

THE BORDERS OF THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

Paul A. Kramer



The wholesale outrage and disgust at Donald Trump's crude, racist disparagement of immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations (negatively compared to Norwegians) is, historically speaking, an accomplishment. Racism has long fueled US immigration exclusions and restrictions, but these days it's rare to hear overtly racist rhetoric like this. We've grown accustomed to the dog-whistling of anti-immigrant racism, as we have with every other kind. Where blood, purity and civilization had once been anti-immigration's everyday vocabulary, anti-racist and immigrant rights activists have—until recently, anyway—succeeded in forcing these terms underground. The fact that public utterances like Trump's would have once been unremarkable among policymakers at the

level of ideas (tone is another matter), and are now unacceptable, needs be registered as its own kind of triumph.

But to resist the racism of Trump's approach to immigration—and the broader racialized nationalism they help ground—we need to go deeper than justifiable outrage at its worst rhetorical outcroppings. We need to examine the ways histories of racism in US immigration policy have been durably imprinted on the dominant terms of the US immigration debate. How exactly did the conversation end up in a place where the question of whether immigrants are sufficiently white, civilized and obedient—whether that question is phrased grotesquely or politely—would come to take up so much space? Taking this story back to its origins, and bearing witness to continuities between our own moment and earlier eras we often like to think we've transcended, can help us see the borders of present-day dialogue as strange and contingent, roads someone chose that did not have to be chosen. Excavating the roots of our own time can also aid us in making room for tough new questions that reframe migration in ways more suited to securing justice, rights and well-being for humans on the move.

Many of the United States' early policies towards immigrants were conceived in recognizably Trumpian terms, in substance if not in tenor. The nation's first naturalization law, from 1790, closed off US citizenship to all but "free white persons of good character." Free people of African descent were among the first migrants targeted for surveillance and exclusion, as they sought entry to the country or moved between states. State repression of free black migrants transformed them into the United States' first "illegal" migrants, laying the groundwork for durable associations between legality, morality, and the need to keep people of color, quite literally, in their "place." The racialization of US immigration law took off in the

decades following the Civil War. Beginning with the Chinese, migrants from Asia were early, foundational targets; beginning in 1917, an “Asiatic Barred Zone” (with latitude and longitude markers laid out clearly in the legislative code) kept out migrants from an imaginary mega-region that stretched from contemporary Turkey to Papua New Guinea.

In the early 20th century, American nativists sought to turn back the clock in racial terms: a new “national origins” quota system admitted Europeans in proportion to the presence of their “nationality” in the American population during the late 19th century, funneling in preferred Northern and Western Europeans, and shutting the gates to most Southern and Eastern European “undesirables.” The 1924 quota law was “Make America Great Again” for a eugenic age, its passage hailed as a “Nordic Victory.” Hitler was a fan. America appeared to be “a young, racially select people,” he wrote admiringly in 1928, by “making an immigrant’s ability to set foot on American soil dependent on specific racial requirements,” among other factors.

The United States’ unapologetically racist immigration codes—with Asian exclusion and “national origins” at their core—survived the Great Depression, World War II, and the beginnings of the Cold War and decolonization. The notion that the United States was or should be a white fortress in a mostly colored world was backstopped by religion, science, scholarship and popular culture. US law did not allow Asians to naturalize until 1952. Under the pressure of anti-racist and immigrant rights activism, the system fell in 1965 with the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, which foregrounded family reunification, Cold War refugee admissions, and the entry of the highly skilled and educated.

But racism persisted in both policy enforcement and popular attitudes. As American employers’ labor demands pulled in

workers, and poverty and repression forced thousands of Latin Americans into exile, new caps on Western hemisphere migration outlawed migration flows through new forms of official restriction and racializing stigma. When Americans used the term “illegal alien”—sometimes attached to “invasion”—they could take comfort in the cover of a legal-sounding category, confident in the knowledge that few were going to think they referred to Norwegians overstaying tourist visas. The 1990s saw new nativist movements directed against Latin Americans, efforts to eliminate migrants’ rights to basic services, and the expansion of immigrant incarceration and mass deportation. In the aftermath of 9/11, the principle that immigrants from Muslim-majority countries required special scrutiny and restriction was central to the remaking of US immigration policy in the name of national security.

But this ongoing, racist singling out of specific groups for restriction or exclusion on the basis of ascribed traits was now carried out through the seemingly race-neutral languages of security, legality, culture, productivity, and assimilation—often strongly inflected with racial meanings, but subtler and deniable. They attracted far less opposition than, say, “shithole.”

Taking on shape-shifting racist nativism in American policy and public life requires us to confront its role in erecting the fortified borders of the immigration debate where they are. The prevailing terms of that debate have been shaped over decades by the perceived need to urgently respond to contemptuous, anti-immigrant questions on their own terms. Can “we” assimilate and civilize “them”? Will “they”—despite their harmful features and the risks they pose—make “us” wealthier and more powerful? Will “they” sap “our” resources? Faced with these questions, immigrants’ advocates often find themselves trapped on their opponents’ terrain,

employing the immigrant version of respectability politics: immigrants are like us and want to become more like us; they are critical to securing the United States' dominant world position; they won't make demands, especially when it comes to economic rights. How often do we hear that the Dreamers are innocent, hard-working, law-abiding, or serving in the US military? This past week, liberals, progressives and others protesting Trump's comments about "shithole countries" understandably rushed to defend Haiti, El Salvador, and the countries of Africa as beautiful, dignified places unworthy of his vulgar derision. But this defensive posture inadvertently legitimates the ugly questions it answers; in this stance, one senses the overwhelming presence of racist suspicion, coursing out of the past into our time.

Countering racist nativism requires changing the terms of debate, bringing in broader perspectives that situate the United States and other powerful states in the wider world and that go beyond questions of immigrant worth and national self-interest. Rather than vindicate immigrants of the offensive charges their enemies level against them, we need to ask about the forces that uprooted them in the first place. What prevents people from thriving in place, and does the Global North's complex, outsized responsibility for the forces of dispossession—from war, to trade policy, to climate change, to the militarized suppression of drug networks, to the funding and arming of oppressive, unaccountable regimes—come with any obligations to the dispossessed? Should people have a "right to stay home" that, for many, is in jeopardy? We need to think about the relationship between immigration policy and the exploitation of workers: the fact that migrant workers who are subject to deportation are far easier to discipline, hurt and rob, and that American workers encouraged to see immigrants as

their worst enemies are severely vulnerable to demagoguery, distracting fantasy and political self-defeat.

We also need to think about the relationship between immigration and the problem of global inequality. Our highly unequal, market-driven world denies vast numbers of people their full rights to self-development, with income, fulfillment and life chances profoundly and unfairly determined by the geographic accident of birth. Mass migration to centers of wealth and power from the poorer parts of the earth—regions callously dismissed by Trump—reflects these imbalances, reproduces them and, to some limited degree, mitigates them, as people in motion seek resources and power denied to them at home.

Building a more just and sustainable world requires that we bring this more capacious vision to the question of what it means to live within borders, and to cross them. It means, most of all, recognizing in contemporary anti-immigrant politics a venerable politics of divide and rule. Reactionary elites in the United States and elsewhere with nothing to offer ordinary people have long known they could sustain their power by capitalizing on, deepening and, where necessary, inventing divisions between self and other, friend and enemy. This political strategy, with troubling successes to its name, is now being updated and rescaled for our globalized age, in which the fault-lines are those of bordered nationality: there will be no protection offered from polluters or health insurance companies, but the threat of Muslims and Mexicans will be met.

We will not, ultimately, succeed in deposing Trump's hateful, racist approach towards immigrants unless we refuse not only his nastiest word choices, but the underlying questions he and others insist we ask, usually in words that don't arouse our indignation. We need new questions that, rather than holding migrant "outsiders" to racialized metrics of national belonging, hold our communities to

standards of justice. Ideally, we will pose these questions in defense of a multifarious, common humanity the flourishing and safety of which we must all fight to protect. To the white nationalists' war cry against migrants, "You will not replace us," we can and should reply, as have many before, you will not divide us.

[Adapted from "Trump's Anti-Immigration Racism Represents an American Tradition," *New York Times*, January 22, 2018.]