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The New Resistance: Immigrant Rights Organizing in an Era of Trump

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The New Resistance: Immigrant Rights Mobilization in an Era of Trump

I want to use this short essay to illustrate the opportunities and tensions within grassroots immigrant rights organizing that emerged in response to the election of Donald Trump. No one disputes the centrality of anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictionist policies within the Trump campaign (De Genova, 2017; Hernández, 2016), so I will not recapitulate those observations here. What I argue, however, is that immigrants and immigrant allies did not passively observe the presidential campaign and election of President Trump. Rather, they actively developed multiple strategies of resistance to the deportation agenda of the Trump administration, even before that agenda began to materialize, and continued to organize during the first tumultuous weeks of President Trump’s hotly contested executive orders. Although these efforts are primarily reactive, they nonetheless illustrate the capacity of immigrant communities and allies to act with creative political agency. Moreover, immigrant rights mobilization does not act in a vacuum, but constantly intersects in both productive and conflicting ways with other social movements. Geographers who are interested in how Latin American immigration is remaking the U.S. socio-political landscape would benefit from a grounded view of how immigrant rights mobilization is remaking urban politics.

Although both Campaign Trail Trump and President Trump has issued a litany of potential threats to immigrants living in the United States, the Trump administration’s actual threat to immigrant communities can be usefully captured in the three executive orders issued during the first week of Trump’s presidency. Two of the three memos were issued on January 25, 2017. The first executive order, called “Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements” (Exec. Order No. 13767, 2017), accused the federal government of “failing to discharge [the] basic sovereign responsibility” of preventing immigrants from crossing the border surreptitiously; the memo sought to further militarize the border and to speed up deportations for anyone seeking entry into the United States, including refugees from Central America who are seeking asylum. The second executive order, called “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States” (Exec. Order No. 13768, 2017), abolished the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) created by President Obama under a memorandum1 issued on November 20, 2014, and promised to rely once again on the widely-criticized Secure Communities and 287(g) programs (Aguilasocho et al., 2012; Armenta, 2012; Coleman, 2012; Nguyen & Gill, 2010; Strunk & Leitner, 2013) to facilitate greater numbers of deportations by enrolling in the help of local law enforcement agencies. Taken together, these two memos represented President Trump’s condemnation of President Obama’s deferral-based approach to immigration enforcement that characterized his second term, and reintroduced aggressive border and interior enforcement reminiscent of the Bush era and President Obama’s first term. The third executive order, called “Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States” (Exec. Order No. 13769, 2017), abruptly denied previously-approved green card holders

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from entering the United States, creating pandemonium at airports along the eastern seaboard as flights arrived from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The substance of the memos is more certainly more complicated than I have summarized here. But the key is that these three memos, when taken together, represented the fruition of threats against immigrants made on the campaign trail, and became the new legal context in which immigrant rights groups mobilized.

Just as the Trump administration’s immigration policies hardly represent a dramatic break from the Obama administration before him, grassroots immigrant rights organizing did not suddenly emerge on November 9, 2016. Indeed, much of the response to the election drew upon existing strategies and social networks developed over the past decade. For instance, young undocumented activists known as Dreamers pressed Congress and the president to act for over a decade (Galindo, 2012; Wadhia, 2013), and are largely responsible for President Obama’s creation of the DACA program. Nonetheless, the election of Donald Trump and his three hastily-issued executive orders generated widespread panic and fear that, in many cities, became channeled into mass mobilization in the form of protests, vigils, and marches, as well as more sustainable creative projects that sought to prevent deportations and reduce the social impacts of deportation on immigrant families and communities. These projects are relevant to Latin American geographers who want to understand how migrants are shaping urban politics and working intersectionally alongside (although sometimes in tension with) movements for Black liberation (Tometi, 2016), LGBTQ rights (Adam, 2017), Muslim inclusion, women’s reproductive rights, labor organizing (Gomberg-Munoz & Nussbaum-Barberena, 2011), and other social justice struggles. My observations are situated in Columbus, Ohio, one of the sites of my dissertation research and a place where, over the past three years, I saw immigrant organizing up close.

I want to highlight three strategies: sanctuary city-style policy, rapid response teams, and the creation of a community advocate for families in removal proceedings. Despite their differences, each strategy was motivated by a well-founded fear of an imminent increase in ICE activity that would likely result in high numbers of arrests, detentions, deportations. Not long after Trump issued his three executive orders, the Washington Post (Sacchetti, 2017) confirmed that non-criminal arrests increased in the first months under Trump, although the lengthy deportation process precluded a thorough statistical comparison between the Obama and Trump administration.

The first strategy that organizers pressed for in Columbus after the election was sanctuary city policy. Although there is no universal definition of a sanctuary city, a fundamental component of sanctuary city policy is a refusal by city officials to use city resources—most importantly, the police—for the purposes of immigration enforcement (Ridgley, 2013). Although these polices are not new (Ridgley, 2011), they became an important political strategy in the late 2000s for municipalities that wished to avoid getting tangled up in the expansion of local

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2 DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), created in 2012, is a program that allows undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as minors to apply for temporary relief from deportation.
immigration enforcement through 287(g) and Secure Communities policies (Provine et al., 2016). Although the City of Columbus and Franklin County have never opted into a 287(g) agreement, data from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (2015) and ICE’s (2015) own records indicate that Central Ohio is a hot spot for the arrests and deportation of low-priority immigrants. These statistics were supported by stories of ICE arresting immigrants with no criminal convictions, including the arrest and deportation of a Moroccan national in early 2017 who was married to a U.S. citizen and was in the process of trying to adjust his immigration status. To challenge these on-the-ground realities, immigrant rights organizations and individuals from the community pressured city council and the mayor to take action through public demonstrations, online petitions, and close-door negotiations. Although the city never declared itself a sanctuary city, on February 3, the mayor and city council released a statement affirming that they would refuse to participate in federal immigration enforcement, and that they would begin a process of translating this position into official policy. On June 5, 2017, Columbus City Council passed an ordinance\(^3\) that turned some of these policies into law. It is unclear yet whether this policy change will result in a meaningful, observable reduction in deportations from Columbus, but the fact that this policy was passed for the first time after Trump became president does suggest that pro-immigrant organizing after the election had a substantive impact on local policy.

Second, immigrant rights organizations developed rapid response teams to respond to what I call ‘deportation events,’ i.e. any action taken by ICE to make immigration arrests *en masse* or on an individual basis, particularly when that event is publicized immediately through social and traditional media. The purpose of a rapid response team is to create a network of volunteers who are ready to respond to deportation events by showing up on-site, documenting, recording, and possibly video streaming ICE activity, connecting affected people with legal resources, providing social and moral support, and publicizing the event in an effort to mobilize further volunteers and undermine public support for ICE’s through ‘shaming’ tactics. At one of the early rapid response meetings held on February 19, 2017, over twenty people gathered to create a rapid response team. The group was a mix of Spanish and English speakers; documented, undocumented, and citizens; DACA recipients; spouses and family members of undocumented immigrants; members of progressive religious organizations; and long-standing community organizers. These volunteers became involved in several public actions over the last few months to conduct outreach to the immigrant community, ground-proof rumored deportations taking place, and to attempt to prevent the deportation of at least high-visibility case. Rapid response teams are being used in cities across the country as first responders to increased immigration enforcement, and with the lack of DHS transparency about deportation operations, rapid response teams are also an important way that communities generate working

\(^3\) Ordinance 1304-2017
knowledge about ICE, and use that knowledge to better prepare immigrant communities for deportations.

Third, two Latina business owners in Columbus who were receiving a high-volume of calls from the community regarding deportations of family members created a permanent case management position to advocate for immigrants in removal proceedings and connect family members to social services. When an individual is arrested and put into immigrant detention, there are various harmful knock-on effects for families and communities: when families lose a head of household, they lose their primary source of income; sudden deportations are traumatic for parents and children; family members that remain may not know where to go for short-term public or private assistance to cope with housing, groceries, and transportation; and families often do not know how to find good immigration attorneys who can help tremendously in removal cases. The Community Deportation Advocate position is the first of its kind in Ohio, and still a rarity in the U.S., is a fully-funded position that focuses on supporting immigrant families before, during, and after deportations. This position is unique in that unlike rapid response teams and pro-immigrant city policy, the Community Deportation Advocate was hired directly from the community, and works in a sustained capacity directly within the community to provide social support and to develop resilience in the face of an intensifying enforcement regime.

Each of these responses to Trump takes place within a diverse urban landscape. The passages of pro-immigrant policy through Columbus City Council generated at least some resentment among Black social justice organizers who’s efforts to create police oversight have been met with municipal recalcitrance. Rapid response teams can, when intervening quickly and without adequate information, can exacerbate rather than relieve the panic of (or rumors of) deportation events. It remains to be seen whether the community advocate position can do more than develop community resilience by contributing to the political pressure for meaningful reforms at the local, state and federal levels. These are not criticism of the three projects discussed here, but they are struggles that will have to be worked out over time through practical critical engagements.

Finally, I want to caution against an analysis of these projects based solely on their instrumental effectiveness. A basic theory of change framework for political activism goes something like this: Step 1, identify and analyze the problems or threats; Step 2, develop and implement strategies to ameliorate the problems; Step 3, analyze the effectiveness of strategies in Step 2 in light of the analysis in Step 1, and adjust as needed. This process model fell apart in the interim period between November 8, 2016, when Trump was elected, and January 20, 2017, when he took office due to the inconsistent and unpredictable whirlwind of political rhetoric, agency nominations, and contradictory policy positions. Even after the inauguration, now that policy has begun to fall into place, case-based activism is still driven more by impassioned individuals than by a clear sense of what works and what doesn’t. Although activists have managed to elevate some deportation cases to the national stage, the relationship between public protest and ICE’s use of discretion is unclear. For instance, after a nationwide campaign, Dany
Vargas, a DACA recipient living in Alabama, was released from detention (United We Dream, 2017); just a few weeks later, Maribel Trujillo-Diaz, a mother of four U.S. citizen children living in Ohio, was deported despite a similar set of strategies (Pilkington, 2017). All this to say, although the projects I described above were born partly out of strategic thinking, their value comes not from their conceptual perfection, but from their ability to direct material resources towards immigrant communities, achieve short-term victories despite a lack of clarity from federal policy-makers, and deepen horizontal social networks that recognize the intersectionality of the immigrant rights movements.

Necessity, as the saying goes, is the mother of invention—and this certainly true of the rich and varied responses of immigrant communities across the United States in the aftermath of the recent election. These responses illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of immigrant rights organizing, and indicate a need for grounded research into how Latin American migrants are shaping urban political movements.


