Debates over immigration policy often degenerate into name calling and the argumentum ad hominem. *Here our Washington editor takes a look at the origins and current meanings of the words often used in this way. Roy Beck is presently researching for a book on the effects of U.S. population growth and immigration policy on the country's environment and quality of life.*

`XENOPHOBIA': SCRABBLE WINNER, DEBATE STOPPER

Scholars Explore Meaning — Precise Way Media Should Use

By Roy Beck

Quick. What's a five-syllable word beginning with an "X" and used as a label to de-legitimize another person's argument in a debate? Hint: It has begun to act like a computer virus inside the word processors of the nation's journalists; seemingly each time they write stories dealing with concerns about immigration, out pops "xenophobia," or the word for its more virulent companion malady — "nativism." The "X" word has joined a host of others, including the powerful "L" word (for "liberal," remember?) in the lexicon of labels that muffle discussion.

These are obscure words to the American public, suggests Judith Levi, Northwestern University professor of linguistics. She says the public has to draw its own inferences about the words' meanings.

But, said several scholars contacted by *The Social Contract*, the context in which the words are used probably leads most people to similar inferences: Xenophobes and nativists are not particularly nice people; perhaps they're in the same league as racists; they don't like immigrants; their attitudes and motivation lie outside the boundaries of socially acceptable political thought in mainstream America.

"The words are terms of derision," said David Bennett, Syracuse University professor of history and author of a book on nativism. The contacted scholars differed on the appropriate use of the terms. But all explained that these are strong words with dark historical shadings and pejorative implications. "Xenophobia" is a high-stakes word. Just as spelling it in a round of Scrabble scores so many points as to be a game-stopper, hurling it against a person in a debate scores the kind of points that make it a discussion-stopper.

All of which raises serious questions for editors, writers and speakers. If the words are such powerful negative epithets, professionals who use them must be clear about their meanings and when it is appropriate to employ them. Use of these words by the media requires the same precision and caution that normally would accompany use of labels such as fascist, communist, racist, anti-semite, racial supremacist, anarchist and bigot. A responsible communicator does not attach those words to anybody or any concept without fully understanding the label and knowing enough specific information about a person or idea to justify using the label.

An informal review of the use of "xenophobia" and "nativism" in recent months reveals little precision. Most journalists have steered clear of blatant misapplication of the words, although they often allow newsmakers to do it in their quotes without challenge. But the overall use of the words is so general that readers and listeners easily could infer, for example, that the labels apply to all who would restrict immigration.

The scholars unanimously agreed that it is a gross distortion to suggest that a person is a xeno-phobe or nativist simply for advocating immigration limits — or even a total cutoff of immigration.

Charles Keeley, the Hertzberg Professor of International Migration at Georgetown University, blames the presidential candidacy of Pat Buchanan for muddying communication. Further confusing the issues is the fact that no other major candidate is talking about immigration, Keeley said. The only major public expression of immigration concerns is Buchanan's. "And he's not leading us to careful consideration of what is best environmentally and best in labor terms in choosing immigrants," Keeley said.

Most journalists don't seem to find Buchanan's framework for discussing the issue to be legitimate. But they rarely point out that there are legitimate, mainstream ways to raise immigration concerns, Keeley explained. Thus, when readers see that a commentator has labeled one type of anti-immigration reasoning as beyond the pale of proper public discourse, they very well may think all anti-immigration reasoning automatically is excluded from polite debate. "The implication is that anybody who calls for immigration reduction is wrong," Keeley said. "It makes it very difficult for those arguing reduction to do so without facing pejorative labels."

How would one go about helping writers and their editors in establishing the boundaries for using the labels? What turns a "socially acceptable" desire for limiting immigration into a xenophobic expression?

Dictionaries give helpful indications. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary is similar to others in showing that one first must be motivated by fear of foreigners. But fear alone does not make for xenophobia. Hatred appears to be a necessary ingredient. Xenophobia is defined as "fear *and hatred* of strangers or foreigners."

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In defining "xenophobe," this dictionary distinguishes between rational fear and exaggerated fear. A xenophobe is a person who is "*unduly* fearful of what is foreign and especially of people of foreign origin." That surely is consistent with what most Americans think when they hear the word "phobia." Webster's Ninth conveys the sense that a person with a phobia is out of control. A phobia is "an exaggerated, usually inexplicable and illogical, fear of a particular object or class of objects."

When the new Random House Webster's College Dictionary defines "claustrophobia," the condition is not merely a fear of being in a closed space with little air and no obvious chance for escape. Rather, it is defined as "an *abnormal* fear of being in enclosed or narrow places," like refusal to board an elevator. Similarly, Random House defines "xenophobia" as "an *unreasonable* fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers."

To warrant the epithet of xenophobe or xenophobia, a person apparently needs to demon-strate a fear of foreigners that is illogical, exaggerated or marked by hatred. A rational fear of what immigration is doing or threatens to do to one's country would not be xenophobia. In fact, it would be a natural and at times healthy reaction, most of the contacted scholars said.

Harvard University's Stephen Thernstrom, professor of history, believes the epithets should be used as the dictionaries define them. Hence, most uses of the `xenophobic' label these days are a distortion, he said. Their use has become so "bizarre" that "there are those who say that the use of a term like `illegal aliens' is xenophobic, even though we have immigration laws" that define legal and illegal aliens.

Historically, there have been many logical reasons that were not xenophobic for opposing immigration or wanting to cut it back, he said. "One of the strongest monitors of unrestricted immigration was organized labor concerned about it providing strike breakers, etc. It [restricting immigration] was a progressive cause. Similarly, some ecological types concerned about pollution and overpopulation seek to limit immigration. Although I'm totally unsympathetic to the issue of protectionism, one can favor high tariffs without being some sinister xenophobic type," he said.

Even xenophobic people who are irrational and motivated by hatred on the issue usually are working from a foundation of legitimate concerns, Thernstrom said: "It's our job to somehow make a distinction and to have reasoned discourse. To say a particular policy position is xenophobic is not an invitation to debate. It is name-calling and likely to get the other person to call a name back. There are people I would call xenophobic, but I would have to do it with recognition that it is a judgment. The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s was clearly xenophobic, although the concern to which they responded was not totally irrational."

Josef Barton, Northwestern University professor of history, would advise editors and writers to go beyond dictionary definitions in considering how to apply the words: "I tend to think about xenophobia in the context of histories between natives and newcomers. Xenophobia points to a generalized fear of persons who are foreign to a culture. It is a very common human emotion. You find it in ancient Greece. It is more or less a constant. Sometimes it peaks, sometimes it is more latent."

Those natural feelings cross the line into something more threatening and less acceptable when they include intense hostility toward an internal minority with foreign origins, Barton said. That is nativism, he said. Dictionary definitions suggest nativism is a form of discriminating in favor of inhabitants who are native-born against those who are foreign-born.

Even people who work to completely close the borders to future immigrants can avoid the charge of nativism if they advocate equal treatment for native-born and foreign-born internal inhabitants, Barton said.

Most of the scholars said it makes a great deal of difference whether opposition is to immigrants or immigration. People are much less likely to act in xenophobic or nativist ways if they are fighting immigration, they said.

Barton sees the possibility of attaching "xenophobia" to some expressions of concern about multiculturalism when they go beyond merely pushing in favor of preservation of a core set of values and show intense hostility toward an internal minority and its cultural values. The definition of "phobic" in the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary is instructive: "motivated by or based on withdrawal from an unpleasant stimulus rather than movement toward a pleasant one." In that sense, Barton said, people perhaps can avoid the "xenophobic" label if they make certain that their actions and words stress what they are for more than what they are against.

One form of opposition to immigration is much

less likely than others to warrant a "xenophobia" label, Barton said. It is the opposition that emerges out of concern for the environment and population stabilization. Perhaps editors should withhold the labels from these people unless their "action passes from perfectly rational concerns into identifying internal minorities as the very root cause of an environmental or population problem," Barton said. "When they [immigrants] become the root cause, that's where rational, reasonable analysis of their contribution has passed into nativistic discourse."

Editors and writers would do well to familiarize themselves with what Georgetown's Keeley calls the four historic kinds of U.S. nativism. Three of the kinds first were identified by John Higham, Professor Emeritus of History at Johns Hopkins University, Keeley said. They are:

(1) Fear of radical philosophies being brought in by immigrants.

(2) Fear of Catholics.

(3) Fear of mongrelizing the Anglo-Saxon virtues of the country.

To those, Keeley adds a fourth: fear of numerical increase.

Every one of those fears has been around since the early years of the nation, and every one could be expressed in a rational, legitimate and non-xenophobic way, Keeley said.

"To be worried about the survival of your culture is a serious question that every group needs to ask."

For example, he said, anti-Catholicism in the 19th century was not without justification. The pope and other Catholic leaders around the world had shown their disdain for freedom of religion and pluralism which the Protestant Americans held so dear. The Catholic Church also was a strong endorser of established religion. Not surprisingly, Americans worried that their country's ideals in these regards would be overthrown if the numbers of Catholic immigrants grew too high, Keeley said.

Likewise, there was concern, beginning with George Washington, about immigrants who might bring in radical philosophies that would undermine the form of government. And Anglo-Saxonism was premised on the accurate observation that democratic ideals had sprung from, and were nurtured in, the British culture, Keeley said. The fear was that people coming from other societies would be unable or not inclined to preserve those ideals.

"To be worried about the survival of your culture is a serious question that every group needs to ask," Keeley said. "The skinheads in Germany are a very ugly form, but that doesn't mean the German people don't have a serious concern about what it takes to maintain a German culture. Part of that requires excluding things from your culture." Thus, editors would not be correct in allowing the use of "xenophobia" in connection with a person, idea or movement just because there was concern about preserving some aspect of American culture. At issue is not which culture is better but the effect on "our culture," Keeley said.

"Let's be honest, some people are worried about language and bi-lingual policies in this country who are not motivated by the highest ideals," Keeley said. "But there are some who honestly ask a serious question about what it is that is the unifying base and source of unity that allows for a political culture." Just because some racists and bigots get mixed up in the question, the concern about unity cannot be labeled xenophobic unless other qualities are present, he said.

What turns all those legitimate concerns into negative nativism, Keeley said, is when a person tries to address the concern by stereotyping all immigrants "and making the prejudicial judgment, for example, that anybody who came in 1848 as a result of revolutions in Europe was suspect because of radical political philosophy. That every Catholic was to be a suspect for a papal takeover. That every Italian was to be less favorably dealt with than every Swede because Swedes in general assimilated more quickly with Anglo Saxons."

"Fear of numerical increase was involved in a lot of the arguments around the turn of the century... this fear has emerged in a new form `that each new American depletes resources and creates labor concerns'"

Keeley said he sees virtually no sign today of nativism based on fear of radical philosophies. About the only anti-Catholic nativism arises around the abortion issue, he said. But quite a bit of Anglo-Saxon nativism continues, manifesting itself in fear of the mongrelization of the nation's culture by large numbers of Third World immigrants, he said.

Reflecting on what ingredients make a person vulnerable to a charge of nativism, Keeley said it appeared emotion is important: "If instead of saying you *fear*, you say you are *concerned* about foreign influence changing culture, there seems to be nothing wrong with that. If anybody can accuse a person of leading [others] on the basis of emotion, that is negative. It's okay to be *concerned* about immigration. You can be rational. But any introduction of emotional terms, positive or negative, is an appeal to emotion and seems to be unacceptable."

The real dilemma for those involved with the

issue, he said, is that one moves masses of people to act by appeals to their emotions. After all, what is at stake is a way of life, values, and comfort with the usual ways of doing things, he said.

And what about the fear of numerical increase? That one is different from the other immigration fears, Keeley said. Since the beginning, it has been far less encumbered with the negatives of nativism, he said. The first major manifestation of this fear was by Thomas Jefferson who thought the country needed no more immigrants to fulfill his vision of an agrarian America. This kind of fear loomed large around 1890 with the closing of the frontier and the feeling that a nation without an empty frontier did not need more immigrants, Keeley said. Fear of numerical increase was involved in a lot of the arguments around the turn of the century that the cities were overcrowded and factories didn't need more immigrant labor.

More recently, Keeley said, this fear has emerged in a new form "that each new American depletes resources and creates labor concerns."

It is difficult to justify using "xenophobia" and "nativist" against people with numerical concerns because their argument is not based on the composition of immigrants, who they are or where they come from, Keeley said. Nonetheless, he said such opponents to immigration still need scrutiny: "Some, wanting to restrict on environmental terms, are less than honest not to say that composition also is important to them."

Linguists are not likely to be of much help to editors and writers, said Northwestern's Levi: "We linguists say it is not up to one person or an elite group to say what a word means. Words take on meaning as they are used. The meaning changes over time. There is no single expert on these words. Dictionaries try to reflect how a word is used. But they are always out of date."

What matters, Levi said, is what readers and listeners infer when "xenophobia" and "nativism" are used: "You and I and our editors can continue to insist on what words mean, but it may not make any difference to others. One thing a good writer is skilled at is knowing the limitations of the audience. I can use words properly, but it also is part of my sensitivity to language to know when it is a hopeless cause."

Besides contending against all the baggage readers bring to a word like "xenophobia," she said, the label is problematic because "it is ascribing a motive to a person when you may not know the motive."

That's one reason Harvard's Thernstrom questions the legitimacy of using the label at all: "The word is used much too loosely." Although it can apply in narrow instances, it is terribly inappropriate for the United States in general, he said: "This country thus far has had a quite remarkable record of taking people from virtually every group of the world and getting them to live together. The image, on the Left, of the U.S. as nativist and racist just doesn't hold up."

Certainly, though, negative and irrational nativism has had its moments in American history, observed Syracuse's Bennett who wrote *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988). But he doubts that today is such a moment.

In his book, Bennett showed how all American right-wing movements included fears of alien activities, reaching a peak in the 1920s: "I argue that nativism declined in the '30s and virtually disappeared by the '50s until another kind of anti-alien fear reached a new height with McCarthyism. The fear was not of people but of philosophies."

"My argument is that nativism hasn't really returned," Bennett said. The rise of the New Right during the '70s was a watershed. It marked the first time a right-wing movement did not have fear of aliens as a major component, he said. "It was concerned about sinister ideas within the U.S., but from `secular humanists,' not from aliens."

The debates over the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration legislation during the early '80s offered a ripe opportunity for nativism to return, Bennett said: "I looked at the debates and whether they took on hostility toward the vast numbers of Hispanics entering the country. There didn't seem to be a nativist movement at all. This was a different coalition to curb immigration. A lot of the arguments were coming from American liberals and environmentalists. The activists were not coming from just one side of the political aisle. They weren't using nativist rhetoric." Bennett discounts the tiny number of Americans participating in fascist movements today as little more than interesting material for TV documentaries.

He said two things killed nativism after the 1920s: a sharp drop in the level of immigration and major scientific advances in knowledge about genetics. Even very progressive intellectuals earlier had endorsed nativist views that certain types of Europeans were genetically more disposed to certain traits that made them better candidates for U.S. citizenship. After the scientific advances, that kind of thinking was intellectually disrespectful by the late '30s, Bennett said.

"For that reason, [Bennett] said, `nativism' and `xenophobia' are labels far too strong to be applied to most immigration opponents of today."

In the meantime, immigration had been reduced to a level that allowed the earlier masses of immigrants to assimilate, he said. From 1930 to 1970,

immigration averaged 185,000 each year. That's only about one-sixth the level of today. "Nativism slowly disappeared because the running sores of immigration — the fetid slums, the people not speaking English, the crime rates, paupers and alcoholism — these disappeared."

Although the word "nativism" has been around since the 1830s (according to the Random House dictionary), Bennett suspects it didn't gain its present pejorative power until after the scientific discoveries of the 1930s. After that, "nativism" has suggested beliefs in racial and ethnic superiority.

Perhaps because of that, nativism hasn't recurred even though present immigration now is double the massive numbers which came annually 1880-1920 and led to the nation's worst outbreak of nativism.

"The word `nativist' always has been used by people to characterize people they don't like," Bennett said. "It is about people who act in an undemocratic way. People view nativism as outside the boundaries of democratic society."

For that reason, he said, "nativism" and "xenophobia" (which didn't appear in written form until after 1900, according to Random House) are labels far too strong to be applied to most immigration opponents of today. He said it is "absurd," for example, for some pro-immigration activists in California to say that recent advocacy to stabilize the state's population and limit immigration is nativist and aimed specifically at keeping Hispanics out. The population advocates are directing their effort, not against Hispanics, but out of concern that the state's environment is at risk, he said. "And the state assembly is concerned whether it can provide social services as it did in the past before all the growth."

If a journalist or editor, after considering all the caveats these scholars have offered, still feels inclined to use these labels, what should be the guidelines? Such guidelines can be helpful as well for those who support limitations on immigration. If they wish to avoid or escape the "nativist" or "xenophobic" labels, they must be cautious about behavior that generally is considered outside mainstream, democratic mores.

"Xenophobia" refers primarily to motivations and the nature of fear. "Nativism" is directed more at the attitude and actions toward foreign-born persons, especially those who are part of internal minorities.

Based on the lengthy interviews with these scholars, certain boundaries emerge, defining a circle. Inside that circle, beliefs and actions cannot be defined as nativist or xenophobic. Only if they cross at least one of the boundaries could they be considered for the labels. Some of the scholars would draw the circle larger and do consider some of the boundaries too narrowly drawn. For that reason, a journalist or newsmaker would want to be very cautious in applying the labels unless several of the boundaries are clearly crossed.

Each of the following was suggested by at least one scholar as a boundary a person would need to cross to be either a xenophobe or a nativist:

- irrational fears of immigrants, or perhaps excessive emotionalism,
- identifiable hatred and hostility toward foreigners, especially foreign-born internal minorities,
- responses to immigrants stirred by stereotyped images based on race, religion or national origin,
- belief in genetic superiority of one's own group as reason to keep out others,
- accusations that internal minorities are the root causes of environmental and social problems.

Interviews with the scholars, who came from different ideological perspectives, also suggest that:

- Fear about immigration's effect on a country's environmental quality is not xenophobia.
- The effort to preserve a native culture from being substantially changed by immigration is not in itself nativist.
- A person who worries about what immigration trends are doing to national unity is not necessarily a xenophobe.
- A philosophy of keying immigration policy to the needs of a country's workers is not nativism.
- Efforts to achieve population stabilization through immigration limits are not xenophobic.

Adherence to criteria such as the preceding might consign the "X" word and its family of labels to no more usage than other obscure words in the "X" sections of dictionaries. ■