



# Model Immigrants and Undesirable Aliens: The Cost of Immigration Reform in the 1990s

*Christina Gerken*

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During 1995 and 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law three bills that altered the rights and responsibilities of immigrants: the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the Personal Responsibility Act, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. *Model Immigrants and Undesirable Aliens* examines the changing debates around immigration that preceded and followed the passage of landmark legislation by the U.S. Congress in the mid-1990s, arguing that it represented a new, neoliberal way of thinking and talking about immigration.

Christina Gerken explores the content and the social implications of the deliberations that surrounded the development and passage of immigration reform, analyzing a wide array of writings from congressional debates and committee reports to articles and human-interest stories in mainstream newspapers. The process, she shows, disguised its underlying racism by creating discursive strategies that shaped and upheld an image of “desirable” immigrants—those who could demonstrate “personal responsibility” and an ability to contribute to the U.S. economy. Gerken finds that politicians linked immigration to complex issues: poverty, welfare reform, so-called family values, measures designed to combat terrorism, and the spiraling costs of social welfare programs.

Although immigrants were often at the center of congressional debates, politicians constructed an elaborate, abstract terminology that appeared to be unrelated to race or gender. Instead, politicians promoted neoliberal policies as the avenue to a postracist, postsexist world of opportunity for every rational consumer with an entrepreneurial spirit. Still, Gerken concludes that the passage of pathbreaking legislation was characterized by a useful tension between neoliberal assumptions and hidden anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality.

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