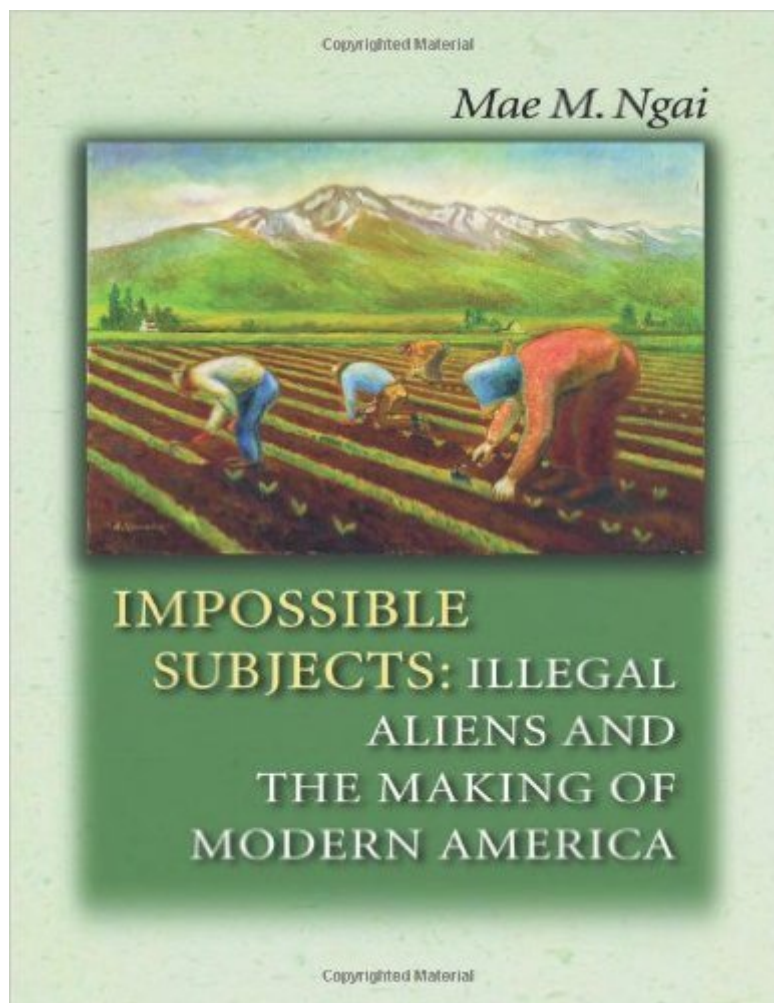


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# Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens And The Making Of Modern America (Politics And Society In Twentieth-Century America)



## Synopsis

This book traces the origins of the "illegal alien" in American law and society, explaining why and how illegal migration became the central problem in U.S. immigration policy--a process that profoundly shaped ideas and practices about citizenship, race, and state authority in the twentieth century. Mae Ngai offers a close reading of the legal regime of restriction that commenced in the 1920s--its statutory architecture, judicial genealogies, administrative enforcement, differential treatment of European and non-European migrants, and long-term effects. In well-drawn historical portraits, Ngai peoples her study with the Filipinos, Mexicans, Japanese, and Chinese who comprised, variously, illegal aliens, alien citizens, colonial subjects, and imported contract workers. She shows that immigration restriction, particularly national-origin and numerical quotas, re-mapped the nation both by creating new categories of racial difference and by emphasizing as never before the nation's contiguous land borders and their patrol. This yielded the "illegal alien," a new legal and political subject whose inclusion in the nation was a social reality but a legal impossibility--a subject without rights and excluded from citizenship. Questions of fundamental legal status created new challenges for liberal democratic society and have directly informed the politics of multiculturalism and national belonging in our time. Ngai's analysis is based on extensive archival research, including previously unstudied records of the U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration and Naturalization Service. Contributing to American history, legal history, and ethnic studies, *Impossible Subjects* is a major reconsideration of U.S. immigration in the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mae Ngai's ambitious book compels historians and general readers alike to critically reassess traditional understandings of and approaches to U.S. immigration. Much of the histories on U.S. immigration and immigration policies have told a similar tale. The United States, the narrative goes, has been tainted by a long history of exclusion, a blight on the nation's democratic tradition that was only recently removed with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. Such a narrative not only reaffirms the myth of American universalism, but also consistently fails to produce any new critical knowledge about U.S. immigration and U.S. history. *Impossible Subjects* differs from these other works of immigration history in this important respect: it proceeds with the conviction that the United States was never a "nation of immigrants." Ngai examines the era between 1924 and 1965, an unconventional periodization in immigration history that situates the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act (usually signifying the end of one regime) at the beginning of her study, and the Immigration Act of 1965 (usually signifying the beginning of another) at the end. Beyond simply filling a historiographical gap in immigration history, the focus on this period of immigration restriction enables a reevaluation of U.S. immigration laws, and more broadly of U.S. history, on several levels. First, it demonstrates that restrictionist policies did not merely function as a tool for exclusion, but more, it created—through a racial and geographical remapping of the nation—new categories and concepts deeply implicated in race that defined the spaces and limits of national inclusion.

*IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTS*, written by Mae Ngai, is the best of recent books on the 20th-century American history of immigration. She reveals that the problem of "illegal immigrants," which has been regarded as one of the most serious problems since the late 20th century, is indeed a legal construction. According to the author, immigrants from Mexico were drawn into the U.S. Southeast because the Southeast political economy, especially agri-business, raised need for the massive wave of low-wage immigrant workers and at the same time defined them as the racially "foreign" people who were rendered alien to America, which was defined as the nation of Caucasians. What enabled the American Government and people to attach racialized foreignness to the Mexican immigrants (and, inevitably, American citizens of Mexican origin) were Immigration Acts, border policing, and discriminatory control of visas. Mae Ngai argues that positive laws concerning immigration policy have constructed the category of "illegal aliens" from Mexico, and the

implementation of the laws by Border Patrols and INS has reinforced the labeling of racially alien immigrants. She bases her analysis on the critical legal theory which suggests that laws constitute social formations. Her usage of the new legal theory in her inquiry into the American immigration history is highly excellent and persuasive. The historical analysis of the immigration problems in this book seems to be applicable to other countries' history. For example, Ngai's insight shall give light to the recent Japanese conservative media discourses on the "illegal migrants" from China, South Korea, and Latin American nations which describe the undocumented migrant workers as illegal, criminal and, in case of women, prostitutes.

The United States of America is the great melting pot of the world's immigrants, or is it? A white, middle-class, Protestant, European American lifestyle is what the great melting pot of American folklore was truly intended to articulate to the immigrants of the early 20th century. Mai Ngai counters this image of the US as the embracive playground of diverse immigrants and powerfully weaves the tale of how race, nationality, assimilation, and immigration all became interwoven concepts in overtly discriminatory US immigration policy of the mid-20th century in her newest book *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. As Mae says, "The telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been an enduring narrative of American history, but it has not always been the reality of migrants' desires or their experiences and interactions with American society and state." (5) Throughout the history of the United States, there has been a clear struggle to define who can gain citizenship in this great nation. Ngai's book attempts not to tackle this debate, but rather how the construction of the illegal immigrant came about because "the promise of citizenship applies only to the legal alien, the lawfully present immigrant. The illegal immigrant has no right to be present, let alone embark on the path to citizenship." (6) Her book begins in 1924 with the adoption of the Johnson-Reed Act which established numeric quotas for immigration from countries across the globe. Prior to the 1920s, immigration was relatively unrestricted as, "the free global movement of labor was essential to economic development in the New World.

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