Contested Community

Russell Hardin

In a widely known joke, a Jewish man is cast ashore on a desert island, where he remains for five years. One day, the captain of a passing ship notices two impressive buildings on what is supposed to be an uninhabited desert island. He anchors and goes ashore. There are two beautiful synagogues on the beach, about half a mile apart, but no one is to be seen. The captain and his crew enter one of the synagogues, where they find the lone man. Told that the man built the two synagogues himself, the captain is in awe. “But they’re so beautiful. How did you do it?” The man shrugs and says that, after all, he’s been there with nothing else to do for five years. “But why did you build two?” the captain asks. “In this one, I worship,” the man says. “That one I wouldn’t go near.”

The joke is funny because it is about the charms of group identification. It also represents the seeming irrationality of such identification. What I wish to discuss is how such identification can turn sour and produce ugly, often violent results. A tale about Hutu versus Tutsi, or Serb versus Muslim, or Jewish versus Arabic identifications would not be so funny.

Group identification and the norms of exclusion that groups sometimes develop are often thought to be primordial—this is, alas, the view of the New York Times in recent years. Or they are thought to be extra-rational in some other sense. Although there may be primordial instincts for identification and for violence, many of the primordialist arguments about ethnic conflict are silly. For example, Robert Kaplan asserts that the psychology of Yugoslavs is hideously different from our own, that it includes deep currents of ethnic hatred and memories of awful events from six centuries past, and that it controls contemporary relations between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs (New York Times Book Review, April 18, 1993). Kaplan evidently believes that knowledge is inheritable through Lamarckian laws. I wish it were—then at least I might be able to speak French much better and ancient Anglo-Saxon English and Gaelic as well. Unfortunately, however, I might then be torn by ethnic hatred of myself as French, hatred of myself as English, and hatred of myself as Irish. I would be a mess. Many parties in Yugoslavia would share this fate, since they are not historically as distinct as the rabid nationalists there maintain they are.

In what follows, I wish to understand group identification and norms of exclusion in large part as the distorted result of individual self-interest. To a rational-choice theorist, this sounds superficially implausible. In 1965, the economist Mancur Olson published his very influential book The Logic of Collective Action. The central argument of that book was that a large group, political or otherwise, cannot generally succeed merely because its members share an interest in success for the group. If a group is to succeed, it will have to find incentives that can be tailored to individual members, typically incentives having nothing to do with the larger interest of the group. An irony, long noticed in the social sciences, of Olson’s argument is that it appeared just at the beginning of a remarkable
era of large-group organizations. The civil rights movement was big before Olson's book saw its way into print, and the antiwar movement was looming on the near horizon. Nearly three decades after Olson concluded that it is irrational for most members of large interest groups to contribute to their groups' goals, uncounted numbers of ethnic and other groups seem to be motivating their members to extraordinary actions.

What happened to Olson's argument? Was it wrong? No, I think it was generally right. For example, consider the large group of us who would like to elect someone to Congress, say the group of 93,000 people who went to the polls in November 1994 to reelect Sam Gejdenson in Connecticut. In one of the narrow-est congressional elections ever, he won by four votes, so any one individual vote was of no avail. Even the votes of five or a hundred people put together might have been of no avail, because Congress could have chosen to seat his opponent on some claim that the votes were miscounted (Newt Gingrich's rise to leadership might be dated from his leading a walkout from the House of Representatives when a Democrat who had lost the official count was seated over his Republican opponent). Such a claim is almost certainly valid when there are 186,000 votes to be counted. The chance that one person's vote actually matters in a typi-cal large-scale election is probably less than the chance that that person will be killed in an accident on the way to or from the polls. Therefore, unless a person is going to be rewarded with a job by the winning candidate, it cannot be in his or her interest to vote. If one votes, either it is for moral or expressive or other reasons—or it is because one radically misjudges one's personal interests in the matter. In any case, voting is, again, not in the individual voter's interest.

If the dangers of voting outweigh the benefits, how much more so must the dangers of the strong ethnic identification that leads one to join in ethnic violence outweigh the personal benefits? Prima facie, it would seem that such strong ethnic identification is not rational in the narrow sense of being in the individual's interest. Against this prima facie conclusion, I wish to argue that ethnic identification and the violence that sometimes follows from it can be seen as individually rational in large part. This involves several explanatory tasks: first, to give an account of norms of exclusion, which requires an account of the interest that members of a group have in abiding by the group's norms; second, to give an account of why exclusive groups fall into conflict and even violence with each other; and finally, to attempt a normative assessment of claims for the rightness and goodness of group identification, as in the contemporary literature on communitarianism.

The Nature of Norms of Exclusion

It would be odd to claim that much of the activity we see in current violent conflicts and in milder ethnic hostilities is not extra-rational in some ways, to varying degrees across individuals and groups. But norms of exclusion are largely socially, not biologically or genetically, constructed. Hence, our problem in understanding them is to understand the social processes that produce them. Understanding can benefit from analyzing norms of exclusion of many varieties, not only those of ethnic exclusion. I will not detail the range of such norms here, but note that they include the norms of the duel in Renaissance through nineteenth-century Europe; the norms of the vendetta as practiced in many times and places, including Corsica, medieval Iceland, and Montenegro; the norms of Jewish guilt; the norms of ghetto slang and contemporary rap; and the norms of academic disciplines.

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Understanding the norms of exclusion can also benefit from analyzing the very different incentive structure of many universalistic norms. For example, there are the norms of keeping promises, telling the truth, marital fidelity, civic duty to vote in elections, Catholic guilt, and many others. It is instructive to note that the force of many universalistic norms depends on their being naturally reinforced by interest, as is true of the norm of keeping promises, or on their being distorted into forms that make them more nearly norms of exclusion. Norms for collective action are otherwise generally very weak. For example, the norm of civic duty to vote is not a very powerful norm, as suggested by the U.S. national elections in November 1994, when it motivated no more than 38 percent of America's eligible voters.

As an example of norms of difference, which are generally norms of exclusion, consider one fairly astonishing norm that has arisen in the United States within the lifetimes of most adult Americans: the use of the term "nigger" as a term of endearment and honor.
among American blacks. I grew up in Texas during the
civil rights movement, and the word "nigger" still
stirs so much revulsion in me that I was hesitant even
to write it in this context. The odd fact is that I could
not speak it in any ordinary context. But American
blacks can not only use it, they can exult in using it.

How did that happen? In outline, the story is as fol-
sows: The meanings and uses of words are merely con-
ventions of language. Conventions forcefully govern
our behavior when they are widely adopted. For ex-
ample, the convention of driving on the right is en-
forced with the threat of lethal consequences. Few
conventions are so powerful as this remarkable ex-
ample of an ideal-type that has, as Robert Merton says,
a concrete instance. But linguistic norms are also force-
ful. If one speaks English in relevantly wrong ways,
one's prospects are diminished. If one speaks only
French in Anglophone Canada or in the United States,
one's prospects are also diminished. The black teen-
agers who call each other "nigger" and who talk and
gesture in rap or the cool pose cannot benefit from trans-
port their slang and style to the worlds of universities,
banks, and politics beyond the local community. Yet
the black teenager who holds out against ghetto slang
and style is apt to be shunned within that local com-

munity. As Shawn Hunt, an academically gifted Brook-
he uses "straight-up-and-down English" in the larger
world, but he can't do that in his neighborhood. His
friends "wouldn't take too good to that," he says.

Note the difference between the simple driving con-
vention and the conventions of ghetto slang and style.
Typically, no one wishes to violate the driving con-
vension. But Shawn Hunt regularly wishes to violate
the norms of ghetto slang. He also wishes to follow
those norms much of the time. Why? If he follows
those norms in his community, he is rewarded with
comfortable relations with many people, with inclu-
sion in their activities, which are among Shawn's ple-
sures. If he violates those norms at other times, he is
rewarded in very different ways—he could earn a col-
lege degree that would open many desirable oppor-
tunities to him. The norm of ghetto slang is an exclusive
norm. The threat of shunning gives black teenagers
strong incentive to use it; the promise of other oppor-
tunities gives them strong incentive not to use it.

To generalize Shawn Hunt's interests, recall Thom-
as Wolfe's pair of theses in You Can't Go Home
Again. Wolfe was educated at Harvard, and then he
returned to his home in Asheville, North Carolina.
There he discovered two related things. First, one can-
not really go back "home" because after the pleasures
of cosmopolitan life, it will hardly be home any longer.
And second, one who does try to go back home is not
really welcome—without, perhaps, giving up much of
the learning and suppressing the tastes developed
abroad. Wolfe clearly appreciated the benefits, the
comforts of home. He characterized a town as "coi-
ing in a thousand fumes of homely smoke, now winking
into a thousand points of friendly light its glorious
small design, its aching passionate assurances of walls,
warmth, comfort, food, and love." Hence, in his view,
the costs of separation were real and potentially large.
(Incidentally, one might recognize the phrase George
Bush took from Wolfe, the "thousand points of light"
of his 1988 presidential campaign.)

The other thesis in Wolfe's pair is that one may have
learned or changed too much to find the comforts of
home as pleasing as they once had been. Wolfe saw
that the comforts of home may be as appealing as they
are in part because of ignorance of the alternatives.
The full process is as follows: The comforts induce
staying at home, which secures ignorance by pruning
vistas, which maintains tastes for the comforts of home.
That is a demoralizing chain of relationships. Those
like Wolfe can break that chain only at the price of
permanent disquiet.

Shawn Hunt may be the talented person who can
switch from one style of speech to another to fit his
milieu. I have an old friend in Texas who talks with
everyone in their style—he is a spectacular mimic. And
he gains from his talent. He told me I should do like-
wise if I wanted to get mechanics, salespeople, and
others to take my interests to heart. Alas, I lack the
talent. I am stuck in one style. Many of Shawn Hunt's
fellow teenagers must have my liability, and they are
essentially at the fringes of their neighborhood groups.
Eventually, they may be shunned, or they may have to
content themselves with severe reduction of external
opportunities. Like me, they cannot have it both ways.

On this account, a ghetto teenager such as Shawn
Hunt must choose from interest in large part. The norm
of exclusion that governs behavior in his group im-
poses considerations of his interest on him. The norm
requires more than an explanation of his behavior,
however. It requires an answer to the question, "Why
do people shun violators of a norm of group identifi-
cation?" Is that also a matter of interest? If talking
straight-up-and-down English makes his friends un-
comfortable, if Shawn is unreliable because he begins
to absent himself from their activities while he studies,
then those friends may soon prefer not to have
him around. They may stop seeking him out, and they
may shun him enough to make him as uncomfortable
as he makes them. People at the fringe of the group are at risk.

Now back to “nigger.” How did the slang develop? We tend to look for specific causal accounts in explaining social results. But here it may be more instructive to see the structure of a result than to find the exact historical progression that led to it. For example, by spontaneous choices and developments over many decades, Americans wound up driving their buggies and wagons to the right of each other when they met. Once enough others did that, everyone else had the incentive to do likewise. The English and the Swedes just as spontaneously wound up driving left. There was no inherently compelling a priori reason to choose one particular rule over the other. But there was compelling reason to follow either one once it developed into a convention. Young blacks might have adopted many forms of slang that would serve to exclude whites from their community. That they wound up with “nigger,” rap, and the cool pose is less interesting than that they are compelled by such norms of exclusion.

We could try to tell the story of how “nigger’ became honorific. Older southern blacks sometimes admonished black children, “You ain’t nothin’ but a nigger, and don’t you forget it.” Stokely Carmichael and others transformed this into a challenge: “In this country you ain’t nothin’ but niggers, and don’t you forget it.” From this, it was a short step to using “nigger” as an honorific identification. It was a remarkable trick—but millions of such tricks are turned every day. What made this trick a new linguistic convention was that it was soon used by many blacks. Countless other terms of exclusion must have been used. But in the competition for novelty and impact, “nigger” may have had unusual advantages. In the end, it came to common usage just as driving on the right had earlier.

Typical norms of ethnic exclusion have many of the qualities of ghetto slang. They are social conventions, not a priori or natural distinctions. And they are reinforced through the interested actions of relevant group members, especially through the shunning of those who waver at the fringes of the group. Sometimes they are specifically exacerbated by potential leaders, as Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic deliberately pushed for Serbian superiority and Croatian, Muslim, and Turkish inferiority and even moral repugnance. Milosevic wanted to become leader and then to reinforce his position. He acted very much in his own interest. And he made it the interest of many Serbs to follow his lead.

The Serbs who lived in Sarajevo, an international city with a heavily intermarried population of Croats, Serbs, and Muslims, were clearly at the fringes of the nation of Serbs that Milosevic cultivated. They did not readily identify with the hyper-nationalist Serbs. They have paid the price of being at the fringes. In November 1993, after eighteen months of Serbian siege of Sarajevo, winter was coming on and the urban amenities of water, electricity, and stores with food were destroyed. Many Serbs finally gave up and left Sarajevo. One young Serbian man tried to cross the Serbian military line with his family. His parents, wife, and children were allowed to pass, but he was detained by the local commander. “You stayed with the balija [Serbian slang for “Muslims”] for eighteen months,” the commander said. “Okay, let’s see how you feel about the balija now. You can go to the front lines and kill a balija, then maybe we’ll let you go (New York Times, November 14, 1993).”

Cosmopolitan thought is naturally hostile to the creation of exclusive communities.

Similarly, many young Croatian men in Mostar in Bosnia found that either they could either leave their homes altogether or they could identify with fellow Bosnian Croats altogether by joining in the murderous attacks on Muslim civilians. Like Shawn Hunt, who could not talk either way on demand, they had to make a choice. Several hundred eventually chose to stay or to return home and joined a civilian unit of killers, who stalk Muslims and shoot them. They shoot men, women, and children, and they make sure their victims are dead lest they rise and shoot the killers in the back as they leave.

The atrocities of Yugoslavs in Bosnia apparently do not match the atrocities of Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi. These countries were set up by their former colonial supervisor, Belgium, which pulled out without creating any institutional structure for self-governance. As in other newly independent Belgian colonies, the result was immediate civil war, which has de facto never ended. After more than three decades of violent conflict, some groups have concluded that the only way to gain control is to kill everyone on the other side. Expulsion of most of the Tutsi from Rwanda thirty years ago has merely produced a new generation of people in dreadful refugee camps. These are people for whom armed struggle inside Rwanda must have been more attractive, despite its risk of death, than continued life in the camps. As in the case
of the Serbian refugee from Sarajevo, who was at the fringes of the group of those who rabidly identify as Serbs, suspect Hutu and Tutsi have been at grave risk. Intermarried Hutu men in Rwanda reputedly slaughtered their Tutsi wives. Perhaps they did not even need the injunction to kill a balija to establish their identification. They knew where they stood, and they knew they had to escape from the fringes of disloyalty.

Many commentators have noted that the Serbians have been especially hard on cities and the monuments of civilization. They have shelled, dynamited, and bulldozed mosques and civic buildings, and they have razed whole cities. Bogdan Bogdanovic, a Serbian architect, accuses Milosevic of wanting to destroy civilization in Yugoslavia. He is probably partly right. But the Serbian urge is, rather, more precisely, to purg the kind of cosmopolitan thought that is naturally hos- tile to the creation of exclusive communities. Milosevic wants ignorance, the ignorance that underlies his account of the history of Yugoslavia, the ignorance that makes it possible for one to believe in the implausible myths of Serbian greatness and Croatian, Muslim, and Turkish depravity. With those beliefs, narrow identifi- cation with Serbia is more readily possible. On some accounts, the most rabid Serbs are from small towns and rural areas in which there are no Croats or Muslims. They come from exclusive communities, and they are uncomfortable with cities and other peoples.

Hutu and Tutsi may have more distinctive objec- tive differences, although intermarriage has produced a very large number of people who are mixed. Moreover, the precolonial terminology of Hutu and Tutsi reflected class membership, not an ethnic identity. A Hutu could rise in class and become Tutsi. The ob- jective measures of identity of many, perhaps most, people in the United States are so complex that the notion of ethnic identity hardly makes sense for them. Identification might nevertheless be strong, and many identify as, for example, African or English despite having insufficient genetic ground for the identification.

In any case, again, it is identification, not identity, that creates conflict. And this is the second issue I wish to address. What are the sources of conflict between groups? One might suppose the conflict is somehow external to the groups, that it is merely a problem for them. Or, alternatively, one might suppose it is some- thing that is created by the groups. In very large part, it is clearly created by the groups in the following sense: if we have identified as a group, then, under certain circumstances, we may individually expect to prosper more from our group’s prospering than from our own success in grasping individual opportunities. There are two classes of goods that we, as a group or as individuals, might seek. First there are distributional goods, such as money, farmland, and so forth. And second, there are positional goods, such as jobs in the government or the army.

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**Group Identification and Group Conflict**

I have spoken of identification rather than of ident- ity. The latter term suggests that there is an objective basis to the identities that people profess. But it is at worst an open question whether identifications are socially constructed, as I think they are. And it is identification, a subjective fact, that affects motivation. Croats, Muslims, and Serbs have only minor dif- ferences in objective identity, yet the strength of their identifications is so great that they are murdering each other. Their differences, nominally, are that they have mostly different religions, although until four years ago theirs was a strikingly irreligious society. Geneti- cally, they are not distinct; what differences they have are the result of geographical separation over many centuries. Muslims are merely Serbs whose forebears converted to Islam—unless their later forebears con- verted back to Orthodoxy or to Catholicism. They all speak the same language, although Serbs use a differ- ent alphabet. Using the same language has caused the hyper-nationalists a lot of grief, because they are in- tend on forcing through differences in their common language to justify their claims of group difference.

Many actual communitarians think their norms are right, pure and simple.

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European aristocrats were governed by the duel- ing norm, which did not apply to others. That they lived up to the norm kept them distinct as a class through the several centuries in which they were displaced economically by the rising bourgeoisie. Through much of that time, they had privileged ac- cess to positions in the state and in the army. In precolonial times, the Tutsi held all positions of authority in the nominal governments of what eventually became Rwanda and Burundi, but there was less privilege than one might suppose because Hutu could become Tutsi. In postcolonial times, Hutus seized control of Rwanda and established privileged access to state jobs, especially in the military and the police.
In Rwanda and in many other nations, including arguably some of the newly independent former Soviet republics, government was itself the most valuable resource for anyone who wanted to prosper. A person’s odds of getting one of the good positions in government, however, would be greatly enhanced if members of other groups could be excluded from holding them. The mere fact of ethnic identification therefore creates a conflict of interest. This is not necessarily true in every case of multiple ethnic groups. For example, if the economy is booming, one’s best prospects might well depend more on individual performance than on ostensible identity. But in bad economic times, or in nations in which the government controls most of the economic opportunities, conflict of interest between ethnic groups is virtually defined.

The conflicts in formerly socialist nations and in the quasi-socialist nations of Africa are exacerbated by the government’s coincidental role in the economy. If there were less government involvement, there might be greater inequality between individuals but less inequality between groups—and less violence between groups. It may be one of the great tragedies of history that so many nations became independent during the high tide of the belief that the Soviet Union had a better way—with centralized control of all opportunities.

Normative Questions about Norms of Exclusion

People commonly think their norms are more than merely a statistician’s norms of typical behavior. They think their norms are right, that other norms would be wrong. Philosophers and social scientists under the sway of David Hume and Max Weber think such a conclusion is wrong because, in Hume’s words, it is the derivation of an “ought” from an “is”—or in Weber’s words, it is a violation of the fact–value distinction. Anthropologists and many others, however, know that ordinary people commonly do infer values from mere facts. What is, is assumed to be good. We have norm X. Therefore norm X is right. This is a kind of group solipsism.

Contemporary communitarian philosophers hold a somewhat milder position: A group’s norms are good for that group. And moreover, we have no way to deduce what would be generally good norms; we have only norms that are, in fact, derived within groups. The communitarian philosophers are not quite relativists about value. They do not hold that every group’s views are right. A group’s views are only right for it—and perhaps only in a functional sense, the way our driving to the right is good for us. Or they hold what is essentially an epistemological position, as Richard Rorty does: Rorty does not say that a group’s values are right for it; he merely says that, from within their own community, members cannot judge the practices of another’s community. We are stuck with group solipsism for epistemological reasons.

Many actual communitarians, such as Milosevic’s Serbs or Rwanda’s Hutus, hold a very different view. They think their norms are right, pure and simple. Rorty, Charles Taylor, and many others are philosophical communitarians, or even merely epistemological communitarians. They are hostile to traditional ethics, which has almost invariably been universalistic. In a universalistic ethics, what is right for one is right for another under relevantly similar circumstances. Strangely, however, many of the antiuniversalistic philosophical communitarians hold a universalistic view of their own: They think community is good. Actual communitarians typically hold no such view. They think merely that their community is good. In defending their community, they may be willing to obliterate other communities.

To belong means to lessen concern for those who are excluded or to be overtly hostile to them.

It is sometimes argued of various values that their truth is somehow correlated with the strength with which they are held. Consider this view in the light of differences between universalistic norms and norms of exclusion. Many universalistic norms have as their object the overcoming of self-interest. For example, the norm of civic duty that often leads people to vote is a motivation that runs against self-interest. Most people have no interest in taking half an hour or more out of the day just to vote when they can be virtually certain that their vote will not make any difference to the outcome. Norms of exclusion typically are quite different. They are reinforced by self-interest. Shawn Hunt speaks ghetto slang with his neighborhood friends because he loses if he doesn’t. Only if he is at the fringe of his group do his interests begin to run against the group’s norms, and then he violates the norm.

Universalistic norms typically have motivational force from moral or public-spirited concern, but they run contrary to self-interest. Norms of group exclusion probably have motivational force from moral or
public-spirited concern, and they also have motivational force from self-interest. They are doubly supported. Not surprisingly, therefore, they are generally more strongly held than are universalistic norms. There is a class of exceptions to this claim: the norms that are enforced in the context of essentially one-on-one relationships, not in large-group relationships of collective action. For example, I have a clear interest in keeping most of my promises, because most of them are made to individuals with whom I have an interest in a continuing relationship. Politicians who make promises to the larger public still have some of that interest, but much less so. Therefore, their promises are less credible and less likely to be fulfilled.

But, generally, it is true that large-scale universalistic norms are less effective than communal norms of exclusion. This claim sounds counter-intuitive to many people, but it is little more complex than the claim that having interest and normative values push in the same direction is more effective than having them work against each other. It is not in the end surprising, therefore, that people assert their group’s norms of exclusion with great, even intolerably great, force. That they do so, however, is no test of the rightness of those norms. Commitment is a matter of fact; rightness is a matter of value. Strength of commitment does not imply degree of rightness. For example, commitment does not make vengeful murder right, no matter how intensely it is desired and believed to be right.

In sum, epistemological communitarianism implies two striking conclusions: First, we should give consideration to community members. In particular, we should acknowledge the extent to which communities can constrain knowledge to produce behavior that we might otherwise wrongly attribute to especially evil or vicious personal character. Second, we should give strong consideration to the contingent sources of support for various communal values and norms. Often we will find that we can explain these in ways that lead us to conclude they have no moral standing. These two conclusions together imply that normative communitarianism is misguided.

More generally, we should conclude that group organization and individual commitment to group purposes are not proof of the rightness or goodness of what the group wants or achieves. Indeed, we should often become suspicious of group success in mobilizing individuals just because individual incentives typically run counter to group action. We should look to the incentives that produce group commitment to determine what their character is. These may be perversely and destructive. In seeking larger shares of their societies’ goods, groups often destroy much of those goods, making virtually everyone worse off. For the present generation, they gain not the spoils of victory, but the spoliation of their lives.

Successful collective action may sometimes be a wonderful achievement. But it may also be a dreadful achievement, the source of great harm, even to those who succeed in the collective action. In the widespread mobilization of the imagined communities of the ethnic groups of our time, the harms seem to grotesquely outweigh any plausible benefits. Despite the occasional good that it may do, group solipsist ethnic assertion is one of the great disasters of modern civilization.

Edward Said fears “that you cannot both ‘belong’ and concern yourself with [others] who do not belong” (Blaming the Victim, p. 178). As in the major cases of ethnic identification in our time, to belong means to lessen concern for those who are excluded or, worse, to be overtly hostile to them. The dreadful lesson of these conflicts seems to be that individuals have an immediate interest in doing things that lead to their own shackling and to the suppression of others. They can have an interest in reducing themselves to something less than human, to a standard pawn in a large strategic game, plausibly played by thugs. They give up their claim to personal identity by giving themselves over fully to trivializing identification, in which, as Henry Louis Gates writes, “your tale is subordinated to an overarching narrative” (New Yorker, March 7, 1994). Individuals acting in groups bolstered by norms of exclusion can transcend the negative logic of collective action—but all too often only at the cost of degradation of self and other.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING


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