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## A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF THE CONCEPT OF DE-OBJECTIFIED HATRED<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

This paper looks at Thomas Szanto's theory of hatred that suggests that hatred has an indeterminate affective focus and that it derives its intensity from the commitment to the attitude itself. Contrary to Szanto's theses, this paper claims that the hated properties are not necessarily fuzzy. On the contrary, in many cases we can clearly reconstruct the quasi-rational genesis of hatred, by relying on the deep structures behind the social dynamics (as demonstrated by the example of anti-Semitism). Furthermore, the paper states that even though in certain cases hatred is a truly empty of content, these cases are marginal in comparison to other, more important forms of hatred.

**KEYWORDS**

hatred, structure,  
intentionality,  
reflexivity, emotions

The article written by Thomas Szanto entitled *In Hate We Trust* (Szanto 2018) is a truly inspiring and a conceptually rigorous work. In his paper, Szanto seeks to understand the intentionality of hatred, an issue that has been mostly ignored. By relying mostly on phenomenological resources, social-scientific investigations and the analytic philosophy of emotions, he aims to conceptualize hatred as a phenomenon that is overgeneralizing (in other words, it has an indeterminate affective focus), tends to be collectivizing, derives its extreme intensity from the commitment to the attitude itself, and, from the viewpoint of its general social dynamics, it tends to reinforce itself. This commentary will formulate the following questions: (1) Can hatred itself be reflexive? In addition: can one hate hatred itself? If the answer is yes, then the efforts against hatred should be clearly reflective (contrary to the thesis that we need an affective strategy of counter-habitualization). (2) According to Szanto's deobjectifying approach,

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the hated properties are fuzzy. Contrary to this, this commentary argues that the object of hatred is often a – distorted, misunderstood – personification of otherwise entirely objective and identifiable social mechanisms. (3) If the object of hatred is not necessarily fuzzy, we might pose a following question: is hatred against impersonal systemic structures possible or not? (4) Contrary to Szanto's thesis that "hatred is directed towards those towards whom one feels powerless", we will suggest that hatred towards powerless people is also possible. (5) At the end of the paper, we will come to the conclusion that the imaginary object of hatred can sometimes be completely empty with regard to real qualities (as demonstrated by the example of the Piréz people), however, it seems that this kind of empty hatred lasts for a short time and it is marginal in comparison to other forms of hatred.

1. The first question is simply whether hatred itself can be reflexive? That is, can one hate hatred itself as it can be – to use the words of *In Hate We Trust* – hatred against "evaluative properties", or, more generally, can we get rid of certain forms of hatred through reflexivity?

Since hatred is, according to Szanto, a habitualized attitude with indeterminacy (Szanto 2018: 463, 466), it is not easy to see how does the relation between hatred and reflexivity function. We feel 'irrationally' helpless regarding hatred because of essential reasons. Still, there are important thinkers who seem to suggest that there can be a connection between reflexivity and hatred.

For instance, Kant claims that hatred is legitimate in at least one case: when we hate sins – including, finally, evil hatred as well (see the analysis of Egyed 2008: 65–66). Sartre even uses the formula or imperative "hatred must be hated", and he also says that "I have to hate the others' hatred towards others" (Sartre 1943: 450–451).

So, this is one part of the question: can hatred be on a reflexive level where it is directed towards itself, namely, towards hatred itself? Can one hate hatred?

The more general part of the question is the following one: if hatred is a habitualized attitude, an attitude that has addictive, non-reflexive features, can we get rid of it through purely reflexive mental acts, or we always need a slow and careful work of dehabitualization or counter-habitualization?

Am I able at all to say to myself: "I must hate person A more", or, on the contrary, that „I shouldn't hate person B at all?" Is this, in its banality, possible, or these would mostly be paradoxical, unimaginable cases?

It is worth mentioning that there are certain ethical traditions that emphasize reflexive work on (against) hatred. For example, the ancient Jewish ethical tradition that rejects hatred towards individuals, but accepts hatred towards total collective enemies, gives special importance to reflexivity (for instance, they use the expression "David's perfect hatred"). According to this tradition, in certain cases you have to get rid of hatred through reflection, but in other cases (when the enemy wants to destroy you and your community) you have to learn to hate – again, this is a reflexive move (Smith 1952; Broshi 1999; Kugel 1987).

There are even thinkers who suggest that the force of reflexivity regarding hatred could be so effective that humanity will soon completely get rid of hatred as such. In his classical *Obsolescence of Humankind*, Günther Anders claims that hatred might soon become an outdated, obsolete, primitively distorted attitude: not only because people will laugh (in an enlightened way) at those who still hate, but also because in our society the technical-calculative strategies take the place of hatred. According to Anders, instead of hatred, today, we have to speak of systematized indifference (Anders 1985). Let us add that the book was written in 1956.

So, to sum it up: the questions we should ask is therefore whether the efforts against hatred should be clearly reflective or we need an affective strategy of counter-habitualization?

2. Szanto suggests that “as an attitude [hatred] derives its effective weight not from the person or from the hated properties which are fuzzy but from the sheer commitment to the attitude itself” (Szanto 2018: 453). I would call this the de-objectification of hatred. Szanto adds that “haters derive the indeed extreme affective powers [...] from the commitment to the attitude itself” (Szanto 2018: 453). He also insists on the “blurred” and “uninformative” character of hatred (Szanto 2018: 43, 471). One might be very skeptical about this kind of conceptualization.

Let us take the example of anti-Semitism. Of course, it is true that there is overgeneralization and stereotypical thinking in anti-Semitism, still, by this kind of conceptualization, one risks losing motivations out of sight. First of all, anti-Semitism is never simply overgeneralizing. On the contrary, it is almost always trying to concretize hatred as much as possible. Hatred against Süß the Jew (Joseph Süß Oppenheimer) in the Nazi propaganda movie, Móric Scharf of the famous Tiszaeszlár affair, Alfred Dreyfus as the victim of the Dreyfus affair, or George Soros as the Jewish-American financier who is involved in currency speculation (and against whom the Hungarian government launched a frontal assault) etc. are not merely mere accidental examples. Hatred is just as concretizing as it is overgeneralizing. We are not simply facing a subsumption of a particular under a universal, but, on the other hand, also a creation of a universal starting from a particular. The object of hatred is not simply a ‘floating signifier’. These concrete cases serve as *exemplums* for haters that not only reinforce already existing hatred, but it can also serve as a starting point to many people. Since nobody is born to hate, and, furthermore, nobody is born as an anti-Semite – certain concrete triggers are necessary.

As for the de-objectifying approach, it seems to define hatred as an almost autopoietic affection that is hardly ever disturbed or influenced by its environment. Or, according to a different conceptual strategy, it seems that the object of hatred merely serves to “establish or reinforce our identity as distinct from others” (Szanto 2018: 472). The hated Other appears as a mere accident in the dynamics of hatred as if the hater has first of all internal difficulties.

Let us focus on the issue of anti-Semitism. From the perspective of Max Weber and Abraham Leon, modern anti-Semitism appears for two reasons. On the one hand, Jews are identified with ‘pariah capitalism’ that is free from the limits of natural economies and feudal relations. They were perceived as a *heimatlose* minority, as *apatrides* who are essentially alien to the spontaneous and authentic dynamics of social relations. In an analogous manner, Jews as socialists (anarchists, Marxists etc.) were also perceived as embodiments of ‘pariah socialism’ (hence *Judäo-Bolschewismus*) that attempts to destroy the very framework of the existing order (see Tamás internet; cf. Losoncz 2013: 173–174).

Let us quote Michael Heinrich in details: “In light of the impositions of capitalism ... there occur time and time again forms of a blinkered negation of fetishism: ‘guilty’ parties are sought behind the anonymous capitalist machinery that can be made responsible for the misery. Attempts are made to influence their actions; in extreme cases, they are supposed to atone for the misdeeds attributed to them. Thus, in the various capitalist societies, a personalization of fetishistic relations can be observed time and time again. Among such forms of personalization is anti-Semitism. [...] A special form of personalization occurs in anti-Semitism. Here, Jews are accused of an economic orientation toward money and profiteering that is allegedly rooted in their ‘nature’ or – since the rise of ‘race theories’ in the nineteenth century – in their ‘race’, as well as an unconditional striving for power that includes plans for world domination, plans that are alleged to have been already successful to a certain extent. [...] Only in modern anti-Semitism are central constitutive principles of society projected ‘outward’ onto a ‘foreign’ group. The projection is also not limited to the economic sphere; rather, cultural characteristics of modern bourgeois society (intellectualism, mobility, etc.) are attributed overwhelmingly to ‘the Jews’ and simultaneously devalued as decadent. [...] It is the capital fetish, in its most developed form as interest-bearing capital, which is personalized” (Heinrich 2004: 186–190).

Yes, certainly there is a structural “inertia” (Sartre) of hatred, however, it does not seem to be true that “hatred derives its effective weight not from the person or from the hates properties which are fuzzy but from the sheer commitment to the attitude itself” (Szanto 2018: 453). On the contrary, the object of hatred is a – distorted, misunderstood – personification of otherwise entirely objective and identifiable social mechanisms. As long as we understand hatred in a de-objectifying manner, that is, from the viewpoint of neoclassically conceived isolated subjects who arbitrarily change their preferences, we risk losing out of sight the objective-structural determinations of hatred. For instance, the de-objectifying conceptual strategy cannot explain neither modern anti-Semitism, nor the reasons because of which Jews became the eminent objects of hatred. Perhaps the de-objectifying conceptual strategy is blurred, not the reality of hatred itself. Hatred is not a self-inducing process that gains its energy from itself, on the contrary, it is embedded in a complex web of social relations. What is more, it does not seem to be true that “haters derive the indeed extreme affective powers [...] from the commitment to the attitude

itself” (Szanto 2018: 253). I would rather say that haters derive the affective powers from objective (but perhaps wrongly understood) circumstances. Hatred of Serbs from the Republic of Serbian Krajina against Croats was not simply an autopoietic, purely irrational hatred – it had its roots in the past (genocide committed by the ustasas), in the present (discrimination against Serbs within the territory of the Croatian republic) and in the future (as they were frightened of being reduced to second-rate minoritarian citizens), etc. Similar cases could be enumerated with regard to racism against African Americans or with regard to the hatred of those Trumpists who live in the socially backward rust belt. In all these cases we are dealing with objective social circumstances that strongly effect the constitution and dynamics of fear and hatred. Accordingly, if we are to conclude that we can reduce hatred through a reflexive de-habitualization, it seems to be obvious that this process could be effective only if we deal with the social causes of hatred as well.

Let us mention one more example. There is an excellent study about anti-Gypsism in Hungary (Szombati 2018). It patiently reconstructs the way that Gypsies became scapegoats for the Hungarian extreme right. The reasons are manifold: the Hungarian province became socially backward after 1989, and the proletarianized Gypsy masses were often perceived as mere parasites while being identified with the whole underclass that was excluded from the continuity of labor and capital. As the welfare state was increasingly dismantled, intensifying social conflicts were experienced as ethnic-racial conflicts. Without going into details, it is clear that hatred in this case is not merely a result of an ‘all-too global evaluation’ related to ‘an indefinitely shifting target’. Rather the dynamics of hatred should be understood as an ideologically loaded (mis)interpretation of tangible and concrete social processes. The effective weight of hatred does not come from the sheer commitment to the attitude itself – this autopoietic aspect of hatred seems to be merely epiphenomenal in comparison to the real causes of hatred. Szanto claims that “it doesn’t matter so much whom one hates or why exactly, but rather that one hates”. In this way, we could suppose that hatred is an ahistorical necessity simply because it can self-induce itself any time. Instead of this, I am convinced that every kind of hatred has to be historicized, and the causes and objects of hatred are crucial. The haters might indeed feel something particular, although they could be misled with regard to the characteristics and the precise function of the object of hatred. Perhaps, *pace* Szanto, affectivity does not “come cheap”, it is “not for free”, on the contrary, it might be the mediated expression of social suffering. It comes cheap only as far as it is not the primary mover of social relations, but appears much more as an affective interpretation of them. I suppose that the empty intentionality (see Losoncz 2017) of hatred might be possible in certain cases, especially when certain people want to blame a social group for their suffering. This kind of hatred is truly de-objectified, but only for a short time, that is, until it is concretized, fulfilled (*erfüllen*).

Szanto also seems to be suggesting that “hatred involves a certain negative social dialectics, robustly reinforces itself”. But why would this be necessary?

As far as the causes (not the objects!) are dismantled, hatred can be certainly reduced. Hatred appears as fatefully self-reinforcing only from the viewpoint of the de-objectified concept of hatred.

2. Szanto's paper claims that hatred "essentializes, abstracts and perdures" (Szanto 2018: 455). On the other hand, it is suggested that there is a "distinction between interpersonal or person-focused hatred, on the one hand, and social-identity- or group-based, or what I call 'collectivizing'" (Szanto 2018: 461). Accordingly hatred targets "only individual persons, social groupings or evaluative properties that are in some sense or other person-centered or person-dependent" (Szanto 2018: 455). I wonder whether this is true.

Let us take the example of capitalism. Capitalism can be conceptualized as a system that is becoming increasingly abstract. Interpersonal relations and personal dependence are minimally important, the crucial thing is the abstract imperative of the self-valorization of capital and the subjection of almost every aspect of life to it (including labor) (see: Kurz internet a, Kurz internet b). Taken altogether, what does the punk expression "fuck the system" mean? Let us suppose that it expresses hatred. There is an anarchist parole according which promotes "destroying structures, not people" (Anarchist FAQ internet). Therefore, my question is: is hatred against impersonal systemic structures possible or not?

3. According to Szanto, "hatred typically involves an asymmetric power relation" (Szanto 2018: 456), "hatred is directed towards those towards whom one feels powerless and is yet dependent upon" (Szanto 2018: 456). This can be certainly true in the case of anti-Semitism (at least in its aspect that has to do with "pariah capitalism"), but I do not think that this is generally true. In fact, hatred can just as much target powerless people who seem to be parasites of the society, but who seem to worsen social relations.

4. Finally, I would like to mention an interesting case which might be still unknown in international literature on hatred. In 2006 and in 2007 a survey was conducted in Hungary about xenophobia. The researchers also listed a fictive community that has never existed – they called them the Piréz community (Kakissis internet). One of the questions in the survey was: "the members of which ethnic communities would you allow to enter Hungary as immigrants?" According to the results, about 59% of the respondents claimed that Hungary should not allow the Piréz people to enter Hungary as immigrants. (They will never enter, obviously.) But what is even more exciting, is that this number (59 %) was relatively close to the rejection towards ethnic communities that really exist (and who are rejected the most): Arabs, Russians, Romanians and Chinese. The completely fictive community was almost on the same level as the really existing ones.

Szanto seems to claim that hatred is mostly based on overgeneralization. I think this case might be interesting because, in a certain way, there is no

overgeneralization at all, and no collectivization or essentialization of the target as a further fact. I am sure that almost none of the respondents imagined the Piréz people while participating in the survey, and nobody had a specific feeling of dependence from them. There was no time to construct any stereotype of them.

What happened is that the Piréz people as an empty signifier took the place of the hated object in a complex system of meanings. This mechanism can remind us of the classical structuralist thesis according to which meanings are not substantial entities, but they have their functional role in a structural-differential system. This is why I like the most when Szanto claims that „targets of hatred are hence replaceable by any other individual exemplifying the same stereotyped negative properties” (Szanto 2018: 463). Except from this last remark, I can totally agree. The objects of hatred can truly function as pure, empty, flexible, completely indeterminate and replacable signifiers. And this makes hatred even more dangerous. But does it perhaps also distanciate the theoreticians of hatred from the affective theory of hatred? To sum it up, I do think that in certain cases hatred can be de-objectified. The case of the Piréz people confirms my thesis that sometimes hatred can function according to the logic of what Husserl called empty intentionality. However, I think that this kind of hatred lasts for a short time and it is marginal in comparison to other forms of hatred.

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## Kritički osvrt na koncept deobjektifikovane mržnje

### Apstrakt

Članak se fokusira na teoriju mržnje kod Tomasa Santa koja sugeriuše da mržnja nema jasan afektivni fokus, te da njen intenzitet proističe iz zalaganja za sam intencionalni stav mržnje. Za razliku od Santove teze, članak tvrdi da omražena svojstva nisu nužno nejasna. Naprotiv, u mnogim slučajevim se precizno može rekonstruisati kvazi-racionalna geneza mržnje, oslanjajući se na duboke strukture iza društvene dinamike (kao što pokazuje primer antisemitizma). Nadalje, članak konstatuje da iako je istina da je u izvesnim slučajevima mržnja bez sadržaja, ovi slučajevi su marginalni u odnosu na druge, značajnije forme mržnje.

Ključne reči: mržnja, struktura, intencionalnost, refleksivnost, osećaji