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American Dream — Immigrant Reality

Symposium Commentary

Opening Remarks

Rodulfo Figueroa*†

Let me thank the organizers of this event, La Raza Law Journal, Mi-
grant Legal Services, and La Raza Law Students Association, as well as U.C. Berkeley, for giving me the opportunity to be here today. I want to congratulate them for having the courage and the vision to present this sym-
posium on immigration. The issue is, in my opinion, one of the most im-
portant, if not the most important, concern of modern societies today.

Because the phenomenon of immigration is rooted in the global context of gross inequality, and disequilibrium in the distribution of wealth, it is perhaps the international, social and political issue of this and the coming decades.

Not long ago, perhaps only five or ten years ago, what happened to immigrants in their new countries used to be a matter of pride for everyone. How immigrants succeeded in other countries was the subject of movies, stories, and television shows.

Mexico, for instance, has been a very lucky country. We have re-
ceived waves of immigrants that have changed parts of Mexico. Just before the start of the Second World War, Mexico received some of the members of the Spanish Republic who made a substantial positive impact in Mexico in almost every aspect of society. During and after the Second World War we had a very important Jewish immigration, which was also a key factor in changing Mexican society.

People who immigrate are, in my opinion, the ones who have what I call the extra engine for success. Immigrants tend to be some of the best and brightest people from the countries they leave. They are the ones who are willing to take a risk and able to make the extra effort that every human activity requires to be successful. In order to succeed, one has to have that small extra engine to do it.

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The United States has in general been very generous with the immigrant, and has received great benefits in return. It is the famous melting pot. If any country has been built by immigrants in the last three hundred years it is this one. What would this country be without the contribution of its immigrants? How would the economy of a state like California operate without its immigrants? How would the agricultural services operate? What would happen if, like in a science fiction novel, all of the immigrants left California overnight? What would happen if you woke up one morning and there were no immigrants in this state? Just imagine in your wildest dreams, what would happen.

I would like you to allow me to read from a text that applies to California and may cast some light on these questions. It is an analysis of those they call the "New Californians" and it goes more or less like this. New Californians are a significant part of the current California work force. New Californians are five percent of California's population, but they constitute 12% of the work force. New Californians are committed to working hard; 89% of all New Californian's work, compared to only 53% of all Californians. Most working New Californians hold more than one job, compared to only six percent of all Californians. Ninety percent of all working New Californians work more than 49 hours a week. New Californians earn only $11,440 a year, compared to $24,921 for all Californians. Note also something very important, something I believe is important for modern society. New Californians have very strong family ties. Sixty-eight percent of New Californians are married, 95% of married New Californians have intact families, no divorces, and 80% of married New Californians have children.

Clearly, immigrants continue to be positive contributors to the societies of their new nations. The meaning of terms such as legal or illegal, documented or undocumented, have historically been changed by societies according to their needs. But they are not that relevant in the analysis of the real problem. Limiting the subject to a shortsighted analysis on how to stop a person moving from one place to another, and whether or not he or she had the legal right to make such a move, does not address the real problem. In my view it is like trying to end drug addiction in our societies by fighting production and drug trafficking only, without a similar effort to address the prevention, education and consumption sides of the problem. The phenom-

2. Id., at 2.
3. Id.
4. Id.
5. Id.
6. Id.
7. Id., at 3
8. Id.
enon of our times is a problem of economic and social growth and economic inequality that has to do with the world economic order.

Advanced communications have changed the world, and it is increasingly difficult to do things in hiding. Today we know about the violations of human rights everywhere. We know that there is not a single country that escapes this unfortunate and degrading phenomenon of greed. Today it is easier than ever before to know what happens in another part of the world. It happens on our television screens every day, every minute, almost instantly, and it is in technicolor. Societies are questioning themselves more and more on matters that were not known before even among themselves. The problems of immigration today have to do with the incapacity of modern society to recognize its own faults and to restructure itself accordingly.

Many people are having problems understanding and accepting that the world has changed. The interrelation and consequent interdependence of countries, nations, societies and consequently human beings is here today, will continue and most likely increase. We should not allow greed, selfishness, blindness, and especially opportunistic "leaders" to manipulate the fear and ignorance of their people into an increased misunderstanding of the real problem, for their own benefit.

I strongly believe that, fortunately, the majority of the people are not on that side of the fence. The majority of the people are trying to understand the phenomenon. Most people understand that immigration is a vehicle for the mixture of cultures, philosophies, attitudes, perceptions and races, that enriches and will continue to enrich our countries, our nations and our lives.

Symposiums such as this one, with intelligent and sensible people, concerned with current problems and trying to find solutions through serious discussions and analysis are, in my opinion, the right efforts and on the right track.

I wish you the best and hope that the discussions will be helpful. Thank you very much.