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The Other N Word

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Abstract

As we waited for a ride, I noticed my friend's shirt. It looked strange and disjointed. It was white and black and looked like cut up picture of a contorted woman. Taken aback, I asked what it was.

"I don't know," he replied. "I like it because it looks Nazi." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, nazi

Disciplines

Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

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As we waited for a ride, I noticed my friend's shirt. It looked strange and disjointed. It was white and black and looked like cut up picture of a contorted woman. Taken aback, I asked what it was.

"I don't know," he replied. "I like it because it looks Nazi."

I asked him to repeat it three times, certain I had misheard. Part of me was convinced there was no way he could be saying that to someone who had been to a synagogue more often than to a church. Most of me was convinced that no one could want to appear "Nazi." But every time, I heard the same word.

Since then, I've heard it more times than I want to count and not as a way to describe someone who commits genocide.

Sometimes it is used as an insult. "She's such a Nazi. She won't let me go to the party until I finish my homework."

Other times, it's used to describe someone who is hyper-organized, strict or on top of tasks: "You're such a grammar Nazi." In that sense, it is as much "communist" as it is "Nazi," but no one would say "You're such a grammar communist." We recognize that "communist" has baggage, so why not "Nazi?" Why do people think "organized" or "task-manager" instead of "murderer?"

It's even used as a compliment. I realized this during a visit with my grandfather. He can be a little bossy (it's a family trait) and likes to keep busy organizing events for senior citizen. In response to his activity and joie-de-vivre, his friend told me with a smile, "Your grandfather's such a Nazi. He really keeps us in line!"

I did not dare look at my grandfather. I hoped he did not hear it. He remembers.

He wanted to be a soldier for America in World War II. He wanted to fight against the Nazis. He couldn't because of an old injury, so instead he became a medic. He has since become a pacifist. It was a dark irony for a war-weary World War II veteran to be called the name of his enemy.

But it was not the first time. He's a first generation Italian. When he was a child, part of his family was still in Italy, at the time under Mussolini. Many secrets are kept about that side of the family and I always feel as if there is something I don't know. My grandfather does not talk about it.

Being Italian is not all that could make him suspect back then. His last name, Chiodo, has been mistaken for being Japanese. Now my mother and I joke that the Kyoto Protocol was named after our family. Back then, especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, it was not a joke to be an Italian with a Japanese-sounding last name. It was un-American. It was, perhaps, "Nazi."

I wonder how I would have reacted if I was my grandfather and I had heard that comment. Would I have been angry? Would I have merely been weary? Would I have felt the war reach back across the decades and make itself fresh in a way I never thought possible?

How does it feel to be Jewish and hear it used so casually? How about for a survivor of Auschwitz to hear his enemy's name used as praise?

A few decades have not erased the impacts of Nazism, and Nazism itself is not dead. It lives on in the neo-Nazi movement and in other hate groups. Our words show them that we either don't know or don't care about the evils of Nazism. Sometimes we speak without recognizing who listens. By praising Nazis in our slang, we legitimize them, and we legitimize their hate. It gives them the chance to return when not that long ago we, and other nations, swore, "Never again."

Not every word deserves reclamation. "Nazi" certainly does not.

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