

H-Net Reviews

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Janis L. Judson, Donna M. Bertazzoni. *Law, Media, and Culture: The Landscape of Hate*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002. 220 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-4981-4.

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A Question of Hate

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It is easy to feel that hate is an ever-growing part of America's national consciousness. From school shootings to gang violence, white supremacists, anti-abortion violence, race riots, and inner city crime, it often seems as though we are obsessed with what Pope John Paul II once famously described as "a culture of death."

Yet it is almost impossible to provide an unbiased discussion of hate. Many groups and organizations quantify and record instances of hate, but there have been few academic attempts to define or to qualify hate. Is hating broccoli the same thing as hating an ex-boyfriend or as hating someone of a different race? Should hate only be measured if it leads to violence? How do you determine when hate will lead to violence? Is someone who commits an act of extreme hate violence insane? Is all violence caused by hate? Does hating the haters invalidate the discussion? The questions are endless and any reasoned examination of hate is necessarily problematic.

The authors of *Landscape of Hate* do not attempt a definition of hate. Instead, they seek to deposit us firmly in the middle ground by providing numerous examples of hate and asking us to decide for ourselves how we feel. They use numerous examples of hate on the internet, in the news, in popular music and so on, to focus the discussion on the many different ways that hate can creep into our lives and our thoughts without us being aware of it.

This approach is combined with devices usually seen in the classroom, for example ending paragraphs with a series of questions. The approach is appropriate, perhaps, since both of the authors are associate professors at Hood College, a small liberal arts college in Oregon; however, it does not always work. The questions are useful for stimulating discussion, but also serve to point up just how much the authors are not answering and can seem some-

what condescending when not in a classroom setting.

Although *Landscape of Hate* is filled with authoritative and well-chosen citations from legal, literary, and popular culture sources, much of the discussion focuses on the anecdotal. The lack of quantitative analysis can also make the use of numerous rhetorical questions seem more like a literary device than part of a serious study. Their anecdotal approach, by focusing on areas often considered the bulwarks of liberal humanism, also plays into the hands of those who argue that it is elements of popular culture such as music lyrics and violent films which create hate in the first place.

Landscape of Hate opens itself up to use as an example of how the law, media, and culture all serve to foster hate and leaves us with the impression that it may be necessary to curtail freedom of culture and legal freedoms in order to suppress a greater evil. While giving readers free reign to think for ourselves, the book unintentionally draws us to the conclusion that it is precisely freedom of thought which has created such a hate-oriented society in the first place. The lack of discussion of the underlying causes of hate—poverty, dissatisfaction, disconnection from society, mental illness, lack of family ties, and the like—is keenly felt.

Given the importance of understanding hate in today's climate, it is the questions that do not get answered that create a great deal of frustration when reading this book. Questions like: What is hate? Is hate growing or receding? Are incidents like school shootings and race riots really incidents of hate or outpourings of frustration, anger, and pathos at a society that perhaps pays too little attention to the disenfranchised? What is the rate of hate in other developed countries? Is America, in fact, leading the world in hate?

Where this book excels is in its descriptions of incidents and individual accounts of hate incidents, all of which provide fodder for discussion and debate. This

technique serves to point up the various ways in which we, as Americans, reveal undercurrents of hatred and violence in the ways we think and speak in our daily lives and in our popular culture. Seemingly innocuous words and actions provide subtexts of violence and hatred. These subtexts act as building blocks of callousness and contempt, which in turn lead to hatred as part of everyday life. These subtexts can be revealed in our complex attitudes toward rap music, legal decisions, journalistic coverage of events, school shooters, serial killers, hate groups, and the paroxysms of violence they unleash. The book points out how, even as spectators, we can become an integral part of the equation of violence.

The problem inherent in this approach is that the authors have necessarily had to pick and choose which events, films, and court decisions to discuss as well as which experts and researchers to quote. By focusing

on particular events and articles, huge gaps in thinking become evident in almost every paragraph. Judson and Bertazzoni suggest that television, movies, and music have a role in shaping our attitudes towards hatred, but at various places in the book argue that popular culture creates an atmosphere in which hate thrives, reflects attitudes which are already there, and provides a forum for amplifying those attitudes. By selecting particular examples, it is not clear exactly how culture affects hate.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, this book is a very useful tool for provoking discussion and thought about hate in popular society. This book would be particularly useful in high school, or as a way for parents to open a discussion on hate with their teenage children. Ultimately, the strength of this book lies not in the answers it provides (or fails to provide), but in the questions that it asks.

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