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Debunking the Stereotypes of Immigrants Who Cross the United States Border

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Over the years, there has been some concern about immigration across the southern United States and Mexico border. As Americans, because of media portrayal and other factors, we have familiarized ourselves with many stereotypes of these foreigners that come across the border. A decent portion of immigrants coming to the United States are from Central America and one of the most impoverished countries in Central America is Honduras. Due to unfortunate events that have affected the citizens of Honduras, this has caused their immigration to the United States in vast numbers, as we have previously seen in the migrant caravan. Although, just like any other immigrant crossing the border, Hondurans are “othered” because of their skin color or ethnical background. A stereotype is most commonly defined as, “an over-generalized belief about a particular group of people” (“Stereotype”). Although when it comes to foreigners, we tend to give them more of a negative stereotype. Negative stereotyping can lead to more racial stereotyping, which is what we experience daily. These stereotypes can get into a person’s mind and play tricks and essentially lower ones self-esteem or self-confidence. While looking at the history of Honduras and the country’s relationship with the United States, I will analyze the common reasons that have led immigrants to leave their home country while also debunking the several stereotypes and misconceptions that we familiarize ourselves with when we see people who have an ethnical origin different to the dominant American culture.

Beginning with the history of the country, because of its economic and political weakness, Honduras has been especially vulnerable and remains to be known as a “Banana Republic”. A banana republic can be defined as, “a politically unstable country with an economy dependent upon the exportation of a limited-resource products, such as bananas or minerals” (“Banana Republic”). In the late nineteenth century, Honduras granted land and substantial exemptions to

several US-based fruit and infrastructure companies in return for developing the country's northern regions. Thousands of workers came to the north coast as a result to work in banana plantations and other businesses that grew up around the export industry. Banana-exporting companies, dominated until 1930 by the Cuyamel Fruit Company, as well as the United Fruit Company, and Standard Fruit Company, built an enclave economy in northern Honduras, controlling infrastructure and creating self-sufficient, tax-exempt sectors that contributed relatively little to economic growth of the country. These companies drew Central American workers north and encouraged immigration of workers from the English-speaking Caribbean, notably Jamaica and Belize, which introduced an African-descended, English-speaking and largely Protestant population into the country (“Honduras”).

While these companies have given little job opportunity to the people of Honduras, the wars the country have been involved with has weakened the country as well. Honduras has experienced many wars throughout the years. Honduras gained its independence from Spain in 1821 and since then nearly 300 small internal rebellions and civil wars have occurred in the country (“Honduras”). One war that stands out and that has had a long-term effect on the country is the Football War with El Salvador. The conflict between the two countries escalated after events that had happened during soccer matches between the two national teams. After the first match between the two teams, El Salvador lost the game and believed they were robbed of the win. The second match brought on a lot of tension. El Salvador came back and defeated the Honduras while continuously insulting the fans. In result, Salvadorians shops were destroyed, leaving some owners killed or severely injured. The third match eventually came about. El Salvador took the victory again. Due to the dramatics and seriousness the players felt over the matches and the constant battle of wanting to hurt each other on way or another, this left the El

Salvadorian government to dispute all ties with the Honduras because they believed that the Honduran government did nothing to bring those who committed criminal acts to justice. This eventually led into the real war. On July 12, 1969 the Salvadoran and Honduran armies engaged in border clashes, but two days later the conflict erupted into war. El Salvador's army attacked Honduras by air and on the ground, and their Air Force also attacked the main airport in Toncotin, Honduras. After a few days of fighting, El Salvador withdrew its troops on August 2. This brief war caused approximately 2,000 casualties, primarily Honduran Civilians. The majority of the civilians living in combat zones no longer had a home because they were burned down or demolished. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were suspended for years and both economies suffered due to the suspension of the Central American Market for 22 years (Milivojevic).

After a war that had a humiliating reason behind it and that led to more destruction and impoverishment, the coup d'état's of Honduras has also played a significant role in their history. There has been five known coup d'état's: 1963, 1972, 1975, and 1978. The most recent and most known about is the coup d'état of 2009 under Manuel Zelaya's presidency. A coup d'état can be defined as, "the sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group" (Britannica). President Zelaya had scheduled an attempt to a non-binding poll on holding a referendum on convening a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution. Due to the controversy, the Honduran Army took orders from the Supreme Court to arrest and exile the President. To the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the European Union the removal of President Zelaya was a military coup. After President Zelaya was exiled, the United States President, Barack Obama commented on the exiling of the president and the overthrown government. Although, once Hilary Clinton became involved, she officially did not

declare the event as a military coup because under U.S. law that would mean that foreign aid would be cut off to Honduras from the United States. In September 2009, the board of the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation, cut off a total of \$15 million of aid to the Honduras, including money that was to be used for road projects. Hilary Clinton was head of this corporation. However for the next seven years, the United States also contributed \$200 million to the military and police of Honduras (“2009 Honduran coup d’état”). This significantly contributed to the rise in human rights violations and overall corruption. This aided the coup government in an increase in power and explained the sudden actions of the military and police force as they began to become more corrupt. The justice system was beginning to fall, resulting in more and more crimes going unpunished.

While the history of Honduras and its well-being has a lot to do with the people and their actions, there are also two natural disasters that has contributed to the decrease in economic growth and impoverishment. Two natural disasters that stand out and has shown a ripple effect of putting Honduras back in a weakened and vulnerable position are Hurricane Fifi in 1974 and Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Hurricane Fifi killed between 8,000 to 10,000 people in Honduras. Throughout the country, Fifi inflicted nearly \$1.8 billion (1974 USD; \$9.14 billion 2019 USD) as part of what was, at the time, the worst natural disaster in Honduras' history. In certain coastal regions, only structures built on higher elevations were left standing. Many major cities, were more than 80% destroyed. Fifi demolished over 10,000 well-constructed homes throughout Honduras. An estimated 150,000 people were left homeless due to Fifi at first. However, when the Honduran government recalculated, they estimated that between 350,000 and 500,000 were left homeless instead. The country's banana crop was completely destroyed by the hurricane; as a result, its economy was severely affected (“Hurricane Fifi-Orlene”). Hurricane Mitch, just like

Hurricane Fifi, left Honduras in an almost unrecoverable position. Hurricane Mitch was the second-deadliest Atlantic hurricane on record, causing over 11,000 fatalities in Central America, with over 7,000 occurring in Honduras alone due to the catastrophic flooding it brought. An estimated 70–80% of transportation network was destroyed, including most bridges and secondary roads, amounting to \$236 million in damage. Hurricane Mitch left widespread power outages after damaging more than 385 km (239 mi) of power lines and several power plants. About 70% of Honduras lost access to fresh water after the storm, although many rural areas had already been experiencing water shortages. The combined damage to transportation, communication, utilities, including power and water, was estimated at \$665 million. Overall, the damage was estimated at \$3.8 billion (“Hurricane Mitch”).

Due to the Hondura’s unfortunate history, it has caused a downward spiral leaving the country to have more difficult boundaries to overcome in order to get them back on their feet. Because of the events in their past, these are some of the causes that have led to the impoverishment of the country and ultimately has led its citizens to decide to immigrate to other countries, more specifically to the United States. When people of color or a different ethnical background immigrate to the United States we tend to stereotype or “other” them, leaving the people of the United States to believe the misconceptions we already think we know about them. In reality, it is because of everything that these people endured in their home countries that have led them to leave and never want to go back. We tend to familiarize ourselves with beliefs such as they wish to “freeload” off of our government, they are unintelligent, they are only here to steal our jobs, or they are here to develop even more criminal activities that they have brought with them from their home country.

Again, Honduras is one of the most impoverished countries in Central America. From 2010 to 2016 the percentage of people in the Honduras living below the poverty line went from 50 percent to 66 percent (“Honduras”) Economic growth is almost non-existent. One of the factors, such as a corporate company like the “United Fruit Company” did not contribute jobs to the Honduran citizens, instead it took jobs away from them and immigrants arriving from neighboring countries and the United States were offered work instead. This decision by the United Fruit Company to offer jobs to immigrants rather than the citizens of Honduras, only worsened the impoverishment of the country, and was possibly a contributing factor into one of the reasons why Hondurans began to make a journey to the United States. By the end of the Football War, it left nothing but destruction causing more poverty and economic problems all around the country. The coup d’état of 2009 just made matters worse. After some decent progress to turn the country around and improve economic and poverty rates, the coup ruined all the progress that was made due to the government being overthrown and primarily controlled by the military. The United States also did not help the country due to their contributions toward the police and military force and not trying to help bring justice to President Zelaya. Ultimately this caused the increase in poverty rates, violence rates, sexual assault rates, homicide rates, and human rights violations. The world continued to ignore Honduras’ issues and the corruption ran unchecked, which caused the citizens to fear for the safety if they remained in the country.

This takes us back to the question of, why do these people want to immigrate to the United States? Well, when someone can’t find a job and can’t make a living due to the increase in poverty and unemployment, how can they support their family or even survive in general? How does someone survive in a country when you are constantly living in fear and never know when laws will change, who may break into your house next, and yet still people who commit

these crimes are never held accountable? This is where some people have had to make the choice in leaving their home country to find a better life. This is where these people make the courageous decision to “leave the devil they know, for the devil they don’t”. The Honduran citizens have lived through being victimized for years. According to a study conducted by Hiskey et al., “Honduran citizens would rather risk their lives by immigrating to the United States knowing the consequences that they could be deported once they got to the border than ever living back in their home country again.”

The stereotypes we give these people come from many places including, through the media. We hear that immigrants are all Mexicans, rapists, criminals, drug traffickers, and so much more but something we don’t look at is who they are as a person. We are supposed to assume the worst because people of higher power have put this image, these assumptions in our heads. If there’s something we as Americans have learned from our own past history, is to not judge a book by its cover and that is exactly what we do, especially when we see people with dark skin or someone who has a different cultural or ethnical background compared to our own. When we see people like the Hondurans or Mexicans, we “other” these individuals, we judge them based on their looks and automatically assume the worst. We give them these negative stereotypes and continuously break them down when all they want is a chance to live free of fear in their home country and be a productive member to our society in this country.

Todorov explains this concept of the “other” and where we got it from. The question of the “other” comes from a story involving Christopher Columbus. Along his voyages to discover America, anyone he came into contact with that were different than himself, he “othered” them. “By “othering”, we mean any action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody’s mind as “not one of us (James)”. The story speaks of the Indians he

came across and how he presumed that he knew their language and that he spoke the same language as the Indians but he did not. His beliefs influenced his interpretations. He believed everyone should look the same, dress the same, speak the same, and practice the same religion. In the story, it explains, “His spontaneous reaction, which he does not always make explicit, but which underlies his behavior, is that, ultimately, linguistic diversity does not exist, since language is natural.” (29) Although when he encountered these people, it was not the case and he wanted to force these beliefs on to them as well. During Columbus’ first encounter with the Indians, he also notices that they are naked. Todorov explains this concept, “the first characteristic of these people to strike Columbus is the absence of clothes – which in their turn symbolize culture.” This is something Columbus did not understand. “The Indians are also, to Columbus’ eyes, deprived of all cultural property: they are characterized in a sense, by the absence of customs, rites, and religion.” (35) Looking into the concept of the “other” through Todorov and the story of Christopher Columbus, we see how we can easily stereotype or “other” someone who come from a different geographical location, who speak a different language, and who even look different than us. It is something that is easily done yet we do not take the time to understand the cultural differences and we automatically make assumptions that in the end may not even be true, no matter how often we try to convince ourselves. This is where we need to inform others, that all stereotypes are not true, even the stereotypes that we put onto the foreigners crossing the border coming in to the United States.

Stereotypes can dissuade our thought of others and persuade us to judge someone before knowing the whole story. Most Hondurans come to the United States to find a better life away from their home country. These stereotypes are also made when people are in denial of a situation of exploitation and impoverishment, for instance they do not want to believe

immigrants have gone through their own hardships, forcing them to make the decision to leave their home country. The Hondurans came running away from a situation of impoverishment and instability in their home country that was created not only by their government and their people, but by the relationships they had with other countries, such as the United States. They leave after situations like the U.S. Fruit Company employing workers other than Hondurans, after a war that was literally started over soccer games causing mass destruction all over the country, after hurricanes that worsened their economic and impoverished state, and after a military coup that overthrew the government that the United States also helped fund. All these situations weakened their mental state and psyche into believing the only way to escape their own fear, torment, and help their families is to immigrate to the United States. Most United States citizens do not realize what the country has done to Honduras when it comes to how the U.S. contributed to the weakened state of their economy and poverty issues by helping corporations take over infrastructure and employing people outside of the Honduras and also contributing to the military coup in 2009 and several years later. The United States has an obligation to Hondurans to help give them that life after so much tragedy they have endured in their home country.

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