



MCM(2013)006

Hatred, a Solidification of Meaning

Jean-Luc Nancy

Philosopher

August 2013

1 - Nature

The appearance in the legal-political, social and institutional lexicon of a term confined hitherto to the affective domain cannot fail to attract attention. Laws and discourse on society and mores rarely deal with emotions. There is talk about marriage, licit or illicit sexual relations, and relations which may give rise to “conflicts of interest”, but never about love or friendship. There is talk about insults, abuse or defamation, but until recently there was no talk of “hate speech”. Just as it seems impossible to ordain love or friendship, it perhaps seemed impossible to forbid hatred as long as it was seen as an emotion that was difficult to relate to anything other than such a private and intimate feeling as love or friendship.

However, this latter word sends us a signal. Friendship is a word used in the language of states, where it is contrasted with enmity (or more precisely with the word “enemy”, in French at least, where “*inimitié*” is a little weak to describe enmity in the political sense, while “*hostilité*” evokes open and active conflict). The enemy can be rightfully said to be a classic concept in the thinking of states, and this was the case even before the state took on that name and evolved into the modern sovereign, then nation, state. The state is defined by an internal legitimacy and an external legitimacy: the latter positions it in relation to other states, each of which may be friend or enemy, ally or adversary. When these “power relations” were combined with and tended to become subordinate to other, more complex and more diffuse relations (economic, ideological etc.), the relatively clear logic of the enemy became blurred. The enemy was not in himself the object of hatred: on the contrary, he could be respected while at the same time being fought. Napoleon reportedly used to say that “there are no more enemies after victory, only men”.

How are we to understand the shift from the friend-enemy dichotomy to one which we must assume to include hatred but where we hesitate to call the opposite term “love”?

We can begin by observing that hatred entered the legal-political domain in the form of “racial hatred”, and perhaps more precisely (there is probably scope for a history to be written here) in the form of the crime of “incitement to racial hatred”. Racism, as we know, was a late phenomenon in European history. It was in the late 19th century that it became possible to conceive of a “complete antinomy between contemporary biology and democratic ideas”¹. Because this “antinomy” was based on fantasy, it had deep roots: democracy was represented there as much more than a political form. It was related to natural human dispositions. One could dwell at length on the implications of “nature” thus conceived or represented and on the link between it and the fact that the universe was no longer thought of primarily as the creation of a god (the beliefs professed or not by the founders of racism are of little consequence here because,

¹ Georges Vacher de Lapouge, *Race et milieu social*, Paris, 1909, p. XXII-XXIII.

where necessary, they bent these beliefs to fit their views) or as the space in which a self-producing and self-transforming humanity moved. The idea of equal dignity for all could have come about in either of these ways (here we shall overlook the hypocrisy of the churches and the illusions placed in technical progress: the main thing is the dominant representations and their power to mobilise).

Racism was therefore the fruit of a form of ontology, physiology or cosmology, as it were, which put down to “nature” the systems of hierarchical distinctions of which all societies known till then offered images (including the distinction between slave and freeman, which could be described as infra- or extra-hierarchical)² or the systems based on the idea of a collective human destiny (all striving more or less towards the creation of a “second nature”). Furthermore, the “nature” of racism (and of some aspects of nationalism) was borne out in the early stages by a view of science which was typical of the age: a steadily growing knowledge of the actual reality of things, and not, as we now conceive of it, the formulation of models, theories and/or fictions about a reality which constantly transcends all these constructs.

Now, the supposed natural reality of a humanity clearly divided into distinct groups called for naturalisation of the idea of “race” (this is not the place to describe a process which began with Buffon and continued with Gobineau, partly on the strength of certain borrowings from Darwinism). Of course, the seeds for this were present in the way the Europeans had already treated the American Indians (especially in South America) and in the way the Arabs and then the Europeans had treated Black Africans (not without the help, sometimes, of certain rulers of these peoples). Of course, rivalry between peoples and mutual disrespect are as old as the world: but they did not signify “racism” and the attendant hatred until Europe began its global expansion.

It is from this angle that we must attempt to identify the deep meaning of hatred. Before racism, all shades of attitude towards foreign peoples and groups could be found: simply referring to them as “foreigners”, branding them as “incomprehensible” (*barbaroi* in Greek), describing them as “strange”, as different from “real people”, referring to them as the “enemy” in a sense close to the modern sense – all these ways of referring to other groups found their place in systems for describing and organising the world, whether based on belief in divine authority or on lineage, territory, vassalage etc. Slavery, in both East and West, also fitted into one of these systems. No reference was made to “nature”.

With “nature”, however, the special consistency of symbolic reference points tended to be dissolved and to be replaced by a consistency which, being “natural” (objective and verifiable), took on a universal validity depending on no other authority. At the same

² It should be added that, before the advances of 20th century ethnology, societies such as those defined by Pierre Clastres as being structured “against the state” were barely known.

time, these developments occurred just as Europe was achieving unprecedented technological supremacy: from the stern post rudder to the harquebus and from the steam engine to steel-making, Europe looked in the mirror and saw Prometheus reflected back. It was concluded from this that a superior race was at work... (In general, the history of Europe has tended to see itself as natural – even if it places its origin in a “Greek miracle”... The conditions and determinations of this origin have yet to be fully explored.)

In earlier times, Christianity had engendered anti-Semitism – and hence a form of racism internal to Europe – the deep motives for which are complex but can be reduced to a simple core: on the one hand, the refusal of Christians to recognise their own origin, out of a desire to assert their full originality; on the other, the resentment felt – from the Crusades onwards – by Christians who betrayed their own principles by engaging in worldly undertakings (politics, business etc.) in the face of the Jews, who saw themselves as a diaspora separated from the lost Kingdom (and by no means inclined to seek its restoration). It was as if, perhaps still unsure of itself, Europe, in a process unparalleled in the annals of culture, had strangely been forced to find a scapegoat to confirm its identity.

Although it did not originate from a naturalist ideology, anti-Semitism ended up converging with racism and impregnating it in its own way, by naturalising its religious origin. By describing the Jews as “perfidious” (“beyond faith”), the Church paved the way for the psychological sense of the term and hence to the classification and naturalisation of the Jews as a “race”. The concomitant movement to promote an “Aryan” race (which emerged as much outside the Germanic countries as in them) stemmed from the search for an identity which was clearly distinct from that indicated by the origin of the Jews, who were represented as belonging to an “Eastern” group. (A study could be made of the complex set of representations of the West-East dichotomy, combined with those of a North-South dichotomy, which created a geographical fabric that partly underlay the naturalism of the 19th century.)

2 - The ego

The combination of all these features gave rise to an ideology, in other words a belief too, going as far as superstition, whose substance can be clearly discerned as being based on an uncertainty and a concern as to identity. On the one hand, to be European was clearly to be master of the world (and, geographically, to be in the middle, in a just balance: Hegel, for example, took this view) – but on the other, who, then, is this master if he owes his mastery solely to himself? What is the source of his dignity? This was not the time for writing an epic poem, as Virgil did to support the Rome of Augustus in its need for identity (having lost or damaged the identity of the *res publica romana*). What needed to be written was a substitute for this, a science of nature, races, their

dispositions and their destinies. For a short while, an attempt was made to think in terms of humanity as a whole, advancing as one towards cosmopolitanism (as Kant would have liked), but this motif (taken up again by Jacques Derrida twenty years ago, and differently by Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour, among others) has so far remained difficult to handle, although it is constantly reshaped by all the major problems of international law. Globalisation, as it is called in English, has taken the place of a cosmopolitical perspective and “*mondialisation*”, as it is called in French, is a very poor illustration of how to build a “world” in the sense of a “cosmos”, with flows of meaning forming a coherent whole.

The idea of nature, since we have to return to it, makes it possible, however, to engage unreservedly, against a background not of cosmopolitics, but of cosmophysiology, in a game of differences and even exclusion. “Nature” in fact encompasses the combined representations of marked, often clashing and fully autonomous differences. Just as nature in general is autonomous – self-regulating and pursuing its own aims – so every natural being is autonomous – self-determining and self-signifying. Everything – the whole and each part – is determined by itself. Nature consists, as it were, solely of egos in the fullest sense of the term, if the ego is the seat, or the ideal agent, of self-determination or even self-construction.

This sense is also in a way the poorest because it the least open: it denotes the ego as an entity closed in on itself, a “self” like an “in-itself” immediately and completely present to itself, what the classical age of French literature called the “*moi*” – the me – which, according to Pascal, is “hateful”³. Here again, history is involved: at a time when Christian Europe was turning into humanist and capitalist Europe and embarking on its global expansion, the question of what French philosophers called “*amour propre*”, in the sense of love of oneself and egoism, became a major issue in the realm of what, at the time, were called the passions. With the passions (as, moreover, with taste, wit, character etc.), what up till then had been a secondary aspect of subjectivity moved to the forefront of the anthropological stage: it was seen as an irreducible individual property. The whole sphere of the individual, free will and the autonomous subject really took shape in this period. This sphere does not exactly belong to the world of nature, although it combines within it the motifs of “human nature” and its individual configurations – the autonomy of each subjectivity being itself part of human nature and its rights.

Self-love is at the heart of this autonomy. For someone like Pascal, heir to the tradition which contrasted self-love with love of God (and of others in God), the self-centred self called forth hatred because it was precisely the wrong kind of love or the opposite of real love. The way in which he describes this hatred speaks for itself:

³ *Pensées*, ed. Brunschvicg, 455.

"[...] I hate it because it is unjust and because it makes itself the centre of everything [...] it is unjust in itself since it makes itself the centre of everything; it is inconvenient to others since it would enslave them; for each self is the enemy, and would like to be the tyrant of all others."

This says everything about what our culture has condemned ever since in the name of egoism or narcissism while cultivating it in the name of property and personal interest. Man thus began to appear hateful to himself in proportion as he achieved emancipation as an individual, in other words as an independent atom. "No god or master" later became the anarchist motto – to which one should always add "not even myself".

Yet we usually omit to make this addition; it is, on the contrary, very often the me which asserts itself in rejecting all submission. Instead of being hateful, it becomes sovereign. The me remains a reference point, one of the strongest in our culture. It is not shaken by all the highly celebrated ethics of "the other" or by psychoanalytical discourse on division of the subject. Introducing the necessary distinction between the "me" and the "I" always meets with strong resistance. It is therefore possible to say that what might be called the invention of the me constituted a model: that of a self-sufficiency for which, initially at least, outsiders and foreigners could only be irksome, not to say dangerous.

The "egology" that was built up in this way also functioned as a model for the naturalism of the human groups already mentioned. The group – family, people, nation, community etc. – regarded as natural was represented at the same time as an autonomous cell and as a me. In other words, as a cellular system whose basic functioning consisted in accepting or rejecting what was not originally contained within its own (protective and distinctive) membrane. In this model, rejection of foreigners precedes and founds the presence to itself of the self. As Freud said, hate comes before love where "self-preservation instincts" assert themselves first⁴. The spontaneous movement by which anything that threatens the integrity of the subject is rejected is followed by a movement which impels the me to incorporate anything on the outside which pleases it and to reject anything which displeases it (which may also contain a part of itself which the subject rejects).⁵

Acceptance or rejection linked initially to mere self-preservation (to a way of persevering in one's being) therefore take on the colouring of pleasure/displeasure and become all the more active for that. Love can go – if only in fantasy – as far as

⁴ See *Instincts and their vicissitudes*. I cannot dwell here on Freudian discourse. To some extent it is itself dependent on the individualistic and egocentric representation. At the same time, however, Freud was one of the first, after Nietzsche and Rimbaud, to have described the inconsistency and fragility of the me.

⁵ In the film by Mathieu Kassowitz, *La Haine* (1995), a character standing in front of a mirror mimes replies to imaginary insults by another person, as if practising doing this, by repeating the following question, which is almost a cliché: "Are you talking to me? To me?" The scene can of course be interpreted in several ways.

incorporation of the other or complete abandonment of oneself (known in spirituality as “oblative love”). Hatred, for its part, can go as far as seeking to destroy the other, and one may think that the expansion of hatred can match that of love in terms of the infinity conferred on it by Christianity and, subsequently, modern subjectivity.

The modern subject is strained, distended and even torn by the opposition between a call to boundless love and an imperious demand to be absolutely self-sufficient.

This is how hatred functions, whether it is individual or collective, private or public, when both registers adhere to the model in which naturalism and egoism are combined – concern for one’s own self⁶. Where both registers are concerned, there is always a risk that this will entail a considerable over-evaluation of what is “one’s own”. One’s own identity is what plays the most harmful role when it is represented (imagined, projected, expounded on) as being truly one’s own, as an “authenticity” of which the idea of “pure race” provides the most pernicious form.

It should be added that while love may be content to pine away with desire (unless it turns into possessive rage and leads to behaviour similar to that of hatred), hatred, on the other hand, is, of itself, turned more towards action. The tendency is on the one hand towards self-surpassment (self-sublimation or self-abandonment), on the other towards self-exacerbation. The subject exceeds himself, as it were, in both ways, and may go mad or die as a result. The fact remains that hatred represents a more active form of excess, more committed to, or bent on, achieving a result. The primary meaning both of the Latin verb *odi* and of the German *hassen* (to hate) includes the idea of a pursuit and even a hunt: the idea of tracking down the hated other, catching him up and seeking to eliminate him.

An analogy might be drawn between this mechanism and that of revenge. But revenge, which undoubtedly sometimes takes on the appearance of hatred, at least has in its favour, as it were, the fact that it reveals its motive: namely to avenge a serious wrong done to oneself or one’s group. Here we have a form of law without law – and in fact it is true in more than one respect that the earliest forms of law were a deliberate elaboration of the notion of revenge. Hatred, however, cannot even give its fury the appearance of revenge. If hatred suspects an act of wrongdoing or affront on the part of the other, that is not a fact but a fruit of the imagination. Hatred takes revenge in advance, as it were, or it takes revenge not for an act but for the other’s mere existence.

⁶ I tend to see the love/hate pairing as a pair of affects specific to our culture. If one were to object that Antiquity was familiar with them, the answer to this is that they were viewed less as feelings of a subject than as formative forces of the world (mingling and separating, attracting and repelling).

3 – Action

Taking revenge for the other's existence means on the one hand assuming that his existence in itself is a violation of mine, and on the other engaging in acts designed to eliminate him.

The first element involves an exacerbation of the dual principle of naturalism and egocentrism. How this dual principle grew and took root to the point of becoming an integral part of a dominant culture in the West should be the subject of intense historical and philosophical study. There is no doubt that this is an underlying structure of our civilisation, which it disseminated as it expanded. It is not enough to say that “in nature” there is always confrontation, fighting and exclusion and that “in human nature” there is always closing off and mutual rejection of communities. What we should instead be asking is why and under what conditions violent exclusion can become a kind of permanent and operational public principle⁷. The entire European history of property – in the sense of possession, domination, origin, distinction, exclusiveness etc. – should be reviewed from this perspective⁸.

This first level of analysis suggests the need for action to stimulate thinking and learning. One can imagine schools devoting much more time to this action than they do at present. This would presuppose prior teacher training and the development of working instruments: the scale of the reflection process involved and the difficulty of engaging in what, in several respects, would be self-critical thinking about our culture and history (without for all that avoiding questioning of other cultures and histories) indicate from the outset that this would be a major intellectual and political enterprise⁹.

The second element relates to the active and executive nature of hatred. Like a declaration of love, a declaration of hate belongs to the category of what are known in linguistics as “performative speech acts”: utterances which perform acts. If I say that I hate, I am performing an act of hate which has noticeable effects in terms of offending some and stirring up others. If the word “*haine*” (hatred) has been adopted by disaffected urban youth in France to refer not just to an emotion but to a social attitude, that is because its emotional charge conveys action and may be expressed almost equally well in words, blows or confrontation. Hate speech is usually accompanied by abuse or insults, but, in themselves, these do not necessarily imply hatred. Calling someone a “bastard”, for example, may – at a stretch - remain on a level where, so to speak, the attribute does fully engage the subject. To call someone a “faggot”, however, is to address the subject as such. The performative effect differs accordingly: in the first

⁷ There would be much to say, for example, about the violence between young people from different villages in 19th century France. Fatal clashes were not uncommon in some regions.

⁸ In the legal field, a history of the relationship between *jus proprium* and *jus commune* would be instructive.

⁹ Criticism should be understood here in the sense of analysis and identification of the parts of a whole rather than in the sense of moral denunciation, which is frequently simplistic.

case, the words brand the other as worthless, in the second they render his being worthless and unworthy of existing.

The legal and educational response to hate speech calls for consideration of this performative aspect. A hate utterance is itself an act; the thought it expresses is in itself an act of negation. When Pascal writes that the *me* is “hateful” – in place of other epithets (“dangerous”, “guilty”, “shameful” etc.) he might conceivably have used – he implies that it must be rejected, and when he goes on to say “I hate it”, he gives the feeling that the “I” is turning against the “me” and condemning it. The performativity of hatred functions like a kind of dark side of the law: it condemns, and its judgment is self-enforcing.

Contrary to what is often stated, therefore, it is not enough to draw a distinction between (potentially fatal) aggressive gestures and words, which, so the argument goes, signify the possibility of exchange. There are words which open up no possibility of exchange and which are more in the nature of acts (they, too, are potentially fatal). Whether or not their full actualisation is deferred is of little consequence: the words (indeed, the thoughts themselves) have already begun to act, and they act both as condemnation of the person targeted and as an incitement to others to join in the persecution and the hunt. There is something paradoxical about the expression “incitement to hatred”: on the one hand, hatred is indeed an attitude which may be “incited”, but on the other, hatred itself already acts as an incitement and as a stimulus to action – aggression, eviction, destruction etc.

4 – Dignity

The effectiveness of hatred is not only turned towards others. It also acts on the *me* from which it originates. It originates from the *me* because that *me* feels the other to be unbearable or unacceptable. As long as the situation is one of revenge – i.e. a response to an actual wrong – it may be considered that hatred, without for all that being legitimised, includes a possibility of justification. One could cite the objective nature of the wrong in question. Reliance on circumstances of social deprivation to mitigate, if not deny, guilt often unleashes hateful sarcasm on the part of those who refuse to accept the argument of objectivity where, in their view, there is only innate – personal and collective – wickedness. In other words, this brings us back to the naturalism-egoism ideology: such and such a group or individual is, by nature, made in such a way that its/his/her identity includes a defect or flaw. The Roma are thieves, the Chinese are sly etc. One could write a very long history of the derogatory descriptions used by peoples of each other – but it would not always be a history of hatred: for it to be so, the ideology in question has to have taken the place of symbolic identification systems. In the writings of Montesinos and De Las Casas, one can see how the cruelty of the conquistadors is condemned in the name of the Christian dogma whose principles the

Spaniards were supposed to observe. This was expressed for example, in the following terms: "Should you [the conquerors] not regard them [the Indians] as your brothers?"¹⁰ For us, fraternity is at the limits of our symbolic capacity, and it may be conceded that the concept is open to question. Nevertheless, this points to an empty symbolic space which needs to be filled in a new way.

In fact, the naturalist-egoist ideology replaces symbolic reference points with representations which are supposed to express a reality (nature, the individual) whose content is to a large extent fictitious. As a result, this ideology easily enters into contradiction with itself: it can declare a general and abstract equality while seeking to ignore the fact that "everyone calls barbarity what he is not accustomed to", as Montaigne put it (once again in connection with the conquest of the Americas¹¹). Generally, moral and legal discourse of "human rights" suffers from the fact that its universality does not fully encompass both the symbolic and the practical requirements of the actual existences of groups and individuals. The dignity – in other words the absolute value – of what is known as the "human person" floats above living individualities. This is "high-altitude thinking".

Frantz Fanon wrote: "*For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with 'human' dignity. The colonized subject has never heard of such an ideal...*"¹² If we want to lose neither the function of the ideal – understood as the true form, not a distant approximation – nor a sense of actual existence, then we must move forward in our thinking about dignity.

To begin with, it must be understood that it cannot be confused with the *me* and that the latter, on the contrary, is already unworthy of what is implied in the ideal. As a closing in on itself, the *me* forms an obstacle to the "I", to what only exists in its opening up, its relationships – which by no means preclude its individuality nor, where necessary, its withdrawal and isolation, and which do not preclude the experience of strangeness, incompatibility and untranslatability either. But the *me* cannot have these experiences: it perceives them as attacks or as threats, in which respect it is unworthy of the exclusive value it would like to attribute to itself.

The first indignity of the hateful *me* is the one it inflicts on itself by denying it to others. It confesses its inability to get out of the circle to which it confines itself – what it imagines as forming its identity. But an identity is, on the one hand, concrete and not imaginary, and on the other it is in perpetual movement. These two features are linked: movement is concrete, it is a history, relationships, experiences. The hateful *me* inflicts the same indignity on others: it freezes them in certain categories, several of which are

¹⁰ Montesinos' sermon, 1511, available on several Internet sites.

¹¹ *Essays*, chapter on "cannibals".

¹² *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961.

already simplifications or imaginary interpretations (“you are a Tutsi”, “she’s a dyke” etc.: each name could be the subject of endless discourse).

Nevertheless, differences do exist, as do conflicts and incompatibilities. Nevertheless, there are justified hostilities and questionable intrusions. The point is not to preach concord between individuals, cultures, customs and languages, but rather to face up to discord and the potential impossibility of resolving it. This impossibility itself needs to be viewed as a non-exhaustive but formative condition of universality. Freud said that Christian love was the only response equal to the unbridled violence of the modern world, but that this love was impracticable. It is definitely that, and the Christian message has all too often conveyed an illusory sense of universality. But the following lesson must be drawn from this: we must consider this horizon of impossibility without entertaining any naïve illusions. Does the impossibility of universal sameness not correspond to the reality of the manifold differences both in nature and within each “identity”?

Here again, we are misled by a belief in the confused configuration combining “nature” and the “me”, a configuration which postulates at one and the same time an illusory universal (a secularised mystical body) and the closed irreducibility of each individual and each *egotised* group (at the same time as each *ego* is reduced to an exemplar of the group...). This belief poses an immediate danger to dignity because it presupposes that everything is given irreversibly and that everyone is therefore, as a matter of principle, complete in their separateness. As is often the case, however, the certainty here conceals an uncertainty: no one is sure of being “himself” or that “nature” is as natural as one would like. Hatred is the fury of an identity which others offend from the outset because it does not want to know how uncertain it knows and feels itself to be; it prefers to banish anything that would confirm its doubt. In the process, this identity loses its dignity by challenging that of others.

But the sense of the dignity or absoluteness of each individual or group can be apprehended neither as a self-evident spiritual truth nor as a legal norm. It, too, can only be approached as an act informed both by what Derrida called “unconditional hospitality” and by the particular circumstances of each encounter. It should perhaps be thought of as a sense which cannot be reduced to a meaning, a sense which is as much a question of sensibility as of intelligence. Hatred presupposes closed meanings. Hatred is a solidification of meaning.