

Watching the Watchers: The Neglect of Academic Analysis of Progressive Groups

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The question about the effects of political scientific bias is not yet settled, but evidence of the existence of this bias continues to emerge.¹ While political/cultural progressives² and the nonreligious³ are overrepresented in academia, it is still debated whether this overrepresentation is the result of discrimination⁴ or self-selection.⁵ Regardless of its source, the overrepresentation

¹George Yancey, *Compromising Scholarship: Religious and Political Bias in American Higher Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Yoel Inbar and Joris Lammers, “Political Diversity in Social and Personality Psychology,” *Perspectives in Psychological Science* 7, no. 5 (September 2012): 496–503, http://yoelinbar.net/papers/political_diversity.pdf; Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, “The Vanishing Conservative—Is There a Glass Ceiling?” in *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope and Reforms*, ed. Robert Maranto, Richard E. Redding, and Frederick M. Hess (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2009), 60–76; Jonathan Haidt, “The Bright Future of Post-Partisan Social Psychology,” address presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, San Antonio, TX, January 27, 2011, Edge, February 11, 2011, <http://www.edge.org/conversation/the-bright-future-of-post-partisan-social-psychology>.

²Daniel B. Klein and Charlotta Stern, “Political Diversity in Six Disciplines,” *Academic Questions* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2004–05): 40–52; Daniel B. Klein and Andrew Western, “Voter Registration of Berkeley and Stanford Faculty,” *Academic Questions* 18, no. 1 (2004–05): 53–65; Inbar and Lammers, “Political Diversity”; Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte, “Politics and Professional Advancement among College Faculty,” *The Forum* 3, no. 1 (2005): 1–16, <http://www.cwu.edu/~manwellerm/academic%20bias.pdf>.

³Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Religion among Academic Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics,” *Social Problems* 54, no. 2 (2007): 289–307; Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, “The Religiosity of American College and University Professors,” *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 2 (2009): 101–29.

⁴Yancey, *Compromising Scholarship*; John D. Gartner, “Antireligious Prejudice in Admission to Doctoral Programs in Clinical Psychology,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 17, no. 5 (1986): 473–75.

⁵Barry Ames et al., “Hide the Republicans, the Christians, and the Women: A Response to ‘Politics and Professional Advancement among College Faculty,’” *The Forum* 3, no. 2 (2005): 17; Henry Giroux, “Academic Freedom under Fire: The Case for Critical Pedagogy,” *College Literature* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 1–42; John B. Lee, *The “Faculty Bias” Studies: Science or Propaganda?* (Bethesda, MD: JBL Associates, 2006), <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/facultybiasstudies1106.pdf>. Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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of political and religious progressives can alter the type of scientific research produced.

A key way academia may be shaped by a disproportionate number of progressive scholars is choice of research question. For example, my colleague David Williamson and I studied the social movement of cultural progressives in part because previous culture war research concentrated on cultural conservatives.^{6,7} Even assuming that progressives unbiasedly analyzed cultural and religious conservative groups, the very act of being scrutinized can produce a disconcerting attitude among those examined. Respondents may perceive themselves more as lab rats in a maze than as citizens in our society. This may preclude academics from scrutinizing cultural progressives because those academics likely share similar progressive beliefs.

A potential problem with overemphasis on analyzing conservative social and political groups is the focus upon the inconsistencies exhibited by members in those groups. It is difficult for any group to live up completely to the ideas its members espouse. Progressive groups who value tolerance may display intolerance when reacting to conservative individuals. Conservative groups pushing for small government may protect governmental intervention when intervention meets their own needs. If most, perhaps all, social groups exhibit episodes of inconsistency with stated ideal goals, overexamination of conservative groups can damage their image relative to progressive groups who do not undergo examinations that reveal their inconsistencies.

In this article I explore academia's failure to examine progressive social groups via a critical analysis of one progressive organization: the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). This analysis indicates possible insights into a scientific community where both progressive and conservative social groups undergo critical analysis. My aim is not to critique SPLC, but rather to illustrate how progressive organizations are not immune from the same irrational shortcomings often noted among conservative organizations. The inability of social scientists to recognize these potential shortcomings is

⁶George Yancey and David Williamson, *What Motivates Cultural Progressives: Understanding Opposition to the Christian Right* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

⁷Matthew C. Moen, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992); Clyde Wilcox, *God's Warriors: The Christian Right in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Clyde Wilcox and Carin Larson, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006).

shaped by disproportionate representation of progressive, secular scholars unlikely to seek a critical assessment of SPLC.

To date, very little critical analysis of SPLC exists.⁸ Perhaps the best example is Brett Garland and Pete Simi's 2011 critique of SPLC's use of civil litigation to battle supremacist violence, in which they contend that this strategy does not address the core causes of racial violence.⁹ While Garland and Simi are critical of the litigation strategy, they accept the stated intentions of SPLC at face value—a step that may limit exploration of the larger social and institutional factors influencing SPLC. Vaughn May examines SPLC from the point of view of social entrepreneurship.¹⁰ This perspective acknowledges the financial advantages of the techniques used by SPLC that corresponds with the progressive social goals of the group. Other sources include SPLC as part of a larger assessment of civil rights organizations, but do not focus on SPLC.¹¹ Missing is a critical analysis of SPLC that looks beyond its stated goals to assess its social position and how this position influences its institutional character.

Background of the Southern Poverty Law Center

The SPLC was founded in 1971 by civil rights lawyers Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin. The organization's initial goal was to file antidiscrimination

⁸In contrast to the few articles that have been written about SPLC in its more than four decades of existence, several academic articles and books critiquing the Tea Party—which has existed for less than five years—have already appeared: Matt A. Barreto et al., “The Tea Party in the Age of Obama: Mainstream Conservatism or Out-Group Anxiety?” in *Rethinking Obama: Political Power and Social Theory*, ed. Julian Go (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011), 105–37; Devin Burghart and Leonard Zeskind, *Tea Party Nationalism: A Critical Examination of the Tea Party Movement and the Size, Scope, and Focus of Its National Factions* (Kansas City, MO: Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights, 2010); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Tea Party: A Brief History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012); Jared A. Goldstein, “The Tea Party Movement and the Perils of Popular Originalism,” *Arizona Law Review* 53, no. 3 (2011): 827–66; Christopher Karpowitz, J. Quin Monson, Kelly D. Patterson, and Jeremy C. Pope, “Tea Time in America? The Impact of the Tea Party Movement on the 2010 Midterm Elections,” *Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 2 (2011): 303–9; Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁹Brett Garland and Pete Simi, “A Critique of Using Civil Litigation to Suppress White Supremacist Violence,” *Criminal Justice Review* 36, no. 4 (2011): 498–512.

¹⁰Vaughn May, “Selling Civil Rights: Social Entrepreneurship and the Klanwatch Project,” *National Social Science Journal* 3, no. 2 (2011): 125–32.

¹¹Jessica Henry, “Beyond Free Speech: Novel Approaches to Hate on the Internet in the United States,” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 18, no. 2 (2009): 235–51; Rebecca Orel, “Making It Better Now: How Advocates Can and Should Use a Critical Period for LGBT Youth to Create Sustainable Change,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 44, no. 2 (2013): 577–618.

cases. Then, in 1981, SPLC began a “Klanwatch” project to document the activities of white supremacist organizations. The project was particularly useful in identifying groups with an ideology of white supremacy that was not clearly identifiable from the name of the group. Several years later the SPLC expanded its emphasis on documenting racial sources of hatred and violence with “Hatewatch,” a project focused on protecting immigrants, upholding LGBT rights, monitoring black separatists, exposing anti-Muslim bigotry, and teaching tolerance.

The Klanwatch Project constructed a listing of individuals and groups advocating white supremacy. This enabled SPLC to stigmatize supremacist groups. SPLC became an important source of information in the civil rights movement and established its legitimacy as an activist organization. SPLC uses a map of what the organization considers to be active U.S. hate groups, which in 2012 totaled more than a thousand organizations, chapters, and groups. SPLC’s criteria for an organization to be considered a hate group is not clear, but it is no longer limited to racism. According to the “Hate Map” page of the SPLC website, all hate groups have “beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.”¹² Hate group activities can include “criminal acts, marches, rallies, speeches, meetings, leafleting or publishing.”¹³ SPLC analyzes the websites and publications of each group to determine if it is a hate group; however, websites that appear to be the work of a single individual, and not representative of an entire group, are not included on the Hate Map.

The listing of possible hate group activities is quite broad and how activities are interpreted as hateful can be subjective. Whether certain beliefs malign an entire class of people can be a matter of interpretation. Asserting that Muslims are subhuman, for example, would meet the condition of hatred. But the conviction that one espouses better, or even superior, theological beliefs is not in itself a matter of hatred toward members of other religious groups, because most people, including Muslims, feel that their own beliefs are superior to the beliefs of others. And yet evaluators may well call it hatred when Christians proclaim the superiority of their beliefs.

Such subjective criteria make it easy for an evaluator of potential hate groups to be lenient when evaluating groups that arouse his or her sympathy,

¹²“Hate Map,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Active U.S. Hate Groups, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map>.

¹³Ibid.

but stricter when evaluating groups toward which he or she is hostile. Given the progressive orientation of the SPLC, it is plausible that progressive groups may not be seen as hateful unless they openly state that out-groups are subhuman, while conservative groups can be defined as hateful for perceiving their ideas as better than the ideas of their out-groups. The subjective nature of the criteria for determining a hate group provides a conceptual structure more vulnerable to social bias than an objective criteria applying to groups across a wide political, cultural, and religious spectrum.

Over the past few years many scholars, journalists, authors, researchers, activists, and other individuals have used SPLC as a source for identifying hate groups. SPLC has been seen as the gold standard for determining if a group is a hate group or merely a group with social or political opinions that differ from mainstream society. But SPLC does not label hate groups using the kind of objective method we would expect from an organization seen as embodying a gold standard. The SPLC blog *Hatewatch*, for example, is subtitled *Keeping an Eye on the Radical Right*.¹⁴ One can infer that only hatred by conservatives warrants the attention of the SPLC. With the exception of black separatists,¹⁵ it is fair to argue that all groups that land on Hate Map are groups associated with conservative politics or religion.¹⁶

Using an evenhanded approach, an evaluator would find that many progressive groups could also be included on *Hatewatch*. With the list's broad criteria, it is difficult to assess with accuracy whether hateful groups with a progressive ideology can comport with the standards SPLC uses to identify hate groups. Comparing a progressive group that uses harsh rhetoric with a conservative group on *Hatewatch* helps to envision the possibility of comparable progressive "hate" groups.

¹⁴*Hatewatch: Keeping an Eye on the Radical Rights* (blog), <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/>.

¹⁵For example, the Nation of Islam and the New Black Panther Party are also on the SPLC's list of hate groups.

¹⁶Is it possible that hatred is more embedded within conservative ideology than progressive ideology? Indeed, scholars advocating a theory of right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1968 and 2007, Hunsberger 1995) contend that political and religious conservatives are more likely to blindly follow authorities when those authorities advocate the removal of the rights of minority group members. However, my recent research (2013) shows that many of the characteristics of authoritarianism can be exhibited by political and religious progressives when they are asked about conservative Christians. Bob Altemeyer, *The Authoritarians* (Winnipeg, MB: Bob Altemeyer, 2007); Bob Altemeyer, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1968); and Bruce Hunsberger, "Religion and Prejudice: The Role of Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Right-Wing Authoritarianism," *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 2 (1995): 113–29. George Yancey, *Dehumanizing Christians: Cultural Competition in a Multicultural World* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

Comparison of Military Religious Freedom Foundation to Family Research Center

In 2010 SPLC made the controversial decision to include the Family Research Center (FRC) on *Hatewatch*. Clearly FRC was not placed on *Hatewatch* for the same reasons as the Ku Klux Klan or other violent supremacist groups. Justification for labeling FRC a hate group was due to FRC's assumed intent to malign LGBT individuals. Specifically, SPLC accuses FRC of making untrue assertions about the motivations of gay rights organizations and perpetuating hateful, untrue myths about LGBT individuals. These actions are not violent in and of themselves, but supporters of SPLC argue that they can lead to violence.

For example, the SPLC webpage on FRC cites a fundraising letter from Tony Perkins, head of FRC, in which he states about LGBT activists: “[I]t’s part of a concerted effort to persuade kids that homosexuality is okay and actually to recruit them into that lifestyle.”¹⁷ Unless he has a mind reading machine or actual claims from gay rights leaders that they are recruiting children for their organizations, Perkins cannot back up this claim. It is a claim that can be seen as stigmatizing LGBT individuals. The FRC is also accused of perpetuating myths such as that gays have higher molestation rates and same-sex parenting harms children. SPLC asserts on its website that science has proven these claims to be false/incorrect and that FRC spreads lies that stigmatize homosexuals.¹⁸

How SPLC treats “myths” is noteworthy. A recent magazine article by Charlotte Allen makes a convincing case that the disagreement between SPLC and FRC regarding child molestation is more about different interpretations of scientific studies than about one side accepting science and the other side rejecting it.¹⁹ Moreover, recent research by Mark Regnerus indicates that same-sex parenting may be connected to social dysfunctions in children.²⁰ Furthermore, other research has revealed severe flaws in previous

¹⁷“Family Research Council,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Get Informed, Intelligence Files, Groups, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/family-research-council>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Charlotte Allen, “King of Fearmongers,” *Weekly Standard*, April 15, 2013, http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/king-fearmongers_714573.html.

²⁰Mark Regnerus, “How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study,” *Social Science Research* 41, no. 4 (July 2012): 752–70. This research has been disputed by LGBT scholars and activists. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the controversy behind this research; nevertheless, Regnerus’s piece is a study in a peer reviewed journal. It is sufficient to note that SPLC cannot accurately claim undisputed evidence that same-sex couples are identical to traditional couples with regard to child-rearing.

research affirming that same-sex parenting has no effect on children.²¹ It is too simplistic to state that the FRC ignores scientific research to promote hateful statements, and more accurate to argue that FRC focuses on scientific findings in a perhaps uncharitable way, and in doing so promotes resentment and stigma against LGBT individuals.

If we use the actual, and not stated, reason SPLC provides for designating FRC a hate group, then we can ask whether other groups exist that are not on the list because of whom the group targets. For example, if a particular group targets conservative Christians, then it may escape being designated a hate group by SPLC. To see if this is the case it is useful to examine a group that opposes conservative Christians with strong rhetoric, such as the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF).

MRFF was established in 2005 by Michael Weinstein.²² He started the organization in response to discrimination he and his sons experienced from Christians in the military. Consequently, MRFF was founded to address what Weinstein perceived as too much conservative Christian influence within the military. He has been quite willing to criticize conservative Christians. In a *Huffington Post* blog entry titled “Fundamentalist Christian Monsters: Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” for example, Weinstein accuses Christians of attempting to usher in “a blood-drenched, draconian era of persecutions, naturalistic militarism and superstitious theocracy.”²³ Evidence of acts of violence of these types by Christians is exceedingly lacking, because research suggests that Christians with higher levels of religiosity are less likely to commit crimes.²⁴ Furthermore, Weinstein needs that same mind reading machine Perkins lacked to claim reasonably that Christians seek an

²¹Loren Marks, “Same-Sex Parenting and Children’s Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association’s Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting,” *Social Science Research* 41, no. 4 (2012): 735–51; Douglas W. Allen, “More Heat Than Light: A Critical Assessment of the Gay Parenting Literature, 1995–2010,” unpublished paper, 2011, available at http://works.bepress.com/douglas_allen/1/; Robert Lerner and Althea K. Nagai, *No Basis: What the Studies Don’t Tell Us About Same-Sex Parenting* (Washington, DC: Marriage Law Project, 2001), <http://protectmarriage.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/nobasis.pdf>.

²²Ben Burrows, “An Interview with Michael Weinstein,” In Their Own Words, *Philadelphia Jewish Voice* 32 (February 2008), <http://www.pjvoice.com/v32/32300words.aspx>.

²³Michael L. Weinstein, “Fundamentalist Christian Monsters: Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” *Huffington Post*, April 16, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-l-weinstein/fundamentalist-christian-_b_3072651.html.

²⁴Olena Antonaccio, Charles Tittle, Ekaterina Botchkovar, and Maria Kranidiotis, “The Correlates of Crime and Deviance: Additional Evidence,” *Crime and Delinquency* 47, no. 3 (2010): 297–328; Colin J. Baier and Bradley R. E. Wright, “‘If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments’: A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Religion on Crime,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 38, no. 1 (2001): 3–21; Chau-Kiu Cheung and Jerf Wai-keung Yeung, “Meta-Analysis of Relationships between Religiosity and Constructive and Destructive Behaviors among Adolescents,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 33, no. 2 (2011): 376–85.

oppressive theology, since no major Christian organization states such a goal.²⁵ The *Huffington Post* blog entry isn't the only place where Weinstein accuses Christians of being willing to use mass murder to promote their goals. He also makes this claim in his co-written book, *No Snowflake in an Avalanche: The Military Religious Freedom Foundation, Its Battle to Defend the Constitution, and One Family's War against Religious Extremism in High Places*.²⁶

In these few comments Weinstein has violated some of the same norms SPLC used to designate FRC as a hate group. Weinstein is promoting a myth of Christian violence not substantiated by previous research and has attributed motives to conservative Christians that he cannot document. In addition to making these comments, Weinstein has also partially blamed the actions of Major Hasan, the alleged killer at the Fort Hood shootings in 2009, on his mistreatment by Christians;²⁷ linked the actions of Christians to Stalin and Hitler;²⁸ and accused Christians of using cult-like tactics to invite military teens to pizza parties and movie nights.²⁹ Just as it can be argued that Perkins is guilty of fostering resentment toward and stigmatizing LGBT individuals, Weinstein can be accused of fostering resentment toward and stigmatizing conservative Christians. If comments similar to those Weinstein made about conservative Christian activists were made about LGBT activists, it is highly likely that he and MRFF would be on *Hatewatch*. Ironically, Weinstein uses *Hatewatch* to justify his arguments.³⁰ Being placed on *Hatewatch* is due less to the degree or nature of hatred than to who is the target of that hate.

²⁵Of course, one can find outlier example of conservative Christians making claims that can be interpreted as a desire for theocracy. However, there are homosexual activists who make claims that seem to substantiate the "myths" that SPLC claims are incorrect. For example, the National Association of Man-Boy Love actively works towards the legalization of pedophilia and uses the acceptance of homosexuality in their arguments. Yet one of the myths the SPLC discusses concerns the development of the acceptance of pedophilia due to hate crime laws. Just as the existence of individuals who argue for a link from homosexuality to pedophilia does not substantiate that homosexual activists seek to promote pedophilia, it is also the case that outlier Christians who support a notion of a theocracy does not mean that Christian activists seek to violently set up a theocracy.

²⁶Michael L. Weinstein and Davin Seay, *No Snowflake in an Avalanche: The Military Religious Freedom Foundation, Its Battle to Defend the Constitution, and One Family's War against Religious Extremism in High Places* (Los Angeles: Rare Bird Books, 2012).

²⁷Michael L. Weinstein, "Hasan and the Proselytization Factor," On Faith, *Washington Post*, November 10, 2009, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2009/11/hasan_and_the_proselytization_factor.html.

²⁸Burrows, "An Interview with Michael Weinstein."

²⁹Michael L. Weinstein, "Fundamentalist Christians Evangelizing Military Youth on the Taxpayer's Dime," *Huffington Post*, February 27, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-l-weinstein/club-beyond-military-proselytization_b_2734370.html.

³⁰Weinstein, "Fundamentalist Christian Monsters."

The purpose of this analysis is not to argue that MRFF should be placed on a hate list; nor do I argue that FRC must be taken off *Hatewatch*. I contend that it is intellectually inconsistent to place FRC on a hate list that does not include MRFF—if that list is intended to be a comprehensive measure of hatred in the United States. The MRFF has exhibited qualities similar to those for which the FRC has been criticized. A “hate” list composed through the use of consistently followed criteria would either contain MRFF and FRC or exclude both organizations. This inconsistency within *Hatewatch* is not due to SPLC’s innate inability to assess correctly the potential of hate within MRFF and FRC. This distorted assessment is connected to the SPLC’s refusal to consider conservative political, cultural, or religious groups as potential victims of hatred. This unwillingness serves an important organizational purpose for SPLC, although it complicates the claims that SPLC is a fair arbitrator of hatred in the United States.

Is It Okay to Hate Christians?

Perhaps there are rational reasons why conservative groups should be targeted for hate. For example, SPLC claims to defend those maligned for typically immutable characteristics. This provides a reason for SPLC to be unconcerned about hatred directed at conservative Christians. If homosexuality³¹ and race are immutable characteristics, then clearly religion is not and it may be acceptable to hate someone who chooses the wrong religion. But this rationale does not explain why SPLC is concerned with Islamophobia. Furthermore, SPLC has paid considerable attention to unfair treatment of undocumented immigrants. Clearly these immigrants made a choice to come to the United States. To remain consistent, one has to argue why vilifying the decision to follow the Christian religion is acceptable, but it is not acceptable to vilify the decision to transgress a country’s national borders.

³¹To be sure, it is not completely clear if homosexuality is innate. While acceptance of homosexuality as a biological trait is commonly argued by many scholars (Dorner et al. 1975; Mustanski, Chivers, and Bailey 2002), others have discussed the fluidity of sexuality that inadvertently challenges notions of innate sexual orientations (Wilkerson 2009). It is beyond the scope of this paper to flesh out this argument and I accept the argument of homosexuality as being innate at this point to further the argument of the paper. Gunter Dorner et al., “A Neuroendocrine Predisposition for Homosexuality in Men,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 4, no. 1 (January 1975): 1–8; Brian S. Mustanski, Meredith L. Chivers, and Michael Bailey, “A Critical Review of Recent Biological Research on Human Sexual Orientation,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 13 (2002): 89–140. William S. Wilkerson, “Is It a Choice? Sexual Orientation as Interpretation,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 97–116.

Another argument for allowing conservative Christian organizations to be branded as hate groups is that there are supposedly no real consequences to this hatred. Christianity is the religion of the majority in the United States and members of this faith are in an excellent position to defend themselves. This argument does not hold up. First, while Christians have majority group status in many areas, they do not have such privileges in all areas of our society. My recent work indicates that being recognized as a conservative Christian is a hindrance to employment in academia.³² It is plausible that in other areas dominated by cultural progressives, such as media and the arts, hatred towards conservative Christians has real consequences.

Second, it is a myth that no violence is directed toward Christians. Churches are not burned solely to collect insurance or because of racial hatred.³³ I cannot forget the Wedgewood Church shooting—in which Larry Ashbrook killed seven individuals and wounded seven others—because it occurred in 1999, the year I moved to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. It is not inconceivable that Ashbrook, who was mentally unstable, was influenced by hateful comments about Christians before going on this rampage. Anti-Christian hatred likely influenced Floyd Corkins in his attempt to kill members of the FRC. Ironically, Corkins reportedly used SPLC's website to identify FRC as a target.³⁴ Violence motivated by "hate speech" can be perpetrated against conservative Christians and Christian groups.

Another argument for ignoring hatred toward conservative Christians may be that such hatred is acceptable if launched against what are taken to be truly hateful groups. It may be useful to be "intolerant of the intolerant." I disagree, however, since if individuals can become hateful toward those they hate, then why cannot hated groups be allowed to hate back? If hatred is an acceptable response to being hated, then the FRC gains the moral right to hate groups publicly accusing them of hatred, since such groups clearly exhibit hatred toward them.

³²Yancey, *Compromising Scholarship*.

³³Just one example of a church burning connected to religious, and not racial, animosity can be seen in the actions of Jason Bourque, who was convicted of burning churches in east Texas and was found to have atheist material in his possession. Lee Hancock, "Atheist Books, Guns Found at Home of Arson Suspect," *Dallas Morning News*, February 24, 2010, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20100224-Atheist-books-guns-found-at-8793.ece>.

³⁴"Floyd Corkins Pleads Guilty to Family Research Council Shooting," ABC7.com, February 3, 2013, <http://www.wjla.com/articles/2013/02/floyd-corkins-hearing-accused-frc-shooter-may-take-plea-deal-84917.html>.

A final assertion for why we should ignore hatred toward conservative Christians may be that there is not as much hatred toward members of that group as toward members of other groups in our society. This assertion builds somewhat on the notion that because Christianity is the religion of the majority in our society it is therefore highly accepted. And yet, my previous work on this subject reveals that animosity toward Christians is at least as high as animosity toward Muslims and is more prevalent than animosity toward Jews.³⁵ That work also indicates that the individuals with anti-Christian animosity tend to be well-educated and white, qualities indicating more per capita social power than those with other types of anti-religious hostilities. Individuals with hatred toward Christians are in a better position to use hatred in shaping social and political policies that influence Christians than those with animosity toward other religious groups.

If none of these rationales explains the exclusion of hatred toward conservative Christians by SPLC, then what is a more logical explanation? A powerful argument can be made that this exclusion evolved due to the social position of SPLC, which developed in a political atmosphere where progressives pushed for civil rights legislation. This allowed SPLC to attract political and social progressives, who brought with them opinions about who are the perpetrators and who are the victims of hatred. Acceptable in-groups and unacceptable out-groups for SPLC would be determined by the vested interests of those progressives. As our society became more politically partisan, SPLC cemented its position as speaking for those with progressive political and social attitudes. Rather than developing into an objective clearinghouse for the identification of hatred—no matter where the source of that hatred may develop—SPLC has become a useful organization for progressives to legitimate their battle against conservatives. Since conservative Christians are categorized as opponents there is little, if any, incentive for SPLC to recognize hateful expressions against Christians, because doing so actually works against the social vested interest of the group.³⁶

³⁵George Yancey, "Who Has Religious Prejudice? Differing Sources of Anti-Religious Animosity in the United States," *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 2 (December 2010): 159–71.

³⁶The fundraising needed to maintain such an organization is a practical reality of this focus. By situating itself on one side of the larger political and cultural war instead of remaining a "neutral" arbitrator of expressions of hate, SPLC is in a position to find financial support from the progressive communities that they serve. It may be possible to create an organization that addresses expression of hatred from both conservatives and progressives; however, it is unclear whether such an organization would manifest enough vested interest by financial supporters to maintain its effectiveness. The bifurcated nature of our political culture may make it nearly impossible to create neutral and fair "referees" to identify social excesses within both the conservative and progressive subcultures in our society.

Even conservative political and religious organizations not placed on *Hatewatch* are affected by the stigma SPLC can generate. Such groups may feel more constraint on expressing their ideals relative to their progressive counterparts, because they may be misunderstood and stigmatized as a hate group. The nonexistence of a similar conservative organization with the reputation to create a similar list of progressive groups frees those progressive groups to disparage their political enemies in ways not allowed to conservative political groups.

If SPLC is to become an objective broker of expressions of hate it needs to alter its current organizational structure. First, it needs an objective standard by which hatred is measured. The current standard is too subjective, and allows individuals to label hate groups according to their political and social biases. Second, a true standard of assessing hatred cannot be limited to individuals on one side of the political and/or cultural spectrum. Research has established the presence of animosity toward a traditional group such as conservative Christians,³⁷ and the probability is high that members of such groups are sometimes the victims of religious discrimination in certain social environments.³⁸ Limiting assessment of hatred to one side of the political/cultural spectrum creates a distorted view of the actual instances and consequences of hatred.

It is not, however, in the organizational interest of the SPLC to take a less distorted approach. Because the SPLC relies on the intellectual, social, and financial support of progressives, taking steps toward employing an objective, balanced assessment of hatred can threaten progressive support. Given the reputation the SPLC already has as a progressive organization, it seems unlikely that conservative groups will supply sufficient resources to make up for a loss of progressive support. SPLC is institutionally limited in its ability to monitor with accuracy hatred in all of its various forms in the United States. What the SPLC does instead is meet certain important needs of its progressive clientele by stigmatizing certain political and cultural out-groups via *Hatewatch*.

Conclusion

It has become widely accepted to turn to *Hatewatch* as an authority for assessing what individuals and groups are bigoted. And it has become commonplace among progressive advocates to use its inclusion on SPLC's Hate

³⁷Yancey, *Dehumanizing Christians*; Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio, "A Prejudice for the Thinking Classes," *American Politics Research* 36, no. 2 (2008): 155–85.

³⁸Gartner, "Antireligious Prejudice"; Yancey, *Compromising Scholarship*.

Map as sufficient evidence that an organization is indeed a hate group.³⁹ In light of this critical analysis it is fair to argue that SPLC is a standard only in evaluating certain types of hatred. Accepting *Hatewatch* as the final word implies that hatred toward social conservative groups is nonconsequential. The shortcomings of SPLC should be anticipated, since there are social and cultural forces working against the formation of an objective listing of all “hate” groups or hateful public figures. The lack of critical analysis of SPLC supports an illusion that SPLC is the ultimate arbitrator of what is hateful and what is not.

Some can argue that SPLC may be a perpetrator of the hatred it claims to fight. The 2012 shooting outside the FRC headquarters perpetrated by Floyd Corkins provides a clear link from rhetoric to attempted violence. If the concern surrounding expressing hatred stems from the possibility that such expression turns into violence, the Corkins shooting provides clearer evidence of this connection than any example I read on the SPLC website entry on the FRC. Furthermore, Julian Bond, a member of the SPLC board of directors, is reported to have said that Tea Party groups are “admittedly racist.” While one can make the argument that Tea Party members are more likely to be racist than other groups in society,⁴⁰ I have not encountered any story of a Tea Party leader admitting that the Tea Party is racist. Using the criteria that the SPLC has applied to Tony Perkins, Bond can be accused of mislabeling or even lying about his political opponents. What these examples suggest is that even SPLC is sometimes inconsistent with the values it espouses.

³⁹Justin Berrier, “CNN Turns to Anti-Immigrant Hate Group FAIR For Immigration Commentary,” Media Matters for America, blog post, August 19, 2011, <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2011/08/19/cnn-turns-to-anti-immigrant-hate-group-fair-for/183858>; Callie Carmichael, “Anti-Government Extremists Groups Reach Record Levels, Say Experts,” CNN U.S., March 6, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/05/us/splc-extremist-groups-report/>; David Fahrenthold, “Self-Deportation Proponents Kris Kobach, Michael Hethmon Facing Time of Trial, WP Politics,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-04-24/politics/35452165_1_immigration-reform-law-institute-illegal-immigrants-michael-hethmon; Steven Pulicover, “It’s Official: Southern Poverty Law Center Labels NOM a Hate Group,” *Rev. Steve* (blog), November 23, 2010, <http://reverandsteve.blogspot.com/2010/11/its-official-southern-poverty-law.html>; David Strong, “MSNBC: Stop Giving Air Time to Hate Groups Like Family Research Council,” petition to MSNBC, cited June 14 2013, available at [change.org](http://www.change.org/petitions/vice-president-communications-stop-giving-air-time-to-hate-groups-like-family-research-council), <http://www.change.org/petitions/vice-president-communications-stop-giving-air-time-to-hate-groups-like-family-research-council>.

⁴⁰Even there caution is warranted. While there is some work suggesting that Tea Party members are more likely to ignore institutional racism and have racial resentment, nothing indicates that these individuals are more likely to be overtly racist. When accusations of racism are made, it is generally implied that individuals possess overt racism. In this sense, even the notion that members of the Tea Party are racists can be quite misleading; however, such abuse of language has become so commonplace that it is hardly worth pointing out except in extraordinary situations such as this one. Arian Campo-Flores, “Are Tea Partiers Racist?” *Newsweek*, April 25, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/are-tea-partiers-racist-70695>.

My main focus, however, is not a critique of SPLC. I could have chosen a variety of other progressive individuals and organizations to assess and make the same basic points. This is a critique of the social biases within academia that preclude critical analysis of progressive social groups. Such neglect serves academics with progressive, secular perspectives by allowing progressive, secular social groups to make claims of truth and objectivity. Such claims enhance the social power of these progressives. But this neglect damages any real scientific attempt to assess social and political factors in our society. Scrutiny directed at conservative and religious groups—and they should be scrutinized—while progressive organizations are given a pass creates a distorted understanding of reality. In doing this, social science scholars replace an objective examination of our society with a biased approach serving progressive social and political interests.

I have addressed the absence of critical analysis of progressive social groups, in this case the Southern Poverty Law Center, in academia. There are likely other ways in which the social biases dominating academia reduces our ability to engage in scientific analysis. Academics should encourage introspection to identify how social and political biases alter the theoretical, methodological, and intellectual practices within their given field. Doing so empowers scholars to cleanse their disciplines, at least partially, of social biases that interfere with their ability to use a rational scientific approach.