

TRANSCRIPT  
**HOW WE GOT HERE**  
EP 5 – Unwelcome to America

**NINA ALVAREZ** The metro is an underground railway that stretches out from Washington DC to Maryland and Virginia. It was built in the early 1970s by thousands of workers. Mostly white men.

[TAPE] Old newsreel from [metro construction](#).

Today, Metrorail serves 91 stations throughout 118 miles of track - and now there is new construction. It's called the Purple line. It will add 16 miles of track into Prince George's County Maryland. Plus, there's an entirely new line Dulles International Airport. This time, the workers are mostly brown.

[TAPE] Denis: It's not an exaggeration to say that in the last 20 or 30 years that the construction industry in the Washington DC area has been led by Latino immigrants.

That's Dennis Desmond, the business manager of Laborers Local 11. For the past 100 years or so, it's the union that has represented the commercial construction workers in the DMV - that's the Washington DC Maryland Virginia Area. Today they represent about 3,000 workers.

[TAPE] Denis: About 2000 to 2200 of our members are, um, immigrants, mostly Salvadoran. We have some Hondurans, some Guatemalans, a few from miscellaneous other countries, but the great bulk of our membership is Salvadoran

And Salvadorans are the largest foreign born population in the DMV.

[TAPE] Dennis: I think you saw the Salvadorans arriving in large numbers in the late seventies and particularly during the 80s during the civil war. And then they've just come steadily, uh, since that time.

[In the mountains of el salvador it's people are waging a bloody civil war or struggle in which the reagan administration wants to draw the line against soviet and Cuban interference](#)

From 1980 to 1992, the Salvadoran Civil War was fueled by a billion U.S. tax dollars - and not because there was any great strategic value in Central American countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. President Ronald Reagan was on a mission, determined to defeat our cold war rival, the Soviet Union.

[TAPE] [newsreel](#): It's this controversial junta that American officials are now seeking to portray as a progressive bastion against communism.

Despite opposition in congress and the American public, for over a decade, the U.S. government supported a regime with one of the worst human rights records in the western hemisphere.

In the war against a left wing insurgency, over 75,000 civilians were killed, mostly at the hands of the US trained and supported Salvadoran military. Thousands more were tortured or disappeared.

[TAPE] [Old newsreel](#) about Salvadorian civil war:  
The morning rush hour in the city of San Salvador, and while the drivers hoot impatiently to get to work, an unburied corpse lies ignored by the roadside, brutal evidence of the civil war to which the US is now committing weapons and advisors.

And that is why Antonio Flores left – returning only to retrieve his five sons as each approached recruitment age. In El Salvador, that could be as young as ten years old.

[TAPE] [Antonio Flores tape](#)

The war was brutal, he says. He describes seeing bodies on the streets every morning. Victims of government death squads and combat. It was not possible to live and work while his family and neighbors were terrorized by constant violence.

Over one million Salvadorians fled during the 1980s – that was 20 percent of the country's population then.

Most came to the United States. But even though US tax dollars were fueling a war that fueled their flight, Salvadorans were not recognized as war refugees. Political asylum was rarely granted - somewhere in the vicinity of 1 - 2 percent of all applications were approved.

[TAPE] [Ricardo Inzunza: \(18:57\)](#) It started in that administration that we started vilifying and creating a bad taste in people's mouths about immigrants like people who were breaking the law.

Ricardo Inunza was a deputy commissioner with the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. It's an agency that was folded into the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11.

[TAPE] [INZUNZA](#) and we know that they're not criminals. And the people who were calling them criminals knew they weren't criminals. But in order to make our point politically, to create a wedge issue, or to gain votes, we called them narco terrorists....

Central Americans keep coming. In 2019, they were coming in caravans and a cruel practice was perpetrated against immigrant children.

[TAPE] 00:00 [“Tonight we’re getting disturbing audio of 10 central american children separated in the field by border patrol just last week.](https://www.propublica.org/article/children-separated-from-parents-border-patrol-cbp-trump-immigration-policy)  
Sound from here - <https://www.propublica.org/article/children-separated-from-parents-border-patrol-cbp-trump-immigration-policy>  
TAPE: The battle over the Trump administration’s zero tolerance policy intensifying, with lawmakers from both parties condemning it as cruel and inhumane. The administration still defends the strategy. Thousands of people protested across texas yesterday, they accused the administration of punishing undocumented children by removing them from their parents. The department of 1995 children were separated from their parents between April 19 and May 31.

Public outrage followed, but many also blamed parents for making the journey at all. Despite the notion that America has been built by immigrants. Despite that immigrants mostly pay taxes, the narrative of the law-breaking illegal alien dominates the public discourse.

[TAPE] Trump tape: Nearly one hundred and eighty thousand illegal immigrants with criminal records are tonight roaming free to threaten peaceful citizens.

I’m Nina Alvarez. I’m a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. I’ve covered conflict, migration and gender stories around the world for television news and documentary for well over two decades. Lately I’ve been focusing on immigration - specifically Salvadorans already here. This is *How We Got Here*, a podcast that takes a step back to look at the pressing issues facing journalists today--race, class, immigration, gender. As journalists, we like to say we’re writing the first draft of history. But if we don’t know our *own* history, we run the risk of misinterpreting what we see. And what we hear. Of not being able to connect the dots. This is episode 5, Unwelcome to America.

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Joining me now is Mae Ngai. Mae is the Lung Family Professor of Asian American studies, professor of history, and the co-director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race here at Columbia University. She is the author of *Impossible Subjects*, a landmark work that examines the idea and the term illegal alien, and how it clashes with our notions of citizenship and race. It is a must read resource for any journalist covering immigration.

Let's start with the term that seems to drive a lot of the conversation: illegal alien. When did it first come to use? And what prompted it?

**MAE NGAI** You know, a lot of Americans whose ancestors are European will say, my ancestors came here the right way. They came legally. They did everything right. They wanted to assimilate. You know, they weren't illegal. And I think what's important to understand is, before the 1920s, especially during the peak years of Ellis Island immigration, there were no restrictions, or there were very, very few restrictions on immigration. Only 2% out of some 20, 25 million people were rejected. So I always tell people, there's no great honor in being legal if everybody is legal. You only have the phenomenon of so called illegal immigration when you have restrictions on immigration. The first so-called illegal aliens were Chinese because the first restrictive act of immigration was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. But as a general rule, immigration was unrestricted until after World War One. So there's no such thing as a green card. No such thing as a passport even. No such thing as a quota. You just showed up. And if you had \$15 to \$20 in your pocket, and you didn't have an obvious disease you got in. So we only have this idea of the illegal once you have restrictions, and the restrictions imposed on immigration in the 1920s was quite severe. It cut immigration by 85% to what it had been before World War I.

**NA** And who was that targeting? I mean in 1924 there were still immigrants coming from Europe.

**MN** Oh, absolutely. The high immigration period from the 1890s to World War One, were coming mostly from Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and kind of Central East Europe. So there were many Italians, Poles, Russians, including many Jews, people from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Greece, etc. And these were the people who supplied the brawn, right? The muscle for the industrialization and urbanization of America. They dug subway tunnels, they sewed garments in sewing factories. They paved the roads, you know, these, this was the high tide of American industrialization.

**NA** Can you take me back to the Chinese Exclusion Act? 1882. What prompted that to even happen, like who thought of this and what was the purpose?

**MN** Well, Chinese first came to California during the California Gold Rush around 1850.

And their arrival there coincided with people that came from the eastern and southern United States, but also people from all over the world, really, from Europe to Latin America, Australia, Hawaii, etc, etc.

And the situation on the gold fields was one where white Americans used a kind of nativism, a kind of anti foreign politics as a weapon of competition, right? It was – their view was this is our gold. It's not yours, right? But it was really a kind of weaponization of nativism, or anti foreignness so they could have more gold, basically.

And this idea that it's, it's all ours is not for you was, in some ways, we can think of it as a crude expression of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which drove American continental expansion since the 1840s. Right? It's the movement of the US Republic across the continent. A process which necessarily involved trampling over Native American Indians, waging war against Mexico and taking Mexico's northern half. And this was something that was also closely related to the sectional conflict over slavery, right? Because both the north and the south needed to expand to the west in order to build their vision of what the United States would be.

So this idea was that the West was really for white people. That's what Manifest Destiny meant. It meant that God willed the continent to be for white people.

And so when they got to the edge of the continent, and they, they could look behind them and see that they had succeeded in annexing Mexico and dispossessing Native Americans. And they looked at the next frontier, they turned around, and they looked at the next frontier, which was the Pacific. And that was a complicated move, because they saw on the one hand, a new frontier, that beckoned in terms of American business and geopolitical interests. But it also invoked anxieties because that necessarily meant people coming to the United States from those new areas. So Chinese Exclusion was basically a move to make sure that the United States and especially its Pacific Coast would remain white.

**NA** I'm imagining what your research turned up. And I'm sure it brought up some really interesting media, talking about Chinese immigrants, their role in, you know, whatever industries that we're working in. Can you describe any of the media that you came across in your study of this period?

**MN** You know, Chinese immigration was extremely controversial, both on the west coast, of course, where there was the most opposition, but it also made it into the national media. So periodicals like Harper's Weekly, for example, often had cartoons or stories about Chinese immigration. There's two that really come to my mind. I think they're both by Thomas Nast.

One of them has the figure of Columbia, right, the lady who represents the Republic, and she's standing in front of a wall upon which all kinds of anti Chinese slurs are written, you know, that they're like rats, they're an invasion. They're heathens, they're barbaric.

And she's protecting a Chinaman figure who is very abject – he's kind of crouched behind her. And she's protecting him from a mob of people who are meant to be Irish, they have clubs, and they're threatening to tear this Chinese person down. And the caption is the Chinese question and what is the Republic for?

So here you have a cartoon that gestures towards an idea that America is for all and that the constitution should apply to everybody and the Constitution should protect the Chinese. So that's on one side of the debate.

In another cartoon, you see an image that's divided in half down the middle vertically. And on one side, it has a figure of Chinaman, a racist caricature, and it says the West, and he's meant to be the problem.

On the other side is an African American figure, and it says the South. And so here, you have a really acute portrayal of the idea of the two colored problems in America. And I can't say the title of the cartoon, because it includes the N word. But it's the N problem and the Chinese problem. And these are seen as twin racial problems in the 1870s, the late 1870s. And, in fact, Chinese Exclusion only passes Congress in 1882 because there's an alliance between the South and the West.

Right, white supremacy in the south, white supremacy in the West. And if you think about it, those are the strongholds of conservative politics or Trumpism in our time, right? That's where the red states are concentrated. The Midwest, the West, and the South. Not so much California, but the rest of the west and the south.

So you know, this pairing of the Negro problem and the Chinese problem very much spoke to a question right after the Civil War. You know, what was the promise of the Civil War? The promise was that in freeing enslaved people that America would extend the principle of equality – all men are, or all people we should say, right, all people are created equal – really to everybody, right? That was what a democratic society would look like. And the backlash against emancipation in the south. Right? The reversal of reconstruction had national consequences. And it really meant that the choice between a democratic vision of this country versus a racist vision, right, a racist and unequal country, was really what was on the table.

And this was a time when both the South and the West were being incorporated into a national economy, right, a national market, and a national polity. And what would that polity be comprised of? Would it be all people who could vote? Well at that time even all men who could vote? Or would it be, would the franchise be limited to white men?

**NA** Well, and ultimately, it was limited.

**MN** Right. So Chinese Exclusion starts as a regional political movement, but it becomes implicated in a national decision really about what the nature of American democracy would look like, or not look like.

**NA** Let's go back to what you said, a little bit, a few minutes ago, which was, what's yours And what's ours. Manifest destiny. How do they define and I, you've touched on this, but I'd like to hear it more specifically, how was *you* and *us* defined? Who decided who is us and therefore ours is restricted to one particular group, being white people?

**MN** That's a great question, because I think the boundaries of white were not that rigid. And, in fact, it is in their migration to the west, that European groups who were considered lesser than white Anglo Saxon Protestants, it's in their

movement to the west, where there's more fluidity and more dynamism also in the economy, that Eastern Europeans or Irish in particular, make their bid in some ways you could say to become white. So it's not an accident that the anti-Chinese movement in California was led by Irish Americans.

**NA** That's interesting because I think you see that even now with the Latino divide, and, you know, even Latino support for Trump, that there are gradations. And it's who can-- who do you want to identify with? And what does that get you? And obviously, that gets you more rights, more power, or access to power, so that seems to be something that has carried through as immigration has shifted from other places, but also introduced new ethnicities that will identify as white for purposes of access to economic power, or political power.

**MN** And we should be clear that the so-called lesser whites, they were always legally considered white, they were never barred from naturalization, let's say, right? You know, until after the Civil War, only white persons could become citizens through naturalization.

After the Civil War, they added people of African descent, but they excluded Chinese. So Irish Americans, but also Italians, and Slavic immigrants, they were always white in a legal sense, they were never barred from becoming citizens. But how they were accepted in society was another process, right? That took longer to achieve.

And they often were able to do that by being in situations where they were the whites that were above people of color. So that was also a process that took place in Arizona, where there was a lot of mining, copper mining and silver mining. And there were both native born whites who held the skilled jobs. And then there were Eastern European immigrants who had more unskilled jobs in the mines.

And then there were Mexican immigrants who also had unskilled jobs. And the Eastern European workers use their position above the Mexicans in a way to forge their identity as whites and their privilege as whites.

**NA** And Mexicans have not been successful in that sense, as a group, I mean, there are obviously Mexicans who are in political power, and they're also business owners and perhaps even part of the 1%. But as a group, and how we regard Mexicans hasn't really changed.

**MN** No, it hasn't.

**NA** I want to also touch on one thing you said, which was fascinating to me, that I think this is actually a very little known fact. We kind of know it anecdotally, but I don't think I realized that of the 20, 25 million people that came through Ellis Island, only 2% were rejected.

**MN** That's right.

**NA** And when you look at the 1980s, and, you know, the Central Americans, which is a period I'm much more familiar with, and have been working on a project about recently, the opposite was true. Only 2% of people who came fleeing wars in Central America were actually given any kind of political asylum or any kind of access to legal status. How was that flipped?

**MN** Well, the first big change was in the 1920s, with the Immigration Act of 1924. And that did two things.

For the first time, it placed a numerical ceiling on how many people could come into the country. Before that time, there was no numerical limit on how many people could come. So during the 1910s, it was an average of 1 million people a year who came to the United States. And the 1924 Act set a ceiling of 150,000.

The next thing it did was that it distributed that 150,000, in a very unequal way, right, according to a formula based on national origin, but which privileged people coming from northern and western Europe and gave very, very tiny quotas to Eastern and Southern Europe. That was the whole intent of the bill, was to restrict immigration, from Italy, Russia, Poland, Hungary, etc. And so then you had a situation where very few people could come period, and then people coming from certain countries were almost completely shut out. Because, you know, the quota for Italy was 5,800. Right? Whereas the quota for Great Britain was 59,000 or something like that.

And the sad thing is that, you know, the quotas from northern and western Europe were rarely filled, because those were not great sending countries anymore. So, that was the first thing that happened. And that's what created unauthorized or illegal immigration in a general sense, right? Beyond this specific cases of Chinese and other Asians.

Then in 1965, there was a reform of our immigration laws and the national origin quotas were repealed because they had been recognized as being obviously racist and discriminatory.

[TAPE] [Old Newsreel: On Oct. 3 1965 on Liberty Island near the Statue of Liberty, president Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act.](#)

[“This bill says simply that from this day forth those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationships to those that are already here. “](#)

And this was a reform that resulted after more than a decade of organizing and lobbying by Euro-Americans. By American Jews by Italian Americans, who rightfully saw those low quotas as a kind of badge of inferiority. So they wanted to eliminate it.

But what happened was that in its place was established a system of quotas that was on the surface equal, right? Every country had the same number. And it very much reflected its time, which was during the Civil Rights Movement, where equality was the main principle, right? But a formal equality. But when



you make all countries the same, right, and that number, that magic number was 20,000, was the maximum number any country could send. That meant that high sending countries like say, Mexico had the same limit, 20,000 as a country, well, let's say New Zealand, or Belgium, right.

And that's why, since 1965, or since the 70s, especially, we have had increasing numbers of unauthorized migrants come from countries because they max out of their quota. So India, China, you know, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, they are bound by the same limit that low sending countries have or countries with much smaller populations.

And then another thing that serves to limit people from the global south is that there's an income requirement. So in order for a person to sponsor a family member to immigrate, the sponsor, who usually has to be a US citizen, the sponsor has to have a certain income.

And so you also have undocumented immigration, from parts of the world where there may be a quota spot, there may be a visa available, right, just by the number of quotas they have, but they cannot come in legally because their family member that they want to unite with doesn't make enough money.

And that's supposedly to keep people off of welfare. But we know that immigrants, including immigrants that come from poor countries, and who don't have a lot of skills, they come here and they work. Immigrants don't come here to be on welfare, they come here to work.

So that also creates problems for countries like the Dominican Republic, there's a lot of unauthorized immigration because of this income problem. And that I'm sure also pertained to Central America. Then the other thing that complicated Salvadoran and other Central American migration in our own time, is the problem of endemic violence, civil violence, as well as poverty. And so the move for people to come in under the asylum system has been very complicated, because there's a lot of violence, right, conflict and coercion of young people by gangs. However, the asylum system does not accommodate. Well, for example, right, you have, we had this problem of the so-called unaccompanied minors, right, young people who came often to join a parent who is already living in the United States. And they came and they asked for asylum, and they said they were fleeing gang violence. And the problem is that the asylum law does not consider gang violence or youth to be categories of eligibility for asylum.

[TAPE] [Newsreel: Joining us now is CBS News immigration reporter... In 2018, victims of gang persecution generally would not qualify for US asylum. Attorney general Jeff Sessions categorized those types of violence as private criminal acts and said they did not merit asylum.](#)

The asylum laws were written in 1951, during the Cold War, and they don't apply to today's conditions. So that's why you have such a high rate of rejection. A point of view of logic, and reason would say they should be admitted. But the law is so rigid that many people are not able to get in. So if a person came and said that they were a victim of domestic violence, they

actually had a better chance of getting asylum than if they were a young person who said they were fleeing gang violence.

But the whole thing is crazy. And to go back to the 19th century, you know, this question of are you a political migrant or an economic migrant? That distinction didn't exist before World War Two. And if you think about people who came in the early 20th century, in the 19th century, there's always a combination of economic and political motives for why people move. Right? Jews came both for economic opportunity, but also they were fleeing religious persecution and repression in Russia. The Irish were both famine migrants and fleeing from British colonial rule. Chinese came because they had bad harvests and because there was rebellions and repression from the Ching Dynasty. So there's usually a combination of economic and political conditions that impel migrants to move.

**NA** But somehow the economic migrant is looked down upon, and in the 80s, when Salvadorans were coming, including Antonio Flores, who I mentioned in the beginning of this program, you know, yes, he was fleeing a war, but there was also an economic factor.

**MN** Exactly. Because in the midst of a war, there's not a lot of work.

**NA** Exactly. There's not a lot of possibilities of farming if you're being bombed all around.

**MN** Right.

**NA** But I've watched a lot of media programming at that time, from that time, in my own research, and it was interesting, the US government kept saying they're not war refugees, they are economic migrants. And therefore, we can't just open the door to everybody who needs a job. So it's really interesting, that distinction between political migrant and economic migrant, but we have this notion that a political migrant, that is a virtuous person to bring in, you know, they're fighting for something noble, or were attacked over beliefs, but economic migrant, that category is something that we really reject.

[TAPE] With us today is Tom Cotton, Senator from Arkansas, who wishes to curtail legal immigration. Cotton: "The governments of Honduras and El Salvador and Guatemala do not persecute their own systems systematically which is the basis for asylum and refugee status under our laws.... An economic migrant is not eligible for asylum. Asylum is designed for say, a Hong Konger, whose student visa expires, and doesn't want to return to Hong Kong now that the Chinese Communist Party has cracked down on that country."

**MN** Well, that dynamic, I think, is a product of the 80s and 90s. Well, it goes back even farther, I think, I mean, the political migrants or refugees that the United States has welcomed have all been anti-communist. Full stop. Cubans in the 50s, Hungarians. And so when people fled the Duvalier regime from Haiti, they were not considered political refugees. Why? Well, because they were black, but also because Duvalier was an ally of the United States. So when people flee right-wing governments and dictatorships, often that are propped up by the United States, all of a sudden, poof, they're not political refugees, they're economic migrants. So this is politically determined, like who gets to be the political refugee.

**NA** But it was also not consistent with international law as well as our own Refugee Act of 1980.

**MN** Yeah, I mean, it took till 1980 for the United States to even have a refugee policy. Right, which, which says a lot. I mean, I think our policies and practices on refugees has always been very fraught and full of contradictions. After the Vietnam War, the first refugees who came tended to be in the South Vietnamese government, right, the allies of the United States, a lot of them were, you know, former military or elites of some kind. So they were welcomed at first, but then when people fled later, right, the so-called boat people migrations, right, they were not accorded the same welcome.

[TAPE] Boat people migrations old newsreel: The south China sea 1978, a boatload of Vietnamese refugees at the end of a 300 mile journey. They come ashore at the rate of 10,000 a month, much faster than the US or any other nation is willing to accept them.

And even the elite South Vietnamese who came right after the war, even they were suspect among a lot of Americans, because they were not only Asian, but people blamed them, quote, unquote, for America losing the war. So you know, even when people come, who are anti-communist, other kinds of dynamics enter the equation and complicate matters.

**NA** So in the beginning of this podcast, we tell the story of Salvadoran workers coming to Washington DC, fleeing a war in El Salvador in the 1980s -- 1980 to 1990.

And at that time, the Metro Rail was being built, or rather, it was, it was built in the 70s. But in 1980, Salvadoran workers kind of took over the job. And today, they're 80% of that workforce. And so on the surface, the story of those Salvadoran workers pretty much taking over the construction business in our nation's capital, would support that anti immigrant narrative that immigrants are a threat to the American worker, because that's one we hear often also, right? That, that immigration is, is not good for the American worker. And it's also become a rallying cry for white supremacists.

[TAPE] Newsreel: Police in Tennessee are braced for further demonstrations after Neo Nazis and white nationalists held a rally in two cities to protest against refugee resettlement in the state. Calling it a white lives matter march, groups including The Nationalist Front and the League of the South gathered in \_\_\_\_, Their message to immigrants, you're not wanted here.

So how has this narrative evolved? And there's also the criminal narrative, the idea of the original sin of crossing the border, and you can't ever forgive them for crossing the border without registering and certainly without permission. How has this come to be? Why can't we shake this narrative? And is it true? Are immigrant workers a threat to the American worker?

**MN** In general no.

I will come back around to this question of the construction industry. But in general, immigration is high during times of economic expansion. Right, people aren't going to come to a country when there are no jobs, right? Immigrants are drawn, or even recruited when the economy's expanding. But to be even more precise. There are high levels of immigration, not just during times of expansion, but when there's a really big sectoral shift, or a shift in the structure of the economy.

So, for example, at the turn of the 20th century, when there was high levels of immigration from new regions of Europe, that was a time of industrialization and urbanization, right? Where there was huge numbers of jobs that were created. And those immigrants that came at that time, they didn't take jobs from native white Americans, right? They were in new jobs.

Now, in times of this, this kind of sectoral change or-- and expansion, what happens is that there's not only expansion in new areas and new industries and new jobs, but workers in older industries, often also face changes in their position.

So in the late 19th, and early 20th century, skilled white workers or craft workers found their jobs de-skilled, is what we would say, right? They had less power over their own work, right, and they had less power within the workplace. So it wasn't so much a question that immigrants took their jobs, but that the jobs of older white workers or workers in older industries became more precarious.

So it's not a one for one replacement, right? But there's a whole reorganization of the labor force and the economy that's taking place. And you can see the same thing happening in the late 20th century with the so-called globalization of the economy.

And what that meant, in countries of the global north, especially in the United States, was a whole reorganization of the economy, where you had the emergence of a very powerful finance sector, right, the 1%. And you had a growth of the service sector, including construction or lower skilled, lower wage jobs in service industries. And you had a shrinking of the manufacturing and industrial sector, in part through movement of production offshore, but

also due to automation. So you saw the levels of employment in the auto industry or steel diminish.

So immigrants didn't come and take those industrial jobs, right? They fill the ranks of the service sector, right? And there were some immigrants also who are more highly educated, who were recruited into STEM fields, like, for example.

So if you think about it, right, you have more and more immigrants working in like, say food production, or cleaning hotel rooms, working as domestic workers, they didn't take over the auto industry. But to get to this question of the construction trade.

One thing that happened in the late 20th century, as part of this reorganization of the economy, was a movement against labor unions.

[TAPE] [1965 NYC Labor unions old footage](#): One of the conflicts people talk about is the fact that the unions are asking for more money while the city is starving. If the unions didn't ask for more money the city would still be starving.

And so a lot of employers in different sectors deliberately went about diminishing the power of labor unions. And this took place in a number of ways.

Some of this was when, you know, there was a big trend in finance of mergers and acquisitions, right? A big company, or bank really would take over a number of others. And then they would lay a lot of people off and reorganize everything and you know, get rid of the Union, etc, etc.

**NA** And so that was a cost cutting measure. Right?

**MN** Right. So called profit making measure although I'm sure we can, see it from the other point of view right? So a lot of people lost their jobs that way. And what happened in some industries is that those processes took place was that the unions were weakened, sometimes they were destroyed. Other times they were not necessarily eliminated, but vastly weakened. And there were huge wage cuts. And a lot of older workers left those jobs. So in some industries, like in meatpacking, the employers relocated meatpacking plants from urban areas in the Midwest, like Chicago, or Minneapolis and St. Paul, and move them to more remote locations where unions were not strong, like Iowa and Nebraska. And then they started to recruit immigrants and sometimes refugees to work in those factories. So it wasn't that the immigrants just came and replaced the older white workers. There had been a restructuring that took place where the older native born workers left those positions or were pushed out you could say. The same thing happened in commercial janitorial services, big office buildings, commercial buildings, in downtown areas like in Los Angeles, where the employers broke the union and shifted to subcontracting work.

So those jobs had previously been held by African Americans. And then when the unions were broken, and they went to subcontracting, then you saw Latino workers in those jobs.

And what's interesting if you compare LA to New York City, where the union was not broken, right, the union in New York is famous, the SEIU 32 BJ. That's one of the strongest unions in New York City. They represent building workers, not just building cleaners, but also doormen and other building workers. And that union actually did not suffer the same fate as building workers did in Los Angeles. So in New York, you have a union that's actually quite diverse. The older, black and white workers were not pushed out. But as the city grew, more and more other workers of color joined that union, and they were able to keep their wages on par. So that also happened in construction. And I don't know the story about Washington DC specifically, but I suspect it's a similar story that happened in New York, where the construction unions really took a beating. And subcontracting became the favorite method of hiring.

**NA** We've been talking about immigrants coming here. But rarely do we talk about immigrants having to leave some place. They also have to leave or place and there are factors that also push that, you know, we've clung to this American Dream narrative and the notion that economic migrants, a either want to come and mooch or b, they are going to come take American workers jobs. But can you, can we talk about the push factors? You know, in El Salvador, it was the war, Vietnam, it was a war. There was a US role in both of those conflicts. But what are other pieces of the story that aren't getting as much attention historically, but also today?

**MN** That's a really important thing to think about. Because I think it's true what you said that people don't come to America just to mooch, as you put it. As we said earlier, there are both economic and political factors why people move. Right now I think we also have to think about climate change. Part of the crisis in Central America right now has to do with the devastation of hurricanes. In parts of the world climate is really causing huge refugee problems. I mean, these people are not even showing up in the United States. Right. They are remaining, they remain in the global south, in refugee camps. So climate I think is a big reason. But I think in general, I would say two things. First, I think as people who believe in human rights, we have to uphold the right to move. But we also should uphold the right to stay. We should, we should hope that people have conditions in their homes, in their home countries, where they can have a decent life. Not just a decent life, a meaningful life. And then they can pursue their dreams and ambitions without having to undertake perilous journeys or cross borders at great risk to their lives. So we also have to think about why is it that so many parts of the world have conditions such that people feel they have to move in order to have a decent or meaningful life. And so this is a problem of, in a very general way, because it's

a problem of the unequal distribution of wealth throughout the world. Right? That's one way to look at it. Another is to look at it in terms of uneven, not just unequal, but also uneven development. So for example, in the 1970s, and 80s, when there was a lot of migration from South Korea, Taiwan, other parts of East Asia, mostly, what was going on was that those countries were developing very rapidly. And there were more and more opportunities for higher education. But there weren't enough professional jobs for highly trained people. So you had a mismatch, right? You didn't have an alignment in terms of labor market supply and demand.

And there were also people from Korea and Hong Kong and Taiwan, who were able to come to the United States for Advanced Study, and then had to say, well, where are they going to pursue their professional careers.

And so it wasn't until later that those economies really grew, right that when we had the phenomenon of the so-called Asian tigers that there were then many more jobs for professionally trained people. Technical jobs. And now you have an interesting phenomenon in the 21st century, where Asian Americans, people born in the United States, actually moved back to Asia, because there are more job opportunities there. And less discrimination even. So a lot of Chinese Americans who feel frustrated that they cannot really advance in, you know, corporate world, or in the finance world, have gone back to China, where there were, there have been a lot of opportunities, right, because it's a economy where it's really on the make.

You see a similar thing more recently in Africa, where college educated professionals often don't have enough opportunities in their countries. So you have more professional migration from certain African countries, to the United States. And that's actually ironic, because they were able to take advantage of the immigration lottery system that was set up in 1990. That's what, where you see an increase in of African migration is through that, because that was not meant for Africa, that was meant for, to get more white people to come to America.

So I think, you know, there's both unequal distribution of wealth, there's the uneven economic development in parts of the world that create conditions where people make decisions about where they think they and their families will be able to have a better situation for themselves. And then you have at the other end of the scale, just utter disasters, right? Climate disasters, wars, ethnic cleansings, I mean, all the horrible things that are going on in our world today, which impel people to flee.

**NA** For our journalism students, you know, we keep telling them, you know, we're writing the first draft of history. As a historian, you can probably look back at media 100 years ago, but also today and find similarities, hopefully some improvements in how we have covered the immigration story. What do you think we're doing right? And what are we not doing right? Or what are we doing wrong?

**MN** I think one thing that's been positive in news coverage around immigration has been the personal stories that journalists have told. You know, when immigrants or refugees are interviewed or their, their lives are detailed for readers, and when we can hear their own voices and see their faces and pictures. I think that's really important because it makes something that's very abstract and arcane as policy matters, it makes it, you know, real for readers, right, to see the human side.

There is a danger in that also though, because I think if the portrayal of individuals or family stories is too much about victimization, then that's not so good either. This is all about striking a balance.

And then I think there's also some risk in the success stories. Right? You know, so I think it's, it's great to see stories about people who persist and overcome difficulties and succeed. But you also don't want to feed a narrative where if you just work hard, you'll make it, right?

So I think we need all those stories. And it's hard because when people read one story at a time, they don't necessarily put them all together. I don't know how you solve that problem.

And then I think on the reporting of policy, there needs to be more historical perspective, and maybe a broader perspective, because I think it becomes really easy to report on policy debates as a very kind of blow by blow account of who's saying what in Washington, and a lot of people can't even follow those debates. They're so arcane, but also a lot of times those debates offer choices that are too narrow, right? It's like one plan is bad. And another plan is slightly less bad.

[TAPE] [Newsreel: the Biden administration is now scrambling to control the biggest border surge in 2 decades. Almost 4,9000 unaccompanied minor children are now being held in border patrol facilities, far longer than the 72 hours the law allows.](#)

And I think Americans have to have a broader historical perspective. So they can think about questions like, Well, why do we separate economic and political migration so starkly? Why can't we change the way we even conceive of it? If that's not a policy question then people don't even raise the question.

So I think some of the bigger issues that frame migration, bigger questions about why is it that the legal regime that we have, how did it come to be and a lot of what has to happen, I think, in this coming period, is we have to think outside the box.

And I think journalists need to also do that.

**NA** Thank you, Mae, this conversation has given us, and me, a lot to consider and think about for our reporting on this topic that isn't gonna go away. So thank you for making the time and sharing a real valuable perspective. Thank you so much.

**MN** Thank you for having me.



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