

Understanding the Racist Right in the Twenty First Century:  
A Typology of Modern White Supremacist Organizations

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## Introduction

For most Americans today the white supremacist movement exists solely in the history books. It is a throwback to a time when hooded Klansmen rode on horseback through the night burning crosses of the lawns of black families and lynching black men in the post-reconstruction south or when Nazis in brown and black uniforms marched the streets of Europe saluting fascist dictators in Germany, Italy, and Spain. The images of white supremacy today are of the marginalized southern “redneck” or the sullen, post-adolescent skinhead – angry men who hate everything because the world has given them nothing. These modern images have come to dominate the popular culture specifically due to historical changes in American society. While white supremacy was once considered a social norm in the era of “Jim Crow” laws and state sanctioned segregation, the success of the Civil Rights movement has made racism generally socially unacceptable. Through the television talk show, the television documentary, or the feature film, we have been taught that the white supremacist movement is a marginal part of a non-racist society.

Despite such historical changes, the white supremacist movement carries on building a membership and spreading its message of racial hatred across the United States and the world. The annual intelligence report of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2003a) found 708 organizations which it considers active hate groups in the U.S. This is an increase of approximately 5% from the previous year’s total of 676. Of these groups, the SPLC estimates that 610 are white supremacist organizations<sup>1</sup> with 133 Ku Klux Klan groups, 220 Neo-Nazi groups, 18 racist skinhead groups, 27 Christian Identity groups, 91 Neo-Confederate groups, and

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<sup>1</sup>The SPLC also includes Black, Jewish, and Latino/a separatist/supremacist organizations in its count of hate groups, but they are not counted as white supremacist for obvious reasons.

121 groups which could not otherwise be categorized<sup>2</sup> (SPLC, 2003a). The continued increase of membership in white supremacist groups<sup>3</sup> speaks to the ebb and flow of white supremacist group formation where groups often consolidate and splinter based on ideological and personality differences (Blazak, 2001; Ezekiel, 1995). However, actual membership within groups generally remains constant. The growth in organized white supremacist groups could be reflective of increased membership as a result of concerted recruitment efforts by white supremacists.

Statistics such as the above have long been based on attempts to categorize the myriad white supremacist groups into distinct categories based on criteria such as ideology, activities, and support bases. Generally, these categories have worked to adequately cover most groups which operate within a broader hate movement. However, one can see problems arising in the specific categorization used by groups such as the SPLC in order to define modern supremacist movements. The sheer volume of groups covered under the “other” category may be the direct result of typologies of hate groups which are too narrow in their definitions. This paper seeks to develop a new, broad typology for hate groups using some of the criteria established by previous researchers. By analyzing public statements made by supremacists on their websites, it is possible to make distinctions between three broad categories: political, religious, and youth cultural.

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<sup>2</sup>The total number of groups in the category labeled “other” by the SPLC is 137. The list includes various white supremacist and racist skinhead music labels, publishing companies, Odinist groups, and women’s groups. Also featured are conservative organizations that may not be explicitly white supremacist, but use similar rhetoric and often incorporate racist sentiments into their propaganda and organizing efforts. The Jewish Defense League (JDL) and Voz de Aztlan, a Latino/a organization, were also listed in the “other” category but were not counted in the list of white supremacist groups because of their minority orientation regarding the position of Jews and Latinos/as (respectively) in American society. The JDL does, however, espouse a racist ideology in regard to relations between Jews and Arabs, especially Palestinians, in regard to the state of Israel while the Voz de Aztlan engages in anti-Semitic rhetoric regarding the role of Jews in American Society.

<sup>3</sup>The total number of hate groups in the U.S. in 1999 was 457.

## Typologies of Supremacy

Supremacist organizations have generally been organized into specific categories based on what appear to be organizational or ideological criteria. Generally, typologies have defined the white supremacist movement of consisting of the Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and Christian Identity (Blee, 2003; Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996). In addition, Dobratz (2000) has established a typology of what she terms religious white supremacist groups which includes Christian Identity, Creativity<sup>4</sup>, and Odinism.

The modern Klan is a direct descendant of the groups of Confederate soldiers and other southern Whites who organized against reconstruction following the Civil War. The popularity of the organization has ebbed and flowed throughout the previous century and a half; however, Klan membership has been in decline over the previous two decades as a result of infighting between leaders, government infiltration and prosecution, and successful legal action by anti-racists. Most researchers of the racist right will point out that referring to a monolithic Ku Klux Klan is a misnomer as there have been numerous splits and dozens, if not hundreds of Klan organizations formed in recent decades (Blee, 2003; Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996). Attempts by Klan leaders to regain and consolidate power have led to radical changes in some Klan groups. Certain Klans have attempted to create a more mainstream image by renouncing violence and even running candidates for local and state offices (Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996). Other groups have chosen to adhere to more radical ideologies by associating with Neo-Nazi groups which they may have shunned in the past (Blee, 2003) or affiliating with the Christian Identity religious belief (Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996).

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<sup>4</sup>Creativity is the belief system of the organization which was known as the World Church of the Creator. This name is no longer used by the organization due to a copyright lawsuit from a New Age religion which had used the same name (SPLC, 2003b; SPLC, 2003c)

Neo-Nazi organizations generally hold some ideological similarity to the original German National Socialist Workers Party led by Adolph Hitler. They see their ideology as being directly influenced by Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and often see Nazi Germany as a model of a racially pure state. Neo-Nazi organizations have combined the symbols and rituals of Nazism with modern day rhetoric against African Americans, immigrants, the U.S. government, homosexuals, feminists, and, of course, Jews. Anti-government rhetoric as well as complex theories about Jewish world domination have led many neo-Nazi groups to prepare for a violent race war against American society. Many groups have also actively recruited skinheads as future foot soldiers for this coming war (Blee, 2003; Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996). A significant number of holocaust revisionist groups and individual "researchers" may also be associated with the Neo-Nazi movement (Blee, 2003).

Although the skinhead subculture as a whole is not racist, there is an active element of racists who use it as both a recruiting ground and a means of spreading propaganda. The number of racist skinheads often varies due to the constant number of individuals who enter and leave the subculture<sup>5</sup>. It has been assumed that many racist skinheads are less committed to and less knowledgeable about the actual ideology of neo-Nazis than other white supremacists. Skinheads are often drawn more to the subculture and the escape it provides from mainstream society than racist ideology. The subculture thrives on a network of bands, fanzines, music labels, and concerts as well as a shared aesthetic involving tattoos, patches, and Nazi insignia. The commitment to violence by skinheads has made them possibly one of the more dangerous

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<sup>5</sup>It is not uncommon for skinheads to be associated with racist, anti-racist, and "non-political" elements within the subculture during their time as members.

elements in the white supremacist movement (Blazak, 2001; Blee, 2003; Ferber, 1999; Hamm, Marks, 1996; Ridgeway, 1995)

Citing Barkun (1997), Dobratz (2000) defines the primary beliefs of Christian Identity as follows: “(1) white ‘Aryans’ are the offspring of the tribes of Israel according to the Bible; (2) Jews are the children of the devil, a relationship that is traced back to the sexual relationship between Satan and Eve in the Garden of Eden; and (3) the world is rapidly approaching a final apocalyptic struggle between good and evil with Aryans battling a Jewish conspiracy to try to save the world” (289). A critical element that distinguishes true white people from others by the ability to blush because whites are the descendants of Adam or Aw-dam who name is said to mean, “to show blood in the face” (Dobratz, 2000; Ridgeway, 1995). Christian Identity followers have organized themselves through a network of small churches and communities across the United States. The most noted of these is the Aryan Nations organizations which called for the establishment of a white homeland in the Pacific Northwest and the division of the United States into a series of racially exclusive nations (Blee, 2003; Dobratz, 2000; Ferber, 1999; Marks, 1996; Ridgeway, 1995).

In addition to Christian Identity, the white supremacist movement has witnessed the growth of two unique spiritual movements tied to white identity: Creativity and Odinism. Creativity is the name given to the spiritual beliefs held by members of the organization which until 2003 operated under the name, the World Church of the Creator. This belief is centered on the concept that one’s race is one’s religion, it rejects Christianity because of its association with Judaism, and instead embraces what it believes are the laws of nature which include ideas of maintaining racial purity and superiority for whites (Dobratz, 2000). This organization has been particularly successful at organizing neo-Nazi skinheads through its early association with the

premier racist music label, Resistance Records, and its rejection of traditional religious beliefs (CNC, 2001). Finally, Odinism is a pagan belief in Norse mythology as a basis for spirituality. This is based on the belief that the true religion of white people is that of northern Europeans, specifically Scandinavians, and that these are the true gods of all “Aryans.” This belief system has been equally appealing to younger recruits into the movement because of its association with paganism (Dobratz, 2000).

The typologies listed have attempted to categorize the white supremacist movement, yet maintain a certain amount of inconsistency. Organizations such as the Klan are given the same status as an entire subset of a subculture while ideological systems (Neo-Nazism and Christian Identity) are considered to be in similar categories as specific groups. Dobratz (2000) typology of religious beliefs in the movement is a significant improvement of previous typologies but is limited because of its focus only on the theological beliefs of groups and individuals involved in the movement.

## **Methods**

As noted by Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang (2003), the precise number of internet hate sites is often hard to pinpoint. The internet is not a static medium and sites which are popular and running one day may be gone the next. In order to obtain adequate information on white supremacist organizations using the internet, a convenience sample was used. This researcher accessed an internet directory listing of extremist sites known as “The Hate Directory,” containing close to 1000 sites (Franklin, 2003).

“The Hate Directory” attempts to be a comprehensive catalog of bigotry on the internet and contains sites that are not necessarily white supremacist in nature. Included in the listing are anti-Muslim/Arab sites that may not be white supremacist in nature, extremist feminist sites (such

as a link to the “S.C.U.M. Manifesto”), anti-Semitic sites run by minorities (such as the Nation of Islam), and even an anti-racist site that is misinterpreted as a hate site (for Noel Ignatiev’s Race Traitor magazine/journal). After culling the listings for such sites and removing other non-organizational such as links to the infamous anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a population of 739 potential sites remained. Confirming the statements made by Gerstenfeld and her colleagues regarding the tenuous nature of hate sites and the internet in general, only a significant minority of the links on “The Hate Directory” led to actual working sites. This yielded a final sample of 251 working links used in this study. All sites were accessed between December 27 and 30, 2003.

Data was collected on the final sample of working websites. The sites were first categorized as either political, religious, youth cultural, holocaust revisionist, or other. In the final analysis, revisionist and “other” designated websites would be excluded because they did not represent an organization or group. This yielded 226 sites to analyze in terms of ideology and activity. Ideological categorization was based on the following criteria: neo-Nazi/fascist, white separatist/white privilege, Christian Identity, Creativity, Odinism, as well as unspecified or multiple ideologies. Group activities were propaganda and/or literature distribution, lobbying/legal activity (including running for public office), creating community/unity, armed resistance/race war, and other. Among activities designated as other merchandise sales, mp3 trading, and prisoner support were the most common.

## **Results**

Using the classifications of political, religious, and youth cultural, the survey of websites found that political organizations represented slightly over 50% of hate sites on the internet (123 total sites). The second most common organization type was religious representing 36.7% (n=83)

of the total sites. Of the religious oriented groups, Christian Identity appears to be the most common (73) with Creativity representing a small proportion of sites (7) and only one (1) designated as explicitly Odinist. Youth cultures represent a small, yet significant minority of hate sites listed (20 or 8.8%).

As can be expected, the primary activity of any group represented on the internet would be propaganda; therefore, an overwhelming majority of sites viewed (91.6%) had a primary purpose of propaganda and relaying information. Significant differences in activities emerge upon analysis of secondary activities listed on websites. The vast majority (45%, n=102) of sites advocated some form of armed resistance or race war. Other significant activities included providing a sense of community (12.4%, n=28) and lobbying/legal activities (9.7%, n=22). Many sites (9.3%, n=21) engaged in other activities or provided other services to their viewers/members. These included merchandise sales, radio broadcasts, prisoner support, mp3 or other computer file sharing, conferences, and rallies or concerts.

It is at the level of activity that significant differences among organization types begin to develop. By cross tabulating types of organization and activity one can gain a greater understanding of the differences between groups (see table 1). As the most prominent second activity, armed resistance/race war is shared by all three types as a secondary activity. However, encouragement of armed resistance and/or race war represents approximately 80% (n=53) of activity for religious groups whereas only 46% (n=43) of political groups were characterized as advocating it on their websites. Interestingly enough, only one (1) youth culture oriented site advocated armed resistance/race war as a second activity. The second most prominent activity for religious groups was the creation of community representing 11% (n=8) of total second activity categories. For political groups, creation of community was the third most common activity

(14%, n=13) with lobbying/legal activity being the second most common (21.5%, n=20). Youth cultures were most likely to create community (37%, n=7) with propaganda distribution a close second (32%, n=6). The third most prominent activity for youth cultures fell under the “other” category which generally represented merchandise sales and mp3 sharing/trading.

**Table 1: Activity by Group Type**

Activity	Type		
	Political	Religious	Youth Culture
propaganda/ literature distribution	4 (4.3%)	2 (2.7%)	6 (31.6%)
lobbying/legal	20 (21.5%)	2 (2.7%)	0 (0%)
create community/ unity	13 (14%)	8 (11%)	7 (36.8%)
armed resistance/ race war	43 (46.2%)	58 (79.5%)	1 (5.3%)
other	13 (14%)	3 (4.1%)	5 (26.3%)
total	93 (100%)	73 (100%)	19 (100%)

## **Discussion**

The total numeric counts of organizations represent a snapshot of white supremacist activity on the internet. However, they give researchers a picture of the prominence of certain groups over others in the United States today. Using the political-religious-youth cultural classification system, it is possible to understand the breadth of the movement without constructing categories based on a variety of factors.

The numbers of organizations represented in this study are consistent with the findings of the SPLC noted earlier in this paper. The majority of hate organizations in the United States can

be classified under the political designation and represent a grouping similar to the SPLC's (2003a) neo-Nazi classification. The difference between religious organizations may be reflected in the classification of many Ku Klux Klan groups by this researcher as Christian Identity. In analyzing the sites of many Klan groups, specific references were made to either the Christian Identity theology or used language taken from Christian Identity texts. As such, Klan organizations would have to be categorized as part of the religious white supremacist movement despite their political activities. Similarly, the Creativity movement which is often classified as a neo-Nazi organization is categorized as a religious organization (Dobratz, 2000; SPLC, 2003a). Furthermore, the lack of Creativity websites reflects the serious problems faced by the organization in the past year. Having lost its name to a New Age religion in a copyright lawsuit and with its leader jailed for attempting to hire out a contract on the life of a Federal judge, the Creativity movement is in serious disarray. It has lost the right to its internet domain name and simply does not have the public presence it held throughout much of the 1990s (SPLC, 2003b).

Possibly the most significant result of this analysis the possibility for defining organizations based upon their ideologies and activities. The distinction between political and religious organizations is largely based on ideological differences. While many political organizations actively espouse a Christian religious belief, it is often not central to their ideology. Organizations which are classified as political are consciously aware of themselves as part of a social and political movement. The political organization is based on addressing social and political issues from a white supremacist analysis. In this respect, they often frame the world through a racist view and advocate a neo-Nazi/fascist solution based on racial hierarchy to rid the world of social problems (Arena & Arrigo, 2000; Berbrier, 1998a; Berbrier, 1998b; Berbrier, 1999; Daniels, 1997; Dobratz, 2000; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 2000; Ezekiel, 1995; Ferber, 1999; Hamm, 1993;

Ridgeway, 1995). In contrast, religious organizations often rely on a spiritual argument for white superiority. Regardless of the specific type of white racist religion, there is a consistent theme that white superiority and social control are the desire of god(s) or creator(s). This spiritual element distinguishes religious white supremacists from their more secular, political counterparts and has at times been the cause of distinct rifts in the movement (Dobratz, 2000).

Youth cultures are less ideologically coherent than political and religious groups. It is not uncommon to find a variety of ideals regarding the nature of white supremacy among members of youth cultures. The skinhead scene incorporates members of neo-Nazi organizations, members of the Creativity movement, Odinists, and Christian Identity followers. In the Black Metal and industrial/Goth scenes there is a variety of both secular and religious beliefs. For example, National Socialist Black Metal often rejects religion or embraces Satanism or neo-Pagan Odinism (CNC, 2001). The prominence of one ideology over another in white supremacist youth cultures is often the result of targeted recruitment by certain organization within a specific subculture. The story of Resistance Records is typical of the power of association between an organization and youth culture. Initially, the music label was affiliated with the Creativity movement and helped consolidate the organization throughout the early 1990s. After several years of tax and business troubles, the label was sold to the National Alliance which has since gained prominence in the movement and solidified its position as the premier neo-Nazi organization in the United States and possibly the world (ADL, 2002; CNC, 2001; Ware & Back, 2002). Furthermore, the Christian Identity Aryan Nations has long courted skinheads by holding gatherings and neo-Nazi rock concerts on its compound in Hayden Lake, ID. These often drew hundreds of skinheads from across the country and the world and were instrumental in building a neo-Nazi skinhead movement in the United States (Blee, 1003; CNC, 2001; Ferber, 1999; Hamm, 1993). Despite

the lack of ideological cohesion, youth subcultures represent a unique element in the modern white supremacist movement. It is in the category of activities that one truly begins to see the distinctions between the three categories presented in this paper.

As marginalized social and political movements, it is understandable that all three categories of racist organizations would rely heavily on the internet as a primary means of spreading information and ideas via propaganda. However, as this research points out, when looking at other activities a clear difference between groups in categories begins to emerge.

The most consistent activity across all three categories appears to be a belief in and preparation for a coming race war. This is consistent with the ideology of both political and religious groups as well as the lifestyle of youth cultures. Political groups are motivated by the politics of neo-Nazi or fascist ideology. Fascist movements are essentially revolutionary movements. They seek to make social change through a radical change in the political system. This revolutionary philosophy of fascism is based on a notion of conflict which is based on a struggle for the supremacy of one nation or race over others. The philosophy of conflict within fascism looks to the victory of the powerful over the weak for its justification. It sees power as the ultimate goal in and of itself. Power can only be achieved through violence for the fascist and the ultimate form of power is control of the state. The fascist method of violence as a means of control becomes the justification for war. Fascists must engage in war for domination to prove their philosophy. In this respect, the fascist vision of the world is one of total war until total control has been achieved (Lyons, 1995). Therefore, political organizations based upon this ideological system are likely to advocate race war as a means of establishing their ideal social system.

Religious white supremacists put a theological spin on the fascist/neo-Nazi justification for racial violence. However, the religious orientation of said groups adds an element of zealotry to their call for armed resistance. Whereas political organizations are engaging in a struggle for social control, religious groups are preparing for an inevitable holy war. For the Christian Identity belief, it is the duty of white Christians to engage in conflict against Jews and other “mud people” as part of a struggle that will ensure the second coming of Christ and the redemption of all white Christians as the true children of Israel. Furthermore, there is a constant battle on earth between what many Christian Identity adherents believe are the children of Satan (Jews) and the children of Adam (white, “Israelite,” Christians) (Bushart, Craig, & Barnes, 2000). Creativity stresses the importance of race war in its theology encompassed in the statement of Racial Holy War (RaHoWa). According to former Creativity leader Matthew Hale, “Creativity adamantly proclaims that the White race must survive. It must expand...” (in Dobratz, 2000: 290). Finally, Odinism’s focus on nordic myths of war and conflict encourages its followers to engage in struggle for what adherents believe is their race or their people.

The clearest distinction between the three categories comes in the form of activity that goes beyond a commitment to violent racial struggle. Political groups were most likely to engage in what are generally deemed as traditional political activities such as lobbying or running for political office. Only approximately 3% (n=2) of the websites categorized as religious and none of the youth culture sites encouraged members to engage in the political process or listed such activities in their group descriptions or mission statements. However, a significant minority (21.5%, n=20) of sites categorized as political either included lobbying or participation in the political process as an activity or encouraged viewers to engage in some form of traditional political participation. This may reflect a trend within the extreme right of attempting to appeal to

the political mainstream. This process has taken the form of running candidates for office, lobbying for legislation, and other participation in mainstream politics (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1995; Ezekiel, 1995). Political sites were also more likely to engage in other forms of political activity such as conferences, political rallies, and prisoner support. This type of activity most appropriately designates such groups as “political.”

Youth cultural groups are unique in terms of activity in that they are often more oriented around maintaining their subculture while still encouraging the politics of racial superiority. Websites that are classified as youth cultural are more likely to sell merchandise (especially music), have message boards where visitors can discuss subculture, music, politics, and other topics, and trade music as well as relevant racist texts. As Blee (2003) points out, “[t]he ideology of racist skinheads has to be pieced together from the flyers, song lyrics, racist ‘zines, clothing, tattoos, insignia, and music that define skinhead life” (194). Websites provide a perfect portal into the world of racist skinhead subculture by providing access to many of the elements listed above. Other racist youth cultures such as National Socialist Black Metal, Gothic, and Industrial/Noise pride themselves on intellectualism. For these subcultures, the internet provides a resource for further understanding of the philosophies of neo-Nazis, fascism, and racist religion. They also allow interested parties to understand the norms and aesthetic of the subculture of their choosing (CNC, 2001). Further, sites dedicated to youth culture act as portals to more established religious and political organizations and strengthen the movement as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

Analyses of the racist right in the United States often rely on categorization of white supremacist groups. Whether it is to provide an accurate estimate of the types of hate groups operating in the U.S. or as a means of understanding the subtle difference between organizations

and the individuals involved, researchers rely on typologies of supremacists to aid in the understanding of right-wing extremism. However, most typologies of hate often rely on constructing categories that do not seem to demonstrate any cohesion. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan are categorized along side whole ideologies such as neo-Nazism and theological belief systems such as Christian Identity are presented as similar in some form to youth subcultures such as the skinheads. These attempts at creating a complete picture of the extreme right ultimately create a great deal of confusion both for academics and the public at large.

It is this researcher's contention that a new typology of supremacy must be put into place based on overarching characteristics of hate groups. This typology should base its categories on ideological consistency between organizations and a common repertoire of activities. As such, the white supremacist movement may be broken up into three specific categories: political, religious and youth culture groups and organizations. Research has shown that there are distinct differences in ideology between organizations that are often conflated into what is known as the white supremacist movement. These ideologies often influence radially different approaches to both issues of racial superiority as well as the types of activities groups will engage in. As such, the differences in ideology and activity point to the necessity to adopt the political-religious-youth culture typology suggested.

This study is however not an exhaustive analysis of the racist-right. There are significant limitations to the analysis of web material. Statements made in the "virtual" world of the internet may be either more or less extreme than ones made in the "real" world. Also, it is possible for organizations to misrepresent themselves via the internet by creating multiple websites purported to be local chapters. Therefore, analyses of printed material by active supremacist groups may be necessary to supplement the findings of this study. Furthermore,

interview research may yield interesting results regarding the distinct differences between types of groups categorized in the typology suggested by this researcher.

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