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State Categories, Bureaucracies of Displacement, and Possibilities from the Margins

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Abstract

In this presidential address, I argue for the importance of state-created categories and classification systems that determine eligibility for tangible and intangible resources. Through classification systems based on rules and regulations that reflect powerful interests and ideologies, bureaucracies maintain entrenched inequality systems that include, exclude, and neglect. I propose adopting a critical perspective when using formalized categories in our work, which would acknowledge the constructed nature of those categories, their naturalization through everyday practices, and their misalignments with lived experiences. This lens can reveal the systemic structures that engender *both* enduring patterns of inequality and state classification systems, and reframe questions about the people the state sorts into the categories we use. I end with a brief discussion of the benefits that can accrue from expanding our theoretical repertoires by including knowledge produced in the Global South.

Keywords

state; bureaucracies; classification systems; immigration law; gender-based violence; Latin America; inequalities

My interest in the intricacies of state-constructed categories, rules, regulations, and the bureaucracies that deploy them stems from a concern with how inequalities are created, sustained, amplified, and reproduced. While this concern has been central in sociology, and recent ASA presidents have examined it in their addresses from their respective theoretical perspectives (Lamont 2018; Lareau 2015; Ridgeway 2014), my contribution is a focus on state-created categories that determine eligibility for tangible and intangible resources. I present a lens through which to explore how state bureaucracies produce exclusion and marginalization through eligibility rules. For instance, state bureaucracies populate the categories of “undocumented” or “ineligible” through the implementation of administrative standards, though the people classified in them did not naturally become “ineligible” or “undocumented.” I argue that entrenched, systemic inequalities in all areas of life are baked into and maintained through the quiet yet formidable workings of the rules and regulations that sustain the categories that are institutionalized in bureaucratic systems (Bourdieu 1994). Adopting this lens can reveal the structures that generate and maintain inequalities *and* the

categories at the center of sociological work, which may reorient our questions and generate new knowledge about the groups we study.

Classification into state categories is accomplished through the implementation of rules and regulations, that is, the tools that translate state power into processes that stratify access to material and symbolic resources (Bourdieu 1994, 2018). Historically and contemporaneously, powerful economic and political interests, settler-colonial systems, and prevailing ideologies of race, class, and gender are baked into the administrative standards on which formal classification systems are based. As state bureaucracies apply rules and regulations, they draw a line between the eligible (and presumably deserving) and the ineligible (and supposedly undeserving); this system includes but also displaces and abandons groups, hence shaping structures of inequality. The regular interactions of socially vulnerable groups with the state reveal how the administrative apparatus transforms social categories into consequential practices that sustain entrenched inequality.¹ Ultimately, such routine encounters are fundamental to the construction of the state itself (Auyero 2012).

Despite their impartial appearance, formalized categories and classification systems rely on normative assumptions about social groups, which creates a consequential moral order that is distributed unequally across axes of stratification (Bea and Poppe 2021). Thus, far from being objective tools that simply facilitate establishing eligibility to allocate benefits, classification systems create and reproduce enduring social inequalities, with far-reaching effects on citizenship, rights, and belonging (see Miller 2021). As Herd and colleagues (forthcoming:2) note, administrative burdens (e.g., the costs of complying with rules and requirements) “fall heavier on more marginalized groups, undermining their claim to citizenship rights ... burdens are often not the result of inattention or lack of capacity, but rather a deliberate design” (see also Gowayed 2022; Miller 2021).

In this article, I illustrate my arguments by largely drawing from my work on immigration to the United States and gender-based violence against women in Central America. Both cases have allowed me to examine the power of laws, state categories, and rules and regulations in people’s lives. Both cases offer what Merton (1987:10) calls “strategic research material,” that is, empirical cases “that exhibit with special clarity the structure and workings of phenomena of more general interest.” And in both cases, I center the lives of socially vulnerable groups—immigrants in precarious legal statuses and poor women experiencing gender-based violence—as they interact with state agencies. As Espiritu and colleagues (2022) observe, a focus on vulnerable lives—not as a problem to be solved but rather as the foundation of a paradigm—can render intelligible questions of more general import. Thus, I trust that my arguments will resonate more broadly to illuminate how, through rules and regulations, bureaucracies sustain structural inequalities and create displacements in all areas of life.

I begin with an overview of state-created categories and their potential effects. Next, I discuss three processes of state categorization: social construction, normalization, and

¹This has been the core connecting thread in my work on the lives of Central American immigrants in the United States and on gender-based violence against women in Central America.

misalignment. Attention to these processes sheds light on how inequality structures are left intact through the implementation of a vast bureaucratic tangle of rules and regulations. I urge sociologists to probe the larger forces and powerful interests that produce the regulations embedded in state-created categories. Finally, I conclude with a call to action that aims to rectify some intellectual exclusions as we build sociological knowledge.

STATE POWER, CATEGORIES, AND RESOURCES

State-created categories carry imprimatur to shape the lives of those who must interact routinely with state agencies (Massey 2007). Although exclusionary practices remain after legally exclusionary categories are formally removed (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Monk 2022), I argue that the formalized categories that bureaucracies use for the distribution of resources have direct implications for enduring inequality. States can be progressive *and* regressive, “extending rights and promoting wellbeing and inclusion with one hand and with the other taking them away” (Htun and Weldon 2017:159); thus, bureaucracies can foster inclusion (see Marrow 2011). Here, I focus on the exclusionary side of bureaucracies because this is how they manifest in the lives of the people at the center of my work. My focus, however, can reveal much about the forces behind the structural systems that include *and* exclude through rules and regulations.

The approach I propose centers bureaucracies of displacement, which is valuable for assessing ongoing policy debates such as those surrounding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The year 2022 marks the tenth anniversary of the Obama-era executive order that extended temporary protection from deportation and gave work permits to certain undocumented youth, benefiting some 800,000 people.² Yet due to the age requirement and a deadline for application set in 2012 and never updated, most undocumented youth graduating high school in 2022 did not qualify for enrollment in the DACA program. Another example is the plight of 9.3 million undocumented immigrant workers left out of federal Covid-19 (CARES Act) relief benefits,³ even as they were publicly recognized as “essential” and heralded as heroes for sustaining critical economic sectors through their labor during the pandemic (see Bonilla-Silva 2022). Indeed, the Department of Homeland Security, the very agency that targets these immigrant workers, created the “essential workers” category, which underscores the importance of their labor in critical sectors (Roberts and Burks 2021).⁴

Through assessing eligibility, state categories shape the distribution of resources and penalties that structure life chances. Deadlines, background checks, licensure requirements, fees, and citizenship requirements divide people into the eligible (who presumably deserve a particular benefit) and, on the flip side, the ineligible (who are presumably undeserving).

²-Estimates of the number of DACA beneficiaries vary slightly. According to the U.S. government, the “active DACA” population was 643,560 as of March 2020 (<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Approximate%20Active%20DACA%20Receipts%20-%20March%2031%2C%202020.pdf>).

³-Initially, the CARES Act excluded U.S. citizens, lawful permanent resident spouses, and children of undocumented immigrants (approximately 3 million people) by requiring *all* family members to have a social security number. These family members were later reclassified to be eligible for stimulus payments (Gelatt, Capps, and Fix 2021).

⁴-Not all “essential workers” are immigrants or undocumented, but immigrants make up a large share of this category. For instance, 69 percent of all immigrants (and 74 percent of undocumented immigrants) are classified as essential workers (Roberts and Burks 2021).

These demarcations are deeply consequential for the poor, the socially vulnerable, Native/ Indigenous peoples, and those racialized as Black and Brown. Thus, I focus on “external” categories (Tilly 1998; cf. Brown 2020), which not only determine who deserves a benefit *but also* justify the uneven distribution of tangible and symbolic resources, rights, and penalties.⁵ Immigrants who submit a form that takes years for the system to process, or who cannot pay a fee, risk detention and deportation. Poor women unable to have an abortion because the embryo has been granted personhood rights equal to the woman’s (Goodwin 2020) will see their lives upended. For instance, in El Salvador, where abortion is classified as “aggravated homicide” and completely banned, unprovoked miscarriages are considered a crime. Women even *suspected* of having had an abortion are serving 30-year prison sentences. This example underscores the punitive power of state-created classifications, and it may preview the coming landscape in the United States (Viterna 2022).

State categories and classifications are ubiquitous, embedded in everything we do, and so familiar that they often fade from view. States do their work by classifying people, as a state with finite resources “has no other choice but to categorize. Every state must draw lines between kinds of people and types of events when it formulates its criminal and civil laws, levies taxes, allocates benefits, and regulates economic transactions” (Starr 1992:264). Categorical distinctions, Tilly (1998:7–8) argues, is how those “who control access to value-producing resources solve pressing organizational problems.” The normalcy of the organizing logics of categorical distinction is embedded in bureaucratic practices that determine eligibility, which sustain stratification systems (Saglam 2022) and state power, as “classification is the means and stakes of power, and as such, it is integral to the modern state” (Mayrl and Quinn 2017:61).

Significantly, the myriad classification systems, omnipresent but seldom recognized, are integral to how we see the world and understand state actions. As Morgan and Orloff (2017:13) observe, “A state’s power lies not only in its ability to prevent exit or coerce compliance, but also in its ability to induce agreement to manufacture categories, standards, and principles of social, economic, and political organization that penetrate deep into individual consciousness.” In Bourdieu’s (1994:4–5) conceptualization, the state “incarnates itself simultaneously in objectivity, in the form of organizational structures and mechanisms, and in subjectivity in the form of mental structures and categories of perception and thought.” These are the state-created categories on which I focus, those that reveal state power through its bureaucracies, which transform people’s lives *and* shape the very lenses through which we see the world and normalize state classifications and exclusionary systems.

Other scholars have argued that categorization is foundational to the study of inequality (Brubaker 2017; Massey 2007). Thus, Massey (2007:5–6) notes, “all stratification processes boil down to a combination of two simple but powerful mechanisms: the allocation of people to social categories, and the institutionalization of practices that allocate resources unequally across these categories ... producing what Charles Tilly (1998) referred to as ‘categorical

⁵There is a vast scholarship on social categories that I do not include in this article. However, social and “external” categories follow the same logics, are deeply intertwined, and similarly create and reproduce inequalities (cf. Brown 2020).

inequality.” In following this scholarship, my goal is to illuminate how inequality structures emerge in the administrative standards that bureaucracies deploy to distribute resources, which reveals a key link between bureaucracies of displacement and citizenship.

A caveat is in order. As we know, the state is not a single actor but a constellation of institutions (Morgan and Orloff 2017), and its multiple administrative units may pursue different projects with contradictory logics (Mehrotra 2017; Wacquant 2022). However, “the state is not just *any* set of institutions.

... The state’s access to legitimate coercive force, and administrative and normative power, endow it with a unique capacity” (Htun and Weldon 2017:159).⁶ Each agency has its rules, eligibility requirements, and regulations; thus, each administrative unit can create obstacles, or institutional roadblocks and hurdles (see Sackett and Lareau forthcoming). For instance, when entering the U.S. asylum system, undocumented immigrant minors face contradictory logics: as minors, one agency categorizes them as deserving of protection; as undocumented people, another agency subjects them to the enforcement system (Galli 2023). Nevertheless, state agencies with seemingly conflicting goals can cooperate and may appear to provide services efficiently (Lara-Millán 2021). As a result, individuals who simultaneously navigate the multiple classification systems of government agencies face a labyrinth of conflicting rules and requirements. These rules and regulations accumulate and engulf people in “a state of bureaucratic confusion” (Ordoñez 2008:57), entrapping them in multiple bureaucratic layers (see Brown 2020; Fernández-Kelly 2015; Haney 2022; Sackett and Lareau forthcoming).

Effects of Categories on People’s Lives

Categories and classification systems, together with their invented rules and regulations, impact every aspect of life—access to housing, physical space, legal status, education, healthcare, employment, and protection from violence. The effects are immediate but also “durable,” as they are reproduced across time and generations, creating “categorical inequality” (Tilly 1998) that affects life chances. Classification as an undocumented immigrant, for instance, dramatically diminishes access to formal employment and a host of material and symbolic resources. The effects are so potent that they reverberate laterally to other members of an individual’s family, multigenerationally to children and grandchildren, and to entire communities. Even the relatively more favorable reception policies for refugees (Waters and Pineau 2015) minoritize them and channel them into poverty, as the welfare systems that govern their lives reclassify their abilities, diminish their potential, and then devise programs to remedy them (Gowayed 2022).

In a study I conducted in Los Angeles in 1995 (Menjívar 2002), I found that Guatemalan immigrant women mobilized a range of informal ties to access health treatments for themselves and their families because their undocumented status shut them out of formal medical care. Twenty-five years later, in an ethnography we have been conducting in rural Kansas, we find the same pattern (Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020): undocumented

⁶Discussion about many functions of government activity through channels that are obscure to the public (see Mayrl and Quinn 2017; Mehrotra 2017) is beyond the scope of this article.

Guatemalan immigrant women continue to activate their informal ties to respond to their ineligibility for formal medical care inscribed in the Affordable Care Act (Waters and Pineau 2015). The persistent classification of Guatemalans as undocumented (not as asylum-seekers) has translated into a quarter-century of exclusion from a host of social benefits and secure jobs, while also marking them as targets for immigration enforcement (Adler 2006; Gómez Cervantes, Alvord, and Menjívar 2018). Such exclusions disproportionately shape long-term patterns of integration and citizenship, reaching partners and children and reverberating through entire communities (Gómez Cervantes et al. 2018).

Family reunification law *shapes* the composition of immigrant families (Delgado 2022; Menjívar, Abrego, and Schmalzbauer 2016). We find that regulations to petition family members, such as numerical caps on family preference visas, bars to readmission, and income requirements, contribute to *keeping* families apart (Enchautegui and Menjívar 2015), findings that contrast sharply with the narrative of a family-based immigration system. Although ostensibly created to *reunite* immigrant families, family reunification parallels and complements the enforcement practices that separate families. Through rules and requirements, the silent bureaucracy of the family reunification system reconfigures immigrant families so profoundly that it potentially affects more families than do the more visible separations via deportation (Enchautegui and Menjívar 2015). These legal entanglements, together with enforcement programs, force immigrants to live apart from their families and to form the transnational family arrangements prevalent in immigrant communities today (Kasun 2017). The effects endure across geography, as the experiences of immigrant families in the United States and in origin countries attest (Abrego 2014; Kasun 2017). Effects also persist across time and generations to disadvantage the spouses and children (and even grandchildren) of the immigrants the state systems classify as undocumented (Enriquez 2015).

State-created family separations are historically rooted in classist and racist ideologies, predicated on race, class, and family stereotypes; therefore, they have mostly affected the poor, Black, Native American, Asian American, and Latina/o families. Taking children away from their parents in the context of slavery, boarding schools, the war on crack cocaine, the child welfare system, mass incarceration, and the camps for separated immigrant families at the southern U.S. border today are all connected politically; they are the products of state projects to control populations through fear.⁷ Such separations attest to a history of state terror based on racism and unleashed on communities of color likely to be ensnared in state institutions (Briggs 2021; Roberts 2022; Rocha Beardall and Edwards 2021). Through normative assumptions about families that deem the socially vulnerable ineligible to live with their parents and children, these groups endure the weight of administrative regulations and bear the brunt of state power through the pain of family separations. Thus, mere awareness of immigration enforcement scrutiny heightens immigrants' sense of risk of separation (Asad 2023), with far-reaching effects across all stages and spheres of life (Simmons, Menjívar, and Valdez 2021; Torche and Sirois 2019).⁸

⁷These actions mirror the practice of taking children away from their families during military dictatorships in Argentina, Spain, El Salvador, and elsewhere.

The scholarship on policing and confinement underscores the enduring consequences of classification as a criminal or as formerly incarcerated, noting the deeply racialized basis of classifications that singularly affect African Americans (Western and Sirois 2019). Spillover effects reach individuals' families (Adams 2018), children (Haskins 2016; Turney 2017), romantic partnerships (Comfort 2008), and civil and citizenship rights (Miller 2021), with persistent effects after incarceration (Haney 2022; Miller 2021; Western 2018). Such effects are not unintended; rather, they result from "deliberate design" (Herd and Moynihan 2018) via "44,000 laws, policies, and administrative sanctions ... 19,000 labor market restrictions ... one thousand housing restrictions ... [and] four thousand regulations [that] shape civic participation," which render those classified as formerly incarcerated ineligible for most resources, with lasting effects on their life chances (Miller 2022:167). As the immigration system uses the same punitive logics of the carceral system (Hester 2015; Kurwa and Gurusami 2022),⁹ Latino and Latina immigrants experience the same damaging consequences as those ensnared by the prison system (Bosworth, Parmar, and Vázquez 2018; Lopez and Castañeda 2022; Patler and Branic 2017; Ryo 2019).¹⁰ In our research on the post-detention lives of Central American women asylum-seekers (Menjívar and Gómez Cervantes n.d.), we find that the bonds and Alternatives to Detention programs into which the women are placed keep them and their families system-embedded *and* indebted (see also Haney 2022; Harris 2016; Harris, Pattillo, and Sykes 2022).

The power instantiated through state classifications in affluent nations is not confined to their national territory; it overflows into their regions of influence. U.S.-created categories of undocumented and deported affect people's lives beyond U.S. borders; the stigma associated with these categories persists long after deportation to affect deported individuals' lives in the countries to which they are sent (Roberts, Menjívar, and Rodríguez 2017). Powerful nations' logics of border control extend beyond their territorial boundaries (Menjívar 2014; Nethery and Silverman 2015) to regions that depend on these wealthy nations' aid.¹¹ The United States, the European Union, and Australia, among others, have implemented an architecture of exclusion and expulsion in transit countries, reclassifying asylum-seekers as economic migrants and excising territories to keep potential asylum-seekers from reaching the wealthy nations' borders (FitzGerald 2019). Such strategies are built on securitization partnerships (Hiemstra 2019) that facilitate the (re)classification of certain unwanted, racialized immigrant groups as terrorists and criminals, which in turn serves to normalize their punitive treatment. Today, the U.S. southern border has been pushed so far south that Mexico has become a vertical border (FitzGerald 2019) extending well into Central America. Thus, the countries that expel thousands seeking asylum in the United States

⁸-This sense of risk reaches naturalized and U.S.-born Latinos (Asad 2020) due to the racialization of legal status that associates Latinas/os with an undocumented status (Menjívar 2021).

⁹-Mass incarceration and the criminalization of immigrants are parallel racial projects of the state; the criminalization of (mostly Latina/o) immigrants is rooted in the various racialized "wars" (e.g., crime, drugs, terrorism) (Longazel, Berman, and Fleury-Steiner 2016).

¹⁰-Legally, immigration "detention" should differ from prison, but in practice, conditions are the same in both (Gómez Cervantes, Menjívar, and Staples 2017).

¹¹-Poorer nations do not simply obey wealthy nations (see Manukhin and Robles Herrera 2019); however, strategies of control and enforcement are exported to the countries where rich nations exert influence. At the same time, U.S. techniques developed to conquer and rule abroad have served as templates for police militarization domestically (Go 2020).

are implementing militarized technologies of border control (Jaffe 2021) to keep other asylum-seekers from crossing their territories on their way north.

THREE ASPECTS OF CATEGORIES AND CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

I highlight three *interrelated* aspects of state categories and classification systems: (1) First is their constructed nature. Political and economic interests, historical pressures, and systems of oppression, including racism, classism, and sexism, shape formal classifications. (2) Second is their normalization; as they are woven into informal practices of everyday life, categories manifest *and* amplify state power through routine interactions. (3) And third is their misalignments. Formalized categories intended to select the eligible by design only capture a subset of real-life experiences; thus, mismatches inevitably arise. Lived experiences spill over and fall in between or outside categories. Through acts of commission, states exert power *directly* by including (the eligible) but also excluding, by targeting, surveilling, and punishing. States also exert power over people's lives via acts of omission, neglect, and abandonment.

Categorization and classification systems are by nature constructed and naturalizing (Bourdieu 1994; Wacquant 2022). Considering the constructed nature of state-created categories, their normalization through practice and their misalignments provides a powerful lens to expose how the bewildering array of rules and regulations creates and reproduces inequality—but it can also illuminate possibilities for change (see Spade 2015). Using this approach in sociological work may help us avoid inadvertently reifying state classification systems while accounting for the political, economic, and ideological interests baked into the administrative standards used to create the categories we use as we produce sociological knowledge.

State Categories Are Constructed

The first aspect of state-created categories that I highlight is their constructed nature. As noted, categories and classifications, and the administrative standards and requirements that structure them, are never neutral. Formalized classification systems reflect the interests of those who dominate (Bourdieu 1994).¹² As such, classification systems change over time and across space to reflect shifts in the structural forces that create them.

Take the U.S. immigration system, which is predicated on an architecture of rules and regulations that classify people and structure the entire migration process (Menjívar and Gómez Cervantes 2020). Two categories illustrate the malleability of state classifications and their relation to the state's carceral projects. In the 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the category of "aggravated felony" created new grounds for deportation. Originally reserved for serious crimes such as murder or drug and weapons trafficking, this category has expanded over the years to include a broader range of offenses. Today it includes minor infractions, reclassifying immigrants' traffic tickets and shoplifting as felonious and thus

¹²Numerous instances reveal the powerful interests and ideologies that emerge in state categories. In work examining violence against women laws in Central America, we find that familyism ideologies influence how these laws are designed and placed within the legal hierarchy to disfavor women (Menjívar and Diossa-Jiménez 2023; see also Chernova 2012).

deportable offenses. The broadening scope of this category has contributed to the ballooning of the deportable immigrant population from 3.5 million in 1980 to 12 million in 2012 (Hester 2015), and a fivefold increase in the detained immigrant population between 1994 and 2017 (Ryo and Peacock 2018). The capacity to deport this population has been enhanced by additional administrative rules that disproportionately affect Latina/o immigrants (Hester 2015), whereby immigrants facing deportation waive their right to trial and appeal. Approximately two-thirds of deported individuals are subject to such expedited removal procedures (American Immigration Council 2014).

State categories left inactive can be reactivated, with added intensity than initially intended, to respond to new political and economic demands, as the category of unauthorized re-entry demonstrates. Incarceration for unauthorized re-entry has been on the books since 1929 but was not enforced until the early 1990s (Hester 2015) under the Clinton administration, which massively expanded and aligned immigration enforcement with the racially based (and economically and politically profitable) carceral system. First-time, unauthorized entries constitute misdemeanors; each re-entry is classified as a felony. Operation Streamline, a joint initiative of the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice started in 2005, fast-tracks and merges the process so immigrants are subject to accelerated prosecution that blurs the line between misdemeanors and felonies (National Immigration Forum 2020). Since the 1990s, the prosecution of re-entries as felonies (linked to for-profit prison schemes, Gilman and Romero 2018) has contributed to the spectacular growth in the number of immigrants in federal custody for the “crime” of returning after deportation. Indeed, “three-quarters of all people in federal prison for immigration-related crimes are held for entering the country without inspection or overstaying an immigrant visa” (Hester 2015:147).

The reclassification of immigrants into offenders has *produced* the detained and deportable population (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014), making this population formally ineligible to live in the country. These classification systems are gendered, classed, and raced. Immigrants, especially poor men from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, are disproportionately targeted; 89 percent of the detained population comes from these four countries, and 79 percent of all detained immigrants are men (Hester 2015; Ryo and Peacock 2018).¹³ Like the aftermath of a criminal record (Miller 2021), the harmful effects of these classifications endure; a felony conviction for re-entering after deportation creates a criminal record that prevents status regularization or legal re-entry. Reclassifying minor offenses into felonies ensures that a growing immigrant population (overwhelmingly Latinos/as) will be forever disenfranchised and always at risk, while also guaranteeing that millions of Latino/a immigrants will never be eligible to return to the United States through formal channels.¹⁴ Thus, contrary to popular belief, the U.S. immigration system is not “broken”; it works precisely as intended.

¹³.Of the 30 nationalities that comprised 90 percent of deportations between 1998 and 2021, immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and El Salvador were consistently ordered removed at higher rates than average (Farrell-Bryan and Peacock 2022). Pedroza (2022) notes similar uneven enforcement by national origin, including a recent spike in Haitian deportations.

¹⁴.The criminalization of immigrants is bureaucratically aligned with other measures that physically and socially exclude immigrants. For instance, immigrants are not afforded the same legal protections as U.S. citizens in the criminal justice system (Bosworth and Kaufman 2011); they do not have a right to court-appointed counsel and can be held indefinitely without a hearing.

There are numerous other examples of immigration reclassifications, but the United States is no exception. In a racist anti-Haitian decision, the Supreme Court of the Dominican Republic retroactively stripped several generations of Dominicans of Haitian descent of their Dominican citizenship, rendering them effectively stateless overnight (Childers 2020). The United Arab Emirates has used temporary residence and the outsourcing of passports to the Union of Comoros to reclassify unwanted domestic minorities as foreign residents (Lori 2019). Imperial governments have historically designed ambiguous citizenship (re)classifications to categorize their subjects based on racial ideas. Hong Kong-born British Chinese were recategorized four times, “repositioned as belonging to, but not part of, Britain” (Benson 2021:2). During U.S. imperial rule in the Philippines, Filipinos were simultaneously classified as nationals, citizens, and aliens (Baldoz 2011; Quisumbing King forthcoming).¹⁵ Today, residents of U.S. territories are categorized into a gradient of legal statuses with varying degrees of benefits.

Administrative rules are couched in neutral, formal language, creating seemingly objective regulations for the purpose of distributing benefits; their institutionalization stamps neutrality and objectivity onto exclusionary practices. However, requirements for deservingness are suffused with class-, gender-, and race-based ideologies that reflect and sustain larger exclusionary systems.¹⁶ Granting a benefit only to those whose life experiences conform with eligibility requirements amplifies the exclusionary power of regulations. For many stigmatized groups, structural circumstances make institutional requirements nearly impossible to meet—per design. Coutin and Fortin (2021) observe that seeking legal status in the United States *appears* inclusionary because it offers the possibility of gaining regularization, but acquiring formal status requires meeting exclusionary standard definitions of eligibility. In some cases, people transform their lives to fit requirements. We examined how immigrants seeking status regularization (a benefit) alter vital aspects of their lives permanently, marrying, divorcing, or postponing childbearing to show the state that they deserve legal recognition (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016). Aptekar (2023) also observes that, as paths to citizenship narrow and immigrants’ insecurity rises, the U.S. military’s promise of citizenship as a recruitment tool tempts some immigrants to bargain for inclusion with their lives.

Although U.S. immigration categories are created in the United States, it would be incorrect to assume they only reflect U.S. domestic social structures and exclusionary systems. U.S. economic and political interests, and foreign policy, have fashioned categories of immigration admission, especially when the United States has intervened and destabilized the institutions and social systems of the countries where immigrants originate. As Gowayed (2022:8) observes, “refugees arrive to the very countries whose foreign policies have subjugated either them or people like them, and whose domestic policies are patterned by the same racisms that facilitated those foreign policies” (see also Aptekar 2023). Since the 1980s, Central Americans have been fleeing dislocations that the United States contributed to creating through military, economic, and political interventions. These immigrants have

¹⁵For the parallel case of Puerto Rico, see Emigh, Ahmed, and Riley (2021).

¹⁶This is the case across state categories, including those governing spatial mobility (Sewell 2020), credit (Robinson 2020), debt (Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017), housing (Rosen 2020), and licensure (Chavez and Redbird 2015), among others.

faced some of the most exclusionary contexts in the United States, as classifying them as asylees would contradict U.S. foreign policy in Central America (Menjívar 2000).

On the flip side are people fleeing conditions the United States condemns in the interest of foreign policy; Cubans and some other exiles are emblematic cases (Eckstein 2022; Menjívar 2000). Today, Central Americans are being denied even the right to apply for asylum as they are forced to remain in Mexico (Garrett 2020), creating the spectacle of a “border out of control” for an already fearful U.S. public. For 40 years, Central American asylum-seekers have been reclassified as undocumented (Menjívar 2000), criminalized, and suspected of gang membership (Abrego and Villalpando 2021); they disproportionately experience the force of immigration enforcement and ineligibility to regularize their status. Haitians face similar circumstances, as their country has been plundered and devastated by wealthy nations (Childers 2020; Dubois 2013) that today respond to their claims for protection with mistreatment (HRW 2022). For these emblematic cases, race, foreign policy, and immigration enforcement intertwine to create categories of exclusion and formalized categories of dehumanization.¹⁷

Economic interests, domestic political pressures, foreign policy concerns, and ideologies of race, class, and gender configure state classifications that categorize individuals as eligible to receive benefits or excluded from them. This process is hierarchical and stratifying, as it affects social groups unevenly and enduringly.

State Categories Are Normalized

The second aspect of state categories I center is their normalization. State categories are embedded in institutional practices but do not exist in a social vacuum. People absorb official classifications into frames through which they make sense of the world and those around them, influencing everyday interactions and practices.

When state categories become integrated into people’s cognitive repertoires, the effect is potent. It is how state power becomes implicated in “the minute texture of everyday life” (Gupta 1995:375) while remaining invisible as state power (Bourdieu 1994); common-sense usage normalizes and reinforces the legitimacy of state-created categories (Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden 2021). For instance, when the category of undocumented immigrant, a juridical status created by law (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014), is used in public discourse and media circles, its power is augmented because “illegality” is no longer just legally produced; it is also socially constructed as “social illegality” (Flores and Schachter 2018). Significantly, the everyday use of state categories reinforces the belief that certain groups share characteristics by virtue of having been classified into the same category. In this way, the normalized use of the undocumented category allows policing efforts that racially profile and target the very individuals the state classifies as undocumented (and those associated with them or who look like them).¹⁸ Such practices go unquestioned because “it’s the law,” which is assumed to be objective and neutral.

¹⁷Following state responsibility doctrine, Dadhania (forthcoming) argues that instead of mistreating these asylum-seekers, these countries should be held accountable and provide reparations for the forced migration their actions have caused.

In my work in Arizona, non-state actors like bank tellers, business owners, and car dealer employees would ask Latina/o customers for proof of legal status and check whether the documents were “legit,” even if not required by law (Menjívar 2017). Josefina, a Salvadoran woman, told me that even supermarket employees had asked her for her documents when purchasing a money order. The power embedded in these interactions is not lost on these immigrants; they would describe it as “living with the law in our lives” (Menjívar 2011a). In essence, non-state actors do the governmentality work of the state, which happens when administrative categories become embedded *in and* shape everyday interactions, especially when deployed in hostile social contexts where they intersect with racialization practices (Menjívar 2021).

Once state-created categories become integrated into everyday life, people in turn use them on themselves and co-ethnics, amplifying other social exclusions. In our ethnography in rural Kansas, we found that established non-Indigenous Latinas/os exploit and cheat undocumented Indigenous Guatemalan immigrants (Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020). They take advantage of the Indigenous immigrants’ multi-layered legal, racial, class, and linguistic vulnerability (see also Gómez Cervantes 2021). The state-created undocumented/ documented binary, deployed within a marginalized community, exacerbates existing exclusionary practices and solidifies the power of formal categories to divide and exclude, amplifying their potency to unevenly distribute legal rights, protections, and benefits.

People contest categories individually but also mobilize to respond, resist, and change them (Bourdieu 1994). People organize to create categories that the state then formally adopts; thus, social actors outside the state also contribute to defining formal categories (see Emigh et al. 2021). This relational aspect between classification systems and those categorized through them is sociologically important (see also Auyero 2012).

Examples of successful mobilizations to create (or expand) formalized categories to seek inclusion abound. The legalization of same-sex marriage and the ban-the-box movement by formerly incarcerated people¹⁹ both sought inclusion through formal classification. Immigrant groups also have mobilized to carve out legal inclusion, historically (Marinari 2020) and contemporarily (Nicholls and Uitermark 2017; Terriquez 2015). Undocumented youth organized to pressure the Obama administration to create the DACA program (Nicholls and Fiorito 2015), and Salvadoran immigrants’ mobilization in the 1980s led to the creation of Temporary Protected Status or TPS (Menjívar 2000), which was then included in the 1990 Immigration and Naturalization Act. As the Trump administration threatened to end TPS designation for several national-origin groups, TPS holders formed the National TPS Alliance to fight to maintain this designation and to seek reclassification into a more inclusive and permanent category (Menjívar, Agadjanian, and Oh 2022).

¹⁸ Similarly, the use of the term “refugee” in public spaces, often associated with sympathy, contributes to construct refugees’ experiences as the opposite of so-called “regular immigrants” (see Brown and Dromgold-Sermen 2022). This justifies the exclusion of asylum-seekers who are classified as “regular migrants.”

¹⁹ The ban-the-box movement aims for employers to see an individual’s qualifications for a job, not the stigma of a conviction or arrest.

As critical as classification into a formal category may be, it is not a panacea, as a category does not by itself translate into equality; normalized, ingrained social practices remain after the elimination of formal exclusions. Maghbouleh (2017) shows that although U.S. courts classified Iranian Americans as White, in the eyes of the public they remained a racially liminal group considered non-White. While establishing legal categories to include a broader range of experiences is important, attitudes and stereotypes about the people so classified must also change. Vogler and Rosales (2022) show that despite changes in formal classification, immigrant trans women continue to experience gendered forms of punishment in immigration detention. Similarly, in examining the flawed implementation of over three dozen laws addressing violence against women enacted since the 1960s in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, we find that in contexts where entrenched gender ideologies stereotype women, devalue their lives, and prioritize family unity, such laws are largely symbolic (Menjívar and Dioosa-Jiménez 2023; Menjívar and Walsh 2017; Walsh and Menjívar 2016). The faulty implementation of legal protections for women thus has as much to do with unchanged practices, stereotypes, and attitudes toward women as with the legal categories that states deploy to protect women from violence.

Again, the United States is no exception; for instance, discriminatory practices persist in global migration systems despite the end of formally exclusionary laws. Although Brazil has responded to Haitian, Venezuelan, and Syrian forced migrants with policies of inclusion, these groups are each racialized differently in media and the public sphere (Jensen and Dias 2022). When Ecuadoran officers switched to less binary admission categories by using the classification “mixed migration” instead of immigrant/refugee, they ended up excluding many asylum-seekers (Gómez and Herrera 2022).

Finally, we may contribute to enhancing the power of state classifications when we use them unquestioned in scholarly work. Often this is due to the organization of the data we use and how we make our work legible to other scholars. From different corners, scholars have called for a critical approach when using state categories, warning that their unquestioned use may reify the constructed categories we critique (Brubaker 2013; Monk 2022; Williams 2019). Such usage may limit theorizing on the relationship between difference and inequality (see Monk 2022), as inequality *produces* the categories we use (Williams 2019). Neglecting these questions may reinforce the purportedly objective, neutral nature of state-created categories.²⁰

The normalization of state-created categories is a powerful force, affecting the lives of marginalized groups in ways that intensify their vulnerability. In normalizing state-created classification systems through everyday interactions and usage in public spheres, state power and its capacity for control are amplified. However, integrating state categories into everyday interactions also prompts responses through which categories are resisted and changed.

²⁰Tilcsik (2021) notes that seemingly objective language used to explain discriminatory practices may in fact strengthen belief in the accuracy of the stereotypes we seek to debunk.

State Categories and Misalignments

The last aspect of state-created categories I highlight is misalignment. Formalized categories facilitate the work of bureaucracies but do not capture the breadth of people's experiences. As Monk (2022:7) observes, "The state reduces what are fundamentally continuous social differences to crisp, nominal differences that are more easily handled in bureaucratic systems." Lived experiences spill over categories, but misalignments also result from neglect when the state abandons vulnerable populations. Finally, misalignments also emerge in the crevices created by law, as experiences fall in-between formalized categories. Thus, misalignments create, cement, and map onto exclusionary systems.

I faced a misalignment challenge when I tried to fit the experiences of Salvadoran immigrants into the established immigrant/refugee binary. They had fled El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s, where crossfire between government soldiers and the opposition, or a blown-up bridge, often impeded travel to their workplaces. Were they "economic migrants" or "political refugees," as the binary forces us to think? I concluded that geopolitics and governmental decisions determine who is classified as a refugee, rather than a match between the plight of the people seeking protection and the state's definition (Menjívar 1993, 2000). The constructed migrant/refugee binary may be bureaucratically practical, particularly when rationalizing exclusions. It cannot, however, capture experiences borne out of a combination of economic dislocation, poverty, violence, war, and other injustices, which characterize the conditions that displace many poor people around the world today. As Hamlin (2021:3) observes, patterns of global migration "push against the migrant/refugee binary, revealing it to be a constructed 'legal fiction' (Fuller 1967) ... inaccurate portrayals of reality but are treated as if they are true for the purposes of bureaucratic expediency and convenience." Regardless of how misaligned administrative binaries might be with immigrants' experiences, these are so ingrained in how we see migratory flows that we, scholars, regularly use them in research. We compare the profiles of the people the state classifies as immigrants to those classified as refugees (or contrast the undocumented to the documented), which may reinforce the belief that the individuals the state sorts into these binaries are, in reality, intrinsically different.

Young immigrants arriving in the United States and other parts of the world may travel on their own, with non-family members, or accompanied by adults but, upon apprehension, border authorities separate and classify them as unaccompanied (Ryo and Humphrey 2021). This reclassification misrepresents these migrants as small children traveling alone, masking their heterogeneity, veiling the presence of other social actors throughout their journeys, and robbing the minors of their agency (Menjívar and Perreira 2021), which ultimately affects their eligibility assessment for the resources they need to survive (Galli 2023). Their classification may have less to do with the minors' lived experiences than with a "geopolitics of compassion" (Casavantes Bradford 2022), which positions these minors as tools of political statecraft.

The general area of the sociology of the family presents multiple examples of misalignments that reproduce inequalities and reify normative expectations (see Powell et al. 2010). Kin relations that the state recognizes frequently do not match the lived experiences of families, as state definitions only recognize practices that align with established ideologies of a

normative family. For instance, next-of-kin often find that the bodies of deceased loved ones go unclaimed due to misfits between the family as defined by the state and by individuals (Timmermans and Prickett 2022). And inheritance laws disqualify particular family structures, disadvantaging those that do not match formalized classifications of the family, creating “marginalized legal categories” (Bea and Taylor Poppe 2021). In work on immigrant families, we found that the state’s ideological code of the family (Smith 1993) used to determine visa eligibility excludes many relationships meaningful to immigrants, including grandparents who raised them or cousins with whom they grew up as siblings, misalignments that lead to indefinite and painful family separations (Menjívar et al. 2016).

But even when immigrants petition for family members who meet state-approved definitions of kin, bureaucratic obstacles still create misalignments. For example, the father of two immigrant brothers in Phoenix submitted applications for their permanent residence when the boys were teenagers (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). The applications took so long to go through the backlogged immigration system that one of them turned 21 during the process, aged out of the category, and became ineligible for this benefit. The younger brother, by contrast, received his green card. The immigration system itself, through eligibility requirements infused with normative ideas of family, misrecognizes and misaligns families’ lived experiences, creates mixed-status families, and stratifies access to resources *within* families in lasting fashion.

Omission.—Misalignment also occurs when the state turns the other way through acts of omission, neglect, and the abandonment of stigmatized and socially devalued groups, creating multidimensional social exclusions. Acts of omission do not *create* classifications directly, but when the state omits and neglects it draws a line that excludes, defining an “anti-category.” This category includes those who are ignored, underestimated, and neglected. For them, the state’s acts of omission reach deeply, influencing how they think of themselves, their place in society, and the rights they believe they either have or lack.

My thinking about state omission is inspired by Biehl’s (2013) conceptualization of social abandonment, Giroux’s (2016) politics of disposability, and Gilmore’s (2022) “anti-state state,” which refers to the state’s administrative disregard of certain groups; the neglecting of responsibilities toward certain people, families, and communities; and the provision of unequal levels of protection to them. Gilmore refers to these as acts of “organized abandonment,” through which the state controls *and* deprives the same group of social benefits. In my conceptualization, I include state acts of neglect and indifference as an “anti-category.”

Instances of anti-categories abound in the United States and elsewhere. One in three women is exposed to gender-based violence around the world (UN Women 2022) and these women often have nowhere to go for help, even when laws exist to protect them, because authorities charged with implementing these laws minimize or dismiss women’s calls for help. In our research on gender-based violence in Central America, we found multiple instances of state neglect, structural violence through the underfunding of social safety nets, and a general disregard for the lives of the poor (Menjívar and Walsh 2017; Walsh and Menjívar 2016). Poor women are further devalued by the symbolic violence of entrenched gender ideologies.

For instance, authorities in Honduras redirected funds and resources away from protecting women from violence to crimes the authorities considered to be “more serious,” such as theft and “common crimes,” even though Honduras has one of the highest femicide rates in the world (Menjívar and Walsh 2017). Similarly, in Guatemala, police officers neglected to investigate the murder of a woman even when the victim’s family paid for gasoline for the police car and bought lunch for the officers, after the officers had claimed they could not investigate the crime due to a lack of gas and food (Walsh and Menjívar 2016).

These acts of state abandonment are routine; they send powerful messages to poor women that their lives do not matter. Consequently, poor Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran women—those who comprise this anti-category—see no alternative but to seek protection elsewhere; many migrate in search of asylum in the United States. Native American women and girls in the United States and Canada are similarly neglected (García-Del Moral 2018); they are also killed and disappeared, but their murders fail to receive the state attention they require. In death as in life, poor women and girls often bear the brunt of states’ anti-categories that neglect, diminish, and abandon them—in Central America, the United States, and elsewhere.

In-betweenness.—Classification systems assign people to categories into which they either do or do not fall, but peoples’ experiences can also fall *between* categories. The experiences of immigrants caught in between legal categories prompted me to reflect more deeply on life between state categories, or liminal legality (Menjívar 2006). Emblematic examples include immigrants on Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and DACA and those who wait in limbo for years for their applications to be adjudicated.²¹ I conceptualize this in-betweenness as a *condition*; people in these spaces coexist temporarily, partially, and often indefinitely in two different (even opposing) formal categories. This condition is materially, socially, and existentially quite different from being classified into one or the other category (see also Lori 2019). Regular renewals can go on for years, if not decades, deeply affecting individuals’ sense of self, relationships within their families, contact with institutions, artistic expressions, and sense of belonging and citizenship (Menjívar 2006). This condition is characterized by precarity and the anxiety of waiting, yet it also generates a sense of hope for the future and the possibility of exercising the rights that people living in this condition do possess, which has given impetus to political engagement. From their precarious temporary statuses, these immigrants have pushed to change state classifications (Burciaga and Malone 2021; Getrich 2021) by deploying oppositional consciousness (Martinez and Salazar 2018) and participating in collective mobilization (Burciaga and Martinez 2017; Nicholls and Fiorito 2015).

The uncertainty intrinsic to a liminal condition, however, can eclipse the benefits that even a partial legal status brings (Menjívar et al. 2022; Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021).²² A TPS Alliance leader once explained that when his son was born in the United States, he and his wife were advised to open a bank account to save for the boy’s college tuition. They

²¹ Similar cases exist in other areas of life. Powell, Quadlin, and Pizmony-Levy (2015) identify a striking parallel between immigrants in liminal legality and same-sex couples.

²² This partial status can create a (false) sense of security in relatively more inclusive contexts, such as Colombia today (Del Real 2022) or the United States pre-amplification of enforcement.

inquired whether they could withdraw their savings in case their temporary status ended, but the bank said no, so they did not risk opening the account. The boy is now 18 and college-ready but faces multiple challenges to finance his college education without parental savings. Similarly, the uncertainty inherent in the DACA program may erode some of the benefits of DACA to recipients, even to their U.S.-born children (Patler et al. 2021). Hence, the insecurity of waiting inherent in the liminality of in-between categories is reproduced across time and generations, constituting categorical inequality.

Furthermore, individuals living between formal categories are forced to interact with state bureaucracies regularly to reaffirm deservingness as they renew their permits and show clean criminal records; they are thus over-surveilled (see Asad 2023). Such contacts remind these immigrants that they live in the country only temporarily—months at a time but, in a cruel twist, on indefinite extensions—and are being watched. Living in liminality produces a tension with the state like what the formerly incarcerated experience: they are both overpoliced and underprotected (see Miller 2021); simultaneously controlled *and* deprived of certain protections (see Gilmore 2022). The goal of the state may be to remove or to include them only partially, but their limited protection makes them vulnerable to abuses while also enveloping them in the criminalization dragnet of the immigration regime through intense surveillance.

As bureaucracies implement rules and regulations to determine who can receive tangible and intangible resources, experiences that do not conform to state definitions are excluded. Misalignments between state-created categories and human experience affect, in particular, the socially vulnerable whose lives do not fit bureaucratic standards. As such, enduring exclusion is reproduced through the seemingly benign task of resource distribution.

CATEGORIES OF NEGLECT AND OMISSION IN SOCIOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

In this address, I argued that through the deployment of state categories, bureaucratic systems foster enduring social inequalities. I see similar processes at work in the creation of sociological knowledge. Though not a state bureaucracy, mainstream/North American/Global North sociologists also create categories of inclusion, exclusion, and neglect as we generate sociological scholarship. We disregard, and sometimes purposefully ignore, the works of scholars located in the Global South.²³ At this critical moment in the United States, where institutions, constitutional protections, women's lives and rights, and the environment are at risk; where racism and various forms of violence run rampant; and where enduring inequalities have been brought to light *and* amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, it would enrich us to engage scholarship from the Global South.

Civil conflict, state violence, authoritarianism, political violence, large refugee flows, and economic dislocation have been central to sociological work in regions of the Global South. Incorporating epistemologies from those regions into Global North-based frameworks would

²³The “Global South” is not a homogeneous category or region (see Benzecry 2021). Following Go (2016:33), I use the term to denote a geopolitical position to bring attention to knowledge produced at the “bottom of the global hierarchy.”

add perspective to our understandings of the current reality in the United States today, not least because the same forces that have ravaged the Global South are also wreaking havoc here. It can help us rethink concepts, recalibrate analytic lenses, reconstruct taken-for-granted categories, and unearth the powerful interests and ideologies that structure the rules and regulations at the heart of the administrative categories we use in our work. Although some of us already do this and advocate for this approach (see Perspectives 2022),²⁴ I see a need to do more.

I share only two salient examples of how I have benefitted from incorporating into my U.S.-based scholarship conceptual frameworks produced in Latin America, the region that has influenced me the most. First, when I was grappling to understand the complexities of life for women in an ethnography I conducted in Guatemala (Menjívar 2011b), I drew on broader conceptualizations of violence by Central American social thinkers, which better interpreted that reality. The writings of Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (1998) on political and structural violence; Ignacio Martín-Baró (1991), one of the Jesuit priests assassinated in El Salvador, on everyday violence and a militarized mindset; Guatemalan anthropologist Claudia Dary Fuentes (1994) on gender inequalities in non-Indigenous households; and Costa Rican feminist Alda Facio Montejo (1992) on familism ideologies have been theoretically generative to my research. The Mexican feminist Marcela Lagarde y de Los Rios's (2006) concept of feminicide has guided my thinking on the role of the state in the prevalence of gender-based violence against women (Diossa-Jiménez and Menjívar 2021; Menjívar and Walsh 2017; Walsh and Menjívar 2016).

These scholars' expansive and ground-breaking scholarship has illuminated my work in Central America. Significantly, however, it has helped me understand the conditions that immigrants face in the United States, such as conceptualizing the U.S. immigration regime as a form of violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). And work on racism in Guatemala by scholars there (Taracena Arriola 1999; Velásquez Nimatuj 2008) has helped me discern the many facets of entrenched anti-Indigenous racism prevalent in U.S. Latino communities (Menjívar 2021).

Collaborating with scholars from the Global South and remaining open to their work in our roles as reviewers and editors would energize our connections and expand intellectual repertoires. Sociological insights generated in other languages are frequently rendered invisible by the global prominence of English-language publications. More translations into English are needed to facilitate access to sociology from regions of the Global South.

A second benefit I have derived from the Latin American sociological tradition relates to what we refer to in the United States as public and policy sociology (Burawoy 2021). The tensions we debate between advancing scholarship or engaging in the struggles stemming from sociological knowledge have been blurred for decades in Latin American sociology. Indeed, as Venezuelan sociologist Roberto Briceño-León (2002:16) has observed, the challenge there is not to choose one or the other but to find ways to improve combining the two.

²⁴See the plenary panel on Decentering North American Sociology at the ASA 2022 meetings (Levitt and Menjívar 2022).

Latin American sociology has given the world a theoretically eclectic vision of sociology (Briceño-León 2002) and novel concepts (see Benzecry 2021), and Latin American sociologists have applied this knowledge to promote social change. For this reason, sociologists were targeted and departments of sociology were shut down throughout the region during the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. Latin American sociologists have a long history of doing sociology with one foot in academia and the other in public arenas.²⁵ Today, they continue producing influential scholarship while engaging in social transformation, such as participating in the *Marea Verde* (Green Tide), the successful campaigns for abortion rights that have swept the region, which can serve as a template for U.S. mobilizations. Latin American sociologists have demonstrated time and again that it is possible to do scholarship *and* engage in social change—and to do both well. Latin American sociology has inspired me to contribute with my scholarship to a variety of efforts to eradicate (or at least ameliorate) the harmful effects of state-created classification systems on the people at the center of my work.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I have examined how social exclusions are produced through the formidable workings of state bureaucracies. Through classification systems, multifaceted expressions of state power shape our lives and do untold harm to vulnerable and stigmatized populations. Through rules and regulations, state bureaucracies establish eligibility and draw a line between those who will receive a benefit and those who will be excluded, stigmatized, and disenfranchised. And though seemingly objective, state classification systems and their administrative rules are not neutral; they are constructions based on race, class, and gender ideologies, reflect political and economic interests, and are recreated and amplified through everyday practices. I have based my arguments primarily on my research on immigration and gender-based violence, but state classifications matter in every realm of life. Thus, I argue for adopting a critical perspective when using state classifications in our work, which would acknowledge the constructed nature of formalized categories, their naturalization, and their misalignments. Recognizing the inequality structures baked into the plethora of rules and regulations that sustain the categories we use in our work can reframe questions about the people the state sorts into categories.

The analytic lens I propose can shift the focus of our analysis in meaningful ways for sociological scholarship—from analyses based on taken-for-granted categories, which can reify the presumed characteristics of individuals classified by the state, to analyses that reveal the structures that engender *both* the classification systems *and* enduring patterns of inequality. We, sociologists, are singularly well-suited to advance this critical perspective and to influence analytic practices that will inform genuine, enduring social change. Our broad theoretical and methodological tent gives us the fluency to understand how administrative categories are created and how the data produced through these categories are used. We have strategic advantages to change the conversation about the people at the

²⁵Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a key development theory scholar, served as Brazil's president (1995 to 2003). Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, the Mexican feminist who coined the term femicide, served as an elected member of the House of Deputies (2003 to 2006).

center of our work and to enhance our discipline's influence in government, policy, and other domains outside academia.²⁶

In briefly discussing the scholarship from the Global South that has influenced my work, I present one path by which to potentially expand our theoretical lenses and rethink the questions we pose (see Moussawi 2022). Work in this vein can generate alternatives to explore relationships among entrenched inequalities, state power, bureaucracies of displacement, and our place in knowledge production. This path can also connect us with sociological thinking in regions of the world that have long experienced the conditions we are facing in the United States today.

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Biographies

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Photo by James Michael Juarez

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²⁶I thank Neda Maghbouleh for reminding me of this point.

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