

Understanding the Anti-Nerd Prejudice
In memory of Jason Zarri
By Nathaniel Bates
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I am writing about a subject that is laden with the potential for misunderstanding. I might trample over some of the sacred shibboleths of political correctness in the sense that I will be discussing such issues as anti-nerd prejudice but also anti-Jewish prejudice (the two are related in my view). I will be drawing from my own experience as a Nerd, someone with Asperger, and also my own experience as a Jew in Gentile society. Both of these have cast me as an Outsider in a lot of contexts. Warning: I will not necessarily use politically correct terms, as I will use the term "nerd" and not euphemisms that might be more accepted. It defines who I am and it is the term I will use. If you are easily offended, or easily misunderstand complex references in binary terms, please do not proceed:

We have much less anti-nerd prejudice in our society than we used to have. This is a positive sign that I never thought I would see in my lifetime. Kids are learning about mathematics and science at an increasing rate, with positive institutional support and---this is key---positive support from their peers. In some sense, anti-nerd prejudice may be seen as being

on the decline in much the same way that institutional anti-black prejudice was receding in the North even before the Civil Rights Era. Yet, just as the Civil Rights Era needed more than simple toleration but needed society to face itself, so a Civil Rights Era for nerds will require honest conversation and not merely more students attending robotics clubs in schools.

A long time ago, nerds were completely shunned. One never wanted to be called a nerd in the public schools. Over time, this has softened. Part of the reason this has softened is because of the successes of computer techies in the market place. With financial power comes the soft power of "coolness." Just as art is not art until a wealthy person buys it, an outlier personality type is not "cool" unless a person of high social standing adopts it. Nerds are perceived as being popular, increasingly female (attractive to boot), and financially successful. Even Asperger has a certain mystique to it that Autism never had in the past.

That having been said, the increasing shift in our society is disturbingly toward personality in assessing character. We see this in hiring, and we see this in college admissions. We see it in dating and in other social interactions. The mistaking of character for personality is a dangerous delusion that will

destroy any society. More to the point, however, it undermines the potential for perceived nerds to advance in careers. If one is perceived to have a social deficit, then the deficit model is what is applied. This becomes the new acceptable form of anti-nerd prejudice in that it focuses its ire on those within the penumbra of nerd culture, those who may not be celebrity scientists or tech CEO's but who are part of the working class.

Telegenic nerds are praised on such shows as "the Big Bang," a show that I have frankly never seen a full episode of and have no real desire to see. I prefer to model my own personal nerdness on Star Trek, but that is beside the point. My point is that the increasing tolerance of certain nerd archetypes does not mean such prejudice is over, any more than the fact that African-American actors can be shown on television as likable characters does not mean racism is over. Often prejudice goes together with objectification, as women have often found in dealing with the complexities of sexism in a society that puts super-models on pedestals. I maintain that anti-nerd prejudice is alive and well even in the era of celebrity scientists. It must be confronted but it also must be understood.

One possible way of understand the problem was raised by David Anderegg in his book *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies, and Trekkies Can Save America and Why They Might Be Our Last Hope*¹ and it might bear some light on underlining causes of this prejudice. I will cast his argument in my own words, drawing upon my experience as a Jew in Gentile society as well as a person with Asperger in a Neurotypical Society. He does not mention Jews but I will, with your permission. Jews in medieval society were cast in the role of money lenders by the Church which forbade them from doing anything else. This meant that Jews HAD to loan money to Gentiles. It was not a personal choice, a fact over looked in Anti-Semitic literature on the subject of Jews and money lending.

The connection of Jews with money lending and tax collecting made them increasingly unpopular, **as was intended**. The ruling class could use Jews to press money from peasants and then to turn on Jews when the social fabric became increasingly revolutionary and a scapegoat was required to keep order. In

¹ David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies, and Trekkies Can Save America and Why They Might Be Our Last Hope*, (New York: Tarcher/Penguin Books, 2007). ISBN No. 1585428523.

essence, the System required Jews to be scapegoated from problems in society that were structural and not the fault of Jews. Peasants were turned against Jews instead of going against the "God-Ordained" feudal system. This method of using and then discarding Jews was lethally effective at preventing social revolution and continued in to the current capitalist order. Modern anti-Jewish conspiracy theories are really about defending the structural oppression of the System by creating a group of people as the problem instead of seeing the System itself as dysfunctional.

Where is the comparison with nerds? My sense is that the original anti-nerd prejudices began as religious prejudices against a science that was once seen by many as the work of the Devil, similar in some sense to Anti-Semitism. My guess is that at its root much of the anti-nerd prejudice still has religious fear at its root. Scientists are largely secular and the particular way in which New Atheists have engaged have extenuated much of the sense of a divide between science and religion (as have the polarizing behaviors of religious conservatives who have defined religion politically instead of as personal spirituality). Communities with traditional values are much more likely to hold anti-nerd prejudices than

communities with modernist values and we must acknowledge the role of religion in this conversation.

Anti-Nerdism parallels the history of Christian and Islamic Anti-Semitism, in which Jews were (and are) seen as disruptions of a supposedly organic pre-capitalist community whose nature is selectively remembered by reactionary *revanchists*. As Anderegg points out, nerds are similarly cast as a scapegoat for why the organic nature of some communities are shattered. Nerds represent science and rationality for some who fear those things as displacing the familiar. While these fears have their roots in religion and old-fashioned patriotism, they have been exacerbated by the decline of traditional skilled jobs in a way similar to how Anti-Semitism was exacerbated by economic dislocation.

In essence, nerds have been cast by the System as scapegoats. We have seen the decline of the old fashioned community in America and often people blame the forces of modern technology for making old jobs disappear. Computers have contributed to the end of jobs, and working class communities have the right to notice this fact. Anderegg maintains that much of anti-nerd prejudices are a way for people to cope with the loss of the traditional status of industrial jobs and I

agree. **Yet, I would add to his analysis the fact that the blaming of nerds is a way for people to avoid blaming the System who often do not have the analytical skills to see the deeper roots of the problem.** Nerds become the people behind the loss of jobs in Middle America, not Capitalists who outsource American jobs for the sake of profit. We become a perfect stand-in for the loss of social community and equality in America, the reason for outsourcing and "bowling alone," instead of understanding that the System itself has promoted these things as part of its policies.

Anderegg does not seem to show sufficient empathy for the fact that American workers HAVE been made redundant by modern corporate capitalism and this cannot be made the fault of workers themselves, as so much of the American discourse around the subject of poverty has done. I read his book selectively, and perhaps I did not get the full gist of his argument, but it was my perception that he like so many blamed the lack of scientific education for the loss of jobs. To me, that bears a remarkable similarity to other arguments blaming the poor for their misfortunes that we have heard from moralists of all stripes. That point must be noted even as I ultimately agree with his analysis and his call for greater appreciation of nerds and people on the Spectrum. I would hope that the politics of

blame and scapegoating would be eliminated with rational understanding, however, and not simply shifted to another target.

At the same time I do agree with Anderegg that the blaming of nerds is ultimately futile. Just as European Anti-Semitism was once the "socialism of fools," so is American Anti-Nerdism and pseudo-Jacksonian Anti-Intellectualism the "populism of fools." The System will continue to make workers redundant because it is economically rational, not because it is scientifically rational. And, more to the point, those of us who are nerds are just as much victims of this process as anyone else. Add to this the fact that we also suffer from personality based discrimination and a general tendency toward emphasizing personality over genuine character and we see the basic nature of the problem.

Where to go from here? Or, as the classic question was asked, "Where do we go from here?" Anti-Spectrum and Anti-Nerd prejudice is harder to address than racism because it is often based on the primal socialization instincts. People with different personalities are easier to scapegoat than people who simply have different skin colors. The shocking tendency of some to rationalize police brutality on the streets of Ferguson

and New York may have as much to do with perceived social differences as with skin color, perceived social differences being harder to address. Nerds and people with Asperger have a harder task ahead than one might think because of those perceived differences. Yet, one way to move forward is to recognize that the problem of employment discrimination is political. The political nature of society represents its power differentials, and also who is cast in what roles. The idea that people are "naturally" shunted in to jobs as computer programmers instead of the full panoply of jobs that might be available is not actually natural. It is as politically defined as the demand by the medieval Church that Jews become only money lenders and tax collectors and its answer is the same, an acknowledgement of power with the redress of power imbalances.

Employment discrimination is as political as outsourcing is. None of these are the "natural" result of technology. They are the results of politicians and CEO's. If nerds realized this, we would begin to engage in political struggle instead of being behind a computer, a fault that must be acknowledged among so many of us. And, if Neurotypicals realized this, they would join us in a common struggle instead of scapegoating us for what is beyond our actual control since the people in charge of most corporations are the epitome of Neurotypicalness; being social,

aggressive and very adept at lying. Indeed, the underlying religious and cultural roots of scapegoating are hard to fight. Being seen an "agent of the Devil" because of one's differences is a hard view to fight. However, being seen as the source of the loss of someone's status can be addressed with empathy and a willingness to stand up to Power on the part of people often not credited for empathy but who have often exhibited it in my experience. I do not have panaceas but a willingness to engage with structural economics and social physics would be a good place to start. In fact, while structural analysis may not seem to be as much fun as Star Trek or computer science, it is actually kind of nerdy!

My personal perspective. Thank you for reading.
In memory of Jason Zarri, whose life was never in vain.

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