

Hatred has become a political taboo

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By the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, it is the one emotion that is considered intrinsically illegitimate. We have legal categories like “hate speech,” “hate crimes.” For a public figure, to profess or even publically acknowledge feelings of hatred towards anyone—even their bitterest rival—would be to instantly place themselves outside the pale of acceptable political behavior. “Haters” are bad people. In no sense can it ever be legitimate to base a political or social policy on hatred, of any kind. It has come to such a pass that one can barely encourage hatred even against abstractions. Christians used to be encouraged to “love the sinner, hate the sin.” Such language would never have been coined today. Even to encourage others to feel hatred for envy, pride, or gluttony might be considered slightly problematic.

This was not always so. There was a time when hatred was assumed to form part of the essential fabric – even, to constitute the essential fabric – of social and political life.

Consider the following quotations:

[The Emperor] Commodus had now attained the summit of vice and infamy. Amidst the acclamations of a flattering court, he was unable to disguise, from himself, that he had deserved the contempt and hatred of every man of sense and virtue in his empire. His ferocious spirit was irritated by the consciousness of that hatred, by the envy of every kind of merit, by the just apprehension of danger, and by the habit of slaughter, which he contracted in his daily amusements.

The honest labours of Papinian served only to inflame the hatred which Caracalla had already conceived against his father’s minister...

The Persian monarchs adorned their new conquest with magnificent buildings; but these monuments had been erected at the expense of the people, and were abhorred as badges of slavery. The apprehension of a revolt had inspired the most rigorous precautions: oppression had been aggravated by insult, and the consciousness of the public hatred had been productive of every measure that could render it still more implacable...

The hatred of Maximin towards the Senate was declared and implacable...

The leaders of the conspiracy... rested their hopes on the hatred of mankind against Maximin.

The empire was afflicted by five civil wars; and the remainder of the time was not so much a state of tranquility as a suspension of arms between several hostile monarchs, who, viewing each other with an eye of fear and hatred, strove to increase their respective forces at the expense of their subjects.

The emperor [Constantine] had now imbibed the spirit of controversy, and the angry sarcastic style of his edicts was designed to inspire his subjects with the hatred which he had conceived against the enemies of Christ.

What jumps out about these passages—they are all drawn from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—is first of all, just how normal hatred was assumed to be. It was only to be expected that kings and politicians should hate their rivals. Conquered people hated their conquerors, unjust rulers were detested, emperors hated the senate, senators loathed the common people and imperial advisors and members of the emperor’s family were detested by the urban mob, which would periodically try to burn their palaces. Even more remarkably to the contemporary ear, there is no sense, in the works of ancient historians or ancient moralists, that such hatreds were in principle illegitimate. They might be. But many were entirely justified. Indeed, hatred for a cruel and unjust ruler could even be considered a civic virtue. In Medieval times feelings of ill will between prominent families, neighborhoods, and guilds were often institutionalized in relations of formal “hatred,” considered simply the inverse form of friendship; one could also be transformed into the other by appropriate rituals. In England, for instance, it was assumed that, in the ordinary course of events, the common people would detest the king, royalty in most places being seen as foreigners, there would often be public celebrations at the failure of some royal project. Hatred for men of the cloth was inveterate. (As late as 1736, Jonathan Swift wrote an essay entitled “Concerning that Universal Hatred that Prevails Against the Clergy.”) Different branches of the clergy hated one other: the schoolmen hated members of the monastic orders, the lay clergy detested the priests. According to Thomas Aquinas, even the hatred of God himself was preferable to unbelief or indifference, since it was, in its own way, a form of intense engagement with the Divine.

Hatred, then, was part of the very fabric of social life. Neither did any one really imagine things could be otherwise. Nor was this a peculiarly European phenomenon. Similar passages could easily be assembled for China, India, the Valley of Mexico, or almost any society that existed under monarchical or aristocratic rule.

So: when did hatred begin to fall into such disfavor? One might argue that there was always a strain of disapproval in Christian literature, but even the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” implies that it is legitimate to hate a sin, and nowadays, things have got to such a pass that even that is likely to be considered problematic. Still, the evocation of Christian love, and the feeling that political hatred is a violation of Christian principles, only really appears in the 19th century. In England, in appeals against the “class hatred” of the Chartists, which—it was held by elite politicians, middle class reformers, and Christian socialists alike—would only leave to the violent envy and paroxysms of revenge that characterized the French revolution. The essentially reactionary impulse here can be seen even more clearly in the common reaction at the time to any assertion of the rights of women: early feminists were invariably denounced as “man-haters.”

All this is important to bear in mind because nowadays we tend to assume the phrase “politics of hate” has necessarily right-wing implications (since the phrase is normally applied to racism, ethnic hatred, or homophobia), and as a result, that the taboo on expression of political hatred

is a triumph of essentially left-wing sensibilities. In fact, the history suggests this is far from the case.

First of all, even in the case of racism, anti-Semitism, or ethnic chauvinism, to frame these things in terms of “hatred” almost necessarily means focusing on followers, and not leaders. The great murderers of the twentieth century were not men driven by terrible passions, they were cynics who fomented and exploited the passions of others. It is utterly unclear if Hitler personally hated Jews (or for that matter whether Stalin personally hated Kulaks.) There are indeed many indications they were emotionally incapable of any such deep feelings. What’s more, the passions they manipulated were from every part of the emotional spectrum, their followers murdered just as much from love of humanity, or at least love of nation, family, community, than from hatred. To treat the lesson of all this that one should be against “hate”, and create a category of “hate-crimes,” is tacitly placing the blame on the dupes and simply informing would-be mass manipulators that their craft is perfectly legitimate, just, that there are certain levers that they really shouldn’t push.

In fact, if you really think about it, the universal taboo over any expression of hatred in political life actually has the effect of validating this sort of manipulation. As I mentioned, politicians nowadays (unlike those in the past) are expected to pretend that they feel no personal hatred for anyone. But what sort of person can exist within a world of constant rivalry, scheming, and betrayal, and *not* hate anyone? There are only two real possibilities: one would either have to be a saint, or an utter cynic. No one really imagines politicians are saints. Rather, by maintaining the superficial pretense of sainthood, they simply prove the depths of their cynicism.

One could go further. The outlawing of hatred could be seen as the opening gambit towards a move towards a world where the cynical pursuit of self-interest is the *only* legitimate political motive. Note how the very idea of a “hate crime” inverts the familiar legal principle that a crime of passion should always be punished less severely than one driven by cold, self-interested calculation. It’s probably no coincidence that a wave of legislation against hate crime, in the ‘90s, was soon followed by “anti-terrorism” legislation, which, similarly, stipulated penalties on crimes driven by political passions (and the way the laws are generally phrased, these passions could include the most benevolent idealism and love of humanity or nature) more severe than those that would have been imposed on the same crimes had they been committed for economic profit or personal self-interest.

It’s significant that this logic *only* applies on the political level. After all, the very idea of a “crime of passion” largely exists to justify male violence against women in domestic situations. Any realistic analysis of the way that power works in our society would have to begin by acknowledging that such passions, and the fear and terror they create in their victims, are the very foundation of those larger systems of structural violence which uphold inequalities of all kinds (including those ostensibly covered by “hate crimes.”) Yet, domestic violence is never, itself, considered a “hate crime.”

Passions only make crimes worse when they take place in an explicitly political context. At home, they are an exonerating circumstance.

It would seem there are only two universally recognized exceptions to the taboo on hatred. These are telling in themselves.

The first is what might be termed “consumer hatred.” It is acceptable to express hatred, even passionate hatred, for things that others consider desirable, but you do not: for Boy Bands, UGG shoes, the films of Coen brothers, for mushrooms or anchovies on pizza. This of course is entirely in keeping with the general principle that passions are to be confined to domestic affairs and not to politics. The second is more ambiguous: the hatred of criminals. It is permissible to hate those who cause pain and suffering by violations of the law. But even here, perhaps because we are in an ambiguous zone moving from the personal to public sphere, it is rarely explicitly framed as “hatred”. There often seems a kind of coy flirting with a forbidden emotions, here: as in the villains in so many pulp fiction genres, whether cowboy or spy movies, superhero comic books, or above all, the endless true-crime, serial-killer literature, where the whole idea seems to be to try to imagine a human being so extraordinarily detestable that one could be forgiven for hating them after all. In America, for instance, crime victims are granted a particular license in this regard, since they are allowed—indeed, encouraged—to express the most hateful emotions conceivable towards criminals, including sadistic desires for the suffering of others that could never be acceptable under any other circumstance. But this itself can be extended to a form of license. It might seem odd to watch TV interviewers gush with sympathy as some crime victim expresses the comfort they take in the despair and misery of their daughter’s killer (“perhaps it’s better he think he has a possibility of being freed, because then being locked up again will make him suffer even more!”); until, that is, one realizes that we are dealing with a kind of pornography of hatred, where the moral virtue of empathizing with one who has suffered provides an alibi for the vicarious experience of feelings one would otherwise have to treat as profoundly reprehensible.

We would do well, I think, to learn a little from the ancient world. Hatred of injustice can be a form of virtue. Much as Aquinas wrote of hatred for God, in the face of unjust structures of power, it is at the very least superior to either indifference or disbelief. We need to acknowledge that many forms of hatred can be a positive social force: hatred for work, hatred for wealth, hatred for bureaucracy, hatred for militarism, nationalism, cynicism, and the arrogance of power. And that in many circumstances, this will also mean hatred for individual bosses, tycoons, bureaucrats, generals, and politicians, and a rich feeling of accomplishment when one knows one has earned their hatred. To absolutely exclude hatred from politics, is to rip the fiber out, to deny the main motor of social transformation, ultimately, to reduce it to a flat plane of hopeless cynicism.

It is also to exclude any real possibility for a politics of redemption.

Without the existence of hatred, love is meaningless. It is just insipid idealization: idealization simultaneously of the self, and of the object of one’s devotion. As such it is fundamentally sterile. Real love, the only kind genuinely worthy of the name, is a kind of dialectical overcoming. It only becomes possible at the point where one comes to understand the full reality of one’s beloved, which necessarily, means encountering even those qualities one finds infuriating, loathsome, or detestable. For surely, if you know enough about anyone, you will find something in them that you hate. But it’s only when one encounters that, and decides nonetheless to love them anyway, that we can talk of love as an active, redemptive, and powerful force. And some element of hatred,

however small, must always remain there for this to continue to be true. Real love can only be love if it conquers hatred, but not by annihilating but by containing and transcending it, and not just once, but forever.

I should add that this is not just true of romantic love—it's equally true within families, friendships, even, if in perhaps more attenuated form, within communities, political associations. There are profound lessons here, I think, for the practice of solidarity, mutual aid, and direct democracy. Traditional communities, we are often told, can come to collective decisions by consensus, or engage in forms of mutual support and cooperation, because they are relatively small, intimate groups with common sensibilities; this would not be possible, supposedly, for larger, impersonal bodies assembled in contemporary metropolises. But anyone who has spent any time in such a small, intimate community knows that they are also riven with deep and abiding hatred. If you think about it, how could it be otherwise? Coming to a public meeting in a village means trying to come to a common decision in a group which contains everyone who has ever insulted one's mother, seduced one's spouse or lover, stolen one's cattle, or made one look ridiculous in front of one's friends. Yet they are, generally speaking, able to do it anyway. This overcoming of communal hatred is the concrete manifestation of collective love. It is far, far more difficult to achieve than an impersonal decision amongst those who know little about each other, beyond the fact that they are united in opposition to something else. A true geography of revolutionary groups, then, would begin, not imagining groups based on some perfect, idealized solidarity (and then bewailing the fact that they don't really exist), but rather, by mapping out the lines *within which* such webs of hatred have been, and continues to be, actively overcome, through practices of solidarity, and *across which* (justifiable) hatreds cannot be overcome without transforming their fundamental institutional basis—whether those be the organization of workplace, government bureaus, or patriarchal families. Once we stop seeing hatred as something to be ashamed of, it will simply become obvious that even the deepest, most personal, hatreds can be overcome within relations of solidarity—in fact, *are* overcome, on a daily basis, in any social group that isn't entirely dysfunctional—which, in turn, will make it obvious that once those institutional structures are destroyed, no human being will remain beyond redemption.

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