Racism and Anti-Semitism Are Often Culturally Validated

"Hate ... is part of the culture—the way of life—of the society in which it exists."

Jack Levin is the Irving and Betty Brudnick Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Northeastern University in Boston; Jim Nolan is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at West Virginia University. In the following viewpoint, they argue that anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of prejudice are not the result of aberrant psychology or the demagoguery of charismatic leaders. Rather, they contend that prejudice is often a cultural norm, so that, for example, in Nazi Germany, people who did not support the elimination of the Jews were seen as social rebels and immoral. The authors conclude that cultural norms of prejudice have a major effect on anti-Semitism and racism.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the authors, why was Hitler able to convince so many Germans to participate in the elimination of Jews?
2. What do Levin and Nolan say is the cultural history of white racism in America?
3. During World War II, why did Jews in Poland and Hungary fare much worse than Jews in Denmark and Belgium, according to the authors?

Given the appropriate conditions, some sympathizers can be moved to dabble in bigotry or even to become hatemongers. According to [Harvard professor emeritus Daniel Jonah] Goldhagen, tens of thousands of German citizens during the Nazi era of the 1930s, reacting to Hitler's interpretation of a terrible economic situation, translated their sympathy for anti-Semitism into mass murder.

At the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, defendants sought unsuccessfully to elude responsibility for their participation in the Nazi slaughter by arguing they had been mesmerized into obeying the orders of a charismatic Adolph Hitler. Rather than admit that they approved of what he represented, they spoke instead of Hitler's domineering presence, his irresistible magnetism, his ability to cast a hypnotic spell. Their defense was meant to let them off the hook: "No Hitler, no Holocaust."

According to [history professor John] Weiss, even the most powerful orators cannot possibly convert those who have not already bought into their ideas. Radical demagogues have the capacity to confirm but not to convince. It was not Hitler's style so much as the substance of his rhetoric that persuaded hundreds of thousands of German citizens to participate in, or at the very least not to oppose, the massacre of Jews.

Of course, there may be some limited circumstances, for example, among prisoners of war, where the control over an individual is absolute or complete. Under such conditions, it may actually be appropriate to speak in terms of "brainwashing," "mind control," or "thought reform." But in most of the circumstances of everyday life, individuals possess an element of free will that can only be manipulated so much. The most authoritarian and charismatic leader cannot completely undermine...
individual autonomy and voluntarism. In fact, it is pure myth to suggest that the members of a society collectively lack any power to resist while under the spell of a madman. Even extremely vulnerable individuals possess an "active self" that severely limits the power of the most persuasive leader to mold or shape the behavior and beliefs of his followers.

Cultural Hate

It would be comforting if we were able to characterize hate and prejudice as deviant, irrational, and pathological behavior—as an aspect of the domain of a few "crazies" on the fringe of society whose psychosis is in urgent need of treatment by psychotherapy, psychotropic medications, or both. Unfortunately, hate hardly depends for its existence on individual pathology or abnormal psychology. Nor is it a form of deviance from the point of view of mainstream society. Even if the admission of being prejudiced is unacceptable, hate itself is instead normal, rational, and conventional. It is part of the culture—the way of life—of the society in which it exists, appealing typically to the most conventional and traditional of its members.

Even in such an extreme set of circumstances as the atrocities committed under Nazism, genocide was carried out and encouraged not by ideological fanatics and schizophrenics but by ordinary citizens. Even the perpetrators were normal by conventional mental health standards. The power of Nazism was indeed strong, but it hardly prevented most ordinary citizens from making ethical decisions and functioning in a normal way. For example, Polish authorities suggested for decades that the Nazis had been responsible for a 1941 massacre of the Jewish residents of the town of Jedwabne. New evidence argued that it was not Nazi soldiers but ordinary Polish farmers who herded 1,600 of their Jewish neighbors into a barn and set it on fire.

The Normality of Hate

Where it is cultural, sympathy for a particular hatred may become a widely shared and enduring element in the normal state of affairs of a group of people. Even more important, the prejudice may become systematically organized to reward individuals who are bigoted and cruel and to punish those individuals who are caring and respectful of differences. In such circumstances, tolerance for group differences may actually be regarded as rebellious behavior and those who openly express tolerance may be viewed as rebels.

Sympathizers draw their hate from the culture, developing it from an early age. As a cultural phenomenon, racism is as American as apple pie. It has been around for centuries and is learned by every generation in the same way that our most cherished cultural values have been acquired: around the dinner table; through books and television programs; from teachers, friends, and relatives.

In the American experience, White racism has a long and deep cultural history, being traceable back centuries to the impetus in the New World for enslaving large numbers of Africans rather than White Europeans. Racism can therefore be seen not as a conscious conspiracy of powerful people or the delusional thinking of a few radical bigots. Rather, it is an important, if largely unconscious, aspect of America's historical experience and of our shared cultural order, arising from the taken-for-granted
assumptions that Americans learn to make about themselves and others.

Stereotyping also seems to have a cultural basis that is dependent on the cognitive development of an individual. As a result, the particular cultural images of a group of people may not be accepted, or even understood, by a child until long after she has already developed an intense hatred toward its members.

Later on, education seems to be effective in reducing stereotyped thinking. In addition, legislation can, within limits, reduce discriminatory behavior. Yet, the emotional component of hate may persevere over the course of a lifetime, regardless of attempts to modify it. Beginning so early in life, hate may become a passion for the individual who acquires it, being much harder to modify than stereotypes or the tendency to discriminate.

**The Cultural Breadth of Hate**

The cultural element of hate can be seen in its amazing ability to sweep across broad areas of a nation. Individuals separated by region, age, social class, and ethnic background all tend to share roughly the same stereotyped images of various groups. In the United States, for example, some degree of anti-Black, anti-Asian, and anti-Latino racism can be found among substantial segments of Americans—males and females, young and old, rich and poor—from New York to California, from North Dakota to Texas.

Similarly, in Nazi Germany, Hitler's condemnation of the Jews reflected not only his personal opinion, but also the beliefs of hundreds of thousands of German and Austrian citizens. While the police looked on approvingly, university students joined together to beat and batter their Jewish classmates. Faculty members and students voiced demands to rid the universities of Jews and cosponsored lectures on "the Jewish problem." Because of their genuine conviction, thousands of German soldiers and police helped to murder Jews. Civil service bureaucrats aided in doing the paperwork to expedite carrying out Hitler's extermination program. Many important business, banking, and industrial firms cooperated in the task of enslaving and murdering Jewish citizens. Thousands of German physicians cooperated in sterilizing or eliminating the "undesirables." Finally, whereas the church in other European countries denounced racist anti-Semitism, Germany's religious leaders (both Catholic and Protestant) failed to protest the final solution [i.e., exterminating the Jews].

At the cultural level, the emotional character of racial or religious hatred is reflected collectively in laws and norms that prohibit intimate contact between different groups of people. In the Deep South, Jim Crow laws created separate public facilities: "colored" and "White" restrooms, waiting rooms, water fountains, and sections on public buses. In the South African version of apartheid [racial segregation], Blacks were similarly restricted to living in segregated communities and could work among Whites only under the strictest supervision.

In Nazi Germany, the same sort of enduring sympathy for hate might be found among citizens concerning anti-Semitism. In explaining the particular stronghold of Hitler's "final solution," Goldhagen has argued that an "eliminationist anti-Semitism" was a long-standing feature of German culture that
dated back centuries. The majority of ordinary German citizens believed that the Jews, ostensibly being responsible for all of their country's economic woes, had to be eliminated at any cost. Thus, rather than some dark and repulsive secret, gruesome stories about the Nazi's brutal anti-Jewish policies—the death camps, gas chambers, hideous experiments, and mass murders—were told and retold proudly across the land to ordinary German citizens who were eager to hear them.

Nazi anti-Semitism was located at the end of a continuum of cultural bigotry that seems to have helped determine the fate of Jews not only in Germany but in other European countries as well. Nations such as Poland and Hungary, which had a long-standing tradition of anti-Semitic attitudes and behavior, were also nations in which a large proportion of Jews were murdered; countries such as Denmark, Belgium, and Bulgaria where a tradition of tolerance and respect for religious diversity was strong were also countries where a relatively sizable proportion of Jews survived.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


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