

Sarah. R. Coleman. *The Walls Within: The Politics of Immigration in Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. vii + 272 pages. Hardcover, \$35:00.

Historian Sarah Coleman presented a detailed and careful analyses of the contentious fight over the rights of immigrants to the United States since the 1960s. The immediate spark to this battle stems from the 1965 *Hart-Celler Act*. This law formally put an end to the National Origins Formula embedded in the 1924 *Johnson-Reed Act*, which essentially limited immigration through a national origins quota from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and other places. In effect, the law was designed to preserve the American ethnic/racial homogeneity by promoting immigration from Northwestern Europe. Consequently, the 1965 law changed the US immigration system by doing away with national quotas in favor of a supposedly equalitarian approach.

Unexpectedly, the new law generated a backlash. This book provides a history of the political and legal clashes over US immigrants' rights since 1965, and how these conflicts shaped both legal and unauthorized immigrants' access to public schools, employment, and social assistance. In her examination of the clashes that ensued, Coleman focused on efforts to limit immigrants' rights within the US through domestic policy, and not on attempts to stop immigration at the border. The author discussed the federal, state, and local levels of government, who touselled with each other over who has the authority that make critical decisions that impinge on the lives of immigrants. While the *Hart-Celler Act* seemed to be progressive, the federal Government's expansion of the welfare state with a variety of new benefits did not sit well with conservative immigration restrictionists, who blamed immigrants as a burden on the state and its citizens. Coleman focused on the increasing role that the rights of *aliens* played in immigration control and policy from 1965 onwards. The author aptly put it this way: "...as federal policy appeared increasingly directionless in the 1970s and 1980s, states and local governments began

taking more decision making about immigrants into their own hands. In doing so, local and state action in turn pressured federal officials either to delegate authority to the states or to conform federal immigration policy to state preferences” (p.5). One of the most contentious issues on the national dialogue concerning immigrants, particularly illegal immigrants, is access to public education.

The book begins by examining the rise of unauthorized immigrant education activism in Texas. The Texas Education Code stipulates that all children, regardless of their immigration status, were entitled to attend the public schools of the district where they resided. But in the 1970s, several school districts in Texas, backed by the Texas Legislature, began to back track and to impose tuition on the children of unauthorized immigrants. In response, unauthorized students and their parents sued the school board, and with the support of a team of activist lawyers, the case went to the US Supreme Court, which ruled in a 1982 landmark decision in *Plyler v. Doe*. This decision extended the education rights of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to children of unauthorized immigrants. Coleman traces the federal government’s role in the *Plyler* case, in both the Carter and Reagan administrations, and explores how the federal government’s arguments were influenced by political and policy considerations. For example, in a spirited debate in Supreme Court hearings, some justices were sympathetic to the equal protection enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment of all persons, their immigration status notwithstanding. In a comparative argument, the Justices wondered aloud whether the state could deny fire protection to unauthorized immigrants. They queried how the state could punish children for their parents’ illegal entry. The opinion in the *Plyler* case noted, “It is difficult to understand precisely what the State hopes to achieve by promoting the creation and perpetuation of a sub-class of illiterates within our boundaries” (p. 56). Following this ruling, many sounded

an alarm about the economic burden that would result by extending education and social welfare benefits to unauthorized immigrants. The fallout from the *Plyler* decision to expand rights to unauthorized immigrants was increased attack from all sides, which led to a shift in the notion of rights for citizen and noncitizen immigrants.

The book examines the debate over immigrants' access to employment, labor rights, and employer sanctions. With a shift in the economy and a competitive employment market, fear ramped up that unauthorized immigrants would take jobs away from citizens. Specifically, the expansion of unauthorized immigrant labor from agricultural work to service and light manufacturing, as well as the move from rural fields to urban centers made illegal immigrants more visible to both the media and politicians, who viewed them as a threat. Anti-immigration activist groups pressured law makers to penalize businesses that employed unauthorized immigrants, by way of employer sanctions. Restrictionist groups viewed employer sanction as effective policy prescription to protect domestic labor markets and anti-poverty campaigns from an influx of low-income people from Mexico and Central America. Employer sanctions, billed as an illegal immigration stopper, did not work out as restrictionist activists had hoped. The 1986 *Immigration Reform and Control Act* included though not only employer sanctions, but also anti-discrimination rights provisions that discarded national origins or *alien* status, a guest-worker program, and the legalization of the status of millions of unauthorized immigrants. Point is that immigration became a political chess game for both Democrats and Republicans. Both grappled to navigate the growing calls for restriction and also harvest the expanding Latino vote. By the 1990s, the restrictionist movement were frustrated with the federal government and the failure to restrain immigration and, therefore, turned their attention to state governments.

Further, Coleman examines the battle over immigrants' benefits. The restrictionist movements' grievances pointed to immigrants' use of social welfare assistance programs and immigrant women's uncontrolled reproduction as burdensome on the welfare system. A rising tide of restriction culminated in the 1996 *Welfare Reform Act*, which removed most noncitizens from welfare eligibility. The welfare benefit restriction evidently became the most significant success of the anti-immigrant movement since the 1970s. Lastly, Coleman explores the debate over local immigration enforcement and immigrants' rights. The murder of a teenager, Justin Younie in Iowa by unauthorized immigrants sparked a drastic expansion of the role of state and local authorities over immigration enforcement. Following 9/11, the federal government and the states, based on the politics of fear and anti-terrorism collaborated to enforce immigration law locally across the country. *The Walls Within* offers a valuable perspective on the internal dynamics of immigration politics and policies and how they impact immigrants in the United States.

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