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The Trouble With Refugees: Xenophobia, Populism, and the 2016 American Presidential Election

ABSTRACT

In 2015, a group of citizens attempted to bring refugees to resettle in their small Midwestern American town. At first widely viewed as humanitarian, the effort was soon met with an enormous backlash from a group of local conservatives. Why did refugees, who were a fairly neutral figure of humanitarian intervention in 2015, suddenly become a polarizing figure in the run up to the 2016 US elections? What role does the figure of the refugee play in the constitution of illiberal regimes? In this talk, I argue that the figure of the refugee became the focal point of a long-standing affective economy based on anxiety, one cultivated over the decades. By unpacking anti-refugee sentiment, I show that it is contagious anxiety which defines illiberal voters, rather than their membership in any particular social group - which is what allows illiberal ideologies to spread quickly across social groups and across space.