



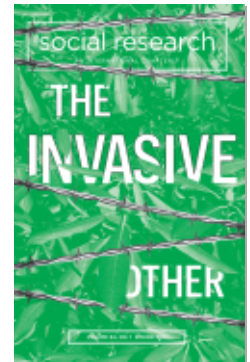
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Invasive Pathogens?: Rethinking Notions of Otherness

Miriam Ticktin

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Invasive Pathogens? Rethinking Notions of Otherness

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, THE GLOBAL NORTH HAS BEEN INCREASINGLY bombarded by news of impending epidemics: SARS in 2003, avian flu in 2005, Ebola in 2013, and Zika in 2015. One thing that has helped to stoke the fear is that these are not simply viruses, but *zoonoses*—infectious diseases that are transmitted between species, or more specifically, from nonhuman animals or birds to humans. Although zoonoses are clearly not unknown phenomena—an earlier example is HIV/AIDS—transformations associated with the scope and speed of human mobility and with climate change have led these infections to spread more quickly and widely, leading to a fear not simply of epidemics, but of global pandemics.

Stated differently, a threat of invasion is perceived on multiple fronts: the rapid movement of infections across political borders, but also, the movement of viruses across species borders. In this sense, it seems like threat is everywhere, and no bodies or borders could ever be safe. The field of biosecurity developed in response to this fear. Joseph Masco writes that as early as 2001, after the September 11 attacks, which were quickly followed by anthrax attacks (via letters that contained anthrax spores), public health started to be spoken of in the language of war, blurring the two realms: all vectors, from people to microbes, represented future danger. Biosecurity—initially a term used in New Zealand in the 1990s for animal and agricultural safety, to protect livestock and crops from disease—was incorporat-

ed into the counterterror state after 2001, and the logic of disease merged with those of weapons of mass destruction, becoming one unified problem (Masco 2014). That is, invasion by people and pathogens became spoken of in the same language and framed as the same problem.

The response to this problem was the practice of “preparedness,” a series of anticipatory protocols for crisis management, with the goal of being able to respond well to emergencies, from pandemics to terrorist attacks to natural disasters—all of which come to resemble one another in the mind of the planners (Lakoff 2008).

Yet, as many scholars have argued, regimes of biosecurity and preparedness have not simply responded to terror; they have actually created and propagated it. They extend the horizon of crisis, and manufacture an affective apparatus that works to incite a feeling of existential threat. Intentionally or not, they have constructed and legitimized a militarized response to questions of health and disease. In Nathaniel Hupert’s terms, it has created an “us versus them” that anticipates foreign-born infections, and a fear of global contagion by way of people crossing borders. This has resulted in the closure of borders and the quarantining of certain kinds of people. In the case of Ebola, for instance, several countries closed their borders with Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, despite this being deemed medically unnecessary and even counterproductive. In the popular American press, in the face of Ebola, there were calls for a closure of the US-Mexican border, demonstrating the conflation of understandings of racial “otherness” with pathology.

Is the best way to tackle the spread of pathogens to fight them with militarized technologies and weaponized regimes of health? Both papers in this section respond negatively to this framing and take on the metaphor of invasion by revisiting the medical science associated with it. In “Who’s Invading Whom? Zika and Intergenerational Public Health,” Hupert turns our understanding of the language of invasion on its head by rethinking epidemiological research and public health practice. He argues that the models we currently

draw on are misguided. For example, in its approach to Zika, Brazil marshaled military troops for mass spraying of mosquito larvae, but this was not successful, because we now live in a connected world, and not all countries signed on to the “total war” approach. Hupert makes a compelling argument that this framework misdiagnoses the problem: rather than seeing the virus as the enemy, he expands the frame to demonstrate that Zika is the result of global warming and the creation of a petroleum-based, plastic-filled environment in which the *Aedes* mosquitoes (those that carry Zika) flourish. In this sense, the “them” in the equation of “us versus them” is in fact *us*. We are our own worst enemy, and the only way to actually address the spread of such viruses is to think more broadly, to include our own continuing damage to the environment. Hupert suggests that we are invading the health of generations to come by not addressing these longer-term, structural issues.

David Napier also takes on the metaphor of invasion that bi-osecurity and preparedness are built upon; in his paper “Epidemics and Xenophobia, or, Why Xenophilia Matters,” Napier draws on new understandings of epigenetics, regenerative medicine, and immunology, correcting the idea that the job of the immune system is to attack and fight against invading pathogens, ie, to eliminate the “non-self.” This was a model that grew out of scientific findings in the 1960s and developed in the context of the Cold War, with its associated metaphors of secret invasion. New findings challenge this model, showing that, in fact, the immune system goes out to explore, to familiarize itself with its environment; it specifically works as a “search engine of difference,” looking for the unfamiliar in order to assimilate new information. But Napier not only corrects our scientific understandings; he also proposes that we use this updated science to revise our political approaches. Rather than assuming we should be afraid of the Other, that we are constantly at war with difference, this medical science actually shows the opposite: we require difference in order to survive. Indeed, he argues, it behooves us to revise our politics, in line with this fact.

These two essays give us scientifically and medically grounded ways to uncouple pathogens from people when we think of infection or invasion; and they suggest that neither should be approached through the metaphor of invasion. What's more, they offer more responsible ways to *recouple* pathogens and politics, in the service of more egalitarian futures.

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