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THE SOCIOLOGY OF HATE SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

Hate speech reflects and reinforces underlying prejudices and structural inequalities, functioning as a mechanism to maintain existing power dynamics and social hierarchies. It is a multifaceted sociological phenomenon that intersects with the multileveled concepts of nationalism, racism, gender, and migration. This article argues that a comprehensive understanding of these intersections is necessary to sociologically analyse hate speech, revealing this interplay between systemic power structures and individual prejudices. This is necessary if we are to understand and mitigate the rising influence of hate speech in society.

Keywords: hate speech, nationalism, migration, border, purity

LA SOCIOLOGIA DEL DISCORSO D'ODIO

ABSTRACT

Il discorso d'odio riflette e rafforza i pregiudizi di fondo e le disuguaglianze strutturali e funziona come un meccanismo volto a mantenere le dinamiche di potere e le gerarchie sociali esistenti. Si tratta di un fenomeno sociologico multiforme che si intreccia con i concetti stratificati di nazionalismo, razzismo, genere e migrazione. Questo articolo sostiene che una comprensione completa di queste intersezioni è necessaria per analizzare sociologicamente il discorso d'odio, rivelando questa interazione tra strutture di potere sistemiche e pregiudizi individuali. Ciò è necessario se vogliamo comprendere e mitigare la crescente influenza del discorso d'odio nella società.

Parole chiave: discorso d'odio, nazionalismo, migrazione, confine, purezza

INTRODUCTION¹

Theoretical expectations (Malešević, 2024) have held that atavistic notions of group membership rooted in ethnic essentialism or primordial ties would gradually diminish following the decline of post-colonial nationalisms and, more definitively, with the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of the supposedly last few independent nation-states, such as Slovenia (these are often described as “historical latecomers”). However, these assumptions have proven premature. Nationalisms in “stateless nations” (e.g., Catalonia, Scotland) have regained momentum, underscoring the continued relevance of sub-state identity politics. Concurrently, questions of national identity and group belonging have reemerged with renewed intensity, particularly in response to transnational migration and the 2015 “Long Summer of Migration” in Europe. At the EU level, disputes over asylum policy have exposed deep normative divisions among member states, framing migration as a challenge to solidarity and sovereignty. Public discourse has oscillated between humanitarian and security narratives, while far-right populist movements have mobilized anti-immigrant rhetoric to contest multiculturalism and European integration. This has inevitably brought about practices of symbolic exclusion of non-nationals that are increasingly mirrored in policies that criminalize migration. Recent research confirms a global resurgence of nationalism (Bieber, 2022) and racism (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2020) alongside the proliferation of hate speech directed at racialized and marginalized Others; this further accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moreno Barreneche, 2020; Bajt, 2021).

Contemporary nationalist and racist discourse is not only pitted along the lines of cultural difference, but also invokes biological determinism through exclusionary narratives such as references to “our blood”, which intersect with sexist, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies. Stigmatizing those who are deemed not to belong (Triandafylidou, 1998; Bajt, 2016) or domestically marginal-

izing those who do not contribute to the biological reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997), the concepts of “external” and “internal” enemies function as strategic constructs for managing the perceived dislocations of postmodernity. This is vividly reflected in contemporary hate speech, which frequently targets immigrants, racial and religious minorities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Empirical evidence points to a simultaneous rise in nationalist economic protectionism, xenophobia (particularly Islamophobia), homophobia, and racially motivated violence, indicating the persistence and transformation of exclusionary discourses in contemporary societies. References to race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and culture are most prominent in debates on hate speech (cf. Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022, 443), that is why this article focuses on nationalism and migration as exemplary frameworks of sociological hate speech analysis.²

Nationalism and modern forms of racism are intertwined with notions of ethnic and cultural superiority, fuelling hate speech by promoting exclusionary ideologies that marginalize minorities. Such rhetoric is amplified in political discourse and media, legitimizing xenophobic attitudes, reinforcing social divides, and perpetuating prejudice and discrimination. Hate speech rooted in racism dehumanizes marginalized communities, legitimizes the unequal treatment of minorities and violence towards them, and perpetuates historical injustices and contemporary inequalities. Derogatory language stigmatizes ethnic groups and becomes a vehicle for perpetuating systemic racism. A systematic, large-scale analysis of American newspaper coverage of Muslims (Bleich & van der Veen, 2022) suggested that consistently negative media coverage contributes to the public’s acceptance of negative associations with marginalized groups. In addition to ethnic stereotyping, gender also plays a crucial role in the sociology of hate speech. Misogynistic language and gender-based slurs reflect broader patterns of gender inequality and reinforce patriarchal structures. Finally, migration adds another layer of complexity to hate speech, as migrants, often

1 This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS) [grant number J5-3102 *Hate Speech in Contemporary Conceptualizations of Nationalism, Racism, Gender and Migration*; and P5-0413 *Equality and Human Rights in Times of Global Governance*]. The author would like to thank Mateja Sedmak and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments to an earlier version of the manuscript. Thanks also goes to Matt Rees, who provided proofreading and language-editing assistance for this article.

2 Legal definitions generally relate prosecutable expression to attacks on protected characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on, whereas sociological analyses examine how language, threats, or stigmatizing labels reinforce dominance and social hierarchies. Beyond the legal threshold for hate speech, sociology thus shows how it can still create fear, social exclusion, and polarize communities.

depicted as the Other, have become the prime target for populist xenophobic and nativist rhetoric.³ By constructing migration as a threat to social cohesion and economic stability, anti-immigrant hate speech exacerbates social divisions and influences policies and practices that disadvantage migrant communities, increasing their discrimination and social marginalization.

This article analyses the interplay between the structural and situational factors that give rise to hate speech, with particular emphasis on the intersections of ethnicity, nationality, and gender. I propose a sociological definition of hate speech, conceptualizing it as discriminatory, anti-minority derogatory expression aimed at subjugating marginalized groups (see Leets, 2002). While hate speech is often discussed within legal and linguistic frameworks, and frequently in tension with the principle of freedom of expression, it remains undertheorized in sociology. The absence of a universal definition, coupled with the highly contextual and nationally embedded legal treatments of hate speech, has limited the scope for comparative or theoretically grounded analyses. Consequently, scholarly debate on hate speech is fragmented, and its causes, social functions, and impacts remain insufficiently examined. This article addresses that gap by analysing hate speech not as an isolated discursive event, but as a practice of social domination, deeply entangled with broader dynamics of nationalist state policies, racist prejudice, gendered norms, and migration “management”. I argue that hate speech should be studied through its intersections along these long-standing axes of inequality and exclusion. Building on this intersectional approach, I introduce two critical perspectives to improve our understanding of the symbolic logics underlying contemporary hate discourse: the perspective of “borders” and the perspective of “purity”. These two lenses help explain how hate speech constructs “insiders” and “outsiders”, and how it legitimizes hierarchies of belonging and exclusion.

The analysis is guided by two central research questions: 1) How should hate speech be defined sociologically? Does it encompass all offensive acts toward social groups, or is it specifically targeted at subjugating minorities perceived as the Other? 2) How is hate speech produced, and what role does the social position of the speaker and the target play in this process? To address these questions, I draw on theoretical and empirical literature spanning sociology, nationalism theory,

critical race studies, and migration studies, especially on “crimmigration” (Stumpf, 2006). In particular, I explore five core dimensions of hate speech: a) its function, b) its intended message and audience, c) the identity of its target groups, d) the role of prejudice and discrimination in its emergence, and e) its embeddedness in broader social and political systems. Through this analysis, I demonstrate why the study of nationalism, racism, gender, and migration is essential for understanding the mechanisms and consequences of hate speech in contemporary societies.

The paper begins with an overview of selected academic attempts to define the phenomenon of hate speech. While the literature in the field of computational large language models (LLMs) has seen exponential growth and has overtaken the legalistic discussion that has generally dominated hate speech analyses, my focus is on a sociological understanding. After examining how hate speech is produced and what roles the social position of the speaker and the target play in this process, I then turn to uncoupling its other dimensions. My inquiry is grounded in the recent European experience of migration. In 2015, Slovenia, a Schengen member state along the “Western Balkans” migration route, became a key transit corridor for refugees fleeing conflict zones in the Middle East (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2017). The arrival of large numbers of refugees triggered an upsurge in xenophobic rhetoric and online hate speech, alongside rapid shifts in policy. These included amendments to the (Slovenian) Defence Act, the construction of a razor-wire border fence with Croatia, and the tightening of asylum legislation (Bajt, 2019). Delineating how migration is constructed as a symbolic “invasion” through racist prejudice and as a security threat through nationalist policies, I argue that hate speech is embedded in the very core of the nation-state. These developments reflect not only a securitization of migration but also a broader discursive transformation, in which hate speech functions to justify exclusion and reinforce national boundaries.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HATE SPEECH

The findings from a recent systematic review of extant literature on hate speech and its correlates identified 423 academic definitions, 168 measurement tools, and 83 legal definitions (Vergani et al., 2024). Defining “hate speech” is undoubtedly

³ Migration is a complex phenomenon and should not be treated as a homogeneous category. Hate speech may be less frequent against high-skilled migrants from affluent states compared to irregular migrants from the Global South. However, despite differing attitudes toward different “categories” of people on the move, I argue that the conceptualizations applied in this article are universal.



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important, yet it is ultimately secondary to understanding its broader social consequences. While the law is tasked with providing precise definitions to delineate what constitutes an illegal utterance versus what remains permissible within the realm of freedom of expression, sociology approaches the issue from a different vantage point. Legal frameworks necessarily draw clear boundaries for the purposes of regulation and sanction. However, a wide spectrum of derogatory, demeaning, and hostile speech operates outside these legal confines. It is precisely within this extra-legal space that sociology, as the discipline concerned with the patterns and dynamics of social life, offers valuable insights. Hate speech, when examined sociologically, is not only a discursive practice that marginalizes and stigmatizes, but also a phenomenon with potentially harmful and at times even deadly consequences for individuals and communities. It should therefore be seen as a symptom and conceptualized as a pivotal mechanism that transforms derogatory speech into action, creating pathways toward real-world violence.

The consequences of hate speech are far-reaching and deeply damaging. On an individual level, it contributes to psychological harm, including anxiety, fear, and internalized stigma among those in targeted groups. It can also lead to social withdrawal, reduced access to public spaces, and diminished participation in civic life. On a structural level, hate speech legitimizes discriminatory policies, fuels social exclusion, and normalizes violence. It reinforces stereotypes that justify unequal treatment in education, employment, housing, and healthcare. In extreme cases,

hate speech lays the groundwork for hate crimes and institutionalized forms of oppression. Hate speech reflects and reinforces underlying prejudices and structural inequalities, functioning as a mechanism for maintaining existing power structures and social hierarchies. In sum, it is a multifaceted sociological phenomenon. The sociology of hate speech reveals this interplay between systemic power dynamics and individual prejudices, which is necessary if we are to understand and mitigate the rising influence of hate speech in society.

Several scholars have proposed sociologically relevant definitions of hate speech, highlighting different aspects of its meaning and effects. Tsesis (2002, 81) introduced the concept of *misethnicity*, which he defined as “hatred toward groups because of their racial, historic, cultural, or linguistic characteristics.” This is reflected in “consistently disapproving, hypercritical, and oft-reiterated generalizations about groups and persons belonging to them,” through which members of outgroups are depicted as malevolent, inherently evil, or vile (Tsesis, 2002). For Tsesis, such expressions are specifically directed at historically oppressed racial and ethnic groups and operate as a tool of their denigration. Waldron (2012, 27) similarly defined hate speech as “publications which express profound disrespect, hatred, and vilification for the members of minority groups”. In his account, the harm of hate speech lies not only in the insult to its targets, but also in the way it undermines their social standing and the assurance of dignity that democratic societies should provide. Gelber (2019) argued that hate speech constitutively and causally harms its target(s) by subordinating them and thus undermining their equal participation in public deliberation. She proposed a narrow, regulable category of hate speech defined by the kind and degree of harm it produces. In her view, an utterance becomes hate speech when: 1) it is publicly directed at a member of a group subject to systemic discrimination in the relevant context; 2) the speaker acts from relative authority (formal or informal) embedded in those discriminatory structures; and 3) the speech subordinates the target, thus legitimizing discrimination against it. She stressed that the capacity to harm can be mobile and may involve the construction of new targets. Gelber’s approach explicitly avoids relying on detecting a speaker’s emotion of “hate” or the use of epithets because “moderate” policy discussion or “jokes” may still be hate speech if they play a subordinating, exclusionary role (see also Jalušič, 2017). Hate speech is therefore not simply about offensive language, nor does it depend on the speaker expressing personal “hatred.” It is about speech acts that, when uttered by someone in a position of social or institutional authority, reinforce existing inequalities and undermine the civic

participation of already marginalized groups. This framework is valuable for my first research question because it draws attention to the relational character of hate speech: it matters who speaks, about whom, and within what structures of inequality.

After a series of legal and linguistic discussions having dominated the field, another key focus of contemporary hate-speech research arose: its rapid online dissemination. The use of computational methods and machine learning to analyse such speech is increasingly growing (Poletto et al., 2020). In digital spaces, the Internet's speed and reach allow hate speech to spread instantly, prompting many states to shift regulation to private platforms (Brown, 2017). This raises practical challenges for applying definitions in fast-moving environments where corporations – not public institutions – make decisions. These analyses highlight the need for definitions that account for the media conditions that shape hate speech. Hence Hietanen and Eddebo (2022) proposed four modes of definition: teleological definitions (speech directed toward harmful ends), consequentialist definitions (speech producing harmful effects), formal definitions (the prohibition of specific ideas or forms), and consensus-based definitions (rules set by authority or agreement). They argued that real-world practice usually blends these modes, and that it is necessary to more clearly articulate the underlying values, especially in regulatory and online-moderation contexts. Their typology is particularly useful for this article's second research question: it shows how definitions can be translated into rules and practices that recognize not only intent and effects, but also the ethical commitments societies choose to protect. After all, hate speech cannot be understood outside the framework of democratic regulation (Pejchal, 2020). Its definition requires attention to the harm it produces, since democracies must constantly balance freedom of expression with the protection of human dignity. Indeed, Pejchal (2020, 281) noted that "there is an international consensus that the term 'hate speech' is contextual," so any attempt to define hate speech faces limitations.

All these varied approaches underscore the need to focus on subordination as a component of systemic discrimination, to provide tools to clarify and operationalize definitions across legal and digital settings, and to expose the distinctive pressures of online media environments. For this reason, I develop a sociological perspective that links the conceptualization of hate speech to theorizations of nationalism, racism, migration, and gender. I argue that hate speech is not simply offensive group-directed expression, but speech that

produces and reinforces Otherness, particularly through racialized and gendered exclusion. This perspective embeds definitional criteria within observable social relations, and shows how hate speech functions as a mechanism of subordination, creating justification for exclusion, violence, or repression. My approach aligns closely with Parekh (2012, 40–41), who identified three core features of hate speech: 1) it targets a specific person or group based on an arbitrary, normatively irrelevant trait; 2) it stigmatizes the group by assigning it qualities widely regarded as undesirable; and 3) it portrays the group as an unwelcome presence and a legitimate object of hostility. This framework captures both the denigrating content of hate speech and its role in legitimizing exclusion and hostility.

Existing definitions converge on the idea that hate speech denigrates minorities or Others, undermining their dignity and civic standing. However, these categories are often treated as fixed rather than socially constructed. A sociological perspective instead examines how such groups are produced: notably through nationalism, racism, migration politics, and gendered hierarchies. From this view, hate speech is not merely an act of vilification but a mechanism that reinforces boundaries between "us" and "them." By embedding the concept within broader dynamics of power, inequality, and exclusion, sociology highlights how hate speech sustains enduring patterns of discrimination, particularly in the form of sexist, homophobic, racist, and nationalist prejudice, and why its effects reach beyond individual insults to threaten democratic cohesion. What counts as a vulnerable target is itself the outcome of wider social and political processes: nationalist myths of purity, border regimes, and the construction of the Other continually generate categories of belonging and non-belonging. Situating definitions of hate speech within these broader structures, we can extend the above discussed approaches, showing that when nationalism, racism, migration, and gender are considered, we can better understand both how hate speech is defined – and how it operates in practice.

BOUNDARY-MAKING AND THE "MYTH OF PURITY"

How is hate speech produced, and what role does the social position of the speaker and the target play in this process? My goal is not to reiterate warnings about the dangers of hate speech, nor to compile further empirical evidence of its proliferation, both of which are already well-documented (Waldron, 2012). Instead, this article adopts a historical and socio-analytical perspective to demonstrate, through

specific examples, how deeply destabilizing “destructive messages” can be socially (Tsesis, 2002). Situating hate speech in the context of migration processes emphasizes how nationalism, racism, and gender (including sexuality) relate to its production and proliferation. The research problem thus centres on reconceptualizing the link between nationalism, purportedly a neutral ideology of the nation-state, and migration, which increasingly carries negative and stigmatizing connotations in public and political discourse. Both must be analysed as gendered, racialized, and mutually entangled, a perspective largely absent from current scholarship. This reconceptualization is crucial, since questions of national, racial, and cultural affiliation are inseparably tied to the construction of what Triandafyllidou (1998) referred to as “significant others,” the (racialized) “them” against which collective identities of “us” are reinforced. Building on this theoretical foundation, I argue that understanding exclusion, discrimination, and hate speech requires attention to the nationalist, racist, and sexualized logics through which Otherness is articulated.

These processes are particularly pressing in the context of intensified global migration flows over recent decades and proliferated as a result of the social disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which raised fundamental questions surrounding social cohesion. Even though international migration flows dropped sharply in 2020 due to border closures, travel restrictions, and lockdowns (IOM, 2022), the pandemic coincided with a marked increase in hate speech and xenophobia. The United Nations Secretary-General warned of a “tsunami of hate” targeting migrants and minorities during the health crisis, driven by disinformation and scapegoating (United Nations, n.d.). Similarly, a Council of Europe report documented a significant rise in online hate speech against migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities during COVID-19, amplified by conspiracy theories and the so-called “infodemic” (CDADI, 2023). These trends suggest that proliferation is not actually linked to migration volume, but to heightened uncertainty, fear, and disinformation, which reframes migrants as symbolic threats in public discourse and intensifies identity-based polarization. Issues such as mobility, integration, and the inclusion of “foreigners” (i.e., migrants) thus become entangled with broader concerns about the viability of multicultural coexistence (Benhabib, 2004; Joppke, 2010). Importantly, the groups most disproportionately targeted by nationalist and racist exclusion, and by hate speech in particular, are also those who are already structurally marginalized: immigrants and refugees, as well as ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.

Media narratives, often shaped by nationalist and populist political agendas, frequently construct a homogenized image of migrants as inherently male and threatening, irrespective of their actual backgrounds or individual circumstances (Wojnicka & Pustułka, 2019). Scholarly analyses have subsequently employed critical postcolonial and intersectional frameworks of these perceptions, particularly in narratives that construct foreign men as dangerous and hypermasculine (Scheibelhofer, 2017). Yet neither migrant men nor migrant women constitute homogeneous groups. Their experiences are shaped by a complex intersectional matrix, including social class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and family circumstances; these produce diverse positionalities and migration outcomes. As such, migrant experiences are not only gendered but also differentiated in terms of marginalization and privilege (Wojnicka & Pustułka, 2017). An intersectional approach to Otherness considers how these ethnic, religious, gendered, and sexualized dimensions of identity are mobilized in nationalist discourse, practices, and policies. Only such an integrative framework can adequately explain the persistence and the evolution of hate speech in contemporary societies.

The multivocal concept of “purity,” closely tied to ideas of autochthony and nativeness, is a useful entry point for examining the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in hate speech’s intended message. Purity is invoked in national myths to establish the imagined unity of the nation, while simultaneously designating Others as impure, unsafe, or contaminating. The Dangerous Other is often depicted as a source of disease, destruction, or pollution, a figure whose very presence is framed as a threat to the health of the national body politic (Bajt, 2021). Historically, these ideas have underpinned radical projects of systemic exclusion, most extremely in policies of racial hygiene and eugenics (Gasman, 2004). Nevertheless, they remain present today, resurfacing during the COVID-19 pandemic as contagion anxieties mingled with xenophobia, and amplified by hate speech on digital networks (CDADI, 2023). Ideas of purity – and impurity – are also embedded in contemporary state practices that govern access to labour markets, residency rights, social benefits, and citizenship; together, they continue to shape policies of exclusion. Hate speech operates within these frameworks and can become part of the state’s nationalizing practices.

This dynamic illustrates how exclusionary discourses and institutional arrangements co-constitute the nation-state, revealing that hate speech functions not merely as a communicative act but as a mechanism embedded in broader projects of

boundary-making and identity construction. Nationalism, racism, and hate speech thus converge in their reliance on collective myths of purity and boundary-making. These myths are central to the construction of national identity and, in turn, to hate speech's function of exclusion. To understand how these processes relate to anti-immigrant hate speech, it is necessary to situate national identities within Europe's broader historical and contemporary self-understandings. Italy, Germany, "Eastern Europe," and Slovenia represent just some of the cases where ethnolinguistic nation-building has been particularly influential (e.g. Smith, 1998), and where multicultural realities coexist uneasily with nationalizing tendencies. At the core of these tendencies lies the myth of European exceptionalism. European identity has often been narrated as culturally superior, civilizationally advanced, and historically destined for progress (Geary, 2005). This self-understanding, however, insulates "Europe" from the global contexts in which it developed; these narratives obscure Europe's heterogeneous and interconnected origins, papering over the multicultural exchanges that have profoundly shaped the continent (Fontana, 2003). The Moorish presence in Andalusia, which lasted for eight centuries and influenced European science, art, and architecture, is often minimized. The Ottoman Empire's long-standing interaction with Southeast Europe, particularly the Balkans, remains both feared and denied in national memory, despite its centrality to the region's history (Todorova, 1997). Even Germany, frequently imagined as the heartland of European unity, was historically a mosaic of ethnicities and languages, from Sorbs to Jews to Slavic-speaking communities (Fontana, 2003; Kersting & Wolf, 2024). Europe's history is therefore one of encounters rather than purity. However, the traditional Eurocentric narrative of exceptionalism insists on isolating European development from its context and tracing it back to supposedly superior ancestors. Such retrospective nationalisms and myths of descent construct an image of a "pure" European identity and an inherently superior European "race." The Greeks provide a telling example: fragmented and divided, they forged a collective identity by defining themselves against external Others (Triandafyllidou, 1998). The invention of the "barbarian" as a mirror of inferiority enabled the Greeks to recognize themselves as a people of higher culture. What originally denoted nothing more than a foreigner, someone who could not speak fluent Greek, became transformed into the extremely negative category of "uncivilized savage" (Fontana, 2003).

The border provides another lens through which we can examine how social and political processes construct categories of belonging and

exclusion. A border may appear as a tangible, physical barrier such as a fence or a wall. It may also be digitally established, through technologies such as barcodes or biometric controls that regulate access to territory, rights, membership, or participation. Yet beyond these material and digital forms, the border always carries a symbolic dimension: it represents the line of (self)categorization that defines who belongs, who is recognized as part of the civic and cultural community, and who does not (Bajt, 2016). In this way, borders are as much about identity as they are about territory. Hate speech reinforces these symbolic borders by discursively constructing outsiders as dangerous or impure, thereby legitimizing exclusionary practices. Border-making is therefore not only a spatial or legal process, but also a communicative one, where language becomes a tool of boundary enforcement. In doing so, it shifts the discussion beyond borders as mere lines.

Myths of purity are reinforced through hate speech, introducing discursive violence into governance. The exclusion of foreigners is therefore not an accidental aberration, but intrinsic to the logic of the nation-state, which repeatedly seeks to homogenize itself (Rae, 2002), presenting the civic body as an ethnocultural body. Citizenship, immigration regimes, welfare entitlements, and education systems all reflect and reproduce this drive toward homogenization, systematically positioning minorities as outsiders. Conceptualizing hate speech as a potential part of these structural homogenization processes highlights its role in reproducing symbolic violence, where language becomes a mechanism for sustaining social hierarchies and normalizing systemic marginalization. The contemporary European context demonstrates how these dynamics operate in practice. In times of economic insecurity and political crisis, migration is frequently framed as a permanent threat. The portrayal of migrants, especially Muslims, as dangerous Others thus becomes a powerful populist tactic. What is crucial is that hate speech is not confined to the fringes of society. It increasingly emanates from the very institutions that are meant to protect democratic values, including parliaments and political parties. Right-wing politicians often resort to populist platitudes, invoking the protection of the ethnocultural nation against supposed threats from migrants, Muslims, or other minorities. This rhetoric does more than draw boundaries between "us" and "them"; it actively constructs the Other as inferior or uncivilized, thereby legitimizing contempt and disrespect. By framing minorities as existential dangers to the nation's purity and security, nationalism and racism transform symbolic exclusion into moral

panic, which in turn normalizes verbal aggression and paves the way for physical violence. Addressing the electorates as endangered ethnocultural nations illustrates how racism, migration politics, and hate speech dovetail to normalize exclusion and foster divisions.

Gender also plays a key role in hate speech, as misogynistic slurs reflect systemic gender inequality and uphold patriarchal norms. Hate speech not only insults individuals, but reinforces structural hierarchies that legitimize exclusion and violence against women, making gendered language a tool of social control. However, gender relations as well as stereotypes are socially constructed and intertwined with nationalizing processes. These often marginalize migrants, especially women, and normalize sexist and homophobic prejudice against minorities. This matters because ignoring gender as a social construct allows nationalist projects to portray migrant men and LGBTIQ+ individuals as cultural threats, embedding hate speech within broader political agendas.⁴ In the nationalist mythology, the male is the defender of the nation, “our” women, and “our” borders; any deviation from this ideal is perceived as threatening and unnatural, and consequently in need of elimination. Framing hate speech in this way allows the positioning of gender nonconformity as treasonous, legitimizing verbal and physical aggression as acts of patriotic defence. The principles of “male” and “female” are evidently separated, and their active and passive roles are clear (Mayer, 2000). This rigid dichotomy underpins hate speech by creating a binary moral order, demonizing those who challenge these roles. The rape of “our” women is therefore perceived as a penetration of the nation, a polluting intervention in the national body; any “mixing” with the Other symbolically corresponds to the loss of the nation’s purity, uniqueness, and culture. This metaphorical framing explains why hate speech often uses sexualized language: it dramatizes cultural anxiety and mobilizes fear of contamination to justify exclusionary rhetoric. Gender stereotypes, when interwoven with ethnic identity, can give ample scope for the thriving of racist nationalism (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Gender has thus emerged to play a pivotal role because it helps secure the “self” by creating the immigrant Other as culturally different. Hate speech then becomes a strategic identity-building practice, where defining the Other sustains a sense of superiority.

These historical and contemporary dynamics raise pressing questions about how to conceptualize migration in a world of increasingly technologized

borders on the one hand, and the symbolic exclusion of populations seen as non-belonging on the other. Technological border regimes not only regulate movement, but at the same time produce discourses that frame certain groups as perpetual outsiders, fuelling the narratives of threat and contamination that underpin hate speech. Migration to, from, and within Europe is not new; but it has now become one of the continent’s most contentious issues, transforming from a social fact into a moral panic. Too often, politics further exacerbates the problem rather than offering solutions, creating fertile ground for language that dehumanizes and delegitimizes migrants. Political amplification of fear legitimizes hate speech as part of mainstream debate. The rise of exclusionary rhetoric and hate speech in public institutions demonstrates how deeply myths of purity and danger continue to shape European societies, undermining the principles of equality, inclusion, and dignity that these societies claim to uphold.

The recent rise of populist nationalism has revived ideas of national purity, often cast in cultural or racial terms. Populist right-wing parties, such as the Lega Nord and the Brothers of Italy, UKIP in the UK, Golden Dawn in Greece, and Fidesz in Hungary, have all reinforced national boundaries by racializing difference, particularly in response to the 2015 “refugee crisis.” The figure of the Muslim migrant became a symbolic threat used to reassert ethno-racial and civilizational difference, thereby re-territorializing white identities (Thorleifsson, 2019). Refugees were portrayed as Islamic terrorists, and the Cologne New Year’s Eve assaults were used to cast Muslim men as criminals. In Germany, groups like Pegida and the Alternative für Deutschland have warned that “true Germans” are endangered by migrants and Muslims. Slovenia has similarly grounded identity in language, culture, and myths of autochthony, portraying migrants, particularly Muslims, as backward or dangerous. These narratives indeed shape policy: Slovenia built a razor-wire fence on its Croatian border in 2017, reflecting Europe’s broader border hardening. Despite different migration histories, such movements all construct exclusion through nationality, ethnicity, religion, and notions of symbolic impurity. Debates over whether Turkish-Germans can ever be fully German and fears of Balkan migrants diluting Slovenian culture fuel discrimination in housing and employment. Across Europe, migrants are linked to crime and welfare dependency, intensifying fears of “cultural contamination” and strengthening anti-immigrant sentiment.

4 However, the phenomenon of homonationalism strategically and selectively incorporates certain LGBTIQ+ subjects (e.g., white, cisgender, and middle-class gay) to showcase support for their rights as a means of reinforcing racial, religious, and cultural hierarchies. Their incorporation into the nation-state as symbols of modernity and progress hence occurs at the expense of racialized, immigrant, and non-normative bodies, which are simultaneously marked as threats.

From a sociological perspective, Leets (2002) emphasized that hate speech is not merely “offensive” speech, but a form of discriminatory expression that targets identity traits such as ethnicity, religion, or nationality. It is therefore instrumental; hate speech works to define and enforce the boundaries of national belonging. In this sense, it is intimately linked to the nationalist discourses outlined above. The racialized and gendered construction of the Dangerous Other does not remain in the realm of symbolic identity, but is enacted through speech practices that stigmatize and exclude. Hate speech thus serves as a discursive technology that reproduces nationalist myths of purity and constructs outsiders as existential threats.

CONSTRUCTING MIGRATION AS A THREAT

Let us now turn back to the function of hate speech and its embeddedness in broader social and political systems, particularly the phenomenon of migration. In the early 19th century, Europe experienced what Bade (2005) called “proletarian mass migration,” a period marked by the freedom to easily cross borders. This historical openness stands in stark contrast to the present, where migration is increasingly framed as a security threat. The shift has not been merely administrative; it has fundamentally altered the language and symbolism surrounding mobility. When borders become militarized, and monitored with infrared sensors and drones, migration is no longer conceived of as a human journey but as an intrusion. Irregular migrants, including asylum seekers, are often confined in detention-like settings and left in prolonged bureaucratic limbo. Such practices not only restrict movement, but they also construct migrants as inherently suspicious, reinforcing stereotypes of criminality. This securitization narrative feeds directly into hate speech, which thrives on metaphors of invasion and contamination, and portrays migrants as enemies. The concept of “symbolic assailants” (Jiang & Erez, 2018) captures this dynamic well: even without committing criminal acts, migrants are imagined as threats to the social order, and states increasingly merge criminal and immigration law (“cimmigration”) to manage migration (Stumpf, 2006; Zedner, 2019). This convergence reflects a shift in how states perceive and manage borders; they are no longer merely geographical demarcations, but dynamic spaces where legal, political, and social controls intersect. By blurring the boundary between crime and (im)migration, states provide a legal foundation for exclusionary rhetoric, making hate speech appear rational and justified. Securitization and legal frameworks do not simply regulate migration, but in effect actively shape a

discursive environment in which hate speech flourishes. Immigration violations, which had previously been civil matters, have now become criminalized, enabling detention and deportation under the banner of public order and national security. In Slovenia, recent reports indicate that foreign nationals now make up most of the prison population. Counterterrorism policies further fuse these legal regimes to fortify borders and control movement. More broadly, the principle of free movement throughout the EU has been challenged by the reintroduction of internal border controls. Discretionary policing at these borders contributes to the criminalization of migration, as law enforcement officers exercise considerable latitude in stopping and checking individuals, often relying on racial or ethnic profiling (van der Woude & van der Leun, 2017). These developments underscore the fact that borders are not merely lines on a map; they carry political, cultural, and emotional significance.

Nevertheless, one crucial fact about global migration is that most people continue to live in the countries in which they were born. Only one in every 30 people migrates across borders (IOM, 2024). This observation is not just statistical; it challenges alarmist narratives that fuel hate speech by portraying migration as an overwhelming or uncontrollable phenomenon. By showing that cross-border migration is relatively rare worldwide, the data undermines the rhetoric of “invasion” and helps us understand how exaggerated perceptions of threat become a foundation for hostile discourse. Despite their modest overall share, the number of international migrants has increased significantly over the past half-century. In 2020, an estimated 281 million people lived outside their country of birth, which was 128 million more than in 1990 and more than triple the figure recorded in 1970 (IOM, 2022; Castles et al., 2013). This long-term growth has made migration an increasingly visible and politicized issue at national, regional, and global levels.

Importantly, the relatively small statistical presence of migrants contrasts sharply with their outsized symbolic role in hate speech iterations. Although international migrants form only a small share of the world’s population, their regional concentration makes migration highly visible and politically charged, driving intense debate and media attention. As earlier sections have shown, populist, nativist movements, as well as racist hate speech, depict migrants, particularly Muslims, as existential threats to cultural integrity and security. Hate speech, framed around notions of invasion, impurity, and danger, magnifies the presence of migrants far beyond their demographic weight (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2019). In this way, migration statistics and hate

speech imaginaries diverge; while only a fraction of the global population migrates across borders, the figure of “the migrant” becomes central in political struggles over identity, belonging, and national purity. Media discourses are frequently fuelled by populist politicians who portray the overwhelming majority of migrants as young dangerous males (Wojnicka & Pustułka, 2017), while migrant women are marginalized and often reduced to reproductive bodies, exaggerating their role as child-bearers and framing them as demographic threats to the host nation (Sargent & Larchanche, 2007).

Another important fact concerning the act of crossing borders relates to the role of nationality and passport access. Surveys on overall quality of life by country and migration opportunities indicate that the availability of migration pathways is partly determined by one’s country of birth, and, in particular, by the passport held by the prospective traveller. This is crucial for understanding hate speech because such structural inequalities often become discursively exaggerated into narratives of privilege and exclusion. When mobility is framed as a marker of worth, hate speech exploits these disparities by portraying migrants from less privileged countries as inherently inferior or threatening, reinforcing stereotypes that legitimize discrimination and hostility. For example, the Henley Passport Index, a global ranking of countries according to the freedom of citizens to enter other countries, demonstrates that an individual’s ability to travel with relative ease depends significantly on citizenship. Visa access generally reflects a country’s status and standing in the international community, as well as its stability, security, and prosperity compared to other states. Slovenia ranks highly in this regard. The data also reveals two additional points. First, citizens of countries highly ranked on the Human Development Index can travel visa-free to approximately 85% of all other countries. Singapore, Japan, and South Korea occupy the top three positions, closely followed by Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. Most of these countries correspondingly also serve as popular destinations for immigration. Second, visa restrictions imposed on countries with very low levels of human development make regular migration routes difficult, if not impossible, for their citizens. As a result, irregular migration routes often represent the most (if not the only) feasible option for potential (e)migrants from these countries. Afghanistan ranks at the bottom of the list, along with Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen. Many people from these countries simply have no realistic opportunity to cross borders through regular channels.

Why are accurate statistics important for understanding migration? Because opinion polls show a worrying fact that the vast majority of people in European countries overestimate the share of the migrant population in their country. The discrepancies can be very large (European Commission, 2022). Close to seven in ten (68%) respondents overestimate the real share of immigrants in the population. Many governments have now adopted restrictive immigration controls and increasingly use criminal justice measures to address what they term the “immigration problem.” Border and crime-control discourses converge around protection and security, with criminal and immigration law acting as gatekeepers of social inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This article rests on the premise that hate speech must be addressed through a sociological lens. Such an approach allows for an examination of the social contexts, power relations, and symbolic dimensions of harmful speech acts. My definition of hate speech emphasizes its embeddedness in social hierarchies: it is speech directed against marginalized groups, with the intent or effect of reinforcing their subordination. Understanding hate speech in this way requires attention not only to the content of the message but also to its purpose and its situational context. Crucially, it is necessary to assess whether the perpetrator of hate speech occupies a position of social power and public influence, and whether the targeted group possesses the capacity to defend itself or to respond effectively in public discourse. In other words, hate speech cannot be fully understood in isolation from the asymmetries of power that structure social relations.

I have attempted to demonstrate that hate speech is not a matter of individual expression or interpersonal hostility, but a deeply embedded social phenomenon that reflects, reinforces, and legitimizes systemic inequalities. While legal definitions of hate speech remain necessary for delineating what is prosecutable within the rule of law, sociology provides the analytical tools to examine the broader range of derogatory discourse that exists outside legal confines, yet still produces tangible harm. Hate speech functions as both a mirror and a mechanism of structural power, shaping and maintaining hierarchies along the lines of nationality, ethnicity, gender norms, and migration status. By situating hate speech within the intersecting contexts of nationalism, racism, gender inequality, and migration politics, this analysis underscores its role as a conduit for prejudice and discrimination. It is not a random or isolated act, but an instrument for sustaining

existing social order. Historical and contemporary patterns show that hate speech contributes to the social construction of the Other as inherently inferior, dangerous, or undeserving. The targets of hate speech are rarely arbitrary: they are most often groups positioned as the Other, whose perceived difference is leveraged to justify exclusion, marginalization, or violence. Media representations, political rhetoric, and everyday discourse operate together to normalize such narratives, thereby influencing public attitudes, policymaking, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

Understanding hate speech therefore requires an intersectional sociological approach – one that connects the macro-level forces of political and legal systems with the micro-level realities of individual prejudice and everyday communication. Only by recognizing hate speech as both a product and producer of structural inequality can effective interventions be designed. This means not only addressing hate speech itself but also transforming

the social conditions that allow it to flourish. The challenge for contemporary societies lies not only in prohibiting the most egregious forms of discriminatory derogatory expression, but in dismantling the underlying social and institutional conditions that allow such discourse to thrive. By anchoring the analysis in this specific context while engaging broader theoretical debates, this paper contributes to a more grounded, interdisciplinary understanding of hate speech as a social phenomenon. In doing so, it also calls for renewed sociological engagement with a topic too often left either to the domains of law or quantitative computer science, despite its clear relevance for social dynamics, power, and inequality. As sociologists, scholars, and citizens, we are compelled to critically analyse how identities are constructed, weaponized, and policed. Only then can we work toward building inclusive societies that reflect Europe's actual heritage, not as a fortress of purity, but as a crossroads of humanity.

SOCIOLOGIJA SOVRAŽNEGA GOVORA

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava sovražni govor kot kompleksen družbeni pojav, ki presega pravne definicije in zahteva poglobljeno sociološko analizo. Cilj je pokazati, da sovražni govor ne predstavlja zgolj individualnega izražanja predsodkov in diskriminacije ali medosebne sovražnosti, temveč deluje kot mehanizem, ki odraža in utrjuje obstoječe družbene hierarhije ter systemske neenakosti. Tekst osvetli povezave med sovražnim govorom in konceptualizacijami nacionalizma, rasizma, spola ter migracij. Na ta način preučuje, kako sovražni govor deluje kot mehanizem utrjevanja družbenih hierarhij. Analiza vključuje sociološko interpretacijo javnega diskurza, medijskih reprezentacij in politične retorike, pri čemer se osredotoča na strukturne posledice sovražnega govora – predvsem za marginalizirane skupine. Na ta način razkriva, da sovražni govor pogosto cilja prav na marginalizirane skupine, ki so že tudi zgodovinsko v podrejenem položaju, ter da ima konkretne posledice: od psihološke škode in družbene izključenosti do normalizacije diskriminatornih politik in nasilja. Poseben poudarek je namenjen vprašanju moči: kdo ima dostop do javnega govora in kdo je tarča brez možnosti odgovora. Članek zagovarja potrebo po intersekcionalnem pristopu, ki povezuje makrostrukture z mikrorealnostmi vsakdanjih predsodkov. V zaključku poziva k širšemu sociološkemu angažmaju pri obravnavi sovražnega govora kot družbenega pojava, ki oblikuje identitete, utrjuje neenakosti in vpliva na prihodnost vključujočih družb.

Ključne besede: sovražni govor, nacionalizem, migracija, meja, čistost

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