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A “Chinese Virus,” Threats of Foreign Contagion and the Making of Race, Empire, and Nation

There has been a lot of talk recently on contagions and metaphors. On March 16, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted that a “Chinese Virus” had entered America’s borders.¹ By Trump’s retelling, this “foreign virus” would be the reason for untold levels of American suffering.² In the months to come, the American people would be tested. And they would have to show their national resolve against this alien scourge. By the end of March, over four-thousand Americans had lost their lives to Covid-19.³ By Trump’s logic, these were the first casualties of America’s war – a war against foreign invasion and globalization.⁴

Over the past month, critics have firmly rejected Trump’s nativist reading of the global pandemic. They have documented how Trump’s inflammatory comments jeopardize Asian-Americans’ health and safety.⁵ They have shown how this narrative miscasts the virus’s actual trajectory to the shores of New York.⁶ And they have insisted that what we need now is *not* a retreat to nationalism and American-first rhetoric, but a doubling down on what the pandemic so breathtakingly reveals: the global scale of our collective interdependence.⁷

¹ For a discussion of his original tweet, see “Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’ Tweet Adds Fuel to Fire With Beijing,” *Bloomberg News*, 17 March 2020.

² Trump introduced Covid-19 as a “foreign virus” in his Oval Office address of 11 March 2020. See “Trump calls coronavirus a ‘foreign virus’ in Oval Office address,” *CNN*, 11 March 2020.

³ “US coronavirus death toll now over 4,000,” *ABC News*, 1 April 2020.

⁴ On the relationship between Covid-19 and anti-globalization backlash, see Peter S. Goodman, “A Global Outbreak is Fueling the Backlash Against Globalization,” *The New York Times*, 5 March 2020; Phillippe Legrain, “The Coronavirus Is Killing Globalization as We Know It,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2020.

⁵ Sabrina Tavernise and Richard A. Opiel Jr., “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety,” *The New York Times*, 23 March 2020; Alexandra Kelley, “Attacks on Asian Americans Skyrocket to 100 per Day during Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The Hill*, 31 March 2020.

⁶ Carl Zimmer, “Most New York Coronavirus Cases Came From Europe, Genomes Show,” *The New York Times*, 8 April 2020.

⁷ Mahlet Mesfin, “It Takes a World to End a Pandemic: Scientific Cooperation Knows No Boundaries— Fortunately,” *Foreign Affairs*, 21 March 2020; Morgan D. Bazilian and Samantha Gross, “COVID-19 is a Reminder that Interconnectivity is Unavoidable,” *Brookings*, 12 March 2020.

Historians, literary critics, and journalists have been leading the way in rejecting Trump's racialized remarks.⁸ In an effort to distill the pernicious logics which underlie such metaphoric constructions, they have turned back to history. They have documented how societies' darker sides frequently come to light in such crises.⁹ They have noted how the most vulnerable among us are disproportionately affected by the pandemic's escalation.¹⁰ And they have asked us to see such metaphoric reflections not as mere rhetorical gestures, but as a part of a larger process through which nations delineate the boundaries of their "imagined communities" – the fault lines between "us" and "them."¹¹

In the midst of mass death and a global economic depression, we find ourselves caught in a moment when people are increasingly thinking historically and doing so as to better understand present times. At the *Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah's* seminar in January, I presented on the topic of contagion and metaphor. I did so while describing my research on Holocaust memory and its uses during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). In what follows, I draw from this presentation to argue that this little-known chapter in the Cold War history of Holocaust memory stands as productive counterpoint for us to think with and against.

Tropes of Contamination and Imperial Dismantlement

In 1957, France was engaged in a bloody civil war. Three of its overseas departments – what were then collectively known as *Algérie-française* – were up in arms, proclaiming their independence from the French Empire. Since 1954, a revolutionary group called *le Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) had been gaining traction in mobilizing national and international support. For officials in

⁸ For works that evaluate the political significance of our metaphoric framings of the disease, see Ian Buruma, "Virus as Metaphor," *The New York Times*, 28 March 2020; Paul Elie, "(Against) Virus as Metaphor," *The New Yorker*, 19 March 2020; Eren Orbey, "Trump's 'Chinese Virus' and What's at Stake in the Coronavirus's Name," *The New Yorker*, 25 March 2020; Allan M. Brandt and Alyssa Botelho, "Not a Perfect Storm — Covid-19 and the Importance of Language," *New England Journal of Medicine* 382 (2020): 1493-1495, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2005032>. For an analysis that evaluates the foreign policy implications of Trump's comments, see James Fallows, "2020 Time Capsule #5: The Chinese Virus," *The Atlantic*, 18 March 2020.

⁹ David Brooks, "Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too," *The New York Times*, 12 March 2020.

¹⁰ On how the pandemic affects communities of color and the most vulnerable among us, see Connor Maxwell, "Coronavirus Compounds Inequality and Endangers Communities of Color," *Center for American Progress*, 27 March 2020; Anna North, "Every Aspect of the Coronavirus Pandemic Exposes America's Devastating Inequalities," *Vox*, 10 April 2020; Stacey Patton, "The Pathology of American Racism is Making the Pathology of the Coronavirus Worse," *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2020. On the imagined communities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹¹ On how such metaphors reaffirm certain exclusionary logics, see Lucy Taksa, "Fighting Words: How War Metaphors Can Trigger Racism," *The Lighthouse*, 7 April 2020; Anna Fifield, "Africans in China Allege Racism as Fear of New Virus Cases Unleashes Xenophobia," *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2020; Jessica Hauger, "The Actual Danger of Coronavirus," *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2020.

Paris, the potential loss of the territory presented itself as a profound source of national dishonor. Less than twenty years after the country's occupation by German hands, France was still in the process of recovering. And from Paris's point of view, the maintenance of its overseas territories and colonies was critical to assuring the country's continued geopolitical relevance.¹²

Metropolitan fears over the loss of Algeria were rife with national anxiety. Since 1881, Algeria had been an integral part of France, legally no different than "Normandy, Brittany or the Savoy."¹³ Moreover, for many, Algeria's modernization stood as testament to the successes of France's "civilizing mission." French police and military officers responded to the growing nationalist movement in Algeria boldly and with violence. Torture became central to the state's counterinsurgency strategy. And for the duration of the war, officers of the state employed it with abandon. They did so in prisons, homes, and concentration camps throughout the territory.¹⁴

Tropes of contagion and narratives of infection played an integral role in the wartime debates. In 1959, a clandestine group of pro-FLN supporters published one of most controversial publications of the war. Titled *La gangrène* (The Gangrene) the volume shocked much of Paris.¹⁵ Its shocking effect emanated from the fact that the volume reprinted seven torture testimonials, testimonials whose authors had all been tortured during the winter months of 1958-59 and in metropolitan Paris nonetheless. Pro-imperial supporters also made use of the gangrene narrative. In 1961 Jacques Soustelle, a former Governor General of the territory, penned an article entitled "La gangrène."¹⁶ In it, he elaborated upon what pernicious practices had developed in the course of France's decolonization. More radical right-wing writings on the war similarly made use of the gangrene trope.¹⁷

¹² On the Algerian War, see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: the Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2006); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹³ Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18

¹⁴ On the French's institutionalized use of torture and violence in Algeria, see Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Sylvie Thénault, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale: camps, internements, assignations à résidence* (Paris: Jacob, 2012) ; Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Rita Maran, *Torture: the Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

¹⁵ Béchir Boumaza, Mustapha Francis, Benaïssa Souami et Moussa Khebaili, eds. *La gangrène* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1959).

¹⁶ Jacques Soustelle, "La gangrène," *Indépendance du Sud-Ouest* (Agen, 15 June 1962). I draw this reference from Todd Shepard's work on the topic. See Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 169-170. For more on Soustelle and the policy of integrationism, see Todd Shepard, "Thinking Between Metropole and Colony: the French Republic, 'Exceptional Promotion,' and the 'Integration' of Algerians, 1955-1962," in *The French Colonial Mind: Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters, vol. 1* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 298-323.

¹⁷ For an examination of how the far-right marshalled the trope of gangrene when discussing sodomitical rapes at the end of the war, see Todd Shepard, *Sex, France & Arab Men, 1962-1979* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 201-202.

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag stresses the political import of our different disease metaphors. The particular disease metaphors we attribute to societal ills – and vice-versa, Sontag argues, are in themselves revelatory. They can show if and how we perceive the source of an infection to be internal to the body or to have emanated from foreign lands.¹⁸ The disease tropes that structured wartime conversations during the Algerian War lend credence to Sontag’s provocation. When De Gaulle’s Minister of Justice Edmond Michelet took up the topic of torture in 1959, he argued that its appearance represented the invasion of a “Nazi virus.” It signified the “after-effects of the Nazi totalitarian pox.”¹⁹ Michelet came to this metaphor from the position of trying to distance the state from any accusations of complicity regarding torture’s proliferation. A virus metaphor thus served his efforts to do so. For critics of the state’s uses of “pacification,” such as anti-torture activist Pierre Vidal-Naquet, a cancer metaphor – not that of a virus – proved most helpful. Cancer comes from within. And thus, its metaphoric constructions called attention to how an internal scourge was responsible for France’s wartime crimes.

Distinguishing between the different politics that supported activists’ uses of a cancer, virus, or infection trope offers one way to analyze these metaphors’ political and historical significance.²⁰ Another way is to consider how both sides of the conflict – that is, both pro-imperial and pro-independence – marshalled metaphors of disease. And then, relatedly, to consider how their collective uses of such disease tropes reveals the predominance of three mutually supporting logics – those of race, nation, and empire.

When French military troops first arrived on the shores of Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s, they perceived their work to be in service of the “civilizing mission.”²¹ A discourse of civilization supported their colonial conquest, as did a narrative which racialized the “colonial world” and presented it to be a source of moral and biological contagion. This practice of perceiving non-European lands as a site of degradation and contamination extends back to the mid-nineteenth

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978). Also see Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

¹⁹ As quoted in Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Torture: the Cancer of Democracy*, trans. Barry Richard (Baltimore, M.D.: Penguin Books, 1963), 92. For more on Michelet’s wartime career, see Nicholas Lemaitre, “Edmond Michelet, Une Résistance Spirituelle,” *Inflexions* 29, no. 2 (2015): 53-64.

²⁰ For an example of such an approach, see Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 151-152.

²¹ On France’s invasion and occupation of Algeria, see Benjamin Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France’s Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011). On the ideology of France’s “civilizing mission,” see Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: the Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

century.²² And the practice persisted through midcentury discussions on the Algerian War. When in 1961 Bâtonnier René-William Thorp penned an article the war's violent excesses, he bemoaned France's moral degradation. Affirming this latter point, Thorp marshalled the metaphor of gangrene. Moreover, he insisted that this bacterial infection had originated in the colonies.²³ A gangrene, he argued, had passed over the Mediterranean and was now festering in the city of lights. Other observers of France's moral degradation similarly emphasized the Algerian origin of the infection. The Algerian War has "contaminated us," wrote one reader to the editorial board of *France Observateur*.²⁴ Torture's proliferation signified not only the degradation of France's republican values, but also the country's "Algerianization," Pierre Vidal-Naquet recounted.²⁵

Longstanding national narratives also shaped these anxiety-filled discussions over the war. Ever since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Germany has held a position of note within France's cultural and political imagination. Fin-de-siècle observers worried over their country's decline by way of comparing France's infirmity to Germany's relative strength.²⁶ During the Great War, this comparative practice came to encompass discussions revolving around visions of German barbarity.²⁷ In face of the crimes the 1930s and 1940s, commentators incorporated the adjectival descriptor of "Nazi" within such reflections. And this comparative tradition continued into the midcentury. In March 1959, Edmond Michelet mobilized the metaphor of a "Nazi virus." He was one of the most well-known proponents of such spectral proclamations. But he was not the only one. Notable figures such as François Mauriac, Jean-Marie Domenach, Charlotte Delbo, Henri-Pierre Simon, and Laurent Schwartz joined him.²⁸ All five, at some point during the war, asserted the connections and resemblances between French and Nazi violence.

²² For works that examine how anxieties over infection, contagion, and civility shaped British and French experiences of imperialism, see David M. Pomfret, *Youth and Empire: Trans-colonial Childhoods in British and French Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: the Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker, eds. *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²³ René William Thorp, "Répression Raciste et Solidarité Française," *France-Observateur* 604, 30 November 1961, 24.

²⁴ See section "Nos Lectures Écrivent," under the header 'La gangrène nous a tous contaminés,' *France-Observateur* 641, 16 August 1962, 2.

²⁵ Vidal-Naquet, *Torture*, 107-119.

²⁶ On fin-de-siècle anxieties circulating around conceptions of French decadence and German vigor and the uses of pathological tropes therein, see Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: the Medical Concept of Decline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 132-170.

²⁷ James Morgan Read, *Atrocity Propaganda, 1914-1919* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941); Ruth Harris, "The Child of the Barbarian: Rape, Race and Nationalism in France During the Nineteenth Century," *Past & Present* 141, no. 1 (1993): 170-206.

²⁸ François Mauriac, "La Question," *L'Express* 65, 15 January 1955, 15; Jean-Marie Domenach, "Propositions raisonnables," *Esprit* 250, no. 5 (May 1957); Pierre-Henri Simon, *Contre la torture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957);

Behind each of these discussions – on contagion, torture, and the Algerian War – stood a collective reflection over France’s imperial pasts and soon to be post-imperial futures. Since the beginning of France’s imperial project in the mid-nineteenth century, two competing visions had defined contemporaries’ perceptions of France’s imperial expansion. The first rallied behind a secular vision of French republicanism. It proposed that France’s colonial conquest signified the diffusion of a certain set of secular republican values – values which the Revolution of 1789 codified and which were embodied in the tripartite motto “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.*”²⁹ The second vision gave lip service to the Empire’s republican spirit, but remained more closely attuned to colonialism’s uses with respect to the diffusion of a set of European and frequently Christian ideals.³⁰ Wartime debates over the Algerian events cast into question the legitimacy of both views. Pro-independence observers lamented the war’s cost with respect to the denigration of the country’s republican values. Pro-imperial proponents, in contrast, dwelled upon the loss of a European – and thus civilizing – force in North Africa. Participants of both conversations mobilized metaphors of disease.

Frames, Continuity, and a Question

Today, our discussions on disease and contagion have much less to do with empire and the problem of torture and much more do with Covid-19 and with the perils of globalization. Nevertheless, in looking back upon this little-known chapter within the Cold War history of Holocaust memory, we can proffer two salient observations and one polemical query.³¹

Charlotte Delbo, *Les Belles Lettres* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1961); Laurent Schwartz, “Le problème de la torture dans la France d’aujourd’hui,” *Les Cahiers de la République* 38 (November 1961), 17-31.

²⁹ On this republican view of the civilizing mission and the contradictions therein, see Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); J.P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁰ For works that consider how France’s civilizing mission related to the diffusion of a certain set of European-Christian ideals, see Kyle Francis, “Catholic Missionaries in Colonial Algeria: Faith, Foreigners, and France’s Other Civilizing Mission, 1848-1883,” *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016): 685-715; Bradley Rainbow, “The Soul of Empire: Missionaries of Africa in Colonial Algeria, 1919-1939,” PhD diss., University of Chicago (2005).

³¹ While I do not fully develop this point in this article, references to Nazi crimes held a central role within metropolitan discussions over the war’s brutalities. “Your Gestapo in Algeria!” was one of the most circulated articles on torture. A volume title *Nuremberg for Algeria!* Also saw broad diffusion within political circles of the left. Notably, most wartime references to the Third Reich focused on a vision of Nazi aggression in general and not on Jewish suffering in particular. Of course, this is not to say that references to the Nazi genocide of Europe’s Jews were entirely absent from wartime discussions. For instance, when Laurent Schwartz, a leading member of the anti-torture fight, offered an address on torture in 1961, he compared France’s use of torture to German anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, this example notwithstanding, wartime references to the history and memory of the Third Reich largely support the scholarly consensus which perceives the late 1950s and early 1960s as a moment which predated the so-called “rise of Holocaust memory” in the 1970s. For wartime examples, see Claude Bourdet, “Votre Gestapo d’Algérie,” *France-Observateur* 244, 13 January 1955, 6-7; Jacques Vergès, *Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!* (Paris: Maspero, 1961); Laurent Schwartz, “Le problème de la torture dans la France d’aujourd’hui,” *Les Cahiers de la République* 38 (November 1961), 17-31. For examinations of

The first observation relates to which national and ideological narratives structure our current talks on Covid-19. In 1960s France, long-standing narratives regarding France’s civilizational and national supremacy – as compared to Algerian backwardness or German barbarity – informed how contemporaries mobilized a cancer, virus, or gangrene metaphor. In 2020, we are similarly confronted by such ideologically-motivated metaphoric constructions. President Trump declares a “Chinese virus” is descending upon us. Others suggest that the real threat is a “Communist Coronavirus.”³² Both insist upon the foreignness of the disease. And both participate in reifying a view of history, in which America’s exceptionalism is grounded in its white and democratic constitution.³³

The second insight returns us to the question of continuity. When anti-torture activists emphasized the Algerian origins of France’s gangrenization, their remarks drew upon longstanding assumptions, which presented Algeria to be exotic and foreign – as a place where transgressive behaviors would find fecund terrain to develop. In 1979, Edward Said called our attention to the political structures which underlie such discursive practices. He argued that the rhetorical traditions which Europeans mobilize to describe the “Orient” are themselves politically meaningful and a locus of power.³⁴ Midcentury critics of torture, who marshalled the threat of gangrene or the trope cancer, certainly did not perceive their work as participating in this Orientalizing tradition. But, questions of intent put aside, by propagating various myths of contagion their activism did bolster the imperialist ideologies from which these narratives of disease originally sprung.³⁵

A similar story of continuity could be told with respect to how narratives of Asian Otherness have operated within American history and self-presentations. The first wave of sustained Chinese immigration to the U.S. came in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁶ The racialization of Asian identity

the rising tide of Holocaust memory and the import of the 1970s, see Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy: de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990); Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); Eleanor Davey, *Idealism beyond Borders: the French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³² Daniel Henninger, “A Communist Coronavirus,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 January 2020.

³³ On what role whiteness has played in defining American identity and history, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ian Haney López, *White by Law: the Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990).

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

³⁵ For more on the exoticization of Algeria, see Sage Goellner, *French Orientalist Literature in Algeria, 1845-1884: Colonial Hauntings* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018). On how French colonial law handled Algerian difference, see Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

³⁶ On the history of Chinese immigration and exclusion in the United States, see Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Charles J. McClain, *In Search of*

developed soon after. White residents and laborers frequently employed the racial epithet of a “coolie” to describe their new neighbors; remarks over the uncleanliness of their living conditions often followed. During the Cold War, fears of a Communist invasion were grafted onto anxieties over the enduring “yellow peril.”³⁷ And Trump’s insistence in emphasizing Coronavirus’s Chinese origins extends this rhetorical tradition into our contemporary moment. As a pathogen, Coronavirus did originate in Wuhan, China. Yet, the threat of the “Chinese virus” only resonates among the American because of this longer history. These exclusionary rhetorics have long defined American identity, with the menace of an Asian invasion standing as one example of many.

And finally, we come to our polemical query – one which few participants in recent debates have dared to voice: the question of whether these metaphors of contagion and tropes of disease can be mobilized for the greater good, with the goal of building a more egalitarian and just future in mind. By returning to the disease metaphors that proliferated during the Algerian War, we encounter the Janus-faced nature that defines the diffusion of these disease tropes. Narratives of contamination and contagion can certainly reify nativist and racist assumptions, like they are doing in Trump’s world today. But they also support citizens in their efforts to describe what injurious practices they wish to banish and work against. When Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Laurent Schwartz, or René-William Thorp invoked the trope of a gangrene or a cancer, they did so in an effort to heed their audience and readers to action. They wanted to insist that the rule of law in France was worthy of a robust defense. Certainly, their uses of such contamination narratives or disease tropes pose their own complexities. But in face of today’s political vitriol, it is worth remembering what ideals animated their metaphoric provocations. Following the Holocaust and in face of decolonization’s violent excesses, they committed themselves to working towards a more just and less-racialized future. We should perceive our current endeavor – of discussing, challenging, and defending various tropes of contagion – as serving a similar purpose.

Holocaust Memory and the Age of Covid-19

Over the last month, we have seen a number of historians, sociologists, and cultural critics weigh in on Trump’s nativist remarks. Collectively, their scholarship serves as a resource from which we can draw upon amidst our global confusion and isolation. Historians of the Holocaust have been

Equality: Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth Century-American (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³⁷ For an example of how a Communist threat worked in conjunction with fears of a “yellow peril,” see Dan Gilbert, “Why the Yellow Peril Has Turned Red!” (1951), in *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, eds. John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats (London: Verso, 2014), 298-301.

less active participants in the debate. This is a shame. Not only does the history of the Third Reich provide a dramatic case study of how racialized provocations over hygiene and foreign invasion have previously served forces of the right.³⁸ But the Cold War history of Holocaust memory reminds us what impact these tropes held in defining West Europeans' encounters with difference. Moreover, both histories bring to light an especially salient point: the degree to which in moments of turmoil and upheaval – decolonization being one example, a pandemic being another – exclusionary narratives find space to fester.

When in March 1959 Edmond Michelet called the French state's use of torture to be evidence of a "Nazi pox," few contemporaries noted how such tropes of infection had long served the interests of empire. Nor did they elaborate upon how race and nation have long been defined via such discussions of disease. This is not surprising. They did not have the vocabulary to do so. Sixty-one years later, following Foucault, biopolitics, and a critical interest in understanding what politics underlie the cultural constructions of the "Invasive Other," we no longer have such an excuse.³⁹ In the age of Corona, we have to think critically about what the diffusion of the "Chinese virus" narrative tells us not only about Trump, but also ourselves.

³⁸ On the Third Reich's conceptions of racial hygiene, Aly Götz, Peter Chroust, and Christian Pross, eds., *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene*, trans. Belinda Cooper (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 76-103.

³⁹ For a helpful investigation that thinks through the political logics that define our construction of the "Invasive Other," see Miriam Ticktin and Arien Mack, "The Invasive Other," *Social Research: an International Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 3-231.