

Narratives of Infectious Threat and Contagion Crises in Contemporary Immigration Rhetoric

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“[T]he Immigration and Nationality Act provides: ‘Whenever the President finds that the entry of any aliens or of any class of aliens into the United States would be detrimental to the interests of the United States, he may by proclamation, and for such period as he shall deem necessary, suspend the entry of all aliens or any class of aliens as immigrants or nonimmigrants, or impose on the entry of aliens any restrictions he may deem to be appropriate.’ In a landmark decision last year, the Supreme Court recognized the President’s broad authority to so impose such restrictions. That broad authority formed the foundation of this most recent proclamation that was designed to protect the United States from the detrimental effects of uninsured immigrants.”

—US Press Secretary

While campaigning for the presidency, Donald Trump deployed very specific tropes related to immigration, construing the flow of people through US borders as a form of crisis. As he made statements about the Mexican government and Mexican immigrants, Trump advanced a consistent message that Mexican immigrants posed a level of threat to the United States. His message was resolute and presented the Mexican government as a scheming entity focused on sending the United States its problematic citizens (for example, its criminals, “gang bangers,” and unproductive members). This presentation is best exemplified by Trump’s claim:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re not sending you, they’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists and some, I assume, are good people... (Gamboa).

Trump offered these infamous words during a speech at Trump Tower in New York City as he ran for the presidency. By repeating the idea that Mexico is sending people to the United States a total of four times in his first two sentences, Trump places intent and action, suggesting that “our” immigration situation (whatever that may be) is the direct result of an orchestrated effort by Mexico. This rhetorical move was clearly purposeful, as well as being profoundly appealing to the general American public.

In this essay, we briefly analyze the current shaping of a particular aspect of what we call the “Mexican/Central American/immigrant threat” narrative. Specifically, we consider the notion that Mexican and Central American immigrants are deemed threatening because they are characterized as “diseased”—and this “disease” is presumably contagious. Reference to “disease” has lent a contemporary manifestation to the idea that immigrants mark a crisis or disaster—an angle that politicians have tirelessly worked since the events of September 11, 2001 (though the roots of this idea extend to an earlier point in US history). Trump continued to deploy the image of Mexican immigrants as diseased invaders after his election by talking and tweeting about how these immigrants bring diseases to the United States, placing contagious threats squarely at the US-Mexico international border.

An important aspect of this rhetoric lies in how it establishes a crisis—“an urgent threat to core values or life-sustaining functions,” in the words of Arjen Boin and Paul T’ Hart (42). As Boin and T’ Hart convey, a crisis is readily linked to a disaster given that a disaster is “a crisis with a devastating ending” (42). For the last two decades or so (or, the post-9/11 period), the Mexican/Central American immigrant threat narrative has thrived in construing immigrants as a threat to US core values and infrastructure (that is, its life-sustaining functions). This threat has been deemed capable, at any moment, of facilitating the demise of the United States. In other words, it has been marked as a crisis moving the United States towards its ultimate end.

During his presidential run, in 2015, Trump claimed in a written statement that “tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border. The United States has become a dumping ground for Mexico and, in fact, for many other parts of the world” (Walker). This statement offered a global cast to the alleged crisis. During this same year, the conservative-leaning Southern Medical Blog (SMB) published a column by the editor titled, “Illegal Immigration and the Threat of Infectious Disease,” in which the editor stated that “illegal immigration may expose Americans to diseases that may have been virtually eradicated” (Editor). The blog concluded that “the federal government’s Department of Homeland Security has public health controls in place to minimize any possible health risks” (Editor). Despite this caveat, the rhetoric of “immigrants bring disease” has maintained broad appeal. This is the case even if, as we discuss below, the actual threat of infection from immigrants is minimal in reality.

Three years into his presidency, Trump tweeted that opening the border for “anyone to come in” would bring “large-scale crime and disease” (DaSilva). Concern with the threat of contagious diseases, especially as associated with “foreigners,” is part of the current political climate and has a long history (see, for example, Markel and Stern). As such, it is not surprising when this concern is articulated for political gain or when it manifests anew. In a related tweet a few months later, Trump stated, “Democrats are the problem. They don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13” (Simon). Many might argue that the president and other politicians are, in fact, reflecting the US Press Secretary’s remark (in the opening epigraph) regarding “the detrimental effects” imposed by certain immigrants. And interestingly, a PEW Research Center poll in 2016 showed that, when asked about infectious diseases, 51% of US adults expressed that “compared to 20 years ago, there are more threats today to people’s health.”

We argue, here, that while Trump’s statements are actually neither new nor creative in their presentation, they are politically effective and clearly indicative of the current moment. This time is characterized by a deeply ingrained xenophobia and profound scapegoating which, in the United States, has been developed and curated through decades and even centuries of anti-immigrant sentiment. Now, it is manifest through particular ideas characterizing immigrants as carriers of infectious disease in specific ways. We have seen this quite recently with the emergence of COVID-19 and its spread within the United States, as anti-Asian sentiment and behaviors began to appear in mid-February and early March of 2020. In addition to assaults on Asian Americans, Chinese restaurants and Chinatowns in both New York and San Francisco endured a stark loss of business, given an association between the virus and China (CBS News). As Carla Russo summarized in a piece for *HuffPost*, “Misinformation surrounding the new coronavirus has led to spikes of racist fearmongering against Asian people” (Russo).

We see similar fears reflected in a recent typhoid fever scare among the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), which we consider as a case study below. This incident mirrors recent

rhetoric used by Trump and other politicians. First, however, we reference a few historical events that provide grounding for the “immigrant threat” narrative, as our main point concerns both the continuities and new articulations of the idea, especially as it is crafted in terms of “disease.”

Antecedents: The Long-Standing Idea that Immigrants Bring Disease

In her essay, “Epidemic Disease and National Security,” Susan Petterson conveys that since the true security implications of international diseases for the United States remain limited and indirect,” the country is then relieved “of any moral obligation to respond to health crises beyond [its] own national border, unless or until those crises directly and immediately impact national security” (46). This limitation, however, has not stopped the United States from creating narratives about immigrants and disease within its own borders, with the basic narrative remaining intact through the decades and centuries while growing in scope and being adapted to specific groups of people at different times. The main point within the narrative is that immigrants bring disease to the United States, and as a coinciding matter, immigrant bodies are diseased bodies. This notion—that immigrants are purveyors of infection and disease—has been a long-standing aspect of the country’s blaming social ills on non-Americans.

For instance, amidst an outbreak of chickenpox in 1877, a San Francisco health official proclaimed, “I unhesitatingly declare my belief that this cause is the presence in our midst of 30,000... unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen, who have disregarded our sanitary laws, concealed and are concealing their cases of small-pox” (Board of Supervisors 397). Likewise, in his book, *The Pandemic Century*, Mark Honigsbaum provides the example of a polio epidemic that spread through Brooklyn in 1916. Investigators from New York’s Board of Health blamed the epidemic on “recent Italian immigrants from Naples living in crowded, unsanitary tenements in a district known as ‘Pigtown’” (5). As Honigsbaum notes, in the 1920s, “ethnic quarantines [were] spurred by fears of small pox and typhus being introduced by migrants from across the border,” and they “had become a routine measure in Los Angeles and other southern California towns” (85).

Although Americans’ imaginations regarding the health dangers posed by immigrants has rested on various groups throughout history, immigrants from Latin America—especially, Mexico and Central America, in part because of their physical proximity to the US border—have most recently been at the forefront of political discourse in the United States. This discourse has acted to mobilize constituents and voters, with recent iterations including Trump’s awkward statements that “tremendous infectious disease are [sic] pouring across the border,” and “keeping the border open would bring large scale crime and disease” to the United States.

As Robbie Totten indicates, while immigrants and disease have been linked, and this linkage has informed US immigration policy from colonial times, in the nineteenth century and in the name of national “self-preservation,” the federal government began to restrict entry for those carrying contagious diseases. Prior to this, all efforts to restrict entry of immigrants were relegated to the colonies (first) and states (later). Nineteenth century legislation made fear of the “contagious other” a federal matter, and thus, tangible at the national level. Alan Kraut notes that Ellis Island played an important role in this shift, as Health Officers made it “an incubator for public health policy and a laboratory for scientific experimentation”—a “barricade against germs and genes” (77). Kraut points out that “Americans’ apprehensions that these newcomers were detrimental to

the public health” (78) did not subside, even with the stringent health and mental inspections undergone by immigrants at Ellis Island and other immigration depots.

May 2019 Case Study: “Avoid Contact with the Animals that Can Pass on the Infection”

The long history connecting immigrants to disease made it rather easy for Trump to deploy the trope of the “diseased (Mexican) immigrant,” both as a presidential candidate and as president. Use of this trope resonated with his constituents and many Americans regardless of its veracity. Likewise, history made it uncomplicated for popular national news agencies to invoke the trope when reporting on immigrants from Central America in 2018, warning against existing evidence that those entering “the southern border of the United States might be carrying smallpox, tuberculosis, and leprosy, and are going to infect our people in the United States” (Betuel). The fact that smallpox was declared eradicated from the human population in 1979 is irrelevant to the force of the narrative—one that routinely envisions immigration as a crisis and disaster in the making. This can be seen in the early stages of COVID-19, when Trump and administration officials banned travel from China as early as February 1, 2020 and routinely referred to the virus as the “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus” (Penney). Trump then initiated specific immigration bans in April that were extended at the end of June. Ilya Somin points out that “this policy is the most sweeping ban on immigration in American history” (Somin). And the policy was enacted despite the fact that at the time, “Many potential immigrants would be coming from nations where the disease [COVID-19] is actually less widespread than it currently is in the U.S.” (Somin).

Moreover, as journalist for NBC, Maggie Fox, notes, a recent study conducted by a commission assembled by the medical journal, *The Lancet*, showed that immigrants are not likely to infect “host” populations. According to the study:

[I]nternational migrants are [actually] less likely than people in their host countries to die of heart disease, cancer, respiratory diseases and other ills. The exceptions are hepatitis, tuberculosis and HIV. But... these infections are generally only spread within the affected immigrant communities and not to the wider population (Fox).

Dr. Paul Spiegel, Director of the Center for Humanitarian Health at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and one of the study’s co-authors, summarizes, “There is no evidence to show that migrants are spreading disease.... It is a false argument that is used to keep migrants out” (Fox).

Regarding our case study, on May 29, 2019, local and national news agencies (including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Forbes*, *New York Post*, *ABC News*, *NBC News*, and *Fox News*) began to cover aspects of a story concerning one member of the LAPD who had been diagnosed with typhus and at least one other who had shown symptoms of the disease. The story appeared in cyberspace from May 29 through June 4, with most reports occurring in the first two days (May 29 and May 30). Reports of the story were fairly consistent among the different news outlets, as they made clear that the source of the disease had not been identified. However, the outlets that did speculate on the source pointed to two specific (and verifiable) facts: (1) the city’s large homeless population and the poor conditions in which they live, and (2) a recent rat infestation that enveloped the downtown LA area. These were the only two possible sources of infection identified by every news agency reporting on the typhus case (Rivas).

We focus our discussion below by considering reactions to reports, of *NBC News* (on May 29) and *ABC News* (on May 30), that two LAPD officers were being treated—one for typhoid fever and one for typhus-like symptoms (Rivas). To reiterate, *ABC News*, in a one-line paragraph, emphatically stated, “It’s unclear what caused the officers’ illnesses” (Rivas). And *NBC News* reported, “typhus can be spread by infected fleas that live on rats that have been linked to growing homeless encampments” (Staff Reports). Neither story used the word “immigrant,” and neither story suggested immigration or immigrants as the source of infection. Nonetheless, many of the individuals who registered their thoughts in “comments” sections of the stories (we refer to these individuals as “posters” here) were adamant about immigrants being the source of the disease. Below, we share eight comments made by posters and subsume them under five concepts. These posters represent the majority of anti-immigrant comments made, but perhaps more importantly, each poster references an aspect of the “immigrants as disease” trope. Collectively, these comments offer a picture of how this trope is being used and conceived today.

Please note that these comments were not the only ones made, as many posters focused on either the ineptitude of the local government or on LA’s homeless population (mentioned in both reports). However, the selected comments regarding immigrants are important in that they were not triggered by language in the stories themselves but by the posters’ prior association of disease with immigrants. The five subsuming concepts for the comments are as follows: (1) Third World epidemics are coming to our borders, (2) immigrants are vermin and animals, (3) an infected mob is crossing the border, (4) this is an infectious health crisis, and (5) the United States is a welfare state.

Third World epidemics are coming to our borders

Robert (poster to *ABC News* story):

This 3rd World epidemic is what the end result is when you have liberal left-wing Socialists running California, its cities and counties and the infestation of diseased illegals. California needs to be quarantined, pure and simple and travel warning issued. California will resemble Europe during the Bubonic Plague if they don’t get a handle on illegals, San Francisco and LA. “Bodies, dead bodies!” will be the cry of the body collectors moving through the streets.

Knot (poster to *ABC News* story):

When you allow third world immigrants in don’t be surprised when one morning you wake up and find yourself in a third world country.

Immigrants are vermin and animals

David (poster to *ABC News* story):

You liberals deserve it all for importing vermin from third world countries, now you are one.

Paul (poster to *ABC News* story):

Avoid contact with the animals that can pass on the infection. Shut down the border! It IS a national health issue.

An infected mob is crossing the border

Joe (poster to *ABC News* story):

Our Third World diseases are coming from the mob crossing the Southern border.

This is an infectious health crisis

Rodger (poster to *ABC News* story):

Recent immigration perhaps??? Best thing to do would be to boycott Los Angeles and Hollywood until Mayor can exude some leadership and deal with infectious health crisis that has magically appeared.

The United States is a welfare state

Man (poster to *ABC News* story):

THIS is the obvious result of a million+ no-education, no-skills, no-English gimmes allowed into the country—and protected by the state.

Chris (poster to *NBC News* story):

I think cramming in more illegals and voting for more radically liberal leadership will fix this.

Analysis and Conclusion: The Immigrant as Disease and Disaster Narrative

Each of the comments above reflects a specific idea concerning the connection between disease and immigrants. Each idea has been historically deployed either to keep immigrants out of the country, or if already inside the country, to contain them in particular neighborhoods and away from American citizens. Within the United States, immigrant detention facilities at the Southern border have been cited for their poor treatment of detainees, with widespread news reports during the summer of 2019 indicating that migrant children were going without soap, toothbrushes, and sleep (Flynn). According to an article published by *The Washington Post* at this time, “the government was in court to appeal a 2017 finding that child migrants and their parents were detained in dirty, crowded, biting cold conditions inside U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities along the Southern border” (Flynn). It is no accident, then, that COVID-19 has rapidly spread within these detention facilities, given their unsanitary conditions and the absence of basic protective measures (such as social distancing and hand sanitizer). As of July 1, 2020, it was reported, “The number of immigrants with COVID-19 in Immigration Customs Enforcement custody has risen rapidly. More than 2,700 detainees nationwide have tested positive” (Reznick).

According to contemporary rhetoric regarding immigrants, as illustrated by the posters above, diseases such as typhus share the following features: (1) they are Third World country diseases (Robert, Knot, David, and Joe), (2) they come to the United States through the Mexican border via immigrants (all posters), (3) they come to the United States in immigrant bodies that are less than human bodies (David and Paul), (4) they turn the United States into something it is not (Robert and David), and (5) they create health and social crises (Rodger, Man, and Chris). In short, these diseases are linked to immigration in the popular imaginary and associated with crises and disasters.

The totality of the comments displays the idea that immigrant bodies are diseased and contagious bodies. Although the link between disease and immigrants has undergone a long process of historical development, the five concepts identified above together create a strong narrative that shapes twenty-first century American ideology about immigrants and/as disease, one that taps into contemporary fears of disasters. This is the case even if each of these concepts has been activated at other points in time.

To be clear, there is no demonstrated (or demonstrable) connection between immigrants and disease. The only real link lies in the fact that immigrants are less likely to have adequate access to health care, but even then, immigrants are not a likely source of contagion for the general population of the country. Despite this fact, rhetoric concerning immigrants and disease, and

images conjured by this rhetoric, are deeply ingrained in the American psyche. Thus, when Trump connects immigrants and disease in one of his speeches or in one of his tweets, he activates these notions within the population. This is so even when he does not specifically reference immigrants, which is also demonstrated by our case study when major news agencies reported on typhus without once mentioning immigrants and immigration (but were nonetheless referenced by posters).

Politicians and public figures have the power to trigger notions of crises by using the sensibilities of a particular moment to weave together fears, anxieties, and widespread ideas about particular groups in sound bites that resonate with the general public. They do not need an actual crisis or disaster. In main, they merely need the perception that something is a crisis, with its eventuality being perceived as disastrous. This is why, in the statement referenced in our opening epigraph, the US Press Secretary was able to say, without much questioning, that the President's proclamation "was designed to protect the United States from the detrimental effects" of immigrants. One of these unnamed effects is leading the public to think of crises and disasters associated with immigrants and immigration.

Finally, we would like to offer Jon Stratton's connection between the "living dead" and immigration. Stratton equates immigrants (among other displaced people) with the living dead, by way of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life." In Stratton's words:

[B]are life has a dual meaning. In the first place it refers to lack of legal protection by the state. Without that protection, the person reduced to bare life can become transformed into the second understanding of bare life: the liminal condition of death-in-life. Indeed, such a person can become one of the living dead (278).

If we agree that immigrants are stripped of everything except for bare life, that is, "the liminal condition of death-in-life" by way of both policy and rhetoric, it follows that they would be spoken about as disease-carrying animals or vermin, a tax on the system, and a crisis. Within this frame, immigrants become the ultimate source of infectious threat and contagion. As such, they present and themselves become a crisis and feared disaster.

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