

The dirty war on the immigrant: History's lessons, past and present

SIMPLE ENEMIES

Simple minds need simple enemies. This is particularly so in times when complex structural changes that are not fully understood threaten traditional and cherished ways of life. Around 1900, “the Jew”—male, crooked nose, fat, glib, dirty, cheating—was the enemy. Around 2000, “the immigrant”—male, brown-yellow-black, emaciated, sly, cheating border guards—was made the enemy. Whereas anti-Semitism led to the Holocaust, today anti-immigrantism had led to the deaths of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men and women annually in the Sonoran-Arizonan desert, the waters of the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic Ocean.

For centuries, Jews were discriminated against, their options for economic activities severely constrained, and their places of residence relegated to certain underserved quarters of cities or whole states. Having been made different, they were different. Immigrants have been discriminated against for a century and a half, ever since the concept of the “nation” was introduced and the requirement made that the population of a state consist of cultural clones with a single national identity, one mother tongue, and a readiness to die for the fatherland. Just as “the Jew” had been constructed as a different race, though he was merely of different religion, the immigrant, too, was germ-ridden, needing to be cleansed upon entering society. They were unnatural and needed to be naturalized to become citizens, though this option was open only to a few and certainly not for those genetically “deficient” or “of other races.”

FLASHBACK ONE

Spanish warrior-settlers arrive in what today is called New Mexico, fur traders and later armed men (soldiers) and a few settlers arrive in the St. Lawrence Valley, while religious fundamentalists

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calling themselves Puritans land along the coast of what would become New England. Although they were immigrants to regions already settled by other peoples, the Puritans, in New England, and the Britons, in Canada, would come to dominate the knowledge-producing sector of their respective societies by the 19th century, styling themselves first-comers, and appropriating to themselves institutional hegemony and power-wielding dominance.

Immigrants can be dangerous to settled societies as First Peoples across the Americas can attest. At the turn of the 20th century in North America, one of these immigrant societies, the United States, identifies immigrants as fiendish races to be deported. In Canada, the legal framework may be far more open, but immigration programs such as those concerning refugees or seasonal workers leave much to be desired. In Mexico, the descendants of the native inhabitants are still discriminated against—few exploitable immigrants arrive because the “Indios” can be exploited.

FLASHBACK TWO

In Europe, where the concept of the nation as settled from time immemorial was invented only about 150 years ago, the elites who dominate knowledge production eradicated from memory multiple intra-European migrations. The aristocracy migrated for purposes of marriage and power constituting a trans-European rather than national elite. The middle classes moved between cities to seek economic opportunities, establishing trade networks as well as regimes of exploitation of colonized peoples across the globe. The labouring classes migrated to find jobs, and peasant families moved to tillable lands where they could eke out a living and seize better opportunities. Europe's allegedly non-immigrant nation-states are in reality founded on mobile people and a multitude of migrations, and cultural interaction. The same holds true for Chinese society, Indian society—all parts of the world, in fact.

REWRITING HISTORY

The lesson of this source-based rather than ideology-based historiography is: “Immigrants are us.” Thus, the present war on immigrants requires a brainwashing of entire societies, which must be made to forget their own past. If, in the present, “we” (people descended from immigrants) want to prevent “them” (today's immigrants) from coming, deport those already arrived, or eradicate people labelled “illegal” or “asylum cheaters,” then the officials of society's historical memory rituals have to delete all the files containing information on the migration aspect of “our” shared past. Fascists and fascist-minded gatekeepers in the 1930s refused entry to Jews (in the words of one administrator, “none is too many”), wanted to deport Jews to Madagascar (as a highly placed magazine publisher suggested), or

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advocated sending them to concentration camps.

If critical minds reinsert the memory stick labelled “migration,” then the whole history of the North Atlantic world and of the world in general appears fuller, livelier, and more innovative. The migration-included narrative more closely reflects the data retrieved from those societies. Migrant men and women arrive with minds and bodies, and with ideas and initiative. They want to improve their lives or, if they arrive as refugees, rebuild interrupted life-courses. Many depart from circumstances similar to those of Jewish migrants in the past: Their economic activities have been limited in a global apartheid in which the richer (mainly white-skinned) segments of the global economy exploit the poorer (mainly non-white and non-Christian) peoples of the world. Institutions like international or world banks and monetary funds as well as globally active corporations profit from this system. The label “free trade” has become Orwellian Newspeak for the protective walls that prevent an equalization of life chances and the achievement of human rights across the world. The often touted concept of “sustainable ecologies” for living and future generations needs to be expanded to emphasize “sustainable lives” in all regions of the world and free movement between such regions.

The dehumanizing of immigrants, as practised by many politicians, mass media writers and spokespersons, and right-wing voters, prevents actual and potential migrant men and women from feeding themselves and their children, and from selecting the options guaranteed to the living by the concept of human rights since the Atlantic world’s “Age of Revolution.” Finally, it denies them the recognition of the US Declaration of Independence that all men, women, and children are created equal. It also deprives the societies that migrants want to reach, whether in the European Union, Canada, or the United States, the skills and cultural input of potential new-


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comers. Walls, whether the Chinese, the Berlin, or the one on the southern border of the United States, have never been able to stop those who are to be kept out from craving survival and better chances. Potential and actual migrants, to use current Western terminology, are entrepreneurs in their own lives. They are ready to take risks, invest in their own skills, and provide a safe future for their children.

THE FUTURE

At one time in history, Iberian monarchs expelled Jews and Muslims, depriving the peninsula’s many societies of their capabilities and connectivity to other societies. At another time, a society labelling itself superior and Aryan

expelled and exterminated Jews, Roma, and Sinti as allegedly inferior East and Southeast Europeans, and thrust the globe into destructive and self-destructive warfare. Do our governments today want to continue with this type of history or do they want to embrace the human rights concepts of the Enlightenment and the succeeding revolutions? Are US, Canadian, or European citizens superior to people of other places of birth and other colours of skin—as some politicians and commentators seem to argue? Charters of rights need to apply to all humanity and not exclude people who want to change their abode and leave a “home” that is unsafe and unsustainable with the purpose of building a new inhabitable structure for their lives and their progeny.

History provides negative as well as positive options. History may not repeat itself, but like anti-Semitism, anti-immigrantism dehumanizes its very proponents. Barbed wire is not a policy. If, in 2009, many US citizens and much of the world look to President Obama to effect changes, this is insufficient. Each and every one of us needs to act to fight walled-in minds, and to provide chances to all men and women, whether migrant or resident. 

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