



It's an American! It's an Alien! It's the Enigma of Superman: Tracing Superman's Nationality Crisis to Twentieth Century Anti-Immigration Cartoons and Comic Strips

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Abstract

This essay explores American conceptions of otherness and national identity via comparative case studies of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (1938, June 1) and twentieth-century cartoons and comic strips that featured immigrant characters. While it is generally acknowledged amongst Superman scholars that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, were avid comic strip fans, formal parallels between Superman and his cartoon precedents have escaped study. Recognizing Siegel's and Shuster's childhood love of immigrant comics strips enables scholars to see the connection between Superman and this earlier tradition of immigrant cartoons and comic strips. Such comparisons highlight the nationalistic struggles that occupied American politics and society during the early twentieth century and impacted the creations of Superman in 1933 (apocryphal) and 1938 (canonical). Interwar Superman (1933 and 1938-40) paradoxically presented himself as a paragon of Americana and as a foreign immigrant. Superman's simultaneous embodiment of two nationalistic extremes—the Rooseveltian mind and immigrant body—imbued him and his allegory with a *nationality crisis*.

Keywords: Superman, *Action Comics*, American nationality, immigrants, cartoons, comic strips, nationality crisis

Introduction

From the turn of the 20th century to the interwar period, singular panel cartoons and multi-paneled comic strips served as accessible and cheap entertainment for any literate American citizen who could afford a newspaper. Many cartoons and comics strips from the period of 1890 to 1933 featured immigrant or foreign characters—particularly those of Jewish, Russian, German, and/or Chinese descents. These characters were popular among American readers not because they resonated with their target audience's mental sensibilities, but because they inverted them. Comic strips such as *Fitzboonski the Anarchist* and *The Katzenjammer Kids*

chronicled raunchy, silly, base, and inept characters whose consistent ineptitudes and perceptual oversights led to the futility and unraveling of their stereotypically “anti-American” actions.¹

When American readers engaged with these immigrant comic strips on a long-term basis, they *depended* on feeling “better” concerning both their temporary emotive states and their social and/or national standing in American society. The immigrant characters had to be foiled by their exploits and adventures to make the American reader feel triumphant and in control despite amassing feelings of uncertainty about the United States’ and Europe’s social, political, and economic futures both on the world stage and home fields.

While Superman was a drastically different symbol in terms of his characterization as a “beneficial” immigrant, his creation and social impacts were deeply indebted to this immigrant comic strip tradition as his creators—Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster—were avid readers of such comic strips and were themselves, children of Jewish immigrants (Tye 2012).² Recognizing Siegel’s and Shuster’s childhood love of immigrant comics strips enables scholars to see the connection between Superman and this earlier tradition of immigrant imagery. Such comparisons highlight the nationalistic struggles that occupied American politics and society during the early 20th century *and* impacted the creations of Superman in 1933 (apocryphal) and 1938 (canonical).

In *Action Comics* #1, “The Coming of Superman” (1938, June 1), Superman was the epitome of the Rooseveltian man: a fully assimilated immigrant who no longer retained any traces of his birth culture and bridged male virility, aggression, and determination with the constructive goals of the American nation (Gerstle 2017). Superman was an alien *tabula rasa* that landed in Smallville, Kansas, and—due to the influence of the kind-hearted Kents—he was easily molded into the American ideal.³ As Clark Kent, the Man of Steel was humble, silent, passionate, and dedicated to his fellow citizens (as a staff reporter for the *Daily Planet*).⁴ Yet as Superman, the

¹ “Anti-American” actions included, but were not limited to: propaganda-by-the-deed anarchy; jet-setting off on dangerous adventures; purposeful attempts to uproot established authority figures (both political and/or domestic).

² Between Siegel and Shuster, their favorite comics were *The Katzenjammer Kids* (which featured two foolish German boys on exotic adventures), *Happy Hooligan*, and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (Tye 2012).

³ In *Action Comics* #1 (1938, June 1), and *Superman* #1 (1939, June 7), Kansas was not named as the original landing place of Superman’s spaceship; instead, no location was listed. Eventually, in 1949, *Superboy* Volume 1, Issue #2 (1949 March/April), named Smallville as the location of Superman’s childhood home; however, Smallville was not pinned in Kansas until Richard Donner’s *Superman: The Movie* (1978). In 1947, *The Adventures of Superman* radio show situated the Kent family in Iowa, not Kansas.

⁴ In *Action Comics* #1, “The Coming of Superman” (1938, June 1), Clark Kent applied for a job at the *Daily Star* newspaper. In *Action Comics* #23, “Europe at War (Part II)” (1940, April 3), the *Daily Star* was renamed to the *Daily Planet*. Likewise, *Action Comics* #23 featured the premiere of the evil genius Lex Luthor.

Man of Steel was much more: he was strong, masculine, pioneering, independent, morally erect, steadfast, and unwavering...at least in the eyes of his secret admirer (Lois Lane). To his enemies, Superman's supernatural aggression, haughty demeanor, stagnant doctrines, domineering personality, and facetious air made him a symbol of terror and draconian violence. Unlike Christopher Reeve's iconic altruistic Superman from *Superman: The Movie* (1978), interwar Superman only used emotional sympathy *tactically*, as in the case of *Action Comics* #8 (1939, January 4). In Issue #8, Superman dangled (*but* did not drop) wayward teenagers from a utility pole to convince them to abandon a life of petty crime (Gerstle 2017; Siegel and Kane 1939). In other words, the Man of Steel was your typical "friendly neighborhood" countryman (Gerstle 2017).⁵ To exhibit "other" characteristics would have made Superman appear as un-"American."

Yet, Superman retained one essential element of his past: his biology, which endowed him with super-human abilities and prevented him from seamlessly assimilating into American society (i.e. his need for two and sometimes even three *separate* identities: Superman, Clark Kent, and Kal-El). Superman balanced on the precipice between one stereotypical categorization and its inverse, as he was both an alien (in the most literal sense of his biology) *and* an American citizen (regarding his ideological patriotism). At the turn of the century, native-born Americans similarly perceived that immigrants' minds, values, and traditions could be "Americanized," albeit, such acceptances were qualified. At the same time, Americans used immigrants' phenotypic traits or outward accouterments as "justified" reasons for immigrants' social, spatial, and economic exclusions from American society and culture; such were the experiences of Russian Jewish immigrants in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917-23 and Asian immigrants in the contexts of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 *and* the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (Gerstle 2017). Thus, to the Rooseveltian man, the un-or-partially assimilated immigrant was both a symbol of hope *and* an obstacle: the ultimate *nationalistic foil*. The cartoon and comic strip mediums placed immigrants' phenotypic bodies, in addition to their moral and political minds, at odds with American figureheads, like Uncle Sam (see Figures 1, 2a, and 2b). Such compositions stereotyped Eastern European, Jewish, and Asian immigrants as

⁵ The phrase "friendly neighborhood" originated from the aptly named *Spider-Man* cartoon series of 1967-70, in which the hero was first referred to as "your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man." Used here in reference to Superman, the phrase transforms Superman into an "American Everyman"—or, a Rooseveltian Man so to say; *Spider-Man*, "To cage a spider," ABC, January 18, 1969, Bakshi, Ralph et al. (Writer & Director), & Anzilotti, C. (Director). (1967, January 18). To cage a spider (Season 2, Episode 19) [TV series episode]. Krantz Films.

lazy, undemocratic, socialist (i.e. Marxist communist and/or anarchist), violent, unpatriotic, unemployed, goofy, and/or shifty.⁶ Interwar Superman (1933 and 1938-40) paradoxically presented himself as a paragon of Americana and as a foreign immigrant and, as such, his potential for social mobility was confined. Superman could neither fully assimilate into mainstream American culture without fear of reprisal (hence, his need for a patriotic supersuit), nor could he separate himself from humanity, especially his adopted birth country.

Compositionally, *Action Comics* #1, “The Coming of Superman” (1938, June 1) likewise teetered between two poles. In their creation and presentation of Superman in 1938, Siegel and Shuster balanced the aesthetic and thematic influences they gleaned from comic strip precedents with their attempts to formulate a new visual template (Tye 2012). The (what the author calls) “Super-Clark model” transformed the unruly, othered immigrant into the “fully assimilated immigrant”: an *abstract and neutral figure* who, like Clark Kent, could hide and repress his foreign qualities to remain virtually undetectable (bar some super-narrative setback); a representation that was hitherto absent from the American cartoon and comic strip traditions.



Figure 1. Unknown (1898, May 9). “Keeping Them Guessing!” [Cartoon]. *Boston Globe*. Cartoon History of the Spanish American War Collection, George A. Smathers Special Collections.

⁶ Concerning Theodore Roosevelt, in *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, Gary Gerstle wrote that: “Roosevelt conceived himself, and his nationalism as anarchy’s enemy...He supported efforts to exclude prospective immigrants who, in his eyes, lacked the ability—physical, moral, or mental—and will to Americanize...barr[ing]...anarchists from entering [and staying inside] the United States” [43, 55 (Gerstle 2017)].

In early 20th century comics, the tension-filled mediation between America and the foreign “other” was shown visually through anti-immigrant narratives. Newspaper cartoons and comic strips portrayed their xenophobic messages in three ways. First, at the turn of the century, due to the formal restrictions determined by cartoons’ single-paneled formats, the narrative opposition between immigrant and American characters was portrayed *visually* via straightforward and easily recognizable racial stereotypes. This early 20th century visual manifestation of a larger narrative contrariety had a long tradition within the cartoon medium—which the United States revived in earnest amongst excitement for the Spanish-American War of 1898. This avidity was represented and encouraged to American readers via the form of Uncle Sam—America’s ultimate soldier—who fought battles for the country on all fronts: the battlefield, foreign soil, the Senate House, and even on the streets of urban America (see Figure 1).

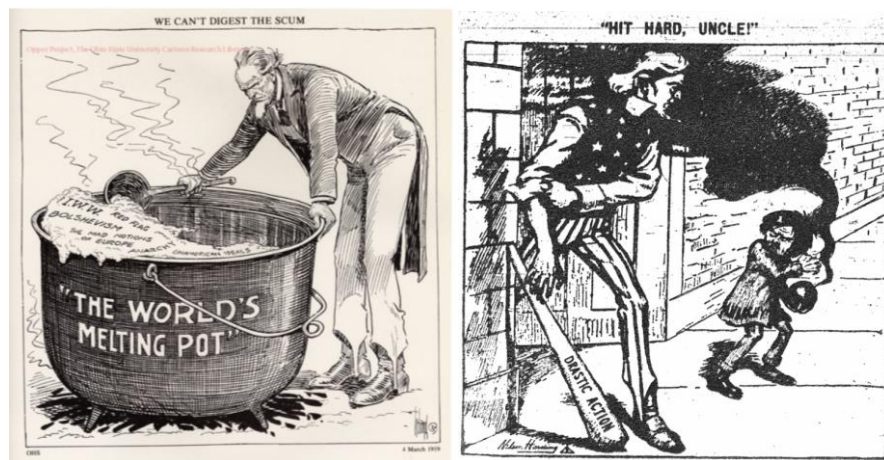


Figure 2a (Left): Ireland, Billy (1919, March 4). “We Can’t Digest the Scum” [Cartoon]. *Columbus Dispatch*. <https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/the-red-scare>; **Figure 2b** (Right): Unknown (n.d.). “Hit Hard, Uncle” [Cartoon]. *Santa Rosa History*. <http://santarosahistory.com/wordpress/2012/03/there-are-anarchists-everywhere/>.

After the War ended, turn of the century cartoons continued to use the metaphoric figure of Uncle Sam to portray peacetime American anxieties that bubbled up in response to the 1898 Treaty of Paris (see Figures 2a and 2b). The Treaty rapidly expanded and politically validated a new era of external American imperialism that forever tied the United States to the global arena. This newfound world agency and responsibility led to an American existential crisis regarding its national and international roles. Consequently, Americans’ reception and depiction of immigrants altered. During this period, single-paneled cartoons (see Figures 2a and 2b) conveyed Rooseveltian mentalities through their application of narrative, visual, moral, nationalistic, and occasionally, linguistic barriers between the American icon of Uncle Sam and the foreign icon of

the antagonistic, unidentifiable, and ultimately *irreformable immigrant*. By expressing xenophobic fears against the increased presence of immigrants and the “anarchy,” “bolshevism,” “unamerican ideals,” and “mad notions of Europe” (see Figure 2a) they supposedly brought with them to America, these cartoons suggested that Americans distrusted their country’s proportional increase in world agency. America’s growing international role and overwhelming immigrant population ultimately challenged and—in the minds of multigenerational American citizens—attempted to dismantle long-established notions of American identity, which until 1898, was defined by the United States’ political and geographic isolationism (as set by George Washington during his *Farewell Address* of September 19, 1796).

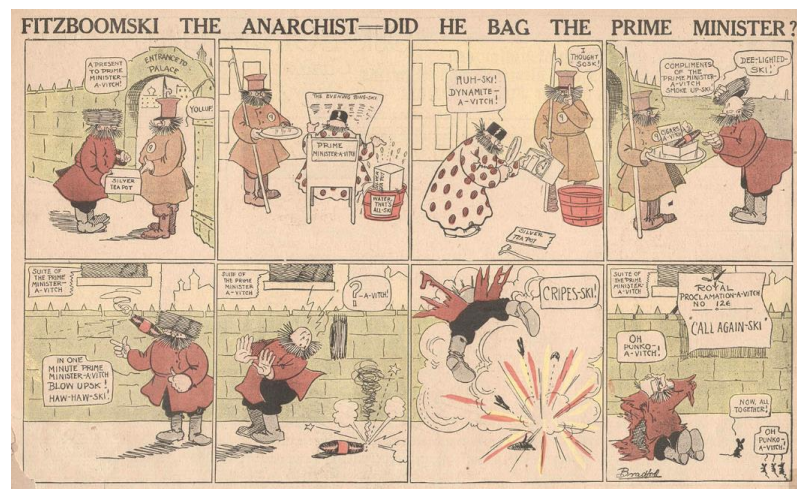


Figure 3. Badford, Walter (n.d.). *Fitzboomski the Anarchist*—“Did He Bag the Prime Minister?” [Comic strip]. *Stripper’s Guide*. <https://strippersguide.blogspot.com/2009/11/obscurity-of-day-fitzboomski-anarchist.html>.

As the 20th century progressed, single-frame cartoons matured into multi-frame comic strips, the latter of which had newfound narrative capabilities. The second and third ways that newspaper cartoons and comic strips portrayed anti-immigrant tensions were through the suggestive nature of comic strip titles and their open-ended narrative structures. Comics such as *Fitzboomski the Anarchist* (see Figure 3), followed the daily antics of Fitzboomski: a stereotypical Eastern European anarchist, whose misguided and one-note passions led to his repeated—and futile attempts—to disturb Russian law and order via the assassinations of Russia’s Czar and Prime Minister. Such anti-heroic immigrant characters were popular among American readers because they confronted, and ultimately, confirmed Americans’ cultural values (i.e. democracy) and their politically tinged racist beliefs. Together, these dispositional and active characterizations separated the immigrant subject from the “average” American viewer in

a way that allowed American readers to visualize and undermine the world outside of the United States *through* an outsider's perspective. This reflexive rose-colored lens simultaneously protected the American audience from interacting globally *and* allowed them to ostracize "others" who attempted to attain the evermore narrowed nationalistic status of "American."

Action Comics #1, "The Coming of Superman" (1938, June 1) modified this traditional form of visual subjecthood by subverting the previous iconographic notion that entwined immigrant bodies and actions with foreign (so-called, "anti-American") ideologies. Superman's most powerful superpower was his espousal of and determination to preserve the "American way" that indoctrinated him; this element of his personality allowed Superman to represent himself to American readers as a "fully assimilated" and benign (physical) "other" from the planet Krypton. By offering an alternative characterization of the foreign body and its actions, *Action Comics* #1 nullified the traditional cartoon and comic strip conflation between foreign figures' nationality, politics, and moral aptitude; likewise, *Action Comics* #1 garnered the possibility for non-immigrant bodies to embody and act upon traditionally "unamerican ideals" (see Figure 2a). Superman's simultaneous embodiment of two nationalistic extremes—the Rooseveltian mind and immigrant body—imbued him and his allegory with a *nationality crisis*.

In sum, Superman was—in body and mind—a nationalistic contradiction that ultimately conformed to the "American way." For this reason, unlike other cartoon and comic strip immigrants that appeared in the early 20th century, Superman's bodily actions (i.e. superpowers) and tactics (that bordered on urban anarchy and homicide) did not pose an inherent, overt threat to the American status quo.⁷ This distinction thus prompts a follow-up question: if Superman erased the menace inherent in the immigrant form, then who or what inherited it? The answer took shape in a figure whose characterization was the inverse to that of Superman—an American body consumed with foreign ideas. Consequently, Superman's narrative foil emerged as early as *Action Comics* #23 (1940, April 3) in the form of the Man of Steel's greatest adversary—Lex Luthor, who was biologically American *and* nurtured fascist fantasies of world domination and global anarchy (i.e. un-American political ideologies; foreign).

⁷ For examples of Superman's destructive, anarchistic, and homicidal actions during the Golden Age of Comics see: J. Siegel, & B. Kane (1939, January 4). *Action Comics* #8 [Comic book]. New York, NY: Detective Comics. <https://www.dcuiverse.com/comics/book/action-comics-1938-8/4fbf5099-3820-4a40-ae62-c060b90a2fd1/>.

Through Superman, Siegel and Shuster reshaped the mold of what immigrants *should* be by offering a hopeful narrative of what they *could* be to the American people. Albeit, this uplifting narrative neither ameliorated, nor dissolved Americans' xenophobic anxieties; instead, it consigned these pent-up agitations towards *common* American threats. In 1938, such menaces included the symptoms of the Great Depression (e.g. unemployment, poverty, hunger, and homelessness); manipulative American corporations; the chaotic and war-prone European continent; American war endorsers; and, even the United States' laws. Superman created a new enemy for Americans and, until the country's entrance into World War II, that enemy was itself.

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