

## Review of The Violence of Hate: Understanding Harmful Forms of Bias and Bigotry

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**Book Review:**  
***The Violence of Hate: Understanding Harmful Forms of Bias and Bigotry***

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*The Violence of Hate: Understanding Harmful Forms of Bias and Bigotry*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition Jack Levin and Jim Nolan. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. Paperback, \$54.00, 9781442260504.

In *The Violence of Hate*, Jack Levin and Jim Nolan illustrate that “hate is alive, well, and living in our communities where it continues to have a major impact on the access to opportunities and personal safety of millions of Americans” (p. x). A central task of their book is to explain the how and why hate violence persists between groups. Their primary focus is within the United States, though this fourth edition includes a number of references to Europe and other regions.

Readers should take time to read the preface, which contains the clearest setup of Levin and Nolan’s argument. To specify the sources of hateful acts, Levin and Nolan develop a “situationist” perspective that locates individual interests within their immediate circumstances, as well as broader cultural and economic environments. That framework leads Levin and Nolan to conclude that “hate originates not in the ranting and raving of bigoted extremists at the margins of society but in the tacit approval of ordinary, even decent, people who are located squarely in the mainstream” (p.ix.). Levin and Nolan use a number of recent examples to illustrate their argument, including police shootings of African Americans, violence against gay and lesbian youths, and anti-Semitism throughout history and the present.

The introductory remarks in the preface provide fixed coordinates for the first chapter, where Levin and Nolan introduce foundational concepts such as prejudice, discrimination, privilege, and the relationship between individual and group identity. The sequence of this chapter is cumbersome, and various strands of their argument seem to interrupt one another. Levin and Nolan distinguish their study of “individual hateful acts” from “studying institutional and structural forms of discrimination,” but they do not explain on why their approach is uniquely valuable or how the two paradigms might speak to one another (p. 26). Readers are left to assemble the “big picture” on their own.

In their second substantive chapter, Levin and Nolan extend their argument into longer and more effective strides. They contrast their situationist approach against the concept of “benign prejudice,” which “locates the responsibility for inequality within the minority group itself” (p. 29). That contrast may be especially important for engaging readers who are skeptical about the impact of biases against marginalized groups. Here, the combination of examples at the end of the chapter seems productive, leveraging American readers’ familiarity with and social distance from each case.

The third chapter offers an overview of hate crimes in the U.S. The front end of the chapter focuses on hate crime statutes and statistics. But Levin and Nolan also offer an extended application of Bourdieu’s theory of practice to policing. That application might seem like an interlude, but it

*Book Review:*  
*The Violence of Hate: Understanding Harmful Forms of Bias and Bigotry*

demonstrates that hate crimes are not objectively identifiable events; they need to be *perceived*. And police perceive incidents from within an array of professional practices, which sometimes work for or against the legal recognition of how bias shapes criminal conduct (p. 94). That insight also amplifies their cautions regarding the measurement of hate crimes; it also gives force to Levin and Nolan's argument for integrating hate crime policy into officer training, so that officers are better equipped recognize and record incidents that involve group-based hate.

Levin and Nolan's fourth chapter proposes a typology of actors involved in hate, ranging from committed hatemongers to more casual "dabblers," as well as larger numbers of sympathizers and bystanders. These groups, they suggest, are often willing to mete out (or at least tolerate) harm toward middlemen groups, who are perceived as competing with the majority or enjoying undue privileges. The next chapter explores the psychological, economic, and political advantages of bigotry, with respect to each set of actors in the authors' typology. They also review basic reasons why inter-group isolation prevents people from realizing the destructive results of bigoted attitudes and behavior.

This edition of *The Violence of Hate* came to print during the summer of 2016, on the cusp of important shifts in the United States: the election of a U.S. President who made hateful rhetoric a feature of his campaign and administration; the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville; the Me Too movement against sexual violence; and the social mobilization following George Floyd's killing. In some respects, the particular time-stamp of this book is quite helpful. Levin & Nolan's steady hands remind us that the recent mainstreaming of hate has deep social origins. The conditions for hate crimes and ethnic violence persist as long as members of society are willing to tolerate bigoted behavior, regardless of whether they personally approve of it (p. 138). Thus, hate did not emerge and is unlikely to cease because of any one personality or electoral cycle. Levin and Nolan provide necessary tools for our time.

Still, Levin and Nolan's book leaves some aspects of hate undertheorized, and recent events clarify the stakes of those gaps. Conceptually, their focus is on how mainstream actors tacitly empower hate on the margins; they offer fewer insights into how hate operates when its proponents wield tremendous institutional power. Although Levin and Nolan briefly discuss how political and cultural elites can set the tone for intergroup relations (p. 177-183), they often use the passive voice to describe shifts in public perceptions. For example, in the context of the military response to September 11, they write, "Our military action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan focused our attention on the plight of Afghan women... Less publicized was gender inequality in Saudi Arabia..." (p. 57). A clearer and more robust analysis would specify the strategies leaders use to foment (or condemn) bigotry, as well as the conditions under which those strategies are likely to succeed (Benford, 2007). For similar reasons, the book could devote more attention to how media organizations cover hate groups (Bail, 2012). Finally, Levin and Nolan's short comments about hate-based websites seem oddly out of step with the proliferation of hate across social media (p. 116-117).

Overall, *The Violence of Hate* demonstrates the continued relevance of a classic sociological insight: "Hate is normal, expected, and, in many cases, quite rational" (p. x). The text is a valuable contribution to public discourse, yielding insights into the relations between inter-group tensions,

discrimination, and more discrete acts of hate. Educators in sociology, peace and justice studies, and criminology should consider the book for its strong content, even if some of that content could be more effectively arranged.

### **References**

- Bail, C. (2012). The fringe effect: civil society organizations and the evolution of media discourse about Islam since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 855-879.
- Benford, R.D. (2007). An insider's critique of the social movement framing perspective. *Sociological Inquiry*, 67(4), 409-430.