

SLATE

Why Soros Is the Right's Favorite Immigration Boogeyman

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Financier and philanthropist George Soros' critics in the United States and around the world have leveled all manner of charges, real and absurd, against him, for decades now. But nothing—not being involved in the breaking of the Bank of England, not speculating on Asian currencies, not supporting Sarajevo during the war in Yugoslavia, not putting money toward defeating George W. Bush in the United States or election monitoring in Georgia in 2004, not even his role in the financial crash of 2008—has been as effective at cementing Soros' status as a boogeyman as recent debates over immigration.

To understand the particular anti-Semitism of saying that a Jew is trying to bring in immigrants to corrupt a predominantly Christian nation, one needs to understand that a core principle of anti-Semitism is that Jews are always the Other. In the Soviet Union, they were rootless cosmopolitans. In Hitler's Germany, they were not only not of the German people; they were not of the human species. These are extreme examples, but they are nevertheless

part of history. Thanks to leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Donald Trump blaming Soros for an influx of immigrants into their countries, this trope is also part of our present.

The idea of the Jew bringing in immigrants is, in a certain sense, the most perfect anti-Semitism. Here is a person who is not tied, not really, to the country in which they claim to live, of which they claim to be, subverting and corrupting the true nation, the true people, the ones who really belong. Of course, they want to subvert the values of the nation; they were never, could never, really be part of the nation in the first place. Of course, they are helping the invaders; they are invaders themselves. Of course, Jews are not helping refugees because they think it's right; their reason for helping them is the reason Jews do everything. Jews want only to corrupt.

The beauty of this theory, if one is an anti-Semite, is that one does not even need to say the word *Jewish*. The very image of a prominent Jewish person smuggling in people trying to destroy the soul of the nation is enough to make anti-Semites' synapses light up.

Here, someone might say that other rich people are criticized for spending money, and that attacks on them aren't dismissed as anti-Semitic. But the attacks on George Soros are not anti-Semitic because they are a critique of money spent; they are anti-Semitic because they are a critique of money that has not and will never be spent. They are the invention and ascription of an agenda, a modern version of an old and hateful conspiracy.

Here, someone else might suggest that Soros is barely Jewish. This is correct if one thinks that the only way to be Jewish is to be both religious and tightly tied to Israel. Soros is neither of those things. Zionism, he once said, didn't interest him because he was interested in the universal human condition. But not being interested in Zionism is different from not being Jewish.

“Put yourself in my place,” he told his interlocutor in that particular interview. “I was facing extermination at the age of 14 because I was Jewish. Wouldn't that make an impression on you?”

Trump won the presidency after a campaign in which he called Mexican immigrants rapists and promised to ban Muslims from entering the country. He was not new to immigration conspiracy theories, nor was he new to anti-Semitic food for thought—during his campaign, he tweeted out an image of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's face and the Star of David over piles of money (Trump, of course, denied that there was anything anti-Semitic about this; elsewhere in the campaign, he told Republican Jews that they did not support him because he, Trump, couldn't be bought, and they, Republican Jews, liked to buy and control their candidates).

But as the 2018 midterm elections approached, he combined xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

In late October 2018, Trump said he “wouldn't be surprised” if “someone” was paying for the migrant caravan that was then making its way to the Southern U.S. border. When one reporter helpfully shouted out, “George Soros?” Trump replied, “I don't know who, but I wouldn't be surprised. A lot of people say yes.”

“When I saw [Trump blame Soros for the caravan], I was just like—whoa, this is just Orbán's playbook that's come to America,” said Frank Sharry, founder of the liberal (Soros-funded) immigration group America's Voice. He remembered Soros becoming a boogeyman for the right wing back when he gave personal money to stop George W. Bush's reelection back in 2004, he told me—but he didn't remember it being so anti-Semitic.

A few days before Trump wondered aloud whether Soros was funding the caravan, it should be noted, Chris Farrell, director of research of the conservative Judicial Watch, said the caravan was funded by the “Soros-occupied State Department.” That same day, a synagogue in Pittsburgh was attacked. Eleven people died. The massacre was thought to be the deadliest against Jewish people in U.S. history.

The alleged shooter was upset specifically over the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish nonprofit that helps resettle refugees, which, he said, “likes to bring invaders that kill our people.”

The attack on the Tree of Life synagogue was a conflict between the language that Trump pushes and the ideals that Soros has funded. It was not the only one. In 2019, the Trump administration planned to change the census to track immigration status, which was quickly called out as a plan to scare undocumented immigrants and boost white voting power.

One day while I was reporting in Budapest, I checked my email, and a story in my daily Soros Google alerts caught my eye. It was sitting there amid the daily churn of conspiracy theories and diatribes.

My friend and former BuzzFeed News colleague Nidhi Prakash had written it. The headline read, “Inside the Massive, Coordinated Push to Make Sure a Census Citizenship Question Does Not ‘Distort Democracy.’”

The piece was about the fear from immigrants’ rights groups that the threat of the question would deter immigrants, including green card holders, from participating in the census. So, too, was it about the coordinated advocacy work to make sure immigrants and their families were not left out—by offering help lines in multiple languages and doing community outreach—and the unprecedented support from philanthropic organizations, including Soros’ Open Society.

There is, to be fair, an argument to be made that the very fact that those groups needed funding from a billionaire was already a distortion of democracy. But if the funding wasn’t there, some of the most vulnerable people in the country would almost certainly be undercounted.

Shortly thereafter, the Supreme Court ruled that the citizenship question could not be added to the census. Activist groups doubled down to prevent an undercount of immigrants.

The story did not end there. Weeks after the Supreme Court ruling, Trump told four freshmen members of Congress, all women of color, all U.S. citizens, three of whom were born in the United States and one of whom was a refugee, to go back from where they came. He presided over a crowd that chanted of one of the women, Rep. Ilhan Omar, “Send her back.” He made clear that he wanted to make the 2020 election about immigration, and xenophobia, and borders, and Others. About the promise of a closed society, and an ethnonational conception of what it means to belong to it; the antithesis, in many ways, to Soros’ life’s work.

Democrats, too, are in a different place than they were in 2014, the year of Dreamers and President Barack Obama being labeled “deporter in chief.” They are even in a different place than they were in 2016, when former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton failed to win the presidency with her message of “Stronger Together.” At one 2019 Democratic primary debate, Obama’s former vice president, Joe Biden, asked Obama’s former housing secretary, Julián Castro, whether he had objected to the mass deportations. “It seems one of us has learned the lessons of the past,” Castro retorted, “and one of us hasn’t.” Castro was running on decriminalizing illegal border crossings, something of a departure from Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel’s tough-on-immigration line. I asked George Soros whether he, too, supports decriminalization; he did not provide an answer to this particular question.

“The No. 1 difference is [that] it’s become more partisan,” Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration at the Cato Institute, told me over the phone in August after I asked how the immigration debate and discourse have changed over the past several years. “There were a large number of Republicans who thought liberalizing immigration was the right thing to do,” he continued, citing the Gang of Eight—eight senators, four of whom were Republicans, who wrote a bill to modernize U.S. immigration (it passed the Senate and expired in the House under the leadership of Republican House Speaker John Boehner in 2013). Democrats were more likely to support liberalizing immigration, Nowrasteh allowed, “but it wasn’t the massive imbalance you see today.”

There is another difference, too, he said. “The rhetoric is more extreme.”

Multiple studies have shown that there are more people in America who think immigration is good than people who think immigration is an ill. But for people broadly supportive of

immigration, according to Nowrasteh, the issue is probably not the main thing driving them to the polls. For nativists, he said, immigration, or opposition to it, is the No. 1 concern. They don't know how many immigrants are in the country, they don't know how the complex U.S. immigration system works, or that no one person—even Soros—could control it. But the more ignorant the opinion, Nowrasteh said, the more likely the people holding it are to oppose immigration. They know that they don't want immigrants, and they will vote accordingly. And Trump will encourage them to.

Will the people who vote on that issue come out to vote? And if they do, will Trump win? And if he does, what does that mean, in the late years of Soros' life, for the legacy of a man who spent billions of dollars to counter this—Trump's—way of thinking about who gets to belong to and participate in a society?

I asked Charles Gati, a Johns Hopkins professor who knows Soros and was once quite friendly with Orbán, what he thought Soros' influence ultimately was. It was still to be decided, he told me. It wouldn't be decided in Hungary—“Hungary for the time being is lost.” It would be decided here, in the United States, in an election that it appears will be largely about whether this country wants to be an open society that allows different people from different backgrounds to have an equal shot at shaping the debate or a closed (and white) one.

“If Trump is defeated in 2020,” he said, “then [Soros] will be seen as a major factor that stopped the growth of fascism in the world.” That he decided, more than 15 years ago, to get involved in U.S. politics will be viewed as a “fine choice.” He will be seen as one of the people who “began to turn the tide.” But if Trump is reelected—which, Gati said, seems likely—“then he will be seen as a good man who has failed. Which I regret very much,” said Gati, “because he deserves better.”

People say that it's better to have tried and failed, Gati said, adding, “But it's not a great saying.”

I asked Soros if he agreed with Gati. Did his legacy—does his legacy—hinge on whether Trump is reelected?

“No,” he replied. “The open society is always endangered and each generation must fight for it to survive.”

There will always be people who would suppress others. In an open society wherein everyone is able to participate and express their opinion, those people have a right to express that opinion, too. But it is up to others who do not believe in ethnonationalism, ethnic cleansing, voter suppression, the stripping of the rights of citizens, border walls as substitute for other policy—it is up to those others to ensure that the participation of those who believe in a closed society does not come to mean the exclusion of all the people who disagree. It is up to the people who believe, still, even now, in the need for open societies.