

2010

Social Justice Implications of the Organism Metaphor

Gerald V. O'Brien
Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Gerald V. (2010) "Social Justice Implications of the Organism Metaphor," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3495>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

Social Justice Implications of the Organism Metaphor

GERALD V. O'BRIEN

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Department of Social Work

The denigration of marginalized groups is frequently supported through the widespread employment of metaphors that present a pejorative image of the group in question. The organism metaphor, wherein the target group is portrayed as a threat to the integrity of the social body, is a particularly important metaphoric theme in the advancement of social injustice. Drawing largely from primary source documents, this paper provides an overview of the organism metaphor as it has been employed historically to denigrate various social subgroups. Implications for the social work profession are discussed.

Key words: anti-Semitism, eugenics, immigration restriction, metaphor analysis, organism metaphor, policy framing, social justice

Both policy advocacy and social justice have become, for good reason, important elements of social work education and practice. An essential component of ethical practice in the profession includes advocacy on behalf of marginalized populations. A crucial component of this advocacy is the ability to understand and call into question existing group stereotypes and misperceptions, especially when such beliefs support public fear of the group or public indignity against group members. Such portrayals are frequently employed in the political arena to support restrictive legislation against such groups, or put roadblocks in the way of supportive or rights-granting

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, March 2010, Volume XXXVII, Number 1

legislation. Social workers and related professionals are called upon to be public relations specialists, in a sense, since the broader “framings” of the groups with whom we work impact social policy development and practice at all levels (Lens, 2005; O’Brien, *In press*). We can no longer conceptually divorce the individual or family in need from the larger group of which they are—at least in the minds of many—a component.

Pejorative metaphor themes, therefore, constitute a particular interest to contemporary scholars in the social welfare arena, especially to those who focus on social justice issues (Lakoff, 1996). It is incumbent upon social workers to become aware of various ways in which denigrating metaphors have historically been employed for the purpose of dehumanizing minority populations or presenting them as a threat to the general population (O’Brien, *In press*). Such themes cut across geography, cultures, populations and periods.

This article describes one of the more important denigrating metaphor themes, the organism metaphor. The perception of the larger community as a functioning organism is a long-term social work concept, included, for example, in ecosystems theory. Even the terms we frequently employ to describe at-risk groups, such as “marginalized,” takes into account the perception that such individuals stand on the periphery of the social body. Following a brief overview of the organism metaphor, this article will describe in some depth the various sub-themes by which devalued groups have been framed within the context of the metaphor.

Ostracized community groups are often portrayed as diseased entities that threaten to infect and corrupt the healthy components of the social body. Linguistic metaphors that are a central feature of the larger organism metaphor, such as plague, cancer, and virus, are increasingly prevalent within contemporary socio-political dialogue, and are frequently employed to support aversive social policies directed at marginalized groups. According to Donald Levine (1995), the organism metaphor draws on the conceptualization of the nation or community as a holistic biological body, similar to other physical bodies (pp. 239-240). Individual humans and what are considered to be homogenous groups are perceived to be components of this organic body. The value of these components

presumably depends on the extent to which they can be viewed as contributing to overall functioning of the social organism. A prevalent theme in the use of the organism metaphor is the contamination of the healthy segments of society by the unhealthy segments. Noël (1994) noted that those devalued 'out-groups' that can be perceived as invasive and destructive tumors or parasites can be acted on with relative impunity. Intolerance, she contended, "takes on an almost immunological form, with the healthy antibodies of society violently rejecting what it perceives as 'foreign' elements" (p. 119).

Perhaps the most important advocate of the perceptual image that characterized the organism metaphor was the Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (O'Brien, 1999). Spencer (1904) wrote that "a society as a whole, considered apart from its living units, presents phenomena of growth, structure, and function, like those of growth, structure, and function in an individual body; ..." (p. 301). In considering this analogy, he added that a "metaphor, when used to express a real resemblance, raises a suspicion of mere imaginary resemblance; and so obscures the perception of intrinsic kinship" (p. 301). As Levine (1995) noted, Spencer believed that the State was a living organism—not just symbolically, but in a very real sense.

This paper analyzes the various elements of the organism metaphor, incorporating primary and secondary sources related to the following: (a) the American anti-immigration movement of the early 1900s; (b) discussions of 'feeble-minded' persons during the eugenic alarm period (1900-1930); (c) the American and German anti-Semitic movements; and (d) the anti-Japanese movement in the U.S. (1905-1945). All these periods included concerted efforts by opposition groups to highlight the threat that was posed by the group in question, and to foster support for aversive social control policies against the group. Such policies included the quota-based restrictive immigration acts of 1921 and 1924 (immigrants), state involuntary sterilization and restrictive marriage laws (feeble-minded), a range of segregation policies and the Nazi anti-Jewish programs (Jews), and restrictions from owning land and gaining citizenship, and, during World War II, forced internment (Japanese). While the examples are primarily based

on U.S. policy discussions during the first part of the twentieth century, employment of the metaphor in Nazi discourse is included, as it was the most extensive use of the organism metaphor, and in a very real sense characterized the Nazi segregation and extermination efforts.

It is useful to consider the organism metaphor chronologically, progressing from efforts to identify the potentially dangerous entities, to the penetration and spread of the entities within the social body, the threatened contamination of "healthy" societal elements, and ending with the eventual death and decay of the heretofore healthy organism. The only way to protect the healthy social body is to isolate the unhealthy, disease-carrying elements, or to ensure they do not penetrate community-national boundaries. Thus policies related to institutionalization, imprisonment, deportation or even elimination of the unhealthy organisms are the forms of social control that most readily derive from the organism metaphor. As one might assume, such measures are often said to be necessary for the protection of the community.

The foreign origin of the target group is a central feature of the organism metaphor. Just as those elements that adversely affect the human body are usually seen as infecting us from the outside, so too those groups that contaminate the social body are frequently said to have a foreign nature. The target group, like a plague, is invariably viewed as coming from somewhere else. Allen Kraut (1994) noted that with the increased acceptance of the germ theory of disease transmission in the late eighteen-hundreds, "the notion that illness often came to America from someplace else" took root and prospered (pp. 58-59).

It should be noted that even when the social groups that are deemed to be harmful to the general population were born to standing members of the community, rationales that support a foreign identity may still be constructed. Such was the case, for example, with the Jews in Germany who, regardless of their tenure within the country, still were said to embody a foreign nature or essence (Goldhagen, 1996; *The International Jew*, 1920). In California during the first decades of the twentieth century, Japanese-Americans too were considered, regardless of their families' tenure within the country, to be 'Japanese,'

and subject to internment. Likewise, feeble-minded persons, even if they were third or fourth generation Americans, were often characterized by eugenicists as the products of devalued foreign stock (Rafter, 1988).

In situations where the presumably destructive target group is easily characterized as foreign, the organism metaphor is apt to be a major rhetorical mode of dehumanization. Supporters of early immigration restriction policies in the United States, for example, prolifically employed this metaphor. As immigrants were 'digested' or 'absorbed' by the national body, they might—if there were too many of them or they were of 'poor quality'—cause disease or discomfort to the nation (O'Brien, 2003).

Supporters of immigration restriction laws wrote that Americans wanted "a law that [would] ... give America a chance to digest the millions of unassimilated, unwelcome and unwanted aliens that rest so heavily in her" prior to taking on a great many more (Roberts, 1924, p. 58), and that "the stomach of the body politic [was] filled to bursting with peoples swallowed whole whom our digestive juices do not digest" (Strother, 1923, p. 634). The Japanese, too, were characterized as a source of national indigestion. A 1924 editorial cartoon showed Uncle Sam at a dinner table refusing a plate of "Japanese immigration," stating that the food would give him "digestive trouble" ("End of the ...," 1924, p. 15). Miriam Deford (1935) contended that most Americans during the 1930s viewed the Japanese as "an indigestible ingredient in the national hash" (p. 332).

George Chatterton-Hill, in his book *Heredity and Selection in Sociology* (1907), expanded on this application of the organism metaphor. He compared the individuals making up the social organism to the food taken in by a physical body. Some food, he said, characterized by the more desirable segments of society, serves to provide essential nutrients. This food is incorporated within the social body and assists in energizing it and ensuring its survival. Other food components, presumably having a similar effect on the body to unfit and diseased societal elements, are characterized as little more than waste products. They cannot serve the body, and the inability of the organism to properly eliminate these food products—or to effectively guard against ingesting them in the first place—could

be detrimental to the organism and potentially lethal (pp. 257-261).

Anti-Semitic writers on both sides of the Atlantic frequently called Jews foreign intruders in the national body. Hillaire Belloc begins his book *The Jews* (1922) by detailing the need to eliminate 'alien' bodies from the national organism. There were three ways of such elimination, he said. These included absorption within the national body, "elimination by destruction," and "elimination by expulsion" (pp. 3-8). Belloc contended that if the first option was not viable because the foreign entity was a permanent and fundamentally different type of being than the rest of society, as was the case with the Jews, some alternative means of dealing with the group, such as expulsion, needed to be considered.

More so than a 'bad' food product, though, the group is usually described as a potential source of disease. Feeble-minded persons, for example, were frequently referred to by eugenic advocates as cancer cells, viruses, and other specters of disease (O'Brien, 1999). Charles Davenport (1910), the leader of the American eugenics movement, compared 'morons' to the bubonic plague (p. 128), and Martin Barr (1897), the administrator of the institution for feeble-minded persons in Pennsylvania, said that "it does seem absurd that while we wage war upon microbes and bacilli, we turn loose this worse than leprosy to poison the very springs of life" (p. 7). Ellsworth Huntington (1935) was perhaps the most blunt in describing the relationship between morosity and disease. He wrote that "crime and dependency keep on increasing because new defectives are born, just as new cancer cells remorselessly penetrate into sound tissues," and that "[i]t would by no means be a misnomer to call the American Eugenics Society a Society for the Control of Social Cancer" (pp. 45-46).

Writers who warn of invasion of the social body often note that the potentially destructive elements of the target group are very difficult to accurately distinguish from the 'general population.' Indeed, target group members are often feared not only because of their divergence from the rest of the community but also because of their likeness (Zuckier, 1996), as these similarities may allow group members to pass as 'normal' citizens. In such cases, the scope of social control may be

expanded to include all persons within the group who are potentially threatening. In the most extreme cases, such as Japanese internment, the difficulty of differentiating the harmful from the non-threatening members of the group necessitates that social control measures be taken against virtually all members of the target group.

As an outgrowth of this inability to easily distinguish which members of the group should be subject to social control, a cadre of 'diagnosticians,' 'investigators,' or law enforcement professionals who can separate the threatening members of the group from the rest of the community will be created. The rise in diagnostic or investigatory expertise naturally leads to a rapid increase in the number of persons who fall within the target class, thus resulting in an exacerbation of the fear that such persons are indeed penetrating, spreading throughout and threatening to contaminate the community.

This rise in diagnostic expertise can clearly be seen in the efforts of eugenic supporters to develop a workable intelligence test which could accurately separate feeble-minded persons from the rest of the community. The term "moron" was created in the early 1900s by Henry Goddard, a leader of the eugenics movement. Goddard created this term to describe that large group of 'feeble-minded' persons who seemed to be inconspicuous within the community, and graded over into the 'normal' population (Trent, 1994, p. 160). Goddard and others popularized the tests as a method of delineating the class of feeble-minded persons that they felt should be targeted for eugenic social control measures such as sterilization or institutional confinement.

A particularly striking example of the organism metaphor is the following, which was included in an article from the *American Defender*, a California-based publication that was particularly vocal in its opposition to Japanese immigration:

Wherever the Japanese have settled, their nests pollute the communities like the running sores of leprosy. They exist like the yellowed, smoldering discarded butts in an over-full ashtray, vilifying the air with their loathsome smells, filling all who have the misfortune to look upon them with a wholesome disgust and a desire to wash. (cited by McWilliams, 1935, p. 735)

As the above quotation demonstrates, there is little difference between the disease and the filth components of the organism metaphor. The perception of the target group as dirty or filthy is often a precursor to viewing members as a diseased entity (Gilman, 1984; Nelkin & Gilman, 1988; Selzer, 1972). It also serves to reinforce the animalistic metaphor that such persons are subhuman beings. Since filth causes disease, those social groups that live in unsanitary conditions are more likely to carry and spread disease. Indeed, their predilection to filth may be said to imbue them with a tolerance for or immunity to the diseases they carry. Eugenic family studies, such as Goddard's famous description of the Kallikaks, were developed largely to demonstrate the hereditary nature of 'degenerate' conditions; these studies frequently described their subjects as living in and indeed, creating unsanitary, decrepit and animalistic dwellings (Goddard, 1923; Rafter, 1988). H. L. Menchen (1937), justifying a proposed sterilization program for the rural poor, many of whom he presumed to be feeble-minded, wrote that:

The birth rate, down in those pious and malarious wastes ... is precisely what the traffic will bear, and if it were not for the fact that the death rate, especially among children, is also inordinate, the region would swarm like a nest of maggots. (p. 399)

Numerous German and American anti-Semitic publications too noted the filthy conditions within which the stereotypical 'Jew' preferred to live (Hitler, 1971, p. 57; Nelkin & Gilman, 1988; Weindling, 2000). The 'unwashed' state of both the Jews in New York City and the Japanese in California was especially a concern because of their involvement in growing or selling food products, which might easily serve as a vehicle for intentional or accidental contamination (McWilliams, 1935; Selzer, 1972), and the unsanitary nature of Jewish restaurants was also a staple of *Der Stürmer*, the leading Nazi propaganda newspaper (Showalter, 1982; Thurston, 1935).

The organism metaphor holds that once the 'infected' group or person situates itself inside the body of the nation, it will, like a cancer, spread unrelentingly throughout the

organism. Spread may occur by means of rapid reproduction, as with a quickly growing virus. The presumed high fecundity of the target group has often been used to support the argument that they are rightly characterized as an infectious, rapidly reproducing entity threatening to take over and corrupt the social body. Undesirable immigrant groups were continually denigrated because of their high fecundity (Ross, 1922), and anti-Japanese agitators frequently opined that it was only a matter of time before the Japanese had outnumbered the White race in California (Ogawa, 1971). An important element of American and German eugenic rhetoric—including Adolf Hitler's writings—was that morons and other degenerate populations were breeding at a much higher rate than the rest of the population, and eventually would overwhelm the country and take over the democratic process (Guyer, 1927; Hitler, 1971).

Spread may also occur by 'contaminating the blood' of the nation. Poison is a potent linguistic metaphor when the organism metaphor is used to rail against 'mongrelization,' or the specter of race deterioration. As the undesirable group interbreeds within the population, it is said to spread its poisonous influence. Since blood is a liquid, and poisons often are as well, the metaphoric connection is especially potent. Undesirable immigrants, for example, were said to be responsible for 'the poison working in the veins of America' (Roberts, 1924, p. 58). Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* (1971) that the Jew "poisons the blood of others, but preserves his own. The Jew almost never marries a Christian woman; it is the Christian who marries a Jewess. The bastards, however, take after the Jewish side" (p. 316). Jewish "poisonings of the blood," he added, "have led not only to a decomposition of our blood, but also of our soul" (p. 396).

Eugenicists contended that as a plague within society, feeble-minded individuals threatened to transmit their malignancy throughout the rest of the community, largely by means of intermarriage with persons who were not feeble-minded (Van Wagenen, 1914). When eugenic supporters lobbied in state legislatures for sterilization laws or increased institution funding, they often displayed charts from the family studies. These presentations graphically showed "the vitiating spread of mental defectiveness throughout a whole stock" (Pictures

the Cure ..., 1917, p. 725). Drawing on an early, simplistic form of Mendelism, many eugenicists perceived the human species to be composed of 'pure' and 'impure' strains, and the primary goal of eugenics was to ensure that "the family lines of pure strain shall not be contaminated" (Gosney & Popenoe, 1980, p. 7). Female morons were especially portrayed as a pollutant. As Elizabeth Yukins (2003) wrote in her analysis of the family studies, these works "pathologized" women such as Deborah Kallikak "as dangerous biological contaminants" (p. 165).

Because of both its diseased quality and its rapid spread within the social body, the target group is portrayed as threatening not only the integrity but indeed the very life of the national organism. The Nazi publication *Der Stuermer* reported that the Jews were "the germ that has thrown the world into a disease which irrevocably leads to death unless humanity rises at the last moment." Just as individuals needed to protect themselves against disease, this article continued, "the world will be restored to health only when the most terrible germ of all times, the Jew, has been removed" (cited in *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Supplement A*, 1947, p. 950). *The International Jew* (1920), an American anti-Semitic publication underwritten by Henry Ford, likewise held that "[t]he main source of the sickness of the German national body is charged to be the influence of the Jews." Because the sickness had gone on for so long, the book continued, an "eruption has broken out on the surface of the body politic" (p. 23).

Often animal metaphors are employed to highlight the process of decay that is likely to be inflicted on the social body by the target group. Parasites may, in some cases, be a harmless nuisance, but they can also threaten the health of the body. Examples such as the Nazi's frequent use of the "Jew as louse" analogy cut across both the organism and animal metaphor, comparing the devalued group not only to a disgusting animal, but one which is central to organism (and presumably national and racial) decay (Proctor, 1988; Weindling, 1989, 2000).

The only way to protect the nation that is threatened by potentially infectious subgroups is to keep them out of the general population, to quarantine them until it is certain they pose no further threat, or to perform a radical 'surgical' intervention to exterminate the infectious portion of the social body.

Herbert Spencer (1893) discussed this surgical analogy in his book *Social Statics*:

We should think it a very foolish sort of benevolence which led a surgeon to let his patient's disease progress to a fatal issue, rather than inflict pain by an operation. Similarly, we must call those spurious philanthropists who, to prevent present misery, would entail greater misery on future generations. ... Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, these unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation (pp. 150-151)

Within this context, the social control agent is portrayed as a public health worker par excellence. Hitler not only depicted the Jews as an invasive virus but considered himself the scientist called upon to eradicate it:

The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged to-day is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus! (*Hitler's Secret Conversations*, 1972, p. 269)

Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (1920) added that in those nations that were aware of the Jewish threat, "[t]he social system had encrusted around the Jew, keeping him in a position where, as the nations knew by experience, he would be less harmful. As nature encysts the harmful foreign element in the flesh, building a wall around it, so nations have found it expedient to do with the Jew" (p. 28). While such segregation, in most cases, would be viewed as inhumane, here it is taken as a necessary means of safeguarding the community.

Eugenic supporters touted both long-term institutionalization and sterilization as public health measures. Following the Kallikak study, the Governor of New Jersey recommended segregating the Pine Barrens (where most of the Kallikaks lived)

from the rest of the State for public health purposes (McPhee, 1968). Regarding sterilization, Martin Pernick (1996) wrote in his book *The Black Stork* that a close conceptual relationship existed between germs and 'germ plasm,' which described genes during the better part of the eugenic era. Both "enabled diseases to propagate, spreading lethal contamination from guilty to innocent bodies," and both could be effectively eradicated by means of sterilization (p. 52). In its 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, the Supreme Court acknowledged the societal benefits of involuntary sterilization by comparing the procedure to compulsory vaccination. Citing the earlier *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* case, the Court held that 'the police power of the State must be held to embrace, at least, such reasonable regulations established directly by legislative enactment as will protect the public health and the public safety' (cited in Dudziak, 1986, p. 858).

When the disease had gained a foothold in society and quarantine was no longer an option, extermination of the 'infected' components of the population is presented as the only way of ensuring the survival of the community. Certainly the clearest example of this application of the organism metaphor was Nazi Germany's race hygiene programs. A number of scholars have noted that, in keeping with their focus on race purity, Nazi medicine was much more concerned with the health of the social body than with the physical well-being of individuals (Harrington, 1995; Proctor, 1988; Weindling, 1989, 2000). Within this context, the physician, or 'genetic doctor,' was not a healer of individuals, but of the state, and, just as an inflamed appendix would be removed from a diseased body, a diseased individual was viewed as inimical to the future health of the Volk (Hanauske-Able, 1986, p. 271).

Hitler himself described the necessity of protecting the health of the German nation from invasive foreign entities in the pages of *Mein Kampf* (1971). Because the German states did not adequately police the quality of its new citizens, they were taking into their borders "poison elements which they can scarcely ever overcome" (p. 440). America, he noted, had shown by its recent immigration restriction laws that it too understood the harm that was posed by such groups. The Nazis not only continually compared Jews and other

marginalized groups to a plague, bacteria, tumors, parasites, lice, and other specters of disease, but contended that race hygiene was, in most respects, analogous to individual hygiene. A Nazi professor, for example, held that "any people that still keeps and protects Jews is just as guilty of an offense against public safety as someone who cultivates cholera-germs without observing the proper precautions" (Cohn, 1966, p. 207).

This form of employing the metaphor did not originate with the Nazis. In his 1909 book *The Expansion of Races*, Charles Woodruff wrote as follows of Jewish immigration into the United States:

The same law applies to the Jew as applies to a bacillus or any other organism which may be beneficial if few and in place, but deadly if numerous and out of place. ... Just as soon as he becomes so numerous as to be an economic disease he is eradicated. The persecution of the Jew, then, is and always has been a natural law, because it is necessary for survival of the supporting organism. (p. 383)

Woodruff contended that Poland had 'died of this ethnic infectious disease,' and the same fate awaited the United States if it did not limit immigration (p. 385).

According to Martin Pernick (1996), Dr. Haiseldon, one of the few eugenic supporters in the United States to openly advocate euthanasia, clearly invoked the organism metaphor as an important means of protecting the social body by contending that the death of inferiors "is the great and lasting disinfectant" for the race (p. 84). While few mainstream American eugenicists publicly supported euthanasia as a eugenic response, many invoked eliminationist rhetoric that corresponded to the organism metaphor (O'Brien, 1999). "Death," said Leon Cole (1914), invoking an unusual medical metaphor, "is the normal process of elimination in the social organism, and . . . in prolonging the lives of defectives we are tampering with the functioning of the social kidneys" (p. 503). As in Nazi Germany, this rhetoric fostered the view that eliminating or preventing the birth of degenerates was an important element of purification or of cleansing the community of its inferior

elements.

As noted above, the German physician during the Nazi era was considered an 'Erbarzt,' or a hereditary physician, whose primary duty was "to take care of the nation's most valuable germ-plasm" ("New German Entymology ...," 1934, p. 126). Cohen (1988) added that doctors within the Reich were "biological soldiers" who had been "charged with healing the wounded social organism by killing all who attacked it," (p. 33) including those with presumably hereditary conditions that could be spread throughout the community. Within the context of such a system, providing medical assistance to the 'unfit' was to "commit treason against the racial heritage of the German people" (Altman, 1939, p. 132).

In keeping with the organism metaphor as an apt means of framing its eugenics and race hygiene programs, the Nazis referred to gassing, first used in its euthanasia program, as 'desinfektion,' and those who carried the bodies from the gas chambers to either the dissection rooms or incinerators were called 'disinfectors' or 'decontaminators' (Fleming, 1982, p. 23; Müller-Hill, 1988, pp. 97-98). Zyklon B, used in the Auschwitz gas chambers, was originally developed by a fumigation company for the purpose of pest control (Friedlander, 2004, p. 182). Orders for the chemical 'were placed by the chief disinfectant officer of the Waffen SS on behalf of the Auschwitz 'Extermination and Fumigation Division,' and the gas was supplied by a company called Degesch, which was a German acronym for 'German Company for Pest Control' (Hilberg, 1967, p. 130; Müller-Hill, 1988, p. 70; Oplinger, 1990, pp. 245-246). Paul Weindling (1989) noted that disguising gas chambers as shower facilities—as well as the widespread use of the term 'race cleansing'—was an intentional expression of the Nazi mindset that compared individual hygiene to race hygiene (p. 550).

Reification of the Metaphor

Interestingly, those subgroups that are targets of the organism metaphor as a primary means of social construction are often relegated to environments where they are apt to become

infected with communicable diseases or parasites, thus reifying the metaphor. Ghettos, tenements, reservations, detention centers, prisons, asylums and similar locations, as well as the vehicles used to transport people to such environments, are often characterized by unsanitary and unhealthy conditions. As contamination rates within such segregated environments increases, the perception that the group itself is infectious—and that their segregation is rightly a public health rather than a social or political concern—becomes validated. While Jews, for example, were referred to as ‘lice’ and ‘bacteria’ prior to their placement in ghettos and work camps, this metaphor was no doubt strengthened when they were placed in these environments where they naturally acquired parasites and contagious diseases. Likewise, those who have been labeled mentally retarded have, throughout the past century, been confined to institutional environments that served to ensure that group members would indeed become a public health menace. This isn’t to imply that such placement occurs for the express purpose of reifying the metaphor. Nevertheless, the relationship between rhetoric that emphasizes images of contagion and contamination and the eventual infectious condition of group members cannot be lost on those who engage in or support social control measures.

Conclusion

Whether the target of animosity is welfare “parasites,” “diseased” migrants, or gays and lesbians who are attempting to “contaminate” the youth of the nation, the organism metaphor remains a consistent and virulent metaphor theme. One conspicuous example of its contemporary use is in the denigration of Hispanic, and particularly Mexican, immigrants. In his 2002 book *Brown Tide Rising*, Otto Santa Ana noted the extensive use of the metaphor themes discussed above within the context of California’s Proposition 187 debate, which limited rights to “illegal” immigrants during the 1990s. Supporters of the Proposition frequently used body and disease metaphors to frame this debate. Even more recently, advocates of restrictive measures such as Colorado Congressman and recent Presidential Candidate Tom Tancredo have both invoked

organism metaphors within their calls for restriction, and have pointed out what they believe is the very real possibility of contagion from unrestricted immigration. Tancredo contended that exotic conditions such as Chagas disease (otherwise known as the "kissing bug disease"), leprosy (Hansen's disease) and Dengue fever are increasing in the U.S. due to Mexican immigration (2006, pp. 165-166). Many other contemporary examples which parallel the historical ones described in this text could be delineated.

Human beings have very strong subconscious reactions to the specter of bodily invasion and the subsequent corruption of our bodies from within, and propagandists are quick to exploit these fears for socio-political purposes. In our efforts to advocate on behalf of vulnerable populations, social workers must attend to the overall political environment within which policy decisions are made, which includes the conceptualization or framing of the groups in question. The term "perception is reality" is nowhere truer than in the discussion and implementation of public policy. If social workers leave the social construction of vulnerable populations to individuals and organizations that are inimical to the interests of such populations, we will be fighting an uphill battle in our efforts to foster supportive social policies.

References

- Altman, R. (1939). Selection from the skies. In: The law of the select, (trans.), *The Living Age*, 357(4477), 132-135.
- Barr, M. W. (1897). President's annual address. *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics*, 2(1), 1-13.
- Belloc, H. (1922). *The Jews*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Chatterton-Hill, G. (1907). *Heredity and society in sociology*. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- Cohen, C. B. (1988). The Nazi analogy in bioethics. *Hastings Center Report*, 18(5), 32-33.
- Cohn, N. (1966). *Warrant for genocide: The myth of the Jewish world-conspiracy and the protocols of the Elders of Zion*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Cole, L. J. (1914). The relation of philanthropy and medicine to race betterment. *Proceedings of the First National Congress on Race Betterment* (pp. 494-508). Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914.

- Davenport, C. B. (1910). Report of Committee on Eugenics, *The American Breeders Magazine*, 1, 126-129.
- Deford, M. A. (1935). The Japanese in Hawaii. *The American Mercury*, 35, 332-340.
- Dudziak, M. L. (1986). Oliver Wendell Holmes as a eugenic reformer: Rhetoric in the writing of constitutional law, *Iowa Law Review*, 71, 833-867.
- End of the 'melting-pot' theory. (June 7, 1924). *The Literary Digest*, 81, 15.
- Fleming, G. (1982). *Hitler and the final solution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Friedlander, H. (2004). From 'euthanasia' to the 'final solution'. In *Deadly medicine: Creating the master race* (pp. 155-184). Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- Gilman, S. (1984). Jews and mental illness: Medical metaphors, anti-Semitism, and the Jewish response, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 20, 150-159.
- Goddard, H. H. (1923). *The Kallikak family*. New York: Arno Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Goldhagen, D. J. (1996). *Hitler's willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Gosney, E. S. & Popenoe, P. (1980). *Sterilization for human betterment*. New York: The MacMillan Company. (Original work published 1929)
- Guyer, M. F. (1927). *Being well-born: An introduction to heredity and eugenics*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.
- Hanauske-Able, H. M. (1986). From Nazi holocaust to nuclear holocaust: A lesson to learn?' *The Lancet*, 2(8501), 271-273.
- Harrington, A. (1995). Metaphoric connections: Holistic science in the shadow of the Third Reich. *Social Research*, 62, 357-385.
- Hilberg, R. (1967). *The destruction of the European Jews*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books. (Original work published 1961)
- Hitler, A. (1971). *Mein kampf* (R. Manheim, Trans.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. (Original work published 1943)
- Hitler's secret conversations: 1941-1944*. (1972). Translated by Norman Cameron & R. H. Stevens. New York: Octagon Books.
- Huntington, E. (1935). *Tomorrow's children: The goal of eugenics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- The International Jew: The world's foremost problem*. (1920). Dearborn: Dearborn Independent.
- Kraut, A. M. (1994). *Silent travelers: Germs, genes and the 'immigrant menace'*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lakoff, G. (1996). *Moral politics: What conservatives know that liberals don't*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Lens, V. (2005). Advocacy and argumentation in the public arena: A guide for social workers. *Social Work*, 50, 231-238.

- Levine, D. N. (1995). The organism metaphor in sociology, *Social Research*, 62, 239-265.
- McPhee, J. (1968). *The Pine Barrens* (2nd ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- McWilliams, C. (1935). Once again the 'yellow peril.' *The Nation*, 140, 735-736.
- Menchen, H. L. (1937). Utopia by sterilization, *The American Mercury*, 41, 399-408.
- Müller-Hill, B. (1988). *Murderous science: Elimination by scientific selection of Jews, Gypsies and others: Germany 1933-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression: Supplement A*. (1947). Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality. Washington: United States Government Printing Office.
- Nelkin, D. & Gilman, S. L. (1988). Placing blame for devastating disease, *Social Research*, 55, 361-378.
- New German etymology for eugenics. (1934). *Eugenical News*, 19(5), 125-126.
- Noël, L. (1994). *Intolerance: A general survey*. Translated by Arnold Bennett. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- O'Brien, G. V. (1999). Protecting the social body: The use of the organism metaphor in fighting the 'menace of the feeble-minded.' *Mental Retardation*, 37, 188-200.
- O'Brien, G. V. (2003). Indigestible food, conquering hordes, and waste materials: Metaphors of immigrants and the early immigration restriction debate in the U.S. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18, 33-47.
- O'Brien, G. V. (2009). Metaphors and the pejorative framing of marginalized groups: Implications for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45, 29-46.
- Ogawa, D. M. (1971). *From Japs to Japanese: An evolution of Japanese-American stereotypes*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Company.
- Oplinger, J. (1990). *The politics of demonology*. Selingsgrove: Sesquehanna University Press.
- Pernick, M. S. (1996). *The black stork: Eugenics and the death of 'defective' babies in American medicine and motion pictures since 1915*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pictures the cure for legislative sloth. (1917). *The Survey*, 37, 725-726.
- Proctor, R. N. (1988). *Racial hygiene*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rafter, N. H. (1988). *White trash: The eugenic family studies 1877-1919*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Roberts, K. (Feb. 2, 1924). Slow poison, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 196, 8, 9, 54, 58.
- Ross, E. A. (1922). Controlled fecundity, *The New Republic*, 29, 245-232.

- Santa Ana, O. (2002). *Brown tide rising: Metaphors of Latinos in contemporary American public discourse*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Selzer, M. (Ed.) (1972). *Kike: A documentary history of anti-Semitism in America*. New York: World Publishing.
- Showalter, S. (1982). *Little man, what now? Der Stürmer in the Weimar Republic*. Hamden, CN: Archon Books.
- Spencer, H. (1893). *Social static* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company.
- Spencer, H. (1904). *The study of sociology*. New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company.
- Strother, F. (1923). The immigration peril. *The World's Work*, 46, 633-637.
- Tancredo, T. (2006). *In mortal danger: The battle for America's border and security*. Nashville, TN: WND Books.
- Thurston, R. (Dec. 4 1935). The Nazi war on medicine. *The New Republic*, 84, 100-102.
- Trent, J. W. (1994). *Inventing the feeble mind: A history of mental retardation in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Van Wagenen, B. (1914). Surgical sterilization as a eugenic measure. *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics*, 18, 185-196.
- Weindling, P. (1989). *Health, race and German politics between national unification and Naziism, 1870-1945*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Weindling, P. (2000). *Epidemics and genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890-1945*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Woodruff, C. E. (1909). *Expansion of races*. New York: Rebman Company.
- Yukins, E. (2003). Feeble-minded white women and the spectre of proliferating perversity in American eugenics narratives. In L. A. Cuddy & C. M. Roche (Eds.), *Evolution and eugenics in American literature and culture, 1880-1940: Essays on ideological conflict and complicity* (pp. 164-186). Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.
- Zuckier, H. (1996). The essential 'other' and the Jew: From antisemitism to genocide. *Social Research*, 63, 1110-1152.

