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Book Review
by Carleen Simpson

Dreams Derailed: Undocumented Youths in the Trump Era

William A. Schwab
2018
University of Arkansas Press
126 pages
Paperback, $20.95

Director of Education, Research, and Outreach at the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History where he researches immigration, community, and international development issues. Schwab previously wrote Right to DREAM: Immigration Reform and America’s Future along with three other books. Schwab wrote this book to help Americans make better informed decisions on the pivotal issues facing the nation about immigration. This book offers a humanitarian approach to thoughtful immigration reform and provides serious answer to common misconceptions.

Divided into seven chapters with fourteen pages of current endnotes, each filled with extensive research on the immigration process, the DREAM movement, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the experiences of undocumented youth. Dreamers is a term used to refer to the undocumented children of immigrant parents. These children often come of age in America without any significant memory of their birth land. The DREAM Act was an attempt to acknowledge their presence and create a legal pathway to citizenship; DACA was an executive action to create a legal pathway for them to remain in America.

The first chapter discusses how the creation of a global economy has created more wealth than at any other time in history as well as enormous inequality. This economic transformation has been accompanied by demographic changes with large numbers of immigrants coming to America and reshaping politics. Millions of Americans left behind by economic growth and threatened by immigration, feel fearful and frustrated. In Schwab’s view, Trump was smart enough to tap into this fear and win the election despite the partisan divide his success enlarged.

Chapter two is presented in question answer format and provides clarification on facts about immigration. We are a nation of immigrants and always have been. Immigrants are a potent force in our economy no matter how you look at it. Our political discourse has focused on unauthorized immigration, and left youth brought to this country as children by their parents as pawns in the debate.

A history of contradictory, incoherent, and unfair policies is introduced in chapter three, documenting the Chinese Exclusion Act, Quota Laws, and the Immigration and Nationality Act. Congress’s first attempt to solve the problem of undocumented youth, the DREAM Act, would provide children a path to legalization under certain circumstances. Although support for the DREAM Act remains high, it has not been passed. Obama attempted to mitigate this by using
criteria in the DREAM Act to write the executive order DACA. This was terminated shortly after Trump became president. Schwab believes that the repeal of DACA will harm the economy, cost the U.S. government lost tax revenue, and force young immigrants back into the shadows.

Chapter four explains DACA, its’ effects, and the cost of ending it in more detail. Most DACA participants came here at a young age and were born in Latin America. DACA has had a significant impact on the economic and psychological well-being, education, and social integration of recipients. This allows them to increase earnings, savings, and consumption, as well as pay more in taxes. This program has been successful. Ending DACA would result in fewer trained workers and reduction in the national GDP. DACA participants are not eligible for benefits, and their contributions to Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds would fall. Ironically, this would mean fewer resources for American citizens, reduced funding for deportations, and a decline in international transfers which might actually increase emigration to the U.S.

In chapter five we hear from allies of undocumented youth. A teacher, an attorney, a community activist, and a college professor describe their daily work with undocumented youth and their commitment to the cause of immigration reform and social justice. These individuals attest to the successes of DACA and to the fear, anxiety, and hopelessness the undocumented felt before DACA. Most importantly, their stories tell us of a broken political system where our leaders ignore the will of the vast majority who want immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented youth.

We hear the stories of two DACA recipients, whom Schwab has known for a decade and profiled in his 2012 book. Their stories confirm what we learned about DACA recipients. They both came here with their families at a young age for economic opportunity and overcame the challenges necessary to become a member of our society. They lived fearfully in the shadows working tirelessly for the DREAM Act until DACA transformed their lives. After Trump’s announcement ending DACA, these Dreamers were met with anger but also determination to fight on.

The final chapter of Schwab’s book recaps what was discussed in previous chapters, the Trump Administration’s severe impact on immigration policy, and how change will take place going forward. Change will take place through the aging of generations, their ideologies, and values, and through social movements. Solving the political problem of the Dreamers will make the first step in resolving our larger immigration issues. As Schwab proclaims, “You only need to look to our past to see our future” (p. 121).

I was surprised that Schwab rarely mentioned rural America because of his connection to a rural state, Arkansas. The depopulation of rural America has been slowed, and sometimes reverse, by relocation of immigrants to rural areas. As an undergraduate social work student raised in a conservative household, I am accustomed to hearing concerns and fears about immigration. Schwab helped me to understand the reality of immigration in America and to see the benefits of accepting these newcomers. This book has ignited a new desire in me to speak out about immigration problems and get involved. Others interested in serving in rural America need to read this book, too. Facts do not always change attitudes, but facts are a good place to start.