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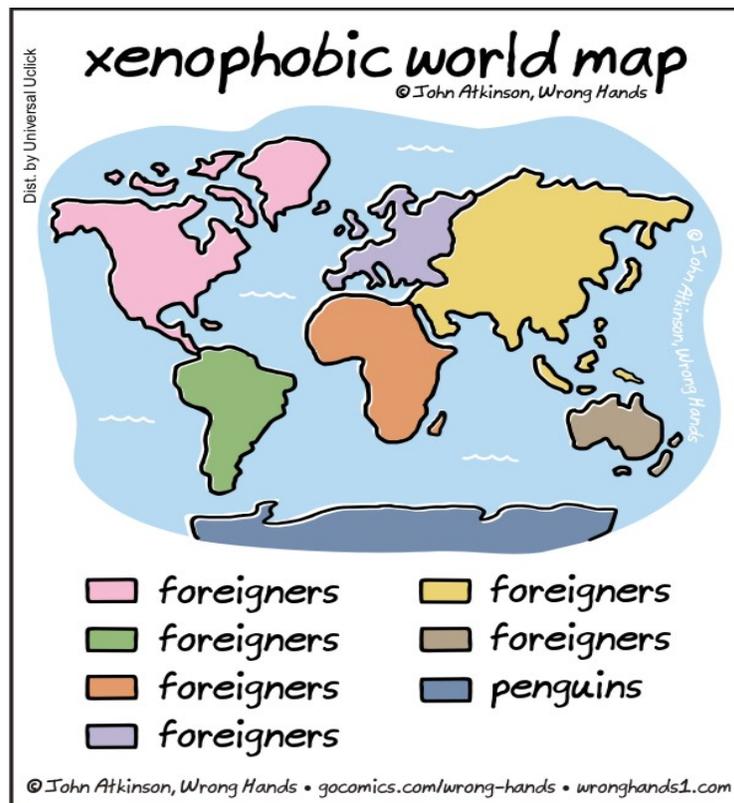


Figure 1: from Atkinson, 2016

The Psychology of Xenophobia

The term xenophobia comes from the Greek words for foreigner/ stranger (*xenos*) and fear (*phobia*) and is pretty self-explanatory: it describes the condition where I fear anything that is foreign to me (and anything that is foreign to the likes of me). Xenophobia, analysed in its roots as the age-old “fear of the unknown”, naturally generates apprehension and anxiety in the human mind (or soul, depending on your beliefs), because fear is an all-too-powerful emotion.

Evolutionarily speaking, fear has been a crucial survival tool for our ancestors, as it alerted them to the surrounding dangers by activating their fight or flight response. This is why *xenophobia* encourages social discrimination and prejudice towards a specific group labelled as “fear-inducing,” i.e., as a threat to our national identity, to our racial purity, to our law and order, etc. Spurred by powerful and primeval *fear*, initial discrimination and prejudice may well escalate to hatred and actual, physical violence; psychologically speaking, *fear* is, for the most of us, too overpowering to manage and reason with.

The question is *who* is in the position to label x, y, z social group as a threat. If one thinks about it, the *people in authority* is the obvious answer, a category which also translates as the *ruling elites*. In fact, it is common for the ruling elites to know that the xenophobic tactic is an effortless and successful way to sway the masses, by stirring up primitive emotion which resists reason and clear thinking. Ideologically, fear towards outgroups has been a staple for the right, or far-right, groups. This is the reason why xenophobia is very close to *racism*, which is the belief that “inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others” (Dictionary.com, 2018a), and *ethnocentrism*, which is the “belief in the intrinsic superiority of the nation, culture, or group to which one belongs, often accompanied by feelings of dislike for other groups” (Dictionary.com, 2018b).

Lastly, it makes sense that xenophobia, like the emotion of fear, flourishes in periods of danger or crisis. An environment which welcomes xenophobic feelings is one of an imminent threat (or *artificial* imminent threat), insecurity and frustration.

Xenophobia Today

The West has been suffering from a series of crises since 2008, which have paved the way for the xenophobic ideology to take a firm hold in people’s consciousness. In 2008, the global financial crisis struck the US economy causing almost 2.5 million job losses, general insecurity about employment, record low levels of trust towards the capitalist system, and a stagnating economy (Uchitelle, 2009). Then it affected Europe, too, where a decade of recession (2008-2018) and austerity measures imposed on several member states, as well as the “refugee crisis” / “migration crisis” which spiked in 2015, have terrified people.

It is said that voters have been favouring anti-establishment figures, perhaps in order to express their indignation towards the corruption of the born-and-bred political elites of the last decades (Flegenheimer & Barbaro, 2016). For example, the current US President, Donald Trump, was never a politician proper, only a real-estate developer and a TV show presenter. My opinion is that the voters have been caught up in the mesh of the recent and long-enduring financial and social “crises” that the absolutist, one-sided, uncritical and easily digestible far-right rhetoric has

blossomed. Whatever the reasons why, it is a fact that far-right politics have seen a significant momentum in the West in the last few years.

Below are some examples:

- In the Czech Republic, the Czech Social Democratic Party, a once robust party of 20%, struggled to achieve a mere 7% in the last general election of 2017. The newly elected (on 21 October 2017) Prime Minister, the oligarch Andrej Babiš, has openly voiced his ideal for a Europe-wide “anti-refugee alliance” that will ban immigrants from coming to Europe (*The Conversation UK*, 23 October 2017). Eerily similar to Donald Trump, before entering politics in 2012 with his ant-establishment party ANO, his biography included being a businessman and a media mogul.
- The newly elected (15 October 2017) Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, is a far-right supporter, especially of anti-immigration and anti-Muslim ideas (*The Conversation UK*, 23 October 2017). During his campaign he promised to close the borders to refugee flows, ban headscarves in schools, and speed up the deportation processes for migrants. Both the ÖVP and FPÖ (Freedom Party) also promised to cut benefits for all foreigners, even from EU nationals residing in Austria. Actually, Kurz’s message was so similar to the extreme right-wing FPÖ he was labelled a copycat! Nowadays, his conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) is ruling in a coalition with FPÖ. As for the FPÖ, their provocative leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, has tellingly used campaign slogans such as “Love for the homeland instead of Moroccan thieves” (Heimatliebe statt Marrokaner-Diebe) and “Home instead of Islam” (Daham statt Islam).
- In the UK, the Brexit campaign to leave the EU was led by the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP). Also, the Brexit victory (23 June 2016, with 52%) was mainly owed to anti-immigration voices.
- In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s open-door policy, or “Willkommenskultur” (that is, the welcoming culture and positive attitude of the state towards refugees and migrants) that culminated in 2015, soon gave way to indignation and low ratings for her. Merkel was criticised for her refugee policy, which was allegedly exacerbating the crisis while encouraging the “flow” of immigrants into Europe. Now, she is at loggerheads with her coalition partners, trying to form a proper coalition government, while the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) has become the first far-right party to enter the national parliament since WWII.
- In France, Marine Le Pen, head of the extreme right-wing party Front National, as well as former President Nicolas Sarkozy, a conservative, stood brazenly against Merkel’s policy. Le Pen accused Merkel of burdening Europe with illegal immigrants; Sarkozy

warned about the imminent dissolution of the French society by the influx of immigrants (Hasselbach, 2015). Although they did not win the French presidential elections, their voices rose in popularity and were repeated widely.

- In the US, both as a candidate and as a President (elected 9 November 2016) Donald Trump's rhetoric has triggered popular anxieties about religion, race, etc. His pre-election promises about building the "huge Mexican wall" and his post-election signing of the Muslim travel ban are two telling examples. African Americans, as well, have seen the systemic bias against them, inherent in the justice system, surging once more, although it had previously abated. Undocumented immigrants, too, are facing an increased rate of raids and arrests (Ball, 2017). Summing up, the United States' inclusive identity as a nation of immigrants is being dissolved.

The Far-Right Xenophobic Platform

So, what is the problem with the far-right's ascent in Europe and the US?

What is the problem when the Czech Republic President repeatedly asserts that "we must sink those smugglers' boats," adding that "our people do not want any multiculturalism here" (Britské Listy, 2017)?

What is the problem when one of the two presidential nominees (and future US President) openly declares during his campaign that "when Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . They're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists..." (Burns, 2015)?

The problem is that the far-right platform perceives the world almost as shown in the cartoon in Figure 1. Far-right rhetoric has been mostly xenophobic, nationalist and racist, and has currently turned anti-refugee, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim (termed *Islamophobia*). Far-right politicians point to foreigners as the cause for all the current Western plights and insecurities. The following sentiments and related slogans "migrants take our jobs, threaten our culture and security, flow into our borders uncontrolled, etc." are not new. Anti-foreigner prejudices have been repeatedly used throughout history by rightist political groups to scapegoat migrants/refugees by blaming them for everything the government could not fix (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

Most worrying about the rise of right-wing ideology is the rise and popular acceptance of hate speech and the legitimation of exclusionary practices previously deemed unthought of, such as physical attacks on the social groups being ostracised. For example, in 2016 hate crimes in the US reached their highest peak in the last five years according to the FBI, especially around the time of the US election (Ball, 2017). In Europe, Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic), also known as the Visegrád countries, have launched a vehement opposition to

the EU-prescribed refugee quotas; Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has even erected a 110-mile long fence along its Serbian border to keep migrants at bay, also announcing more fences to be built (Gutteridge, 2016), apparently inspired by Trump's campaign. The Austrian Chancellor joined the Visegrád club late in 2017, renouncing Austria's past "erroneous refugee policy" and calling for more border protection (*The Local*, 2017).

It is fairly obvious there is a growing number of anti-foreigner opinions and plans of action being approved of and being considered as "normal" by citizens of multiple countries. This is a huge problem, because it paves the way for larger evils, with ethnic cleansing (genocide) being the worst of all. A short historical journey would remind us of the Holocaust (WWII) where 6 million Jews, among other minority groups, were murdered, or the town of Srebrenica, where more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed, and many thousands more forced to leave, during the Bosnian War, 1992-1995 (Wikipedia, 2018).

It is important to understand that far-right animosity towards foreigners is deceitful; it depends on who "we" call our ally and friend at any given time, and who we can safely label as "foreigner." For example, the Austrian's far-right FPÖ, whose first leaders were former SS officers, and which has been well-known for its racism and neo-Nazism ideas, used to have a strong anti-Semitic identity. However, after its plummeting popularity in the post-WWII polls and elections, the party changed its scapegoat target. Nowadays, it survives only because its leader has directed the hostility towards another religious minority group, the Muslims (Shuster, 2016). It follows then, that far-right parties target the most vulnerable minority group at any given time, appealing to the emotions of the already disoriented voters by providing them an easy solution to their problems... and, in so doing, secure their own election to office.

Relation to Intercultural Dialogue

Where is xenophobia located in our modern Western world of so-called "multiculturalism" and "globalisation," in a world that just a couple of years ago welcomed foreigners, working towards inclusion, tolerance, and open borders?

Since fear and apprehension are inherent to human nature, and because the general financial crisis left people fearful of their future, xenophobia is being sustained by the political elites without much effort, simply tapping on the aforementioned insecurities and anxieties and pointing to the newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Therefore, I strongly believe it is necessary for people to *become aware of what is going on behind the scenes*, including whose vested interests are being pursued by the proliferation of hate speech, and *start putting more effort to engage in genuine intercultural dialogue with their neighbours*. Too good to be true? I don't think so.

As Alexis Stamatis, a Greek novelist and poet, has recently suggested, what is necessary is the actual understanding of the Other, whose "foreign culture" is ultimately so very similar to "ours." In other

words, what is needed is sharing our myth with the myth of other cultures (Stamatis, 2018). Why not share our Western myth, then, with the myth of the Mexican, of the Syrian, of the Afghan? I believe that what is needed is more authentic interaction with “the foreigner,” always based on goodwill and genuine interest; only through getting to know “the Other,” will we be able to shed the artificial fear towards her/him.

A little pause and critical thinking towards all the xenophobic rhetoric would be beneficial, too. It would help us to listen more carefully, think through and see through the exaggerations and the lies, get reasonable with our fears, and condemn the people who are fuelling them for their own gain.

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