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Why do democratic governments commonly scapegoat minority groups?

Introduction

Six million Jews were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). It became one of the darkest periods in history, during which the world witnessed the oppression of the Jewish people. They were separated from their families, tortured, and murdered under Hitler's rule. But it did not start with gas chambers. Rather, it began years earlier with Hitler's *"Mein Kampf"* and, according to the World Jewish Congress, "the step-by-step persecution of a minority group" (World Jewish Congress). However, why did Germany during the 1920s listen to Hitler and spark both World War II and the Holocaust?

In the aftermath of the First World War, Germany was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. This forced the nation into paying $33 billion in war reparations, giving up its overseas colonies, and relinquishing parts of its land to France and Poland. Additionally, Germany also had to radically reduce its army and never possess an air force or submarines (The National WWII Museum). The German people were angered by this, having to endure more hardship for their loss. In fact, from money manager George J.W. Goodman, "a wheelbarrow full of money [Marks] would not even buy the newspaper" (Goodman).

Through Germany's sorrow in the aftermath of World War I, Hitler was able to rise to power. He was a mesmerizing speaker who could call for a new German order. Hitler saw the government as inefficient and weak. He sought to replace it with an authoritarian system (The National WWII Museum). However, to make his plan easier to achieve, Hitler needed to find something for the German people to blame for their misfortune. He needed a scapegoat. Thus, in his *"Mein Kampf,"* Hitler blamed the Jewish people for the suffering that Germany went through in the 1920s. He also stressed the notion of a superior Aryan race. Despite his arguments being pseudoscientific or unsupported, the German people believed him. They ignored rationale, only wanting a source to blame for the Treaty of Versailles, irrespective of whether the blame was justified or not. It was also simpler to scapegoat the Jewish people as they were a minority in Germany during this era. The Jewish population of Germany was approximately 505,000 people out of the total population of 67 million (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). This made them represent less than 1% of Nazi Germany's population.

By exploiting the Jews, Hitler was able to establish himself as the dictator of Nazi Germany. Subsequently, World War II followed, bringing a tremendous increase to the death toll and devastating a variety of communities. But while scapegoating is often synonymous with authoritarian and totalitarian governments such as Nazi Germany, the Jewish people were not scapegoated by these governments at first. Hitler had begun blaming them in his book while Germany was a democratic government.

In the United States, politicians have blamed Asian Americans for the rise of COVID-19. They have even gone so far as to call the virus the “China virus” to associate the disease with the Asian population. As a result, xenophobia and hate crimes against Asian Americans rose in the country (Harper, Gover, and Langton). On the topic of anti-Asian sentiment, Pahl et al. (2022) led a study analyzing anti-Asian attitudes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this study, it was found that greater awareness of how racial and socioeconomic factors contribute to disparities in the impact of COVID-19 was associated more with a lower level of anti-Asian sentiment (Pahl et al.). Due to the devastation brought by the pandemic, people looked for something to blame. The first cases of COVID-19 were located in China (U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence). Therefore, politicians blamed Asians for causing the coronavirus, creating an increase in hate crimes and scapegoating a community. It is also easier for politicians to do this as Asians make up a minority in the United States, being approximately 7% of the total U.S. population in 2025 (Krogstad and Im).

In this article, we will be exploring why democratic governments like the United States and Germany have scapegoated minorities. In our examination, we will focus on two specific key areas: economics and culture. Democratic governments have many checks to ensure that there is no tyranny by the majority. This is often done through free and fair elections and obligations to protect fundamental rights. However, with Germany’s economy hurt and national pride decreased from losing World War I, Germans at that time blamed the Jewish population for their suffering. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption it caused to society and culture, Americans blamed Asians for the virus. For this reason, it will be important to look at these sections, for they show why democratic governments scapegoat. As it is more effortless to blame communities who are a minority in the country, blaming them becomes more utilized. Not only can one argue that this action is immoral, but one can even look at Nazi Germany as evidence of how democratic governments can lose their democracy.

Subvert Responsibility in Economy

Many democratic governments have scapegoated minorities as a way to shift blame for failures in their economy. Germany had scapegoated the Jews to avoid responsibility for a weakened economy following the 1st World War. But, scapegoating because of economic suffering is not only limited to Germany. Let us look at two specific case studies where Democratic governments have scapegoated minorities. These will be the United Kingdom and Mexico.

In the United Kingdom, migration only added 171,000 people to the population last year. This was almost half the number seen in 2024 and lowest since 2012 if we were to exclude the Covid Pandemic (Kipling and Kotecha). Migration decreasing has largely been due to British policies regarding policies. They are limiting migrants by raising the general threshold for those arriving on skilled visas. Additionally, most overseas students and care workers are prohibited from bringing their family members and dependents with them respectively (Kipling and Kotecha). But the question of why these policies are enacted remains.

Well, it has to do with anti-migrant sentiment stemming from economic concerns. As Gamlen from the Australian National University puts it, “When economies sputter, when public services strain, when communities feel fragmented, immigration becomes the symbol for everything wrong.” People even feel this way even when this is not the case. Evidence has shown migration generally strengthens economies and increases overall output without decreasing local wages. Yet, humans would take the simple explanation over the complicated one. Hence, when supply stocks, inflation, and housing pressures occur, immigrants get blamed (Gamlen); and these immigrants are minorities, who have come from a different culture with different values and traditions. With immigrants essentially being outsiders at first, some take advantage of this, blaming immigrants when the problem could be entirely something else.

In the seventeenth century, Chinese immigration to Mexico slowly increased. This mainly stemmed from the United States enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prevented direct entry for Chinese people. To bypass this, Chinese immigrants would travel to Mexico. From there, they would cross the border to get to America. Nevertheless, a Chinese presence would grow in Mexico. At the time, they were seen as an "indispensable source of productive labor that enhances Mexico’s development,” according to Rocío Gomez (Gomez). As Mexico’s economy was bolstered, the presence of Chinese immigrants grew.

However, some Chinese immigrants were brought under fraudulent contracts to work as “semi-enslaved laborers,” exploited by industrialists. During the Mexican

Revolution, anti-Chinese violence occurred across the country. It was seen in Chiapas, Sonora, and most notoriously Torreón, Coahuila (Múzquiz). Torreón was home to a thriving Chinese community in the 1900s, though. They were influential and prosperous. But this resulted in some Mexicans growing bitter at their economic success. In the 1900s, a man named Flores gave a speech blaming Chinese people for any “economic struggles” (Gomez). As a small ethnic group in Mexico, many Chinese immigrants were subjected to harsh labor conditions with the sole goal of enhancing Mexico’s economy. While many argued that their presence was a necessity to create a financially strong nation, it did not stop some from assaulting Chinese communities. Rather, some like Flores blamed immigrants during an economic downturn, as it was easy to scapegoat them. They were a minority. In spite of working hard for Mexico’s marketplace, they were viewed as the reason when hardship happened.

In these two case studies, it becomes apparent that economic downturns do play a factor in scapegoating minority groups. However, what we find is that it is not restricted to Germany. We see this in the United Kingdom and Mexico. Both of these two nations are democracies; they have scapegoated, whether it was in their past or present. Their motivation for scapegoating hinges on the fact that these countries do not want to take responsibility for funding problems.

And unfortunately, it has led to a rise in hate crimes. During campaigning ahead of the UK's vote on Brexit, immigrants were scapegoated for fiscal issues. This caused violence against immigrants and ethnic minorities (Pummer). In fact, there was an increase of 15-20% in hate crimes after the Brexit referendum (Clifton-Sprigg, Vujic, and Carr). Brexit also resulted in harsher policies, such as mass forced deportations being called upon for. Whether those scapegoats actually played a role in the problem does not matter. According to French theorist of mythology René Girard, the scapegoat is chosen because they are easy to victimize without retaliation (Pummer). That is why democratic countries have scapegoated minorities. Not only is it to subvert responsibility for economic failures, but also because minorities are much easier to target.

Subvert Responsibility in Culture

Minorities are not only scapegoated for economic reasons. Democratic governments sometimes scapegoat or blame minorities for unfortunate events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic as seen in the United States. Scapegoating can also happen through fear of changing demographics. In this section, we will be looking at Argentina and France.

In 1871, Argentina faced yellow fever. In the 19th century, Buenos Aires had a population of 195,000 people. But yellow fever claimed 8% of that population, meaning 15,600 people died from the disease. It is known as one of the deadliest epidemic outbreaks to ever strike Buenos Aires and Argentina (Caputo).

Because of the yellow fever crisis in Argentina, much disinformation, misinformation, and incomplete information were spread across the country. It also reached cities outside of Argentina, like New Orleans in the United States, where 13,000 people died in just three summers. Often, such misinformation is spread during a disease outbreak, especially regarding the illness's treatment and cause. We saw this with the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to that, another group of people was blamed for Argentina's 1871 yellow fever: immigrants, who were looking for work (Wiedenmann and Fisher). Instead of isolated events of scapegoating mainly immigrant Italians and Spaniards, it was systemic behavior by government-appointed officials. They possessed a discriminatory bias against minorities due to their attempt to minimize the spread of the epidemic (Caputo). These actions demonstrate a key reason why a democracy like Argentina would blame immigrants for issues that arise. It is to release their anger, stemming from suffering.

During the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, there was more than just showcasing France globally. The world also saw abuses against people living on the streets and the use of intrusive surveillance devices. This raised concerns about privacy and discrimination. It doesn't end there. In the snap parliamentary elections in that very same year, there was increased racist and xenophobic rhetoric (Human Rights Watch). This would later foreshadow more aggressive French policies. Specifically, it signaled the new, tougher approach to migration. Discrimination concerns seen in the Paris Olympic Games also validate the findings in a report by Amnesty International. In that report, it was noted that "numerous female migrants who were victims of violence went to a police station to be protected and were issued an OQTF (obligation to leave French territory) and placed in detention" (European Council on Refugees and Exiles).

Nevertheless, migration statistics have been at an all-time low. From 2004 to 2024, average annual net migration for France was 1.33 per 1,000 people. Compared to Germany, which was 3.4 per 1,000 people, that is low. Additionally, France didn't host a million Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in 2012 and 2022. Germany was actually the country that hosted them. Additionally, France's asylum centers never experienced extreme overflows. And yet, French politicians continue to stress about the country being taken over by foreigners (Weck). When immigrants are being scapegoated by France, it is because of fears of shifting demographics. We can see this in their harsh

migration policies. We, additionally, see this in the increase in racist and xenophobic rhetoric. It is the fear that minorities will accumulate to then become the majority, and that the changing demographics create a different-looking France. They fear and love to spread ideas on the dangers of US-style identity politics. In doing so, they mobilize voters and even gain attraction. Retailleau's speeches that stir up crowds have a 42% approval rating. He is among the country's most prominent politicians (Weck). Scapegoating and harsher policies against minorities are not just to maintain the demographic image of the country. It is also a tool that some have used to gain power and influence.

As we view the two case studies, we learn blaming others doesn't just occur when the country faces monetary problems. Scapegoating also happens when illnesses arise and fear of change occurs. But the commonality in all forms of scapegoating is hatred and anxiety, where society is depressed by the suffering it faces. A few weaponize this negativity, amassing authority in their communities. But at the same time, this leads to an increase in hate crimes and exclusionist policies, hurting minorities—the scapegoated.

Conclusion

In Federalist 10 [part of the Federalist papers that defended the form of government under the United States Constitution], James Madison explored majority rule vs minority rights in the essay. He argued that creating more factions would force them to negotiate with one another, resulting in them creating solutions that support minority rights. He also claimed that a larger size for a country will make it difficult for factions to gain control over one another (Bill of Rights Institute). Essentially, he emphasized that rule by a majority is immoral and a threat to democracy. That is why he proposed to have a multitude of factions.

Democracies possess many institutional checks. The United States must adhere to its Constitution in drafting new laws and policies. While some democracies and Constitutional Democracy, the most prominent political ideology in the 20th century, possessed the rule of the majority, it was often balanced out. Democracies have free and fair elections, limited power, the rule of law, and are obligated to protect the fundamental rights of every citizen (Gilliard). Authoritarian nations, on the other hand, are synonymous with scapegoating. The Russian regime has carved a path for stigmatizing LGBTQIA+ communities. As Roylance, a staff editor at Freedom House, writes, "to find an Authoritarian, just follow the scapegoat" (Roylance). In most cases, Authoritarian states have been run by charismatic leaders who manipulate fears,

desires, and necessities of the country (Gilliard). This can be seen in the very first country brought up in this essay, and arguably one of the most infamous cases of scapegoating: Nazi Germany. Under Hitler's rule, Germany conquered the entirety of Europe [excluding the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union], sparked the Second World War, and led a devastating purge of the Jewish people. Much of it was easier to do because of using the German people's anger at World War 1 to scapegoat the Jews. But there is one key thing here. While the Holocaust was started during Hitler's Authoritarian rule, the intense hate against the Jewish people didn't begin there. It began with Hitler's hateful rhetoric as he campaigned in democratic Germany.

Scapegoating doesn't only pertain to Authoritarian regimes. It can also be seen in Democratic countries. We see this with France and the UK adopting harsher immigration policies and blaming for either shifting demographics or economic downturn. We observe this with Mexico and Argentina, which have blamed minorities for their misfortune. We can view this in the United States, where people blame Asian people for COVID-19, even when the person has never been to China. It is much like Germany in the 1920s, who blame the Jewish people for the Treaty of Versailles. And what that led to was an erosion of democratic principles. Through scapegoating minorities, majority rule ensues. Policies that disproportionately favor majorities over minorities become more apparent in society. With democracies employing these same tactics as seen in Nazi Germany and Russia, one can wonder if and when these governments will no longer uphold their political philosophy.

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