

Is Fear of Strangers a Human Instinct?
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Is fear of strangers (xenophobia) built in to the human genetic code? If genetic, it would be instinctive and innate. Blinking when something is thrown at us is instinctive. Fight or flight is an instinctive response to danger. Maternal protection of her young appears to be instinctive. But attitudes toward strangers are not uniform. The attitude is a learned response that depends upon our life circumstances.

People living in an environment of scarcity and hardship, such as the Inuits (Eskimos) or desert Bedouin, must protect their food or water supply if they are to survive. Tribes with too few childbearing women must raid a neighbor to abduct the women if they are to survive, and they must quickly accept those women as members, not outsiders.

The long human history of warfare is certainly evidence of fear (or hatred) of strangers, although if we look hard, we will find more warfare among cousins than among strangers. Even the famous Trojan War in ancient Greek history was not so much a war of strangers, but was a war between people with different economies but common language and culture. Troy was rich and fortified; the Greeks were poor and greedy.

What makes the case that xenophobia is not an instinct can be seen in humane attitudes toward strangers. Our most ancient ancestors, living in clan groups, had annual meetings with other clans to trade, and perhaps most important, to exchange marriageable daughters. They must have seen that too much inbreeding produces problems, an observation that was ignored by ruling families and today by all Muslim-majority countries today. These societies not only favor close-cousin marriages, but culturally promote it, despite dire results.

A case of royal inbreeding was evident in 19th century Europe, when offspring of the prolific English Queen Victoria married cousins throughout the continent, planting a deadly genetic defect, hemophilia. In addition, these close relationships did not prevent one of the deadliest wars ever faced by Europe, World War I. And the Muslim preference for cousin marriages, designed to keep family wealth internal, has resulted in statistically alarming genetic defects, statistics finally kept by modern European governments. Will this change the custom? This is unknown.

As much fear of "the other" that we have seen throughout history, we have also seen a contrary message. Ancient Greeks, Jews, and Arabs were taught by their religions to treat strangers kindly. In Greek mythology, people were taught that a visitor might be a god in disguise, and it would be foolish to mistreat such a guest. Most Semitic people also were taught that they should treat strangers with hospitality. Even the Bedouin, living with scarce water, were compelled by their culture to grant refuge and hospitality to any stranger appearing in their midst.

The welcoming attitude ends when the strangers come in large numbers, threatening to overwhelm the host. This issue is facing Western countries (Europe and the US) today with a flood of refugees. Those fleeing horrors of war, rape, and genocide touch our hearts. Such refugees in times past became the good citizens of these countries today. But there is also an immigration flood arriving with hostile intent (Islamist ideology). To ignore such danger is utter folly.

Ancient Britain was overrun by Anglo-Saxon tribes, a flood arriving with their carts and cattle. They overwhelmed the natives, who fled to fringe areas of Wales and Scotland, losing their country.

How did the entire swath of North Africa change their lives as Roman citizens and their religions as majority Christian and minority Jewish to majority Muslim in less than a century? This change was so profound that even language was transformed from Latin to Arabic over that period. The economy was changed too, from agricultural breadbaskets and great wineries to deserts that could only support goats and sheep because Bedouin Arabs scorned agriculture and wine.

The world's immigration crisis cannot be resolved by either xenophobia or blind hospitality. We must be neither mean-spirited nor bleeding hearts. It requires serious triage and good judgment and a well-thought out immigration policy.

674 words

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