Topic Page: Xenophobia

Definition: XENOPHOBIA from Dictionary of Psychopathology

Extreme fear of strangers accompanied by hostility. Seen in human groups where affiliation needs are strong and the group is especially secretive or even elite. May also be inferred as a factor in animal groups as well—perhaps in the form of territoriality. Of course, with respect to territoriality, food supply as well as issues of dominance and sexual prerogative seem to be the more specific factors of hostility to or fear of strangers.

Summary Article: Xenophobia
From Encyclopedia of Global Studies

Literally “the fear of strangers,” xenophobia is the targeting of foreigners and estranged citizens for stigmatization, discrimination, and scapegoating within nation-states. Xenophobic hostility and violence arise in multicultural contexts in which established constructs of national identity are in crisis. Anti-Semitism and anti-Romani discrimination, the persecution that Jews and Roma people, respectively, have long experienced in Europe and beyond, are two forms of xenophobia that vilify segments of national populations perceived to be incapable of being integrated. Fundamentally incompatible cultural and ethno-religious differences are purportedly thought to threaten the integrity of society.

Although present in many parts of the world, Islamophobia became a major focus of preoccupation in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere at the beginning of the 21st century. Intolerance toward Muslims grew in the aftermath of al Qaeda’s terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Both government and popular anxieties around homeland security and the War on Terror induced a sociopolitical climate that has made Arabs and Muslims, both immigrants and citizens, vulnerable to racial profiling and immigration monitoring as well as to more heightened forms of discrimination, including hate crimes. Whereas the most nuanced government discourse distinguishes between Islam, the religion, and radical Islamism or Muslim extremism as a political ideology, the two tend to be merged in the popular imagination.

U.S. xenophobia has not focused only on Muslims. New waves of immigration from the global South destabilize traditional notions of the United States being predominantly White, resulting in a crisis of identity for segments of the Euro-American citizenry. In the context of this demographic shift, the inflow of undocumented migrants across the border with Mexico led to controversial legislation in Arizona, where the profiling of Mexicans (and anyone suspected of being Mexican) was legalized in 2010. Later, a federal judge blocked the legislation’s most controversial components. A related legislative reform eliminated ethnic studies in public schools that in any way advocates ethnic solidarity or criticizes White privilege. Several other states have followed Arizona’s example. This trend makes migrants more legally vulnerable and fearful of organizing around their grievances as cheap labor in regions where profitability depends on the exploitation of undocumented workers. These migrants seek work in the United States because subsistence at home has declined under the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although free trade has had some success, it undermines peasants’ competitiveness by flooding the market with less costly, mass produced, and subsidized agricultural produce from the United States.

Under conditions of globalization with differential outcomes from deregulated trade, widening wealth
disparities, both internationally and intra-nationally, and accelerated transnational movements of capital, technology, and people, xenophobia is increasingly ignited in the encounters immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers face in host societies. In Europe the main targets are Muslims and Jews, but also central and eastern Europeans who migrate westward for employment and quality-of-life opportunities. In historically contingent contexts in which immigrants are subjected to human rights abuse, those egregious practices emerge from circumstances in which some but not all categories of outsiders are stereotyped and blamed for job loss, housing shortages, crime, and menacing the prevailing moral and cultural values of society. Immigrants are scapegoated for conditions with complex origins and structural logics in which the interests of political and economic elites are often grounded. These dynamics, along with the anxieties of working and small business people, fuel moral panics that demonize foreigners and lend legitimacy to the repressive means of social control that populist right-wing political campaigns advocate. For example, far right parties managed to win the support of nearly a third of the voters in Austria's 2008 federal elections.

Xenophobia does not exist only in Europe and North America. It is present in some form and intensity in many parts of the world. In South Africa, violence exploded in 2008, targeting principally African refugees and migrant workers around the country. The rationale was that foreigners were culpable for “increased crime, sexual attacks, economic deprivation, unemployment, disease and all manner of social ills” (Sichone, 2008, p. 256). Despite the constitution's recognition of the human rights of all, neither government officials nor the public have a positive view of immigrants. The media are, in good part, responsible for this. Polarizing identity politics has intensified in a volatile climate in which a shared civic identity and sense of citizenship are undermined by the post-apartheid state's failure to deliver its promises. Whereas most national leaders refrain from overtly championing xenophobic nationalism, local-level political entrepreneurs have “made use of xenophobia to mobilize poor people against migrants in the struggles for space, jobs and other resources” (pp. 257-258). South Africa's alienated township dwellers are denied the substantive rights and benefits of citizenship and yet direct their resentment toward their equally disempowered foreign neighbors.

Although xenophobia is distinct from racism (which traditionally involves the oppression of a category of people on the basis of what are believed to be fixed “natural” differences, often physically visible), the two commonly intersect and overlap. In the contemporary era, racism is often subtle and the concept of “race” encoded in a public rhetoric of culture rather than in a biologically determinist notion of categorical and hierarchical difference. Even in classic racism, ideas about cultural differences, deficits, and pathologies figured prominently in beliefs about racial inferiority. In an age of neoracism, racism without races, or postracism, an ideology of cultural fundamentalism, also characterized as cultural racism, has arisen, blurring the boundary between racism and xenophobia and, in many contexts, racializing xenophobia.

Connections between racism and xenophobia are addressed in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which resulted from the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in South Africa. The rights of migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers remained a major concern at the Geneva-hosted Durban Review Conference in 2009. A human rights approach to global migration governance was advocated, consistent with the vision articulated in the International Convention on the Protection Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, adopted by the General Assembly in 1990 but not entered into force until 2003.
See also:
Ethnocentrism, Immigration, Migration Policies, Types of, Nationalism, Neo-Nationalism, Otherness, Racial Identity, Refugees

Further Readings


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