

Positioning Hate

Kathleen Blee
University of Pittsburgh
kblee+@pitt.edu

Paper presented at the Conference to Establish the Field of Hate Studies,
Spokane, WA, March 20, 2004.

I. INTRODUCTION

A year after the publication of my book on women in the contemporary organized racist movement, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (2002), I received a series of emails from a woman I will call Jenny. The study of racist activists in this book was based in part on my interviews with women in the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazi and white supremacist skinhead groups, and Christian Identity communities. Although Jenny was not among those I had interviewed or even met in the course of the study, she had heard about my book—although not read it, as I later discovered—and contacted me to complain. Jenny insisted that I had inaccurately characterized people in the racist movements as motivated by hatred. In her experience, the movement, at least in the past, had been composed largely of “well-meaning” and “fair-minded” people. Only recently had it attracted less savory characters who were just “looking for a home for their hate”—people, Jenny concluded, who were making the racist movement less comfortable for the good people like her.

It is not hard to dismiss Jenny’s comments. People in organized racist groups tend to be disingenuous, especially when it comes to describing their racial commitments and activities. Not surprisingly, they want to present themselves and their groups in the most favorable light and thus are loath to accept pejorative terms such as “hate.” Even if a racist activist wished to be candid, it is difficult for someone to accurately describe what motivates his or her behavior. Events and commitments of the present shape not only how people *tell* stories from their lives, but also how they *know* or *remember* these experiences (Fielding 1981; Goldberg 1990; Somers 1994). Subsequent events cloud perception of what prompted actions in the past, a process evident in my study of racist women. When asked to explain what led to their current racial activism, many described it as the outcome of a sudden, dramatic racial “conversion” through which they radically revised their earlier, naive ideas about race and racial politics. The actual biographical events that led these women to racial groups, however, give a very different picture: one of gradual recruitment through a personal contact rather than dramatic ideological transformation. The seeming memory of racial “conversion” that these racist women relate as

their route to racist groups was thus a *post hoc* reconstruction, grounded in their current racist commitments, rather than an accurate recounting of their original motivation to join.

Given the difficulties of assessing motivation, even for people of goodwill, should we assume that complaints by avowed racists about how their motivation is portrayed by outsiders can simply be dismissed? Perhaps not. In this article, I want to suggest that it might be valuable for those of us who are committed to antiracist work to think about Jenny's remarks. My purpose certainly is not to rehabilitate the image of racist group members. Rather, it is to reconsider how we understand the "hate" of racial hatred. In this article, I examine the relative merits of considering racial hatred as an individual motive or as an outcome of social action. I ask whether it might be worthwhile to re-examine the common presupposition that racist groups necessarily attract haters and that all those who enlist in racist groups are necessarily motivated by hate. And I evaluate the implications for scholarship and anti-racist politics if we consider that people like Jenny may not be personally filled with hatred or did not join the racist movement because of hatred toward other racial or ethnic groups.

The argument of this paper draws on recent theorizing in the sociology of emotions and sociological studies of racial hatred and ethnoviolence, as well as my empirical work on racist activists in the 1920s Klan (Blee 1991), the contemporary organized racist movement (Blee 2002), and what are commonly known as "hate crimes" (Blee n.d.). I begin by describing how intergroup hate like that exhibited in racial hatred is generally understood, focusing on studies and public discussions of racist groups and racial violence and the limitations of this conceptualization. I then propose an alternative approach, considering intergroup hate as a social outcome rather than an individual motivation for actions, and explore the utility of this reconceptualization for the study of racist groups and various types of ethnovoilent incidents.

II. HATE AS AN INDIVIDUAL PHENOMENON

The role of hate in practices of intergroup conflict and tension is generally regarded, at least implicitly, as a matter of individual psychology. Intergroup hatred is understood as a complex of emotional states, cognitive views, and affective sentiments within an individual who is negatively focused on a social group other than his/her own. As such, intergroup hatred typically is understood to be embedded in a complex of other traits of perception and personality, such as prejudice, discrimination, displacement, and identity. Although not all people exhibit or experience hatred toward members of other social groups, there is an assumption that the psychological building blocks of group hatred are universal. Prejudice and discrimination, for example, are seen to stem from the need to reduce and organize the welter of information that is received in complex social situations by pre-judging information received from other peo-

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ple and sorting it into a limited number of pre-formed categories. Displacement and identity, too, are regarded as rooted in basic and perhaps innate human desires for status, power, and social connection such that people tend to displace their frustration onto people seen as dissimilar and to value people regarded as similar to themselves (Aronson 1992).

Although the psychological foundation of group hatred is considered to be universal, this does not mean that all persons feel hatred toward members of other social groups. For many, perhaps most people, such intergroup hatred is never activated. In some people, however, particular sets of social, economic, political, or psychic conditions may trigger animosity toward those of other social groups. The conditions of its provocation will shape the groups to which such intergroup hatred is directed. For example, interracial competition for valued resources like jobs, housing, education or political power may shape intergroup hatred in a racial direction. Aggression displaced from a female target may shape hatred toward all women. Even deficits or needs of personality may play a part in directing intergroup hatreds. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1992/1946, 37) famous discussion, for example, depicts anti-Semitism as a passion, a disgust, a revulsion, "an involvement of the mind so deep, so complete, that it extends to the physiological," that is, a twisted religion embraced by those who wish to avoid the burden of reasoned action and to displace anxiety through hatred of an entire group of people.

This understanding of hate as a matter of individual psychology and personality is evident in scholarship and public policy as well. This is particularly evident in two contemporary phenomena associated with intergroup hatred: hate crimes and organized racist groups. Hate crimes are criminal offenses judged to have been motivated by animus toward a defined class of persons. Although the class of persons protected under hate crime statutes varies among states and between state and federal statutes, these laws typically apply to crimes prompted by prejudice on the part of the perpetrator based on the victim's race, ethnicity, or religion; less often they extend to crimes motivated by animus on the basis of sexual orientation, disability status, or gender (Perry 2003, 496-7; Green, McFalls, and Smith 2001). There is considerable controversy about the utility of such laws in curbing intergroup violence, especially the efficacy of heightened punishment as a deterrent; the constitutionality of punishing a perpetrator more for an offense motivated by racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and so forth than for a comparable offense without such motivation; the limited reach of the law across potential classes of victims, especially women; and the level of enforcement of such laws (Bourne 2002; Jacobs and Potter 1998; Jenness 2002/03; Jenness and Grattet 2001; Wang 1997).

The second area in which hatred of other groups is often analyzed as an individual-level phenomenon is that of social movements organized to oppose social progress, such as collective resistance to the social advancement of

women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and so forth. I focus on here racist organizing, but the explanatory dynamics are similar for other oppositional movements. Racist activists, as Jenny complains, are typically regarded by commentators and scholars as haters, a characterization that assumes that people seek out racist groups in order to express their antipathy toward members of racial, ethnic, or religious minority groups. From the post World War II collaborative project of German critical theorists who came to the U.S. to escape Nazi persecution and published their exploration of the psychological roots of fascism as *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), to present day journalist accounts of racist leaders, there is a preoccupation with explaining why certain people are predisposed to hate others enough to join racist groups. Although Theodore Adorno and his colleagues were careful to link authoritarian dispositions to the particular constellation of family and social configurations they saw as characteristic of early twentieth-century Germany, more recent commentators often provide little explanatory connection between individual personality attributes and the actions of racial hatred. Instead, accounts of racist activists often describe a welter of factors that are assumed to condition someone to a life of racial activism: economic marginality, perceived harm by someone of another race, or blocked avenues for expressing aggression. Yet these factors tend to be assumed rather than demonstrated to cause a particular person's decision to become a racial activist.

There is no doubt that considering hate as rooted in attributes of individual personality has been useful for analyzing why certain people become involved with various forms of violence or organized resistance to the advances of other social groups. It helps clarify why two persons, situated in similar social, historical, and even familial contexts, can arrive at very different positions with regard to issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Further, the focus on individuals helps clarify the deep and passionate feelings that tend to accompany acts of intergroup violence or movements to oppose the rights of those seen as different from oneself. But such an individualistic focus also has limitations. It tends to strip individual action away from a social context, thereby assuming as universal certain sentiments, emotions, and ways of thinking that might, in fact, be variable across time and place. And it leaves unanswered the nagging question of Jenny's complaint: Should all racist activists be considered to be "haters"?

III. HATE AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

To broaden the understanding of hate, especially in the context of intergroup conflict and violence, it is useful to consider hate as a social, in addition to an individual, phenomenon. Such a social conception considers four analytic qualities of the experience and expression of hatred: hate as *relational*; hate as *socially constructed*; hate as *accomplished*; and hate as *organized*.

The notion that *hate is relational*, rather than simply an expression of an

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inner psychological state, is based on recent developments in the sociology of emotions as well as in efforts to develop a comprehensive theory of the expression of racialized and sexualized hatred across the globe (Eisenstein 1996; also Card 2002; Roy 1994). This understanding of hate focuses not on the origin of hatred in the individual psyche, but on how hate is expressed and the consequences of that expression. Zillah Eisenstein (1996, 23) links this way of thinking of hate to more psychological understandings in her assertion that:

I do not view hatred as natural, or timeless, or homogenized, and yet it is something more than contextually specific. As a politics of "otherness," hatred calls forth the imaginings of unconscious fantasies. But the fantasies are changeable.

For Eisenstein, hate is a politics of "otherness," of "other-ing" groups of people as different from and more threatening than the self. Hatred is thus a boundary mechanism, sealing borders between the self (or the group seen as similar to the self) and those seen as different. Hatred, in this sense, is exclusionary. It creates social boundaries that mold or intensify a sense of commonality within the self-group (the "us"), even those that may not have been experienced before. The intensification of nationalist hatred in the former Yugoslavia, for example, shaped a sense that there was a commonality to being Serbian or Croat, even among those who had lived very inter-ethnic lives in the past (see Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Nirenberg 1996; Oberschall 2000). Similarly, racial hatred operates to create a sense of whiteness as a commonality that bridges such cross-cutting differences as those of ethnicity, location, social class, or gender (Essed and Goldberg 2002; Horowitz 2001). Further, the social boundaries created by intergroup hatred create a singular sense of the "Other," (the "them"), against which one's own group is defined and posed. Hatred erases the internal differentiation of the Other, bringing to the fore its common antagonistic qualities. There can be no recognition of heterogeneity among the Other. All Serbs or Croats, all African Americans, all gays and lesbians, all women are rendered similar and non-distinct through this hatred.

In this view, hatred is an interactional rather than a purely psychological process. It arises in the course of social interactions in particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, and it shapes the possibilities for future social interactions (Parkinson 1996). Through interaction, Serbs learn to think of themselves as Serbian and to hate Croats. As a consequence, they take actions that make peaceable interactions across these lines of national identification difficult or impossible in the future. Considering hate, like other emotions, as an interactional phenomenon also highlights its communicative function. Emotions, according to Ian Burkitt (1997, 40; italics in original) are "expressions occurring *between people* and not expressions of something contained inside a single person." The implication of rendering emotions as relational rather than intrapsychic is to shift attention from the background of

individuals who express emotions to the relationships among people in which specific sets of emotions arise. It is to focus on how emotions are learned in social settings; how emotions are related to power relations, including those of race, gender, sexuality, and class; and how they are tuned to specific intended audiences, even if expressed privately (Parkinson 1996, 679).

Relatedly, it is useful to consider how *hate is socially constructed*. This understanding of hate is based on a theory that at least some emotions are historically and culturally situational; that is, they are dependent on the definition of a situation, as well as the availability of emotional vocabularies and sets of emotional beliefs, rather than being invariant, automatic, patterned responses (Thoits 1989, 319). Social theorists of emotion vary in the extent to which they regard emotions as socially constructed, with some insisting that all emotions are products of social life and others arguing that some emotions are the product of an interaction between innate drives and social life. The middle ground position, expressed in a statement by T.D. Kemper (1987, 276, cited in Thoits 1989, 321), is that "physiologically grounded primary emotions become elaborated 'through the attachment of social definitions, labels and meanings to differentiated conditions of interaction and social organization.'" This suggests that, although there may be physiologically based primary emotions, social norms dictate when certain emotions are correct or even mandatory. Applied to the emotion of intergroup hate, this implies the importance of understanding the conditions under which such group hatred is likely to be expressed. Here, the observation of emotion theorists that negative feelings are more often directed down the status hierarchy (Thoits 1989) is particularly useful, suggesting that the emotion of group hate is most likely to be expressed by socially dominant groups (whites, men, heterosexuals, for instance) against those who are socially subordinate (persons of color, women, gays and lesbians).

According to the view that regards emotions as at least partly a product of social construction, it is possible to find patterns in the expression of emotion. These patterns, known in the sociology of emotion as "emotion cultures," are historically variable. Thus, the contemporary United States can be characterized as a "love culture" because of the cultural pressure to define a wide range of emotional situations as representing emotions of love. Similarly, at the time of its breakup, the former Yugoslavia might be considered a culture of ethnic hate. Not only the expression of racial hatred, but also the actual experience of emotions such as hatred toward racial others, reflect the patterned nature of social construction. Racial hatred is not arbitrary, but rather is constructed or muted by distinct social influences.

Hatred might also be understood as something that is ACCOMPLISHED. This focuses on hatred as a process rather than an attribute. In scholarship on intergroup hatred, there is considerable evidence that hatred can exist as an outcome of a particular sequence of social events. James Aho's (1994) work on the sociology of enemies uses the theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to suggest a process whereby hatred toward racial enemies is

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accomplished. In Aho's explanation, the process of intergroup hatred begins when a group of people is identified and labeled in a negative way. Negative labels impose a constant and a primary identity on a group of persons who may see themselves as having little in common. People of a variety of races, sexualities, and ages who have the HIV virus take on the master status of "AIDS victims"; gay men of varying occupations, lifestyles, and political inclinations all become "fags" or "queers." If intergroup hatred is to be accomplished, such labels tend to be legitimized by those who are presented as authorities or experts. Sociologists whose studies suggest genetic differences in intelligence by race, psychologists who assert that homosexuality is a disorder, and religious leaders who pronounced AIDS victims as deserving of their fates are examples.

The next stage in accomplishing intergroup hatred, according to Aho, is that of myth-making. Accounts are created that purport to demonstrate the inevitability of the negative label now attached to a group. Such fables as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a mythologized description of Jewish conspiracies, work to justify the negative evaluation of other groups. As these myths persist over time, some take on the character of common sense, a process known as "sedimentation." The racist depiction of African American violence toward whites in the early twentieth-century film "Birth of a Nation" comes to be regarded over time by some whites as a factual historical account of southern life after the Civil War. Similarly, as knowledge of the original fabrication of the myth fades from memory, vicious legends like the *Protocols* can take on the character of taken-for-granted knowledge. And the process of accomplishing intergroup hatred, in Aho's terms is completed through ritual. The group to which negative qualities have been attached are treated with caution, secrecy, cruelty, or violence (Nirenberg 1996). If they react in kind, their negative qualities are confirmed. If they do not react, they are seen as weak or cowardly.

Literature in the sociology of emotion also suggests that emotions like intergroup hate might be understood as *organized* sentiments, what Gordon W. Allport (1992, 31) refers to as "an enduring organization of aggressive impulses," rather than as inner traits. Considering the organization of intergroup hatred underscores how such emotions tend to be provoked by enduring social relationships; that is, how these emotions are embedded in larger social relations such as those of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class.

Finally, emotions like intergroup hatred are socially and politically *encouraged* (or forbidden). In addition to overt forms of encouragement or sanction, such as expressions of vilification or support of minority groups by politicians, media, schools, and other social agencies and institutions, emotions can be engendered by more subtle social forms, including the organization of the physical and cultural world (Parkinson 1996). Racial segregation in housing or schools, for example, encourages feelings of dislike, even hatred, across racial lines as racial groups are spatially arranged as different, often competing,

groups. Cultural displays of a group's superiority over other groups may similarly provoke the feeling and expression of intergroup hate.

IV. APPLICATIONS TO RACIAL VIOLENCE AND RACIST ORGANIZING

How does a sociological stance on intergroup hatred help explain phenomena like racial violence and racist organizing? I suggest several possibilities, based on my research on racial hate crimes and organized racist groups.

Hate crimes, as mentioned above, generally require evidence that a perpetrator's criminal actions were motivated by animus toward a legally protected group of persons. For an act to be counted as a hate crime, a criminal offense must have characteristics that would suggest the motive of group animus, such as the perpetrator's membership in a racist group, possession of racist literature, or use of racial epithets during the crime. However, as Lu-In Wang (1999; 2001; 2002) and other legal scholars point out, there are problems when the definition of a hate crime focuses on individual motivations of hate. Since the definition of hate crimes "recognizes no motivation other than pure animus, it tends to identify as 'real' hate crimes only the most extreme and dramatic cases [and] to consider the bias crime perpetrator and his culpability in isolation from the social context, characterizing the perp as a deviant, hate-filled extremist who acts on his own deeply-held hostilities toward the victim's social group" (Wang 2001, 215). This casts the perpetrator in the role of a social deviant whose actions are prompted by irrational emotions of intergroup hatred. It also obscures the possibility that motives of racial hatred may be mixed with more mundane goals like personal gain or status enhancement in crimes such as assault or robbery.

If we consider intergroup hatred as a social, in addition to an individual, phenomenon, it is possible to understand the acts of violence that are regarded as hate crimes in a broader and more accurate fashion. Such acts are not always the product of individual emotional states like hatred, but can reflect broader social institutions and cultural norms. Social divisions of power and resources and cultural ideas about those regarded as Other make certain groups of people more vulnerable, more targetable, than others even in the absence of particular animus by an individual perpetrator (Wang 1997). Thus acts of violence against members of socially and culturally subordinate groups by members of privileged groups—acts that are made possible, even likely, by the social structure of privilege and subordination—might well be considered conceptually equivalent to hate crimes even when individual perpetrators are not immediately motivated by emotions of intergroup hatred. This of course may broaden the notion of hate crimes beyond individual, intentional inflictions of harm to include also institutional, collective harm against subordinate racial groups such as racial inequities in access to prescription drugs, as well as acts of violence motivated by the opportunity to victimize a vulnerable person even when the immediate and proximate motive for violence is not racial.

Our understanding of racist groups, too, may well be enhanced by incorporating a social as well as an individual notion of intergroup hatred. Returning again to Jenny's comments on my book, it is important to acknowledge that there is variability in emotions like intergroup hatred, both among members of racist groups and even within one person, across the course of their lifetime. Carol Heimer's (2001, 3) critique of social institutions that "tend to assume the constancy of the subject" is a caution against analyses of racist groups that regard their members as all and constantly hate-filled and motivated by racial hatred. Indeed, it may be more productive for scholars, as well as more fruitful for antiracist activists, to differentiate carefully among racist group members and among phases in the lives of individual racists. My work on racist women (1991; 2002), as well as studies of racist men by Raphael Ezekiel (1995) and of adherents to right-wing Christian Patriotism by James Aho (1990), suggests considerable variability in the motives of individual racist activists. Social camaraderie, a desire for simple answers to complex political problems, or even the opportunity to take action against formidable social forces can co-exist with, even substitute for, hatred as the reason for participation in organized racist activities.

A social understanding of intergroup hatred will not replace the need to pay attention to how individuals experience and express hatred toward those they perceive as different. But it may provide new avenues for understanding situations—like those of hate crimes and racist groups—in which the link between motivations of hate and acts of racial hatred is complex, and sometimes tenuous.

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