

Title of your paper Disruptive Integration: Pasadena Day Laborers and Their Conflicted Path to Incorporation

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In the 1990s, California presented a hostile terrain for undocumented immigrants. By an overwhelming majority, state residents supported a law that would criminalize the status and conduct of undocumented immigrants and restrict life-supporting services. Day labor workers were the most public face of the immigrant community because they congregated on public streets in the search for work. Their high visibility made them targets of municipal laws to render the public solicitation of work illegal. This paper examines how top-down government efforts to “integrate” immigrant workers in Pasadena, California (an adjacent suburb of Los Angeles) into the sociopolitical order spurred highly contentious relations, which eventually resulted in producing a relatively autonomous political space for the workers.

During the 1990s, day laborers in Pasadena engaged in heated conversations over why their treatment was a violation of equality. They initiated a campaign against restrictions and for the creation of a workers center where they could regulate work, provide essential services, and politicize workers. The city responded receptively to the campaign. The day laborers would be tolerated and even supported as long as they ceased disrupting areas undergoing fast gentrification. They were allocated a “proper” place if they accepted certain responsibilities and operated within the confines of this place. The politicized workers accepted the city’s support but rejected their assigned place. The impossibility of containing the workers and their association in a neat box resulted in countless disruptive conflicts between the government and the workers. Through small and incremental struggles during the course of the 2000s, the workers slowly consolidated and expanded their bases of power. This enabled them to better define and shape how they themselves would be integrated into the city.

This case reveals how government efforts to reach into civil society and “integrate” outsiders do not always result in a smooth governmental or policing order, as predicted by governmentality theorists. By incorporating these “wild fragments” (Foucault 1975) into governing regimes, the local government of Pasadena had great difficulty exercising control while insurgent workers used small interstitial cracks to pry open spaces of political opportunity. While they were partially restricted by the powers of the local state, their early politicization and high tactical capacities allowed them to transform small cracks into serious openings, and to use these openings to exercise a degree of control over their political fates in the city.

Theoretically, the paper is heavily informed by Michel Foucault, James Scott, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière, and social network theory. Methodologically, the paper is based on historical archives of

the Pasadena Day Labor Association, La Escuela de la Comunidad (in Pasadena), and the Center for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. The paper also draws on semi-structured interviews with activists from the Pasadena Day Labor Association and the Pasadena government. Lastly, it makes extensive use of Pasadena City Council minutes for the period 2000-2010.

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