

# Primed to Hate

By Theodore Dalrymple

Speech is silvern, said the old proverb, but silence is golden; and notwithstanding the recent disgraceful attacks on free speech, I more often find myself longing for freedom *from* speech, for example on trains, than freedom *of* it. The banality of so much conversation, including my own, appalls me. Much conversation is not so much the expression as the suppression of thought.



Recently, I happened on another advantage of freedom, if not from speech exactly, at least the freedom from the sound of speech. I happened to see on my computer an interview with a political figure who was being interviewed on the subject of education, but with the sound turned off. It was,

in a way, very revealing.

Perhaps the interviewee was speaking nothing but the plainest good sense, though, given the general ratio of bilge to common sense, I rather doubted it on purely statistical grounds. What was interesting was to observe the facial expressions of the man, from which mere sound would have been a distraction.

Clearly, he was speaking fluently, or at least without interruption. There was no hesitation or hint of doubt in his manner. I suppose this might have been because he was very well-informed on the subject, but again I rather doubted it. I

would imagine that in his case, certainty and assertiveness were to him what the grin was to the Cheshire cat: It was what remained behind when all else had disappeared. He would have been as categorical questioned on any subject whatever. Certainty was his *métier*.

There was something more, however, something even more alarming: His certainty was obviously accompanied by hatred, as if he were attacking a person whose differing opinion were the menace of a dangerous enemy. There was no humor in what the interviewee said, only a kind of savage dogmatism.

This brought me to reflect on the nature of modern hatreds. There is no new emotion under the sun, of course, but it seems to me that hatred is now in the very air that we breathe, in a greater concentration than at any time in my life that I can remember.

Some of it seems to be almost free-floating, to preexist its object, such that when an object presents itself that can plausibly be hated, it attaches itself to it with avidity or relief. People therefore hate in disproportion to any cause, and I do not entirely exclude myself from this tendency. I find myself hating figures who have done me no personal harm, or at worst only harm in the abstract.

I am not by nature a great hater, perhaps because I am too lazy to maintain such a high-energy emotion for long: I can't be bothered with it. When I look back on my life, as increasingly I do, I try to think of those whom I have hated, and they have been really very few. The first that comes to mind was a nurse who took a malicious delight in informing on, or bearing false witness against, those who were inferior to her in the hierarchy. She enjoyed inflicting genuine harm on them, seemingly from what Coleridge called, mistakenly in the case of Iago to which he first applied it, *motiveless malignity*. She liked doing harm for its own sake.

There was also a coroner, who I thought was a pompous ass, who once humiliated me in his court for no good reason, criticizing me for not spending much time with each of my patients. Of course I didn't; I had a lot of patients to see and little time to see them in. It was not I who determined the conditions in which I worked. The coroner was merely trying to demonstrate to the relatives of the deceased (whose death was not my fault) how much he sympathized with them, and I was the means by which he did it.

For a number of years (about three), I dreamed of revenging myself on these two people—actually the only ones whose name would occur to me if I were to undergo a test of free association with the words “those whom you have hated.” For example, I thought that if I met the coroner in a social situation with his wife, which was not impossible, I would tell him to his face, in front of his wife, that he was a jumped-up, self-important ass and then leave him and her to stew in my opinion. I would never have done it in practice, and soon came to realize that it would have been a very wrong thing to do in any case. And now my hatred of him has long since dissipated completely.

But oddly enough, I now catch myself hating distant political figures, only one or two of whom are generally among the worst in the world—Kim Il-Sung, for example. Others I hate with an unreasoning hatred; they are bad, all right, but they do not approach Kim's level of evil, nor do they affect the course of my life very much.

It is said that love makes the world go round, but I think that hatred is the far stronger force. Together with envy and resentment, to which it is closely allied, it is by far the strongest political emotion. I am aware of its destructive potential and try to control it in myself, though expunging it altogether is more difficult.

Why hatred, and so much of it, directed at figures whose

defects are often more symbolic than truly destructive of one's life (I am not talking of horribly oppressed people who have "objective" reasons for hatred, or people who have been the victims of true malignity)?

Hatred is enjoyable. Among other things, it assures the person who feels it that he is capable of generous outrage. Who has not felt the pleasures of hatred? We enjoy reading about hateful characters much more than reading about good persons, and it requires much more literary skill to make good or lovable people interesting to a reader than hateful ones. We are primed, so to speak, to hate.

No doubt evolutionists have an explanation for it: that the savannas of Africa from which mankind emerged were full of dangerous enemies whom we anthropomorphized and to whom we ascribed the worst motives. Hatred assists survival.

But why so much hatred today among those humans who, all things considered, are the most fortunate who have ever lived? Perhaps the idea that life is perfectible, and ought therefore to be perfect, has something to do with it. Since life is supposedly perfectible, an explanation must be sought for why it is not; and in a single word, the explanation is *enemies*, whom naturally we hate.

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