

Xenophobia must not accompany the arrival of coronavirus

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Body

Following an email detailing false reports of coronavirus present at the off-campus Lorenzo apartments, a petition made on Change.org to cancel classes has garnered more than 10,000 signatures. (Daily Trojan file photo)

In recent weeks, the disturbing trend of outright xenophobia accompanying the spread of the coronavirus has been made apparent. In Japan, the hashtag #ChineseDontComeToJapan has been trending on Twitter in the past week. In Singapore, thousands of residents have signed a petition calling on the Singaporean government to impose a ban on Chinese nationals from entering the country. In some East Asian countries, businesses have posted signs saying, "Chinese Not Welcome." In France, a regional newspaper warned of a "Yellow Alert." And last week, an email was sent out to residents of the Lorenzo apartments that said a resident had fallen ill and was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

What followed was a kaleidoscope-like view of USC student reactions: a "Cancel School" petition garnered nearly 10,000 signatures, xenophobic memes were posted on Facebook pages directed at Chinese American students and an overall fear and panic gripped the Trojan campus. University officials released multiple statements that the email was false, and there was no coronavirus outbreak at USC. Seeing how some USC students and others would react if the coronavirus really did make an appearance, it is important to ensure that xenophobia does not make a concurrent appearance.

First, one must understand that there is a valid concern that the disease's arrival would cause xenophobic attitudes to crystallize due to an existing historical precedent. Indeed, finding a scapegoat for epidemics is not a novel practice.

At the onset of the Black Plague, Jewish people were blamed and viciously persecuted. Between 1348 and 1351, the Jewish quarters of European cities and synagogues were sacked with many being murdered in their homes. In the Valentine's Day Strasbourg Massacre, several hundred Jews were burned at the stake in fear of their spreading the plague. In Speyer, Germany, Jews were buried in wine casks and cast into the Rhine River in fear their corpses were a danger to the Gentile communities. Fast forward to 1793, the yellow fever epidemic gripped Philadelphia to the point that local officials singled out newly arrived actors and artists for spreading the disease.

Thus, concern for xenophobic attitudes to become apparent cannot necessarily be dismissed. Indeed, negative attitudes against immigrants is often an effect of an epidemic. In 2015, Stanford Graduate School of Business professor Hayagreeva Rao along with graduate Sunasir Dutta conducted a study to investigate xenophobic attitudes. Participants in one group were told that new strains of the flu recently emerged and were asked to

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imagine where the strains might have come from and how to stop the spread of this virus. They were then asked whether the U.S. should create an avenue for illegal immigrants who were already in the country to become legal citizens.

As anticipated, simply thinking about contagion made respondents less likely to support immigrant legalization measures. The Stanford researchers recognize that their pilot study has weak points, yet stand by their belief that results would be much more pronounced in real-world situations.

Humans have never lived in a bacterially sterile world. And humans have never dared to envision a future where infectious disease is banished to history books lest we join those past great civilizations that relied solely on fanciful illusions. Every day, people leave the comfort and security of their apartments and college dorms and expose themselves to the germs of the world, whether that be through sitting next to a student who has been sneezing for weeks on end or being squished by strangers on the Metro. Some of the responses to the outbreak of the coronavirus are rational: When a person is sick, we have always been told to stay away from them. Yet, there is a difference between disassociation and discrimination.

If we wish to be rational beings, then it is important to understand that difference and to also understand that there is a bigger virus to worry about than the coronavirus: the flu. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 19 million Americans have fallen ill with the flu so far this season, which includes 180,000 and hospitalizations; an estimated 10,000 deaths, more than 60 of which were children.

There seems to be much cleaning to do in our own American households first before we begin to vilify our foreign counterparts. The Undergraduate Student Government released a statement last week affirming the rights of Asian and Asian American students on campus, making clear the need to support the rights of all students to live, study and participate at USC regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin and travel history.

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