

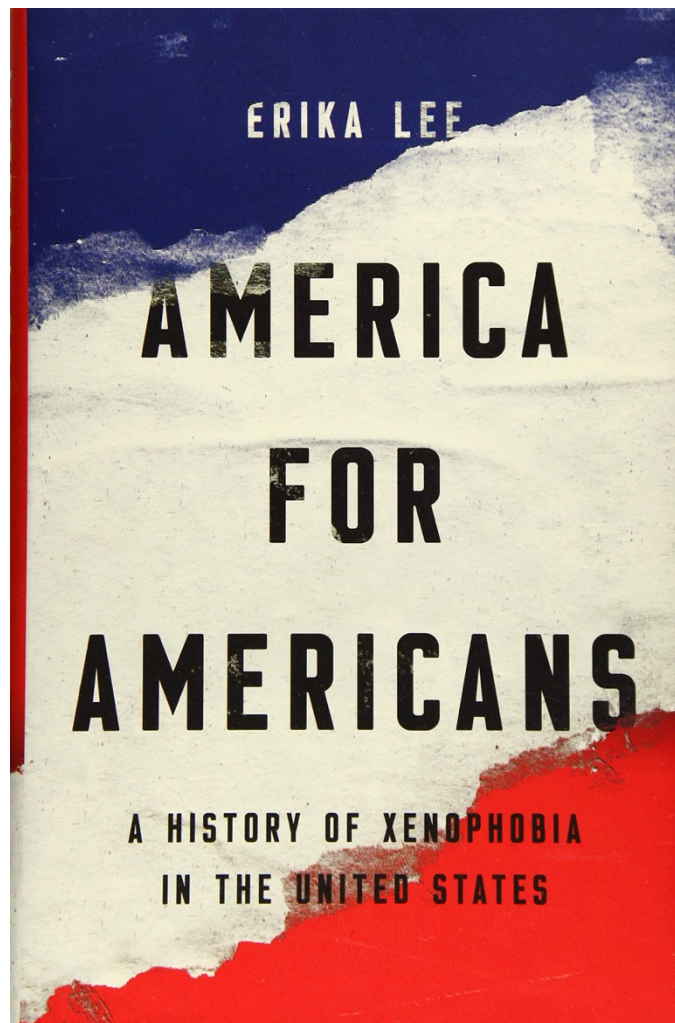
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the
United States by Erika Lee

by Eva Richter



AMERICA FOR AMERICANS: A HISTORY OF XENOPHOBIA IN THE UNITED STATES. BY ERIKA LEE

Erika Lee. (2019). *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*. New York: Basic Books,

In a meticulously researched, historically detailed narrative, Erika Lee, author of *America for Americans*, delineates the racism and xenophobia that have met successive waves of foreigners seeking admission to this country and inclusion in its life. The author identifies two conflicting narratives of migration in America: one depicts an open country that welcomes migrants from everywhere, values their contributions and incorporates them into the success story that is American democracy; the other depicts a country in which, since the very beginning of the country's founding, migrants have been met with xenophobia and racism, have been devalued, exploited, denied the full benefits of citizenship and even deported. Writing in the last months of the Trump regime, Lee maintains that the xenophobia that found such clear expression in Trump's anti-immigrant actions, far from being a new impulse, has been an abiding American tradition. Lee does not dispute the truth of the first narrative, but in this work she focuses exclusively on the second narrative and presents a grim picture. (Since the distinction between documented and undocumented, permanent and temporary, migrants and refugees is not particularly relevant to Lee's thesis, I will use the general terms immigrants or migrants throughout this review to refer to the various cohorts she deals with.)

While she agrees that there is no settled definition of xenophobia in international law, academia or human rights, Lee defines it as "an ideology: a set of beliefs and ideas based on the premise that foreigners are threats to the nation and its people," born of a narrow, power-based determination of who is or is not an American, sowing fear of the foreigner, separating him/her from the "natives," and criminalizing both the act of migration and the migrant. She sets the impulse to xenophobia in what she defines as the racist crucible of America's founding with its hostility both to Native Americans, whom it drove out of their lands, and to enslaved Africans, whose rights as human beings the European settlers denied, dehumanizing both groups and declaring them inferior. Lee maintains that race is the single most important factor in determining which foreigners shall be targeted for xenophobic discrimination, explaining that "xenophobia is a form of racism." Race and racism, then, determine the underlying hostility; xenophobia and xenophobic acts are their expression.

But race as Lee invokes it is also a fairly fluid concept, and she traces different forms of racism used to stereotype groups on the basis of perceived behavior and values, both with and without color markers ("color-blind racism"). Distinguishing among "different kinds of whiteness," xenophobes become adept, as she says, at manufacturing racial difference. Thus, the early German settlers and the Irish were stereotyped on the basis of their language, culture, religion and other characteristics, and their right to belong in America was rejected on the basis of the threats they were perceived to embody to the existing American system of values and way of life. The eminent Benjamin Franklin himself deplored the admission to the colonies of all

"blacks and tawneys" and called for the increase of what he called "the lovely white," whom he specifically identified as the English colonist, while he passionately maintained that German immigration presented a clear danger to the integrity of America. Thus, even if they were not specifically "black or tawney," the German were perceived to belong to a different racial category from the "lovely white" English. The Irish were later similarly racialized when they arrived.

In the context of capitalism, with its emphasis on competition, it is economic, political and social power that determines what it means to be an American. The power structure also determines not only where an individual stands in the hierarchy of power, but also where one's group, as defined by certain generalized attributes, shall stand. For much of American history, Lee says, the dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestants claimed the idea that only they, as the "first settlers," the colonists who established the country's language, culture and form of government, could be considered native and therefore quintessentially American. Lee points out that such a claim amounted to a justification of a wholesale land grab, justification for the westward expansion of America, the dispossession and genocidal destruction of the Native Americans, and ultimately the establishment of what the author calls "a distinct and racist national American identity."

In successive chapters the author details the xenophobia and racism that have met the groups that have come to America, starting with national groups like the Germans in the early 18th century, continuing through the Irish, Chinese, Italians, Mexicans and other Latin-Americans, and the Japanese, and finally comprehending "alien" religious groups like the Jews and most recently the Muslims. She shows how, until they became a colonizing force that stripped Native Americans of their lands, the Germans were considered inferior to the original settlers and unlikely to be able to fit into American life. However, once they became part of the dominant society economically and politically, the Germans could be contrasted with the Native Americans, whom they had exploited and robbed, and they could become acceptable to the dominant white majority as part of their white, successful group. To ensure the existing racial structure, laws were then passed decreeing that only free white persons could become citizens, a racial barrier that persisted until 1952.

Lee traces opposition to the great wave of Irish immigration in the 19th century, culminating in what she defines as both racial and political xenophobia as the Irish were identified by their Catholic faith and their membership in the Celtic race. They were then targeted by the ascendant nativist Know Nothing political party (the name was conferred on them because one of their principles was that when challenged to explain whom they represented they were instructed to claim to know nothing), a party that demonized and stereotyped the Irish as "wild" and untrustworthy, though Lee says they were still perceived as white and thus were apparently victims of a different kind of racism from that which was applied to enslaved Africans and always used a color marker. The Irish were finally accepted when they developed political power, but not before many of them had been deported or had otherwise been denied the promise of American freedom.

Discrimination against the Chinese proceeded on racist lines again, reinforced by the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that invoked the government's regulatory and national security powers and issues of race and class to exclude the Chinese from citizenship. It was not revoked until 1943, when China was an ally in the war against the Japanese.

According to Lee, every successive immigrant group was received with similar racist xenophobia that contrasted the incoming group with the dominant power group in racial terms, attributing to them negative characteristics perceived as threatening to the purity, the persistence and the power of the dominant group. Lee discusses at some length the barriers that were raised against each group, such as the promotion of literacy tests, the use by Madison Grant and his followers of the "science" of eugenics to keep out "inferior stock," the racist theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and the complicity of leading lights in public life and sacred academic enclaves like Harvard and Yale. She traces the racialization and exiling of the Mexicans, who had once been natives of the land now claimed by the United States, and she discusses the use of quotas in successive immigration bills designed to keep out people of color. The incarceration of the Japanese during World War II is a particularly sorry chapter in this country's exclusionary policies, as people of Japanese origin, many of them born in this country, were forced into detention centers, their property confiscated by the US government, their civil rights abrogated, even while young, able-bodied men of Japanese descent served most admirably in the armed forces during World War II. The stated reason for this incarceration was distrust of Japanese loyalties, but tellingly, not a single case of espionage or disloyalty was ever charged against any Japanese in or out of the camps. Their loyalty was simply unquestionable, and their imprisonment can only be understood as an extreme form of xenophobia and racism.

The Immigration Bill of 1965 receives quite thorough discussion in terms of racism and xenophobia. Though Lee agrees that it was groundbreaking, forged as it was during the height of the civil rights movement, in its call for thorough social reform, she concludes that it was imperfect in both design and execution. According to Lee, it actually led to a new kind of "color-blind xenophobia," which substituted charges of criminality for racism and led directly to the calls for a wall to keep all migrants out. Lee discusses several factors contributing to the rise of the xenophobic and racist tropes, which led directly to the exclusionary policies of Donald Trump and the demonization of all things Muslim. Among them are California's highly xenophobic Proposition 187, anti-immigrant measures passed as part of the tough-on-crime measures of the Clinton Administration, the role of the North American Free Trade Agreement in destabilizing labor patterns, the rise of the Tea Party, various terrorist attacks in Yemen, Kenya, Tanzania, and on 9/11. Throughout, Lee cites the binary impulses in American society that pit "good" and "bad" immigrants against each

other, elevating now one, now another group in constant competition for legitimacy, acceptance and power.

The book is well illustrated with historical cartoons, photographs, advertisements and declarations. It is meticulously researched and documented and presents a thorough indictment of American immigration policies, illustrating throughout how racism and xenophobia, in a constant and developing dance with one another, have brought us to this defining moment in our immigration history.

Migration has increased all over the world, fueled by climate change and environmental disaster, wars, political and social instability, economic and social inequalities and violence of all kinds--personal, group induced and institutional. This book could be a valuable resource for a course on the nature of diversity and inclusivity in a democratic society. It could help students to examine questions of individual responsibility to the stated values of the society--questions of inclusivity, equality, equity and justice in the light of an increasingly diverse citizenry--and an attempt to understand the limitations of those values as they are daily practiced. It could help students begin to define and understand their obligations as individuals in a pluralistic society with democratic values, at the same time as they may demand adherence to national laws and safeguards both from themselves and from those who have grown up with different sets of values.

Change is the most constant characteristic in our society, and it is hastened by the addition to the body politic of new immigrants with different cultures, languages and customs. How and whether we as a nation adapt to such change; when and how and what we change; how we decide what must be preserved and why; what our core values are; and what our responsibilities and obligations are remain constant questions, part of an ongoing conversation. Migrants and new citizens must be drawn into the conversation and become part of whatever solution our society comes up with. Keeping them out, disenfranchised and powerless, can lead only to further resentment and alienation. Ultimately, it dooms us to the finally destabilizing eternal power play that Erika Lee describes. Defining xenophobia as a threat to American democracy, she finally calls on readers to recognize the destructive nature of our racist and xenophobic policies and calls for immediate reform. It is noteworthy that one of President Biden's first acts as President was to call for immigration reform, a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented migrants, the expansion of legal immigration, and safeguards for the provisions of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or Dreamers Act of the Obama period that protects from deportation those who were illegally brought to this country as children. To date, however, neither he nor the Democratic Party has followed up on this call. It will be fascinating to see how this drama plays out against a badly divided society in a perilous, anti-democratic time.



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