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RACIST ACTIVISM AND APOCALYPTIC/MILLENNIAL THINKING¹

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In recent years, there has been an alarming resurgence of organized anti-Semitism and racial hatred in the United States. A decade ago, membership in racist and anti-Semitic groups totaled less than 10,000, but since that time hate groups have increased dramatically. In part, this growth reflects an effort to broaden and diversify membership beyond the small enclaves of Southern white male supporters who traditionally have formed the nucleus of organized hate. Numerous racist and anti-Semitic groups have made particular efforts to recruit women and adolescents and, as a result, women and young girls now play a highly visible and significant role in the hate movement, constituting an estimated 25% of the membership of many Klan and neo-Nazi groups.

In addition to broadening their membership, hate groups have had some success mobilizing popular support for white supremacist candidates and agendas. The electoral efforts of former Klansman and neo-Nazi David Duke and candidates fielded by the anti-Semitic Lyndon LaRouche show the potential of hate groups to attract support from voters in the political mainstream. Less visible, but equally disturbing, is the rapid proliferation of radio and cable television programming, computer bulletin boards, telephone "hate lines" and FAX networks which allow hate groups quick access to large numbers of supporters and potential recruits.

These changes within the organized hate movement are beginning to show results. Incidents of violence, terror, and vandalism directed at members of racial, religious or national minorities by self-proclaimed racist and anti-Semitic groups have been recorded in hundreds of cities, small towns and rural areas across the U.S. Moreover, the organization of the hate movement has become tighter, with increasing cooperation and links among many hate groups.

Hate based politics -- like right-wing extremism in general -- have been traditionally understood as xenophobic, reactionary and anti-democratic. As such, scholars have regarded organized racism and anti-Semitism as outmoded ideologies, radically at odds with the progressive and democratic impulses of modern Western society, and on the verge of collapse. This has made it difficult to interpret, or to counter, the growing appeal of racist and anti-Semitic

1. Portions of this were previously published in *Gender & Society* (1996) and in a volume, *Conspiracies*, published by the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment (1995).

groups in the U.S. and elsewhere. The attraction of these movements to young people in particular has been difficult to explain since racism and anti-Semitism typically are seen as legacies of the past, attitudes that will moderate over time and across generations.

A number of studies of racist and anti-Semitic groups in the U.S. and in Europe suggest that contemporary white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups are less monolithic and ideologically unified than had been previously understood. In fact, such groups have a wide range of ideologies and membership strategies. They range from white-power skinheads who are loosely structured, extremely transient and attract young, fairly apolitical adherents to Klans and neo-Nazi groups which are tightly organized, geographically stable and recruit entire families. Ideologies of nationalism and xenophobia, characteristic of earlier organized racism, now are on the decline as U.S. hate groups foster links to counterparts in Europe and South Africa and as allegiance to race increasingly supersedes loyalty to nation. Moreover, issues of white identity and white culture quickly are replacing those of national identity and economic competition as major themes of hate group literature and rhetoric.

In this paper, I address one aspect of the ideology of contemporary U.S. racist groups -- that is, the role that apocalyptic and millennial ideas, typically grounded in conspiratorial theories, play in the ideas and actions of racist and anti-Semitic groups. Although certain apocalyptic ideas -- particularly the notion of an impending, cataclysmic "race war" -- have long been influential in the discourse and propaganda of organized racist groups, massive popular interest in the year 2000 has leached into white supremacism. Most racist groups now incorporate millennial ideas into their ideologies, typically arguing that Zionist control of government or finance will lead to the collapse of current economic and political systems (and perhaps their replacement by Aryan-controlled systems) at the turn of the millennial year. In this paper, I discuss both how racial activists are motivated by apocalyptic/millennial ideas and the extent to which such beliefs of individual members correspond to the ideologies of the racist groups to which they belong.

My work has focused primarily on the role of women in such groups, but many of the findings also describe the beliefs of male racial activists. This paper draws from data from in-depth interviews that I conducted with 34 female racist activists, together with informal interviews with a number of male racial leaders and rank-and-file activists. Respondents were leaders who are known both within the movement and outside, leaders who are not known publicly, and rank-and-file members of racist groups. They live in 15 different states and in all regions of the country. Although difficult to categorize precisely, they include neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan members, racist skinheads, white separatists, Aryan supremacists and racist-leaning militia/survivalists. The interviews include lengthy life histories as well as structured questionnaires. These data suggest five conclusions about millennial thinking among members of American's racist right.

1. Certain aspects of millennial, apocalyptic, and conspiratorial thinking are widely shared across the racist right, even among groups not generally regarded as conspiracy-based.

Increasingly, virtually all racist groups share a fear of a so-called "one world order." The one world order is described as a system in which all political and economic power in the world is centralized among a small group of conspirators who are intent on sacrificing the common good to enrich themselves by allowing or even facilitating an apocalyptic war of all-against-all. Thus, many racist groups practice "survivalist" preparations and lifestyles, stockpiling arms, food, batteries, and medical equipment in remote rural hideouts.

Ku Klux Klan members, Aryan supremacists and neo-Nazis may clash over the role of religion or private enterprise, but most embrace the idea that internationalism (and thus the erasure of national identity, and perhaps the extinction of racial distinction as well) looms on the immediate horizon and that Jewish interests dominate the push for an international government. Groups that have historically stressed xenophobic, anti-immigrant and nationalistic themes tend to emphasize the threat that they claim a "one world" government would pose to U.S. national interests. Other more racially-focused groups, like Aryan supremacists, accentuate what they claim is Jewish control of international politics. But all come to a similar conclusion about the direction of world politics.

The feared Jewish/one-world apocalypse is not based solely on anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Rather, this perceived conspiracy bundles together a number of seemingly-unrelated concerns -- some of which are widely shared across segments of the American population. In the propaganda of racist groups, fears that the government is increasingly eroding personal privacy, that the average citizen lacks control over his or her children's education, that social and cultural change is accelerating, that the economy is becoming increasingly centralized and that corporations are becoming monopolies -- concerns common to a large number of Americans -- are linked together and given a racial cast.

Attributing these changes to Jewish control or foreign intervention makes them seem understandable. It also helps to obscure certain contradictions which adhere in conspiratorial logic -- for example, simultaneously fearing that the American system will be undermined and violently opposing the existing system. Typical of such reasoning are the comments of a Southern Klan woman who insisted that:

The one world order is fast approaching and the computers have taken over 95% of all transactions, 90% of all communications, and as far as payroll and management it's almost 100%. So one world order is here and it's backed by Jewish money and Jewish organizations. Although they're the ones that openly said 'No we're against it,' they're secretly in it. They're all a part of it because they own the government, they own a percentage of the government, the media - Jews - [and own] our federal reserve system.

A skinhead from the Rocky Mountains similarly perceived an identity of Jews and government along with the complete estrangement of all non-Jews from the American government:

The Jew "new world order" is the worst thing ever, especially for the white race and also for every single individual in the world -- besides the government and Jews.

Among today's organized racists, Jews almost uniformly are identified as the principal conspirators -- central yet anonymous; omnipotent but hidden from the public eye. To believers in such conspiracies, Jewish control is absolute. "They" -- the unknown group of Jewish conspirators -- can do anything. They can grant -- and revoke -- all privileges of daily life. The interviews are peppered with statements suggesting the awesome, incomprehensible and disembodied power of the conspirators -- such statements as "they took my husband away from

me;" "we are not granted permission for a white history month;" and "if we don't succeed in waking our people up, we will be annihilated."

Also common among racist women is a belief that a "race war" is imminent, fueled by hidden, evil powers. As a Ohio Klanswoman related "a race war is coming. *They're* predicting one -- even the government knows its coming." To most female activists, the coming race war is inescapable, inevitable. It is the culmination of forces that are unseen and unstoppable.

Conspiratorial thought is powerful in part because it is relatively immune from logical refutation. If a conspiracy isn't visible, that only shows how effective the conspiracy is. A skinhead told me:

The list of people in control of the government, banking, media and entertainment reads like a Synagogue roster. Their agenda is to bring in the New World Order, with most of it being their people in control of things, whether in front of or behind the scenes.

As a reasoning style, conspiracy theories connects disparate historical occurrences in patterns that, although odd, seem to provide a understandable rationale for events. As a Midwest Nazi woman put it:

The people that have been in control, especially very strong since the end of the Civil War, very strong. So they was part of the Civil War. They was part of the French Revolution, the same groups. They made the French Revolution. And it just goes so far back.

Underlying all conspiracy theories is the belief that there is a singular *truth* -- a complete and accurate interpretation of society, history and politics -- that has been systematically hidden from most people by powerful conspirators. To these women activists, government bureaucrats, television producers, book publishers and school officials all work together to prevent the common person from understanding the truth. As a Nazi from Kansas put it, "it's not just the media, but [it's] the powers that control television and radio, who control the schools and get into the children's minds when they're young."

To these women, only deliberate action can penetrate the veil of confusion. Individuals like themselves, they insist, must "research to find out the truth about issues suppressed by the media, what you don't learn in school." Or as a Nazi from Georgia put it, you must "teach [your children] the *truth* about things you won't read about in history books or see in the news."

2. Apocalyptic, millennial, and conspiratorial thought reflects a sense of personal and group powerlessness, victimization and imminent peril that resonates with the experiences of many women.

Part of what makes such thinking so compelling to individuals is how it taps into a sense of both personal and political vulnerability. Most individuals in this society experience threatening situations, but white supremacist organizations teach people to understand their personal situations in generalized, racialized terms. Thus confrontations with members of other races or religions become understood as specific incidents that confirm the existence of a larger racial/religious struggle in which each individual -- consciously or not -- is involved. This process of moving from specific incidents to general principles is seen in the words of an Aryan separatist who commented that she "could have race mixed when I was younger and lots of black men wanted to date me but after seeing what happened to my girlfriends I knew that it was wrong to date outside of my race."

For some adherents to organized racism, the process of generalizing from individual experience to race relations is much more complex. Most racists come to understand negative experiences with members of minority groups in general, racialized terms. But some become more deeply involved with conspiratorial logic and learn to see nearly all personal experiences through a racial, conspiratorial lens.

One example of such all-encompassing conspiratorial belief is the conclusion that race, religion and ethnicity can only be known through actions. People who are "on your side" therefore are *necessarily* white, Aryan or Christian -- regardless of their appearance. Conversely, those who wrong you must be non-white, non-Aryan or Jewish. Such a logic is evident in a number of interviews where respondents sought to distinguish someone's *true* racial identity from their superficial racial markings. When a Southern neo-Nazi described her best friend, an African American man, for instance, she explained that, as a confidante, he was "really white." Having an interracial friendship thus did not disturb her racist beliefs because she assigned race on the basis of loyalty, not skin color.

Women in this society often are in circumstances in which they are relatively powerless or are threatened. Conspiratorial themes of peril and protection thus may be particularly effective with women. A Wisconsin Nazi saw her future as "a struggle to survive in an increasingly anti-white nation under Jewish control," confiding that "if the [racial] war does not break out within the next ten years, I'm afraid my children will be exterminated by the enemies of our race." A Klanswoman told me "it's hard to make house payments ... they're teaching my grandson black history ... the future is getting rougher, more criminals, very dangerous." Yet another Klanswoman said she sought a future with "a lot less violence, a lot less murders, you know, just a more stable, definitely more stable than it is today, and I'd definitely like to see the drug problem hit a rock bottom."

3. The basis of conspiratorial thought among women is more often pragmatic than ideological and more often personal than abstract.

Family ties, not abstract principles, form the core and the impetus for conspiratorial belief among racial women. It is not perceived threats to the white race or to Christians *in general* that leads these women to adopt an "us" vs. "them" mentality and a commitment to racial activism. Although the propaganda issued by racist groups warns that all children of the race are in jeopardy because of such things as Jewish control or interracial marriage ("race-mixing" in the language of racists), it is concrete, specific worries about one's *own* children that motivates these women. Over and over, women explained their activism as a necessary sacrifice for the future of their children. An Aryan separatist claimed that she joined her group after:

thinking of all my family and how much I cared about them ... my children and how I wanted them to have a nice place to grow up.

Others perceived threats more abstractly, but only through the prism of their children and family life. A woman active in a white power group exemplified this logical progression when she commented :

When you just give your children over to be taught things that you do not believe you're just asking for family trouble and eventually it leads to national trouble, which you can see when the communists came over and infiltrated in the early 1900s in churches and universities. It just slowly crept into all of our schools.

Even more abstract political beliefs are understood by activist women in a very personalistic, practical way. A Klanswoman expressed her opposition to interracial marriage, for example, in terms that differ greatly from the abstract defense of white racial privilege that male Klan leaders express. To her, the problem with having a mixed-race baby did not involve racial principle, but rather revolved around practical issues of family and support networks.

You're giving up your family to [have an interracial baby] and then all of a sudden you get to feeling 'Well where's this getting me? How am I going to survive? I used to go to my father and my mother and talk to them about various things. Now I don't have them.'

If threats and conspiracies are understood largely in terms of their impact upon immediate family and one's daily life, so too is the virtue of being in the opposition expressed in terms of its impact upon self and family. A member of a violent Aryan group summarized how she felt about the group as:

It's given me more purpose and commitment in my life and I think it's helped me get closer to ... my family, my friends. It's strengthened bonds of commitment.

4. Millennial, apocalyptic, and conspiratorial thinking can assign meaning and identity to believers.

A major appeal of such thought is its simplicity. It reduces a complex world to simple categories of "us" and "them." There are no ambiguous positions, no uncategorizable people. Such thought processes work to erase the variety and heterogeneity among the group identified as "them." All Jews, or African Americans, or government officials are seen as identical, interchangeable and unified in their agenda and goals.

These systems of logic also simplify and unify the group that is identified as "us." It validates believers in their beliefs. As an Ohio woman commented, "in the Klan I found others that felt the way I felt." It creates a sense of commonality, even a community, that transcends borders and spans great distances. In the words of a Utah skinhead, it reveals "the unity between all, even in other states and overseas." A conspiracy in which "we" need unity and collective action gives life renewed purpose and direction. Being in the movement, a Washington woman claimed, meant that her "life changed forever." Another insisted that the racial movement has made her "responsible and drug-free." Yet another declared that "the pro-white movement has given me hope for a future."

As the racist movement gives meaning -- however distorted and narrow -- to the lives of its adherents, it also creates an identity for activists. As a Kentucky woman put it:

It is not so much that I am in the Klan, it is the fact that the Klan is in me! By the Klan being in me I have no choice other than to remain, I can't walk away from myself.

5. Some elements of millennial, apocalyptic, and conspiratorial thinking are learned within racist groups.

Most activists describe their entry into organized racism as a conversion experience. Like other converts, they tell stories of sudden, crystallizing understanding, voyages of discovery or passages from darkness into light. As one respondent characterized it, "when I opened my eyes, [I] became aware of just how brainwashed white people have become." Life histories tell of conspiracies once hidden, and now revealed. Racist activists relate experiences through which they became aware that Jews -- or African Americans or government agents -- caused and controlled the economy, or politics -- or even the minutia of daily life.

But it is important to realize that most of these stories -- and maybe even the memories of events -- have been created after the fact. They reflect understandings of one's past life that are learned in the process of conversion to racial activism. They are memories and stories and images that have been retrospectively formatted by the propaganda of racist groups. To activists, joining a racist group was the event that revealed the conspiracy. Once they understood "the truth," they could place the events of their past within this conspiratorial context.

A 23 year old racist skinhead, interviewed on death row in a Southern state, cited a car accident as her personal turning point, after which "it's like, my whole attitude changed ... my mind focused more on white supremacy." In her narrative, descriptions of the loss of control she felt as a hospital patient -- "IV's in my arms, tubes in my nose" -- blurred together with images of African American nurses surrounding her bedside, probing and invading her body. Assertions of self against institutional dehumanization took on a racialized cast: "I said [to the nurses] 'don't touch me. Don't get near me ... leave me alone.'"

A fifty-five year old Nazi related a similar story, describing her complicated medical history in increasingly conspiratorial tones, as a prototype of the struggle between Aryan and Jew. Consider her memory of the operating room when she was being prepped for surgery:

There was nobody in there. No instruments, nothing. Then a man appeared from behind me and said he's my anesthesiologist. We started talking, I sat on that operating table, that iron metal thing, and he said "where are you from?" I said I'm from Germany. I had long blond hair and my face was clear, wonderful complexion. At that time still I believed and trusted completely ... He said 'Well, I'm gonna give you the anesthesia now.' I inhaled and realized that I couldn't exhale ... he was just sitting there watching me ... I wanted to say I can't breathe [but] I had no more voice.

Much later in the story, and as the explanation that made the story cohere, she told of her discovery that the anesthesiologist was Jewish, that in fact the hospital -- along with the media, the government, nearly everything -- was owned and controlled by Jews. Racist organizations teach their adherents to understand their lives in a new way. What formerly appeared to be random is now seen as deliberate. What appeared individual and personal now is understood as collective and impersonal. This retrospective understanding is most clear in the life history accounts of experiences with Jews and African Americans.

Virtually all of the respondents could point to incidents in their past that they perceived as negative with African Americans or other people of color. But none recounted a past experience involving anyone who was Jewish. Anti-Semitism -- more than anti-African American racism -- seems to be learned *within* racist groups. These women often joined their groups because of an antipathy toward African Americans or other racial minorities. Once in the groups, however, they were taught that it is Jews who manipulate racial tension. As a Midwestern Nazi put it "when I first joined [her group], it was for dislike of blacks. Now I realize the Jews are controlling their puppets the blacks for their own means."

Conclusion

It is difficult to predict the direction of millennial thinking within organized white supremacy in the U.S. The historian George Mosse characterizes European racism as a "scavenger ideology,"² a characterization that can be applied usefully to contemporary U.S. organized racism. White supremacist leaders are adept at seizing ideas from mainstream discourse that have the potential to mobilize people into racist agendas and concerns about computer problems in the Year 2000 have been linked successfully to anti-Semitic politics in a number of racist groups. Given the generally bleak assessment of social change that permeates organized racism, however, virtually no groups have incorporated the millennial belief in radical transformation of society in a better direction although the white separatist impulses of organized racism provide a platform for such belief. Whether these concerns will remain after the turn of the millennium is unclear since racist leaders have proven equally capable of discarding ideological positions when they lose their persuasive power.

2. Mosse, George L. 1985. Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

In contrast, apocalyptic thinking is deeply ingrained in organized racist ideology and is likely to be a persistent theme into the future. Despite numerous failed prophecies in the past, members of organized racist groups persist in their belief that a transformative “race war” is imminent. Some predict a race war within a year or two. Almost all see it happening within a decade. And, more than a belief, apocalyptic ideas have channeled the practices of many racist group members, propelling migration from cities to rural areas and from the East and South to remote areas of the Northwest and prompting racist groups to create hidden compounds and survivalist lifestyles. Since racist belief in the modern U.S. is so firmly permeated by anti-Jewish conspiratorial logics, apocalyptic thinking and behavior may well become even more central to organized racism in the years to come.