Using Immigration to Define Americans as White and White as American

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Abstract

This paper overviews the intentional, explicit, and harsh U.S. immigration policy and the ways that it, directly and indirectly, has defined American and white as synonymous. There is a brief literature review followed by an argument that whiteness has actually required the immigration discourse to uphold and perpetuate racist ideas and enlist average white citizens. This process happens at the systemic level, in terms of national policy, laws, and private industry, and at the individual level as individuals become deputized to uphold whiteness through the lens of who is allowed in America.

Introduction

US immigration laws have essentially always protected, benefitted, and helped define Americans as closely tied to whiteness but after September 11, 2001, it became even more intentional, explicit, and harsh (García Hernández, 2020). While the government shifted its attention to regulating legal and illegal immigration, according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL, 2018), anti-immigrant groups like the Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) have also changed the boundaries of what is considered acceptable within political action and public discourse. This research paper explores how average white citizens, not law enforcement or legislators, have used immigration law and language in order to promote and protect whiteness. It focuses on how they have organized socially and politically, particularly since 9/11/01 to define immigration as non-White and America as White. In recent decades, as outright racism has become less accepted in mainstream discourse, whiteness has required anti-immigration as a cover to gain and maintain buy-in from average white citizens and to uphold its ideals. Whiteness has always conformed and adapted to contemporary standards in order to appeal to the average citizen and maintain its hold over politics, economic and social systems. As racial slurs fall out of favor, whiteness has been able to shift to anti-immigrant rhetoric in order to continue to define Americans as white and white as Americans.

The paper begins with a very brief overview of immigration history in America, focusing particularly on the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, and how attitudes and laws have changed in order to uphold whiteness depending on who is actually immigrating. Particularly after September 11, 2001, the government and self-deputized white vigilantes have used immigration as a way to mainstream far-right ideology. Racism has always existed in America from the genocide of indigenous populations to the enslavement of Africans to the exclusion of particular races from immigration to more recent pathologizing and surveillance of particular communities. This cannot be separated from the country's history and recent attempts are closer to adaptation than they are brand new creations. The paper then offers a brief literature review for additional context before arguing that whiteness has required the immigration discourse to make sure the average white citizens can uphold and perpetuate racist ideas that moved from the fringe to popular in the last 20 years.

The United States has used naturalization and immigration law to establish its citizens as white since the 1790 Naturalization Act established that free white persons may be granted citizenship after two years of residency as long as they demonstrate good moral character and swear allegiance to the Constitution (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). The government continued to oversee immigration but was less concerned with preventing or limiting the number of people that became American until the demographics began to shift away from Western European towards Eastern and Southern Europeans and people from East Asia in the late 19th and early 20th Century. However, the most repressive and exclusionist immigration policy and attitudes in American history developed as people of color fought for and began to receive more equal legal status. These policies ranged from Lyndon Johnson's curtailing of opportunities for legal entry from Mexico; to Nixon's, then Reagan's, Wars on Crime and Drugs;

Reagan's Cold War interventions in Central America that displaced thousands; George Bush's War on Terror; and finally, President Trump's transformation of the humanitarian problems affecting Central American families into a manufactured immigration crisis (Massey, 2020). With these shifting attitudes and a growing prison industrial complex came a sophisticated system to incarcerate people for migrating to the United States—a stark shift from the majority of the country's history—emerging around the mid-1980s and growing to over 200 modern-day facilities operated both by the state and private companies (García Hernández, 2020; ADL, 2018).

The post-9/11 period elevated discourse and imagery of immigrants as a threat to new heights in many ways including through culture, laws, and the discussion around safety and security (Ismaili, 2010). The Homeland Security Act of 2002 shaped government immigration agencies by moving nearly all of the functions of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and establishing three new agencies underneath: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Furthermore, immigration control continued to expand as these agencies now do things that INS did not have the capacity or the legal ground to conduct prior to 9/11 (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). Both documented and undocumented immigrants faced new immigration orders, attempts to register their communities, and surveillance from law enforcement among other forms (Ismaili, 2010). This expanded immigration control also includes greater cooperation between federal, local, and state authorities; more lawfully admitted immigrants with no link to terrorism getting detained and deported; more aggressive vigilante groups operating at the USA-Mexico border; restricted immigrant access to meaningful judicial review of administrative processes; and law enforcement agencies enacting more raids and crackdowns based on racial and ethnic profiling (Ismaili, 2010). The United States has historically defined citizens as white both culturally and legally despite the presence of other races from the country's birth. However, laws are just words on a page until they are enforced. Whiteness in America has relied on a mix of government and law enforcement agencies, organized vigilantes, and average white citizens to help establish white as the norm. As powerful as the police or ICE or even the KKK have been, they can all be identified and potentially avoided. To this end, immigration laws have been used to enable and embolden the average US citizen to act on whiteness' behalf in order to extend the government's reach.

Contextual Literature Review

The use of military language to describe immigration raids conducted by DHS, naming immigration as an invasion, and this attitude's accompanying policies have helped grow the number of nativist extremist groups and anti-immigrant groups (Romero, 2011). Romero examines the spectacles and symbolic politics that normalize human and civil rights violations and legitimize racism toward immigrants. These violations and racism include substantive changes to legislation that provides a foundation for state and local anti-immigrant ordinances, increased surveillance and racial profiling, and violations of the Fourth Amendment (Romero, 2011). The language that government officials and, in turn, the media use, such as framing migration as a crisis or using terms like "anchor baby," dehumanizes immigrants and reinforces the synonymy of the immigrant, terrorist, and criminal (Romero, 2011). This results in the normalization of hate speech as patriotic. The long history of responding to immigration with the ideology of white injury and stoking fear—whether by scapegoating migrants for social problems or claiming that Spanish is becoming the dominant language—allows for racial profiling and violence to be condoned as unavoidable collateral damage that stems from the need to maintain a secure nation. As the state shifted immigration policy towards terrorism after September 11, 2001, Romero argues that the primary strategy for anti-immigration groups to avoid being identified as vigilantes by the media, and to conceal their nativist and racist attacks, is to incorporate patriotism into their protests. The ADL (2018) points out that these groups further attempt to conflate their anti-immigrant ideology with popular issues, such as the environment, education, jobs, and the economy, by claiming that immigrants use up the country's resources in these areas in order to help shield them from public scrutiny for their extremist

views. In doing so, they also gain support by linking xenophobic philosophies to causes mainstream audiences to care about.

Brown, Keefer, Sacco, & Bermond (2019) analyzed specific rhetorical devices and noted that the idea of immigration as a disease compared to other conceptualizations elicited greater anti-immigration positions. Policymakers have exploited these feelings in order to promote xenophobia, shape attitudes, and frame non-white immigrants as a disease (Brown et al., 2019). This in turn heightens interpersonal restrictions toward outgroups beyond politics and into the general public.

Khouri (2018) explains how Trump's railing against immigration and promotion of people like Stephen Miller are the latest installments of anti-immigrant rhetoric that empower employers to weaponize ICE against their undocumented workers. ICE supposedly has a memorandum of understanding with the Labor Department that says ICE will refrain from enforcement at businesses that are under LD investigation and that ICE will investigate whether the tips it receives are motivated by a desire to manipulate labor laws or retaliate against workers, neither of which are reasons for ICE to act. However, that agreement has not really played out in that manner (Khouri, 2018).

Santamaría Graff (2017) connects the Trump administration's anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican proposals to historical legislation that nominally protected national security or a return to American values but actually aimed to maintain whiteness. Anti-immigrant narratives criminalize particular behaviors in order to justify imperialistic, unjust policies and further serve dominant white political elites and their constituents. This can be seen as far back as the 1820s and 1830s when US colonizers fought Mexican troops over the Texas territory, or through the invocation of Manifest Destiny, and traced to the harsher immigration policies in the interior and along the borders post-9/11. The assumption underlying Trump's "Build That Wall!' is that the country is under siege by criminals intent on dismantling the core fabric of what makes America great, including radical Islamic terrorists, Mexican rapists, and "bad hombres" (Santamaría Graff, 2017). The slogan stoked nativism and manufactured narratives that government agencies, vigilante groups, and individuals could grab onto.

As the demographics of immigrants changed over the last 10-20 years, anti-immigration rhetoric and sympathies have become a much more mainstream argument (ADL, 2018). This prevalence of anti-immigration views is both the product of and supported by traditional media, social media, and a wave of elected officials that have been pushing these types of policies. As Khouri (2018) explained, Donald Trump's ascendancy and Fox News' complicity both resulted from nativist, racist, and patriotic opinions in the voter base and also pushed those beliefs to new extremes. Having a presidential candidate in a major party who was willing to be openly anti-immigrant gave permission to his followers, as well; it is a cycle where both sides allow the other to deepen their views while also crediting the other as the driving force and removing their own personal blame (ADL, 2018). Much like using popular or mainstream issues to shield their real desires, this allows those involved to deny or minimize the roles they have played in causing harm.

Individual Deputization

Stoked by government policing, messaging, and the media, attitudes towards immigrants developed into a fear of sharing resources and fear of the immigrants themselves. White people have reacted accordingly. Post-9/11 apprehensions of Latinx people increased sharply, as did mass workplace raids and individual targeting of immigrants by white Americans in the name of national security (Santamaría Graff, 2017). The unlawful physical presence of certain groups on U.S. soil was framed as a threat. These threats gave rise to conspiracies that include: immigrants are outsiders who are planning to invade the country; immigrants and refugees are terrorists or sympathetic to terrorism; undocumented immigrants hurt the U.S. financially by taking jobs and social services without paying taxes; undocumented immigrants lead to increased crime and violence; and undocumented immigrants are bringing diseases into the U.S. Racist groups of white people use these conspiracies to spread their anti-immigrant message wider, increase membership to once-fringe groups, and encourage individuals to protect America from these problems (ADL, 2018). For example, FAIR is the largest anti-immigrant group in the United States; it was founded in 1979 and has since developed many anti-immigration front

groups with varied stated missions and goals, including CIS, in order to appeal to wider demographics of its movement, obfuscate motives, and shield the parent group from direct links to racist ideas (ADL, 2018). NumbersUSA was founded in 1996 with the tagline of "for lower immigration levels." The goal of the Remembrance Project, started in 2009, was to educate and raise awareness about the so-called "epidemic" of killings of Americans by illegal aliens (ADL, 2018). San Diegans for Secure Borders (SDSB)'s 2012 establishment can be seen as the foreground for someone like Donald Trump to ascend to the presidency and as a group that would be further legitimized by his spreading their message on national television just four years later through calls to build a wall on the border (ADL, 2018).

In 2019, two Latinx women were selling tacos out of a truck in Dallas when a white woman became upset with them, started arguing, and eventually threatened to call ICE because of their racial identity (Simón, 2019). This is an illustrative example because the women were permitted to sell tacos and were not doing anything illegal, nor were they undocumented immigrants. Even if they had been doing anything illegal or been undocumented, it would not have necessarily justified a white person to deputize themselves and call ICE in this way. However, in this example, even the most surface-level arguments from the right do not apply, making the act even more indefensible. This is anecdotal, but it shows that white people calling ICE is not necessarily about public safety or following the law but more so about race and racism.

One year earlier, a video showed that a white woman in Los Angeles became upset with a Latinx woman panhandling and asking for money on the street, eventually threatening to call ICE on her and arguing with another pedestrian that approached to support the panhandling woman (CBS Los Angeles, 2018). The white woman complained that the panhandler was not from the U.S., but rather from Brazil, and defended that it was, in fact, her business to approach the panhandler when questioned by a passerby. The white woman's implication that it was her business as a white person brings forth the question of whether she would have started an argument with a white panhandler. Based on the given reasons in the video, it seems unlikely. This incident provides some insight into an individual's thought process about who deserves to be in America and what lengths they are willing to go to maintain their idea of whiteness and white Americans.

On the extreme end, there are instances like 2019's El Paso, Texas shooting. A white man killed 22 people in a deadly mass shooting at a Walmart, then confessed to law enforcement afterward that he was targeting Mexicans in the attack (Falconer, 2019). Before the attack, he wrote a racist post online both praising President Trump's border wall plan and denying that his actions were because of the President, but it is hard to deny the connection (Falconer, 2019). In 2018, the final post by the suspect in the deadly shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, made just a short time before the attack, claimed that "HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." These words echo alarmist language used by anti-immigrant groups and politicians (ADL, 2018). These events represent the most extreme logical extension of the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has gained prominence in the last few decades. For anti-immigrant individuals, believing the rhetoric is the first step; smaller actions, like verbally confronting people of color come next, followed by weaponizing the U.S. government or law enforcement agencies and ultimately taking the law into their own hands. In doing so, they enforce what they believe is right, whether it be through kidnapping, murder, exploitation, or some other illegal act for their cause.

Conclusion

The development of anti-immigrant rhetoric, policy, and discrimination is not a new invention in America. It is merely an adaptation of the values upon which this country was founded. When mainly white people from Western Europe came to the US, immigration was relatively open with an effectively easy path to citizenship. Even when other races and Eastern Europeans began immigrating, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, racism was more explicit and accepted, so there was no need for coded language or secrecy (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). In 1882, the government could simply pass and enact a law to exclude Chinese people from immigrating to the United States. In 1924, the government could

explicitly limit the quotas by country of origin. In more recent times, upholding white identity as a core principle of being American has required a shift in tactics, and anti-immigrant action in the name of patriotism has become a much more important tool. The government, vigilantes acting on behalf of the government, and individual white actors have all played on the sentiment that immigrants are ruining the country in order to pass laws, target non-white communities, and wield law enforcement agents against people of color.

Some experts believe enacting pro-immigrant legislation, improving response to hate crimes, building trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities, and expanding dialogue between major actors can help combat these sentiments (ADL, 2018). Dr. Ibram Kendi (2017) argues that changing the laws and policies will in turn impact the everyday culture of a community and not the other way around. There are no concrete examples to model these changes after, but the origins of anti-immigrant sentiment are baked deep into the country's imagination. Some think an agency like ICE or CBP cannot be reformed when it was literally created to enforce these racist ideals; along the same lines, individuals that call ICE to report others will never really do so in good faith (García Hernández, 2020). It seems far more likely that American institutions will have to be disbanded and rebuilt in a new image before it can be expected that white Americans will accept a multicultural country that does not merely uphold whiteness.

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