families were still trying to seek protection here. And his administration has very disappointingly continued and expanded certain punitive and restrictive Trump-era policies. And one of them is the Migrant Protection Protocols, which a lot of advocates say helps to destroy immigrants' chances of asking for asylum because it forces them to wait for long periods of time along the US-Mexico border in pretty dangerous places before they can even ask for asylum. And then the other one is the continuation of Title 42, which has closed official port of entries to asylum seekers on the basis, they claim, of a public health rationale. They say that because of the pandemic, they should turn away asylum seekers.

Professor Floros:

So I want to talk about the Dreamers under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival. This was an Obama-era policy

that children who were brought to the United States undocumented by their parents could basically come out from the cold and get legal ability to work, go to school, et cetera. And this seems to have a lot of support on both sides of the aisle, maybe, but there's still no law that actually makes this true. And President Trump said you got to get rid of it. And the Supreme Court said something which I still don't understand, but why is it that even kids, the least threatening of all the immigrants possible, that there still is not more secure protection

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

For young people, specifically?

Professor Floros:

For Dreamers...This is something that people keep talking about, like, yes, we need to help the Dreamers. They're really contributing to society. This is great, but actually we're not going to help them.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

You're right that on the surface, the issue of undocumented youth, some of whom are referred to as Dreamers or as DACAmented people. Their plight appeared to be one of the most accepted, in a bipartisan sense, because they were young people, and it was said that through no fault of their own, they ended up in the United States, although even that sort of language was really problematic because it succeeded in criminalizing the parents of undocumented young people. But I think one of the reasons why it seems impossible politically to try to get a pathway to citizenship, even for undocumented youth who came here as very young children and who have lived in the United States for a very long time, is because even young people in the United States who don't have authorization, they have been adultified in that because they lack legal status in the United States, they actually get seen as more adultlike than they do childlike, if that makes sense, in that there's a lot of discussion among people who study childhood that the sort of concept of childhood innocence is really exclusive in a lot of ways, and it's not extended to certain kinds of young people, particularly young people of color or undocumented youth. And there are anti-immigrant critics who I think, adultify them to such an extent that it doesn't matter what their age are, they committed an offense, broke a law that sort of nullifies their childhood innocence, if they ever had any, from their perspective.

Professor Floros:

Yeah, those two year olds are really dangerous. They should be treated like adults.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Of course, it's absolutely ridiculous, but in fact, in a lot of cases, they are treated like adults because, for example, since they don't have US citizenship, if they come to their own deportation proceedings, they're not entitled to free legal counsel from the government. They have to find their own lawyer through a nonprofit, which is totally possible. There are nonprofits out there who represent young children, but they're not guaranteed council by the government. So there are lots of children who go to their immigration proceedings essentially facing an immigration judge by themselves.

Professor Floros:

Like a five year old is standing there representing themselves?

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Essentially. Yeah, there's lots of news coverage about this. Young children who have to show up to their deportation proceedings without counsel.

Professor Floros:

HOW IS THAT LEGAL? HONESTLY, THIS IS, LIKE, BLOWING MY MIND!

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Yeah. It's really infuriating the way that undocumented people, even those who have committed absolutely no crime, they get deprived of a lot of really basic rights to due process, really basic human rights just on the basis of their legal status.

Professor Floros:

This has been a really great conversation, and I appreciate you taking the time. Dr. Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez, thank you so much for joining me today in The Politics Classroom.

Dr. Padilla-Rodríguez:

Thanks so much for having me. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Professor Floros:

Dr. Ivón Padilla Rodriguez is a Bridge to Faculty postdoctoral research associate in the History department at UIC. You've been listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and that's all I've got for this week. Class dismissed!

Outro Music: "Three Goddesses" by Third Age