

# Hell Is Other People

## An Ethical Dilemma

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*Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.*

Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote “*L'enfer, c'est les autres*”<sup>1</sup> in his allegorical play *No Exit*. Translated literally as “Hell, it is the others,” this line is commonly quoted as “Hell is other people.” Although it feels a bit like an introvert's lament, the line might serve as an operating principle for xenophobia.



Janah Hattingsh, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The xenophobe of 2023 does not merely fear strangers. Rather, as George Makari explains in *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia*, “fear and hatred of the Other has solidified...[and] become a defended solution. ... The world has

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<sup>1</sup> George Makari, *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia* (New York: Norton, 2021), 204.

been simplified and purified: we are good and they are bad.”<sup>2</sup> Among xenophobic groups, “exclusionary criteria” are the point, with “rigid borders...[that] give both definition to members and provide the main purpose for the group.”<sup>3</sup>

Times of instability, such as the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 2008 worldwide economic crisis, and the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, create “a profound political and cultural unease.”<sup>4</sup> In the last three decades, the rapid changes and economically and socially disruptive impacts of globalization have exacerbated that unease. Autocratic leaders and candidates have used these disruptions to their advantage, preying on peoples’ fears of the other, often directed against immigrants. Calling the current mood in Europe “a gloomy void,” Ishaan Tharoor has noted how far-right politicians there “offer a simpler, emotive appeal than their establishment counterparts.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2022 U.S. political races, Republican candidates frequently described immigration as “invasion,” a stance that has become a mainstream position for the party.<sup>6</sup> Vanessa Cárdenas of America’s Voice, an immigrant advocacy group, has described such usage as rhetoric “meant to agitate people for political reasons, because it makes people feel anger and hate.”<sup>7</sup>

But rather than facing an invasion, according to a 2022 report from the Joint Economic Committee Democrats of the U.S. Senate, the country is in fact experiencing a shortfall of immigrant workers, who are important for continuing economic recovery since the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Makari, 241.

<sup>3</sup> Makari, 241.

<sup>4</sup> John Rennie Short, “Column: Why There’s a Backlash Against Globalization and What Needs to Change,” *PBS News Hour*, November 30, 2016, para 22. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/column-theres-backlash-globalization-needs-change>

<sup>5</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “A Far-Right European Union Could Be Around the Corner,” *Today’s Worldview*, *Washington Post*, July 21, 2023, para. 7. <https://s2.washingtonpost.com/camp-rw/?trackId=596a4b9aae7e8a0ef33ca55a&cs=64ba0769b7f9e08976f1623&clinknum=5&linktot=73&linknum=5&linktot=73>

<sup>6</sup> Joel Rose, “Talk of ‘Invasion’ Moves from the Fringe to the Mainstream of GOP Immigration Message,” *NPR*, August 3, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/03/1115175247/talk-of-invasion-moves-from-the-fringe-to-the-mainstream-of-gop-immigration-mess>

<sup>7</sup> Rose, 7.

<sup>8</sup> View “The Hamilton Mixtape: Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” at [https://youtu.be/6\\_35a7sn6ds](https://youtu.be/6_35a7sn6ds).

## Misconceptions

Across Europe and the United States, countries have struggled to manage the logistics of an influx of migrants and refugees. However, a look into U.S. data about the impacts of immigration readily demonstrates that, although challenges exist, particularly for the migrating people themselves, fears are baseless.

First, immigrants — including undocumented immigrants — are less likely to commit crimes than native-born people. This fact directly contradicts Donald Trump’s infamous but groundless 2015 claims regarding the character of immigrants from Mexico.<sup>9</sup> In fact, far from seeing more violent crime, a 2020 study found that “the American communities where immigrants make their homes are more often improved by [immigrants’] presence than harmed by it. Immigrants bring social, cultural and economic activity...[making] these places more vital and safer, not more dangerous.”<sup>10</sup>

And, while they are not committing crimes, immigrants to the United States are also not dragging down the economy or sapping social service budgets. A 2019 report from the U.S. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analyzed the many ways immigrants contribute to the U.S. economy: “They work at high rates and make up more than a third of the workforce in some industries. Their geographic mobility helps local economies respond to worker shortages. ... Immigrant workers help support the aging native-born population, ...bolstering the Social Security and Medicare trust funds.”<sup>11</sup> Overall, population growth through the

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<sup>9</sup> Washington Post, “Full Text: Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid,” June 16, 2015, para. 11. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>

<sup>10</sup> Robert M. Adelman and Lesley Reid, “Undocumented Immigrants May Actually Make American Communities Safer – Not More Dangerous – New Study Finds, *The Conversation*, October 27, 2020, para. 2. <https://theconversation.com/undocumented-immigrants-may-actually-make-american-communities-safer-not-more-dangerous-new-study-finds-146829>

<sup>11</sup> Arloc Sherman, Danilo Trisi, Chad Stone, Shelby Gonzales, and Sharon Parrott, *Immigrants Contribute Greatly to U.S. Economy, Despite Administration’s “Public Charge” Rule Rationale* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 15, 2019), para. 3. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/immigrants-contribute-greatly-to-us-economy-despite-administrations>

children of immigrants is economically beneficial.<sup>12</sup> A common concern is the cost of services to illegal immigrants, but a 2020 study of Texas by Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy found that the economic benefits provided by this population outweighed the combined costs, including public education and health care.<sup>13</sup>

In Europe, views of native-born people regarding immigrants have become more positive in the last decade, particularly in response to specific questions regarding immigrants' impacts rather than broad generic questions.<sup>14</sup> A study by the OECD/European Commission found that young people tended to have more positive attitudes toward immigrants than views held by elderly individuals and were more likely to interact with immigrants, affecting their viewpoints in positive ways.

Even the arrival of refugees does not have the negative impacts that some opponents imagine. Researchers have found predominantly positive economic effects on countries hosting refugees,<sup>15</sup> and a 2019 study looked at how the long-term presence of Congolese refugees affected local communities in Rwanda in terms of safety, social networks, and trust. The authors found that more frequent interaction boosted trust between refugees and host communities, further reporting the local perspective that "economic and social support given to refugees plays a key role in reducing and preventing conflict between the two groups."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sherman et al., para. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Jose Ivan Rodríguez-Sánchez, *Undocumented Immigrants in Texas: A Cost-Benefit Assessment* (Houston, TX: Center for the U.S. and Mexico, May 8, 2020), para. 3. <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/undocumented-immigrants-texas-cost-benefit-assessment>

<sup>14</sup> OECD/European Commission, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2023), 126. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en>

<sup>15</sup> Harun Onder, *10 Economic Characteristics of Refugee Arrivals and Returns* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, February 25, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/10-economic-characteristics-of-refugee-arrivals-and-returns/>; Paolo Verme, "Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Refugees on Host Communities," *Development for Peace, World Bank Blogs*, March 28, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/theory-and-evidence-impact-refugees-host-communities>

<sup>16</sup> Veronika Fajth, Özge Bilgili, Craig Loschmann, and Melissa Siegel, "How Do Refugees Affect Social Life in Host Communities? The Case of

## Recognizing Reality

How can individuals and communities stay open to the realities of globalization, specifically the intermingling of cultures and peoples?

Facts can be transformative against xenophobia. Roger Casement's shocking report in 1903 on atrocities in the Belgian Congo and his exposure of British abuses in the Peruvian Amazon "helped provoke a crisis of conscience regarding imperialism itself."<sup>17</sup> In 1911, anthropologist Franz Boas challenged racial science that underlaid much xenophobia, arguing that culture rather than biology determined morality.<sup>18</sup> Boas's data showed how "supposedly permanent racial characteristics could be altered by environmental influences."<sup>19</sup>

But for progress to be made, people must be open to facts — and some people are not. As Makari noted on the "Life Examined" podcast, "Some people need to hate. They have a deeper need to have an Other. ... Freud used the concept of a 'defensive projection,' projecting the shame and guilt you have inside yourself onto another, and that makes you feel great!"<sup>20</sup>

Is hell really other people? Sartre clarified that his quote was not meant to stand alone, that the second piece of the idea is that heaven is also other people. "Hell is separateness, uncommunicability, self-centeredness, lust for power, for riches, for fame. Heaven, on the other hand, is very simple — and very hard: caring about your fellow beings."<sup>21</sup>

Thus, improving relationships with the people near us can be transformative. To that end, perhaps connection can go where facts cannot. Deeyah Khan's experience of change in attitude and action through her engagement with White nationalists, explored

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Congolese Refugees in Rwanda," *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 33 (2019), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0139-1>

<sup>17</sup> Makari, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Makari, 104.

<sup>19</sup> Makari, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Bastian, "How War Fuels Racism, Fear, and Xenophobia," Life Examined (podcast), *KCRW*, March 12, 2022, 0:16. <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/life-examined/xenophobia-migrants-war-conflict-racism-hate/george-makari-anti-immigrant-fear-history-psychosis-ukraine/embed-player>

<sup>21</sup> From Gerassi, *Talking with Sartre: Conversations and Debates*, quoted in Kiki Berk, "Hell Is Other People": Sartre on Personal Relationships," *1000-Word Philosophy*, February 8, 2021, para. 11. <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2021/02/08/hell-is-other-people/>

in her documentary *White Right: Meeting the Enemy*, demonstrates that possibility.<sup>22</sup>

Makari has observed that “being communitarian, finding a way of cooperating, has been perhaps one of the most adaptive things humans have ever done. ... That’s how we survive.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the frightening movement of European governments toward the far right,<sup>24</sup> perhaps we can be brave enough to see the value of other people, and thus we can pull others — and ourselves — out of Sartre’s crowded hell.

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<sup>22</sup> Deeyah Khan, filmmaker, “White Right: Meeting the Enemy,” Produced by Fuuse, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Bastian, 7:25.

<sup>24</sup> Tharoor, para 6.