NATIVISM

Nativism, similar to xenophobia, implies a favoring of native inhabitants and a prejudice toward outsiders, particularly foreigners. At various times throughout the American past, nativism in the form of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant sentiment has dominated public opinion and political circles. Americans frequently lapse into nativism during times of economic decline, warfare, and heavy immigration, when they feel economically, socially, and politically threatened by new as well as long-standing "foreigners."

During the late 18th century, nativism became widespread for the first time in the history of the United States due to the instability of the new national government. A young and fragile nation with a weak military and a relatively open political system, the United States in the 1790s became a growing attraction for immigrants from Europe. Yet many Americans feared the rising tide of French immigrants fleeing the violent French Revolution. Despite the assistance rendered by the French to the United States during the American Revolution, Americans feared the newcomers, who might bring radical ideas to upset the American political scene.

Anti-Catholicism represented a strong focus of nativism during the mid-1800s. Following the massive immigration of 2 million Irish Catholics to the United States during the 1840s and 1850s, American Protestants became fearful of contamination by the alleged cultural inferiority of Irish people. Those new American Catholics were labeled as subversive and linked to foreign influence and anti-American behavior. Many Protestant Americans reasoned that the pope would soon become a powerful political figure within the United States.

Anti-Catholic Organizations

 Organizations formed the backbone of anti-Catholic nativism in the mid-19th century. Anchoring the nativist movement, the United American Mechanics was a working-class, white, Protestant organization that targeted groups that it felt threatened the rights of American workingmen. By 1855, more than 50,000 men belonged to the ritual-bound organization. The large membership was due in part to the recent arrival of Irish workers. The emergence of the Know-Nothing Party also illustrates the high level of organization achieved during this period of nativism. Founded in New York City in 1849 as the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, the organization grew into the most powerful nativist organization prior to the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1860s.

Anti-Catholic nativism resurfaced in the late 19th century due to the growing power of the Catholic Church in the United States. During the 1884 presidential election, nativism became a political force once again. Several anti-Catholic organizations flourished and declined in the 1880s. In 1887, the American Protective Association was founded. Highly secretive like the Know-Nothings, it quietly supported anti-Catholic candidates.

In the western United States, Chinese immigrants endured a nativist movement that reached fruition in California during the 1870s and 1880s. The discovery of gold in 1849 induced hundreds of thousands of Chinese people, predominantly men, to immigrate to California. The economic competition they represented in the gold fields motivated white American miners to pass a miner's tax to push Chinese (and other foreign miners) out of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where most of the gold was located. The Chinese became business owners and railroad workers in the late 1860s and 1870s and established "Chinatowns" in Western cities to survive economically.

The Growth of Anti-Chinese Sentiment

After a severe recession and a series of bitter industrial strikes hit the United States in the 1870s, anti-Chinese sentiment grew in California. The movement received widespread support from the Irish working class and was led by Dennis Kearney, an Irish worker and political activist in San Francisco. The anti-Chinese movement also drew strong support from unions and newspapers across the nation. The Knights of Labor, a popular labor union, pushed Congress in the late 1870s to restrict Chinese competition with white workers. Congress eventually passed a bill known as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), restricting the immigration of Chinese into the United States to only a few individuals each year.

In addition to anti-Catholic and anti-Chinese sentiment, anti-Semitism also served as a focal point for nativist thought in the 19th century. Rooted in Christian stereotypes of Jews as greedy and insular people dominated by a mysterious religion hostile to Christianity, anti-Semitism exercised a deeper and more lasting influence on American culture than anti-Catholicism. Immigration served as a catalyst for anti-Semitism in much the same way as it did for anti-Catholic sentiment; anti-Semitism increased markedly when millions of Jews from eastern Europe immigrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Encouraged by the proliferation of propaganda by political groups hostile to Jewish influence in Europe, discrimination against Jews became commonplace in American life. Anti-Semitism also increased due to the upward social movement of successful German Jews who first arrived in the 1850s. Despite anti-Semitic nativism, Jewish Americans achieved economic and political success by the late 19th century that unfortunately brought a backlash from white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan's targets following World War I were predictable: African Americans, Jews, and Catholics. The Klan targeted Jewish business owners and white Catholics who sympathized with African Americans in their quest to achieve equality following the end of slavery. Renamed the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the revived group bore the indelible stamp of its founder and visionary, a Georgian named William Simmons. Like other leaders of nativist organizations, Simmons excelled at joining and operating volunteer organizations. He hired an Atlanta public relations organization called the Southern Publicity Association to disseminate Klan rhetoric, a tactic that helped the Klan rise to the height of its power by the mid-20th century.

The end of World War I promised a flood of war refugees, particularly from the new Soviet Union. American Protestants believed they would bring anarchy and bloodshed to the U.S. political and social scene. In the 1920s, however, the Klan began to lose members following the passage of the Immigration Act (1924), which severely cut back immigration from southern and eastern Europe. By the end of the 1920s, following an era of prosperity for the white middle class, the Klan had only 82,000 members. The 1928 election, however, was shaped by Klan anti-Catholic rhetoric. Democratic presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith lost to Republican Herbert Hoover due in part to Smith's Catholic background, a fact
The Klan became a well-run business enterprise after World War II, when 2 million Americans joined its ranks. In small rural towns across the South, many white Americans became angry toward African Americans and the federal government for supporting the civil rights movement. The Klan offered them an answer to the decline of white control over economic and political power. Joining the KKK became a badge of social status and manhood. Separate auxiliaries for women had also been created, so Klan activity was often a family affair. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Klan in the 1950s and 1960s was responsible for the deaths of numerous civil rights leaders, including National Association for the Advancement of Colored People organizer Medgar Evers. Sheriffs, policemen, and even judges in Southern cities were often members of the Klan, so prosecution of Klan murders rarely resulted.

Nativism Adapts to Changing Times

Even after World War II, nativism remained strong in the United States. The rise of communism in the Soviet Union and witch hunts for communists in the United States in the 1950s created a new bogeyman to replace the Jew, Catholic, and immigrant. Indeed, prominent prosecutors of the red scare, like Joseph McCarthy, were Catholics. Nevertheless, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy was forced to deal with his Catholic past, a sign that fear of Catholics remained firmly rooted in the American national character. Still, Kennedy became the first Catholic president, an unthinkable development for Americans between 1850 and 1960.

Like other forms of prejudice, nativism as a cultural movement became more internal and personal in the late 20th century. It no longer produced many organizations that claimed a wide national following, though anti-immigrant groups and the KKK continued to flourish.

In the early years of the 21st century, two foci of nativism have remained: anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Heavy immigration from Mexico and China since 1980 and the perceived problem of border patrol in Southwestern states fueled a resurgence of nativism in Florida, California, New York, Texas, and Arizona in the 1990s. Like the white-male, working-class fear of Chinese immigrant workers in the 1870s in California, a disgruntled white working class once again supported anti-immigrant sentiment in California. In 1994, Pete Wilson won his second term as governor of California by condemning the high level of Mexican immigration to California (and by implication, other states like Texas). The issue of undocumented immigrants from Mexico has played a role in the political debate over immigration reform in the United States. It will, no doubt, continue to be argued in Congress, social media, television news outlets, and presidential debates.

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Further Reading


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