

Planning in the Shadows

Unauthorized Immigrants in Postville

By Gerardo Francisco Sandoval

UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRATION, despite being a critical issue facing cities and towns, has gone largely unaddressed by most planners. There are currently 11 million unauthorized workers in the U.S. and it is a political issue increasing in attention and conflict. But where are progressive planners in this important civil rights debate? It wasn't until I had completed four years of fieldwork in Postville, Iowa, where I was studying from a community planning perspective the effects of a large immigration raid on a small rural meatpacking community, that I finally figured out why planners have been absent from this critical issue. Although our economic system relies heavily on this low-wage labor pool, the state criminalizes this population and planners have a very difficult time figuring out how to plan under these criminal circumstances. This dilemma opens up many ethical, practical and planning process-based questions that planners are not well-trained to even ask, let alone answer.



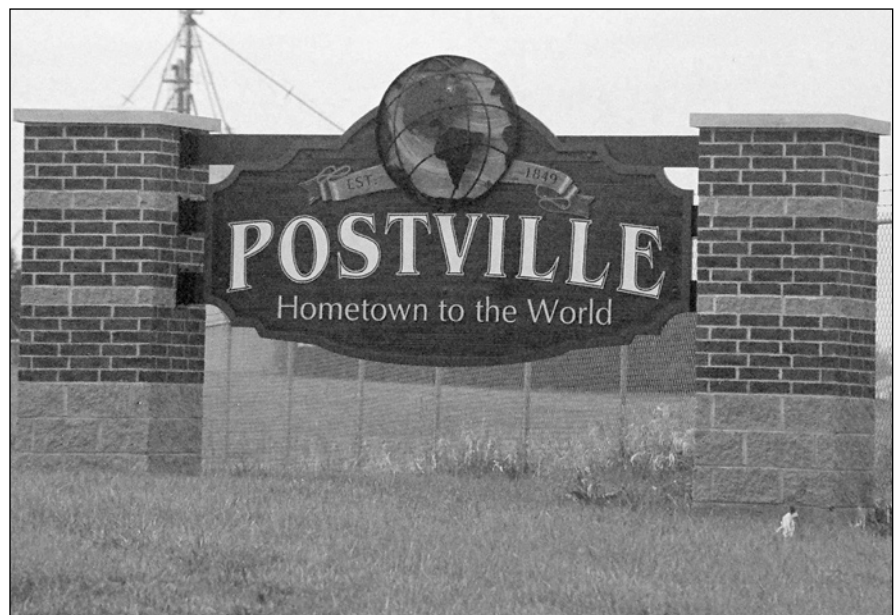
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The popular view of immigration policy is that the system is broken and that comprehensive immigration reform will solve this crisis. My view is that the current immigration system works just fine for the purpose of creating an underclass of shadow workers—unauthorized immigrants who live in a state of invisibility and are systematically excluded from participating in our civic systems. The state directly benefits from an immigration system that creates a mobile, vulnerable, exploitable workforce that does not demand the social security mechanism of our welfare capitalist society. Planners play an important role in creating this system at the local level

and we need to better understand how to plan for shadow populations, even if (or especially if) they are criminalized, so that these communities can come out of the shadows. This unauthorized labor force is structurally a part of our economic system and the workers providing this labor are now a part of our communities, towns and cities.

Postville, Iowa, was a shadow town in the middle of the U.S., a meatpacking plant town with a population of 2,000 people and a high concentration of unauthorized workers. Two books have been written about the multicultural conflicts that emerged in the town,



as have many newspaper articles (including a recent *New York Times Magazine* article) and three films.

Postville has become a microcosm of the multicultural dynamics within the U.S. and the conflicts that arise from it. It also serves as a place to understand how labor, the state and immigrants form a system of exploitative labor linked to shadow transnational networks that ferment and sustain an underground labor force that is transforming U.S. cities and towns.

United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided the Postville meatpacking plant in May 2008 and arrested and deported 389 workers. It was the largest immigration raid at the time and the militaristic style ICE used to conduct the raid garnered international attention. Most of the workers deported were Guatemalans who came from small rural towns in the highlands. The Guatemalan community had grown from three pioneer immigrants in 1995 to about 800 at the time of the raid, most of them unauthorized. The raid destroyed the Guatemalan community overnight and placed the town in an extremely difficult situation as the town's mayor tried to declare Postville a disaster. The town's main employer went bankrupt (the meatpacking plant that had hired the unauthorized workers), most of the Guatemalan small businesses along its main street went out of business, the housing market, which heavily relied on Guatemalan immigrants, collapsed and the remittances being sent to sustain the small rural villages in Guatemala dried up. The shadow system that had built up the town and was basically sustaining the meatpacking plant, the town and the Guatemalan villages collapsed.

Postville demonstrates the risks associated with being dependent on shadow systems that receive at least implicit support from planners, who, in their silence, don't advocate for vulnerable populations. The key lesson in Postville is that as planners we cannot ignore the fact that there is an entire population living in the shadows in our cities and towns, even if we think that by ignoring this population we are somehow helping them out by not focusing on their unauthorized status. Michelle Alexander has recently written an excellent book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010), where she argues that an entire penal system has been developed to crimi-

nalise African Americans and maintain them as a caste.

In the age of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. She argues that once you are criminalized, "employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits and exclusion from jury service are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow.

Unauthorized immigrants are labeled criminals once they cross the border or overstay their visas. This criminality places them in vulnerable situations and creates the conditions for their invisibility.

How did this shadow social system of informality emerge in Postville? The informal sub-economy was supported by social capital that linked the Guatemalan immigrants to their home communities in Guatemala and to Postville. The meatpacking plant, which needed the low-wage labor, recruited immigrants informally via family kinship networks. The town was directly dependent on the meatpacking plant, which was its main employer, and planners turned a blind eye to these issues. My view of planners in this small town consists of town administrators and also regional planners who supported the town's planning activities. But planners, in my view, are also civic leaders that play a direct advising role and influence planning issues in the town. This informal sub-system worked productively with the town's power structure because everyone was in the same boat—dependent on the meatpacking plant to sustain the economic structure of the town.

The question of unauthorized immigrant populations is really one of civil rights because it is the state that creates the conditions of illegality in towns like Postville. The question for progressive planners is therefore how



to bring these populations out of the shadows without putting them at greater risk. Ignoring their documentation status just lets this shadow system maintain the exploitative relationships. We need more research and active progressive planners who tackle this issue head on and contribute to the national immigration debate in the coming years.

How to tackle this important issue is difficult, yet critical, to explore. Every time I ask a practitioner working with unauthorized populations if the people they are helping are unauthorized, they usually say, "I do not ask," thinking they are doing them a service. This, however, is a misguided strategy.



Bringing this issue out of the shadows means that it will have to be acknowledged and discussed. The number of unauthorized immigrants in a community needs to be counted and this issue brought to the attention of civic and political leaders. This is not a recommendation I make lightly given that political backlash might be the result. However, this backlash could in fact lead to opportunities to address this issue. But the numbers are not enough. The human stories behind these immigrants' struggles are just as, if not more, important. Unauthorized workers are members of our communities (some have lived in them for many years and have mixed-status families) and it's important to understand their needs and the particular challenges they face. As progressive planners, we have a responsibility to include this community in our planning processes so that we can learn of



the particular needs and issues it faces and incorporate its ideas and perspective into the community's planning. In my research I experienced both success and much failure in trying to conduct public outreach in communities where there is a high concentration of unauthorized residents. If planners want to conduct outreach to these invisible communities, we have to be willing to do five things: 1) go to them; 2) conduct participatory workshops in spaces they feel safe; 3) work with community organizations that have already built trust with these communities and are offering them concrete social services; 4) make the workshops non-coercive and bottom up; and 5) incorporate the information gained from these participatory workshops into tangible and specific policy recommendations that planning leaders can do something about.

The role of community partners is critical since these communities are rightfully distrustful of planners, making it is extremely difficult for us to work in these communities on our own. We need to collaborate and work via community partners such as faith-based groups, immigrant advocacy organizations, immigrant small businesses which have a good pulse on these communities and service-based organizations that provide English as a Second Language courses and immigration legal assistance. Planners, however, also need to be able to interact with these populations without the help of these partners. Taking an ethnographic approach to community planning would go a long way in this regard. Immersing yourself (to

the best of your ability) into the community dynamics of these populations is important. For example, informally interacting with immigrant populations in their places of worship, play, and work would help planners better understand who the key leaders in these communities are and uncover the hidden dynamics that play a crucial role in these communities. In other words, planners need to be able to befriend key members of these communities and become their advocates.



While engaging with the unauthorized community, planners also have to engage with the political structure in their cities and towns around an immigrant rights agenda. This is where relationships with immigrant rights activists and organizations become critical. Campaigns such as immigrant inclusivity and creating a welcoming environment in the city and town can serve as a way to catalyze change around taking a positive stance on immigration.

Although immigration is in the jurisdiction of the federal government, cities and towns can still play a crucial role in advocating for unauthorized communities. Planners need to play a mediating role between unauthorized immigrants and the community power structure in cities

and towns, which has the ability to implement policies conducive to creating an immigrant-welcoming environment. This could be a positive and concrete step forward for an issue that is politically divisive. In my book, *Immigrants and the Revitalization of Los Angeles* (Cambria Press, 2010), I describe the co-evolution of a low-income Central American community in the MacArthur Park neighborhood and the City's redevelopment and planning institutions via the construction of a subway station that threatened the community's social fabric. In this ethnic metro-pole, the City's institutions had to pay attention to the needs of the immigrant community because the neighborhood sustained a high degree of immigrant financial and political capital. A recent example demonstrates how cities can directly play a role in the national immigration debate. Los Angeles Police Department Chief Charles Beck made national news when he announced that his officers were not going to take part in turning in unauthorized immigrants to ICE (a recent trend in law enforcement). Chief Beck also came out in favor of issuing drivers licenses to unauthorized immigrants. Interestingly, when Chief Beck served as Captain of the Rampart Division of the LAPD, he played an important positive role in the revitalization of MacArthur Park. Planners can learn from these types of examples and play a mediating role in communities with a high concentration of unauthorized residents, positioning themselves to be an advocate for communities that in many ways cannot advocate for themselves for fear of deportation. P²