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**Against Hate**

*Gegen den Hass*

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Sample translation by Sophie Duvernoy

“But if all justice begins with speech, all speech is not just.”

Jacques Derrida

“Precise observation means dissection.”

Herta Müller

## Preface

I sink in the miry depths,  
    where there is no foothold.  
I have come into the deep waters;  
    the floods engulf me.  
I am worn out calling for help;  
    my throat is parched.  
My eyes fail,  
    looking for my God.  
Those who hate me without reason  
    outnumber the hairs of my head.

### *Psalm 69, 3–5*

Sometimes I ask myself whether I should envy them. Sometimes I ask myself how they can do it—how they can hate so much. How they can be so sure of themselves. Because this is what the hateful must be: sure of themselves. Otherwise, they wouldn't speak the way they do, wound the way they do, kill the way they do. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to demean others, humiliate them, attack them. They must remain sure of themselves. Have no doubts. One cannot be hateful if one doubts one's hate. One cannot rage if one is doubtful. One needs absolute certainty in order to hate. Every Maybe gets in the way. Every If subverts hatred, leaches away energy rather than channeling it.

Hatred is imprecise. It's difficult to hate something precise. Precision might bring out tenderness; it forces one to look or listen more closely. Precision would allow an individual to appear in all of her varied, contradictory characteristics, to become recognizable as a human being. But if the contours have been erased, individuals are unrecognizable as individuals. All that is left are vague groups that become targets of hatred, groups that can be defamed and devalued at will, shouted at, raged about: the Jews, the unbelievers, women, Blacks, lesbians, refugees, Muslims, or even, the United States, the politicians, the West, the police, the media, the intellectuals. Hatred fashions the hated object as it likes. It makes it to measure.

Hatred is directed upward or downward—at any rate, along a vertical axis, against “those above” or “those below.” It is always the categorical “other” that oppresses or threatens that which is “ours.” The “other” is imagined as a supposedly dangerous force, or a lesser object, and so the resulting abuse or extermination is not just understood as a

*forgivable*, but also as a *necessary* measure. The other is someone you can denounce, violate, hurt, or kill with no repercussions.

Those who experience this hatred first-hand, who are subject to it, in the streets or on the internet, at night or in broad daylight, who must tolerate terms that imply an entire history of violation and abuse; those who receive messages that wish them death, or rape, or threaten them with it; those whose rights are only partially acknowledged, whose bodies or head-coverings are disdained, who must disguise themselves because they fear attack, who cannot leave their homes because a brutal, violent crowd awaits them, whose schools or synagogues require police protection—all those singled out by hatred cannot and do not want to get used to it.

Certainly, there have always been subtle forms of resistance toward people who are perceived as different or foreign. These were not always noticeable forms of hatred. In Germany, they have often been expressed as condemnations couched in the language of social conventions. The past few years have seen a mounting unease about tolerance: Has it been taken too far? Can't those who have different beliefs, or look different, or love differently, be satisfied at last? There were discrete, yet clear reproaches voiced. Maybe Jews or homosexuals or women could be content and quiet, for once; after all, they've already been given so much. It's as if equality has reached its limits. As if women or gay people might be allowed equal rights up to a certain point, but beyond that, enough is enough. Completely equal? Well, that would be going too far. After all, then everyone would be ... *equal*.

This peculiar reproach—that minorities lack humility—secretly allied itself with a self-congratulatory spirit for the tolerance already evinced. As if the fact that women can work at all is a special accomplishment—but why should they also expect equal compensation? As if it were praiseworthy that queer people are no longer criminalized and imprisoned. Perhaps they should be thankful instead. It's fine for queer people to love each other in private, after all, but why should they get married in public?

The Janus-faced nature of tolerance toward Muslims often manifests itself in the idea that Muslims may well be allowed to live in Germany, but they should preferably refrain from being religious. Freedom of religion is particularly well-accepted when it refers to Christianity. And then, over the years, voices began clamoring more and more frequently for an end to the perpetual examination of the Holocaust. As if remembering Auschwitz had an expiration date, like a yoghurt. As if reflecting on the crimes of the National Socialists were a tourist activity that could easily be checked off a list.

But something has changed in Germany. Today, this country is home to open, unrestrained hatred. Sometimes, that hatred is voiced with a smile, and sometimes not; but far too often, it's shameless. Threatening letters, which used to be anonymous, are now signed with the author's name and address. Hateful comments and violent internet fantasies are often no longer posted under pseudonyms. If someone had asked me a few years ago whether people would ever speak like *this* again in this society, I would have thought it impossible. I could never have imagined public discourse ever becoming so coarse again. I would have found it inconceivable that people could be so violently harassed once again. It almost seems as if all traditional definitions of dialogue have been upended. As if the norms for coexistence have been reversed. As if those who considered respect for others a simple and self-evident form of politeness should feel ashamed, while those who deny others respect, or even loudly hurl out insults and judgments, should feel proud.

Now, I do not consider it a great civilizational gain if people can unrestrainedly shout at, insult, and hurt one another. I do not consider it progress if every inner grievance can be aired out just because exhibiting one's resentment has become publicly or politically relevant of late. Like many others, I do not want to get used to this. I do not want to see the joy that people take in unrestrained hatred become the new norm. Neither in Germany, nor in Europe, nor elsewhere.

The hatred that I will examine is neither distinct nor random. It's not simply a vague feeling that sometimes erupts by accident, or because something impels it to do so. This hatred is collective. It is shaped by ideology. The terms used to degrade others, the chains of thought and images used to think and sort through the world, the experiential grids that are used to categorize and to judge are all pre-formed. Hatred does not arise spontaneously; rather, it is cultivated. Everyone who understands hatred as sudden or distinct inadvertently aids its continued growth.

Yet the rise of aggressive, populist political parties in Germany (as well as in Europe) is not even the most unsettling event of all. There are still reasons to hope that these parties will destroy themselves over time through individual hubris, feuds, or simply by lacking staff capable of professionally working in politics. Not to mention their anti-modernist platforms, which turn a blind eye to the social, economic, and cultural realities of a globalized world. It is likely that they will lose their appeal once they are forced into public debates in which they have to argue and engage with their counterparts, and when they are asked to give reasoned responses to complex questions. It is likely that they will also lose their special status as dissidents once a few of their more reasonable points find adherents. This will only strengthen criticisms of other aspects of their platform. It is likely that we may, in the end, require far-reaching

economic programs that address social unease about growing inequality and old-age poverty in underdeveloped regions and cities.

Both here and elsewhere, the climate of fanaticism is far more worrisome. Increasingly fundamental rejections of people with different beliefs, or none at all, who look different, or love differently from the purported norm, are gathering momentum. A disdain for anything ‘other’ is growing and slowly poisoning everything. We, who are singled out by this hatred, or are witness to it, are all too often terrified into silence. We have let ourselves be intimidated; we do not know how to counter hate speech and terror; we feel paralyzed and helpless. Fear has left us speechless. This, unfortunately, is an effect of hatred: it destroys those at its mercy, it robs them of guidance and trust.

One can only confront hatred by rejecting the invitation to join its ranks. Those who answer hate with hate have already let themselves become deformed. They have already become more like the people the hateful want to hate. You can only confront hatred through acts that elude the hateful: through close observation, relentlessly making distinctions, and doubting yourself. This requires slowly deconstructing hatred into its components, separating the acute emotion from its ideological assumptions, and examining how it arises and operates within specific historical, regional, and cultural contexts. This may not seem like much. It may appear modest. One could object that these methods won’t change the real fanatics. That may be. But it would help to shine a light on the sources that fuel hatred, the structures that make it possible, the mechanisms it obeys. It would help if we could erode the self-confidence of those who agree with and applaud hate speech; if we could take the careless naiveté or cynicism away from those who pave the path for hatred by shaping its thought patterns and assumptions. If those who quietly and peacefully engage with others no longer needed to justify themselves, but rather, those who scorn them were brought to account. If those who naturally turn toward people in need no longer needed to explain themselves, but rather, those who refuse to acknowledge basic needs. If those who desire open, humane coexistence no longer needed to justify themselves, but rather, those who undermine it.

Considering hatred and violence within the structures that facilitate them also means shining a light on the context in which the justifications before the fact and acceptance after it arise. Without them, hate could not flourish as it does. Examining the different sources that lead to particular instances of hatred or violence also discredits the popular myth that hatred is something natural, something that has always existed. As if hate were more authentic than respect. But hate does not simply exist. It is created. Violence does not simply exist, either. Paths are laid for it. The direction in which hatred and violence erupt, their targets, the thresholds and barriers that must first be broken down—none of these things are coincidental or simply predestined; rather, they are channeled. Examining the way in which hatred and violence function, instead of judging

them, also means examining situations in which something *else* might have been possible, in which someone could have made a *different* decision, *intervened*, or *backed out*. Describing the specific course that hatred and violence can take also means pointing out when they could have been stopped or subverted.

Examining hate before it blindly erupts opens up other courses of action. Public prosecutors and the police are responsible for inciting certain kinds of hatred. But everyone in a society is responsible for forms of marginalization and inclusion, for the small and petty gestures, habits, practices, and beliefs that foster exclusion. As a civil society, we must revoke the space that the hateful have to make their object to measure. This is not a task we can hand off to someone else. It doesn't take much to stand by those who are threatened because they look different, think differently, believe something different, or love someone different. Small gestures can change things, can open up social or discursive spaces for precisely those who are supposed to be excluded from them. Perhaps the most important gesture against hatred is not letting oneself become isolated, not letting oneself be forced into silence, into the private sphere, into the shelter of one's own environment. Perhaps it is most important to move out of oneself, to move toward others, and to open up social and public spaces together with them.

Those at the mercy of hate—those abandoned to it—feel that they are “sinking in the miry depths, where there is no foothold,” in the plaintive words of the psalm. They have lost their foothold. They feel as if they are lost in deep water, and the tide is swelling above them. We must not abandon them; we must listen to them when they cry out. We cannot allow this tide of hatred to further swell. And above all, we must build a firm ground on which everyone can stand.