Press release

Hass (hate) comes from *hetzen* (to hound): the history of an emotion

Literary scholar sees escalation of language in public discussion over last ten years – research project on politicizations and instrumentalizations in past and present literature – history of language shows connection between *Hass* (hate) and *hetzen* (to hound) – Episode 6 of the Cluster of Excellence's research podcast "Religion and Politics"

Münster, 21. May 2021 (exc) Preachers of hate, hate-filled comments, hate crime: according to research, the phenomenon of hate has increased greatly in the media and in public debate in recent years. "The keyword 'hate' can be used to describe a worrying development in society: namely, an open emotionalization that tends towards hostility and rejection", says literary scholar Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, who, working on a literary and cultural history of this emotion in the research project "Figures of Hate" at the University of Münster's Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics", has observed an escalation of language over the last decade: "Only ten years ago, we would have called the assassinations in Hanau, the murder of Walter Lübke, and the outrages perpetrated against synagogues and facilities for asylum seekers not 'hate crimes', but 'attacks' or 'acts of violence'".

A look at literary history shows that this extreme feeling has been politicized and instrumentalized since time immemorial. The Biblical story of Cain and Abel, religiously motivated hatred in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the work *100 Lines of Hatred* by the writer and columnist Maxim Billers, and current stage plays about hate mail and shitstorms – these open up dazzling perspectives on the facets of hatred, which, according to Wagner-Egelhaaf, is an emotion that cannot always be sharply distinguished from other emotions. Etymology shows that the word *Hass* (hate), which in its Indo-Germanic origin initially meant 'sorrow' or 'worry', derives from *hetzen* (to hound). "This is significant insofar as emotion and action come together here", she explains. "The link between word and deed is recognized".

The research project takes both a historical and systematic perspective, and integrates approaches from psychology and affect theory, to illuminate hate in its discursive forms. A project outline is available here. Wagner-Egelhaaf presents as part of the Cluster of Excellence's annual theme "Belonging and Demarcation" her initial findings in the sixth episode of the research podcast "Religion and Politics".

Literary history shows that hate is a matter of interpretation

The phenomenon proves complex, as Wagner-Egelhaaf explains. First of all, hate is a human emotion. “But hate is given a function, used for political ends, turned into language, and placed into stories and narratives”, she says. It is therefore worth listening and looking closely, since other emotions often resonate, too. “What we tend to identify as hate very often occurs together with similar yet different affects. Hate enters into connections, for example, with anger, rage, jealousy, revenge, and grief”, says Wagner-Egelhaaf.

She illustrates how far hate is a matter of interpretation by pointing to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. “There, the term ‘hate’ is not used; fratricide does not occur in the heat of the moment. Nevertheless, this is the primal scene of the literary motif of the quarrelling brothers, a motif where one feels unfairly treated and develops hatred for the other”. *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck’s 1952 literary adaptation of the Biblical story, turns this motif into a story of hatred. “Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* deals with the religious and economic motifs of a collective hatred between Jews and Christians”, says Wagner-Egelhaaf, “a hatred where hate always generates counter-hate. This shows the fragile motivation behind hate”. For Wagner-Egelhaaf, the writer Maxim Biller, on the other hand, employs a sharpness of rhetoric in *100 Lines of Hatred* to turn hate “to the service of an enlightened critique of, for example, petit-bourgeois patterns of thought and the culture industry”. Another contemporary example is the “Chorus of Hate” at a 2018 Hamburg Theatre Festival, when performers recited hate mails received by politicians. “It is precisely the professionalism of the performance that makes our experience of the primitiveness and danger of these texts so shocking”, says Wagner-Egelhaaf.

The origins of the word *Hass* lie in the Indo-Germanic ‘kad’, as Wagner-Egelhaaf explains, and mean something like ‘malaise’, ‘sorrow’, ‘suffering’. This root did not initially have the meaning of a hostile feeling directed against others; this only developed later in Germanic usage. “In Middle High German, *hazzen* means ‘to pursue’, and our New High German *hetzen* is also related to this verb. So there are good etymological reasons why speech in the public domain should mention *Hass* (hate) and *Hetze* (hound) in virtually the same breath today”, she explains. (mit/apo/vvm)

Caption: Prof. Dr. Martina Wager-Egelhaaf, © Hilla Südhaus