
Immigrants and Parasites: The History of a Bio-social Metaphor

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Introduction

In autumn 2010, the website of the popular German women's magazine *Brigitte*, "bfriends.brigitte.de", opened a blog for discussion of a recent bestseller authored by an Executive Board member of the German Central Bank (*Bundesbank*) and member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Thilo Sarrazin, that had as its title the statement *Germany does away with itself* (Sarrazin 2010a). The book articulated a strident criticism of Germany's immigration policy over the past 4 decades and alleged that the bulk of the Muslim minority in Germany, mainly of Turkish origin, had formed a "parallel society" who were unable and/or unwilling to integrate into German society and who had taken advantage of its social welfare system. It argued in favour of policies to effect successful integration of the existing Muslim population and a stop to further immigration. As could be expected, the publication triggered massive public debates and controversies, in the course of which Sarrazin resigned from his position as Board Member of Central Bank and the SPD started proceedings to strip him of his membership. On the other hand, Sarrazin received support from mainstream journalists and politicians who accused his detractors of double standards and the desire to silence any non-"politically correct" contribution to the public debate about immigration and multiculturalism (Matussek 2010; Dohnanyi 2010).

The *Brigitte* blog on the topic of Sarrazin's theses generated more than 3,000 contributions and was still "alive" in February 2011, more than half a year since the first presentation of his book (Brigitte.de 2011). In one of the January 2011 exchanges, a contributor, writing under the online name "segres", introduced the metaphor of *immigrants-as-parasites*, in the loaded rhetorical question, "Why

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27 should one be ashamed of not paying for parasites who are opposed to law,
 28 education and equality?” (Brigitte.de, 13 January 2011). This contribution became
 29 the focus of a sub-strand of blog comments discussing whether the term *parasite*
 30 (German: *Parasit*) had been used by Sarrazin himself. One blogger, “eve_lyn”,
 31 alleged that this was the case and that it linked him to the ideology of the National
 32 Socialists: “He [= Sarrazin] uses Nazi terminology. Deliberately!” (Brigitte.de, 13
 33 January 2011). However, no quotation from Sarrazin’s book was produced that
 34 would have substantiated this allegation and Sarrazin’s critics were accused of
 35 slander; in their defence, they insisted that even if he had not used the term *parasite*
 36 explicitly, his book still implied the conceptual stigmatization of immigrants as
 37 *parasites* and accused their detractors of either being naive, gullible victims of
 38 Sarrazin’s “duplicitous” use of language or being xenophobes (Brigitte.de, 13 and
 39 14 January 2011).

40 While it is true that Sarrazin’s book does not contain explicit characterisations of
 41 Muslim immigrants as *parasites*, his repeated emphasis on their alleged “scroung-
 42 ing” and the one-sided use of crime and unemployment statistics to underpin the
 43 claim can be read as supporting their characterisation as living off the German
 44 welfare system (Sarrazin 2010a). They meet the standard definitions of the non-
 45 scientific, “social scrounger” meaning of *parasite* that have been in usage in many
 46 European languages since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with etymologi-
 47 cal origins in ancient Greek and Latin (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2002;
 48 Duden 1982; Robert 1977). Given this long tradition and the ubiquity of the term
 49 *parasite* in the meaning of “social scrounger”, it is worth asking why even its
 50 *suspected* occurrence in a book could trigger such a highly emotional debate. In the
 51 following sections, we shall employ cognitive and discourse-historical methods of
 52 metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black 2004; Wodak 2009; Zinken and Musolff 2009)
 53 to answer aspects of this question.

Migrants and Minorities as *Parasites* in Racist Discourse

54 Current-Day Uses

55 If Sarrazin, on account of his public engagement and his glittering professional
 56 career—before joining the board of the *Bundesbank*, he served as minister in the
 57 city government of Berlin and as a senior manager of the German Railways—is still
 58 regarded by many as a respectable if maverick public figure, he certainly has some
 59 unsavoury ideological and discourse companions. The extremist right-wing
 60 *National Democratic Party* (NPD) praised his book as articulating the “exact
 61 positions” which they had held for decades (NPD 2010). Their Party organ “German
 62 Voice” (*Deutsche Stimme*) accuses the “political class” of wasting the social
 63 product on “more than ten million foreign scroungers, bogus asylum seekers,
 64 illiterates, work-shy and parasites with a German passport” (*Deutsche Stimme*,
 65 5 May 2010). Other extremist websites allege, for instance, that a new Jewish-
 66 Russian “invasion of scroungers” from the former USSR have settled as *parasites* in

Germany and are being helped to *spread further* by a “traitor” government bent on destroying the German nation (Unglaublichkeiten.com 2003) or that supporters of migration and multiculturalism are “the worst parasites in our society” (wahrheiten.org 2010). One blog site gave a new special twist to the latter denunciation by asserting that the mere idea that immigrants could possibly enrich one’s “home culture” was a “parasite that was being put into the brains of our toddlers” by those who wanted to destroy any sense of national identity (aryanmusic.net 2010).

The target meaning of social *parasitic* behaviour, i.e. “scrounging”, “taking advantage of” and “abusing” the hospitality of a “host” person or society, has been a long-standing theme of public debates about immigration in post-war Germany alongside *flood* or *invasion* imagery, as a number of discourse-analytical studies have shown (Böke 1997; Wengeler 2003, 2006, 2007; Hentges 2006; Sutterlüty 2006). The association of migrants with abuses of the German welfare system has become so entrenched in the public consciousness that it even influenced negatively the ongoing debates about Turkey’s application for EU membership (McLaren 2007; Musolff 2010a). However, the explicit use of the term *parasite* is rare. It persists as we have seen, in extremist right-wing blogs and party pamphlets, but it is largely avoided in mainstream public discourse, i.e. newspapers, news agencies and official statements of all main political parties. It is avoided especially in texts that argue against immigration while trying to maintain the pretence of respectability and rationality, such as Sarrazin’s book. In order to analyse this status of the *parasite* metaphor as a semi-taboo in more depth, we will now consider its wider discourse-historical context, going back in time beyond the post-World War II debates.

Conceptual and Discourse History

As the contributions to the Brigitte.de-debate on Sarrazin’s controversial book showed, the most notorious historical association of the political/social *parasite* metaphor in German is its use by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in their propaganda against Jews and other minorities who were allegedly not “indigenous” to Germany but had migrated into it. Indeed, one of the Brigitte.de-bloggers quotes verbatim from Hitler’s 1925 book *Mein Kampf*: “He [= “the Jew”] is and remains the typical parasite, a sponger who like a noxious bacillus keeps spreading as soon as a favorable medium invites him. And the effect of his existence is also like that of spongers: wherever he appears, the host people dies out after a shorter or longer period” (Hitler 1933 and Brigitte.de, 13 January 2011). Hitler was not alone in this, of course. Alfred Rosenberg, sometime chief Nazi ideologue and “Minister for the occupied eastern territories”, depicted in detail the destruction of a crab by its parasite as the “exact parallel” to the influence of Jews on society in his book, *The Myth of the 20th century* (Rosenberg 1936). Joseph Goebbels, the Minister for Propaganda, defined Jews as an “absolutely alien race” that was characterised by its “parasitic features” (Goebbels 1934). The ideological function of the *parasite* metaphor in Nazi propaganda implied, as the historical record shows, a genocidal

109 programme that ended in the Holocaust of millions of Jews and other minorities.
110 The victims were treated *as if* they were agents of a *disease* that threatened the
111 German nation's *health* and who therefore had to be annihilated (Bein 1965). Hitler
112 and his acolytes propagated this genocidal programme from the early 1920s
113 onwards evermore fervently up to the demise of the "Third Reich", with an
114 increased intensity during World War II. In the early stages of the war, they claimed
115 that the *parasite's poison* was indeed the cause of the war and presented its
116 *extermination* as the pre-condition for victory, and later on they alleged that the
117 ongoing *parasite extermination/mass murder* was an "insurance" against defeat
118 (Musolff 2010b).

119 The use of the *parasite* metaphor to denounce their victims during the ongoing
120 genocide was historically unique but by no means original: its ideological
121 foundations had been laid in the second half of the nineteenth century. As early
122 as 1875, Major Osman Bey described Jews as "unproductive parasites" that
123 threatened to win global supremacy unless the other nations destroyed "the World's
124 greatest plague" as soon as possible (Bey 1875). In his 1881 book on "The Jewish
125 question", Eugen Karl Dühring declared that "the Jew" only came into his own
126 when he could "act as a parasite in an existing or impending process of corruption",
127 and he concluded that "wherever [the Jew] had made his home in the nations' flesh,
128 one needed to look closely whether it was still healthy" (Dühring 1881). Paul de
129 Lagarde regarded Jews as equivalents of "trichinae and bacilli", with whom rational
130 negotiation was inconceivable: the "only sensible thing" one could do with them
131 was "to annihilate them" (de Lagarde 1887).

132 This discourse built on two earlier traditions: (a) the long-standing discri-
133 minatory use of *vermin*, *disease* and *decomposition* metaphors to vilify Jewish
134 people, which had been revived in anti-Semitic writings during the first half of
135 the nineteenth century, e.g. in the works of Ernst Moritz Arndt and Hartwig Hundt-
136 Radowsky (Greive 1983; Schmitz-Berning 2000; Fasel 2004); and (b) the scientifi-
137 cally redefined concept of the *parasite* as an organism that depends for its physical
138 existence on a host organism but can endanger the host's survival by drawing too
139 much nutriment from it or transmitting dangerous diseases (Bein 1965; Cox 2002).
140 This new understanding had only become possible with the advent of research
141 based on microscopic observation and experimental methodology since the late
142 eighteenth century. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, this new
143 definition was also applied to evolution theory (Price 1980), and with the rise of
144 "Social Darwinism", it became available for the pseudo-biological defamation of
145 human "races" as hindering or endangering mankind's "progress".

146 If we compare the late nineteenth/twentieth century examples with eighteenth
147 century uses, the difference between this post-Darwinian understanding of the
148 parasite concept as a source for socio-racial denunciations and the earlier uses of
149 the metaphor become visible. In his *Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, first
150 published in 1787, the German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder had
151 described the "Jewish nation" as a *parasitical plant* on other nations: "God's own
152 people who were once given their fatherland as a divine present, have been, almost
153 since their inception a parasitic plant on the stems of other nations" (Herder 1909).

Herder's classification can hardly be viewed as positive or complimentary, but it was still of a different calibre than Bey's, Dühring's and Lagarde's racist uses of the metaphor, let alone Hitler's and Rosenberg's. Herder did not connect the notion of the *parasite plant* with the idea of the nation as a *human* or *animal body*, which he had used elsewhere: to him, the source domain for the *parasite* image was botany; the relationship of the parasite to its host was one of contingent dependency, but not that of a deadly threat. Nonetheless, Herder's use of the *parasite* metaphor to distinguish Jews from other nations created a precedent that was open to social Darwinist and racist reinterpretations.

Reverse Metaphorization: Parasites as *Migrants*

It might be argued that the history of the *parasite* metaphor in racist discourse has little or no bearing on present-day usage. Direct repetitions of the Nazi metaphor version appear to be excluded from mainstream public debate. In his 2010 bestseller, Sarrazin studiously avoids corporeal or medical imagery when depicting his "nightmare" of an ever-growing, non-assimilating Muslim population that marginalises an ageing, non-assertive German population (2010a). While admitting the provocative nature of his criticism of Muslim immigration, Sarrazin claims to stay aloof from racism or "folkish" nationalism (2010b) and to employ "plain", factual language. Surely, he would argue, immigration and also non-assimilation of immigrants are social "facts" that can be discussed rationally and critically.

However, it is debatable whether "immigration" and "(non-)assimilation" are truly fact-based concepts that can be discussed without the influence of metaphorical or other rhetorical "perspectivisation" (Stern 2000). The import of a metaphorical mapping is not restricted to a unidirectional meaning transfer but affects both the source and target concepts, i.e. here, the notions of *parasite* and *immigrant*. The scientific category *parasite* that came into use in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was built on a pre-existing social definition of *parasite* as a social scrounger. Historically, this meaning transfer from the social to the biological domain was the first metaphorical mapping of the modern term *parasite*; in a second mapping process, for which we have cited examples from the second half of nineteenth century, the biological concept of was used to radicalise and "racialise" the social category.

Furthermore, the biological meaning, despite its claim to scientific status, seems to have carried over anthropomorphic implications from its social source concept. Charles Darwin found it already necessary to warn against humanizing interpretations in 1859 when he used the concept of the mistletoe as a parasite in *On The Origin of Species*: "it is [...] preposterous to account for [...] this parasite [...] by the effects of external conditions, or of habit, or of the volition of the plant itself" (Darwin 1901). To this day, popular medical advice websites (e.g. *healingdaily.com*, *dailyparasite.blogspot*, *allergyscape.com*) describe bio-parasites as if they were intentionally "insidious", "harmful" or "destructive". Moreover, bio-parasites

195 are depicted as “typical” immigrants: in popular articles and brochures on the
 196 effects of climate change, for instance, parasites from Mediterranean regions that
 197 spread to the North of Europe are depicted as “unwanted” or “secret immigrants”
 198 who surreptitiously sneak into an unsuspecting and defenceless host population
 199 (Lubbadeh 2006; Orthopress 2010). The popular conceptualization of biological
 200 entities is thus “humanized” by way of a transfer from stereotypical source “knowl-
 201 edge” about immigrants, namely, that they come uninvited, act secretly and bring
 202 with them hitherto unknown dangers for the host society. It is therefore evident not
 203 only that the *parasite–migrant* mapping can work in both directions but also that the
 204 very concept of “(im)migration” is not at all neutral but carries strong ethical and
 205 emotive connotations. These connotations derive from the metaphorical assimila-
 206 tion of the concept of “migration” of biological entities that carry disease and that of
 207 the “migration” of socio-ethnic groups. Both types of migration have the potential
 208 to generate anxiety about the identity and inviolability of the corporeal and the
 209 social “Self”—to pretend that discussions on these topics can be conducted without
 210 emotion is profoundly misleading.

211 Conclusion

212 Our discourse-historical analysis of the origins of the present-day metaphorical
 213 mapping, *parasite–immigrant*, has so far yielded the following results:

- 214 1. Since the late eighteenth century, the previously socially and ethically defined
 215 concept of the *parasite* as a “scrounger” was extended to cover biological
 216 entities, first plants, then animals and microscopic organisms as well as being
 217 re-contextualised in the frameworks of evolution theory and medical parasitol-
 218 ogy, which put the emphasis on descriptions of parasites as *alien bodies* that
 219 *invade a host organism* and can cause fatal damage to it.
- 220 2. In this “scientifically” reinterpreted version, the term *parasite* became available
 221 for new social re-applications that were related to the perceived danger from
 222 ethnic minorities and immigrants. The main “target”-group for such stigmatizing
 223 use of the *parasite* metaphor in German public discourse were, from the second
 224 half of the nineteenth century onwards, Jewish people, as the absolute “Other” of
 225 the Aryan/Nordic “race”. This use of the *parasite* metaphor as a racist stigma
 226 reached its high point during the 1920s–1940s in Nazi discourse when it served
 227 to “legitimise” the genocide of European Jews. While the anti-Semitic use of
 228 *parasite* metaphors has greatly diminished since the end of the “Third Reich”, it
 229 has not disappeared completely. It is still present in neo-Nazi use and it can be
 230 found generally in extremist right-wing discourse, with a broader extension
 231 covering all kinds of perceived alien or immigrant groups. It is marginalised in
 232 mainstream political discourse to the extent that explicit use of the term *parasite*
 233 and outspoken appeals for *extermination* are excluded; however, depictions of
 234 immigrants and minorities as supposedly “incorrigible” or “untreatable” social
 235 scroungers tap into the cognitive potential of the *parasite* metaphor as regards
 236 the perceived *fatal threat* to the respective *host* society and the concomitant
 237 *urgency of radical* solutions. In this respect, the concept of “immigration” may
 238 be considered to embody an implicit metaphorical schema, i.e. that of egotistic

“participants” who are not just beneficiaries of other participants (hosts) but take advantage of or damage them in a systematic way. The one-sided emphasis of public voices such as Sarrazin’s on the “social scrounger” status of immigrants can at the very least be criticised as coming close to exemplifying such implicit stigmatizations of immigrants as *parasites*.

3. Popular scientific and medical discourses, on the other hand, seem to have undergone a metaphorical mapping movement in the reverse direction: bio-parasites are depicted as *alien invaders* and *immigrants* that purposefully occupy and then gradually destroy the human host body. The degree of anthropomorphic metaphorisation of the bio-parasites is evident from the emotive vocabulary and ethical disapproval that accompanies their description in popular self-help literature.

How close the semantic relation between *immigrant* and *parasite* concepts has become can be gleaned from the example of another debate about “parasite immigration”, i.e. US bloggers’ discussions about immigration across the Mexican border, which is perceived to be responsible for the spread of bio-parasites that endanger the US indigenous population. Anti-immigration blogs are full of reports that highlight cases of immigrants who carry parasite-induced diseases (without, however, considering the possibility of such diseases and parasites being “imported” by “legal” immigrants or US citizens themselves), and they allege that only a complete border closure can stop the spread of the bio-parasites and diseases. The blog site “AmericanRenaissance”, for instance, starts from the premise: “The invasion of illegal aliens pouring over the borders of the United States is taking an ominous turn. They are not alone! Their bodies may carry Hepatitis A, B & C, tuberculosis, leprosy and Chagas Disease, [...] a nasty parasitic bug common in Latin America” (*AmericanRenaissance.com* 2004). The alien-parasitic “invasion” is allegedly threatening US children’s lives: “Our borders are as porous today as they were on 9/11. But this terror is a silent invasion—a deadly, growing, ticking ‘Time Bomb’. It means your children are at risk when attending school or going to the movies”. It closes with the appeal: “call your senator or representative, [...] and demand they secure the U.S. border with Mexico to stop illegal immigration by whatever means you deem necessary, i.e., US troops, National Guardsmen, mass deportations and arrests of employers who hire illegal aliens” (*AmericanRenaissance.com* 2004).

While being alarmist, this blog still distinguishes in principle between the immigrant human *aliens* and the *parasites*. In other blogs, however, these conceptual boundaries seem to blur. *MichNews.com*, for instance, warns of a tapeworm parasite “*Taenia solium*”, which was supposed to have been eradicated in the United States—but now, with “[the Third World] immigrating into America at an unprecedented rate of speed, the parasite is moving along with them and passed among people” (*MichNews.com* 2004). One blogger, “Bettybb” in a commentary on a *Washington Post* article about recently enacted anti-immigration laws in Arizona, arrived at the full equ(ivo)cation, endorsing

283 as it did “Arizona’s efforts to eject illegal alien parasites” (*The Washington*
284 *Post* 2010).

285 The semantic convergence of *immigrant* and *parasite* concepts in this meta-
286 phoric use has, as we have seen, ominous historical precedents in racist ideology
287 and propaganda. Discourse-historical analysis can help to raise awareness of this
288 background and also explain the aspects that make it relevant for understanding
289 its present-day use. While extremist demagogues who use to denounce immi-
290 grants as *parasites* may not be bothered about the pseudo-scientific and geno-
291 cidal origins of this imagery, the media that disseminate their appeals and
292 statements as well as the audiences whom they are addressing may be amenable
293 to a sensitisation for the tacit assumptions hidden in this metaphor. If its histori-
294 cal “track record” is exposed, at least the pretence of “innocent” ignorance about
295 its implicit threat is no longer credible.

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