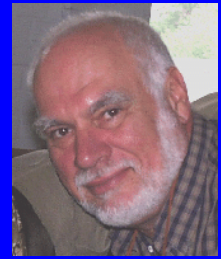


## THE DYNAMICS OF DEFAMATION

June 2003



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### 1) What's defamation? What is it all about?

Defamation is about damaging someone's reputation. When it comes to culture, it is about damaging the image of a group of people. While our constitution promises freedom of speech, and laws protect us from certain direct attacks and harassment in individual cases, it is much harder to defend a group identity from subtle and incessant attacks that become part of a culture as the history of many minorities in the US bears witness.

Such defamation is rooted in group identity. If somebody calls me "a dumb shit" personally, I may not like it, but it is not group defamation (unless it were an incident in a constant pattern directed against me and others like me). But if someone calls me a "dumb guinea" (US term for Italian immigrant families when I was a kid—in that period in the 1940's guinea was of course rich in synonyms like ginzos, wops, dagos and greaseballs, who kept company with krautheads, polacks, etc., ad infinitum) it had social and economic consequences. It was about social safety, jobs, and human dignity.

Earlier in this column I recommended a look at Amin Maalouf's book "In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong," and I would still say it is essential reading if you would like to understand the dynamics of group formation and exclusion, without which group defamation has no fuel to burn. We seem addicted to forming in-groups, which means we are addicted to having out-groups.

Most of the world's religions and philosophies in their best moments have tried to broaden the acceptance of others. Unfortunately redemption and enlightenment vacillate between ideals of brother and sisterhood and human weakness for coercion, assimilation and exclusion. As some wag scrawled on the wall at the beach where I swim regularly, "People have just enough religion to kill each other, but not enough to love each other."

### 2) Why is defamation? What's in it for the defamer?

Historically, it seems just about everything. Power, control, seizure of property. If you can create an in-group vs. out-group dynamic you can justify just about anything against the out-group if you defame them, wars, pogroms, eugenics, preferential treatment, maintaining social structures and promotion systems, slavery, sexual domination. There can be big payoffs. Defamation is a handy tool for the ambitious.

Psychologically there is an emotional payload as well. Running another group down can compensate for low self-esteem by a sense of belonging to my own group, a feeling of superiority, assuage fears of difference. It can make me feel like a man among men of my own kind.

Defamation is a way of diminishing the other. It is easier to kill the enemy if as a marine you learn to think of them as krauts, gooks, slants, pussies, or rag heads, and not full-fledged people like oneself. As the young bomber in "Hearts and Minds" observed, "From 10,000 feet I can lay down a nice carpet of mathematically precise bomb strikes." From up there, you don't have to see (the) people die. Defamation gives you altitude as well as attitude.

When did this all start? Perhaps it harkens back to a time when we had evolved only as far as seeing other tribes and non-relatives as a ready source of edible protein. Apparently the myth of the "noble savage" in North America is now bending under weighty accusations of rampant anthropophagi. Have we stopped eating each other because we recognize wider kinship? Or, have we simply found more sophisticated and less directly physical ways to munch our soilent green bickies.

### 3) What does defamation look like?

Defamation is in the realm of communication—the creation of messages about others. Some of it is pretty blatant, e.g., name calling-based on group identity was my starting point, and though we have tried to eliminate it in the schoolyard, the instinct is far from broken. It is often seen as result of testosterone poisoning in young males but, not exclusively. Women can do it just as well. I was catching up with old flicks over the weekend and last night I rented "Bend it like Beckham" Watching the young Indian footballer Jas lose it and come out slugging when a on the other team called her a "paki."

Name-calling is connected to stories. Stories about group behaviors and characteristics take on a life of their own and give acceptance to unquestioned stereotypes. A Jewish friend of mine who went to the University of Kansas once told how she woke up in the middle of the night with her Midwestern small-town roommate feeling her head, looking for the horns that all Jews were supposed to all have. The defamed in legend have a strong history of eating children, raping women, devil worship, etc., etc.

Defamation stories are even better when there is a real or mythical "historical grounding" for them, often taking the form of, "Your ancestors did this to our ancestors..." Centuries long cycles of blame are based on stories like this. After Tito was no longer around to keep the lid on in Yugoslavia, it took only a couple years of media propaganda to revive enough animosity for just about everybody to go to war with each other in the former Yugo land. This despite the fact that, as a Croatian doctor once told me, "When two soldiers kill each other in this war, the same grandmother goes to both funerals." It seems like there is a strong human predilection to cherishing a historical chip on the shoulder, a "you owe me" attitude.

Name-calling and storytelling are age old. With today's media there is a lot more sophistication. Choosing your shots, innuendo from what you show and don't show, sound bytes. I would really like you to research here, rather than into the classical slurs. Look at how today's propaganda machines work. Seems they spent a small fortune on the lighting for Dubya's landing on the aircraft carrier (shades of Leni Riefenstahl's \*Triumph des Willens\*), for example, so the trick is to look for the subtle stuff, stuff that hits you unnoticed and forms your judgments about others.

### 4) How do people fight defamation?

There are groups that create anti-defamation leagues, when it really gets tough, as Jewish Americans have done and Arab Americans are now doing. Identify defamation, label it, and make evident to others what is going on, hoping there is enough decency in the public to tell the difference between fair and foul play. Sometimes there is, sometimes there isn't. Public receptivity to defamatory behavior mostly has to do with stress and fear levels.

Some people respond in kind, defaming the defamers, if they can muster the power to do so and make it stick. Even where this is not possible, doing so at least creates the illusion among the defamed of marginalizing their aggressors.

Some joke about it, make light of it, or try not to notice it. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," was the stock phrase of my childhood. It was an attempt to deny that names hurt more than physical injuries, though in fact they were often the cause of sticks and stones that lead to more vicious cycles of words and wallops.

Some people make fun of themselves hoping the defamers will see them as harmless and leave them alone. I remember some pretty righteous diversity trainers a few years back blaming Borscht Belt comedians for as colluding with discrimination.

There are people who abandon their own defamed group and try to "pass" or assimilate with the power group, often proving themselves by persecuting their own group or, at least, disassociating from it and criticizing it. This tends to be a biggie for invisible minorities, Gay men were often susceptible to this in the US in the past, e.g., the J. Edgar Hoover and Roy Cohen stories, and, so it seems from recent biographers, Joe McCarthy. Whether or not Joe belongs on this list he is a good example someone who mastered defamation activity if you look at the structure of the anti-communist rhetoric and tactics--apparently not far from the Bush and Fox Network rhetoric as some linguists now contend.

Sometimes people try to break the cycle of defamation by trying to apologize for the past, like the Pope did in his trip to Croatia and Bosnia. However, apology, because it involves admitting you were wrong or something your group did in the past was unfair or defaming, apology not high on the list of US behaviors, particularly in the political realm. Most preferred way of "damage control," of handling the past is denial, explanation or putting a new "spin" on old words in the hope that the public has a thick skin and a short memory. Currently our politicians seem to be at high RPM--"spinning out of control."