

# The Systematic Organization of Hatreds

[Robert Higgs](#)

In the mid-1970s, I began to do consulting work in addition to my academic work. By that time, I had become familiar with how economists generally analyze cooperation and competition, in both the economy and the political realm. Economists put great weight on gains from trade. Nobody, they like to say, walks past a \$20 bill he sees lying on the sidewalk. If a situation contains the potential for a trade or other arrangement that will bring gain to a decision-maker, he will embrace that trade or arrangement. This market process leads, in the theoretical extreme, to the happy condition known as the Pareto Optimum—the situation in which all potential gains from trade have been captured.

Notice that this view of mankind causes us to think of people as self-interested, but not as vicious. Individuals are seen as, in effect, indifferent to the welfare of their trading or cooperating partners, but intent on making themselves as well-off as possible. They do not seek to harm others, but only to benefit themselves (and those about whom they happen to care).

As I launched into my consulting work, which involved

various efforts by Washington state and the U.S. government to resolve disputes and to increase the harvestable resource in the Washington salmon fishery and the federally-regulated offshore salmon fishery in the Pacific Ocean, I quickly learned that the politicians in Olympia did not fit the model I had mastered in my education as an economist. To be sure, they sought to feather their own nests, by hook and by crook. But, in many important cases, they acted simply to hurt their political and personal enemies—whose ranks, in some cases, were quite large. Often, it seemed, Mr. P was clearly “out to get” Mr. Q, and he was not simply seeking this objective, other things being the same; he was actually out to get Mr. Q even if he had to bear a cost in doing so.

So, despite the formal models and informal rhetoric that economists and other academic specialists wield in their research and writing about politics and government, a critical element tends to be completely overlooked: the powerful role of aversion, dislike, and hatred. Economists represent individual preference orderings as rankings of valued options: good thing A > good thing B > good thing C, and so on. But for political actors, the preference ordering often looks more like: good thing A > hurt person X > good thing B > hurt person Y > good thing C, and so on.

This sort of preference is the political sentiment Vladimir Lenin expressed when he remarked: “My words were

calculated to evoke hatred, aversion and contempt . . . not to convince but to break up the ranks of the opponent, not to correct an opponent's mistake, but to destroy him." Closer to home, Henry Adams observed that "politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds."

We see the importance of this element of politics clearly in the contemporary conflict between Democrats and Republicans. Given that these two parties are but two wings of the same predatory one-party state that rules the United States, we might well wonder why their intramural feuding often reaches such vitriolic extremes. The short answer is that despite the two parties' general similarity of fundamental positions, they comprise somewhat different sorts of people—different in regard to religious conviction (or the lack thereof), typical social position, culture, background, occupational distribution, urban-rural composition, and ethnic makeup, among other things—and the two groups tend to dislike each other; indeed, in many individual instances, they despise one another. And their political representatives, though more inclined to conspire and cut deals with the other side, also represent their supporters along the hatred dimension. Occasionally, when a politician does not realize that the microphone is live, we hear some honest expression of his true feelings about his political opponents—"enemies" is the more accurate word.

In view of the foregoing, we are well advised to consider that whenever we seek to move a type of decision-making from private life to the realm of politics and government, we are very likely moving it from a world in which hatred is incidental and avoidable to a world in which hatred is central and inescapable. Because a government imposes one rule, one outcome, one state of affairs on everyone subject to its rule, the hatreds that go into the making of that outcome become generalized and infused throughout the entire society. Thus, what economists label a "public good" is often, in the most substantive way, a "public bad." Even if a person does not share any of the component hatreds that political actors express and deploy, no one can avoid living in a politicized world fashioned in such large part by the organized expression of hatred. It is, therefore, small wonder that some of us view the entire apparatus of politics and government as the living embodiment of evil.

Even a devout Christian has no small difficulty in following Christ's admonition to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." But when we live and act in the private realm, we can make our best attempt to love others or at least to tolerate them in peace, and we have many options for avoiding or running away from hateful people and situations; occasionally we may even be able to lead someone, or ourselves, to substitute love, or at least understanding, for hatred.

In politics and government, however, the institutional makeup fosters hatred at every turn. Parties recruit followers by exploiting hatreds. Bureaucracies bulk up their power and budgets by artfully weaving hatreds into their mission statements and day-to-day procedures. Regulators take advantage of artificially heightened hatreds. Group identity is emphasized at every turn, and such tribal distinctions are tailor-made for the maintenance and increase of hatred among individual persons who might otherwise disregard the kinds of groupings that the politicians and their supporters emphasize ceaselessly.

With a sigh, many people accept that politics and government are, at best, necessary evils. I have great doubt that they are necessary, at least in their present form, but I am certain that in this form they are evil.