

Activism and Civil Society

An Interview with Lecia Brooks of the Southern Poverty Law Center

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On November 26, 2021, Lecia Brooks, the Chief of Staff and Culture of the Southern Poverty Law Center, visited Göttingen on a lecture tour initiated by the Georg-August-Universität and sponsored, in large part, by the United States Embassy. I interviewed Brooks before her talk. What follows is a condensed version of our conversation, edited and reorganized for readability.

In Göttingen Brooks addressed an international group of students and alumni gathered to consider the ways in which political activism contributes to civil society. Her talk focused on the threat to US-American civil society posed by white supremacists and on the SPLC's evolving response to that threat. Brooks linked the work of the SPLC to a tradition of activism stretching from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, and she stressed the importance of commemorating past struggles in the pursuit of multiethnic democracy.

Brooks's pragmatic approach to creating a broad coalition is very much in keeping with the aims of this journal. The editors believe that the problems of civil society are best addressed by a public whose membership is determined by common interest and commitment rather than by common ancestry or experience. A wide-ranging conversation, representing multiple points of view but committed to finding commonalities, is what we mean by the term forum.

The conversation with Brooks ended with her reflections on the language of equality. I asked Brooks if the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence were useful in the struggle against white supremacy. Her response—again reflecting her experiences as an organizer—was sobering. She told me that the language of the Founding Fathers is too historically compromised to speak to people who have faced discrimination. Penned, in part, by slaveholders, and espoused by racists as well as patriots, the words “all men are created equal” come across as empty promises or worse at a time when Bureau of Justice sta-

tistics show, as Bryan Stevenson points out, that “black men [are] eight times more likely to be killed by the police than whites” (43). In the face of such violence, and in response to her work with activists, Brooks sees more organizing potential in the transnational appeal of universal human rights.

It talking about the history of civil rights activism in the United States, Brooks tapped into an important American tradition. She also declared herself a part of another tradition by frankly considering the promise of the United States as well as its shortcomings in an international setting. This tradition dates back to at least 1947 when, at the first Salzburg Seminar, citizens of European nations which had formerly been at war came together to discuss something they had in common: the United States. Brooks serves on the advisory board of the Salzburg Global Seminar, an organization that brings together fellows “across generations, geographies, and sectors, most of whom would otherwise never meet to exchange views or collaborate on new ideas.”

It is in the spirit of such collaboration that we offer this interview in the first installment of *The New American Studies Journal: A Forum*.

Andrew Gross: Could you start by outlining the history and current mission of the Southern Poverty Law Center, now in its fifth decade of existence?

Lecia Brooks: The name is a bit of a misnomer because the SPLC was not originally involved in eradicating poverty. That has changed. Margaret Huang, the current President and Chief Executive Officer, came to the SPLC from Amnesty International after an internal shake-up at the SPLC resulted in the departure of Morris Dees, who co-founded the organization in 1971. Huang has placed alleviating poverty at the center of the SPLC mission. She has also set the priorities of improving voter education and civic engagement, reducing rates of incarceration in black and brown communities, and dismantling white nationalism. Fighting white supremacy has always been part of the SPLC mission, but it’s more pointed now because we’re able to identify a movement as we did in the beginning. Starting in 1979, the SPLC pioneered efforts to target the KKK through civil litigation. Forty years later a white nationalist movement is really poised to disrupt democratic practices—they are exploiting democracy to advance antidemocratic agendas.

AG: Where is this antidemocratic sentiment coming from? Why now?

LB: Some antidemocratic actors in the United States keep an eye on international developments; some apologists for Donald Trump praise the kind of “illiberal democracy” espoused by Viktor Orbán [in January 2022 Trump endorsed the Prime Minister of Hungary in his reelection bid]. There are also a number of homegrown paramilitary and anti-government movements that have a long tradition in places like the Pacific Northwest. Those who advocate pushing back on government rally around incidents like the Bundy standoff in southeast Nevada in 2014, the federal raid on the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas in 1993, and the siege at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992. Anti-government activists hold these conflicts up as examples of governmental overreach. Cliven Bundy suffered no legal penalty for putting up armed resistance to law enforcement; his example has spawned imitators among the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, whose ranks are swelling with disaffected veterans, perhaps reflecting the psychological impact of prolonged military service. They seem to feel no responsibility for taking over government space and threatening government personnel. On the contrary, they feel entitled.

When anti-government sentiment and military training mix with the white nationalism espoused by groups like the Proud Boys, there can be a lot of damage. We saw this this at Charlottesville [the so-called Unite the Right Rally in 2017]: the coming together of different hate and extremist groups who normally don’t come together. There were probably 15 different hate groups in all, including neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, and the Klan. These groups rarely coordinate their activities; however, they united to protest the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue from the University of Virginia campus. Many of the Unite the Right agitators saw the debate over the statue as an opportunity to promote their vision of a white ethno-state...[which] they equate with the democracy and the America that they want. They buy into the “great replacement” theory propagated by the Christchurch killer in New Zealand [this is a conspiracy theory, designed to rationalize the mass murder of immigrants, that claims government elites are perpetrating a shift in the racial make-up of society in order to shore up their political power]. They see immigration and multi-culturalism as threats to white supremacy or even white identity. Trump, adept at “dog whistling” his support of these groups, or signaling his sympathy to racist causes without openly declaring his allegiance, easily convinced the ethno-nationalist and anti-government agitators that that the election

was stolen. This led to the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6. I watched it going down and couldn't believe it. The fact that all these white people could storm the Capitol where weeks before there was strong military presence during BLM protests...

AG: How do antidemocratic groups recruit their members?

LB: Richard Spencer and Matthew Heimbach are key figures in the alt-right who have made concerted efforts to recruit young white men on college campuses. The SPLC has a long history of documenting and mapping the activities of right-wing extremists and hate groups, and part of the website is organized as a resource guide. In the years leading up to Trump's election, Richard Spencer smartly identified college students as a vulnerable group susceptible to messages about racial demographic shifts, but cultural shifts around LGBTQ rights, women's rights, and feminism also played significant roles in his messaging. Spencer would go to traditionally progressive colleges and pull out the white guys who felt marginalized. There is probably no worse demographic to be than a white straight guy on a college campus today. He capitalized on that and talked to them, for instance around the time of Black History month, arguing that they were being left out, and laying the groundwork for the great replacement theory. His goal was to pursue a conservative agenda on so-called liberal college campuses, for instance by targeting professors for propagating liberal ideology. That helped build membership in campus organizations he backed. Spencer encouraged his followers to adopt a clean-cut look (polo shirts, khakis) and to act intelligent rather than like street-fighters. They would invite speakers, such as [former Trump advisor] Stephen Miller to rile up the base about immigrants, and deliberately place university administrators between a rock and a hard place: defend free speech or prohibit speakers who might encourage racial strife? Several colleges and universities lost legal cases on free-speech grounds. When speakers came to campus, their talks were used to collect names of attendees and generate lists of potential members, and the groups began to organize that way, sometimes through conservative organizations that would push more mainstream talking points with a radical undercurrent. These groups are about advancing a conservative agenda writ large, which harkens back to time before equal rights.

At the same time, Matthew Heimbach organized a White Student Union group at his Maryland college. He got a lot of push back but also media attention about supporting white students. After graduating he moved to Philadelphia and stylized himself as the guardian of the working-class white guy by organizing what he calls the Traditionalist Workers Party. Spencer and Heimbach both gained traction and membership by encouraging discontent. They came together in the build-up to Unite the Right and began organizing other groups.¹

The Proud Boys call themselves a fraternal organization, but their frame of reference is not college so much as gang culture. They tried to create a gang modeled on black and brown gangs. They get “jumped” in....There are always a couple of prominent biracial men in the leadership,² and much of their culture seems based on misogyny. It’s not just racial demographics, it’s culture. These men who feel pressed and pushed want to go back to a time when “men were men” and men were in control.

Though various hate and anti-government groups came together at Charlottesville and then at the insurrection at the Capitol, they are not very good at coordinating their efforts—at least not yet. When something happens, they eat their own, they attack each other. Power begins to dissipate.

AG: What can the SPLC do to counter alt-right recruitment and organizing on campus?

LB: I was in shadow tour to Spencer, Heimbach. I tried to speak to young white men on college campuses about how they were being used. I try to appeal to their intellect. This is not possible for people who already drank the kool-aid, but there was also a young man at a university in Kentucky who seemed to come from working class or poverty. He was parroting talking points, but he also seemed to hear something or feel something that might have planted a seed.

I also call on progressive and liberal groups on campus and administrators about how they leave out certain groups out. This is a recipe for disaster. White male Christian heterosexuals may very well be on the margins on today’s college campus. You better find some way to bring them in. A multicultural inclusive democracy can’t leave out an entire group of people. I understand the need for education

1. Spencer was one of the defendants found guilty of civil conspiracy for the murder of the counter-protestor Heather Heyer in Charlottesville and is now facing fines of up to \$26 million. Heimbach still seems to be active.

2. Enrique Tarrio has been indicted by a federal grand jury in the January 6 insurrection.

and calling people out. But there has to be a way to bring this segment of the population in as well. Otherwise we are going to replicate systems of oppression where some groups are in charge and others aren't. Progressives on college campuses want to rail and not build. I tried to talk to administrators and student leaders about building community. It can be done but it has to be intentional.

Most students come from hyper-segregated backgrounds. The college campus is the first time they are in diverse settings. It is crucial to get that right and not encourage continued separation. Simply lecturing people doesn't work.

AG: What kind of reputation does the SPLC have on campus?

LB: The thing about college students and the SPLC's history is that they don't know us. Somebody on our bad side has to identify who we are. But if we have already built a relationship of support with the students, they don't know. They assume that we are liberal, but they don't know our history. The students don't tag us as extreme left but as just another nonprofit. Amnesty, ACLU, etc.—we are assumed to be equivalent. In lots of ways we are less partisan than ACLU or Planned Parenthood because they have a singular focus. I think SPLC is well-positioned to do outreach on college campuses.

AG: What about off-campus organizing? The SPLC pioneered direct-mail fundraising, building up a loyal base of donors who have supported the organization with small donations that, taken together, have created a large endowment. The SPLC now has deep pockets that can be used in the fight against wealthy right-wing donors, such as Koch. Nevertheless, it also has an aging group of donors who grew up with the organization but are now probably retired.

LB: The SPLC is following a trend in a lot of social justice nonprofits, which is to get closer to local communities through what we call "landscape analysis." Ideally that means turning to community members to determine the priorities of the community. What do folks on the ground identify as primary issues? At the beginning we did our own assessment and worked with civil rights groups. That was noble. Going forward, we need to take environmental, meaning locally-determined, stands and conduct landscape analysis to determine the priorities of our local communities. We want to reemphasize our connections to the Deep South (the SPLC has a brick-and-mortar presence in five states).

AG: Besides pursuing legal and organizing strategies, the SPLC provides maintains a publicly accessible database of extremists and hate groups. How do you go about compiling that database? Is there an agreed-upon set of criteria, especially in borderline cases?

LB: Definition: a hate group is any group that demeans another group based on immutable characteristics. It is not our independent opinion. It is based on what they do and say and what they publish. We have researchers and investigative journalists who make those determinations. They monitor for a year and analyze the research they have gathered over the course of that year before placing an organization on the hate group list. One group doesn't automatically roll into list the next year. It is about that year only.

AG: Who are the primary users of this hate-group database?

LB: It was originally developed our service to support law enforcement—to educate them about the community and support them with training that we offer. Hate crime units used our services, but they are not our primary audience anymore. Now law enforcement provides its own training about the meaning of tattoos and other markers of hate-group membership. Some agencies do still use our resources, just as we still send Teaching Tolerance material to schools.³ We do send our material to members of Congress and Homeland Security. Sometimes this material is well received and sometimes not. We are called on more now because of Charlottesville and [the insurrection on] January 6. We are invited to hearings at Treasury, etc., but we are toxic in terms of House and Senate hearings. We don't get invited to a lot of those meetings. It takes a courageous chair to invite us.

AG: What do you see as the biggest threat to democracy today?

LB: The biggest threat to democracy is voter suppression—the attempt to remove or not include everyone in the franchise. It has become the issue that conservatives, white nationalists and the far right recognize as a tool to advance their political and social agenda, and they are not afraid to use it. The US Supreme

3. Teaching Tolerance is a program that began in 1991 to provide schools with films and other material pertaining to the Civil Rights Movement, recently renamed Learning for Justice.

Court has a conservative majority. The Voting Rights Act was already gutted under Roberts's early court. The addition of three additional conservatives appointed since then means there is no hope of saving it. That is the largest threat to democracy. If we lose voting we lose it all.

AG: Could you talk about your work on the SPLC Civil Rights Memorial and the significance of memory in political discourse?

LB: In terms of the importance of memory, we are at a really critical and important time. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis [May 25, 2020] was tragic. However, one positive outcome of the tragic event was that for a moment or a few months, people were able to put together the fact that institutional racism existed and that monuments to the Confederate generals, icons of the Confederacy, so-called Confederate heroes, are foundational to our continued actions in support of white supremacist culture. People were able to see the connection on their own. There were spontaneous uprisings to take down monuments.

The SPLC has been active in exposing public support of white supremacist culture. We put out our report "Whose Heritage?" in 2016 following the Dylan Roof massacre of nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church [June 17, 2015] in South Carolina. The report identifies and catalogues all the markers, memorials, streets, and parks attached to the Confederacy. In 2017, after the Unite the Right rally, Confederate symbols began to appear along with those displayed by neo-Nazis, and people began to pay attention again. Activists on the ground in the South have been doing this work [identifying memorials] forever, but South Carolina and Charlottesville were important in changing the general attitude. The Confederate battle flag that governor Nikki Haley was credited with taking down from the South Carolina State Capitol in 2015 was just moved someplace else. After Confederate flags starting coming down, six southern states including Alabama passed so-called Memorial Preservation laws intended to prevent communities from removing memorials, such as memorials to white supremacy, that were repugnant to them. These laws have not all withstood court challenges, but all of this is tied in with the public memory.

I think we are positioned to realize the importance of what we hold up and promote in terms of memory. Bryan Stevenson's National Memorial for Peace and Justice [opened to the public in Montgomery, Alabama in 2018] helped lay the ground for this. He brought focus to history of lynching—it was so well-received. US military leaders, on their own, finally decided to change the names of 10 mil-

itary installations named after Confederate generals. We have been trying for years to have them do that. This all seemed to happen at the same time. Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben were taken off packages. It was like a light bulb went off. We had a good run, but now it seems to be over. Now there is a push-back against critical race theory. White support has waned for Black Lives Matter. It's all too much. That is uniquely American—this shortness of memory. Let's move on, people seem to say. The same thing happened during the Civil Rights Movement as evidenced by the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Martin Luther King talks about this. One of our founders, Joe Levin, would say remembering is not enough; memory should spark action.

AG: Can we find a common language to bring more people on board? Do the old, "universal" American values like "all men are created equal" still have any moral or rhetorical power?

LB: No. Universal values like equality were never held under scrutiny before, so it is impossible to use them now. People from marginalized groups don't want to use those terms because they were never about them. Terms like "equality" seem like a disguised language for white privilege. We didn't call out things back then. Frame equality in a color-blind society and meritocracy, and it would have some resonance. But individuals can't draw on it. It can work legally, but in terms of shifting opinion and narrative—it doesn't work. It was such a false narrative before that I don't see how it can work now. I don't use it. As we're moving as a country towards partnership in a global society, I think the human rights frame works.

Works Cited

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About the Authors

Lecia Brooks is the chief of staff and culture for the Southern Poverty Law Center, where her duties focus on leadership development, building an antiracist workplace culture across the SPLC's offices and ensuring a continued focus on equity. Her work also has included testifying before Congress twice about the threat of extremism shortly after the deadly January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. Brooks's previous experience at the SPLC includes serving as the organization's outreach director, where she traveled across the United States and abroad to speak about hate and extremism. She has appeared on numerous news programs to discuss civil rights and race in the United States. She has a wealth of experience in diversity advocacy training for corporations and nonprofit organizations, including Walmart, Lyft, Pixar, Colorado State University, and the Newark Public Library in New Jersey. Earlier, she was director of the SPLC's Civil Rights Memorial Center, which honors the martyrs of the civil rights movement and encourages visitors to continue the march for racial equity and social justice. She also relaunched the SPLC's "Mix It Up at Lunch Day," a Learning for Justice program, which inspired students of all ages to break down racial, cultural and social barriers at school.

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