

The Complicated History of Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus"

Cowdrey: It would seem that the rich refugee has a long history of targeting the honest American Native. Such is clearly the case with the poem written by the “*Bolshevik-ish*” Emily Lazarus, who purposely used the statue in order to hurl insults at the American people and “subvert” the original intent and meaning. It was about American and French freedom and liberation from war. It was never about another ethnic group being cruel toward Americans, particularly French Americans and “demanding” they home their refugees. Emma Lazarus turned a beautiful statue and its meaning of peace between two people, *into a completely different, abusive and evil meaning towards its creators, and yet another war*. Americans just couldn’t have their symbol, someone had to take it from them.

The Brits did a number to the Acadians during the Grand Derangement, still we are here in America today. The statue of liberty would have been a symbol of our liberation from slavery and forced foreign cultural assimilation. Yet, unfortunately, the abuse continued within the Jewish political realm. Perhaps worse. These are our findings.

Today, this abuse continues, except the Jews have brought recruits, globalism, and a world that simply wants to harm the American people. They don’t know us, but they sure think they do. They blast off every hateful word, particularly towards White Americans, *because they can*.

The poem has nothing to do with the American people, but how tiring to think that people still today would quote such a cruel thing. Native French communities were recovering from forced migration and cultural assimilation. Just as cruel as it gets, but such is the culture that the political create: they hate, they harm, and they take.

Article:

By Rebecca Onion
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The poem has never represented America’s immigration policy. It’s always been aspirational.

Introduction

This week, yet another Trump administration official tripped up against “The New Colossus,” Emma Lazarus’ stirring 1883 sonnet, which was affixed to the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

This time it was Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, who said that “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” should have an addition, “and who will not become a public charge.”

He deserved the near-immediate backlash that bubbled up; the edit makes a mockery of the poem's intent. And then he made it worse when he went on to "clarify" that the people the poem referred to when it was written were "coming from Europe."

And yet, as the right is ever-ready to point out, the poem has never reflected America's actual laws. It was radical even when it was first affixed to the monument.

Historian Rachel B. Gross wrote:

"Emma Lazarus' poem 'The New Colossus' was a political statement written against white supremacist political efforts in her day, and it remains a rebuke to the same in our day. Reading it as a representation of mainstream American views has always been reading it incorrectly."

To better understand the origin of the poem, its reception at the time, and how it took on the civic weight it now carries, Rebecca Onion spoke with Princeton professor Esther Schor, who wrote an acclaimed 2006 biography of Emma Lazarus. Their conversation was edited and condensed for clarity.

The Origins of the Poem

Rebecca Onion:

When Emma Lazarus wrote this poem, in 1883, where was she, in her activism on behalf of Jewish refugees? What political context did the poem come from, for her?

Esther Schor:

Lazarus was a fourth- or fifth-generation American from a very wealthy family. She was from a Sephardic family, which is to say she didn't speak Yiddish; she spoke English at home. She was educated in her father's library, a very upper-class young woman.

She was made aware of the refugee crisis of Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia by people who were working with her at the American Hebrew Magazine.

She was asked to go visit the refugees early on, at the Schiff Refuge, a camp on Ward's Island. She wrote an amazing muckraking piece of journalism about the conditions at the refuge.

And it was very effective, because within a few days a cannery had offered jobs to these people. She knew how to make a difference; she knew how to have impact.

So, she was deeply involved with them, even though she didn't speak a word of Yiddish and even though I have to say, as a kind of upper-class snob, she recoiled to some extent from these people who were very religious Jews, and they had an utterly different worldview from hers.

But she taught them English, she worked at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Employment Bureau, she advocated for them, and she started her own fund for them, then went to Europe to try to raise money for them, as well.

She was disappointed in the response. But very typical of Emma Lazarus, instead of backing down and feeling humiliated by this, she moved forward.

So she was asked to contribute a poem, because of her work with refugees, to a fundraising effort to build the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, in the fall of 1883.

She at first demurs: “I don’t write on command”—but in her friend’s memoir, the friend wrote, “I reminded her about her work with the refugees, and it hit home.”

So she writes this poem, and this is where she audaciously brings the demand to the American people on behalf of all the “tired and poor ... the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

The Refugee Context

Rebecca Onion:

How does this fit into what people were saying about the refugees in the larger discourse? This was sort of an intervention on her part, against some sort of denial of their right to come here?

Esther Schor:

Another context for this is that there had been some very well-publicized anti-Semitic incidents in the late 1870s.

This affected her circle of affluent Jews. Banker Joseph Seligman was refused rooms at a hotel in Saratoga Springs, a hotel where her father stayed.

So this got a lot of press, and the American Jewish community was especially wary about anti-Semitism.

They had sort of united around this and embraced the Sephardim, the German Jews, but this new flow of refugees was putting this all to the test.

They were not German Ashkenazi Jews, they were Eastern European Jews, they were absolutely impoverished and dependent.

And they were put in a “refuge.” They were taking advantage of housing subsidies, as we might say.

This is what they were doing in order to take one first step forward toward immigration. And it was a crucial first step forward to be provided food and shelter and then gradually, they were assimilated into the community in New York and a lot of other places.

So, this was the context.

Most of the noise is in the Jewish community about these Jewish refugees. At least, that’s what you hear magnified when you follow Emma Lazarus’ life.

That's the conversation she was tuned into, and there was a lot of anxiety, enormous anxiety about what they called "the army of Jewish paupers."

The idea was that if they became a public charge, or even worse, became involved in criminal activity, that it would lead to a really strong wave of anti-Semitism, and it would really be a disaster for the Jewish community.

1882 was also the year of the Immigration Act of 1882, and the Chinese Exclusion Act.

I've been through Emma Lazarus' letters many times, and I don't see her commenting about either piece of legislation. I've looked.

The Statue of Liberty and the Fundraising Portfolio

Rebecca Onion:

So, she wrote this poem for a portfolio of pieces of work about the Statue of Liberty, to be auctioned off to support the pedestal efforts. What were other contributors talking about in that portfolio? Did they see the Statue of Liberty as being about refugees and immigration, or about abolition of slavery, or a connection with France, Enlightenment ideals reaching across the ocean?

Esther Schor:

We don't have the portfolio! It wasn't printed; we don't know who bought it.

Rebecca Onion:

Oh no!

Esther Schor:

We know it was auctioned off; we don't think it brought in lots of money.

It was part of an art exhibition so we have the catalog of the exhibit. And we have Art Amateur magazine in which Lazarus first published "The New Colossus," a month or two later.

A small-circulation magazine.

But I can say that at this time, you're starting to see engravings in the press that are sympathetic to immigrants—ship-deck pictures of people in great crowds, and they have faces, so there does seem to be this moment at which "welcoming the stranger" is in the conversation.

But then the poem is eclipsed, so by the time the statue is dedicated in 1886, it's not read aloud, it's not published, it's just not part of the conversation.

And as you know, it wasn't until 1903 when a friend of hers, just as a private venture to honor Emma Lazarus, undertook to commission a plaque with the poem on it, and put it on the pedestal.

The 1903 Plaque

Rebecca Onion:

And when it was put up, was there an embrace of it, in the larger public sphere? Not so much, right?

Esther Schor:

Emma Lazarus was famous in that decade as a Zionist.

And so the poems that were published, popularized, and anthologized of hers at that time were these Zionist anthems she wrote.

"The New Colossus" was not one of them.

It was not until the 1930s, after the anti-immigration legislation of the 1920s, when pro-immigrationists, most prominently the Slovenian-American journalist Louis Adamic, took the poem up as a kind of anthem.

They put it on stationery, recited it at gatherings, and brought it into the public conversation.

The Changing Meaning of the Poem

Rebecca Onion:

Between the 1930s and now, it somehow went from an interventionist poem, making an argument not everyone agreed with, to something that a lot of people think of fundamentally American. By 1986, you write in your biography, at the centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty, the poem was uncontroversially included. So, sometime between 1930 and 1986, what happened to change its status?

Esther Schor:

The poem began as a subversive poem.

It's literally subverting the meaning of the statue that the French intended it to have, which was to honor French republicanism and abolitionism.

So Lazarus single-handedly changed what the statue meant.

That subversive poem becomes a bourgeois piety, at a certain point.

The Cold War had something to do with it—in essence, the Statue of Liberty becomes a symbol of American liberty, as opposed to fascism.

Irving Berlin set the poem to music and used it in *Miss Liberty* in 1949; the Statue of Liberty is also used in *Saboteur*, a 1942 Hitchcock movie.

Then, “The New Colossus” is also taken up in the public schools as a recitation poem—it’s widely anthologized, read at civic gatherings.

It’s hard to find a date, but I think the Cold War had a lot to do with it.

And my sense is it’s recovering its subversive power now.

The Poem and Immigration Debate

Rebecca Onion:

Yes, I wanted to ask your perspective on the recurrent resurfacings of the poem in our debate over immigration. On the left, the impulse seems to be to correct anti-immigration Trump officials by making reference to this poem’s ideals. Yet, the poem has always been representative of a particular point of view on American immigration—not a consensus position. It seems hard to point this out without undermining the authority of sentiments I basically agree with!

Esther Schor:

The poem has had its detractors, years before Stephen Miller.

Most notably, David Duke, who published a whole chapter on Emma Lazarus in one of his books.

Stormfront calls her the “Jewess who tried to ruin the U.S.”

There’s an alt-right tradition of aiming right at the poem.

Think about it this way.

What other left cause in this country, if we’re going to call immigration a “left” cause, which it is right now ... what other cause has its poem?

Where’s the health care sonnet, where’s the gerrymandering sonnet?

We don’t have these.

We happen to have this poem, and granted people have focused on two lines or a line and a half of it, but there it is.

It just comes right out.

I have this Google alert for “Give me your tired, your poor,” and at midnight I get all the uses of it, in the press.

All over the world.

I get things from Australia; Aberdeen, Scotland; Singapore...