“A Nuisance to Civilization”: Analyzing Anti-Chinese Rhetoric in Gilded Age San Francisco

In 1880, the Workingmen’s Party of California published a pamphlet, *Chinatown declared a nuisance!*, that weaponized racial prejudice to justify the exclusion of Chinese immigrants during the Gilded Age. Far from a passive reflection of bigotry, the document constructed a deliberate argument, framing Chinese residents as threats to public health, economic stability, and American cultural identity. Such rhetoric transformed racial animus into political action, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 – the first federal law to restrict immigration based on race. The pamphlet’s strategies – medicalizing racial bias, scapegoating immigrants for economic woes, and portraying them as culturally unassimilable – reveal a blueprint for exclusionary politics that reverberates in modern discourse.

The first of the pamphlet’s insidious pillars formulated against Chinese immigrants was the medicalization of racial prejudice. By painting Chinatown as a hub of contagion and conflating Chinese immigrants with disease, the Workingmen’s Party portrayed Chinese immigrants as public health menaces. An especially incriminating excerpt reads: “dens of iniquity and filth, houses of prostitution of the vilest sort, opium dens, gambling houses, which destroy the very morals, the manhood and the health of our people. There it is from whence leprosy…this inbred disease of Chinese, is infused into our healthy race” (12). The passage continues: “Chinese prostitutes…implant…the germs of leprosy and other loathsome, constitutional and hereditary disorders…foreign to the American people” (12). This language equates Chinese residents with biological contamination, casting them not as fellow citizens but as vectors of foreign diseases. In doing so, it ignored the systemic forces that created Chinatown’s overcrowding and poor sanitation – discriminatory housing policies, exploitative wages, and the city’s refusal to provide adequate services. Rather than confronting the city’s own neglect, the pamphlet redirected blame to the victims. The assertion made by the San Francisco Board of Health that it “unanimously…declared Chinatown a nuisance” functioned as a powerful rhetorical move, lending a veneer of scientific authority to bigotry, and thus, legitimizing calls for exclusion under the guise of civic protection (6). Such claims helped galvanize public support for drastic action under the pretext of hygiene, mirroring broader pseudoscientific trends, which pathologized racial differences to justify segregation and immigration restrictions.

Furthermore, economic anxiety formed the pamphlet’s second pillar. It exploited the fears of white workers who blamed Chinese immigrants for depressing wages and displacement, declaring “corporations…employed Chinese labor to the exclusion of white labor” (12). This grievance, while deeply felt by many working-class whites, misdirected anger toward immigrants rather than the industrial capitalists who prioritized cheap labor. Still, the pamphlet succeeded in simplifying a complex labor dynamic into a stark racial binary. The pamphlet further stoked resentment by contending that Chinese immigrants were coddled while white property owners “are assessed up to the full value of their property” (8-9). This framing fed into a narrative of Chinese immigrants being parasitic outsiders, leaching resources without contributing to society. In the anti-Chinese activism of post–Gold Rush California, such scapegoating was a common tactic. It fueled discriminatory tax laws and exclusionary ordinances across California, diverting blame from capitalism’s inequities to a vulnerable minority.

Additionally, cultural essentialism and racial othering formed the third pillar of the pamphlet’s rhetoric. The Workingmen’s Party of California argued that Chinese immigrants had “never changed the habits of their…Mongolian race” and lived “in open violation of the laws of [the] State and city” (12, 13). Such claims reinforced the idea that Chinese residents were alien in every sense – linguistically, culturally, and morally. By referring to Chinatown as “the Empire of China” in “the midst of the city,” the pamphlet reduced its inhabitants to caricatures of a foreign civilization (13). These portrayals echoed broader nativist anxieties that certain groups were incapable of assimilation and inherently incompatible with American identity – a belief central to later exclusionary movements, from the 1924 Immigration Act to Japanese internment. The pamphlet’s closing statement – “No cleansing or disinfecting can remedy this evil” – reveals its true aim: not reform, but erasure (13). By framing Chinese immigrants as both biologically and culturally contaminating, the authors justified their removal as a civic necessity.

Likewise, these rhetorical strategies did not emerge in a vacuum. They reflected and reinforced broader political developments in the American West. As the industrial economy expanded and social tensions mounted, immigrants – especially non-Europeans – became convenient scapegoats. Isaac Smith Kalloch, the Workingmen’s candidate for Mayor of San Francisco, encapsulated this sentiment with the slogan: “Chinese must go” (11) This catchphrase gained traction among disaffected laborers and became a rallying cry for legislative action. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended Chinese immigration and denied naturalization to Chinese residents, represented the culmination of years of coordinated campaigns. Pamphlets like *Chinatown declared a nuisance!* were not marginal documents; they were central to shaping public opinion, justifying discrimination, and fueling legislative momentum.

The impact of this rhetoric extends beyond immigration law. It influenced how American identity was defined in racial terms, drawing rigid boundaries between those deemed assimilable and those who were not. The use of disease metaphors, economic scapegoating, and cultural caricatures offered a template that would be repurposed throughout American history. During World War II, Japanese Americans were interned under claims of national security. In the 1920s, immigration quotas targeted southern and eastern Europeans on grounds of cultural and racial inferiority. More recently, anti-immigrant rhetoric has been deployed against Latino and Muslim populations, often relying on similar tropes – crime, disease, terrorism, and economic threat. The legacy of the Gilded Age’s anti-Chinese rhetoric thus continues to reverberate in modern policy and discourse.

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