

DEFINE AMERICAN

An Interview with Jose Antonio Vargas

Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who was formerly a staff writer for *The Washington Post*, among other prominent publications. In a 2011 *New York Times Magazine* essay, he revealed himself to be an undocumented immigrant to promote public dialogue about immigration issues in the United States. He went on to produce a documentary, *Documented*, about his family history and launched the organization Define American with the goal of changing the conversation about immigration reform in the United States. Vargas spoke with the *Journal* from Los Angeles, California about his immigration story and some of the priorities he sees for his advocacy work today.¹

Journal of International Affairs: *In other interviews, you have discussed the fact that people have often assumed you are Mexican because your name is Jose. What reflections do you have on this? Do you feel as though people are often surprised that you are undocumented and from the Philippines?*

Jose Antonio Vargas: Yes. To me, it is really just fascinating how instrumental the mainstream media has been in the narrowing of the immigration narrative. I do not think people understand that more than a million of the [estimated] 11.5 million undocumented Americans in this country are actually from Asia. But you do not hear about that; you do not hear about undocumented Germans or any Europeans or British people. I have met so many undocumented Europeans who feel guilty that, whenever this gets brought up, nobody thinks about them. They get a pass. They are not the ones getting pulled over. They are not the ones being asked for their papers. It raises the question, how does race play into that?

You can talk to documented American citizens of Mexican descent, and they can tell you that they feel completely trapped, even though they are documented

and they are American citizens. What is really important to me is how do we get Irish people, German people, Eastern European Jews—how do we get them to recognize their own history and connect it to the circle of the Latino and Asian immigrants in this country?

It is really fascinating being in Los Angeles. I was in a neighborhood where nearly every residential house I saw, there was a Latino person mowing the lawn, or tending to the garden, or cleaning the window. This city would collapse without

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Journal: *What problems do you see with the conversation this country is having about immigration?*

Vargas: Well, first of all, I do not think we are having a global conversation at all. I think we have a very myopic, simplistic, and frankly, bigoted way of talking about immigration in this country. Especially at a time in which we are living in a truly globalized world, connected by technology and capital. Here we are at a time in

which I can be a global citizen because of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr. All of these platforms, which are made in America, developed in America, and invented in America, allow me to be a global citizen, but yet I cannot be a citizen of the country that I call my home.

Today, there are 232 million migrants in the world; that is 3 percent of the global population and more than ever in the history of this world. We do not know how many of those 232 million are undocumented or unauthorized. I have come to a realization in the past year in the work that I am doing—in the work that we are doing with Define American—which is this: We need to address this fact. We need to confront racial and immigrant history a lot more fully, and we need to talk about immigration and migration in a much more global way as it links to technology and the economy.

Journal: *One of the things you said about your film is that you wanted it to be more of a cultural than political issue. Do you think that shifting the culture can help shift policy, or do you think policy has to come first?*

Vargas: Absolutely. It has to be a cultural shift first. Think about African-

American civil rights. Think about LGBTQ rights. It has always been a cultural shift before it was a political shift. And then consider how partisan and toxic the political conversation is right now about immigration. It is theater; politicians are just about being elected and then reelected.

We have not created the space where we can actually have a conversation with Americans about this issue. And so long as people think it is about Mexico, so long as people think it is about illegal people, we are not going to change anything politically.

I think the question is also this: How do we get pop culture to reflect this changing America that is more Latino and more Asian? A new America is being created right now. And it is beyond black and white. There are more immigrants. Believe me, of course I want immigration reform to happen. Of course I want a green card, and a visa, and all of that. But do we actually think giving people pieces of paper and changing the law is, all of a sudden, going to make them feel welcomed in the country?

Journal: *Obama announced his executive action on immigration in November of last year, but many states are already challenging his plan. How is this a reflection on the culture around the immigration conversation right now?*

Vargas: Again, it is theater. I think most of the policy and the legislation that comes out—especially from Republicans—is based on the fact that the American public does not really know who we are. They do not know that most of us have been here for longer than ten years. They do not know that we pay taxes and Social Security. They do not know that we have families here who are American citizens. They do not know that we are contributing members of our communities.

They do not know these things. That is why the politicians can get away with what they get away with and make it about the border, and make it about these illegal people, these aliens from Mars. We have not totally disrupted and changed the cultural conversation. So that is why politicians take advantage of that. And that is why they talk about us the way they talk about us.

Journal: *You were detained this summer when you were working near the border in Texas. Can you talk about that experience?*

Vargas: It was just surreal. At one point, I was in the same cell as the kids from Central America. There were some girls there, but it was mostly boys, maybe between the ages of eight and fifteen or sixteen. Brown kids, Latino kids. And I am looking at them and thinking, “If these kids would have come from Canada, we

would not allow this to happen.” If these kids had been white, we would not have allowed them to be in a jail cell. We are so unwilling to ask harder questions, and so we pay for the complexity of the situation.

We are so comfortable with hearing, “Oh, send them back home.” But send them where? To the hell that they just walked away from? To me, it is indicative of how race factors into this conversation. We would not have turned our backs on them if they were white. But because they are brown kids, we do not care. That is what I think about that.

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Journal: *Do you think, in some ways though, our country is getting ready for a more complex conversation about race?*

Vargas: I think the young generation is. I think your generation is much more ready and willing to have a much more nuanced and uncomfortable conversation about race. I actually think it is better to be uncomfortable. Because I feel we are where we are right now because we have conversations that are way too comfortable and way too simple.

Since I was sixteen years old, I always knew that I was more than a piece of paper. I mean, if my life were limited by it, by the fact that I do not have these pieces of paper, which by the way, most Americans take for granted, right? So that is why I find that my work is really about questioning the definition of these things. That is what I find my work focused on more and more.

Journal: *Do you think that in being both gay and undocumented, those issues converge a lot for you, in terms of civil rights issues and living in America?*

Vargas: Absolutely. But I feel like it has really forced me to insist on my whole humanity even more. I think it really has forced me to be sure of who I am, right? And define myself, instead of allowing other people to define me. I think that has been the blessing of it, believe it or not. [At age] sixteen is when I found out that I was undocumented, and I also knew that I was gay around that time. And if I survived that, I feel like I can survive anything. 🏰

NOTES

¹ This interview is a condensed and edited version of the exchange between the *Journal* and Jose Antonio Vargas.