IDENTITY-DRIVEN VIOLENCE: RECLAIMING CIVIL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The increase in identity-based violence both domestically and internationally is focusing attention on the need for proactive approaches to reconciliation. The rise of militia movements, and the associated phenomenon of malicious racial harassment in the Pacific Northwest, demonstrates the dangers arising from identity-driven violence. The broad scale success of an anti-affirmative action initiative illustrates the wider significance of discriminatory attitudes. This article addresses those dangers by illustrating the convergence of two kinds of theories about identity-based violence. We will demonstrate how individual-level explanation taken from empirical work in the field of developmental psychology fits with social movement theory to provide a powerful analysis of the causes, and the cure, for identity-based violence and racial discrimination. Specifically, we focus on the relationship between identity formation and political violence, on the one hand, and residual racism among economically and culturally dispossessed whites on the other.

Social movement theory tells us that there are dispossessed whites who are likely to seek status by targeting minorities. Identity theory tells us that it is the disjunction between the certainties of identity socialization for this group, and their present sense of dispossession, that transforms group "interest" into authoritarianism and potential violence. The key empirical link is between identity "foreclosure" and forms of authoritarianism that rationalize violence.

In using the analysis as a guide to solutions to racial violence, we highlight the actions that can be taken to pre-empt violent behavior through a political emphasis on developing constructive developmental choices. We examine the requirements for the development of democratic personalities that avoid the pathologies of violence associated with interpersonal domination and authoritarianism. The direction given by social movement theory points toward solutions based on democratic discourse around objectives derived from identity theory: namely, the recognition and validation of community worth, the improvement and affirmation of participatory competence, and practical steps toward sustaining commitments on an interpersonal basis. These kinds of communication have to be worked out at the non-elite level, and in practical steps that build confidence between communities.

The article builds on the work reported in Hoover's recent book, *The Power of Identity: Politics in a New Key* (Chatham House 1997), and on work by Johnson on race and American national identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity-based violence has, in the post Cold-War World, become the major preoccupation of domestic and international efforts to assure peaceful coexistence among peoples of differing backgrounds. In the U.S., the steady resurgence of the far right over the last 20 years provides a case study for an analysis aimed at prevention and remediation. Many of the most violent elements of the far right have gathered in the Pacific Northwest over the last generation. This article is an attempt to suggest the viability of wedding developmental psychology and social movement theories in an analysis of the reasons for a marked propensity for violence among certain elements of the far right. Our purpose is to propose a strategy for resisting the advance of identity-driven harassment and violence.

A brief review of the historical context will set the stage for our analysis. The election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency in 1980, with his reactionary feel-good rhetoric about going back to a traditional America, was the most dramatic national indicator of the backlash against social welfarist liberalism and the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s. White supremacists, laissez-faire capitalists, fundamentalist Christians, and neoconservatives coalesced under the Republican Party umbrella. Reagan revived the pre-New Deal alliance between conservatism and capitalism.[1] A host of conservative Republican Congressmembers were elected for the first time in 1980 and began to dismantle the liberal consensus of the Kennedy-Johnson years.

Even before Reagan's ascendancy, some white supremacist fundamentalist Christians had decided that the population centers of the United States were lost to morally depraved race-mixers. In the 1970s Richard Butler moved from California to northern Idaho and established the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. Butler's group was part of the Christian Identity movement, which believes "that the white, European conquerors of North America are God's true 'chosen people,' that Jews are Satan's offspring and that people of color are a subhuman species."[2] In rationalizing his move to Idaho, Butler averred that the Pacific Northwest, the part of the United States with the fewest people of color, should be defended as the last bastion of the white race in North America.

Another important strain of the violent far right was the Posse Comitatus (power of the county). The Posse began in the late 1960s and advances the doctrine that county sheriffs are the highest legitimate law enforcement officers, because they are the only ones who are elected. Posse proponents tend to oppose practically all state and federal regulation of individual freedom and private business activity. They have also reinvigorated all the old views about an international conspiracy of Jewish bankers, multinational corporations, and

world government to destroy American sovereignty and the way of life it protects.

In 1979 Richard Butler began to hold an annual Aryan Nations Congress in Hayden Lake, Idaho. The Congresses brought together a diverse range of new and older far right elements, including the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis. In those volatile environs great pressures were mounted for an ever more aggressive stance in defense of God, country, and the white race. Posse Comitatus organizing had already benefited from the farm crisis in the 1980s. A Jewish-dominated international banking system was blamed for the failing agricultural economy, especially in the Midwest. One Posse extremist, Gordon Kahl, was imprisoned for encouraging people not to pay taxes in 1976. Kahl violated his parole upon release by continuing his anti-tax activities. Forced into hiding, he was found by the FBI on an Arkansas ranch early in 1983. He died in an ensuing gun battle. Aryan Nations member Robert Matthews was deeply affected by the death of Gordon Kahl. He formed a splinter group from the Aryan Nations called "The Order." This group embarked on a campaign of bank robberies and murders, until it was broken up following the death of Matthews in a shootout with the FBI in 1985.[3]

Kahl and Matthews became martyrs of the racist, anti-government far right. Elements of this group were noticeable across rural and small-town America, but were particularly pronounced in the Pacific Northwest, where adherents continued to move, attracted by Butler's notion of the region as a white enclave in North America. In 1992 one of their number, white supremacist Randy Weaver, took flight from entrapment over his alleged sales of illegal weapons.[4] The Weaver family sequestered themselves, heavily armed, at their Northern Idaho homestead. In a series of exchanges of gunfire, Weaver lost his wife and thirteen-year-old son. This was seen by the far right as an excessive use of force and convinced many of them of the immorality and insensitivity of national government. Those sentiments were heightened following the incineration of the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas by Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms officers on April 19, 1994 under questionable circumstances. A year later to the day the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed, claiming 168 lives.

In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City massacre, a shocked country learned of the breadth of a patriot/militia movement that saw over 850 cells operating in all fifty states. The authors' own region of the Pacific Northwest has continued, along with the Midwest, to be a hotbed of patriot/militia activity.[5]

II. REACTION AND RESISTANCE

The conventional response to this pattern of harassment has taken the form of heightened enforcement of laws directed against racially-motivated violence.

There has also been a mobilization of community-based movements to counter right-wing political activity. These steps have been effective in dramatizing the problem and mitigating some of its most disturbing manifestations. However, viewed from a broader political perspective, these maneuvers have also marginalized the struggle as a duel between militant malcontents, on the one hand, and human rights activists, on the other.

The advent of a systematic campaign to eliminate affirmative action through state initiatives has revealed the broader dimensions of identity-driven discrimination. In 1998, a Washington state anti-affirmative action initiative passed overwhelmingly, and voting was sharply divided on racial lines. Consequently, it is imperative that a fresh analysis be undertaken aimed toward political action on a broader front. The "mainstreaming" of identity-based discrimination calls for a re-examination of the strategy for combating harassment and violence.

In a rough sense, the anti-harassment forces have received divided counsel from analysts of political behavior. *Individual level* theories suggest that particular personalities need to be selected and dealt with by a variety of means, from therapy to detention to punishment. *Social level* theories, on the other hand, point to conditions of deprivation arising from inequities of class, among other factors, that are thought to foster a sense of dispossession. The displacement of alienation onto aggression against identifiable "others," whether different by virtue of gender, race, or sexual orientation, is a staple of this analysis. The problems with these diverging remedies are obvious: therapy is complex and chancy, detention accomplishes little, and punishment contributes to recidivism. Yet these remedies seem simple compared with the task of remedying social inequalities and reducing alienation arising from the nature of capitalism.

What falls between the cracks in this bifurcation of theory is the possibility that individual and social level theories can be seen to converge around a more effective remedy for identity-driven violence. The key lies in understanding the dynamics of identity formation and defense. While there has been a half-century of empirical research on this subject, that work is largely ignored in contemporary discussions of the political meaning of identity. Identity is taken to be whatever people think it is. The term *identity* is defined only descriptively, and almost never with reference to any form of systematic behavioral research. The means of acquiring identity are left unexamined, other than as social constructions of a presumably arbitrary nature.

Yet a review of what is known about identity formation opens the way to breaking through the artificial division between individual-level and socially-based theories. With that breakthrough, we can begin to see the way toward a democratic resolution of discriminatory behavior.

III. IDENTITY RELATIONS: A BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS

The common meeting ground of all citizens, no matter how factionalized by issues of race, class, and gender, is, paradoxically, *identity.* If asked: *Who are you?*, most of us reply by indicating what we do, what communities we are part of, and whom we are with. Fifty years of empirical research have confirmed that identity is made of three sets of relations: *competencies, communities, and commitments.*[6] Research in developmental psychology by Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan, and James Marcia, among numerous others, reveals that, while these relations take a multiplicity of forms in different settings, the underlying structural similarities are pervasive and striking.

Each element of identity involves relations between individual characteristics and social processes of legitimation, recognition, and validation—or the reverse: denial, discrimination, and censure. It is difficult to claim to be a poet without the imprimatur of publication, or a member of the "elect" or the "chosen" without signs of divine preference, or a committed partner without visible evidence of a bond beyond self-interest. *A secure identity builds on a triad of relations: work that is validated economically and socially, communities that are recognized as intrinsically valuable, and enduring personal commitments to families, friends, and associates.*

In the theory of identity formation, stage development plays a central role in setting the agenda for these emerging relationships. As we move from dependency as children toward the possibilities of autonomy, the crisis of identity looms and the struggles of the late teens and twenties are undertaken. Women and men encounter these struggles differently, but with the common goal of reaching a sense of identity, and a capacity for intimacy, by the commencement of full adulthood. Subsequent stages involve the evolution and defense of identity against the challenges of maturation and old age.[7]

For our purposes, what matters as much as the content of these stages—whether validation is received through membership in a gang or in the Rotary Club—is just how we come to acquire these relations. What social psychologists have documented with striking consistency is that there is no substitute for working through to a satisfactory set of relations by a personal process of testing and negotiation in a developmentally responsive environment. This requires a period of "moratorium" in early adulthood as these relations take shape in the struggle between internal promptings and social responses.[8]

The opposite of such a moratorium is identity "foreclosure"—the adoption of relations of identity not by growing into them, but *by imposition or by acquiescence in the absence of choice.* Foreclosure involves the adoption of roles and values held by significant others without the exploration of alternatives on one's own terms. Identity may appear to be settled, but its foundations are insecure.[9] Here lies the link to authoritarianism and incipient violence. James Marcia, the leading analyst of identity research, notes that:

One of the most consistent findings in identity status research has been that male and female Foreclosures, especially relative to Moratoriums, score highly on measures of authoritarianism and socially stereotypical thinking (Marcia 1966, 1967; Marcia and Friedman 1970; Matteson 1974; Schenkel and Marcia 1972; and Streitmatter and Pate 1989). They show preference for a strong leader over a democratic process, obedience over social protest, and the "pseudo-speciation" described by Erikson (1987): firm conviction that "their" group and "their" way are right. A possible consequence of this position is the somewhat chilling finding by Podd (1972) that, more than any other in a Milgram obedience task who had delivered what they believed to be maximum electrical shock to a "victim," it was the Foreclosures who were willing to do it again; in fact, all Foreclosures who administered maximum shock levels were willing to repeat their performance.[10]

This is where the bridge to social-level explanations becomes visible. What appears to characterize the militias, the extremists, and the practitioners of identity-driven harassment and violence is a form of identity foreclosure. The rigid notions of superiority and virtue associated with one's own community, the denigration of the communities of others, of their claims to competence, and of their forms of commitment, are the stuff of discriminatory behavior. But the disposition to *act* on these identity convictions comes out of a particular kind of developmental experience.

The symmetry between the experience of foreclosure and the power-driven imagery of supremacist rhetoric is consistent with this analysis. For those raised in a culture of clear and predictable roles, of those who are superior and those who are inferior, of a "right" that rationalizes force and abuse, the pressure toward foreclosure is dominant and difficult to escape. Protestations of loyalty, fidelity, and solidarity are at the heart of these experiences.

IV. IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE

What triggers the move from chauvinism to violence? This becomes the question for social theory to address. Social explanations of alienation and dispossession typically center on the impersonal processes of industrial capitalism. What is needed here is a more specific application of these insights to the generational experience of particular groups. Clearly the decline of the small farmer in the face of industrial agriculture has left behind a disinherited rural population. No doubt the transition from a manufacturing to a service economy with lower paid, and less secure, employment has provided the urban counterpart.

However, by the terms of this theoretical convergence, it is just as significant that *cultural relations* of identity have been undermined as that economic forces have been adverse. The verities of conventional lifestyles have, from this perspective, been undermined by a cosmopolitan multiculturalism which is

seen to be enforced through laws on equal opportunity and affirmative action. What is suggested here is that the trigger that moves "foreclosures" from authoritarianism to action, involving a spectrum from overt discrimination to harassment to identity-driven violence, is the cultural and economic dispossession of a generation of poor white males.

Strategies of remediation for the economic predicament and for the cultural misperceptions that fuel these reactions are clearly called for. However, remediation of this sort can hardly be expected to succeed against the continuing pressure arising from forces of cultural and economic change. What is needed is a positive strategy of preventive action.

What our convergent perspective suggests is the necessity of helping people work their way out of the foreclosure that constrains the maturation of identity development. A positive strategy would focus on building legitimate forms of competence, a sense of community that does not require chauvinism, and a capacity to sustain interpersonal commitments.

Mixed forms of community action that combine cultural and economic dimensions offer a greater chance of success than do purely political activities. The distinguishing feature of civil society in America, at least, is the prevalence of voluntary organizations such as clubs, lodges, churches, and even political movements that support a range of cultural and economic possibilities for their members. An understanding of identity makes it clear that this is where the main front is in the battle for a more tolerant society.

State enforcement can prevent the worst abuses. State regulation and social service provision can provide better developmental choices for people. But the will to enforce, and to provide for healthier forms of development, is captive to sentiments of the larger society. It is in the various sectors of civil society that the battle is being waged by the forces of the right—the churches, the conventional political parties, the voluntary associations. And it is here that progressive action is badly needed. Just as identity-driven harassment has been mainstreamed by the anti-affirmative action movement, so does the progressive resistance need to be mainstreamed through a broader array of tactics in civil society.

It is here that the social psychological emphasis on competencies, communities, and commitments converges with an emergent social movement literature on multiculturalism. The pre-1965 definition of American national identity as white meant that the nation was governed by ways of life in civil society and practices of state that sustained white supremacy. In that social milieu to be a person of color meant to be the "other," and therefore, not worthy of serious consideration in social relationships. Consequently, white Americans' *sense of community* did not have to embrace people of different races, and the vast majority of whites certainly had no serious involvement in efforts to correct racism. The community element of identity has been undercut for those who depend upon racial exclusivity for security in a changing world.

Of equal or greater significance, in the last generation, white vocational competencies in everyday life have been challenged by the presence of people of color in schools, workplaces, and even neighborhoods and social gatherings. Racist and insensitive comments and acts, once accepted in closed company, are now frowned upon and are even a cause for embarrassment. With the enforcement of anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws, this behavior can result in the loss of jobs and status. Corporate programs aimed at recruiting from a multiracial talent pool have increased the pressure on whites who are marginalized by economic changes.

The societal tensions arising from the mass entry of people of color into mainstream settings have broader and deeper manifestations than political violence, which is the focus of this paper. A generation after the civil rights revolution, white Americans continue to be *collectively insecure* regarding a revised multiracialist understanding of American history. Far too many whites have had little or no personal experience with people of color away from work, and they often arrive in the workplace with stereotypical attitudes acquired during their socialization in white communities. After work, America remains a very segregated society. Thus, no meaningful sense of *community* exists between whites and non-whites in most of the country.

The correlates of occupational and social disruption, familial instability and economic insecurity, make personal commitments of all kinds hard to sustain. This makes it extremely doubtful that whites or minorities would acquiesce in a multiracialist hegemony in their community lives. In summation, for many white Americans, identity formation with respect to race has been collectively foreclosed by developmental shortcomings stemming from mass miseducation in homes and in schools, compounded by a lack of experience, or tension-ridden experiences, with non-whites in civil society.

What was already a contentious, racially divided society became even more so with secular developments in advanced capitalism. De-industrialization and the flight of capital overseas, increasing automation in production, and the farm crisis were part of a scenario causing the steady decline of real wages and deteriorating standards of living for large sectors of the most vulnerable populations since the 1970s. In the face of this capitalist globalization, fewer and fewer of us of any race are, in fact, sufficiently *competent* to succeed in the global marketplace. The violence of the patriot/militia movement emerges from those sectors of white society possessing less capacity for dealing with the convergence of the forces of legal racial equality at home, and capitalist integration globally. The relationships between legal racial equality, economic globalization, and a greater propensity toward violence among culturally and economically dispossessed whites are demonstrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
LEGAL RACIAL EQUALITY, DECLINING LIVING STANDARDS, AND
PATRIOT/MILITIA VIOLENCE AMONG WHITE AMERICANS

Legal racial equality/
Increased competition between races

Consequences for Marginalized Whites

Foreclosure on racial identity elements

+

Propensity for violence among culturally
and economically dispossessed whites

Economic globalization;
Declining living standards
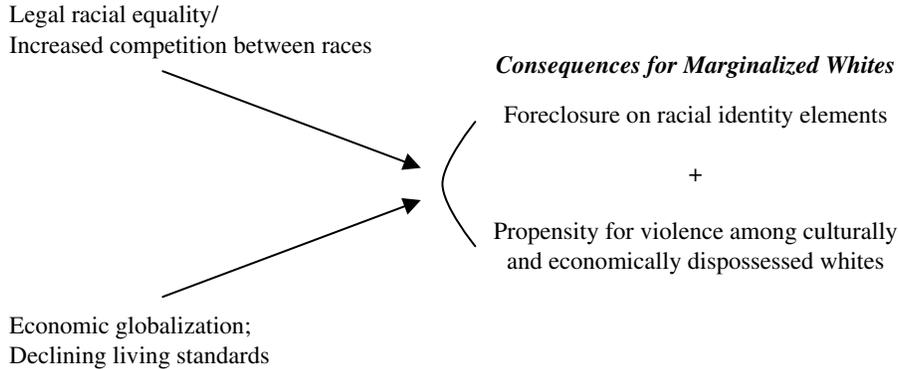
V.   TOWARD A MULTICULTURAL CIVIL SOCIETY

In order to make multiracial communities possible, an alternative to the cultural and political project of the right needs to be mounted in American civil society. But American civil society is a far-reaching and pluralistic site. The deepening of populism following the fall of communism is accompanied by calls for decentralization of power and the fragmentation of states. These *popular-democratic* urges have become salient from time to time throughout American history and are resurgent today.[11] America must achieve a new cultural consensus, but it cannot be elite-driven. "The new America must be a *popular nation* in the sense that it must be what the people say it is, and what they want it to be."[12] But the regionalism so heralded by Madison, because it prevented consistent majorities, confounds efforts at building a national hegemonic consensus. As Johnson has observed elsewhere,

> Westerners, Easterners, Southerners and Midwesterners have different historical forces, and different mixes of baggage to resolve to reconstruct their Americas. Besides, *people have to learn to live together where they live.* The conundrum presented is one of whites promoting Confederate symbols in southern state capitols and universities, anti-immigrant fervor in the southwest, anti-Indian sentiment throughout the West, and the enduring presence of the black under-class in rust-belt cities. Each reflects an enduring ideology of white supremacy, but also a different array of forces to be addressed.[13]

The emphasis in terms of organizing here is clearly regional, with particular focus on local issues. The myriad institutions of civil society must be mobilized to develop competencies for working in multiracial communities where citizens can engage in face-to-face relations to resolve conflict. Job programs and familial support activities are essential ingredients, along with cross-racial community building.

The human rights movement in the Pacific Northwest has been an example of the kind of regional-local network we are talking about. For many years the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment offered an umbrella for communities mobilizing against the Aryan Nations, neo-Nazis, and militia groups. At the same time the Coalition for Human Dignity provided critical intelligence regarding the worldview and strategies of the far right. A third organization, the Western States Center, trained progressive activists, office-holders, and other politicians in electoral politics and other techniques for pressuring government. The Northwest Coalition's annual symposia brought together activists and intellectuals from around the region and country to discuss their experiences and strategies for confronting the far right. After several years, participants began to frame the movement in terms not only of what it was *against*, but also what it was *for*. Although there was not total agreement on this score, an inchoate consensus emerged that the movement was for "multiculturalism."[14] Local groups in the region provided the backbone for efforts toward "tolerance for difference" and "promoting diversity." Together, the three organizations mobilized churches, labor activists, and other local constituencies around a multiculturalist project that addresses the issues of community and, having established that, can increasingly take on issues of competence and commitment, as well.[15]

Efforts such as these, multiplied from locale to locale, and region to region, can replicate *on the left* what the far right achieved in the churches and the corporate world over the last generation. Progressive forces need to re-take the initiative. The message needs to be about respecting competencies among the dispossessed, broadening communities by reaching out to the marginalized members of society, and acting on substantive policies that enable people to keep their familial commitments. Coalitions of activists, churches struggling with a sense of mission, unions seeking a broader base of public approval, companies that want the benefits of talented workers of differing races, voluntary organizations that assert community values against the depersonalization of globalization—all of these are the sites for engendering a multicultural identity that counters the parochialism and exclusionism of far right identities.

The institutions of government are strongly implicated here. We said that in the twenty-first century the nation must be popular-democratic, or what the people want it to be. In determining what the aggregate of social forces interacting out there want for their communities, democratic institutions of government would seem to be indispensable. Taking seriously the frustrations of those who may presently be anti-government, and establishing a format for dialogue

between them and the rest of the community based upon a common value for the place, is what we are calling for here.[16] This is not a utopian scheme. There will always be people who are unwilling to participate in such a community dialogue, or who may participate, but not be willing to accept a consensus reached by the majority. But government must play a central role in discerning the will of the community, because it is the only institution that by its very mission represents us all. This positive vision is about a world in which individual identities can be realized, while being nurtured in the associational life of civil society as well as being nurtured and regulated by the state, without dependence on denigration, denial, and violence.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Hoover and Raymond Plant, *Conservative Capitalism in Britain and the United States: A Critical Appraisal* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

2. Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 158.

3. Ibid., 260, 267-68.

4. Thomas Shapely, "Ruby Ridge Reprise," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 27 September 1995, E1.

5. "Growing in Number, Hardening in Attitude," *Intelligence Report*, Spring 1997: 4.

6. In Kenneth Hoover, James Marcia, and Kristen Parris, *The Power of Identity: Politics in a New Key* (Chatham, N.J.: Seven Bridges/Chatham House, 1997) ch. 2, 3, 4, the empirical and theoretical basis for this form of analysis is developed. In this article, we use the term *community,* rather than Erik Erikson's term *integrity (integral-ity),* to describe the component of identity that has to do with the affiliations and loyalties by which we place ourselves in a world of meaning. Similarly, for the sake of clearer communication, we use the term *commitment* rather than *mutuality* to denote the familial, filial, and marital relationships that provide the third key element of identity.

7. Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980).

8. Cf. James Marcia, "Ego Identity: Research Review," in Hoover et al., op. cit., 122.

9. Cf. Jane Kroger, "Identity in Formation," in *The Future of Identity: Centennial Reflections on the Legacy of Erik Erikson,* ed. K. Hoover (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 66-67.

10. James Marcia in Hoover et al., op. cit., 87.

11. Cf. James Morone, *The Democratic Wish* rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Morone points to the cycle in American political history from populist arousal to movement mobilization to bureaucratization and an increase in the power of government. Our prescription here suggests that, by aiming for localized mobilization across a spectrum of community activities, this familiar cycle can be rendered more productive of constructive change.

12. Vernon D. Johnson, "A Response to Religion and the Contemporary Construction of White-American Nationalism," in *American Armageddon: Religion, Revolution and the Right*, ed. Eric Ward (Seattle, WA: Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment/ Peanut Butter Press, 1998), 94-95. Johnson adds popular-democratic nationalism to the ethnic and civic nationalisms posed by Noel Ignatiev in *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994).

13. Ibid., 97.

14. We switch here to the term multiculturalism, which includes considerations of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, and even environmentalism.

15. The Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment and the Coalition for Human Dignity merged in 1999, and after a series of internal crises, the new organization collapsed. However, the Western States Center still exists. And across the region two statewide organizations, the Montana Human Rights Network and the Rural Organizing Project (Oregon) continue to do similar work. In addition, a number of local organizations continue to exist in the state of Idaho and throughout the region.

16. Hoover makes the argument about the central role of democratic institutions in "Identity, Democracy and the Politics of Human Development," *Centre for the Study of Society and Politics Review,* Autumn 1997: 43. Daniel Kemmis emphasizes the importance of competing sides' all valuing the place where they live and using that as a starting point for democratic dialogue in *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).