

***Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. P. 240. Paperback \$35. ISBN 978-0190619817.**

By Carlos Pereda

We are before an important book. This is its central thesis: the socially undocumented concept overwhelms everywhere the concept of undocumented foreigner—illegal in a country “that is not his own.” In other words: the construct “socially undocumented” is not even necessarily legal. It is an infamous stereotype, an insult that discriminates and oppresses, even against people who, although not American, meet all the legal requirements to live and work in the United States. Why and how is this negative form of recognition constructed? What are the consequences?

Amy Reed-Sandoval answers these questions clearly and precisely. This is her methodology: the author develops a nomadic thinking which goes from the narrative of (certain examples predominantly about) emigrants and emigrations from Mexico to the United States, to critical, explanatory or normative theories—in particular, but not exclusively—about justice, immigration and identity. To finally return, rework and discuss the starting narrative or address other types of narratives from denial. From this nomadic thinking, she reworks data and arguments repeatedly, providing quite a lot of knowledge each time and even some practical proposals.

At the beginning of the book, we find the theory of justice that frames the author's arguments. It is the *relational egalitarianism* proposed by Elizabeth Anderson and, implicitly, some-times by Iris Marion Young. Such a theory is committed to defending the moral equality of all people who inhabit this planet. According to this theory, those states claiming to be fair must cultivate and maintain a society of equals, striving to eliminate or, at least, weaken unequal and oppressive social relations such as those suffered by, for example, “socially undocumented” people. I want to make two observations on theory of relational egalitarianism and, in general, on this *type* of ideal theories.

First, I suspect that normative theories with a very high degree of abstraction can be used, on the one hand, as a responsible “living room,” or prelude, to introduce orientations of the highest value, but which will have to be determined progressively. They are theories that, when concretized, show their virtues and vices. Because, on the other hand, these types of theories are also used as “traps.” Thus, some of what looks like shareable statements at first glance—let us say, about justice—often hide complicities with patriarchal institutions and white supremacy. It is also common to find colonial oppressions hidden amongst other kinds of oppression, such as the economic one—for instance, those belonging to the past formal slavery and, nowadays, to the current informal slavery, both in domestic and agricultural work and in many factories around the world—. Normative theories of justice of the relational egalitarianism type have been used both ways as “liv-ing room” or prelude, and as traps or ideology (as

Charles Mills has pointed out). The use of relational egalitarianism as a responsible “living room” or prelude is part of the outstanding achievements of this great book, the orientations of which become more concrete in the course of the discussions.

However, secondly, I prefer to reconstruct the banner of relational egalitarianism with the expression “collaborative egalitarianism and respectful of each person.” In this way, neither the ideals of the French Revolution for solidarity are neglected or eliminated, nor in its philosophical formulation in the Kantian formulas of the imperative, the formula that commands participation in a collaborative society: a society thought of as a kingdom of ends.

But let us revise some negative consequences in trade with the “socially undocumented” construct. It has already been noted: this construct refers to a radical deviation from its legalistic use. Because as the author does not stop pointing out: you can be socially undocumented with or without legal authorization. Hence, insults such as “you are a wetback”, in the sense that you are a third-class person, do not disappear or even diminish their grievance when legal permits are gained. Why? Such insults are performative: they build an identity that the others (that the social groups around them) recognize-ignore and that soon becomes self-destructive. Consequently, external or objective factors intervene in elaborating this identity and, responding to these, internal or subjective factors. The external factors come from including the person perceived as socially undocumented within a denigrated social group. Some of the following properties-stereotypes characterize this: poor clothing, a way of speaking that sounds strange, non-white skin color, earning a living in poorly paid jobs, even the way you walk can be used for insulting you, or for reacting nervously to some obstacles. As a foreseeable response (from those who are perceived as belonging to such an “undocumented” group), those who receive those insults internalize external factors indicating their unfortunate belonging and make them inner-factors, subjective factors: a self-description which is a miserable portrait of themselves. This self-identification produces an identity that not only hurts but self-destroys.

To elaborate this kind of identity, this objective-subjective construct, the author resorts to the decisive materials, among others, that Linda Martín Alcoff makes available in her great book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self*. According to Alcoff's metaphysical proposal, two properties are characteristics of the visible identity of human animals: the horizon that includes everything that can be seen, known and interpreted from a particular place and its corporeality, the sexed and racialized body from which the person acquires that perspective, that horizon. Opposing common fantasies, it becomes clear that the perceiving body does not control the external world unbiased: from the point of view of no one and from nowhere. Each human-animal perceives with the restrictions and limits of their place: as a body with certain gender and certain race.

However, as Reed-Sandoval indicates in this book, not only race and gender are integrated into the self. Social class also operates as a defining aspect for “visible identity,” and programs the relationships that everyone has with others. For this reason,

all identity is found in the interweaving of relationships of collaboration and hostility, of sympathies and contempt, of help and subjugation. Furthermore, the quality of these interrelations does not depend only on present circumstances. Their training is usually carried out in long and tortuous stories. For example, “racial perception” results from the institution of slavery and the consequent colonial crimes that imposed racial categories as those with which the human world must essentially be classified and, thus, its practices organized. (The imposition of essentialist categories that hierarchize human-animals as first-class, second-class, n class ... is usually one of the most useful instruments of the several domination systems and their insatiable search to “normalize” what is criminally “abnormal.”)

I disagree with Reed-Sandoval on a nuance: in locating the perception of social class—in this case, of the socially undocumented, as belonging to the same type as racial perception or gender perception—. Perhaps, considering these perceptions in relation to all these forms of ignorance, it would be useful to explore some differences related to the local histories of each society. However, I agree that (as in the perceptions of gender and race) we also find in the perception of class, say, of the socially undocumented, ingrained prejudices—which by now are hundreds of years old—not only about how those people are perceived. (Not a few movies and television serials remind us of this with insistent and discouraging frequency.)

Of course, it must be emphasized that it is obvious how a perception (unknown “from the outside”) impacts how these people do not know themselves “from the inside.” Because in this way, a *dialectic of outside ignorance* (“they move around the city like rats hoping not to be caught”) and *self-ignorance* (“we are rats”) takes root. We are facing a dialectic because group ignorance produces personal self-no-knowledge that, in turn, reinforces ignorance that, in turn ... This dialectic not only produces “epistemicides,” but also femicides and, in general, deaths every-where.

Unfortunately, not infrequently, this self-knowledge of the socially undocumented person occurs amid a mixture of resignation, repressed anger, and self-contempt. Notoriously, this is one of the worst self-describing mixes. Surely it will be replied: “with good reason who is perceived or perceived and, consequently, unknown and treated as one or a socially undocumented person oscillates between these self-destructive moods. Do you have a choice?”

To elaborate on this question, the author resorts to Marilyn Frye's “double bind” theory. According to this, for oppressed people, actions are non-accidentally reduced to a few and all involve forms of punishment. It is a theory that reminds us that there are circumstances in which all options are bad: you are the prisoner of a “cage.” Reed-Sandoval rightly points out that socially undocumented people suffer from these circumstances where either option is bad. For example, it is assumed that they are undocumented because they carry out the actions on which they depend to survive. But doing these jobs or not doing them reinforces their denigrated “visible identities” and exposes socially undocumented people to censorship and punishment. (In the last

option, in addition to the other penalties, those poor people will be surrounded with hateful languages: words like “brothel Mexicans” and “grubby and lazy Mexicans,” or “criminals” or simply “rats.”) Faced with these “cages” also of words, Reed-Sandoval outlines another interpretive horizon that allows to recover both the respect of others and the self-respect of the socially undocumented. They are aids that should be discussed step by step. However, in the last part of this review, I will begin to out-line a discussion of later chapters addressing the dilemma, or perhaps the false dilemma, between the “open borders” theory and the “closed borders” theory.

It has already been pointed out that ideal theories can operate as a “living room”, or preludes to good moral, legal, political, and economic guidelines, or as traps. I suspect that the open borders theory only operates as a “trap” that multiplies injustice. It is known that such a proposal is impossible in the political and economic circumstances of this world as they are. Thus, on the one hand, those who formulate this proposal can relax; they do not need to worry about slightly improving those current political and economic circumstances, neither for changing them. They do not need to worry either for investigating possible scenarios of a world with open borders that, if open—in any social circumstance—are the same as a world without borders. (Hence, in these scenarios, the possibility of a Nazi Leviathan cannot be excluded, against which all social resistance is useless.) On the other hand, even the vague outline of the proposal of a world with open borders or, even worse, without borders, usually provokes an immediate reaction to reinforce existing borders.

So, what should we do? Amy Reed-Sandoval reasons a third position: the demilitarization of the border. I agree with her, *if* that position is not formulated as a general theory, alternative for theories of open and closed borders, but as a local proposal to make more human in the current political circumstances—this first quarter of the 21st century—the painful flow of emigrants on the border between Mexico and the United States. Why do I insist that it must be a local proposal? If defending relatively open borders is not the same as defending the elimination of borders, then there will be many situations—without even considering situations as extreme as an attack by a Nazi Leviathan—in which it will be necessary to protect oneself by militarizing the borders. Indeed, from Reed-Sandoval's observations, I have only just begun to discuss this tangled problem with more than provisional observations, of which I am not at all sure. However, one has to start somewhere.

In the beginning, I stated that we were looking at an important book. I correct myself: this book forces us to rethink with rigor and depth problems that produce some of the repeating tragedies of our time, which makes it an essential book.