

## Book Review

# Immigrants Under Threat: Risk and Resistance in the Deportation Nation

By Greg Prieto

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**Reviewer:** Asad L. Asad, *Cornell University and Stanford University*

Studies of immigrant “illegality” in the United States consider how contemporary policy and practice marginalize immigrants, their families, and their communities. A central component of this marginalization is deportability, or the possibility of deportation, which haunts undocumented immigrants in particular (De Genova 2002). Against this backdrop, the rapidly growing literature on immigrant illegality tends to follow one of two separate lines of investigation. In the first, researchers consider the avoidance or hiding strategies undocumented immigrants adopt to minimize their perceived risk of deportation (see, e.g., Asad and Eva 2018; García 2014). In the second, researchers examine how undocumented immigrants mobilize to challenge their marginalization through highly-visible strategies such as large-scale protests demanding their formal inclusion in U.S. society (for a summary, see Jones-Correa and Els De 2013: 218–220). Though some have identified the relationships between these seemingly-incompatible moments of avoidance and engagement or visibility and invisibility (e.g., Abrego 2011), seldom do these two lines of research speak to one another.

Enter Greg Prieto’s important book, *Immigrants Under Threat*, which views undocumented immigrants as actors capable of enacting both avoidance and engagement strategies. Prieto relies on rich ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with 61 respondents in two Mexican-immigrant communities in Central California. For three years, he worked with a local immigrant advocacy organization in the area, the pseudonymous La Unión, to facilitate access to informants in pseudonymous North City and South City. Study participants included 23 undocumented immigrants, three lawful permanent residents, eight naturalized citizens, five U.S.-born citizens, and 22 immigrants of an unreported legal status. Most respondents were connected to La Unión, even if the scope of their involvement in activism differed. Centering his inquiry on the literature’s apparent tension between avoidance and engagement, Prieto asks how the risk of deportation amplifies or constrains the possibility of immigrants’ participation in social movements. Across both contexts, he takes readers on a deep dive into what he calls immigrants’ “shell, or [their] private strategies of avoidance

and isolation, and immigrants' instrumental activism, or their public and collective mobilization for material change" (8). Prieto develops the concept of material moorings, or the anchoring of immigrant politics in these individuals' racialized and economically-marginalized social locations (21), to explain the conditions underlying undocumented immigrants' range of involvement in social movements.

True to the literature on immigrant "illegality," Prieto's analysis first highlights the burdens federal, state, and local policies impose on undocumented immigrants. He gives the example of car impoundments, an understudied but quintessential way social exclusion is encoded into contemporary immigration policy and practice: undocumented immigrants must work to support their families but, denied access to a state-issued driver's license, risk fines and car impoundment for driving without a license in California. During "hot" moments—e.g., when local police have set up checkpoints or when Immigration and Customs Enforcement is spotted in town—Prieto shows the different strategies undocumented immigrants adopt to minimize the perceived risk of detention and deportation in both North City and South City (p. 82ff). But these avoidance strategies can also dampen undocumented immigrants' activism. Facing very real financial pressures, undocumented immigrants in the study simply did not have time—or could not afford to take time off—to participate in social movements.

After outlining how contemporary immigration policy and practice marginalize undocumented immigrants and trigger their avoidance strategies, *Immigrants Under Threat* considers moments in which these individuals become involved in social movements. Prieto develops the concept of "instrumental activism" to show how La Unión activists focused on "the prospect of achieving concrete and material improvements in [undocumented immigrants'] daily lives" in order to inspire undocumented immigrants' participation in the organization's work (108–109). This framing aligns with undocumented immigrants' quest for material and symbolic stability amidst the myriad threats to their livelihoods. Prieto explains how the local contexts the undocumented inhabit condition the type of activism in which they engage. In relatively-progressive South City, undocumented immigrants enjoy broad support among elite actors (e.g., the police chief and local council) and have opportunity to express their concerns to these actors in a community forum format. But relatively-conservative North City is characterized by elite opposition (e.g., the police chief and mayor) to its undocumented residents. A series of police-involved killings amplifies the threat these actors pose. With minimal opportunity for dialogue with elite actors, a more confrontational form of activism—public marches and rallies—emerged in North City.

*Immigrants Under Threat* opens the door to several important questions for scholars, policymakers, and activists working on contemporary immigration policy and practice. First, how might undocumented immigrants without a connection to activist organizations think about social movement participation? As the methodological appendix makes clear, it can be difficult to recruit undocumented immigrants to participate in social-scientific studies without a trusted community leader who can "vouch" for the researcher. Yet, research shows that

undocumented immigrants with connections to community-based organizations are more likely to mobilize politically (e.g., Zepeda-Millán 2017). It might thus be prudent to consider what alternative strategies, if any, undocumented immigrants disconnected from activist organizations report in response to the threat of deportation. Second, what is the relationship between legal status and immigrant integration? The federal policies that expanded undocumented immigrants' vulnerability to deportation also applied to multiple categories of documented immigrants (Asad 2018; Joseph 2018). Greater attention to the strategies that "legal" and "illegal" immigrants adopt to minimize their perceived risk of deportation might help to reveal deportability as a threat to all noncitizens rather than undocumented immigrants alone.

At bottom, *Immigrants Under Threat* offers an engaging, persuasive account of the range of ways undocumented immigrants perceive and respond to the threat of deportation. Greg Prieto challenges scholars, policymakers, and activists alike to look beyond avoidance strategies to also consider the novel—and, sometimes, very visible—ways undocumented immigrants resist an increasingly-punitive U.S. immigration system through social movement participation.

## References

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