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Xenophobia in the 1920s

by Jenny Letourneau

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To immigrants, America was and is the promised land and a place where all of their dreams can come true. The famous poem, “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus was engraved on a bronze plaque in 1902 and has Lady Liberty herself saying, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (“New” 4-5). This poem describes all immigrants who hope to start over and hope to give their families a better life in America. This hope was so great after World War I that from 1900-1920, America experienced a rapid growth in population because of the huge influx of immigrants from Europe.

These new immigrants needed jobs and within the first twenty years of the twentieth century, the number of factory workers went from 4.7 million to 9 million, and many of these “jobs were being filled by the wave of new immigrants, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe” (Lehan 6). Americans were proud of their country’s astonishing “growth in the 20th Century” (Miller 35); however, they felt “the old moral and spiritual values were being undermined by industrialization, standardization, and mass society” (35). The sheer number of immigrants and change also frightened the American public. “A search for order, for conformity and homogeneity at every level of society, was under way” (Miller 35). Americans feared change and wanted everything to stay the same, and those who were not “white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” were resented (Hanson 56). The national hysteria, known as the Red Scare, marks the beginning of this xenophobic period, created by a combination of the Seattle general strike, bombings, and riots. This frightened frenzy created many arrests and deportations of radical aliens, the rise and spread of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and state legislation. The fear was so great that two immigration acts were put into effect; first in 1921 and then revised and made stricter in 1924. Xenophobia became the focus of legislation in America because the people were afraid that their white, Anglo-Saxon values would be eliminated.

There were many events in 1919 that caused the American public to focus on radicalism so much “that all [the] contributing factors were ultimately welded together into a common mass from which emerged the public panic and paranoia known as the Red Scare” (Murray 57). Each of the events contributed “in exaggerating the radical menace and increasing doubts concerning the essential soundness of the nation” (57). The Seattle general strike was the first event inflamed by politicians and employers who used “the issue of radicalism. . . for their own special purposes” (58). In Seattle, 35,000 shipyard workers went on strike because they wanted higher wages and shorter hours (58). After Director of Emergency Fleet Corporation General Charles Piez refused to meet the demands of the workers, arguing they had broken their contract, the Seattle Central Labor Council decided to step in. This council “represented all organized labor in the area, [and] discussed the possibility of aiding the striking shipyard workers” (59); their idea to allow the shipyard workers to win was “a general strike [in Seattle]” (59). The first meeting to plan the strike was on February 2nd; the plan was for all the shipyard workers to walk off the job at 10 a.m. on February 6th and then to wait for further instructions (60). Since this plan was “a serious departure from customary American labor tactics” (60), the Seattle newspapers repeatedly printed statements claiming that the strike was caused by radicals and this was their “first step towards revolution” (60-61). It was not difficult for the papers to win over the public since “there were almost no laws regulating working conditions,” (Lehan 6) and employers feared their workers had brought socialist ideas with them from Europe (6).

Consequently, people prepared for any type of emergency by purchasing “essential pharmaceutical goods, stock[ing] up on necessary clothing and food items” (Murray 60) and requesting guns. It was even said that hardware stores “had more requests for guns than they could fill!” (60). Along with the newspapers, Senator Miles Poindexter, Republican from Washington State, claimed that the strikes were fomented by Communists. He “told the Senate ‘that the increasing number of strikes is based on a desire to overthrow our Government, destroy all authority, and establish Communism.’ He warned that ‘there is grave danger that a Government will be overthrown when it ceases to defend itself. There is no time for sensitiveness on the part of public officials’ ” (Schmidt 237). In the growing climate of fear, few disagreed. Two events that shortly followed the strike only added to the growing fear of the American public.

During the “time when deportation for alien radicals was being discussed” (Murray 69) some anarchist’s posters in New England declared:

GO AHEAD

The senile fossils ruling the United States see red! . . .
 The storm is within and very soon will leap and crash
 and annihilate you in blood and fire. You have shown no
 pity to us! We will do likewise. . . We will dynamite you!
 (Murray 69).

The anarchists soon put these threats into action and sent bombs through the mail. The first bomb was mailed to Mayor Ole Hanson of Seattle on April 28th, and “on the following day, a similar package was delivered to the home of a former senator Thomas W. Hardwick of Atlanta” (69). This package, unlike Hanson’s, was opened and Hardwick’s maid lost both her hands, and Mrs. Hardwick was burned around her head and face (70). Eventually thirty-six bombs were mailed and “the list and the timing of the mailings” (71) showed that the sender wanted to “rid the nation on or about May 1 of government officials and important industrialists [who were labeled as] antiradical” (71). May 1st, otherwise known as May Day, is the day when labor is celebrated in Russian and many other European countries. Of all the immigrants, Russian and Eastern European people were thought of as the most dangerous because supposedly they “brought the seeds of revolution with them into America” (Hanson 60). Americans knew about the 1917 Russian Revolution, and they feared that the same thing could happen in the United States. Thus, the “series of bombings and bomb scares [in 1919 was credited] to radical political activity by foreign agitators” (61). In addition to the bombings, riots broke out in “several major cities” (Murray 73) when Red flag parades were broken up by nativist mobs. Radicals “staged rallies, held mass meetings, and conducted Red flag parades” (74). Often, the riots were broken up by the police and ended with violent fighting.

This was the case in Boston where several policemen and a civilian were wounded and one officer was stabbed to death while trying to break up a Socialist Red Flag parade. Other parts of Boston soon heard of this event which caused crowds of people to come together and harass any potential marchers. One group even “demolish[ed] the Boston Socialist headquarters” (Murray 74) and other groups “captur[ed] stray Socialists” (74). Also, in New York, off-duty but uniformed soldiers raided the Socialist *Daily Call* (Lehan 6). Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who also had received a bomb in the mail, “ordered a series of raids in 1920 against what he called dangerous aliens” (Hanson 61). These would be called The Palmer Raids which “were spontaneous and zealous operations, brought about by the demands of a hysterical opinion; according to this view, government officials were simply too frightened to observe the rights of the radical aliens” (Schmidt 236). The Red Scare climaxed in the arrests and deportations of many of the radicals, a “technically legal” (237) but questionable action against people America now called Bolsheviks.

About 10,000 possible Bolsheviks were arrested and put in jail for days and even weeks.

Frederick Lewis Allen, a contemporary humorist and critic, reported that “often [this was done] without any chance to learn what was the explicit charge against them. At least one American citizen, not a communist, was jailed. . . and barely escaped deportation” (Hanson 61). In a foreshadowing of post-9/11 America, the United States Department of Justice, “argued it was not violating the aliens’ constitutional rights by making arrests and conducting searches and seizures without warrants, denying counsel to the detainees, keeping them imprisoned indefinitely on excessive high bail, and by mistreating them” (Schmidt 236). The raids “were technically legal since the Supreme Court had held the deportation process to be an administrative and not criminal procedure and, consequently, aliens held for deportation had no constitutional rights” (Schmidt 236) it argued.

In addition to federal legislation, “[t]hirty-two state governments passed their own legislation limiting the rights of alien residents” (Hanson 59). To prevent Japanese-Americans from buying more land, California passed the Alien Land Law (60), and San Francisco no longer allowed Japanese children to attend public schools; instead they were forced to go to a segregated school (57). Similar state legislation was enacted in Idaho, Arizona, Montana, Oregon, and New Mexico to restrict “alien-born residents from land ownership” (60). The intense xenophobia in the 1920s also created a revival and spread of the Ku Klux Klan (64). The new KKK “added Catholics, Jews, radicals, and foreigners as objects of its intolerance” (64) and spread all over the United States. Its objectives were “[t]o unite white male persons, native-born Gentile citizens of the United States of America, . . . to shield the sanctity of the home and the chastity of womanhood; to maintain forever white supremacy, . . . and maintain the distinctive institutions, rights, privileges, principles, traditions and ideals of a pure Americanism” (64). The Klan actively expressed the nation’s desperate attempt to hold back foreign influence and gained so much support during this xenophobic period that, at its peak, it reached to “over 4 million members in all forty-eight states” (65). However, even with arrests and deportations, state legislation, and the support of the KKK, the American public demanded even more security.

To Americans in 1920, anyone’s ideas that were not the same as the majority were considered dangerous (Hanson 60). So to give them the security they craved, the federal government created a quota system to limit the number of immigrants from “Asia, Russia, Southern Europe, and all of the nations in Eastern and Central Europe” (58). The quota system of 1921 ruled that “the number of immigrants allowed from each country was restricted to 3 percent of the number of persons from that country living in the United States as of 1910” (58). With 1910 as the base year, “the southern and eastern European countries received 45 percent of the quotas and the northern and western European countries received 55 percent. Although the quotas reduced southern and eastern European immigration by 20 percent from prewar levels, nativists believed it was still unacceptably high” (Ngai 21). Since the nativists were not satisfied with the 3 percent quota system, they demanded “a 2-percent quota based on the 1890 consensus [to reduce] the level of immigration to 155,000 per year and. . . the proportion of southern and eastern European immigration to a mere 15 percent of the total” (21). The 1890 formula was criticized, however, because it was discriminatory (21). The nativists then had “to devise a plan that would discriminate without appearing to do so” (22). John Trevor, who was “a leading restrictionist and head of an immigration-restriction coalition of patriotic orders and societies” (22), helped draft the Immigration Act of 1924 and “warned that new immigration threatened to lower the standard of living and dilute the ‘basic strain’ of the American population” (22). Trevor also felt that “the national origins of the entire population should be used as the basis for calculating the quotas” (22). This new formula “gave 16 percent of the total to southern and eastern Europe and 84 percent to northern and western Europe” (22), and even though these quotas were almost the same as those of the two percent with the 1890 formula, they were allowed since they were not considered discriminatory “because they gave fair representation to each of the nation’s ‘radical strains’ ” (Ngai 22).

The Immigration Act of 1924 caused a large reduction specifically in the number of Italian and Polish immigrants. The Italian immigrants went “from more than forty thousand a year to less than four thousand” and “the number of Polish immigrants [went] from more than thirty thousand to less than six thousand” (Hanson 59). The Immigration Act of 1924 was made up of three parts:

It restricted immigration to 155,000 a year, established temporary quotas based on 2 percent of the foreign-born population in 1890, and mandated the secretaries of labor, state, and commerce to determine quotas on the basis of national origins by 1927. The law also excluded from immigration all persons ineligible to citizenship, a euphemism for Japanese exclusion. Finally, Congress placed no numerical restrictions on immigration from countries of the Western Hemisphere, in deference to the need for labor in south-western agriculture and American diplomatic and trade interests with Canada and Mexico. (Ngai 23)

The three parts “constructed a vision of the American nation that embodied certain hierarchies of race and nationality” (23). It was not that the nativists believed assimilation was impossible, but they did believe that the melting pot of America was suffering from “alien indigestion” (23). There was just too little tradition left in America for the American public’s taste.

The twentieth century was a time of growth and change; however, the 1920s was a decade that also tried to prevent and even reverse that growth and change. The accumulation of the Seattle general strike, bomb mailings, and the Palmer-Raids combined with the daunting headlines of the newspapers created the Red Scare and began the fight for tradition which one could argue continues into the twentieth century. The fight put America into a state of chaos with mass arrests and deportations of radicals. Also, individual states and groups, such as the KKK, took a stand and fought back against the radicals who threatened the spread of Communism and capitalism, which was and is so antithetical to democracy. The nation reacted to its fear by creating the Immigration Act of 1921 and then redefined it to produce the harsher Immigration Act of 1924. Americans were so focused on preserving their white, Anglo-Saxon and theoretically Christian values that they allowed their xenophobia to control their way of life.

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