

#1511 Economic Underclass, Political Pawns (Immigration and Asylum Seeking)

[00:00:00] Intro 9-6-22

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: Welcome to this episode of the award winning Best of the Left podcast, in which we shall take a look at the precarious state of our immigration and asylum system, the legacy of neoliberalism and imperialism on South and Central America, the inhumanity practiced by both of our political parties though, not equally, and the ever present possibility that things could get worse. Clips today are from Democracy Now!, The Takeaway, This Is Hell, CounterSpin, and Intercepted, with an additional members-only clip from Intercepted. And stay tuned to the end of the show for my analysis of the interplay between economics and immorality, particularly as it relates to immigration.

Biden to End Trump-Era "Remain in Mexico" Border Policy; Immigrants Face Ongoing Trauma, Separation - Democracy Now! - Air Date 8-10-22

AMY GOODMAN: The Biden administration said Monday it's officially ending the controversial Trump-era "Remain in Mexico" policy and will no longer force asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases are resolved in U.S. courts over months and years. The announcement came [00:01:00] just hours after a judge lifted an injunction, in effect since December, blocking Biden officials from terminating the program, formally known as the MPP, the Migrant Protection Protocols. The Supreme Court ruled in June the Biden administration had the authority to end the policy.

Some 70,000 asylum seekers were subjected to MPP from January 2019 to January 2021, when President Biden suspended the policy, fulfilling a campaign promise. But a federal court in Texas last December ordered the administration to restart the program after legal challenges from Texas and Missouri. Since then, nearly 6,000 more asylum seekers were enrolled in MPP. Most have been forced to live in squalid makeshift border camps. Others found shelter in towns

near the U.S.-Mexico border. This is an asylum seeker from Nicaragua who was living at a border camp in Matamoros, Mexico, in 2020.

ASYLUM SEEKER: [translated] I know this is not the ideal place for any child or any [00:02:00] teenager. But while we're here, we're doing our best to save them from mental health problems. Sometimes the sadness is overwhelming, but you have to stay strong. I want my granddaughters to have a better future.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, for more, we're joined by Efrén Olivares, the deputy legal director at the Southern Poverty Law Center's Immigrant Justice Project, formerly with the Texas Civil Rights Project in South Texas, where we met him. His new book is *My Boy Will Die of Sorrow: A Memoir of Immigration from the Front Lines*.

Efrén, welcome back to Democracy Now! If you can talk about the significance of the end of MPP. And then we want to ask you about the separation of children and how many are still separated.

EFREN OLIVARES: Hi, Amy. Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Yeah, the end of MPP, or "Remain in Mexico," is a [00:03:00] long time coming. We were pleased to see that the administration suspended the program right at the beginning of the Biden administration. Unfortunately, litigation and the courts got in the way and had prevented it from fully winding down the program, and, in fact, the administration was forced to enroll additional people in MPP. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled and that the district court has dissolved the injunction, there's nothing stopping the Biden administration from promptly and orderly disenrolling everyone who is in MPP and allowing them to face their asylum cases or immigration proceedings from the United States, where they will have access to counsel, the ability to gather evidence, present that evidence, and everything that comes with presenting an immigration or asylum case.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And, Efrén, you worked legally on behalf of many immigrant families that were separated under the "zero tolerance" policy of former President Trump. What's the [00:04:00] status with those separated families today?

EFREN OLIVARES: Well, it varies. There's a lot of situations. Some families have been reunited. Many are litigating their cases against the government as a result of that policy, which, remarkably, the Biden administration is defending

in court. There are dozens of lawsuits still ongoing, and the Biden administration is defending Trump policies and Trump administration officials.

And some families, unfortunately, are still separated. Some children who were taken from their parents are still in the U.S., either with relatives or in the foster care system. And some parents were deported to their home countries, have not been located. So, not every family has been reunited and some never will, unfortunately.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And also, the Biden administration is still enforcing the Title 42 pandemic policy, and nearly 2 million asylum seekers were expelled without due process as a result of Title 42. [00:05:00] What do you see happening with that policy in the future?

EFREN OLIVARES: Well, now the CDC and a host of scientists and public health experts have confirmed that there's no public health justification for Title 42 expulsions. Unfortunately, the ending of Title 42, of that practice of expelling immigrants and asylum seekers, has also been stopped in litigation. The administration has said multiple times that it intends to end that policy, but the courts have prevented it from doing so. We were pleased to see that in Congress there was no codification of Title 42. So, as the administration continues to litigate that against Texas and other states, we look forward to having a science-based policy around the pandemic, as well as a commonsense immigration and asylum policy, so that those seeking safety in this country have an orderly way to [00:06:00] do so.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to go to a clip. I mean, as you've said, you represented many of the separated families at the border and have spoken about this over the years on Democracy Now!, as you write about in your book, *My Boy Will Die of Sorrow: A Memoir of Immigration from the Front Lines*. This is what you write about a day in 2018 in McAllen, Texas. You said, "I came back to the Bentsen Tower. Standing outside, on the corner of 17th and Austin streets, I waited as the reporter set up the camera. Renée Feltz, with Democracy Now!, had traveled from New York City to McAllen to cover the separations. She was the first reporter who reached out to us about the brewing crisis, and we saw this as an opportunity to break the story to a wider audience, which was not yet aware of what we were seeing and hearing in court every day." Let's go to Renée's interview in 2018 outside that federal courthouse in McAllen. A GEO Group private prison [00:07:00] transport bus backed up behind you.

EFREN OLIVARES: These are the buses in which the immigrants, many of whom are parents who have had their children taken away, are transported to

and from the courthouse, probably to a CBP detention facility. The sad thing is that many of those people have children, and many of them were separated this morning, before they came to court, and were led to believe that when they return to the detention facility, their children are going to be there. But we know that the children will not be there, because the government is separating them.

AMY GOODMAN: So, it may surprise some to know, Efrén Olivares, that some 1,000 children are still separated at this point. I believe when the Biden administration came in, they put Dr. Jill Biden, President Biden's wife, the first lady, overall in charge of reunification. If you can talk about the effect — in your book, you also write about your own experience so many years ago being separated from [00:08:00] your family.

EFREN OLIVARES: Yes. You know, that interview that you played, it was before this crisis had made national news, and we were struggling to break through and make sure that the public knew what was really happening at the border. And one of the saddest things is that we will probably never know how many families were actually separated. Given the government's intentional lack of record-keeping, we will not know. Many families were separated, and the children ended up at a shelter, but the shelter never knew that that child had been traveling with a family, with a parent, a father or a mother, because there was no record-keeping. And if the children were too little to be able to explain that, we will never know truly how many children were separated.

And as far as the lifelong consequences of that, you know, there's been widespread reporting on the trauma that that experience, the violent ripping apart of a child [00:09:00] from his or her mom or her dad — you know, just thinking of that audio that leaked, if that doesn't convey what this policy caused to children and to parents. It is still hard to understand how in this country, in 2018 and ongoing, it was possible to see such a cruel violation of human rights against children.

The Lasting Impacts of Family Separation - The Takeaway - Air Date 8-18-22

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Between 2017 and 2021, more than 5,600 migrant families were separated at the US Southern border under the Trump administration's Zero Tolerance policy. The policy ended amidst public outrage, and during his second week in office, President Biden signed an executive order establishing a family reunification task force.

PRESIDENT BIDEN: We're going to work to undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration that literally, not figuratively, ripped children from the arms of their families, their mothers, and fathers at the border, and with no [00:10:00] plan, none whatsoever, to reunify the children who are still in custody and their parents."

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: A year and a half into Biden's presidency, there are still some families separated from one another.

Caitlin Dickerson is a staff writer at The Atlantic and her latest investigative piece, "The Secret History of Family Separation" is a sweeping, nearly 30,000-word piece chronicling the scope of family separation border policy. Caitlin, thanks so much for being here today on The Takeaway.

CAITLIN DICKERSON: Thank you for having me.

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Let's just start with the most immediate: How many families remain separated as a result of the Trump-era Zero Tolerance policy?

CAITLIN DICKERSON: The number of families that remain separated today is somewhere between 700 and 1,000 according to government records. That overall 5,000-plus number speaks to the entirety of the Trump [00:11:00] administration. Some of those separations happened under Zero Tolerance, which started in the summer of 2018. Some of them happened prior in pilot programs that originally began in secret, the country didn't know that they were going on. Part of the issue with reunifying these families today is that record keeping was really shockingly bad. In some cases, just nonexistent at all, some separations weren't documented anywhere.

That's why you have so many families that still according to government records haven't been brought back together. That number 700 to 1,000 is really large, and it is thought that some of those families have found ways to reunite with each other and not alerted the federal government to that, understandably not wanting to deal with the US government anymore. But there are more than 150 children who, to this day, the parents from whom they were separated still have not even been located by the American government. We just don't know where they are.

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: We talk about this as a [00:12:00] Trump-era policy. Certainly there was public outrage at some of the images that resulted from important reporting during that time. But you also help us to understand

that the Trump administration is not the first or last presidency or political administration to separate families at the border.

CAITLIN DICKERSON: That's right. This family separation that occurred under President Trump was an escalation of an approach to border enforcement known as Prevention by Deterrence, which really came out of 9/11. It was when the Department of Homeland Security decided to try implementing what they call "consequences," which means prosecution against people crossing the border in order to discourage them from doing so.

This typically dealt with individual adults and often individual adult men who were migrant laborers coming from Mexico and its early phases, and then under Trump, of course, expanded to families.

Prior to the [00:13:00] Trump administration, families were separated occasionally, including under the Obama administration. That fell entirely outside of federal policy, unless it was done with the explicit purpose for child safety, to protect a child who was thought to be crossing the border with somebody who was a threat to them, maybe they weren't the real parent, maybe they were the real parent but were facing very serious criminal charges unrelated to crossing the border and requesting asylum with their child.

Even though it did happen, though, I should point out the numbers were far, far, far lower than they had been under Trump, and those numbers we really have never seen anything like it.

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: For one moment, let's put aside the moral, the ethical, the humane. From a pure policy perspective, did these consequences work to reduce the number of migrants arriving at the Southern border?

CAITLIN DICKERSON: They don't work. Economists and other researchers who've looked at this issue for a very long [00:14:00] time have pointed out that the main factors that influence immigration are much bigger, long-term trends. The economic circumstances in the countries that people are fleeing from, as well as the economic circumstances here, which is why migration dropped really dramatically, for example, during and after the 2008 recession, because there was very little work available. Then, of course, also the longer-term trends around public safety and whether people feel like their families are safe in their homes on a day-to-day basis.

There is some research that shows on a very granular level and on individual-level, consequences can be effective in that if you, Melissa, were caught

crossing the border illegally and you were prosecuted for doing so, your personal likelihood of trying to do so again may go down, but it's just nowhere near on the scale in terms of effectiveness as, again, looking at these economic [00:15:00] considerations and the public safety considerations, and whether people feel like they're safe on a daily basis.

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: In your piece, you really delve into what family separation looked like, felt like, was experienced like. Are there stories, maybe one that sticks out for you from your reporting?

CAITLIN DICKERSON: There are. That was really important to me to describe the separations themselves because, for years, we've only had the side of the story of the children and families who were involved and it was really impossible to get anybody from the border patrol to go on the record and talk about it.

But I met a woman named Nares Gonzalez, who is a Salvadoran consular worker. She's one of the few people who are outside of the federal government officials who were allowed to be in these detention centers when separations took place. She's really still traumatized by what she saw. She described walking into the facility on the first day that separations were taking place and seeing a sea of crying and screaming [00:16:00] children and families who were all being pulled on at the same time. She said that she would literally see kids where you'd have a parent holding onto one arm and pulling, and then a border patrol agent pulling onto the other arm so hard that she worried these kids were actually getting hurt, and parents wanting to fight back and these scenes were escalating.

There were times when she was actually asked by border patrol agents as a native Spanish speaker, someone from El Salvador, to actually intervene and put herself physically between agents and parents to try to calm them down and explain the situation to them, which, of course, felt horrible to her but she thought that, in that moment, she was so out of control of what was going on that at the very least, what she wanted to do was prevent any of these children or parents from getting physically injured on top of the emotional trauma that they were enduring.

Once the parents were gone, she said that kids would surround her, just grab onto her arms, her legs, her belt loops, just beg her for information, [00:17:00] beg her not to leave at the end of the day because they were so confused. More than anything, they just wanted to know where their parents were.

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Looking ahead, what is the likely future of family separation policy at our border?

CAITLIN DICKERSON: There's nothing right now that prevents family separation from being implemented again tomorrow, certainly in a future Trump administration if one exists. President Trump pushed to reimplement family separations really immediately after he released an executive order ending them under political pressure he was facing from both Democrats and Republicans. But it was something that he lamented for the rest of his presidency and that he tried to convince people to go along with once again.

I think maybe more important than that one person in his views on family separation are the views of dozens of career border enforcement officials I interviewed, who told me they felt that it was successful. They still believe in the idea. They would [00:18:00] say, "We would've really seen the success if we had just left it in place a couple of weeks longer. If we'd just held on for a little bit more time, it would've made a difference." They believe so strongly in the effectiveness of deterrence and increasing the severity of deterrence alongside the increasing border crossings, despite, again, years of research calling those conclusions into question.

Congress has done nothing to outlaw a future family separation policy. At one point, there was a lot of enthusiasm and momentum around outlawing the practice. That seems to have disappeared. Again, there's just nothing to prevent this from coming back, and still a lot of people working in border enforcement who believe it's a good idea.

Political Pawns Immigrant Activists Decry Texas Gov. Abbott for Busing Asylum Seekers to NYC - Democracy Now! - Air Date 8-11-22

AMY GOODMAN: Here in New York City, more than a hundred asylum seekers arrived on buses from Texas early Wednesday morning at Port Authority, the bus terminal near Times Square. Another bus arrived Sunday with no advance notice from Texas officials. This is a Venezuelan-born migrant named Edwin Enrique [00:19:00] Jimenez Guaido.

EDWIN ENRIQUE JIMENEZ GUAIDO: [translated] It's been six years already, six years since I left my country, first to Colombia, next to Ecuador.

And in February, I decided to come here, through the Darién Reserve, Panama, Costa Rica.

AMY GOODMAN: This comes as Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced he's sending asylum seekers to so-called liberal cities. On Friday, he said he chose New York City to be a designated, "drop-off location," along with Washington, D.C., as part of his opposition to what he calls President Biden's so-called open border policies.

People on the buses said they were told to sign a consent waiver. CNN reports the waiver includes a line that absolves Texas officials from liability, "arising [out] of or in any way relating to any injuries and damages that may occur during the agreed transport to locations outside of Texas". At least eight people who got off the buses needed emergency medical attention, according to the New York Mayor's Office of Immigrant [00:20:00] Affairs.

On Tuesday, New York City's Immigration Commissioner Manuel Castro and Social Services Commissioner Gary Jenkins addressed a City Council hearing on the influx of asylum seekers into at least 11 shelters.

MANUEL CASTRO: What is new now is the systematic diversion of asylum seekers and immigrants to New York City by external forces, including by the disgusting, cruel, and cowardly actions of Texas Governor Greg Abbott.

GARY JENKINS: We will be tapping into our nonprofit providers to ensure asylum seekers have access to wraparound services, including legal support, healthcare, and education.

AMY GOODMAN: There are now reports from legal service advocates that some families who could not provide proof of their relationships were separated or had to leave the shelters.

Asylum seekers are also being met by a welcoming effort that includes members of the South [00:21:00] Bronx Mutual Aid collective, Legal Services, and the New York Immigration Coalition, whose executive director, Murad Awawdeh, joins us now for more.

Welcome to Democracy Now!, Murad. Explain exactly what's happening and what's happened at Port Authority.

MURAD AWAWDEH: Thank you so much for having me, Amy, on your show today. I've been a huge fan. And, you know, I wish we were meeting on better terms.

But what we're seeing happening right now is Governor Abbott using asylum seekers as political pawns to merely help increase his polling numbers down in Texas.

Folks who are seeking asylum at the southern border have a legal right to do so. We have seen people who are traveling upwards of 3,000 miles on foot to get to the southern border, then present themselves and seek asylum at the southern border, be treated so horribly by the state of Texas, and then [00:22:00] busing them over 2,000 miles away to New York City. Yesterday morning, most folks who showed up, many of them were asking why they were sent to New York City. One man was trying to — you know, urgently wanting to speak to his wife and children, who were actually in San Antonio, Texas. So he wanted to go to San Antonio, Texas, after Texas had just dropped him off here in New York City. Folks are arriving on the bus sick. They're arriving extremely hungry and thirsty. They're not being given food, and at most times without their identity documents.

So, there's a huge effort that's happening right now to welcome them with dignity here in New York City and make sure that we are showing not just Governor Abbott how it should be done, but really seeing each other as [00:23:00] humans in this moment.

AMY GOODMAN: So, how — do you understand how it's happening? New York City officials are saying some 4,000 asylum seekers and migrants have traveled to New York in recent months, either by choice or because they were sent here by Texas state officials. So, how do they decide who — do they just shove them on a bus?

MURAD AWAWDEH: That's what it seems like, Amy. I think that there is — the governor of Texas is definitely misleading, and Texas officials are definitely misleading the asylum seekers. You know, many of the folks who came here yesterday morning, who got off the three buses that showed up, were asking, "Well, how do I get to North Carolina now?" or "How do I get to Wisconsin?" or Oregon or Louisiana? Folks are being coerced into signing this waiver, to then be sent up to New York City without any support, without any care.

[00:24:00] Last Friday, we saw one young girl get off the bus who wasn't feeling well. She received emergency care, and turned out she needed insulin

because she's diabetic. On Sunday morning, there was one young man who came off the bus and needed treatment because he was having chest pain. We're seeing people being put into really inhumane conditions, not just on the bus but even before the bus. And then, when they get to New York City, we're providing them with care.

So, I think that the bigger piece here is Governor Abbott's lack of empathy, lack of compassion, lack of humanity, and really trying to rile up his base of folks who have historically been anti-immigrant.

Capital's migration policy: Daniel Melo

Part 1 - This Is Hell! - Air Date 2-28-22

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: You mentioned that migration controls have always had to adjust to capitalism's contradictions and demands, which explains why these exploitative migration policies [00:25:00] are bipartisan, so how dependent is the US economic system on exploiting migrant labor?

DANIEL MELO: This is something I cover much more extensively in the book, but it is always - migration has always been tied to the political/economic question here in the US. So from the earliest moments of the US emerging as a nation on the world stage there has been this question of controlling who comes in and out of the country that has almost always been centered around labor.

And that's not to say that, of course, at times there haven't been issues of race and xenophobia and all of that sort of stuff, and you can see intersections of that, say, in the Bracero Program in the 40s, 50s, when there was a national labor shortage here during World War II. We needed bodies to keep factories running, it was just that simple. We needed people to continue growing our food while we shipped people overseas to fight. So Mexican labor largely stepped in to fill that gap. But the day that [00:26:00] that labor was no longer necessary you had Operation Wetback come back in and start —and that's literally what it was named— to start removing Mexicans en masse from the country.

It's never been steps in our migration policy towards necessarily establishing some kind of humane approach to migration, but rather has always centered around this question of political economy.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: Again, you were mentioning the Bracero Program. That's the program started in 1942 to address labor shortages,

which allowed millions of Mexican men to work legally in the United States on short term labor contracts. Would such a program, especially during a pandemic when we have seen labor shortages have been. —I know that that's not necessarily the case—but would such a program, especially during a pandemic have been politically impossible in the United States, whether that was in 2021 or this year 2022?

DANIEL MELO: I do think so, largely because, again, there's no real need for it in terms of the keeping the status quo intact. So [00:27:00] part of what makes migrant labor is so appealing, whether you're talking about undocumented labor or even say in the STEM fields, the H-2B program, is that it's easily exploited and remains under the control of the state.

And to use the undocumented example, you can pay migrant workers pennies on the dollar, because what recourse do they have? They don't have status. There's no way for them to readily organize themselves. And in fact, historically CBP had, Customs and Border and its predecessors, have even worked alongside of agriculture. They would deliver folks that they had apprehended to fields to work and then round them up and take them and deport them, having not paid them a dollar for their labor. And so it's because migrants are always in this precarious legal status, that it ensures that you're able to exploit them.

And so in that sense, there's no need ever to Institute broad [00:28:00] legalization programs in our modern era, just because there's already plenty of migrants here that are able to be exploited, and so long as that remains true, that's going to remain so. And if you wanna jump over, say, and. I've heard folks talk about the example of Reagan's amnesty in 1986 it's, "oh, but look, there's this example where despite there being labor shortages during that era," again in quotations, it was "he gave 3 million migrants status".

But if you actually look at Reagan's incentive around the law and why he actually agreed to push it and sign, it was not because he felt sorry for this group of individuals or that he was worried about their exploitation, but rather it was this question of control. This is a direct quote from Reagan that said he wanted to, "humanely regain control of our borders." And part of what the act did in 86 was to try to penalize employers rather than target migrants to regain that control. So essentially to try to close off some of the [00:29:00] flow into the nation. But of course that was gonna run afoul of just the general capitalist tendency, to be able to do what it wanted to do to maintain profit. And so it never got any teeth. You did end up, of course, seeing a lot of folks gain legal status, but it didn't eliminate the job opportunities to start bringing people over.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: If us immigration policy reveals the dependence of the United States economic system on exploiting migrants and migrant labor to you, why is that exploitation not central to the debate over us immigration policy? What is the impact on the political debate over immigration when there is no focus or even mention of that exploitation?

DANIEL MELO: It's tough to say what the particular parties are thinking at any one point. And I should say that there's not some grand conspiracy by capitalists or even by the political ruling class to keep migrants under thumb, it's just that to do anything else at this point would be [00:30:00] such a massive disruption to the political status quo that is just not something that they can deliver on. And so to that extent, there have historically been trends where you see at times, say, agriculturalists jumping on board with fighting certain repressive or aggressive enforcement schemes, but that wasn't, again, because they were terribly interested in what happened to the migrants, they just wanted access to that labor pool.

One author put it as like, they wanted workers, not fellow citizens. To that extent because migrants, again, aren't voting members, that limited way of even trying to participate in political life here, they're not being heard at that level. And then there's no incentive at this point to make any kind of radical changes. Right now you would get massive political blow back from the right, and of course, here on the left the Democrats have just been so inadequate at moving anything forward that there's just no reason right now to try to pursue votes from the collective [00:31:00] migrant interests and population.

Azadeh Shahshahani on Central America Plan - CounterSpin - Air Date 8-19-22

JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: The White House has since announced some \$2 billion in private sector “commitments” to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, part of what they’ve dubbed a “call to action” to engage the root causes of migration from the region by driving what officials repeatedly describe as an “ecosystem of opportunity” that will allow people of the region to build healthy lives at home.

US corporate news media never met a public/private partnership they didn't like, and they aren't so big on using critical history to shape foreign policy coverage. So if you want to hear challenging questions about this White House plan to bring peace and prosperity to northern Central America, they won't be the place to look.

Our guest raises some of those questions in a recent piece co-authored for *In These Times*, titled “The White [00:32:00] House’s Plan to Stem Migration Protects Corporate Profits—Not People.”

Azadeh Shahshahani is legal and advocacy director at Project South. She’s also a past president of the National Lawyers Guild. She joins us now by phone from Atlanta. Welcome to CounterSpin, Azadeh Shahshahani.

AZADEH SHAHSHAHANI: Thank you very much for having me.

JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: US government involvement in northern Central America is a long history, violent on many levels, and I don’t want to pretend we’re addressing all of that right now. But if you don’t put the Biden administration’s “call to action” in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in a historical context, it seems like you just can’t see it clearly. So please talk us through a bit about what you and others see as primary points of concern about this plan and about the approach that it reflects.

AZADEH SHAHSHAHANI: One of the primary concerns [00:33:00] is the administration’s lack of acknowledgement about the long history of US intervention, and facilitating coups against leftist presidents and democratically-elected governments in support of US corporate and business interests in the region, from Guatemala to El Salvador to Honduras.

And in Honduras, as recently as 2009, of course, we had a coup supported by the Obama administration toppling the democratically-elected President Manuel Zelaya.

And so the US obviously has had a very clear role in destabilizing the region, which has in turn led to forced migration. So, for example, the number of Honduran children crossing the border increased by [00:34:00] more than 1,000% in 2014, so within five years of the coup.

And as another example, immigration from Mexico has doubled since the US signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, which has had the impact of undercutting small business and crushing low-income workers, and has made migration, really forced migration, a matter of survival.

And so the question that we really need to be asking is: “What is driving this call to action? Is it actually supporting people, including Indigenous communities?” Obviously not. What lies at the heart of this call to action, like

previous US government plans toward Central America, and I should say Latin America generally, is to preserve and promote corporate interests.

JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: Concretely, for one thing, the US, we're told, has a commitment from this company SanMar, that we're told is going to create [00:35:00] 4,000 jobs. I think US listeners understand that media are very interested in promises of job creation, and much less interested in following up on how it plays out. But just using that as an example, what is there to think about there?

AZADEH SHAHSHAHANI: Right, so SanMar is a US-based apparel company. And supposedly it's going to purchase more from Elcatex, which is a Honduras-based garment manufacturer that SanMar partially owns.

The Collective of Honduran Women, which is an organization of women who work in Honduras' garment sweatshops, has long denounced the low wages, long hours and serious repetitive motion injuries that they suffer in Honduras' textile industry.

And they actually submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission, which has been admitted, on behalf of 26 women who have suffered some serious [00:36:00] injuries as a result of working in the garment factories, including three Elcatex workers with alleged permanent partial disabilities.

And so these are issues of serious concern. And the issue is also lack of living wages and labor rights for the workers in the garment industry. And so the true beneficiary of SanMar's increased purchasing from Elcatex is going to be SanMar itself, because SanMar is a partial owner of Elcatex, and also one of the corporate elite, which is a pattern we see repeatedly, that these business bills actually support the oligarchy in northern Central America.

JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: This is obviously connected, because anti-corruption, and the idea that corruption is going to be rooted out, [00:37:00] is key to the call to action's promises here. There's an Engel list about, you know, you're going to get on this list if you've been involved in any sort of corruption. How do you see that playing out in practice, in terms of these deals that are being made?

AZADEH SHAHSHAHANI: Right, well, we're not truly seeing actual accountability, with the one exception being Honduras. So you know, the 2009 coup was followed by 12 years of plundering and corruption. And so now the

Honduran President Xiomara Castro and the new Congress have pledged to combat corruption and restore state institutions.

As a part of this, Honduras recently passed a new energy law, which, among other elements, is basically going to enable the government to renegotiate the contracts by which it purchases energy from private energy producers and set more reasonable rates, because right after the 2009 [00:38:00] coup, the government had started negotiating this contract with the private sector that basically gave them huge profits.

So it was estimated that the Honduras energy company, about 70% of its revenue was going to these private companies, whereas if it could produce the energy itself, it would be a lot less money.

You would think that this is something that the US would be supporting, based on the anti-corruption rhetoric at the root of the call to action and all the rest. But then we see the US ambassador to Honduras criticizing the law on Twitter [Tweet from Ambassador Laura Dogu, Twitter 5/3/22] when it was introduced in the Honduran congress, expressing worry about this effect on foreign investment, which again shows us that the US's true motives are corporate profit.

JANINE JACKSON - HOST, COUNTERSPIN: Right, here you have an example of a state saying they want to use their state resources to benefit their own people, and you have the US saying, "Well, you know, [00:39:00] maybe that's not a good idea." It certainly should raise some questions.

The Democrats Long War on Immigrants - Intercepted - Air Date 2-17-21

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Part of what's frustrating about the "ICE gone rogue" framework is that it presents the Biden administration as somehow powerless, when in fact they're not. That really sets the context, I think, for what we can expect in the battles really to come with the Biden administration.

I think it's so important to understand how immigration enforcement has been a pillar of the Democratic party's governance for three decades. And it really was under presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, not Donald Trump exclusively, that an entire immigration enforcement apparatus that was bent on expanding detention and deportation, that was bent on criminalizing migration,

through criminal prosecutions that was bent on militarizing the border, the very bipartisan agenda of detaining and deporting and terrorizing migrant communities.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: All Americans, not only in the states, most [00:40:00] heavily affected, but in every place in this country are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: The Clinton years really normalized the most severe consequences of border militarization and mass detention, both at the same time.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants. The public service they use imposed burdens on our taxpayers. That's why our administration has moved aggressively to secure our borders more by hiring a record number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before. We are a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws.

It is wrong and ultimately self-defeating for a nation of immigrants to permit the kind of abuse of our immigration laws we have seen in recent years. And we must do more to stop it.[00:41:00]

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: 1994 is a really important year because 1994 was the year that the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: NAFTA will tear down trade barriers between our three nations. It will create the world's largest trade zone and create 200,000 jobs in this country by 1995 alone. The environmental and labor side agreements negotiated by our administration will make this agreement a force for social progress as well as economic growth.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: As Bill Clinton was signing NAFTA to ensure the free movement of capital, the impacts of which continue to be felt today, is when the Zapatistas rose up in armed rebellion, citing NAFTA as one of the reasons for their rebellion.

[News clip from [00:42:00] Zapatistas]

And that was because the Zapatistas predicted, as many others did, that the North American Free Trade Agreement would bring misery and

impoverishment specifically and especially across indigenous communities in Mexico. And that it was the latest iteration of neoliberal colonial capitalist warfare on their communities.

NEWS CLIP: In Mexico for the Indian people, if you want food, if you want schools, if you want help, you must die or kill for. Take this. We don't want more papers. We want schools. We want hospitals. We want land. We want support of the government.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: At the same time that NAFTA was being signed and rammed through, the Army Corps of Engineers was fencing the US/Mexico border to constrict the movement of people coming in from Mexico.

And the Bill [00:43:00] Clinton administration knew that NAFTA would create more misery and hence more displacement and more migration, which is precisely why they try to constrict the very movement of the people that they have displaced.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: The solution is to welcome legal immigrants and legal legitimate refugees, and to turn away those who do not obey the laws. We will make it tougher for illegal aliens to get into our country. And we will increase the number of border patrol, equipping and training them to be first class law enforcement officers.

Today's initiatives are about stopping crime, toughening the penalties for the criminals, and giving our law enforcement people the tools they need to do their job. And it certainly plain to anybody with eyes to see that the border patrol is drastically understaffed, breathtakingly understaffed.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Border patrol tripled in size, and it became the second largest enforcement agency in the United States at the time.[00:44:00]

And also we saw border patrol adopt the official strategy of what they call "prevention through deterrents."

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: For example, I've asked the attorney general to increase those elements of our border patrol strategy that are proving most effective, including the use of helicopters, night scopes, and all terrain vehicles.

I've asked the members of the cabinet to create, for the first time, a national detention and removal plan, to dramatically increase the identification and removal of deportable, illegal aliens.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: And it's actually intended to create border deaths because you're trying to deter through death. And operations such as Hold the Line in Texas, Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Safeguard in Arizona all worked together to militarize the border under this strategy.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: One of the cornerstones of our fight against illegal immigration has been a get tough policy at our borders. We initiated Operation Hold the Line at El Paso; Operation Gatekeeper in [00:45:00] San Diego; and Operation Safeguard in Arizona; all with one clear intention: to secure the southwest border. As we speak, these initiatives are making a substantial difference. Illegal immigration is down. Crime is down.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: And within six years of these operations, we saw that border deaths, which I argue we should more accurately call border killings because they're intentional and premeditated by the state, they increased by 509%.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Under the budgets already passed, we've added a thousand new border patrol agents just in the southwest. By the end of 1996, our administration will have increased overall border personnel by 51% since 1993. Thirdly, I have asked for new funds to double the deportation of criminal aliens next year, and to triple them by 1996.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: In 1996, [00:46:00] Clinton passed two laws that really kind of saw the nexus of this dehumanizing rhetoric of quote unquote "crime and drugs and illegals."

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: But we won't tolerate immigration by people whose first act is to break the law as they enter our country. We must continue to do everything we can to strengthen our borders, enforce our laws and remove illegal aliens from our country. This week, I sent strong legislation to Congress to try to stop those abuses, to secure our borders in the future, and to speed up deportation of illegal immigrants.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: And what these two laws did is they expanded the category of aggravated felony convictions, which essentially widened the net for detention and deportation of legal, permanent

residents who had minor convictions in the criminal legal system, stemming from stop and frisk, racist [00:47:00] policing, and the racist war on drugs.

What happened is within a few years, the average daily detentions in the United States tripled, and deportations shot up to an average of 150,000 people annually.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Right now we're deporting 110 illegal aliens every day. That's almost 40,000 a year. And we're going to do even better. Our plan will triple the number of criminal and other deportable aliens deported since 1993.

And whether they're innocent or guilty of the crimes they're charged with in court, they're still here illegally and they should be sent out of the country.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: As recently as last decade, half of the people that ICE detained came under its radar through what's called a criminal alien program, which uses collaborations between local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement as a pipeline for expulsion.

And of course this disproportionately impacts black communities, afro-Caribbean communities, communities [00:48:00] that are doubly, triply punished through federal enforcement.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Our country was built by immigrants. But it was built also by people who obeyed the law. We must be able to control our borders. We must uphold respect for our laws. We're cracking down on this huge problem we found when I got here, and we're going to keep working at it until we do much, much better.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: You know, this kind of structural inequality that was being entrenched through the war on crime, through the war on immigration, through the kind of war on welfare, all of these worked together to really entrench a criminalizing agenda on a number of racialized communities. And at the same time, it was justified through this kind of pathologizing rhetoric of, you know, that culture is the cause of poverty, rather than this deeply structural political inequality that was [00:49:00] created as a consequence of racial capitalism.

Capital's migration policy Daniel Melo Part 2 - This Is Hell! - Air Date 2-28-22

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: You write that migration flows and their governance exist in a broader cycle of displacement and reabsorption. Migrant protection protocols together with the use of Title 42, a little known health law that allows for expedited expulsions of people trying to enter the United States on public health grounds is about the latest and greatest form of this. A means of tightly regulating migrant flows into the us as even failures of capitalism increase the waves of human bodies cast upon its shores. So as capitalism reveals its shortcomings outside the United States, the US limits the number of migrants entering the US has this increased with US support of neoliberalism, both in the United States and abroad, especially in Central American nations?

DANIEL MELO: The short answer is yes. There's a very long and sorted history going back well over a hundred years at this point of US involvement in Central America in particular, Central and South America, but to be very brief about it, [00:50:00] the US's insistence on opening up this half of the world to neoliberalism has consistently decimated the local economies, the local political structure, and the price of that, ultimately, is displaced people. So there have just been increasing wave upon wave of displaced people as neoliberalism failed attempts at doing what it does best, which is getting money for a few and leaving the rest out to dry.

So whether we're talking about NAFTA or further back any other kind of reforms to de-socialize things in Central American countries, in the end the immiseration that results from all of those things is going to displace people. The uptick in crime, even the gang problem is actually a problem of US created political economy. We fund these wars in, say, el Salvador thousands upon thousands of young men are [00:51:00] displaced from that country, come to the US, find a home in poor areas around the country, start becoming involved in gang life, create these large gangs, and then what do we do. We round them up and then send them back to their home countries to proliferate there. So even the gang problem is actually a product of the broader spectrum of US foreign policy choices in Central America over the last 60 years.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: So that would suggest the problem is neoliberalism, or neoliberalism at least exacerbates the problem. If that is the case, when it comes to migration policy specifically, to you, what

explains the lack of debate over neoliberalism? Is it all just the media's fault? Why do we not include neoliberalism within the debate over migrant policy?

DANIEL MELO: That is the question I think. For start, of course, I think there's a whole ideological structure that has really arisen to help defend neoliberalism [00:52:00] against the greatest detractors, but I also suspect that it's just, in some ways our own short memories about what's taken place. You can have Kamala Harris at the beginning of the Biden presidency take a trip to Central America and look those people dead in the face and say, do not come here. Do not come to the US. You will be turned back. You guys need to sort out your problems here. Fix what's wrong here. And she can be entirely sincere about that, believing that it is their problem. Forgetting, again, that a huge portion of their problem has come from US involvement in the past.

So I think whether we're talking about the political elite all the way down to the rest of us, it's so easy just because the pile keeps growing higher and higher and higher of problems that emerge from neoliberal policies, from capitalism, that it's easy to just forget that this didn't just come out of [00:53:00] a vacuum, that it has a history that's tied to it. And yet because we're always under the next crisis, it's so easy to just try to make a quick explanation or push off the problem onto somebody else. And in this case, neoliberalism is just very, very good, at making problems personal in that sense of you are in it because it's your fault. This is happening to you because you did something wrong. And again, whether we're talking about nation states or poor individuals, it's just such a strong ideological structure that preserves this notion that whatever you were born into is your problem.

CHUCK MERTZ - HOST, THIS IS HELL!: So are politics or the needs of capital the biggest obstacle to lifting limits on migrant labor? Are politics more powerful than the demands of the economic system here in the United States when it comes to migrant policy?

DANIEL MELO: I see both as playing off of the other. In our immediate moment political power is, I think, more tantamount to the immediate issues in that [00:54:00] while, there are the potential at least economically to take on many, many more migrants, this question of controlling the border has to come foremost, because what is a state to do if it doesn't have control over who can come in and come out. And so I think that in that sense, politics probably has a stronger role to play at the moment, only because this question of control, this question of power is central given the growing crisis of displaced people that keep showing up at our doorstep.

That being said, though I'm also a firm believer that the economic piece is what underlies so much of politics. So in that respect, who are the politicians answerable to? And it's, in my other piece, it's I point out, it's it's certainly not to the people, because we haven't had any kind of serious economic reform that has bolstered the material conditions of individuals for many years now, and so in that respect there's no looking at the issue from just one side or just the other. It is something that [00:55:00] exists in a cycle.

The Democrats Long War on Immigrants Part 2 - Intercepted - Air Date 2-17-21

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Police and prisons and borders all operate through a spatial logic of immobilization. The very regimes of police, prisons, and borders is to immobilize and constrain and control people who are caught in their cross hairs. And the word mob, which we often hear politicians use...

PRESIDENT TRUMP: ...the radical Democrats have turned into an angry mob and you don't give power to an angry, left-wing mob. Republicans believe in the rule of law, not the rule of the mob.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: The word mob derives from the word mobility. The free, uncontrollable, ungovernable movement of poor racialized people is the root of this criminalizing vocabulary.

NEWS CLIP: The, uh, mob of illegal immigrants, illegal aliens, [00:56:00] uh, pushing through from Guatemala to Mexico, against police and, uh, enforcement and what we saw in the, in those few seconds, were virtually all men.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: And no matter how decent they are, no matter their reasons, the 11 million who broke these laws should be held accountable.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Barack Obama really furthered what Clinton put into place and also escalated it beyond that.

NEWS CLIP: Today, President Obama signed a bill upping funding for border security by \$600 million. The money will go for a thousand new border patrol agents, plus 250 agents for ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, and 250 officers with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency that polices against terror and other threats.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Obama [00:57:00] spent billions of dollars securing the border just as Clinton did in '94 after NAFTA and, under Barack Obama, the budgets of border and immigration enforcement actually began to outpace the budgets of all other federal law enforcement agencies combined.

NEWS CLIP: Under President Obama's border plan, the National Guard will assist with intelligence gathering, surveillance, reconnaissance support, analysis, and training, as well as supporting counter narcotics enforcement.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Under President Obama, the kind of depictions in the public narrative of domestic and foreign threats, they merged, right? So the war at home and the war abroad, boomeranged back and forth. The drones that the United States used to first attack Yemen and Pakistan were first tested on the U.S.-Mexico border. And President Obama, who receives the Nobel Peace Prize, is a president who dropped an average of three bombs every hour in the year 2016, just prior to his [00:58:00] departure, mostly through airstrikes and drone warfare on Syria, on Iraq, on Afghanistan, on Libya, on Yemen, on Somalia and on Pakistan. And when he signed DACA, you know, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which was received with much praise and much celebration, but it was very worrying because he also signaled his intention to increase enforcement at the very same time using the Secure Communities program, which is very similar to the Criminal Alien program under Bill Clinton, and under Obama deportation rates doubled just as they had increased under Clinton. And by 2014, about half of all federal criminal arrests were immigration related.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Even as we are a nation of immigrants, we're also a nation of laws. Undocumented workers broke our immigration laws, and I believe that they must be held accountable, especially those who may be dangerous. That's why over the past six years, deportations of criminals are up [00:59:00] 80% and that's why we're gonna keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids. We'll prioritize just like law enforcement does...

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: In that same year, 2014, was the year where there was a surge of unaccompanied minors at the border. Obama began incarcerating migrant families by detaining them at camps on military bases.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Although this summer, there was a brief spike in unaccompanied children being apprehended at our border, the number of such children is now actually lower than it's been in nearly two years.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: And you know, it was this foundation of incarcerating migrant families that then escalated to family separation and the crisis of hundreds of missing children, and the caging of children, under Trump. And in fact, several of the photographs of children in cages that went [01:00:00] viral during Trump's presidency were actually taken during the Obama years.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Our message absolutely is don't send your children unaccompanied, uh, on trains or through, uh, through a bunch of smugglers. We don't even know how many of these kids don't make it and may have been waylaid into sex trafficking or killed because they fell off a train. We have no way of tracking that. So that is our direct message to the families in Central America. Do not send your children to the borders. If they do make it, they'll get sent back. More importantly, they may not make it.

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: This was a bipartisan practice and it is just simply not possible and would not have been possible for Trump to have done the horrific things that he did were it not for the foundations that were laid by President Barack Obama and previously by President Bill Clinton.

We already know that the U.S. is implicated in why people are forced to move in the first place. And [01:01:00] imperialism is already a root cause of displacement and migration, but I would argue that now another key pillar of contemporary imperialism is the outsourcing of border enforcement. And so the U.S. is basically funding immigration enforcement in Mexico and El Salvador and Guatemala and Honduras. And through these various kinds of border outsourcing programs, the U.S. is essentially left off the hook and other countries now enact U.S. border enforcement. The border just moves further and further south.

JEN PSAKI, PRESS SECRETARY: Beginning on February 19th, the Department of Homeland Security will take steps to begin processing individuals who under the previous administration have been forced to remain in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocol. I will note this news should not be interpreted as an opening for people to migrate irregularly to the United States. Only eligible individuals will be allowed to enter through designated

ports of entry at designated times. [01:02:00] Through a whole of government approach...

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: Trump's infamous "Remain in Mexico" program, you know, was a program that allowed U.S. border officials to return asylum seekers and refugees back to Mexico as they awaited their hearings. And so there was a lot of news about, you know, tens of thousands of Central American and African migrants and refugees who were trapped in Mexico, you know, in teeming tent camps, under horrific conditions and immobilized in Mexico, unable to enter into the United States. Really, what we will see under Joe Biden is that, you know, he may halt border wall construction, but he will continue to outsource border enforcement the way Obama did. And that will allow the U.S. to not only have a wall at the border, it will allow the U.S. to create an entire anti-migrant fortress that extends far beyond the wall itself. And we already saw this in the first few days of the Biden administration when thousands of migrants from Honduras who were headed towards the United States were blockaded and teargassed by Guatemalan soldiers and [01:03:00] police.

The new frontier of U.S. border militarization is not Trump's wall. It's not that symbolic wall on the border. It is this far more dangerous, far more invisible, far more threatening, and far more repressive form of immigration enforcement.

JEN PSAKI, PRESS SECRETARY: Now is not the time to come. And the vast majority of people, uh, will be turned away. Asylum processes at the border will not occur immediately, will take time to implement, um...

HARSHA WALIA - REPORTER, THE INTERCEPT: And the last thing that I would say is that we really have to go further to challenge the border itself. You know, some of those early processes of border formation were very much about containment, whether that was the imperial annexation of over 500,000 square miles of Mexican territory, whether that was [01:04:00] capturing Indigenous lands and Indigenous nations and forcibly forcing them into the U.S. settler state, or punishing free Black movement through the Fugitive Slave Act. All of these, acts of, and processes, were central to U.S. border formation. And I think in the contemporary era, we often think of, you know, Indigenous elimination, anti-Black enslavement, imperialism, and migrant exclusion as linked but separated processes, right? Like often our social movements don't make these links. We see ourselves in solidarity with those struggles, but we don't always see these deep, historic ways in which these processes required each other to make the U.S. the settler colonial imperial empire that it is, right? So the border was not just a line on a map. It is a

constantly produced racial regime. It's a constantly produced labor regime, and it's a carceral regime. It's a form of enacting [01:05:00] immobilization and control. And that's why I think that, you know, an internationalist, an interconnected abolitionist vision of freedom requires a world without police, requires a world without prisons, requires a world without private property, require world without militaries, and requires a world without borders.

Final comments on the amorality of economics

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today, starting with *Democracy Now!* explaining the long awaited reversal of the Trump era "remain in Mexico" policy. *The Takeaway* looked at the legacy of the family separation policy. *Democracy Now!* discussed the Texas governor's policy of busing asylum seekers to Washington, DC and New York. *This is Hell* looked at the history of the role of economics in driving economic policy. *CounterSpin* connected the dots between us interventions in Central and South America to our current immigration policies. *Intercepted* looked back at the complimentary and destructive policies of NAFTA and increased border enforcement under bill Clinton. And [01:06:00] *This is Hell* looked more broadly at neoliberalism and economics on our immigration policies.

That's what everyone heard. But members also heard a bonus clip from *Intercepted*, which dove deeper into the need to rethink the carceral history of our border policies. To hear that and have all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly into the new members-only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support or shoot me an email requesting a financial hardship membership, because we don't let a lack of funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

Now, as promised at the top of the show, I have some thoughts on how economics interplays with morality or immorality. Frankly, I think economics bypasses morality, and it doesn't logically follow that acting on economic incentives means that you are acting immorally. It just means that those are two different [01:07:00] tracks that sometimes run parallel and sometimes diverge.

One simple example that we might have only talked about on the bonus show, but definitely talked about it at least there is a story that, I think it was made famous by Freakonomics years ago, having to do with daycare centers. The situation seemed to be that parents were often late to pick up their children after daycare and having to pay to keep staff on site until the last late pickup was

costing the center's money. And there had been attempts to convince people to try harder to arrive on time, but with limited success, so they decided to take the problem out of the realm of moral duty and put it in the realm of economics. Daycare centers began charging a small fee, usually something like a dollar a minute for every minute the parent was late to try to nudge people economically to arrive on time. But the surprise result was that the late pickups did not decrease, they [01:08:00] increased. And the key takeaway is that lateness had shifted from a moral obligation to a commodity to be purchased. And the hope was that the economic incentive would buttress the moral obligation, but instead it erased it.

This is exactly what is at play when, for instance, immigration policy is framed in terms of jobs. To talk of jobs means we're talking about economics, and to talk about economics means that we don't have to talk about morality anymore. That's why we have phrases like, "it's not personal, it's business," so that you can do something deeply immoral and claim to still be a moral person because it's just business. It's just economics. The reason being that once the mind has jumped tracks over to the world of economics, morality is rarely considered and so the door to wildly immoral ideas gets thrown wide [01:09:00] open.

I'll give you a few examples that are truly awful, so be warned that I'm about to discuss eugenics and Nazi extermination camps. I've been reading up a bit on these topics this summer, you know, little beach reading. So in broad strokes, eugenics was about reshaping society through selective breeding and the controlled prevention of breeding. And what advocates claimed was that they were working toward a better, healthier, and more prosperous society. The mentality of eugenics wasn't pure economics in terms of dollars and cents being the only thing they were discussing, but it was certainly economics adjacent.

The whole system was built on defining the "unfit", as in the unfit to live or unfit to procreate, and this very often had to do with economics and employment. A Harvard professor Frank William Taussig, in his book *Principles of Economics* from 1921, called for the unemployable to be, [01:10:00] "stamped out," and said that if society refused to subject hereditary misfits, the "irretrievable criminals and tramps," to "chloroform once and for all," then they could at least be prevented from "propagating their kind."

So there was a definite tension in the minds of many eugenicists that murder would probably be preferable, but that sterilization would have to do in a sort of compromise with the weak willed, anti-murder constituency. But it gets better because remember, we're talking about the economic line of thinking wherein there is no room for morality. So in terms of creating incentive structures to

change behavior, similar to say, separating families at the border to discourage asylum seekers, try this one on for size, coming from the mind of eugenicist, "in order to discourage ill breeding, at least one eugenics [01:11:00] advocate came up with the novel idea to deal with convicted murderers by killing their grandfathers." Think about policy. Think twice before you procreate, because you'll be on the hook for any crimes your children and grandchildren commit. That may very well nudge people's behavior.

Now onto the Nazis. A journalist years after the war sat down and spoke at length with one of the administrators of the Treblinka extermination camp, where train-fuls of Jews, every day, were taken to be murdered. This guy seems to be a bit of a sad sack who ended up in that position more by failing to resist what he often saw as evil or at very least against the law, or should be, but he just was saving his own life. He just went along to get along. He didn't seem like a true devotee of the cause.

So anyway, the journalist asks the administrator, "what did you think at the time was the reason for the exterminations?" and his answer [01:12:00] came at once.

"They wanted the Jews money."

"You can't be serious."

He was bewildered by the journalist reaction of disbelief and then continued. "But of course. Have you any idea of the fantastic sums that were involved? That's how the steel in Sweden was bought."

Now to be clear, this is an absurd answer, but it's also a telling one. It uses the same tactic of switching a discussion that could be about morality, hatred, racism, discrimination, or any other similar terms in that category and converts it into a discussion of economics. Just as modern day anti-immigration advocates cover their immoral treatment of asylum seekers with economic concerns about jobs, it makes perfect sense that when immorality is taken to the absolute extreme, the exact same strategy would be employed to soothe the conscience of the Nazis who actually carried out these deeds.

And please don't bother [01:13:00] getting upset about the comparison. There's no reason to mistake comparing for equating, and I am certainly not equating.

But now to cap off our tour of economically supported immorality, have you ever even thought about why citizens of the Soviet Union weren't allowed to exit the Soviet Union, to immigrate away from the Soviet Union? I don't really

ever recall being told the reasoning growing up. I think I was just left to assume that to strip someone of their personal freedom to leave is evil and the Soviet Union was evil, so I guess they just did it to be evil. And to be clear, I do think that it is absolutely terrible, an infringement of human rights to ban a person from leaving their country, but of course they gave a reason and they couched it in economics.

Now, the way the west describes it is that the Soviets were afraid of a brain drain because lots of smart people, given the choice, would [01:14:00] choose to leave the Soviet Union for a country and the Western bloc, which fits perfectly into our understanding of our inherent superiority and how, of course, everyone would want to come live in the West and not remain in the Soviet union. Which would be true for many, not all.

But the way the Soviets described it was that citizens of the Soviet Union had been raised there, effectively invested in, by the country and so the country had the right to prevent them from leaving. Why should some other country get the economic benefits from our investment? I don't know if you've ever raised kids. I haven't, but I used to be one, so I can vouch for the fact that there are real drain on resources, and it takes a good long while before you start to see a return on that investment. So I can see their point. If you see the citizens of the country as the product of the country, then to have them leave means you put in a bunch of [01:15:00] resources and get no return on your investment. And to be sure, it would have also been a propaganda defeat for the Soviets if people had voluntarily left, and it could have been destabilizing to the system if people had been free to visit other countries and compare political systems for themselves, that's all still true, but when the Soviets decided they needed to infringe on people's human rights by not letting them leave the country, they framed their argument with economics.

So back to our immigration policy. There is no doubt whatsoever that racism plays a large role in people's opposition to immigration, but it doesn't have to and it's not necessarily the prime mover. Many millions may very well have simply had their brains rerouted away from ideas of morality and onto the train of economic thought where morality has no place. As we heard on the show today, the family separation policy is seen through [01:16:00] the incorrect but not illogical lens that a cruel enough deterrence would slow immigration and asylum seeking. Now, the studies have shown that separating families hasn't been much of a deterrent to immigrants and asylum seekers, but seen through the lens of economics that conclusion could equally mean that either, A, there's no need to implement a policy of systematic emotional torture, because it doesn't produce the desired results or B, the policy just may not have been

torturous enough to produce the desired deterrence. Maybe we could try murdering their grandfathers. So for anyone who believes themselves to live guided by at least some degree of morality, don't let yourself be taken in by the siren song of economic nihilism that feels like a moral excuse to ignore morality. It's an illusion and it will lead you to immoral acts.

Now where [01:17:00] I do think racism comes in is, as I said, not necessarily as a prime mover, like people might not think, "I hate brown people, so I want to stop immigration," what they may very well think is, "I want to protect American jobs for Americans. Therefore, I think that we should have these extremely harsh immigration policies." Now where the racism would come in is when the immorality of the policy is put front and center, it's much easier to hang on to your immoral illusion of an economic argument when you don't see the people involved as fully human.

And I would argue that in this day and age at least, that's probably the majority of people. It's only the real hardcores who would put their racism first as their reason to oppose immigration, whereas most people will allow themselves to be led along [01:18:00] by economic arguments that feel moral, and then they manage to stay in that mindset through a complicated set of reasons that includes that illusion of morality and the complicated mechanics of structural racism and jingoism that lead people to discount the humanity of people from other countries.

All that said though, if you still need an economic reason to justify your stance on immigration, I say, take a page out of the Soviet handbook. It is exactly for the reasons that they wanted to restrict exit immigration, that we should welcome immigrants looking to enter. Some other country invested in those people, sinking time, money, and resources into them to get them through their unproductive childhoods and we'll be the ones to benefit from their economic output for the rest of their lives. That actually sounds like such a [01:19:00] great deal it feels like we're cheating, but of course that would be immoral.

As always, keep the comments coming in at (202) 999-3991 or by emailing me to jay@bestoftheleft.com. That is gonna be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio, Ben, Ken, and Brian for their volunteer work, helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member we're purchasing gift memberships at bestoftheleft.com/support,

through our Patreon page, or from right inside the Apple Podcasts app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content and no ads in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player. [01:20:00] And if you wanna continue the discussion, join us on our Best of the Left Discord community to discuss the show, the news, other shows, basically anything you like. Links to join are in the show notes.

So coming to from far outside, the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay!, and this has been the *Best of the Left Podcast* coming to you twice weekly thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from bestoftheleft.com.