How immigrants are viewed in the United States

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Illegal Immigration and the Language of Political Dehumanization

Various politicians, news channels, and even our President Donald Trump use the term “illegal” while referring to people who have entered the United States of America without proper documentation and framework. It also refers to those people who are currently in America longer than the period allowed on their passports. Another popular term used for people under these particular scenarios is “illegal alien,” which is equally as derogatory as the others, especially when the people referred to here are from the Middle East. Considering headlines and speeches by our political leaders, it is very common to hear the words illegal and immigrant in one sentence. However, recently, there has been a lot of pushback from the people to change the type of vocabulary used for immigrants.

Staying in a country without proper authorization doesn’t make a person illegal or a criminal. Something of this degree, however, does fall under the category of a civil offense. Advocates of human rights and overall peace shed light on the fact that no human being can or should be considered illegal. The use of the words “undocumented” or “unauthorized” is being promoted instead of “illegal” or “illegal alien.” Changing the vocabulary for the action doesn’t change the fact that it is something looked down upon but promotes unconditional respect for every human being irrespective of their nationality or immigration status. “Illegal” means contrary to or forbidden by law, with its synonyms being felonious, illicit, and unlawful. On the other hand, “undocumented” means not having appropriate legal documents or not proven by the existence of legal documentation.

Style Guides, Legal Terminology, and the Rejection of Illegal as a Label

The term “illegal” was deleted from the stylebook of the Associated Press, highlighting that “illegal” is a term used for an action and thus is not applicable to people. In 2015, the term “alien” was removed from the state’s labor code by California Governor Jerry Brown. Before “illegal aliens,” there was the term “wetbacks” used for all the Mexicans residing in the United States. This offensive term was common in newspapers as well as popular literature. Surprisingly, an effort to deport a number of

people in the 1960s was termed “Operation Wetbacks.” Even though it became highly unpopular as a racial offense, major publishers continued to use the term in their books and newspapers.

In more recent times, the term “illegal aliens” is in constant use by judges of the Supreme Court. Federal agencies, as well as federal courts, use the term numerous times even though there is no official requirement for it in judgments or verdicts. This highlights the popularity of the term among the masses as well as the professionals in different departments. However, some believe that the term “illegal” or “illegal alien” is not derogatory at all because it only suggests that the immigrant is unaccounted for in a foreign state. It is important to note that not all of the justice system is tilted towards the use of these terms because, in 2009, Justice Sonia Sotomayor disagreed with the use of the term “illegal” and instead chose “undocumented” because describing these immigrants as illegal portrays them as offenders and criminals in terms of murder, theft, as well as drugs, which is not a correct or generalizable assumption.

News reporters and advocates contribute by highlighting that a more humanistic approach should be taken while improving the United States Immigration Policy by removing racial and judgmental language, as it is not a crime for an “alien” to be living in the United States to begin with. Given the push on this certain topic by the masses, it is very much possible for the court not to choose offensive and derogatory terms for cases involving immigrants. The problem with the word illegal has been widely discussed in the heated immigration debate as this inaccurate word continues to be used on a daily basis by citizens as well as people in the media. Not many users of the terms realize that calling immigrants illegal is equivalent to calling a defendant a criminal who is simply waiting for his trial. More than ten million people in the United States have immediate family members who are American citizens, which means that their immigration status can be easily adjusted according to their circumstances (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

Words, Personhood, and the Social Consequences of Naming Immigrants

Perhaps the most important point here lies in the meaning of the word itself. In general, terms, the word “illegal” is used to describe something that is against the law and punishable under the statutes. For example, if someone hits someone with a car because they were drunk, the driver is considered to be a drunk driver in a hit-and-run case but not an illegal driver under any circumstances. Similarly, if a person commits a crime, no matter how big or small, they are not considered illegal but are to be prosecuted for a civil offense. Journalists in the media present themselves as advocates of fixing the debate between “illegal” and “undocumented” but continue to use derogatory terms in their publications while referring to the immigrants who were initially supposed to be protected from these racial slurs. The fact that they themselves continue fuelling the fire for this particular debate highlights that they are not on the correct course of action. This way, republican strategists and journalists cannot achieve the neutrality or fairness for the immigrants that they aspire to achieve

because the term “illegal” is not designed to neutralize any situation, as we always associate illegality with dangerous criminals.

Different newsrooms around the United States have their own stylebook, which they abide by in terms of what they publish (Pew Research Center, 2019). In 2003, The Miami Herald stopped the use of the word, while The Huffington Post followed the same path in 2008. The main idea was to remove the term “illegal immigrants” from the stylebook so that its usage would cease in newscasting and newspaper publications. It is imperative to realize that the immigrants that people speak of in lowly terms are so well integrated into almost every sector of the economy. The language that we use also belongs to them because the only thing that separates us from them is the fact that their life and everyday choices are dictated by having or not having proper documents. The whole idea of U.S. immigration is more than just who got their papers in a legal way or who didn’t. It’s about foreign policy, extending the economy, and the long history the United States has with the rest of the world.

In a nutshell, it becomes very important to realize the difference between the words “illegal” and “undocumented” because it completely changes how immigrants are viewed. Calling an immigrant illegal dehumanizes them, and it is not acceptable to treat a human being like anything other than a human being. We are living in an age where a green card decides how we view some things; in simpler terms, the green card is significantly more important than the human beings themselves. Lies told by their parents become lies of the newer generations, and it turns into a vicious circle that needs to be corrected, but it still doesn’t qualify for being termed “illegal.”

References

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