

**“Gendering Right-Wing Extremism: Past and Present”  
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When I picked this title, I thought I might try to figure out the commonalities in gender in U.S. racist groups in the twentieth century, as an initial step toward a larger understanding of how right-wing extremism is gendered. However, I found that the obstacles to doing so were more interesting than the original goal of finding commonalities and, moreover, that the goal was ill-conceived in ways that might be useful to consider more broadly in studies of gender in historical sociology. In the spirit of a working conference, these are very preliminary ideas that I hope will be provocative.

I draw on two research projects that examine the role of women in organized racism in two periods of U.S. history. The first is a study of the 1920s Ku Ku Klan, based on analysis of documents and media and interviews with former members of this massive (and mostly Northern) collective crusade against African Americans, Jews, Catholics, recent immigrants, labor radicals, and others. The second is a study of 1990s racist groups, based on observations and life interviews with a sample of activists in neo-Nazi, white power skinhead, KKK, and other white supremacist groups, all of which see Jews as their major enemy; embrace the idea of a coming apocalyptic race war; and practice or celebrate the use of extreme violence and terrorism in support of white, Aryan

supremacy.

Taken together, these two projects are part of what feminist historians describe as a first stage of gender transformation, making clear that women were in racist groups, that some women were as viciously racist as some men, and that the project of white supremacy has not been solely a male enterprise. These projects also contributed to a second stage of feminist transformation, that of using the experiences of women to rethink analytic categories, or as Suzanne Lebsack's says, using women's history to make us smarter about the world. And indeed studies of women in racist groups challenge some of the fundamental concepts used in studies of right-wing extremism. The racial violence of women in the 1920s Klan, for example, was exercised through networks of rumors meant to destroy the livelihoods of Jewish merchants, African American laborers, and Catholic teachers, a technique very different and generally more destructive than the episodic physical brutality of Klanmen in that era. Paying attention to women in this Klan thus means rethinking the idea of collective racial violence, illuminating dimensions of racial terror that lie beyond the public face of violence. It shows that something important about organized racism can't be seen without looking simultaneously at gender, in other words, that organized racism is gendered. But does that conclusion get us far enough? Is there a third stage of transformation that would let us assess the relative nature of gender in various time epochs of organized racism? Perhaps so, but there are two quite different problems that arise.

**Problem #1: Racist extremism seems more similar over time than, in fact, it may be.**

The quest to figure out how organized racism is gendered assumes that racial extremism has an analytic integrity, that it is a phenomenon with a robust essence such that variations across time and context are instances of a “case of” an underlying *thing*. This assumption has been bolstered by the many studies that examine racist extremist movements from a distance, that take what Dorothy Smith calls, disparagingly, a “bird’s eye view” of social life. In such studies, organized racist movements in the U.S., at least since the Civil War, seem remarkably alike: mostly angry men, eager to blame their problems on racialized others.

If we look at these movements more closely, however, their dissimilarities become striking. Consider the various waves of the Ku Klux Klan, what Martin Durham calls “America’s distinctive contribution to right-wing extremism.” Today’s small and Southern Klan is the fourth (in some accounts, fifth) Klan, following the initial Klan of the Reconstruction-era South, the massive Northern-based Klan of the 1920s, and the southern anti-integrationist Klan of the 1950s and 1960s.

All waves of the Klan use similar rituals and regalia and promote white supremacy and, usually, violent means to achieve it. Yet, there are significant differences among Klans, beyond their location and size differences. The table below is a

very rough, maybe not fully defensible, chart of gender, along with race, nation, sexuality, and social class, ideology and demographic composition in the Klans I studied, as well as earlier and later Klans. [Class composition is difficult to chart because a person's social class can also be a consequence of joining the KKK.] Note that there are remarkably few consistencies or even patterns over time. Sometimes gender is important, sometimes not. Sometimes gender and sexuality are both central, other times one is and the other is not.



<u>Eras of the Klan</u>	<u>1870s</u>	<u>1920s</u>	<u>1950-1960s</u>	<u>1990-2000s</u>
women (role)	symbolic	active	absent	active
gender issues	central	central	absent	contested
enemies (nature of)	unitary	multiple	unitary	multiple
race issues	central	central	central	variable
nationalism	contested	central	contested	declining
sexuality	central	incidental	incidental	varies
class issues	minimal	important	central	absent

What does the absence of a pattern tell us? It might be that gender, etc and organized racism aren't related after all, although there is considerable evidence of such relationships within time periods. Or it might be that the search for the link between organized racism and gender (or nationality, sexuality, etc) is futile, that what we are trying to relate gender to isn't a *thing* at all. The underlying phenomena – a Klan – of which a particular Klan is a case, might not be there.

The problem with regarding organized racism as a *thing* is two-fold. One issue, to which I have already alluded, is methodological. As microhistorians have demonstrated, social phenomena that look the same from afar can look very different up close. From a distance, the Klan seems to be a category of racist practice that exists over time. From up close, the Klan looks so different over time, both ideologically and organizationally, that it is a stretch to think of it as a single *kind* of social movement.

The other issue is representational. What constitutes an instance – a case – of the Klan is not self-evident. Rather, the Klan – an historically (semi)continuous movement of white supremacy – is an image that is produced by the Klan itself (as well as by its opponents). At each era, Klan leaders position themselves and their group in an historical trajectory, as the authentic heirs to a longstanding tradition of white resistance to racial integration and equality.

Scholars, too, tend to represent organized racism as more coherent than is the case. This is in part because strong analytic templates have dominated the study of the far-right

including racist movements, creating a sense of analytic equivalence among what are often very disparate kinds of racial movements. WWII-era German Naziism has been a particularly dominant template. The explosive rise of Naziism in Germany, attributed at one point to a fit between its authoritarian mission and the rigid family and personality structure of the population from which it recruited members and supporters, fueled an expectation that the significance of any racist movement should be assessed by similar characteristics of size, rate of growth, and fit with the population. Applied to the modern U.S., however, the template of German Naziism has proven problematic as many U.S. racists groups, focused on terroristic violence rather than electoral success, are (and often to aspire to be) small, tight-knit, and insular.

The problem with templates – and the broader problem about assuming that organized racism is a *thing* – is that it creates expectations for what scholars should look for and what they should ignore. Studies of the massive Nazi movement in Germany have been quite successful in modeling how economic and political changes affected the emergence, growth and impact of National Socialism. Similarly constructed studies of the tiny movements of the far-right in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. have produced little more than sweeping assertions and dubious correlations, like that organized racism is the product of economic crisis or social dislocation. Too, the effort (however misguided, ultimately) of scholars to identify the authoritarian core of German Naziism has been mirrored in efforts to find the core of pathology that leads people into the far-right in

today's U.S.. Here, authoritarianism is replaced by a focus on angry men who feel their power is eroded by women or immigrants, but the argument is similar and poorly supported by data.

What is the lesson for studying gender in right-wing extremism? Perhaps that we need to worry not only about the category of gender as feminist scholars have done, but also the categorical status of the far-right itself.

**Problem #2: It might be misleading to look for gender in historical contexts**

In a review of Chris Rhomberg's study of Oakland, California, Michael Schwartz observed that we can sometimes see social phenomena more clearly if we look at them indirectly. Perhaps this is true as well for gender in historical work. Might it be difficult to see how organized racism is gendered in different historical contexts because looking for gender makes it appear similarly in each context? That is, might it be difficult to find differences in the importance of gender in different historical eras when we are searching for, and thereby assuming, its importance?

Studies that look for gender in racist movements are easily caught up by the hyper-masculinist character of such movements. The most visible racist activists in virtually all movements are men and the practices and rituals of these groups are rife with bravado, guns, issued threats, definitiveness, the belittling of others, strength, boasts, swagger, and the embrace of social hierarchy. Yet there are other dynamics in these groups that are

difficult to categorize as masculine: intrigue, gossip, treachery, drama, artifice, the centrality of bonds among members, performance, and perhaps most centrally, fear and anxiety.

Does that mean that gender is irrelevant to racist movements? Probably not. But it does suggest that gender can be more complex in racist movements than we might be likely to see if we were looking for gender. How racist groups represent themselves, and even their self-identity, is hyper-masculinized: racists are manly men, virile warriors, able to fight off enemies and usher in a white supremacist paradise. But, like the Klan's historical continuity, the masculinist nature of organized racism is a staged representation. Underneath the masculinity of organized racism are more interesting dynamics of gender. In the 1920s, for example, white women were brought into the Klan as newly-enfranchised voters. Today, racist groups increasingly recruit women –not for their stereotypically feminine attributes – but because racist leaders view women as statistically less likely to have criminal records and therefore less vulnerable to becoming informants for or targets of the police. If racist leaders could identify another newly-enfranchised group (in the 1920s) or another group that were unlikely to be connected to the police (today), assuming these fit the racist profile: white, Aryan, etc, they might well be substituted for women as the targets of racist recruiting. That is, women's place in modern racist groups is based in part on a fairly nongendered characteristics. Can we thus say that participation in organized racism is gendered?

It may be that by assuming that gender works with racism, it is impossible to see how it does. We know that *gender* is different across time and contexts, that, as Joanne Meyerowitz's work shows, masculinity can represent strength or protection, independence or camaraderie, solidarity or rivalry depending on place and time. But if we are able to historicize and contextualize *gender*, we have made less progress in seeing how social life is *gendered* in a historically contextualized fashion. To do so, we need to probe the mechanisms – not just the existence – of gender in racism, paying attention to what Joan Scott calls the “unsettledness, paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity” in their interrelation.

Put another way, we may need to rethink the move from the - I think, correct - feminist assertion that gender is an essential dimension of social life to the – I think, problematic – assumption that gender matters similarly in all situations and contexts, that we should seek these out and declare, or assume, its salience. In organized racism, it may be more illuminating to understand exactly when and why racial hatred *evokes* gender, when it *depends* on gendered ideas and relations, and when it *erodes* gender than to try to find evidence of how gender matters in racist movements overall and at all times. Indeed, it may be less interesting in the long run to use gender as an analytic assumption than to discern how - and if - gender is more salient, meaningful, and effectual in some circumstances than in others. Perhaps, we can see – rather than assume – gender by sometimes focusing less directly on it.