

Nativism and the Foundations of US Xenophobia

An Old Doctrine of Hatred and Bigotry Reemerges

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Some have debated whether we should view the groundswell of support for Donald Trump through the lens of white supremacy or fascism, but we can also understand it through the framework of *nativism*, the doctrine of prioritizing the interests of the native-born over those of immigrants. Nativism has a long and ugly history in the United States, in which the ascendancy of Donald Trump and his supporters is just the latest chapter. Here, to counter the jingoism of the 4th of July, we study nativism from its origins to the current day, tracing the common threads that connect all the ways the rich have preyed on the fears and prejudices of the exploited to turn them against those worse off than themselves.

Early US nativism was characterized by three elements. First, hostility towards immigrants for the ways they were perceived to be different, culturally or otherwise, and anxiety that they would take “American” jobs. Second, fear of radicals who were not content with American democracy, who did not recognize America as the supreme source of freedom. Finally, anti-Catholic bigotry: Catholics had allegiance to institutions outside the US that were seen as fundamentally anti-American.

We can see all of these elements emerging again today in updated forms. The first is deployed against Latino and Latina immigrants. All three apply to Muslim-perceived immigrants, as Islam is denigrated as both a radical threat and a mysterious, un-American religion that generates loyalties to foreign institutions and beliefs. There are other, slightly more obscure twists: the re-emergence of patrician nativism, this time the domain of Silicon Valley tech lords who dream of a meritocracy that remains largely Aryan.

The Structure of US Nativism

Nativism flourishes when the class gaps widen that divide the poorest from the rest of society and the richest from the rest of society. Both the poor and the rich become protective of their positions, and cast suspicious eyes on any who seem likely to take what little they have or threaten their place at the very top. Nativism broke out in the economic crashes of the 1880s, particularly in response to the “end of the frontier,” a natural resource that had previously seemed infinite. Immigrants seemed “both symbols and agents of the widening gulf between capital and labor,” in the words of John Higham, the author of all the quotes in this text not otherwise attributed. In fact, many foreign workers brought to Pennsylvania during the 1880s were brought specifically to scab. This hardly endeared them to local workers, and several were killed during riots.

Federal oversight of immigration only began in 1882; until then, the states receiving immigrants set their own regulations and collected fees from the ships that brought them over. Federal regulators shifted the burden of payment onto the individuals themselves and denied admission to “convicts, lunatics, idiots, and persons likely to become a public charge.” In 1891, when the first legal provisions for deportation were established, nativists immediately began organizing to make a literacy test part of the immigration process with the explicit aim of excluding Southern Europeans. Federal control of immigration introduced unprecedented border surveillance. At the same time, it created the *illegal alien* as a new political and legal subject.

In rhetoric that is familiar again today, the general manager of the American Iron and Steel Association insisted that the depression of the 1880s was aggravated “by the presence among us of thousands of idle and vicious foreigners who do not come here to work for a living but to stir up strife and commit crime.” This predecessor of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen is hardly

unique in capitalizing on economic failure to divide the working class—Hitler did the same a few decades later. Nativism is always present among the xenophobic and privileged; it becomes most vicious when a large number of people are swayed to look for someone weaker than themselves to blame.

The US economy has been recovering over the last seven years; unauthorized immigration is not increasing; Obama deported 2.5 million people, far more than any previous president. None of these facts matter. Nativists can appeal to those disenfranchised even in the face of market growth—the real problem they are capitalizing on is not the limits of the economy, but the economic inequalities that result when the rich profit on the poor. It is no coincidence that we find dramatic economic inequality in every country that is experiencing a turn towards nativism and fascism.

American Identity Crisis

It was a Jewish-American poet “aroused by Russian pogroms to a consciousness of America’s mission” who wrote the passage now displayed on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” This stands as one pole of America’s historical attitude towards immigrants. The other is an anxiety produced by precarity and the loss of homogeneity that gives rise to xenophobia. We can identify two narratives here: *America as refuge* and *America as fortress*.

When US capitalists feel threatened, the country retreats into fortress mode: immigrant labor is described as a threat to “American” labor, just as Muslims as a whole are blamed for the September 11 attacks. This strategy doesn’t necessarily serve the interests of individual capitalists:

In conversations with nearly a dozen farmers, most of whom voted for Mr. Trump, each acknowledged that they relied on workers who provided false documents. And if the administration were to weed out illegal workers, farmers say their businesses would be crippled... Farmers here have faced a persistent labor shortage for years, in part because of increased policing at the border and the rising prices charged by smugglers who help people sneak across. The once-steady stream of people coming from rural towns in southern Mexico has nearly stopped entirely. The existing field workers are aging, and many of their children find higher-paying jobs outside agriculture.

But what is at stake here is not a matter of mere material interests. Nativists have long described the US as an Anglo-Saxon nation, portraying that ethnicity as fundamentally freedom-loving. In the first phase of the development of racism in the United States, there was a long process of clarifying what whiteness was in the first place.

Racism and xenophobia are necessary to stabilize capitalism by dividing the exploited, but they can also become obstacles when the market needs to expand. During eras of capitalist confidence, capitalists may represent immigrants as sources of potential profit, as in the case of Steve Jobs.

The most apparently affirmative version of US isolationism preaches that the US represents the greatest realization of freedom in the world to date. A century ago, nationalists could claim that the US offered “the free, rational life of which Europe dreamed but which Europe denied. To fulfill their cosmopolitan task it behooved them to provide for others a haven from Europe’s

oppressions. Thus Americans could enlist in the cause of general human liberty without actively intervening anywhere.” This myth “shores up the national narrative of liberal consensual citizenship, allowing a disaffected citizenry to experience its regime as choiceworthy, to see it through the eyes of still-enchanted newcomers whose choice to come here reenacts liberalism’s fictive foundation in individual acts of uncoerced consent,” in the words of Bonnie Honig. The needs of pluralistic liberal democracy make this position appear to be the middle ground, with open borders to the left and closed borders to the right.

Religion and Radicalism

At times, Christianity has reduced xenophobia by emphasizing the common brotherhood of man. It has also served to promote xenophobia, fomenting hatred and violence against those who are not Christian or not the right sort of Christian. A century ago, nativists framed Catholicism as evidence of disloyalty, a refusal to assimilate. This has given way to a hatred and fear of Muslims, which is justified on both moral and practical grounds by many Christians—and by nativists who are not particularly religious but understand Christianity as the religion of white America. By constantly asserting that Muslims are engaged in a holy war against Christians, the West, and American culture in particular—and sometimes women and gay people, as well—nativists engage all the emotional attachments of the chauvinist white American against Muslims.

Earlier anti-Semites tended to depict Jews as mysterious, unassimilable, objectionably dirty people, “the very personification of avarice and cunning.” Communism, socialism, and anarchism were all derided as fundamentally Semitic politics, unfit for white Americans; black and Asian Americans were not even part of the discussion at that point. The history of state controls on immigration reflects this view: the Alien and Sedition Acts grew out of fear of the French Revolution. The Paris Commune of 1871 helped U.S. conservatives to “associate working-class aspirations with revolutionary violence”; a few years later, in 1886, the Haymarket Massacre deepened that association. In 1903, immigration law explicitly targeted anarchists for exclusion and deportation; this was the first time political opinion had been made a legal basis of discrimination in immigration since 1798. A daily newspaper reacting to Haymarket declared, “There is no such thing as an American anarchist... The American character has in it no element which can under any circumstances be won to uses so mistaken and pernicious.”

Radicalism undermines the claim that the American Revolution was all the revolution anyone could ever need. This is why nativists are forced to mobilize against it, to pretend it is something foreign.

Racism

The founding of the United States upon the mass genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans meant that, for years, nativism debated only the immigration of Southern and Western Europeans. That people from other parts of the world were not humans worthy of consideration went without saying; rather, the battle was over who could be incorporated into whiteness, the fundamental condition of being American. Among other Afropessimists, Frank Wilderson has written at length about the impossibility of black assimilation into US civil so-

ciety. Perceived “failure” to assimilate sparks fears of disloyalty; assimilation has often meant cultural death.

Higham, our primary source in this text, distinguishes between sentiment against various immigrants of European descent—now almost entirely assimilated into the umbrella term of privilege, “whiteness”—and sentiment against immigrants of African or Asian descent and Native Americans:

No variety of anti-European sentiment has ever approached the violent extremes to which anti-Chinese agitation went in the 1870s and 1880s. Lynchings, boycotts, and mass expulsions still harassed the Chinese after the federal government yielded to the clamor for their exclusion in 1882. At a time when the Chinese question had virtually disappeared as a political issue, a labor union could still refer to that patient people [sic] as “more slavish and brutish than the beasts that roam the fields. They are groveling worms.” Americans have never maintained that every European endangers American civilization; attacks have centered on the “scum” or “dregs” of Europe, thereby allowing for at least some implicit exceptions. But opponents of Oriental [sic] folk have tended to reject them one and all.

Racism was still evolving throughout this time. Some cited the Bible to justify it; the emergence of social Darwinism on the coattails of its scientific cousin gave others a more contemporary excuse. In this narrative, Anglo-Saxon success in the “New World” was not the result of luck and privilege, nor of the slave labor and genocide that made it possible; it was an expression of natural justice. Nativist intellectuals began spreading fear about “unassimilated” communities in cities; this was particularly convincing to those who had the least experience with new immigrants. Today, we might think of Trump voters who claimed to be concerned about the southern border... yet have no immigrant or Latino communities anywhere near them. This is an old story: “The Catholic war scare had greatest impact,” Higham explains, “in Midwestern rural areas where ‘flesh-and-blood’ Catholics were virtually non-existent and the enemy lay far away in the cities. Illinois farmers feared to leave home lest Romanists burn their barns and houses. A rural schoolteacher in Minnesota went about heavily armed for weeks to defend himself against the anticipated massacre.”

By the beginning of the 20th century, nativism had coalesced as an intersection of racist and nationalistic attitudes. Social disorder caused by class division and mechanization was assigned firmly as the fault of blacks, Asians, and fresh European immigrants. These people were described as fundamentally disorderly, in contrast with the supposed order of the Anglo-Saxon American past. Said one writer, “[A]narchy is a blood disease from which the English have never suffered.”

Apart from the lower-class nativists, a group of “patrician” traditionalist nativists, mainly from New England, began to theorize race. Frances Walker, a president of MIT, summarized their ideology thus: the new immigrants “are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence... they have none of the ideas and aptitudes which... belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak trees of old Germany to make laws and choose chieftains.” Whereas European immigrants had previously been seen as the best of the best, destined to biologically improve the country they arrived in, Walker argued that the dwindling birthrate of Anglo-Saxon US citizens was a deliberate and practical response to being underbid, in terms of labor, by European immigrants. This meant, according to Walker,

that American Anglo-Saxons were effectively committing race suicide. Sound familiar? Today, the burden of guilt has been shifted—white nationalists refer to roughly the same concept as “white genocide.”

The origins of federal oversight of immigration in the United States bear witness to its fundamental racism. In 1917, immigrants from Afghanistan to the Pacific were banned; in 1924, Asian immigrants were legally described as “racially ineligible” for citizenship by federal law. Meanwhile, southern border enforcement defined people of Mexican descent as illegal immigrants or alien citizens. Here we see racism working hand in hand with capitalism: cheap agricultural labor has been needed for several decades, so Latino immigrants were allowed in by lax enforcement, but kept in a state of rightlessness. After the Bracero agreement, which simultaneously allowed workers to come from Mexico between 1942 and 1964 as agricultural laborers and provided the terrain for the infamous “Operation Wetback” deportation efforts, immigration continued on an informal basis that kept immigrant workers precarious in order to discourage labor organizing among the poorest sectors of the workforce.

Now that agricultural labor is less necessary, protecting “white jobs” from the brown menace is suddenly a public concern again—although the latest statistics show that, while Latinos hold 50% of farm laborer jobs, very few Latinos hold management positions. White citizens simply don’t want low-paying agricultural work.

Meanwhile, the door has opened to Asian immigrants, who are now portrayed as highly-skilled contributors to American society. This is not to say that they do not face racism, particularly if they are Muslim. Still, the economy drives the stakes of the conversation. Park MacDougald’s devastating overview of Nick Lan’s contribution to the neo-reactionist movement in the tech industry, “The Darkness Before The Right”, describes how “race realism” is establishing Asian and Indian tech workers as the worthiest in the modern tech racial hierarchy in a way reminiscent of Hitler’s obsession with the supposed Aryan race. This form of “positive” racialization is only the corollary of the harassment and disenfranchisement less technologically skilled or situationally advantaged members of the same ethnicities experience in the United States. It is reminiscent of the “patrician” nativism theorized in New England in the early 1900s: mystically-minded, privileged race theorists, seeking isolated feudal states comprised of the “best and brightest.” Everyone else will be left to starve—but this is simply pragmatism, they assert, as the deserving members of humanity accelerate towards their final ascension.

Mae Ngai introduces the concept of “alien citizens” in her 2005 text *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Within the framework of white supremacy, citizens who are members of ethnic or religious groups seen as suspect—Italians and Chinese in the early 1900s, Latinos and Muslims today—are presumed foreign and dangerous, unassimilable. In Europe and the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, the majority of immigrants come from places colonized by these decaying powers, at once displaced and given conditional access. The ripples of colonial acts of invasion and coercive governance wash up on our shores from Laos, India, and Mexico, and the same racism that justified that colonization makes it possible to regard immigrants with fear and disdain. Before people of Japanese descent—two-thirds of them citizens—were interned in camps during World War II, 400,000 people of Mexican descent, half of them US citizens, were “repatriated” to Mexico during the Great Depression. If borders exist only to sift human lives into the fragmented forms most suitable for exploitation, then colonialism is the grinding agent—be it the sort of military colonialism carried out by formal state power or the economic colonization orchestrated via NAFTA, IMF, and other agencies.

As Hannah Arendt has described, the shift from the Enlightenment recognition of (European) *human beings* as those inherently possessed of rights to *citizens* as those inherently possessed of rights began with the end of WWI and the creation of the first large-scale refugee crisis in the modern era. The majority of human beings have never actually experienced the recognition of their supposed “inherent rights,” but the liberal myth that they were was revealed to be a lie at the beginning of the refugee crisis.

Resistance

Unfortunately, portions of older waves of immigrants often adopt xenophobic attitudes towards new immigrants, perhaps as an unconscious way of consolidating the grudging acceptance they are beginning to receive. This was evident even in the 1890s. But new immigrants from a variety of places and backgrounds were able to make common cause and demonstrate solidarity in the face of repression—and some second- and third-generation immigrant communities joined them. “The German-American Alliance, representing more than a million and a half members, signed an agreement with the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1907 to oppose all immigration restriction. The Irish leaders who dominated the Catholic Church and in some sections bossed the Democratic party championed the interests of their southern and eastern European followers. But the main effort had to come from the Slavic nationalities, the Maygars, the Italians, and the Jews.” This effort was cultural: these immigrant rights activists celebrated the embattled dream of America as a cosmopolitan melting pot, perhaps cynically—not necessarily because they desired assimilation more than anything, but because they were fighting for their lives. Still, there is something to the cosmopolitan joy of delight in difference, something that does not serve any power beyond that of human freedom.

Unfortunately, the solidarity expressed by most of these European immigrants did not extend to immigrants from other parts of the world. In 1907, Japanese immigrants were thrown under the bus to placate restrictionists in exchange for not instituting literacy tests that would have impeded European immigration. The pro-immigrant—but anti-labor—business interests who made this deal with the Senate did so cynically, with President Roosevelt’s support. Xenophobia was shunted out of one arena and into another for capitalist interests, not humanitarian ones. Meanwhile, the melting pot idea was itself racialized by theorists like Franz Boas (himself an immigrant, democrat, and Jew), who claimed that hybridization of culture and biological forces produced a distinctly “American” face and manner. Divergences from this “American” way could then, therefore, be policed: immigrants were once again coded as treacherous, as were US-born Anglo-Saxons whose political beliefs differed from the mainstream.

Jasbir Puar’s text *Terrorist Assemblages* clearly explains the ways in which citizenship—synonymous with whiteness in the American context—is extended or denied to various groups as a means of conquering through division. Muslims were excluded from membership in American civil society just as (white, wealthy) homosexuals and transgender people began to be included. She argues that this is no coincidence: it frames the stakes of tolerance and safety as repression and fear. Luckily, there are countless stories of people refusing this offering, biting the hand that feeds them, and turning to share with those excluded from society.

People deserve to be able move freely wherever they wish to if it harms no one, to be treated with hospitality, to be neither bound by geography nor allowed to invade the homes of others.

Just as busing black children to wealthy white schools is not the same as white parents driving their children to wealthy white schools, so creating open borders for the United States is not the same as the murder and forced displacement of Native American people during its history. For a refugee, crossing the border can mean survival itself—what parent would not do a similar act for the sake of her children? If we, too, have felt the call of adventure, of care and responsibility for others, let us turn ourselves to solidarity, towards openness and acceptance that is not founded in the old oppressive myths, but in something new we can create together.

Further Reading

As mentioned above, all the quotes in this text not otherwise attributed can be found in John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*.

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