

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Not on My Campus: Place-Based Exceptionalism to Antisemitism and Rightest Movements

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INTRODUCTION

While working on a larger research project on campus safety and gender-based violence, other issues began to emerge including antisemitism, racism, and rightest groups such as the Proud Boys. In terms of antisemitism, some participants referenced a few, “swastika incidents,” and still other participants talked about broader issues associated with rightest, antisemitic, groups such as freedom of speech. In this chapter I examine 25 semi-structured interviews with employees and students at a flagship university in the Pacific to determine some of the ways in which a campus community is making sense of a growing rightest movement, and antisemitism more specifically. I posit that in the era of the Trump administration, young conservatives are emboldened to engage in acts of hate on college campuses, and that members of one campus community make sense of this behavior by framing their campus as an exception to the rise of conservatism; despite being able to identify specific problematic events and behavior.

In this chapter, I contextualize the role of conservative groups such as the Proud Boys on the contemporary college campus. I then draw upon interview data from 25 employees and students at a flagship university in the Pacific region to further examine the way in which members of the campus community are making sense of, coalescing and perhaps polarizing, around issues of racism and

group believes they are similar to other college groups who enjoy drinking beer and making jokes. While these remarks may seem innocuous on the surface, the group is being closely monitored by organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Initially, the Southern Poverty Law Center referred to the Proud Boys as an, “alt-lite” group, which essentially meant the group was perceived to be a “stepping stone” to more extreme white supremacist groups (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). However, on October 13, 2018 the SPLC tweeted that the Proud boys are in fact a, “hate group” (The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Meanwhile in November, the FBI stated publically that the Proud Boys are an extremist group with ties to white-nationalism (Rosenberg, 2018). Thus, while the Proud Boys may seek a more innocent, college-friendly reputation (Sommer, 2017), nationally the group is becoming well established as a right-wing organization with ties to traditional notions of white supremacy. Furthermore, given the group’s affiliation and reputation, the Proud Boys fit into the broader rightest movement in the United States.

Contextualizing the Proud Boys Within the Rightest Movement

Traditional right-wing movements, such as the Ku Klux Klan, are well documented as influential counter-movements to social reform (Cooter, 2006; Love, 2017). For example, participation in the Ku Klux Klan typically grew after progressive movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Chalmers, 2003; McVeigh, 1999). Similarly, Neo-Nazi groups such as the Skinheads emerged first in Europe as a subcultural movement in the wake of World War II and began spreading to the United States in the 1970s, due in part to economic and political tensions, as well as the spread of ideology through group alliances (Cooter, 2006). Although both the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi groups are categorized as right-wing groups (i.e. groups that encourage violence among members) with deep ties to antisemitism in the United States, the two groups have some differences.

First, members of the Ku Klux Klan are typically white elites; individuals well represented in positions of power and who enjoy the privileges of upper middle class (Blee, 1996; Cooter, 2006). Meanwhile, individuals who are members of Neo-Nazi groups are more likely to be working class or poor (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Cooter, 2006; Love, 2017). Second, the majority of identifiable KKK members are older and well established within their community (Blee, 1996; Cooter, 2006). Conversely, Neo-Nazi leaders tend to be younger, and only well known within the smaller Neo-Nazi subculture. Third, members of the Ku Klux Klan

FINDINGS

The Proud Boys, Antisemitism, and the College Campus

Although the Proud Boys were mentioned in interviews with students and employees, I was uncertain that higher education was on the radar of the Proud Boys. Shortly after the Proud Boys started showing up in my data, a newspaper article about the local Proud Boys chapter was published in a student-operated media organization by Harrison Patino. In Patino's article, local Proud Boys leader Nick Ochs explicitly mentions higher education policy, explaining that, "... we're like a men's club the way the Shriners and the Foresters used to be before a bunch of lesbians came along and ruined it with their Title IX, Affirmative Action bullshit" (Patino, 2018). This direct quote from Ochs, one of the few members willing to be named in the article, suggests that Title IX¹ and Affirmative Action², policies closely associated with higher education, are in fact on the radar of the Proud Boys. The statement also demonstrates that, at least in part, the Proud Boys form their group identity based upon progressive groups and policies they oppose; including groups who advocate for greater equity on college campuses.

Further, Ochs goes on to say that, "Our enemies ... which tend to be people on the internet and those on college campuses, want to paint us as the most extreme phenomena facing the American landscape" (Patino, 2018). So, it would appear that members of the local Proud Boys chapter do in fact self-identify as a group of people who oppose progressive movements on college campuses. The quotes also suggest that the Proud Boys believe they have an "enemy" on college campuses, therefore, suggesting that the group does have a presence on college campuses; not just among young working-class and poor individuals.

Although the above passages do not directly tie the Proud Boys to antisemitism, groups such as The Southern Poverty Law Center and Anti-Defamation League make this link. For example, on the group's Anti-Defamation League page, the ADL states that, among other reasons, the group is a cause for concern because of their antisemitism (The Anti-Defamation League, n.d.; The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Additionally, the group's founder, Gavin McInnes, has received public backlash for his antisemitic remarks (The Anti-Defamation League, n.d.; The Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.).

- 1 Title IX is a federal policy prohibiting discrimination based on sex or gender at schools receiving federal funding (Ali, 2010).
- 2 Affirmative Action is a federal policy that serves to alleviate structural barriers for historically disadvantaged minorities (Crenshaw, 2006).

I think the most recent example is things I've heard from a ... like freedom of speech thing that went on like this last week. And so hearing about how they [students] feel unsafe because of maybe some people's views about them or the group that they affiliate with and, and so maybe those kinds of things, they feel like they are ... Like I, I, it almost comes off as like they're physically, they feel physically unsafe in those, in that space. So those are the most recent ones that just came up.

This passage refers to a recent campus event hosted by the local Proud Boys chapter, where members of the right-wing group, Turning Point USA were invited to speak at Campus Center (Turning Point USA, n.d.). Toward the end of the event, some of the students who brought the speakers were recorded making racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks on campus. So, the above passage refers directly to an event hosted by the Proud Boys, where disparaging remarks were made, that made students feel unsafe.

Despite this recent event, however, in another passage, when the same participant was asked if he believes the university is safe, he explained that, "Um, I think that we're, I think we're doing a better job than usual." So, although the participant talks about a specific event held by the Proud Boys on campus; an event that made many students feel unsafe, he still believes that his university does a better job of making students feel safe, compared to other schools. From this interview, it is clear that even when problematic events and behavior occur on campus, those employees who witness and deal with the repercussions still employ place-based exceptionalism; they believe their campus is still safer than other universities.

Finally, from the undergraduate student perspective, when research participants discussed problematic events and/or behavior, they too employed place-based exceptionalism. For example, one student, heavily involved with Greek Culture, had the following to say about the safety climate at her university versus other schools.

It's different. Um, I definitely feel. I definitely do feel safe on campus. Um, well I mean I say it as like anybody could be [at risk.] I guess like I know I've personally never had any issues. I've dealt with them as an RA. Look, I've heard and have dealt with the aftermath of some very scary situations. But like, um, I've never like felt uncomfortable or really anything like that, like even with like the presence of these certain organizations, like even with like the Proud Boys and things like that, like I've never felt like really unsafe.

In this passage, the student explains that she has observed "scary situations," and has even helped other students who have dealt with problematic behavior in her capacity as a Resident Advisor in the dorms. She also acknowledges the presence of right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys on campus. However, despite acknowledging problematic situations on campus, the participant still believes that her campus is safe. Thus, similar to employee participants, students also engage in place-based exceptionalism.

intervention strategies as universities attempt to combat campus-specific issues related to violence, climate, and safety.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the findings from this chapter suggest that there is a growing rise of conservatism, including a surge in right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys, on the college campus. Moreover, conservative events such as speakers from Turning Point USA and problematic behavior such as “swastika incidents” has resulted in sexist, racist, and homophobic remarks. However, members of the campus community still find ways to explain how their campus is safer and/or removed from any national rise in conservatism, sexism, racism, and antisemitism. Thus, I argue that the university where I collected data employs place-based exceptionalism, where employees and students articulate the belief that their campus is safer than other schools.

DeCook (2018) establishes that the Proud Boys initially follow in the footsteps of Neo-Nazi groups by recruiting working-class and poor youth. But, DeCook’s work focuses primarily on the group’s Instagram presence, failing to explain the growing presence of the Proud Boys on college campuses in the United States, or the rise in conservatism more broadly. I argue that the group is able to frame their presence on college campuses by presenting themselves as a traditional drinking club that enjoys cheap beer and “good” jokes, not unlike the pastimes of other young college students. Meanwhile, the group also scapegoats benefactors of Affirmative Action like their Neo-Nazi counterparts, therefore perceiving liberal groups in higher education as one of their “enemies.” Consequently, the Proud Boys have found a way to insert themselves onto the college campus by opposing progressive, higher education policy, and by self-identifying as a group that likes to drink beer and crack jokes; similar to other student groups.

In terms of place-based exceptionalism, whether participants were identifying conservatism, sexism, racism, or antisemitic behavior, the general belief among research participants was that events and behavior on their campus are not as bad as other universities. In fact, one senior level administrator believed that his campus community was “fortunate” to have such an “open” and inviting campus, despite also articulating examples of overt antisemitism. Meanwhile, another participant, an undergraduate student, was able to identify the place-based exceptionalism of others, explaining that many individuals on campus disconnect campus-specific safety issues with what is happening nationally. Thus, her perspective provides insight into some of the ways in which place-based exceptionalism and the rise of conservatism on the college campus can be combatted.

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