

Indigestible Food, Conquering Hordes, and Waste Materials: Metaphors of Immigrants and the Early Immigration Restriction Debate in the United States

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A prime example of metaphor use is to denigrate marginalized populations as a means of supporting adverse social policies against group members. This article describes the use of organism, object, natural catastrophe/war and animal metaphors in the immigration restriction debate of the early 1900s. In addition to describing linguistic metaphors that served to dehumanize immigrants or portray them as a threat to social functioning, more global conceptual metaphors will also be discussed.

As President George W. Bush discovered shortly after he referred to the “war on terrorism” as a “crusade,” metaphors and other rhetoric can have a great amount of importance in the policy arena. Whether describing social problems, the proposed response to them, or even the players and groups involved, even a single word can be a potent vehicle for enhancing or diminishing support for one’s position (Lakoff, 1995). It is not merely coincidental that political debate is often peppered with such picturesque terminology. As Donald Schön (1979) noted, problem setting, or the formation of how social problems are perceived, may be a more important policy issue than problem solving, and problems are framed in large part through the employment of metaphors (p. 255). To quote Krohn (1987), “those who attempt to defend questionable word choices by claiming ‘it’s only semantics’ fail to understand that much more is involved than mere vocalization” (p. 142).

This article describes metaphoric themes that were employed during the immigration restriction debate of early 20th century. This debate led to the most sweep-

ing immigration restriction policies in U.S. history, in the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924. Since a brief overview of the immigration restriction debate itself is important in providing a context for metaphor use, the article begins with this. Following the overview, the major metaphoric themes will be described, with the article concluding with a section discussing the implications of this study for metaphor scholars.

EARLY IMMIGRATION RESTRICTION LEGISLATION

In the United States, fear and denigration of immigrants was present throughout the 19th century. Organized opposition to foreigners, however, did not reach a fever pitch until the decades immediately preceding and following the turn of the century. Between 1880 and 1920 the number of new immigrants into the country increased greatly, in some years exceeding a million per year. Whether the country could adequately assimilate such a large number of persons was a predominant concern.

Much of the anxiety surrounding immigration resulted from the geographic distribution of immigrants by homeland. Following the 1880s, those entering the United States were, in general, coming not from the Western and Northern European nations that had earlier populated the land, but more so from Eastern and Southern European nations such as Russia, Hungary, and Italy (Garis, 1924; Young, 1922). These groups would be described in the writings of immigration restriction advocates as, respectively, the "old" and the "new" immigration.

The most pressing concern about the new immigrants was that they were regarded as physically, mentally, and morally inferior to the older immigrant class. Studies purported to show that immigrants were populating the prisons and mental institutions in much greater percentages than native stocks, and that the intelligence quotient of Southern and Eastern European immigrants was markedly lower than their peers from the North and West (Brigham, 1923; McLaughlin, 1903; Young, 1922). The nation, many argued, needed to focus on quality and not quantity in its immigrant class (Ward, 1910).

Although the number and presumed quality of the "new" immigration were primary rationales for restricting entrance into the nation, many other fears magnified the threat. These included concerns that they threatened the jobs of Americans, that they depressed pay scales, that their votes could easily be bought by corrupt politicians, and that their congregation in large urban areas would change the power structure through bloc voting (Calavita, 1984; Garis, 1924; McLaughlin, 1903).

With the exception of anti-Chinese legislation, early immigration restriction policies in the United States focused not on race or nationality, but rather keeping out those immigrants who possessed "undesirable" characteristics, such as various

disabling conditions, infectious diseases, pauperism, and anarchistic tendencies (Calavita, 1984; Fairchild, 1926). In 1917, the literacy test was signed into law, requiring immigrants be able to read either English or their native language (Calavita, 1984; Hall, 1913).

The 1921 immigration restriction act was passed in response to the ostensible need to legislate a more sweeping policy. This temporary act, which became permanent and more restrictive in 1924, was the most significant immigration restriction policy in American history. The primary component of the 1921 law was the development of a national origin quota. By means of this quota, annual immigration from specific countries would be limited to 3% of the total number of foreign-born persons from that country that were in the United States according to the 1910 census. Because of the nature of the national quotas, immigration from “undesirable” nations of Southern and Eastern Europe was drastically reduced (Calavita, 1984; Hutchinson, 1981).

PATTERNS OF METAPHOR USE IN DESCRIBING THE “NEW” IMMIGRATION

Those who wrote in public forums in favor of restrictive immigration measures were apt to depict the threats that were posed by an “open door” policy through the extensive employment of metaphors. The following themes include examples of metaphoric language that were designed to denigrate immigrants. Also important in the analysis, however, is consideration of what Lakoff (1995) called “conceptual” metaphors, or what Allbritton (1995) termed “*metaphor-based schemas*.” Although metaphors are usually described, Allbritton wrote, as “figurative expressions” or utterances, they can also be understood as a more global means of viewing the “target domain,” or that which is described through the metaphor (p. 36-37). Take, for example, the object metaphor. The phrase “*waste material*” is a clear metaphorical expression describing the target domain, in this case many of the new immigrants, as disposable objects. The more sweeping “*IMMIGRANT AS OBJECT*” conceptual metaphor, on the other hand, may be reinforced in a large variety of ways, many of them nonlinguistic. Indentured servitude, ethnic stereotyping, and the replacement of immigrants by machinery in the workplace are only a few of the nonverbal methods by which the conceptual metaphor is supported. Although most of the following examples demonstrate the linguistic use of metaphors, the conceptual aspects of the metaphors will also be discussed.

Organism Metaphor

The organism metaphor was a particularly apt means of describing the presumed adverse impact of immigrants on the nation. Described by Levine (1995), the cen-

tral feature of the organism metaphor as a conceptual metaphor is that the social community is viewed as analogous to a physical body. Just as the integrity of our own bodies may be threatened by contaminating external elements, so too is the social body vulnerable to corruption by invading sub-groups. Although linguistic metaphors related to disease are most often used to describe the negative impact of the marginalized group on society, metaphors that relate to discomfort or disfigurement may also be included within the organism metaphor. An example of the former is the depiction of the immigrant as indigestible food causing digestive pains, while an example of the latter would be the portrayal of the immigrant or the immigrant's home or business as a blight on the neighborhood.

Many elements of a country are analogous to bodily elements, and we often speak, for example, of the "body of the nation." In addition, immigration became an issue of concern in conjunction with the rapid increase in disease prevention and the public health profession. Infection- and disease-related metaphors were very much in keeping with the thinking of immigration restrictionists, and provided a rhetorically picturesque means of sharing these fears publicly. Moreover, immigrants have always been rightly feared as carriers of disease, and thus the public was conditioned to think of them in such a way. The earliest immigration restriction policies were passed in response to the very real fear of the spread of disease from incoming foreigners (Abbott, 1924; "The Pestilence at the Gate," 1921). Once the connection between disease and immigrants was formed, it became linguistically easy to describe all immigrants as potentially diseased organisms who threatened the integrity of the nation.

A principle concern of the new immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was its massing together within large urban settings such as New York and Chicago—or, in the case of Japanese and Chinese immigrants, California—rather than being disbursed throughout the country. This clustering of immigrants in "alien communities" within the nation's borders was a source of fear not only because these groups were depicted as crowding out the "native" population and taking over the cities, but also because such clustering was taken to have an adverse impact on assimilation.

Organism metaphors that were particularly apt to be used in conjunction with assimilation included "*digestion*" and "*absorption*." Just as the food we ingest benefits us in large part because it is distributed throughout the body, that which is not easily digested by or absorbed within the body is viewed as discomforting or even a threat to health (Fairchild, 1926). This is just as true of the social body as it is of the individual organism. Americans, Roberts (1924) wrote in support of 1924 immigration legislation, wanted "*a law that will ... give America a chance to digest the millions of unassimilated, unwelcome and unwanted aliens that rest so heavily in her*" prior to taking on a great many more (p. 58). Americans had discovered, French Strother noted (1923), that "*the stomach of the body politic [was] filled to bursting with peoples swallowed whole whom our digestive juices do not*

digest" (p. 634). A 1912 article in the *Literary Digest* stated that the immigrant "settles into masses, indigestible, with almost no chance for American influences—even for knowledge of America—to touch him" ("Making the immigrant unwelcome," 1912, p. 36). Edwin Conklin (1921) provided an extended description of the organism metaphor, noting that;

"We talk euphemistically about the 'assimilation' of foreign peoples, as if they were so much food material that could be digested, absorbed, and built into our own organization without in any way changing that organization except to make it larger. ... But the only way in which we could 'assimilate' alien races, that is, convert them into our own life and not be converted into theirs, would be by eating and digesting them, thus destroying their protoplasm, hereditary traits, instincts, and cultures, and out of the elements of these building up our own organization." (p. 357)

In describing the rapid increase in immigration, especially from Southern and Eastern Europe, Cannon (1923) focused on the disease element of the organism metaphor when he warned that "we have begun to gag a bit over the size and quality of the dose." "Is it simply," he wondered, "that the food is strange and alien, or does it possibly contain poisons against which we have no antidote" (p. 325)? Metaphors depicting the immigrant as a source of contagion were especially apt to be used in conjunction with those groups that were viewed as posing a threat to American democracy. Shortly after the turn of the century McLaughlin (1903) wrote that "the law-abiding citizen fears from the immigrant, not only the germ of bodily disease, but the germ of anarchy and also favorable media for its growth" (p. 231). During the Red Scare that followed World War I and the Russian Revolution, an article in the *Washington Post* warned that the nation was being threatened by "a flood of undesirables inoculated with the virus of Bolshevism and Communism" (cited in "An Alien Antidumping Bill," 1921, p. 13). Frazer added (1923b) that Socialist publications supporting unionization were "cheap inflammatory rot, as poisonous and destructive in its effects as typhus germs in a run-down system" (p. 88). Such organism metaphors would obviously become a staple of the McCarthy era vision of the communist as a burrowing figure bent on contaminating others with his venomous ideals and fostering spiritual and political decay of the national organism.

The organism metaphor was particularly descriptive of the connection between the human bloodstream and early perceptions of the "gene pool" or the racial composition of the community. "Until the foreign blood we have is absorbed so that it is made American," insisted a commentary in the *Washington Herald*, "a further transfusion is anything but desirable" (cited in "The Threatened Inundation from Europe, 1920, p. 9). Immigrants were said to be a "stream of impurity," that needed to be thoroughly filtered, a "tide of pollution" that had to be purified, and a "turgid stream of undesirable and unassimilable human 'offscourings.'" (Ellis, 1923, p. 80; "Keep America 'White!'" 1923, p. 399; "Making the Immigrant Unwelcome," 1912, p. 13).

The “*IMMIGRANT AS DISEASED ORGANISM*” conceptual metaphor was fostered by the perception that immigrants were increasing exponentially, both through the large number of new arrivals and their great fecundity (Hendrick, 1907; Phelan, 1919; Rowell, 1920). They would eventually, many believed, take over communities and eventually the nation itself. Although the following quote includes some linguistic metaphors, it is more important in its overall presentation of the immigrant population as a potentially infectious cancerous growth;

“In every city the tendency of the foreigners is to colonization. The units cohere, the mass crystallizes, and stands apart from other elements of the population. It is a process of segregation. A nucleus comes from Europe and takes up a house; other groups, coming from the same village or province, gather around this center; it grows, pushing out the former occupants of the block, working ever from the inner courts and alleys out to the main streets or avenues, until at length the block becomes preponderatingly foreign, and stands there, as related to the city, like a flint surrounded by a bed of chalk.” (Roberts, 1914, p. 160)

Central to the “*IMMIGRANT AS DISEASED ORGANISM*” conceptual metaphor are fears of spread, contamination, and decomposition. These elements were often reinforced even when linguistic metaphors were not employed. As with more recent “white flight,” writers shared stories of previously “pristine” neighborhoods that were taken over by marginalized groups, which supposedly led to degeneration and decay of the area. Immigrants were a threat, James Davis (1922) wrote, because the United States was a “new and clean country,” whereas “life in foreign lands among filth and dirt brought upon the countries of the Old World great plagues of typhus, cholera, leprosy, tuberculosis, and many other diseases” (p. 257).

It was generally accepted that new immigrant groups came from unsanitary corners of the globe, traveled in disease-ridden ships, and, even in America, lived in cramped unhygienic tenements where disease was prevalent. One of the hallmarks of the organism metaphor is that its targets often find themselves living in conditions where they develop diseases at much higher rates than the “normal” population. Jewish ghettos, mental institutions, massive public housing projects, and other such “stigmatized” environments serve to make the metaphorical real, and thus solidify the use of disease metaphors as an apt means of portraying the group in question.

Object Metaphor

The objectification of immigrants was accomplished in part through the substantial use of race, class, and ethnic stereotypes and demographic statistics to describe immigration-related problems and trends. The terms that were used to describe newcomers, however, also fostered the view that such persons were largely impersonal or interchangeable objects. Throughout the primary literature, immigrants were re-

peatedly represented as “*MATERIAL*” whose distinctive characteristic was in their value to the nation as cheap labor. An argument for the 1921 restriction bill was that it would “*stimulate the inflow from countries which yield much more assimilable material*” (cited in “Inviting Immigration,” 1921, p. 8). Another opponent of open immigration sarcastically wrote that “*practically all of the material brought into the Children’s Court for remoulding is a gift from Europe*” (Coulter, 1904, p. 731).

The unfinished nature of the immigrant was such that the immigrant was often described as “*raw material*” (Fairchild, 1926, p. 396). Although the raw material metaphor at least held out the hope that the immigrant—or more likely, his/her descendants—could be fashioned into a productive American citizen, in many cases the undesirable newcomer was characterized as waste material, or “*cargoes of human flotsam*” (Congressional Record, 1921, p. 1438). Many writers were especially concerned about “supported” immigration, whereby other countries would force their criminals or other undesirable citizens to emigrate to the U.S. In response to this practice, restrictionists contended that the country was becoming the “*dumping ground of the refuse material of the Old World*,” and implored Americans to do something about “*the dumping of Europe’s human refuse at our doors*” (“Keep America ‘White’”!, 1923, p. 400; Weber, 1892, p. 424). “*It is obvious to me*,” Leon Whitney (1926) wrote, “*that Europe has regarded America as a human garbage can*” (p. 4).

The “*IMMIGRANT AS MATERIAL*” metaphor was especially pertinent for describing the “melting pot” theory of assimilation (Garis, 1924, p. 366; Ward, 1913, p. 100). James Davis, the Secretary of Labor, said (1922) that the congregation of immigrants prevented the melting pot from blending them together. Recommending that incoming immigrants be distributed throughout the nation, he wrote that “*We have got to take out the lumps or break them up and smooth out the mass*” (p. 257). This view of immigrants as “ingredients” obviously grades over into the organism metaphor and the view of the immigrant as an entity to be “absorbed” or “digested.” The much-quoted words from Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* includes both organism and object metaphors;

“There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth—the harbor where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow. . . . how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame.” (1917, pp. 184-185)

The objectification of the immigrant was also fostered by “*trade*” rhetoric that compared immigrants to other forms of commerce. The *Washington Post* noted that just as Congress passed

“emergency legislation to protect commerce and industry by preventing the dumping of foreign goods upon the American market, . . . the opponents of the [1921] immigra-

tion bill would deny like protection to the working-people and would permit the dumping of foreign labor in unlimited quantities upon the American market. ... Why should this nation become a dumping-ground of human material any more than a dumping ground of cheap-labor goods?" (cited in "Making the Immigrant Unwelcome," 1912, p. 13)

Roy Garis noted in 1924 that "*today the immigrant's labor is considered no more than any other commodity to be bought at the lowest price*" (p. 67). Eugenicist and immigration restrictionist Harry Laughlin, in his influential report before Congress on the need for restrictive measures, noted that with any other commodity the "*importer of goods*" passed judgement on articles prior to agreeing to accept them. We should, he added, have the same attitude toward immigrants ("Europe as an Emigrant-Exporting," 1924, 1239). Ellis Island physician Dr. Victor Stafford contended "*it is a no more difficult task to detect poorly built, defective or broken down human beings than to recognize a cheap or defective automobile*" (cited in Kraut, 1994, p. 63).

The "*IMMIGRANT AS OBJECT*" conceptual metaphor was fostered by the large size of the immigrant population, their segregation from the rest of the community, and the perception that many of them refused to assimilate to American life. As objects of labor, immigrants were welcomed when low-wage work was needed, but, as with the Chinese who helped to build the railroads, once their labor was completed their utility was marginal. That immigrants were replaceable by new machinery also bolstered the conceptual metaphor of the immigrant as an object of labor (Collins, 1924).

Due to the general belief that many of the new immigrants embraced their native as opposed to their adapted homeland, restrictionists contended that it was appropriate to view them simply as interchangeable members of their "racial" group. General DeWitt's famous statement that "A Jap's a Jap" pertained both to Americans of Japanese descent as well as the foreign enemies of America during World War II (Ogawa, 1971, p. 11). American anti-Semitic writings of the day also presented Jewish immigrants as a separate people who could not become Americans. Even if they attempted to assimilate or even "pass" as gentiles, many advocates of restriction argued that Jews were destined to always maintain their "Jewish essence."

Natural Catastrophe and War Metaphors

As the number of immigrants per year increased to a million or more, the surge was portrayed by many restrictions as a natural catastrophe or enemy invasion. Obviously one of the most frequently used terms that described the growing immigrant population was "*FLOOD*." The flood metaphor was especially likely to be used in conjunction with the threat to American character that was posed by the over-

whelming rush of immigrants (Ellis, 1923; Ward, 1913). Whether perceived as a poison coursing through the blood veins of the nation or an engulfing flood, liquid metaphors were an important element of restrictionist writings, and served as an apt means of portraying a group of persons who arrived over the water.

Thomas Darlington wrote in the *North American Review* in 1906 that the “*incoming tide threatens to overwhelm us with the magnitude and ceaseless oncoming of its flood*” (p. 1266). If, restrictionists warned, limitations were not increased, “*the flood gates will be down and a turgid sea of aliens will inundate our sea-ports*” (“Guarding the Gates . . .,” 1924, p. 401). Two years after passage of the 1921 legislation, James Davis noted that this policy had “*effectively dammed a rising tide of immigration from Europe*” (1923, p. 134). One House Member expressed concern that the restriction acts necessitated increased vigilance at the Canadian and Mexican borders. “*Now that we are tightening the restrictions and trying to partially dam the stream,*” he wrote, “*the pressure at the weak points will be greater*” (Congressional Record, May 13, 1921, 1436). Describing the fears of unrestricted Asian immigration, another writer warned that for the government to refuse to maintain policies establishing different immigration standards for Europeans and Orientals would be to “*undermine the dyke that keeps out the infinite ocean*” (Rowell, 1920, p. 65). Elizabeth Frazer (1923c) was particularly picturesque in her description of immigrants;

“It’s a ceaseless ebb and flow, a vast tidal river of labor, of homeless peasantry, surging in, surging out, backing up a bit in winters and slack seasons, and boiling out again like a massive sheet of water over a dam at the onset of prosperity in the spring.” (p. 14)

Related to the natural catastrophe metaphor was the war metaphor. An us-against-them imperative arose not only because of the alien nature of the immigrant, but also due to their presumed deficiencies and refusal to assimilate. These groups of undesirable foreigners were bent on engaging in, even without their knowledge, a bloodless takeover of the nation. Numerous advocates of restrictive measures depicted the “new” immigration as an “*invasion*” of the country. Comparing immigration to the nation’s involvement in World War I, Conklin (1921) wrote that “*armies equal in size to the one we sent to France land every two years on our shores*” (p. 353). According to Warne (1913), the foreign invasion of the United States was “*equal to one hundred and fifty full regiments of one thousand each.*” Therefore, he continued ominously, these foreigners “*were double the entire fighting strength of the United States Army*” (p. 2). Is it necessary, he queried, that “*the invader should come in warships instead of in the steerage hold of steam vessels before the migration can be called an invasion?*” (p. 7) The immigration problem was so serious, Cannon (1923) said, that “*like the hordes of old they are destined to conquer us in the end, unless by some miracle of human contriving we*

conquer them first" (p. 330). Restrictive immigration laws, intoned a former New York congressman in 1892, "*were more necessary than forts and ships against hostile invasions*" (cited in Curran, 1975, p. 118).

Many writers contended that immigrant groups had already taken over many sections of the country. James Phelan, a California politician who spearheaded the anti-Japanese movement in the state, wrote in 1919 that "*upwards of eighty thousand Japanese in California, and they are as much a tributary colony of Japan as though the flag of Nippon had supplanted the Stars and Stripes*" (p. 324). Writers spoke of urban areas where large numbers of new immigrants settled as "foreign cities" within the nation (Frazer, 1923a, 1923b, 1923c; Roberts, 1924)

The "*IMMIGRANT AS INVADER*" conceptual metaphor was supported not only by the large number of immigrants and their massing together, but in addition by the fact that the characteristics, traditions and values of many new immigrant groups were not the same as those of the older immigrant population. A substantial percentage of the new immigration, for example, was from Catholic (Italy and Ireland) and Jewish (Russia and Eastern Europe) countries. Many early restrictionists viewed this "invasion" by religious minorities as a direct and imminent threat to the religious traditions and moral underpinnings of the nation.

A more insidious threat related to the fear that the new immigrants would overwhelm the racial integrity of the nation. New immigrants were portrayed not only as an enemy force, but also as an adversary that was not even aware of the damage that it was likely to inflict on the nation. The arguments of early racial anthropologists such as Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain were regurgitated in the writings of many immigration restrictionists. Greece, Rome, and other seminal cultures, they argued, did not die out because of invasions from without, but rather from race degeneration that arose through miscegenation and "race suicide" (Chamberlain, 1913; De Gobineau, 1966; Grant, 1916). It did little good to protect the nation through armies and munitions, they intoned, when an unseen, but more deadly, internal enemy was corrupting America from within.

Animal and Subhuman Metaphors

The dehumanization of "out-groups" is often fostered through widespread use of animalistic metaphors to describe group members. Although such metaphors were less prevalent in the immigration restriction debate than organism, object, natural catastrophe, and war metaphors, they were invoked periodically. Animal metaphors were often used when the particular characteristic of an animal was seemingly descriptive of the threat posed by the immigrant group. Foreigners congregated in colonies, "*like a swarming ball of bees upon a tree branch*" (Frazer, 1923a, p. 6), and transatlantic stowaways were like "*a wiggling, squirming mass of humanity [which] lay exposed ... like a nest of venomous snakes*" (Weiss, 1921, p. 40). In an extended portrayal, Owen Wister (1921) said that immigrants were

cuckoos that had flown “*into the open windows and doors*” of Uncle Sam’s house. The cuckoo, he wrote, “never builds its own nest, but always lays its egg in the nest of some other bird.” Eventually, of course, the cuckoo would take over the nest from its original inhabitants. Wister warned that although the American eagle was mightier than any cuckoo, it was “*not larger than a million cuckoos,*” and its future was thus threatened (p. 47).

Groups that are targeted for control are often compared to parasites or “low animals” capable of infection and contamination. This image combines the animal and the organism metaphor (Keen, 1986; Lowenthal & Guterman, 1970). Feri Weiss (1921) wrote that those who populated “‘Little Italy,’ ‘Little Ghetto,’ ‘Little Hungary,’ or any other ‘little’ colony in New York or Kalamazoo” were “*parasites on the oak of national prosperity, and should be eradicated*” (p. 200-201). Immigrants of “inferior quality” were also referred to as “*white ants*” who were “*eating away the political structure*” of the nation and “*a big swarm of mosquitoes, infested with malaria and yellow fever germs*” (“The Harm of Immigration,” 1893, p. 43; Weiss, 1921, p. 207). In her 1923 *Saturday Evening Post* series, Frazer (1923a) described her study of immigrants in medical terminology, stating that her intention was to “*investigate the foreign colonies imbedded in the fair physical corpus of New York.*” What would we see, the author asked, “*if we put an actual wriggling cross-section of life under the microscope and took a squint through the lens?*” (p. 6).

The “*IMMIGRANT AS ANIMAL OR SUBHUMAN ENTITY*” conceptual metaphor was reinforced by writings that seemed to demonstrate that new immigrants reflected a less evolved state of civilization than “native” Americans and the older immigrant population. In the writings of many immigration restrictionists, the level or complexity of one’s native civilization was directly related to one’s “humanness.” Elizabeth Frazer described the primitive nature of “new” immigrants in wording that echoed the eugenicists of the day. In their native lands, she noted, they led

“A serene, tranquil, backwater existence untroubled by any wild, turbulent questions of that intelligence which, by its fermenting through the ages, has reared up man on his legs as an adventurous biped instead of continuing a foursome existence alongside his quadruped brethren. In these villages, intellectually speaking, a kind of noble, passive vacuum prevails. ... it is from stagnant reservoirs like this that many of our morons derive.” (Frazer, 1923c, 105)

Frazer’s earlier installment in the series (1923b), on immigrants in Pittsburgh, noted that not much should be expected of Russian peasants, since they “*simply haven’t climbed up that far yet on the racial family tree*” (p. 85). The perception that devalued immigrant groups symbolized an atavistic species was made clear too by Cannon (1923):

“Some of them represent types insensitive to the stimuli of cultural civilization. In the animal world the amoeba must have existed unchanged for millions of years. It is not a degenerate type for there is nothing more primitive in the animal creation, but it has remained untouched by the influences that have played upon it from the beginning. Our knowledge of man covers too brief a period to allow us to dogmatize, but there are certain races that show a somewhat similar incapacity for growth and development, even under conditions which produce marked alterations in other races.” (p. 331).

DISCUSSION

The metaphors that were employed to denigrate immigrants reinforced both conscious and subliminal fears that were particularly ominous because of the rapidly changing culture of the time. Industrialization, urban expansion, unionization, the war in Europe, medical advances and the growth in the public health system were just a few elements of cultural reorganization, and all related in important ways to immigration. The challenge of those who advocated restrictive measures during the first decades of the twentieth century was to convince the descendants of immigrants that their own ancestors were different, in crucial ways, than those who were now coming to America. This was accomplished with the aid of metaphors that served to set the latter group apart as profoundly divergent from those who “built the country.”

This is not to say that immigration restriction itself was inappropriate or wrong. Judging the actions of the past against contemporary moral standards is, of course, extremely problematic. Much of the fear of immigration during the first quarter of the century was justifiable, especially considering the large numbers of immigrants, and their congregation in large urban areas. The Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, however, focused not just on the quantity of immigration but also on the quality, and tied the latter issue to race, ethnicity and social class-related fears. Dehumanizing and menacing metaphors were primarily invoked to underscore these fears, and create the vision of a great and healthy nation whose very survival was threatened by corrupting, infectious, and violent outside elements.

Writings that depict marginalized groups as less than human or a threat to society constitute an important and possibly essential precursor to inhumane or adverse social policies. This is especially true in a democratic nation that purportedly values egalitarianism, individual rights and due process. Justification for limiting the rights of minority groups requires the development of negative social images of these groups in question; images that are often fostered through the use of both linguistic and conceptual metaphors. When the public at large accepts these pejorative metaphorical depictions as an accurate means of perceiving group members, regressive policies may be forthcoming. Brennan (1995), Keen (1986), Noël

(1994), O'Brien, (1999), Wolfensberger (1972) and others have noted that pejorative metaphors often serve to frame public debates that relate to marginalized community groups. Such framing often leads directly to presumptions about both the cause of social problems and the most effective policy response to them (Elwood, 1995; Lakoff, 1995; Schön, 1979). If marginalized groups can be depicted as being less than fully human, members do not require the full range of human rights. If members seem to pose a threat to the community, public action against them can be justified as measures of self-defense (Brennan, 1995).

The importance of an analysis of metaphoric themes that were employed to fashion a negative image of immigrants, moreover, extends beyond this single target domain or historical period. Similar themes cut across different time periods and relate to a wide variety of target groups. The birth differential argument, for example, has been employed at various times to augment societal fear of African- and Hispanic-Americans, persons with feeble-mindedness, the rural poor, "welfare" recipients and other groups. Metaphors that undergird this argument, such as the rapidly reproducing animal, micro-organism or bacteria, may remain fairly constant across a span of time, or only change in superficial ways (Brennan, 1995; Lowenthal & Guterman, 1970; Wolfensberger, 1972).

Academicians and others with an interest in metaphor and rhetoric may play an extremely valuable role in the policy arena by calling attention to metaphoric themes that have the effect of supporting repressive public policies against marginalized groups, analyzing these themes, and countering the development of social myths at their root. Even in a society that values individual freedom and minority rights, there are obviously valid rationales for social control measures. We should all be concerned, however, when such measures gain support because of rhetorical devices and social myths as opposed to a factual understanding of the threat that is posed by those who are primarily impacted by such laws. Many metaphors, especially those that touch our subconscious fears and disgust, do not exist in a historical vacuum. They arise time and again to provide credence to those feelings, often by giving them a human face.

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