Immigration is a perennial hot-button political concern in the United States (and much of the western world). Conservative politicians, especially, attempt to build political capital by framing migrants as inherently criminogenic, despite evidence to the contrary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the public is largely ignorant of how immigration courts work and indifferent to the experiences of those who are tried through these courts. Immigration critics, particularly, despite loving to blame unauthorized migrants for a myriad of societal ills and decrying those who fail to migrate “the right way” by waiting for difficult-to-impossible-to-get visas, understand little about the migrants themselves. Lost in the public discourse is any understanding of not only why people may migrate without authorization but also how immigration courts, and the rules migrants face, drive some migrants’ decision making. Almost entirely ignored in the dominant public discourse is how the migrants who experience immigration court feel about their experience and react to it.

Maya Pagni Barak’s book, *The Slow Violence of Immigration Court: Procedural Justice on Trial*, offers a concise, accessible account that evenly, clearly, and expertly elaborates both how immigration courts work and how the immigration attorneys and the Central American migrants she interviewed perceive the processes of the immigration court. Formed from immigration court observations, and interviews with Central American migrants and immigration attorneys, *The Slow Violence of Immigration Court* is an authoritative touchstone that offers both valuable information for those who are unfamiliar with immigration court and a convincing account of the limits of procedural justice in a decidedly American context. It is a focused work with several lessons that students and researchers ought to take onboard.

Barak first teaches us how the immigration system engages in removal (deportation) proceedings. *The Slow Violence of Immigration Court* discusses the drivers of migration, and unauthorized migration, for the Central American migrants, whose experiences form the basis of this book. Barak then teaches us the concept of *procedural justice*, “the way regular people perceive their treatment by those in positions of power and control” (27); next, she compares *procedural justice* with *distributive justice*, the distribution of benefits and burdens in society, and *substantive justice*, which is “fairness” (28). Barak elucidates how procedural justice is meant to work: by encouraging people to obey the law by administering a procedurally fair process; however, perceptions of procedural fairness are dictated by cultural norms that inform values and individuals’ sensitivities. In certain contexts, procedural justice does not achieve the intended outcomes.

This lesson is salient: migrants facing immigration court and the attorneys who represent them understand and perceive procedural fairness differently. The attorneys, professionals versed in the norms of US culture and law, reported a diverse array of observations. Some reports were of good, impartial behavior exercised by judges and government attorneys. Other reports outlined the problematic features of immigration court, all of which resonated with my own observations of
immigration court proceedings elsewhere in the United States; these problems included the presence of aggressive government attorneys hellbent on winning, poor translation, and awkward virtual hearings.

However, in contrast, Barak shows that the migrants who experience immigration proceedings generally find the process to be procedurally just and view the court to be honest, usually in juxtaposition to their experiences or views of corrupt officials in their home countries. Their evaluation could be a function of their untrained eye and limited experience. Nonetheless, their evaluation is surprising, given what Barak terms the “immigrant legal consciousness.” When members of the migrant community share legal knowledge with each other, they often establish unreasonable expectations or inaccurate or incomplete understandings of how US immigration functions. This concept of immigrant legal consciousness is of particular value because it shows how marginalized people navigate the minefields of limited rights, opportunities, and, critically, information. Importantly, although these issues are relevant to the everyday lives of migrants awaiting immigration court hearings, the popular discourse all but ignores them.

Nevertheless, Barak shows that, even though migrants find the procedures to which they are subjected procedurally fair, migrants are not likely to agree and comply with negative outcomes should they experience them, in large part because migrants do not view the underlying rule to be fair. Critically, immigrants’ non-compliance with deportation orders does not result in their envisioning the US and its government as illegitimate. Moreover, despite living without authorization, these migrants typically comply with the law wherever they can and keep low profiles in a wholistic effort to avoid being deported while living in a country where they often feel safer than their countries of origin, despite their marginalized status.

The accused must perceive laws as being just and outcomes fair, if procedural justice is to work. This core lesson is important not only for the criminologists and socio-legal scholars The Slow Violence of Immigration Court addresses, but also for the political scientists interested in legitimacy and the maintenance of the rule of law. This lesson is particularly salient in the present hyper-politicized context as conservative lawmakers continuously attempt to roll back protections. While procedural justice unfolds distinctly among the people subjected to immigration court, one must wonder whether these cleavages will also appear in US criminal courts should policy makers engage in increasing criminalization once again, which results in a diminution of substantive fairness.

In addition, Barak points to an implicit lesson in terms of how people perceive their place vis-à-vis the world around them. Barak provides fascinating accounts of migrants that illustrate their free-market ethos of free trade and movement. These concepts are inherently adopted by migrants who understand their place in a globalized world in a manner distinct from that of the parochial politicians and their constituents who oppose their movement. Barak does not attack these politicians; her book focuses on the immigration courts, their procedures, and the responses of the migrants. However, this context, which is implicit and would be known to a contemporary reader, is important.

The minimizing of this context is perhaps the book’s one weakness. Its discussion is important for those interested in migration. Although the fast violence experienced by Central American migrants is present, it is in the background. While some of the devastating push factors that inform Central American
migrants’ decisions to relocate, even when they do not have permission to do so are mentioned, the full impact, truth, and presence of this violence feels understated. Skeptics may not be convinced that this rapid violence is real. The book could have further developed the fast violence that motivated many of the Central Americans to head for the US so that readers could better connect with the migrants, particularly as the book ages. The book could have also explored, even briefly, why the US, as opposed to Mexico or Spain, is the ultimate destination for these migrants; those reasons may not be obvious to readers unfamiliar with migrant decision-making.

Certainly, these concerns do not detract from the overall contribution of Barak’s book and its primary focus of identifying how procedural justice plays out in immigration courts. Substantive justice must be part of the conversation if procedural justice is to be effective. Even though no clear political path is available, Barak’s vision of what removal proceedings should look and feel like are convincing, making *The Slow Violence of Immigration Court* a must-read book.