Against Purity

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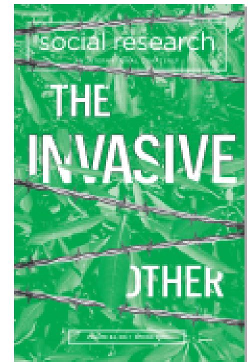

Social Research: An International Quarterly, Volume 84, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 171-182 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Access provided at 19 Jun 2019 08:19 GMT with no institutional affiliation

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FIVE YEARS AGO—WHEN THE VIEW FROM THE UNITED STATES WAS GRIM but few people had even imagined Donald Trump, Brexit, the Syrian war, or the congested seaways of the Aegean—I published an op-ed in the *New York Times* that drew analogies between the language used by extreme anti-immigration activists such as the Minutemen and that used by conservationists and native-plant enthusiasts. The invitation to participate in the conference on which this journal issue is based offered an opportunity to revisit the piece and reflect on its concerns in the context of contemporary politics.

IN MARCH 1939, MY AUNT HELGA WAS TAKEN BY HER PARENTS TO THE Friedrichstrasse train station in Berlin and put on the *Kindertransport* to London. This was the spring following the disastrous *Kristallnacht* of November 8/9, 1938, when Helga, her mother, and her father watched from their apartment window as drunken crowds ran through Berlin (as, that night, they also ran through other cities in Germany and Austria) assaulting anyone they thought might be Jewish, attacking schools and hospitals, and looting Jewish businesses, including the pharmacy on the first floor of the family's building. The next morning, Helga passed a burning synagogue and stores with smashed windows on her way to the improvised Jewish school she was forced to attend; then, on a Thursday four months later, with just one week's notice, her parents, having failed to obtain exit visas for themselves, wrote her name and number on a manila label, tied it to her overcoat, and put her on the train with her suitcase, her stuffed monkey, and two hundred other Jewish children who were also leaving Berlin for a future unknown.

I visit Helga as often as I can in southern California, where she now lives with the ocean, the pelicans, and that evocative scent of Mexican sage. And, recently, she recalled Berlin. She's in a car with her father. The car is stopped to allow a parade to pass, and there, right in front of them, in an open-topped Mercedes, is Adolf Hitler, and that mass of people, their eyes shining, lining the sidewalks, saluting, and roaring his name. How, I asked her, did she feel on the train from Berlin? "I knew pretty much for sure that I would not see my father again," she replied. "I knew he was a very sick man. I'd lived with that for a long time. At that time, when I left, we did not know about death camps, they had not started then. But we did know about concentration camps. I thought in a way … I was very sad. I was very sad when I left my dog. But I was also a little bit excited." In Berlin, she was banned from the public swimming pools and from performing with her gymnastics team at the 1936 Olympics. At the Hook of Holland, she was transferred to the boat to England and given a cabin to herself.

Helga arrived at Liverpool Street station as a 13-year-old who spoke no English and knew no one, and she discovered that the family with whom she expected to stay was unable to take her in. My grandmother, who was active in aiding refugees, was also at Liverpool Street, expecting a 10-year-old boy she had imagined as a playmate for my then-eight-year-old mother. But, for some unknown reason, that boy failed to arrive on the train from Berlin, and it was in this way that Helga became my aunt.

Almost 10,000 children, three quarters of them Jewish, arrived in Britain on the *Kindertransport* from Nazi-controlled Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia in the nine months between December 1938 and the outbreak of war. "The British," as the historian Anthony Grenville has written, "have come to celebrate the Kindertransports as evidence of their humanity and generosity, as part of the story of their 'finest hour' in the war against National Socialism. This conveniently ignores the fact," he adds, "that the Kindertransports took place against the background of Neville Chamberlain's policy of ap-

peasement … and it fails to take account of the very mixed nature of British policy towards the Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution" (Grenville 2012, 2).

Pressured by Jewish aid groups and a surge in public concern following Kristallnacht, the Home office dropped its requirement for visas and passports, agreeing to admit any child under 17 whose support, education, and eventual emigration from Britain was guaranteed by a private individual or organization. Ten thousand children arrived but, as is now well documented, their experiences in their hastily arranged foster homes were complex and varied, as were their experiences of British society more broadly (Benz, Curio, and Hammel 2004; Lassner 2008; Hammel and Lewkowicz 2012).

Before 1938, Jewish immigration to Britain had been strictly limited; in the first five years of the Nazi regime, from January 1933 until the spring of 1938, less than 10,000 refugees were admitted. In March 1938 came the Anschluss, the Nazi annexation of Austria, a deadly wave of pogroms, and long lines outside foreign consulates of people desperate to get away. It was then that Britain instituted a visa system for visitors from Germany that appeared to be designed to limit the number of Jewish refugees but actually led to a substantial increase. Over the next 18 months before the outbreak of war and the definitive closing of borders, 50,000 refugees were admitted.

So the Kindertransports left Berlin, Vienna, and Prague during a brief period in which the British borders were relatively open to Jewish refugees from Nazism, a period in which two other classes of Jews were also admitted. The first was young women who entered on domestic-service visas to take jobs as servants, perhaps as many as 20,000 women in total; the 12,000 to 15,000 from Austria making up maybe a third of the entire population of Jewish women between the ages of 14 and 45 in the country. Grenville, whom I'm drawing on for this account, writes that "most refugee domestics endured thoroughly unpleasant experiences in a form of labour that they … loathed; most escaped from domestic service as soon as they could, usually after the outbreak of war" (2012, 7).

The second category was that of "transmigrants," another 5,000 people who were released from Nazi concentration camps if they showed that they would immediately emigrate from Germany. Grenville describes these British visas as "a genuinely humanitarian and life-saving initiative." They applied to men who had entry visas to third countries—to China, for instance—that were dated too late to qualify for the release program. In practice, most of these people ended up staying in the UK (2012, 7).

As I'm sure many readers of this essay know, there were no comparable initiatives in the United States. As today, fear of refugees forming a fifth column, xenophobia among substantial parts of the public and political class, coupled with the widespread anti-Semitism of the time, blocked any attempts to increase the existing country-specific immigration quotas. Instead, the administration argued that the way to help the victims of Nazism was by winning the war. It wasn't until January 1944 that Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board, whose task was to support rescue efforts in Europe and mitigate conditions inside concentration camps. Apart from the 982 refugees admitted in mid-1944 to the "free port" of Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York—most of whom came from liberated zones, not from Nazi-occupied territory—the US took in no refugees from Nazism during the course of the war (Wyman 1984).

There is no need to draw straight lines here. We're all aware of the current refugee crisis and of some of the obvious ways in which it is both similar and different to the crisis that gripped Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. But the remit of this volume offers an opportunity to think about a specific relation between these two moments, in both of which race and biology come together in public discourse to create a figure of the unwelcome refugee, a figure in our contemporary life that draws on characteristics of the figure of the Jew in the earlier period in ways of which we might want to be aware.

It is a simple but sometimes forgotten point: there is a long tradition in both reactionary and "progressive" political thought of casting Jews as parasites. Alfred Rosenberg, the most important Nazi

ideologist, wrote that “the conception of the Jew as parasite shall in the first instance not be taken as a moral judgment but as biological reality, *exactly in the same way* in which we speak of parasitic occurrences in the life of plants and animals.” He continued with a typically unpleasant analogy: “The sacullina [a parasitic barnacle] pierces the rectum of the common crab, and gradually grows into it, it sucks away its vital forces; the same process occurs when the Jew invades society through the open wounds of the people, consuming their creative forces and hastening the doom of society” (Rosenberg 1933, 461, quoted in Bein 1964, 22). Likewise, when Karl Marx famously wrote that “Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks,” he was contributing to an already well-established racialized discourse that would allow the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin to describe Jews as “a sect of exploiters, one race of leeches, one single devouring parasite” (Marx [1867] 1967, 224; Bakunin [1871] 1924, 208–9). It’s not difficult to find traces today of this blood-sucking vampire in accounts of finance capital, for example, but the parasite—inside a person’s body and, by familiar extension, within the metaphorical body of society, much too close for comfort, unseen and unrecognized until it’s too late—is only one part of the story.

Jews were not only figured as internal parasites—and, clearly, this shouldn’t only be talked of in the past tense—they were also marked as an external threat. In Germany, for instance, from the early years of the twentieth century, they were identified as the carriers of disease, especially typhus, and a network of punitive border-control stations was established at the frontiers with Russia and Poland that were designed to encourage all migrants from the east to stay out.

The historian Paul Weindling (2000) describes the mass application of aggressive public-health procedures by German disinfectors in response to typhus outbreaks during the First World War throughout German-occupied Poland, Romania, and Lithuania. He documents an increasingly strident association of disease with Jews and other so-called racial degenerates. Jewish-owned stores in Poland were

closed until the owners had undergone delousing. Lodz, a town with a substantial Jewish population, was ringed by 35 detention centers for persons considered infested. But military defeat in 1918 changed everything. Rather than expand into purified living space, German medical authorities now found themselves confined to a dramatically reduced national territory and confronting an unmanageable crisis of refugees—mostly ethnic Germans and eastern Jews—as well as returning sick and wounded soldiers.

In the years following the Treaty of Versailles, highly restrictive immigration controls and draconian inspection practices were imposed in an effort to protect the newly vulnerable German population against contamination from the east. Even so, despite the terrible events of the Russian civil war—25 million typhus cases and up to 3 million deaths between 1917 and 1923—there was an increasing sense that the real danger was no longer external. As early as 1920, police in Berlin and other cities were citing "hygienic control" as they rounded up eastern Jews and transported them to disease-infested camps along the borders.

It was at this time that the new discourses of hygiene (which brought together eugenics, social Darwinism, political geography, bacteriology, parasitology, and entomology), new technologies of quarantine and delousing, and the development of bureaucratic institutions initially dedicated to the eradication of disease shifted with little friction to the eradication of people. The elimination of disease purified both race and society—by the mid-1930s, one and the same—and, increasingly, the human victims of disease were seen as indistinguishable from its nonhuman carriers: rats, lice, and other invasive and parasitic "vermin" (Raffles 2007).

The period between the two world wars in Germany is striking for the way that political philosophy and medicine collapsed into each other, so that ghettos, for example, became places of confinement of suspect people that protected the outside population from disease but also, at the same time, places filled with disease that generated a pathological anxiety among that external population about fears of contamination from escapees.

THIS DISMAL HISTORY, IN WHICH HUMANS AND OTHER BEINGS ARE brought together to turn humans into nonhumans and, in this way, to make them killable, was on my mind in the spring of 2011 when I was writing the piece for the *Times*. The Tea Party was strong, armed militia were patrolling the US-Mexico border, and Arizona had recently passed SB 1070, which, among other provisions, introduced penalties for anyone sheltering an undocumented person and required state police to determine a person's immigration status during a stop or arrest. At the same time, the DREAM Act was pursuing its painful journey through Congress, eliciting Republican filibusters and hate speech. Immigration, especially illegal immigration, was the topic of the day and, coincidentally, I'd only weeks before received my own US citizenship in a ceremony that I'd found unexpectedly affecting. It had been a long road for me to get my green card, and it was strange to finally be in that large room with so many other people, all different from me in many ways, but all of us immigrants and all similar in that we'd come to this country out of some combination of wanting to and having to, all of us making new lives out of the varied and unequal resources that we had, all of us listening to the presiding judge tell us that it was the ever-shifting diversity that immigrants like us bring to this country that keeps it dynamic and strong. At this same moment, I came across a series of articles recently published by ecologists who were arguing, counterintuitively, for the conservation value of nonnative species, making the case that they, too, often keep the world dynamic and resilient (Breining 2009; Davis et al. 2011). Together, this confluence of elements seemed like the makings of an opinion piece.

I had intended my *Times* essay to focus narrowly on the implications of the shared language of "natives," "invasives," and "aliens" used by anti-immigration activists and native species enthusiasts, but once I got started it was hard to stop. "While the vanguard of the anti-immigrant crusade is found among the likes of the Minutemen and the Tea Party," I wrote, "the native species movement is led by environmentalists, conservationists and gardeners. Despite cultural

and political differences, both are motivated—in Margaret Thatcher's infamous phrase—by the fear of being swamped by aliens" (Raffles 2011).

I went on to draw other parallels between the two camps: arguing, for instance, that each denies the dynamism and constant change of both ecological and social processes, and pointing out that "designating some species as native and others as alien … draws an arbitrary historical line based as much on aesthetics, morality and politics as on science."

In rapid revisions over a couple of days, my editor at the *Times* encouraged me to make the arguments sharper and increasingly binary until I ended up endorsing an alternative ecology, one composed of dynamically shifting interaction, and calling for readers—in a turn of phrase I rather liked at the time—to "embrace the impurity of our cosmopolitan natural world."

Actually, that part is an argument I still like, although I'd prefer it to have been more nuanced. What I'd originally said was directed mostly at the environmentalists but got lost in the editing: that there may be reasons to prioritize some species over others—for example, to keep rats out of Hawaii in an effort to protect endemic birds—but please don't pretend that the science is free of other kinds of judgment. Admit that you like these birds and this landscape and want to keep it this way, or admit that you want to own a native plant garden because it's aesthetically or philosophically pleasing to you; consider that it's not accidental that this nativist language works in similar ways across these different domains and apparently different political projects; and consider also that there are reasons why both racists and conservationists are attached to it. Start there and we can have a conversation about competing politics and values that takes a clear-eyed look at the impact of deploying this compromised language on this apparently benign terrain. At the very end of the piece, I ventured what I thought was an appealingly wishy-washy tone: "Like the humans with whose lives they are so entangled," I wrote, "[native species] too are in need of a thoughtful and inclusive response."

This was in the days before the *Times* launched its Weekend Review section, and the piece appeared with a large color illustration in a prominent position in the main section of the Sunday paper under the unexpected title "Mother Nature's Melting Pot" with a large-print call-out that I've now forgotten but that said something like "Invasive Species Aren't So Bad After All." I woke up the following morning to find my inbox overflowing with a combustible mixture of love and hate. I'd written other op-eds for the *Times,* but none had provoked this type of reaction, and I was taken by surprise. The love was often quite moving—most of it from first-generation immigrants thanking me for drawing attention to this connection and from other people who'd felt silenced in their gardening communities, unable to voice their discomfort with what they felt was an exaggerated and irrational hostility to nonnative plants.

The hate mail was deeply disturbing. It came from across the spectrum: from enraged professors who attacked me for opening the door to laissez-faire development and wrecking their life's work protecting endangered species; from white supremacists who told me more or less what you might expect white supremacists to tell me; from conservationists of various types who accused me of willful ignorance and many other much worse things. Several emails expressed severe disappointment that I'd been granted citizenship. I made the classic mistake of looking for reactions online and found bloggers promising to do quite violent things to me; on a Minutemen website, they'd somehow figured out I was Jewish.

It took a couple of weeks for it all to die down. Still feeling a little unsettled, I wrote to my editor at the *Times,* and he wrote back congratulating me on the stir I'd created. In the five years since, the systematic and coordinated intimidation of writers—particularly of women and minorities, and especially, it seems, of Jews—has become an established fact of our political life. Now, this episode looks different to me than it did at the time. Then, as I considered the accelerating wreckage of our public discourse, it troubled me that I had participated in and added to this type of confrontational politics. I

thought it was stupid and self-serving—or, at best, naïve—to feed this machine. Now though, as these intimidatory practices become more commonplace and more violent, I see that the lesson from all this is to be as prepared as possible for the consequences of making arguments in public and to be ready to respond forcefully, as much to reaffirm the arguments as to assert that speech, online or in print, cannot be silenced.

There's a story here that far exceeds my experience. The biologists who argued carefully in *Nature* and elsewhere that nonnative species have significant conservation value, and the geographers who pointed out that landscapes disturbed by human activity often have higher biodiversity than protected landscapes, also had to deal with outsized antagonistic reactions—although, in those cases, the hostility came largely from academic colleagues. Some of this story is about the benign self-image of conservation. Some is just that people really like certain things and fight back when they think those things are threatened. Some is slippage and displacement. And some of it is about the contemporary life of a history in which nature and society are profoundly entwined, in which claims made in relation to one resonate with and amplify those made about the other, and in which an affiliation to purity can take unrecognized forms.

AND THAT'S WHERE THIS ESSAY ENDS: WITH THREE FACTS AND A PROBLEM. There is the fact of Helga forced to leave her parents—her father who died, her mother who was transported to Theresienstadt—and the biological reasoning that underwrote that awful history, the logic, if that's what it was, that made those people and the millions like them into a visceral threat to the bodily and ontological integrity of their non-Jewish neighbors and to the state itself. And there is the fact of those millions of people today on the move, similarly caught in the dangerous space between biological and social life, somehow figured as both an external and an internal threat to the integrity of states, populations, and individuals. And there is also the fact of nativism—nativism denied, repackaged, and proudly embraced—crossing

species barriers, borders, ideologies, and affects. Some of the problem that faces us with the contemporary resurgence of right-wing populism and racism lies in these particular senses of integrity and the wholeness and stasis they presume, senses that run counter to a raggedy world in which all kinds of beings and phenomena—humans, animals, plants, landforms—refuse to hold still or keep pure. As if they ever had. As if they ever could. As if that, in itself, as some kind of principle, would be any kind of a good thing anyway.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks go to Arien Mack, Miriam Ticktin, Liz Farley, and all the participants in the *Invasive Other* conference. And to Helga Carden and Sharon Simpson for lifelong conversations on these and related matters.

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