

**OUR HATRED OF “THE OTHER”: AMERICAN RACISM AND DEMOCRATS  
VS. REPUBLICANS IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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In the 2008 Presidential campaign, we have witnessed an intense expression of hatred between Republicans and Democrats and covert racism. The former is indicated by warring conservative and liberal pundits, politicians and candidates, and the latter by the closeness of a presidential race that virtually all the experts believe should have been a “slam-dunk” for the Democratic candidate, Barak Obama. Considering the dire state of the economy, Iraq, health care and global warming after eight years of the Bush administration, Obama should have had a substantial lead over his Republican adversary, John McCain, from the beginning of the campaign, but he didn’t. The race has been neck and neck, with Obama only recently leading in the polls because of the economic crisis.

Increasingly, pundits like David Gergen after the second debate, are concluding that racial prejudice is to blame, what some call “the Bradley effect.” This alludes to 1982 exit polls favoring black candidate for California governor Tom Bradley which turned out to be shockingly wrong when his white opponent beat him in the election. The same phenomenon occurred in the political races of black candidates David Dinkens in

New York City and Douglas Wilder in Virginia. In recent polls taken in key states, such as Ohio, Michigan, West Virginia, Kentucky and Indiana, twenty percent of the vote against Obama has been attributed to racism, and the pollsters have speculated that this is an underestimate. The true figure is more likely 30%. A recent poll (9/22/08- Fox news) shows that only 70% of Democrats support Barak Obama while 85% of Republicans support John McCain. Moreover, 33% of Democrats have negative attitudes toward blacks, which translates into 6% of the national vote. Clearly, racism could decide the outcome of the election.

This is not surprising in view of white America's traditional racism from the time of the founding fathers when black slaves were regarded as chattel and the constitution contained the provision that a plantation owner could count each of his slaves as 3/5ths of a vote. In view of America's racism, it is astounding that Obama was selected at all. Dan Rather said he never thought he would see a black Presidential candidate in his lifetime. In this respect, Obama's candidacy is a major sign of racial progress. Obama himself considers the factor of racism "a wash," when comparing all those who are voting for him because he is black and those who hold it against him. But pervasive fears of his assassination, stereotyping him as a Muslim or terrorist, considering him an uppity elitist, or the question, even among cynical liberals, "Is the country ready for a black President," suggest that racism might still cause him to lose the election.

Psychologically, racism and the hatred of Democrats and Republicans for each other stem from the same psychodynamics. The main factor is the primordial hatred of "the other" that is deeply embedded in our unconscious from birth. We begin life in the womb, physically and psychologically merged with our mother, sharing common

nutrition and oxygen through her blood supply. If we could place ourselves in the fetus's psyche, this merged state is probably experienced as paradise since we are completely taken care of without having to do anything for ourselves. There is no difference between our internal mental world and the external physical world. When the umbilical cord is cut, we are physically separated from mother but are still psychologically merged with her. We still experience everything, including the external world, as our "self." In a sense, we start off life like god since we are everything. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud called this: primary narcissism.

However, the paradise of enwombment is shattered when we are born in what Otto Rank called the birth trauma. We are exposed to noxious stimulation for the first time, the shock of light, sound, hunger, pain. The external world impinges upon us and invades us. Our mother's main job is to nurture and protect us from being overwhelmed by this noxious stimulation, so that we can feel safe and develop a sense of trust. Her job is to continue our enwombed experience as much as possible. We experience this unpleasurable, aversive stimulation, any indication of "otherness" or "not me," as a threat to our existence and become enraged. This occurs when mother does not immediately gratify our needs, such as feeding us when hungry or soothing us when scared or cold. There's nothing more terrible than a baby's rage when frustrated, like a furious demi-god with little lightning bolts coming out of its head.

Thus, we experience the nurturing gratifying good mother as a pleasurable part of our self as we did in the womb, and the frustrating mother as noxious and bad, as the hated 'other' outside of our self. In other words, our first experience of "the other," of

anything outside of our self, of external reality, is felt to be a dangerous threat to our existence and induces our hatred.

Our fear and hatred of the “other” continues throughout our development. At the youngest ages we idealize our parents as the best parents in the world, with trepidation and hate for the stranger, we experience our religion as superior to all others and tend to hate other religions- our race as superior to other races and hate other races, our nation as greater than other nations and hate other nations. And we project all kinds of dehumanizing evil, depraved behavior onto any representation of the “other.” This is evident in the venomous stereotyping of Republicans by Democrats and Democrats by Republicans.

Even we mental health professionals, most of whom are liberal, often cannot believe how Republicans can possibly think and feel as they do, hatefully stereotyping them as virtual Nazis, and have often used conferences like this one to scapegoat Republicans in the name of deepening psychological understanding of political processes. This is amazing since we, as psychotherapists, are professional empathizers, who are trained and put ourselves in the shoes of others every day, and yet so many of us have difficulty placing ourselves in the shoes of 50% of the American population. And I am as guilty as anyone. The Simon Weisenthal center for the study of intolerance points out that we are all prejudiced, and must accept this fact in order to confront it within ourselves to modulate its toxic influence.

Hating “the other” is a way of protecting our original, archaic merged state within mother’s womb that still unconsciously exists in our mental life. If you add to this the strangeness of someone of a different race, the case of black slaves, for example, our fear

and hatred increase exponentially - and American families grow up with traditions of hatred against “others,” – “You’ve got to be carefully taught to hate and fear,” the South Pacific song goes, whether it is whites hating blacks or visa versa, or Democrats hating Republicans.

As part of these unconscious dynamics, the “other” becomes an unknown stimulus like the Rorschach, onto which it is easy to disown and project the unwanted devalued parts of ourselves and hate the “other” rather than ourselves. For example, hating our sexual, licentious impulses, unconsciously disowning and projecting them onto blacks, and accusing them of being sexually depraved. Thus McCain’s accusation against Obama of crossing boundaries in promoting sexual education for kindergarten children, showing Obama smiling lasciviously in McCain’s ads, appeals to unconscious racism based on projective identification. Or the Republican portrayal of Obama as a terrorist when McCain and Palin, in desperation from their plunge in the polls, might want to terrorize him.

Or we could project onto the other what we hate about our internal parents, such as a hated dominating father- a typical Democratic depiction of McCain as a cranky authoritarian curmudgeon, or the Republican depiction of a Democratic government as a suffocating, indulgent mother.

The motivation for the hatred between Democrats and Republicans, in addition to “otherness” is also the result of an internal conflict within the American psyche. I would like to paraphrase my remarks from an op-ed piece that was published in the Los Angeles Times’ Sunday “Opinion” section on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000 when the two houses of congress were equally divided between Democrats and Republicans and the presidential

election between George W and Al Gore was deadlocked. In this article, I said, “broadly speaking, the Democratic Party’s vision of government is roughly equivalent to a powerful, nurturing mother figure protecting and caring for the needy and downtrodden. By contrast, the Republican ideal embodies a strong father figure who rewards people for taking responsibility for their own lives and who supports independent initiative. The Democratic “breast-mother” government satisfies the basic human need to be taken care of by a loving, tolerant parent; the Republican father figure fulfills the need to break from parental domination, to have control over one’s life and to pursue one’s fortune.

“Psychologically, the basic human need of maternal nurturance often conflicts with the need for autonomy. During adolescence, this conflict plays out: Children struggle to liberate themselves from their need for parental care by rebelling against parental authority and trying to assume personal responsibility for their lives. However, even after the adolescent has attained adulthood and become more self-reliant, the psychological need to be taken care of persists to varying degrees and remains in conflict with the need for separation and autonomy. In the political arena, Americans try to resolve this personal conflict by voting for the party that represents their strongest internal need.

“Americans who have traditionally been more in need of help or care—women, the working class, the aged, the disabled, immigrants, certain racial and religious minorities, gays, etc.—and Americans who support them are more likely to vote Democratic. For these voters, liberal means the generosity of a nurturing governing structure. In contrast,

they view Republicans as uncaring, hardhearted and greedy, a party of the rich and powerful demanding that government support their aggressive, self-serving (often entrepreneurial) needs.

“For liberal Democrats, conservative is often equated with depriving the hungry and poor of government support through tax dodges, paying employees the lowest wages and benefits they can get away with, exploiting “Mother Earth” for profit and risking gun violence for the “macho” preference to hunt. They view the Republican stance against abortion as a willingness to ruin a woman’s life in favor of the right of a fetus to live, again supporting the vital interest of the “child’s” autonomy against a “murderous” maternal authority.

“In contrast, Americans who live according to an ethic of self-reliance and subscribe to an individual’s right to control his own life, money and property with minimal interference are more likely to vote for a paternal Republican government. For these voters, government represents a powerful, controlling parental figure, a necessary evil that potentially threatens individual autonomy by “stealing” earned money through excessive taxes. The ideal Republican governance does not spoil or infantilize the people with nurturing, protective handouts but requires them to be responsible for themselves and supports independent initiative through tax breaks” and protects home and hearth with guns.

“If Democrats and Republicans signify the human need to be taken care of versus the need for autonomy and control, then the nearly fifty-fifty split in Congress and in the Presidential election, suggests that these basic psychological needs are exceptionally well

represented in the American body politic. A fifty-fifty split means that the only way for each party to fulfill its political agenda is to compromise with the needs of the other. Ideally, this would lead to more balanced political programs and great psychological satisfaction for the American people.

“But government might also remain stalemated by partisan politics” as it has been for the last eight years in the Bush administration. In other words, elected politicians might self-destructively choose not to compromise, as they did in the bailout vote. One-hundred and thirty-three Republicans in the House of Representatives initially voted against the bailout because it compromised their principles of deregulation and personal freedom. Ninety-five Democrats voted against it largely because they didn’t feel that the average American on Main Street was sufficiently protected. This vote led to the 777 point plunge in the Dow and frustrated most Americans who feared economic catastrophe. They regretted electing politicians unwilling to make the concessions necessary to fulfill their needs.

“Unfortunately, America cannot avoid this conflict. U.S. politics will inevitably be divisive because of the inherent unconscious conflict between the need to be taken care of, as represented by Democrats, and the desire for autonomy and control, embodied by Republicans. It is the dynamic struggle between these two competing psychological needs that serves as a major catalyst for human growth, both individually and politically. Ironically, the most representative election outcome, a fifty-fifty split provides the greatest opportunity to fulfill the psychological wishes of the American people while also leaving them ripe for political deadlock.”

The antidote for the hatred of the “other” whether it is Democrats hating Republicans or whites hating blacks, is empathy. As the country learns more about Barack Obama, for example, his upbringing and his family and sees how black families are the same as white families with good values, struggling with the same human issues and reflect so much of what is good about humanity, the prospect of having a black family in what had exclusively been the “White” House, has become conceivable and acceptable. The same is true of Republicans and Democrats who are open to empathizing with the “other’s” positions and willing to compromise for the good of the country. Through empathic familiarity, the fear and hatred of the “other” and the toxic projections of “badness” often dissolve into seeing and loving the other like ourselves and as part of the human family. By identifying with “the other,” we resonate with that unconscious archaic state of enwombment and pleasurable merger that is embedded so deeply within our psyches, so that “the other” becomes us. We are “the other.”