The Roots of Prejudice

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Notes & Comment

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The subject of this lecture is the Roots of Prejudice. Perhaps we had better start by defining prejudice. Gordon Allport in his book *The Nature of Prejudice* gives the following definition: "Ethnic prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole or toward an individual because he is a member of that group."[1] Perhaps the first and most significant thing that can be said about prejudice is that it is a form of generalization. Perhaps too, this is one reason prejudice is so common. We all must generalize but in the process we are not always respectful of the facts. I said we all must generalize, we cannot avoid it, orderly living depends on it. We all form the experience of our lives into clusters and while we may call on the right cluster at the wrong time or the wrong cluster at the right time, still the process in question dominates our entire mental life. A million events befall us every day. We cannot handle so many events. If we think of them at all we type them. No matter how hard we try to be open-minded, new experiences must be fitted into old categories. We cannot handle each fresh event in its own right. If we did, past experience would be of no use and far from having an open mind we would have a vacant mind as our past experiences would mean nothing to us. Then too, there is a curious inertia in our thinking. We like to solve problems easily and this can best be done if we can prejudice the solution by fitting it into a category. Allport mentions the case of a pharmacist's mate in the Navy who had only two categories into which he fitted every ailment that came his way; if you can see it put iodine on it, if you can't, give the patient a laxative. He had only two categories into which he fitted his whole professional life.

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[1] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: A Doubleday Anchor Book, 1958) p. 10.

Perhaps more closely related to prejudice as we have defined it is the fact that categories color the way we feel, judge and act. For example, we have categories of Muslim, Chinese, Japanese, Negro. If these categories are composed of negative attitudes and beliefs, we try almost automatically to avoid one we identify with such a group. There is a feeling of disfavor that accompanies the concept. In the prejudiced person this feeling of disfavor is irrational, that is, it is not based on knowledge or evidence. Is it true, for example, that Negroes are superstitious, that Chinese are shifty, that Scotchmen are stingy, that Jews are immoral. To make a rational prejudgment of the members of any group requires considerable knowledge of the members of that group. It is very unlikely that anyone has sound evidence for any of the statements made about Negroes, Chinese, Scotchmen, or Jews.

It is important to understand what happens to a prejudiced person when categories conflict with evidence. In most instances categories are stubborn and resist change. To admit new evidence disturbs a way of thinking one has found satisfactory and he is reluctant to do so. Instead he admits only such evidence as confirms his previous beliefs; thus a Negro who is superstitious or a Chinese who is shifty delights him because he can say "I told you so." If on the other hand he finds contrary evidence, he makes use of what Allport has called the "re-fencing devise." This helps him to hold his prejudgments even in the face of contrary evidence. It is the device of admitting exceptions: "There are nice Negroes but...," or, "some of my best friends are Chinese but...". Thus by admitting a few favored cases, his prejudice is kept intact for all other cases. Prejudice, therefore, is based on faulty generalizations about a group as a whole or about an individual because he is a member of that group. Such generalizations we said are inflexible because they do not bend before evidence to the contrary; rather the prejudiced person makes use of what we have termed the "re-fencing" device by which he allows for exceptions and holds onto his prejudices.

This brings us to the question as to how prejudices arise? How can man be so irrational as to accept generalizations for which there is no evidence or to refuse to abandon generalizations in the face of contrary evidence? To answer these questions, we turn to personal values. These values are generally formed in and reflect the groups to which we belong. The first group into which we are all born is the family and in the course of his development the young child learns and takes on many of the values and attitudes of his parents; as he grows older he joins groups of his peers in school and in the neighborhood in which he lives. As he grows older still he may join different organizations and as adult he may be a member of professional groups such as labor unions or of social clubs etc. All of these groups have significance for him and in each of them he finds

people who reflect and affect his own way of thinking. Those who do not belong to his groups are outsiders and to a large extent he may not feel much attachment to them. They are different. Now, if in the groups to which an individual belongs, prejudice against outsiders or outside groups is accepted as part of the ordinary behavior of the members, then he will be prejudiced because he takes on the norms of his group and for the most part conforms to them. Perhaps an example will clarify what I mean. If I am a child born in a suburb of a large city in the U.S. in which no Negro families live, and if I attend a school in the area in which there are no Negro children, all my associations will necessarily be with white childern. If in addition I am told by my parents to avoid Negro children because they are dirty or immoral or dope addicts or criminals or if quite apart from such directly prejudicial commands, I hear my parents using terms of opprobium such as "Nigger", or making disparaging comments about Negroes, then all imperceptibly my views become colored by what I hear and I begin to think as they do. Negroes for me become defined as an outgroup. Negro for me becomes a category made up of negative attitudes and consequently Negroes become people to be avoided at all costs. Prejudice for me, therefore, becomes a normative thing, it defines how I "ought" to behave in relation to this particular out-group called Negro. I have learned these attitudes in the very process of growing up. Therefore, we can make the following statements regarding prejudice. First, it is group behavior. Second, it is learned. We are not born prejudiced. Third, it is transmitted through the learning experience which my generation has had with the one before it. Fourth, prejudices are shared by members of the group, that is, they are practised in common and are not peculiar to particular individuals in the group.

What we have said about prejudice thus far presupposes that the different non-family groups to which one belongs reinforce the values and attitudes taken over from the family. But this is not always the case. It is possible for a person to learn from other groups values not accepted by his family group. Thus in school a child may learn more democratic values. He may come in contact with Negroes and find out that they are not immoral or dirty. Again, though tradition learned in the family may instill prejudice, legislation on the part of local or national governments may alter the general prejudices of the adult public and thus also affect the values that are learned by the young. Thus, during World War II the U.S. government integrated the armed forces, and soldiers who were prejudiced towards negroes and opposed to integration were made to serve in the same units as negroes. Attitude tests of prejudiced soldiers involved showed that their prejudices were appreciably modified by their combat experiences in integrated units. Here we have a case of legislative change,

followed by interaction between whites and negroes which led to the breakdown of prejudice.

The view of prejudice just described we shall call the normative view. It is the more common one among sociologists who tend to see prejudice as a feature of culture which ultimately becomes a part of the individual personality through the process of socialization or of simply learning to become a member of one's society or of particular groups in that society. In that process where prejudice is common it is taken on just like the air one breathes. But just as it is possible to change the air so it is possible to change the climate in which one grows up and in the process to minimize prejudice against certain groups at least on the part of some. Yet we know, and the U.S. at present is a good example of this, that though there is legislation aimed at changing the climate, prejudice can still endure and it does because, psychologists tell us, prejudice is a characteristic of certain personalities. Some people have a need for prejudice and just as laws will not do away with crimes that fulfill deep-seated personality needs so they will not do away with prejudice that fulfills deep personality needs for individuals. Let us look then at prejudice as a characteristic of the personality. This brings us to what has become known as the *scapegoat theory* of prejudice.

The scapegoat theory of prejudice is based on the fact that a large number of our everyday activities are goal oriented. Persons do various acts which they expect to lead to the satisfaction of needs and desires. These acts range all the way from satisfying strong sexual desires to wanting to get on a jeepney before anyone else. Of the many goal oriented activities we pursue every day, some do not achieve the desired results and so dissatisfaction arises. The psychological experience of such blocks to goal oriented activity we call "frustration". According to the scapegoat theory, the individual's response to frustration frequently takes the form of aggression.

There are many kinds of frustration but for our purposes we shall only consider two here. First, those which are highly particular, non-repetitive and not characteristic of a person's style of life, for example, missing a plane and thus missing an important appointment. The second type of frustration and more to the point of what we are discussing here are those of a continuous, enduring nature, endured to the point where they become an integral part of the fabric of the daily and yearly round of life, for example sexual incompatibility between husband and wife. It is this latter type of frustration that in time comes to affect every aspect of the individual's personality and which is important for understanding prejudice. For a common reaction to frustration is aggression. We know from our own experience and have seen it in the case of others, that men who have had a frustrating day in the office or at work may go home and take it out

on their wives or children. Or again we have probably experienced at some time in our careers that when we have been criticized by a superior, we may take it out on a subordinate or if no subordinate is available, we may kick the wall of our office or pound the desk or curse and swear to ourselves.

This raises the question as to who becomes the target of aggression? Typically, a frustrated person does not focus his aggression on the most handy person or object for the simple reason that the person or group on whom the aggression is focused must not be in the position to strike back. Aggressors select not the strong as the objects of their aggression but the weak, the defenseless, the dependent and above all those that are defined by the aggressor's immediate groups or by his society and its majority groups with real objects for aggression. By sociological definition, a minority is a group that is less powerful than the majority. It is typically defenseless. The institutional protections of person and property are applied less stringently than in the case of the majority. The way of life and the value system of the majority tend to be, or to become, the normative standards for the society as a whole, for minority persons as well as for the majority. To the extent that the minority's ways differ from those of the majority, aggression against the minority for their so called "deviance", can be rationalized by the aggressor as something morally good.

We do not mean to imply here that aggression or even prejudice is a majority prerogative. Aggression is also generated in minority group members as a result of lifelong frustrations at the hands of the majority. The current troubles in many of the cities of the U.S. bears out this fact. Minority group persons have a variety of prejudices, just as wide and virulent as those of majority people. Generally minority aggressions are taken out on the majority group itself which is the source of the frustration, on other minority groups or on particular persons or sub-groups within their own group.

Actually direct violent attacks on majority groups do occur but they are relatively infrequent mainly because the consequences for the aggressor are likely to be sure and swift. The more common form of direct aggression against majority groups is political action. The fact that such action may be the result of careful political planning in no way denies the fact that it may also satisfy one's aggressive urges. Indirect aggression against the majority is very common. Negroes and Jews in the United States frequently use humor and satire in this way. Other forms of indirect aggression are "playing the part" assigned by prevalent stereotypes, responding with exaggerated obsequiousness that subtly communicates through satire just what they think of the role assigned to them. Another form of indirect aggression is talking against the majority group in the safe confines of the minority.

Direct aggression against other minorities is probably more common than direct aggression against the majority. It is convenient in a number of ways: first, other minorities are also weak, sometimes weaker than one's own group. Secondly, through words and acts against other minorities, the minority person borrows some degree of majority status. Thus when an anti-Negro Jew and an anti-Negro gentile get together, they may experience some degree of brotherhood.

Finally, there is aggression towards one's own minority. This seems to be the most common type of minority prejudice and it is generally focused not on one's own group as a whole but on individuals or sub-groups within one's own group.

So much, then, for the scapegoat theory of prejudice. The theory states that prejudice is based on aggression due to frustration. As a complement to the normative theory outlined earlier it is valid and does explain a great deal about prejudice though, as Allport indicates, there are also things it does not explain. For example, frustration does not always lead to aggression. It is not always displaced. Anger can also be directed against oneself and thirdly, displacement does not as the theory seems to indicate always relieve the feeling of frustration. Again, it does not explain why some minorities are selected and not others or why there is a striking difference in the amount of dislike shown to different minorities or why certain minorities are respected and others are disliked. Finally, the theory overlooks the possibility of realistic social conflict. What seems like displacement may be nothing more than an aggression directed against the true source of frustration.

Despite these deficiencies the scapegoat theory of prejudice does cast light on a number of contemporary historical facts such as the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Germany before and during World War II, Japanese militarism during the Second World War and on some forms of contemporary nationalism among other things. Let us take them in that order.

The rise of Nazism in Germany is a very interesting study in the frustration aspects of prejudice.[2] The Industrial Revolution came much later to Germany than to most other countries of Europe. As a result there was a period of extremely rapid change with very little opportunity for the country as a whole to adjust to the change. The result was widespread insecurity. People were disoriented from their characteristic way of life and catapulted into a new way of life almost overnight. In addition to this, it is a fact that Germany prior to the First World War was dominated by two groups in particular.

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[2] Talcot Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958). In the 6th, 7th and 14th essays, Parsons discusses many of the points made above on Germany and Japan.

The first was the Prussian Officers' Army Corps. This group was a military aristocracy with a great deal of tradition behind it. Most of the group were also a landed gentry. The second important group was the government civil service, a group devoted mostly to things as they were with little desire for change and with no imagination to instigate change even if it deemed change desirable. Both of these groups stressed as their big virtue devotion to duty and they received strong support from the Lutheran church which was the State church of Prussia, especially in the great emphasis Lutheranism placed on the fact that the authority of princes and governments is by divine authorization. Lutheran pastors were also civil servants, paid by the government and unlikely therefore, to bite the hand that fed them. Finally, as with all landed groups and government bureaucrats, these groups were strongly conservative in their political thinking and opposed to change.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, there was great emphasis in German society on masculine superiority. Formalism, as seen in the great emphasis attached to titles was the order of the day and the lack of any romantic love pattern meant that there was no release from this formalism, even in daily life.

It is against this background that we must see the humiliating German defeat in the First World War and the ensuing political instability accompanied by inflation and the severe depression of the late twenties and early thirties which eventually paved the way for Hitler's coming to power. With the defeat of the war the former order of things was abruptly changed, the power of the Prussian military was broken. The old values and beliefs had collapsed completely. The way was clear for a new set of beliefs and values to take over and Hitler provided these in his doctrine of the master race. It was not a new doctrine and, in fact, it had already been discredited but for a people whose whole way of life had crumpled about them it could serve. It was easy for them to bring themselves to believe that, in fact, the cause of Germany's troubles was rather simple, namely, that the master race had allowed itself to be defiled by mingling with other races, non-Aryans especially, and the Jew as the ever present non-Aryan in their midst. Hence the Jew became a convenient scapegoat who could be blamed for all of Germany's ills.

In many ways the Jew was an apt scapegoat. A great many contradictory things could be blamed on him. For example, Marx was Jew and the communists at the time of the Hitler takeover were posing a threat to Germany; thus Jews could be blamed for Communism. Again the deep religious tradition of the Jews was completely opposed to atheism and so the German communists could blame the opposition to themselves on the Jews.

Secondly, the Jews for the most part lived in the cities and engaged in business; hence they could be blamed for the loss of the traditional values of German rural society. At the same time German businessmen and industrialists at a time of inflation and severe depression could blame the so-called Jewish monopoly for their plight.

Thirdly, the Jews were found all over the world; hence, they could be blamed for being part of the anti-German conspiracy. At the same time the Jews who lived in Germany could be accused of not making their contribution to German life and development.

Finally, there were many Jewish intellectuals and as always there are groups that blame the intellectuals for all ills. Here too the Jews were vulnerable.

The Jew therefore became the source of Germany's ills. Whatever one conceived the cause of those ills to be, the Jew could be blamed for it. It was much easier to accept such facile generalizations than to look for the facts. With a convenient scapegoat at hand, one could vent his pent up frustrations on him.

The case of Japan was in some ways similar to that of Germany. Japan also, prodded on by the government, industrialized very swiftly in the early part of the twentieth century. Generally, however, the control of large industrial firms lay in the hands of family groups, who carried with them traditional family values according to which individual interests were subordinated to those of the family. But as these interests grew, it became necessary to recruit more promising elements from the universities, and to open opportunities to those with talent even though they were not of the family. Yet, the family system remained strong and in many ways resistant to the trend.

At the same time, the government was pushing education, trying to get the most promising students in every village and town into the universities. The government also controlled education and dictated what was taught in the schools. But with all this, the class balance remained for some time intact because status and wealth were considerations more controlling than ability. What we have, therefore, is a case of rapid industrialization which demanded in a sense the breakdown of the traditional system but the traditional system resisted change. This gave rise to strain and tension.

Secondly, industrialization led to the rise of cities and the growth of a large urban proletariat. These people flocked to the cities for employment and under urban conditions and increasing western cultural influences, they undermined many elements of traditional family system. Yet, the family in the rural areas and to some extent in the cities remained resistant to any change. The change along with the resistance to change created tensions. In addition to this, great

pressures were brought on the young to succeed. When one did not succeed, not only he, but his whole family was disgraced, and the disgrace often led the young man who may have failed in the university to commit suicide. It is under circumstances such as these, where there is heightened tension, and strain is felt throughout the nation, that nationalism of the extreme variety that characterized Japan prior to and during the last world war arises. The pressures that were effecting a basic transformation in the Japanese way of life had to be dealt with and nationalism of the extreme variety can help to keep people's minds off the problems they face and focus them on something else. This is all the more effectively done when an outside enemy can be created, since this can unite the people behind the regime regardless of its defects and of how inadequately it is meeting the day to day problems of the country. The whole process in Japan was heightened by the cult of the Emperor. The army, predominantly from the rural classes, posed as the champion of the rural folk against urban corruption and wickedness. A dichotomy was introduced between the wealthy exploiting classes and the poor; urban masses were somehow assimilated in their plight to the rural people. In this way, the army could pose as the champion of traditional Japanese values and of the people against the monied interests and their allies and the corrupting influences from the West.

The German and the Japanese situations present a framework for analyzing modern nationalist trends in countries like Indonesia, Ghana and Cuba among others. Nationalism, as Fr. de la Costa has indicated, "is an achievement." It is, as he says "a fact and a power." "Few things in the modern world have been able as nationalism has, to release such wild energies from multitudes previously passive and inert, and to drive them to attempt and achieve projects previously thought to be beyond the bounds of possibility. It is the ability of nationalism to inspire such unquestioning loyalty, such complete commitment, that has led scholars like Carlton Hayes to call it a religion."

"It would seem reasonable, then, instead of fighting or ignoring this power, to harness it in the service of constructive ends. The undertaking is not without its difficulties. How, for instance, strain the venom of hatred from the movement—hatred of the stranger, hatred of the former colonial master, hatred of the too prosperous neighbor—without depriving it of its demonic drive? How free it from arrogance, from stultifying self-adulation without at the same time taking away its power to inspire the supreme self-confidence necessary for arduous undertakings? How, finally, make it compatible with a sound internationalism without eviscerating it altogether?"[3]

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[3] Horacio de la Costa, S.J., "The Background of Nationalism," *Exchange*, No. 34 (1965), p. 7.

I cannot answer all these questions but perhaps our little dis-
cussion on prejudice will provide us with a start. It has been said
of President Sukarno that every time he delivered a speech, he led his
country backwards. He led the fight for independence and in doing so
gave the people the hope that with the expulsion of the colonial
rulers, they would move into the golden age, but in time disillusion-
ment set in and instead of dealing with the staggering economic prob-
lems the country was facing, he continued to fight the colonials.
Thus he was calling the people's attention away from the problems at
home by creating an outside enemy. His confrontation on Malaysia
was of this nature. The frustrations of his people were displaced on
the world outside Indonesia when what was needed most was dynamic
leadership capable of attacking the problems at home. Nationalism
is a process. It involves the achieving of identity as a people and
this is a continuing thing. It does not involve, in an increasingly
smaller world, a refusal to recognize the hard won identities of
other peoples. In achieving this identity, it is not, as is sometimes
thought, necessary to re-write history. It is more important to have
a realistic perception of what happened in one's past and to distinguish
between this realistic evaluation of the past and a romantic idealiza-
tion of the past which often in times of tension passes for history but
is nothing more than historicism.

International misunderstandings like personal prejudice are often
based on false generalizations. Like personal prejudices they too can
fulfill a national need of relieving frustration. Perhaps the ultimate
solution lies in educating a body of citizens who have a passion for
facts and are not taken in by facile generalizations and stereotypes.
In so doing we will be developing a realistic way of dealing with
national problems, which will prevent displacing them onto other
vulnerable peoples.

JOHN F. DOHERTY, S.J.

The University's Role As A
*Source Of Culture**

Certainly no one should have any doubts about the university's
role as an agent of cultural transmission. For whether culture be
spelled with a capital C, to signify the finer things in life, or with a

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