

# The BLACK C o m m e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine  
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,  
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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**Hispanic Panic**  
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**Guest Commentator**

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Geraldo Rivera wrote a book, "[His Panic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.](#)". He is mainly trying to counter the charges of his fellow Fox TV hosts, Sean Hannity and Lou Dobbs for their anti-immigrant stances.

It is called the browning of America by hate-mongers, this recent wave of Hispanic, largely Mexican, immigration into the US. I like to call it the *re-browning*.

But there are a few things he doesn't seem to notice. Their real fear is the *brownness* (or not whiteness), of these immigrants, not so much their legal status. In the 1980s, in New York City, there were large numbers of undocumented workers from Ireland and Eastern Europe (and still are). They work largely in the construction trades; if you were really looking for them they would not be hard to find. Hannity and Dobbs are not talking about them, and not because they don't know about them, because they do.

Anti-immigration rhetoric is a way of openly doing racism without looking like it. It is no longer acceptable to do anti-African bigotry out loud, as Don Imus found out when he decided to use the Rutgers University Girls basketball team to denigrate. He was doing race-wide racism, but he thought, by choosing the ball team as his target, that those who weren't in on the code (the way Rush Limbaugh's ditto-heads are), he could get away with it.

In New York City, ethnic European undocumented workers work largely in construction subcontracting businesses, allowing the owners to gain business by putting in lower bids. When I owned a commercial and residential cleaning business in the 1980s, I was gradually overshadowed, and even unable to move into some lucrative fields, like asbestos removal, because my competition hired Koreans or Mexicans or European undocumented workers. They didn't pay taxes, worker's compensation, insurance or benefits on them. These workers were not hidden - they worked in plain sight.

But, despite how it looks, they weren't taking business away from me. They were doing business that I, as a woman and/ (or) African American, wouldn't have gotten in the first place. In order to comply with the law, for federal or municipal construction projects, I would be asked to write a proposal for contracts I would not get, no matter how good my proposal. (I knew this because a sympathizer actually had to tell me). The business could say, using me, for example, that they had sent bid requests to minorities and women, who either did not submit a bid (because the request would be sent too late that it was not even possible - days before it was due rather than the normal weeks or months, allowing time for inspection and questions), or submitted one that did not qualify, for any reason they made up. These companies did not have to prove their compliance; all they had to do was submit a certificate of mailing or registered mail document. The dates were either not looked at or part of a collusion.

Anti-immigration feeling has always been a feature of American society. Much of the immigration of the 19th & early 20th century, was by recruitment (with passage advanced), by industrialists, for people to work the new and growing economy in the steel mills, mine shafts, subways, bridges, construction and manufacturing, etc. Employers would pit different ethnic groups against one another in order keep or lower wages.

A few years ago I worked in a restaurant I described as diversity gone mad. The workers, almost all non-Europeans, were from everywhere imaginable, including places you never heard of or countries changing their names even as we spoke. Every sexual orientation was represented as well. Among them, was a large undocumented Mexican workforce.

An undocumented Mexican worker could schedule vacation time home, but because he/she had to use underground transportation called Coyotes, the management permitted a few days leeway in leaving and returning. That told me that there was complicity on the borders for employers.

In some parts of the country Mexicans and Central Americans are imported by companies by special dispensation, for time specified periods, to work in the meat factories and agriculture, even where there is massive unemployment in the local populations. It is said that these workers do work that regular Americans won't do. That is not true. What Americans won't allow, because the laws won't allow it, and they know their rights, are the *conditions* - which are slave-like - that these *indocumentados* live and work under. They live in crowded barracks with insufficient sanitation and air; long work hours, and non-living wages. Undocumented workers are not taking jobs away from Americans; they are being *given* those jobs.

Anti-immigrant talk is racist talk pure and simple. It is nothing else. It should be dealt with on that level. Undocumented immigration is largely by recruitment, by design, not accident. That someone from a remote village in Mexico, without language and few resources, could find his/her way to Small Town, USA by accident, and immediately get a job, defies logic.

The National Urban League put out a report a few years ago, that said unemployment of young African American men was at 50%. This report appeared around the same time anti-immigration talk was heating up. The nexus was no accident. African Americans were being asked to get into this racist debate – and some did, claiming that undocumented immigrants, who do low-level unskilled or semi-skilled work, were taking their jobs.

The problem with this report is that you could point to any year at any time and find the same conditions. Shortly after this report appeared, I happened to see a policy report from 1968 that said that unemployment among young African American men was 38%. The difference in the numbers is the difference in the way the count was made, adding in an uncertain number called under-employed and the “stopped-looking” for employment, to raise the percentage.

Anti-immigration talk for the ordinary American without a job, or who has lost a union job paying decent wages, or is facing foreclosure, is an enigma, blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Geraldo Rivera, in his book, includes many hate-filled emails he has received around the issues of Hispanics and immigration. His choice of which to include suggests that the only people opposed to immigration are the least educated and least articulate.

Relegating anti-immigrant talk to the uneducated and ignorant ignores the real source, and lets the real perpetrators of this kind of bigotry off the hook. Rivera, like many in oppressed populations do, tries to justify the existence of Hispanics in the US by pointing out that many are doctors and lawyers and professionals. So what? The Hispanic janitor is no less worthy. He thinks, like many do, that bigotry is just ignorance of the targeted group. But bigotry, for some, is a way of feeling *inside* one's own group by having an out-group from which to differentiate oneself, especially if one's self-esteem is not all that it could be. No amount of education would take away that need.

While the public conversation is about the illegality of certain people, it should be about racism, neo-slavery, and working conditions. It should be about who is doing the hiring and what they gain and how they are devastating the livelihoods and communities of Americans, without negative social or legal consequence to themselves except huge profits that “trickle down” to nowhere.

African Americans need not get ourselves involved in a racist dialogue. We have nothing to gain; we could only lose, helping oppressors oppress. Let's not get it twisted.

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