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# American Radicalism

Joel Olson

2008

I'm a member of the Repeal Coalition, a group building a grassroots campaign to repeal all anti-immigration laws in Arizona. In the process, we are trying to build an alternative politics of immigration. Rather than the nativists' attempt to hate, harass, and blame all undocumented people and their allies for all of Arizona's woes (and we've got a lot of woes right now), we insist on the right for all people to *live, love, and work anywhere you please*, regardless of documentation.

To the Minutemen, Teabaggers, Sheriff Joe Arpaio supporters, and other nativists, our politics are un-American. "America needs to defend its borders from the illegal alien invasion!" they practically spit at us. "If you don't love this country, then leave it!" (The hypocrisy of their position is that they are trying to make many undocumented migrants who do love the U.S. leave it. Such a strange patriotism!)

I used to have a knee-jerk reaction against this patriotism. "If these people represent what it means to be an American, then I don't want anything to do with America," I would grumble. But the more I think about it, the more I've come to believe that nativists *don't* represent what it means to be an American.

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It's true that, as Frederick Douglass said in his famous 1852 "Fourth of July" speech, the United States is guilty of "gross injustice and cruelty." Douglass is right to blast, "your national greatness [is] swelling vanity; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery."

But as Douglass himself recognized, this is only part of the story. Slaves, for example, believed in the American principles of liberty, equality, and democracy more than the citizen. Aren't they more "American," then? Undocumented people often believe in these principles more than the nativist, too. Nativists tend to see freedom as a privilege for some, to be denied to others. But those who have been excluded from American democracy, from slaves to indigenous peoples to the undocumented, see it in a much more expansive and radical light. They are not afraid to follow these principles to their logical conclusion—such as the right for all people to live, love, and work where they please.

The revolutionary C.L.R. James (1901–1989) has influenced my thinking on this. James was Black, Latin American (he was born in Trinidad) and himself an "illegal alien" (he moved to the U.S. in 1938, stayed after his visa expired, and was deported in 1953 during the Red Scare). He was also a radical who loved America. He opposed elitist distinctions between "art" and "popular culture," "intellectuals" and "the people," and "politics" and "everyday life." In the U.S. he saw these things brought together by a creative, hardworking, freedom-loving working class and a culture that truly believed in the intelligence and capacity of ordinary people.

But James also feared there were dark forces "making for totalitarianism in modern American life." These forces—racial discrimination, capitalism, and an increasingly powerful federal government—produced isolation and alienation and a loss of freedom among Americans. If they became too strong, James predicted, they could undermine the democratic ethos

of America. Supporters of civil and immigrant rights today can easily see similar forces at work today.

James didn't hate the U.S. because of this tension between freedom and totalitarianism, nor was he a blind patriot. Rather, he believed that the working class needed to recognize this contradiction in order to defeat the dark forces. In other words, we need to *redefine* the U.S., not reject it.

This is a difficult lesson for radicals today, who see the U.S. exclusively as an imperialist, racist, sexist force. They believe that the only way to build a free society is to reject America. But the U.S. is also native resistance, abolitionism, radical Reconstruction, the Wobblies, SNCC, Black power, the Brown Berets, feminism, Stonewall, and May 1, 2006. These are every bit as American as Sheriff Joe or Abu Ghraib.

In the U.S., liberty has come with slavery, equality has come with racial and gender tyranny, democracy has come with the lynch mob. We beckon other nations to "bring us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" while demonizing people as "illegals" for taking us up on the offer. But this contradiction is an opportunity to transform the U.S., not an excuse to reject it. It's an opportunity to see undocumented migrants, waving American and Mexican flags alike, as expressing a new vision of freedom, one that goes beyond the narrow confines of the nation state. Like others before them, these folks are struggling to transcend the very meaning of "American." It's a struggle I want to be part of.