

BY LINDSAY BEYERSTEIN

Beyond the Hate Frame

Whether it's a spree killing, a vandalized mosque, or a bias attack on a queer teen, Americans are quick to chalk it up to hate. The label "hate crime" invites us to blame overwrought individuals acting on extreme personal prejudice, making it seem as if a small cadre of social deviants is our main obstacle to a peaceful society. In fact, such individuals are products of a society that endorses all kinds of violence against the very same groups who are targeted in hate crimes. The perpetrators of these crimes are taking their cues from a society that embraces mass incarceration, militarized policing, the school-to-prison pipeline, and other forms of structural violence wielded disproportionately against people of color, queer and trans or gender non-conforming people, and the poor.

Kay Whitlock is an independent scholar of structural violence who seeks to dismantle the prison industrial complex. She is the cofounder of Criminal Injustice, a blog series that explores myths about crime, criminals, and the justice system. Michael Bronski is a professor at Dartmouth College and author of the award-winning book *A Queer History of the United States*. Their new coauthored book is *Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics*, published this year by Beacon Press.¹ This spring, they spoke with PRA about their work.



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What led you to write a book about hate and the role that it plays in our politics?

KAY WHITLOCK: I wrote a piece for Political Research Associates in 2012 about reconsidering the "hate frame" as a useful progressive political frame. Michael and I had worked together before on my book, *Queer (In)Justice*, which he helped acquire for Beacon Press. Michael shared my PRA article with Beacon. Beacon was interested in the two of us joining together, opening up the discussion far beyond just specific kinds of progressive politics.

What is the "hate frame"?

KW: We think of a frame as a conceptual, and often rhetorical, path that shapes how people think about an issue. It always suggests a particular direction we ought to go in to address the situation.

In U.S. progressive politics the hate frame has four main assumptions: First, that hate is rooted purely in irrational, personal prejudice and fear and loathing of difference. In fact, it's also rooted in ideologies and supremacy, in a historical and cultural context. Second, that hate is hate, and the specifics don't matter. Third, that the politics of hate is about that crazy irrational feeling, which is caused by personal prejudice

gone amok. In this view, hate is not about structures, not about power hierarchies, not about institutional practice. Finally, that hate is perpetrated by extremists, misfits, and loners who are violating agreed-upon standards of fairness, and that hate violence is unacceptable and abhorrent to respectable society.

In fact, what is called "hate violence"—violence directed at vulnerable and marginalized groups—is not abhorrent to respectable society. On the contrary, respectable society has provided the models, policies, and practices that marginalize people of color, queers, disabled people, and in many respects, women. The hate frame disappears considerations of structural violence and substitutes in their place the idea that there are these crazed extremists, and that's who we have to go after.

The overarching question of the book is how hate is mobilized for political purposes and in what ways that destroys the possibility for good discourse on structural issues.

Do you think it's counterproductive for watchdog organizations to monitor hate groups?

KW: It's certainly important to understand how readily blatantly racist, xenophobic, and anti-queer ideas that gain steam on what we think of as the margins seem to migrate into mainstream politics. But the "hate group" descriptor is imprecise

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and subsumes many different histories into a single, too-simplistic template. It also gives the false impression that the hate is “out there” and “extreme,” when the problems are embedded in mainstream U.S. civic life and culture. It’s never easy to distinguish between the messages of many “hate groups” and the actions of respectable civic and religious leaders as they set back or dismantle progress in civil rights and economic justice.

While nativist, white supremacist, and virulently anti-LGBT groups may be horribly blunt in their supremacist beliefs, the ideologies themselves are as old as the entirely “respectable” projects of settler colonialism, Native genocide, chattel slavery, the eugenics movement, and economic exploitation. Hate is important in our politics. But people don’t want to own it. Even the people we think of as hatemongers, like neonazis, are often loath to say they hate people in so many words.

MICHAEL BRONSKI: They do and they don’t. I was teaching Intro. to LGBT studies at Dartmouth. I wanted to do something about the Matthew Shepard case. All the students knew about it. They’d all seen “The Laramie Project,” and they identified very strongly with Shepard. I think most of my students came pretty close to saying they hated Shepard’s killers. People are sort of eager to own a certain form of hatred and express it in more careful terms. It feels good.

I tried to get my students to think outside of the hate frame. It wasn’t just a case of simple homophobia where a relatable, young, cute, blonde gay man was murdered senselessly. I wanted them to see the larger issues, like gender behaviors, poverty, and even geography. Everybody sees themselves not as haters, but as being hated. But once they’re hated, they quickly access the desire to hate back.

KW: Most neonazis will frame their essential message as love. In fact, almost everybody will frame their political message as love. But then you watch all the little side conversations and the message boards...

People—whether we’re from the right or the left, or anywhere in the middle—will often identify our own virtue by who it is that we loathe and despise and who it is that we’re against. That happens as much in progressive circles as in right-wing circles.

So, on the left, we’re defining ourselves by hating the prison industrial complex or brutal police officers?

KW: The language of hate is an easy placeholder. Probably all of us use it. I use it too. But what I keep trying to do is to get very specific about the issues.

You can’t just say that the reason the Ferguson police have such extraordinarily oppressive ways of policing is just because they hate Blacks. It’s much more complicated. There is a root in

supremacist ideology, but it’s quite possible to treat someone with great brutality, or contempt, as if they don’t matter, because you’re simply indifferent to their fate.

Is brutal policing in Ferguson rooted in societal ideologies about the non-personhood of Black people, the notion that Black lives don’t matter? As opposed to visceral hatred?

KW: I think all of that is there. The callous disregard of Black lives in U.S. policies and practices since the inception of the country is so total that [non-Black] people don’t even recognize where their indifference or contempt comes from. It’s not necessarily boiling over as obvious racism, but it’s still woven in. That’s why it’s so tempting in policy to go after the people who commit hate crimes, because we know who they are. The bigger problem is a Ferguson, a Cleveland, a Chicago, an Oakland.

MB: One of the hallmarks of people who do hateful things is how often they see themselves as being victims. Police in Ferguson probably see themselves as being put-upon. An extreme example would be the Klan, who see themselves as victims of black people getting too much. It’s a mistake to leave that out of the equation. They see themselves as being victimized by the system, more so than their victims, often.

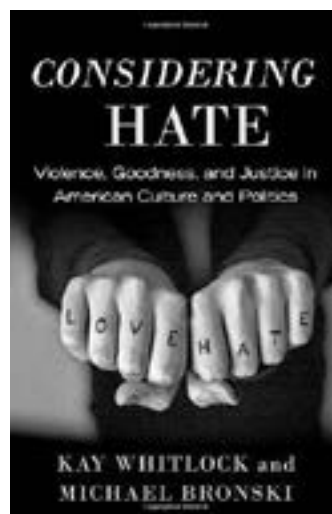
KW: The white, male, heterosexual power structure will almost always, in the face of protest, present itself as the victim of the group that’s challenging it.

Disability is a major theme of the book. You describe how, for centuries, disability has been cast as something that’s hateable and therefore something that justifies coercion—like exiling disabled people from towns, or putting them in institutions. If disabled people are seen as monstrous or inherently criminal, it becomes easier to see their mistreatment as something society does for its own protection.

KW: Disabled people are often imagined as monstrous, degenerate, or defective. Then these labels get used to characterize any group that’s not in the central power hierarchy. So debates about disability start to include questions about American Indians, and Black people, and voting rights and citizenship; they start to include debates about women.

There’s often a contradictory dynamic. It all works to manage a great deal of anxiety. People with disabilities are construed as criminals, as objects of fear and loathing, but also as objects to be felt sorry for and cared for in a patronizing kind of way.

MB: I got an email from a friend who’s teaching a class on disability at Tufts. He said he’s teaching a clip from Fredric March’s 1931 Hollywood version of *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*. When the very handsome March drinks the potion, turning him into Mr. Hyde, the transformation is really remarkable. He actually becomes black and gets misshapen teeth. The insane, murderous Mr. Hyde becomes stooped over and disfigured, and he becomes African-American-looking. It’s very much part of this mythos that some people who are not in the mainstream—including African Americans—are dis-



abled and therefore evil. There's that easy leap. A Hollywood classic shows it to us quite viscerally in about 90 seconds.

In the book you talk about how disfavored groups get inter-defined, for example: disabled people are defined as inferior, and then femaleness and Blackness get construed as physical defects relative to the white male ideal.

KW: We decided to use the lens of disability, but we could have picked race or gender, or queerness, and gone in as deeply. Gender, gender conformity, class, race: they all collide in these stories. One of the reasons we try to tell the story emphasizing the overlap of different oppressions is to demonstrate the pit-fall that happens for progressive people when we fight in disconnected, parallel, single-issue ways.

Is your argument that the "hate" component of hate crime is rooted in the same impulse that makes communities hire oppressive police forces?

MB: That may be true in some simplistic ways, but we would all do better by really looking at every instance and trying to understand each instance in itself to see how it fits in a larger structural pattern. It's important not to lump people together just because the behaviors look somewhat similar.

KW: It's very easy to arouse justified outrage for specific, dramatic, sensational acts of violence that are intended to dehumanize someone from a marginalized group. [Like when attackers set out] to get a transgender woman, or "teach a Latino immigrant a lesson." Those things are horrific, and we need to respond. We fixate on spree killings and assassinations because they're so visibly terrifying. As we say in the book, fear has a kind of payoff: it makes us feel alive.

But regardless of who's in power, we also have these structural forms of violence that continue year after year in the most respectable civic and private arenas. The violence is steadfast, consistent, and it's absolutely massive. I'm talking about the violence of prisons, detention centers, psychiatric hospitals, and public schools with school officers who are armed to the teeth and who have absolute discretionary power to send kids into the criminal/legal system for minor infractions. We have lots of violence against people with disabilities who are penned up in institutions where someone has absolute power over them.

I did my first work challenging the hate frame in 2001 for the American Friends Service Committee. Everywhere I went to speak [about the limits of hate crime legislation], good people who cared passionately about social justice would get furious if you talked about the structural violence of prison. It seemed impossible for people to accept that the legal system wasn't the appropriate place to lodge our concerns. Just the thought of them having to engage with the massive violence of a system that dealt with hardened criminals....

So, they wanted to address the violence against "innocent" people but didn't feel comfortable condemning violence against "bad" people?

KW: Right. This is not to put people down. This is part of my

life's work, working at this intersection of places where people don't even recognize it as violence.

What violent things do people fail to recognize as violent?

KW: There's the school-to-prison pipeline. A lot of white people have no idea how pervasive that is, or what the heavy presence of school resource officers can be like. Basically, what goes on in prisons and jails is not recognized as violence. Solitary confinement is not seen as violence or torture, though it is.

MB: When it comes to violence people don't recognize as violence, at Dartmouth there's a very strong Greek system. The embedded violence of hazing is completely and totally accepted. It's everything from physical assaults to sexual humiliation. Eating certain foods to make them throw up. Forcing diuretics on them to make them sit in the bathroom for hours on end. Hazing is constructing masculinity by humiliating people to the point of being physically ill. On many college campuses this is regarded as completely acceptable or even good behavior, until somebody dies.

Like when Abu Ghraib became public and all those pundits were saying it was no big deal because they do this stuff in fraternity hazing?

MB: Precisely.

KW: We talk in the book about how cultural strategies are really needed in order for us to take a look at some of these realities in disruptively intelligent ways. [Ed: Whitlock is talking about innovative protest tactics, like ACT-UP air-dropping condoms into a prison because the prison wouldn't distribute condoms to prevent the spread of HIV, and the eye-catching actions of the Chicago Light Brigade, which mobilizes flash mobs bearing glowing LED panels that spell out progressive slogans.²]

Until we work towards deeper shifts in consciousness, we're always going to be tinkering with the machinery, and finding new ways to let old systemic problems persist. If we think culturally about telling the story in fresh and unexpected ways, then we may have some fresh and welcome insights.

You write about the importance of refocusing on goodness. What are some of the ways that we can refocus on goodness instead of defining ourselves in terms of who we hate?

MB: Everybody wants to see themselves as a good person. It's a really invigorating question. Rather than redefining it, what I've learned in talking about the book and to students, is actually getting people to think of what it would mean to be good. What it would mean to step out of descriptions of ourselves as business of usual? What it would mean to do something that is counter to the usual? ☺

Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics was published by Beacon Press in 2015. This discussion has been edited for clarity, length, and flow.

Beyond the Hate Frame, p.3

1. Beacon Press, "Considering Hate," <http://www.beacon.org/considering-hate-p1046.aspx>.
2. <http://www.chicagolightbrigade.org>