

Delegitimizing Jews and the Jewish State: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism after Auschwitz

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That antisemitism has largely disappeared after Auschwitz is a belief held by many who consider themselves steadfast democrats, progressives and supporters of multilateralism, European integration and the peaceful solution of international conflicts through diplomatic negotiation. This is the age of a post-nationalist *zeitgeist*, or so they believe. Yet the string of verbal and physical attacks against Jews and Jewish property in Western Europe in recent years has given rise to an ongoing discussion about a so-called "new antisemitism." What makes this "new antisemitism" distinct are two facts in particular: that it frames itself in the context of a discourse about the conflict in the Middle East and that it springs from new groups of perpetrators, hitherto unlinked to hatred of Jews, at least not in European public perception. It was also the suddenness and vehemence of its eruption after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that led to the notion of this antisemitism being somehow new and largely unrelated to the old antisemitism of the far Right. Hadn't European societies—on both sides of the Iron Curtain for that matter—ostensibly shaped their post-war identities precisely in opposition to the evils of Nazism and fascism? Hence, was this "new antisemitism" not actually different, in that it seemed to derive from genuine grievances—be they the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel or the equally undeniable racist discrimination suffered by Arab-Muslim migrants in Europe? Wasn't it this that propelled them toward attacking Jews while engendering empathy, if not sympathy, among considerable sections of the liberal and radical Left? Indeed, was it antisemitism (rather than inter-ethnic or religious strife)—as some "wise guys" would argue—if the perpetrators themselves were "Semites"?

In order to understand this "new antisemitism," it appears necessary to go back and see what happened to the old one. It is widely—and mistakenly, as it will be

argued here—assumed that exposure to the horrors of the Shoah served as an eye-opener to the world as to where antisemitism could lead. This assumption is often linked to the belief that the destruction and discrediting that Germany had brought upon itself would yield a profound understanding of the evils of Jew-hatred. And if that had not done the job, then the creation of an economically stable democracy surely would.

Needless to say, such assumptions epitomize a sort of wishful thinking, betraying utter incomprehension about what antisemitism is, how it functions and what socio-psychological purposes it fulfils. Its resilience cannot be understood by those who were taken in by the myth of the so-called “zero hour” (*Stunde Null*). According to that idea, postwar Germany represented a complete material, social, political, cultural and psychological dissociation from its Nazi predecessor. The concomitant denial of any enduring legacy was believed to be a fact rather than an ideological figment.

Fourteen years after the end of the war, the philosopher and social researcher Theodor Adorno, who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s and returned in the 1950s, remarked in a lecture:

National socialism continues to live on, and to this day we don't know whether it does so only as the ghost of what was so monstrous that it didn't even die off with its own death or whether it never died in the first place—whether the readiness for unspeakable actions survives in people, as in the social conditions that hem them in.¹

It was in this context that Adorno and his fellow researchers coined the term “secondary antisemitism” for a phenomenon which they observed in postwar West Germany: a lingering resentment against Jews—“not *despite* but *because* of Auschwitz.”² The ancient resentment had indeed shifted its arguments and pretexts to a new level. While direct attacks on Jews for being Jews had become taboo, the victims were now either assigned blame for what had happened to them or attributed a smaller or larger degree of responsibility for the actions of the perpetrators.³ The so-called reparation payments provided a further pretext to insinuate that the Jews were exploiting the Holocaust in order to enrich themselves at the cost of the Germans. It was the reincarnation of the old stereotype of the avaricious and venal Jewish “money sucker.” This was an antisemitism that could not forgive the victims for having made its practitioners into perpetrators. Jews were to blame for the fact that henceforth, for Germans, a yearning for an absolute identification with their own nation and national history had become impossible. As a result of this narcissistic mortification, the roles of perpetrators and victims

were inverted through an exculpation strategy: The latter were effectively construed as “the real offenders” whereas the former appear as those wrongfully accused.

What has been distinctly outlined in the case of Germany, which on account of its special history is a unique case of course, also holds true to varying degrees with regard to other European countries. Although essentially a German crime, the Shoah was executed with the assiduous support of numerous Nazi allies, collaborators and fellow travellers. Complicity in the irrational murder of the Jews and the rational economic utilization of their material wealth—though the magnitude of moral guilt might vary—ranged from the Baltic SS volunteers who pulled the triggers to the Swiss bankers who sat by their adding machines. The realization that the Shoah contained a pan-European dimension of responsibility did not cross the borders of Austria or the former German Democratic Republic, both of which denied any complicity in the Shoah. Instead, they fostered national narratives in which they actually portrayed themselves as victims of Nazism. Only in the last fifteen to twenty years have European states begun to publicly acknowledge their degree of co-responsibility and made at least some amends, while reluctantly embarking on a path of soul searching. Correspondingly, discourses on “secondary antisemitism”—that are as of now academically under-researched—have developed in those countries as well, whether in the form of concern that Jews would come to reclaim their property or simply fears of “competition” for the status of victims.

The subliminal anger against the victims is evident even today in ongoing discourses such as the debate over “drawing a final line under the past” (*Schlußstrichdebatte*), i.e., the question of whether it is time to stop talking about the Holocaust. It is in the act of doing away with the past and of dimming its memory that the extermination of the victims is manifested once more on a sociopsychological level. Yet, it is with respect to the debate about the legitimacy of the State of Israel that a most sophisticated version of this coping strategy has materialized. As mentioned above, since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2001, a dramatic increase in anti-Jewish incidents in numerous countries in the Western hemisphere has been recorded both in quantitative and qualitative terms, ranging from insults and propaganda crimes to physical assaults and even murder. Apart from the obligatory condemnation of such acts, one can also identify attempts at rationalization. In that scenario, Jews in Europe are the hapless victims of (over)reactions driven by anger and despair on the part of Arab or Muslim actors. To this must be added an almost *de rigueur* critical view of Israel found in politics, the media and society at large, one which often reverts to classic antisemitic stereotypes. This can be seen in a host of hostile portrayals of Jews and the Jewish state, which amount to demonization. Some impute Israel with targeting children or employing policies

rooted in the idea of biblical vengeance (“an eye for an eye”). Others suggest that there is a pro-Israeli world conspiracy being directed from the United States (catch-phrase: “The Israel Lobby”⁴ or “the Israelization of US policy”⁵). The Jewish state is compared to Nazi Germany or even denied its fundamental right to exist and defend the lives of its citizens.

The process of confronting one’s own nation’s historic guilt for the Shoah—more or less advanced in each European state—has been accompanied by an ambiguous universalization of the Shoah and of the lessons derived from it: tolerance, human rights, anti-nationalism and non-violence. As much as these values are, in principle, to be welcomed, many dangers are embedded in the perspective from which they derive, such as the risk of ignoring the specific circumstances of the Shoah and the particularities of antisemitism. The proliferation of the terms that are based on or connected to it, and their use by such disparate groups as human rights activists, peace activists (“nuclear holocaust”), animal rights activists (“animal holocaust”), Islamic activists (“Muslims are the Jews of today”) and even neo-Nazis (“bomb holocaust”) has been a result of this discourse. Consequently, the Shoah has become almost arbitrarily exploitable—even to the extent of being turned against its very victims and their descendants. For they can now be reproached and taught a lesson, so to speak, by those who feel morally ennobled and empowered precisely because they believe to have learned what they deem to be the right lessons of history. It essentially represents simply another—though currently more opportune—delusional strategy for coping, hence the obsession with Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians.

If the Jewish state can be cast in the role of the “new Nazis,” or at least as the torch-bearer of the South African apartheid regime, does this not help to relieve the critic from the historic burden that his own national history has imposed on him—even if only to a certain extent? If everyone plays the role of “Nazi” at one point or another, does this not render the very idea of moral differentiation and responsibility somewhat obsolete? According to this thinking, the role of victim and perpetrator switch almost randomly. Yet it is here that the flip side of the underlying mechanism of guilt projection becomes most apparent. Each specific experience—including comparisons with other groups of victims elsewhere and at other points in time—is not taken seriously. Instead, these traumatic experiences are once again turned into objects, that is, instruments that are to bring psychological relief of the guilt-ridden perpetrators and their—conscious or unconscious—factionists. The “nazification” of Israel is an emotionally charged fantasy that has little to do with the realities of the Middle East conflict but that demonstrates the mindset of its promoters.

No less irrational is what lurks behind rationalizations of antisemitic incidents. One can observe a certain asynchrony in the pattern of public reactions to current displays of open antisemitism that actually helps illustrate the point about the transformation of the exculpation and coping strategies of “secondary antisemitism.” While anti-Jewish actions perpetrated by the extreme Right continue to be denied, minimized, excused and even justified in some regions of Europe, they are, by contrast, strongly condemned in others. Yet it is often in the latter that anti-Jewish manifestations on the part of Muslims are met with the kind of rationalizing arguments that in former times were (or elsewhere still are) used as a coping strategy for dealing with the Shoah: that Israel is suppressing the Palestinians, that Jews are wrongfully (or in part not so wrongfully) identified with Israel as a Jewish state, that they should have known better after all they have been through. As if the Shoah had been some kind of moral reformatory.

The consequence is an imaginary selection between good and bad Jews, the former being the cultivated and culture-producing, universalist, perhaps even a bit folkloristic, and non-militaristic urban intellectuals who have inhabited European societies for so long. Typically, the others are depicted as the uncultivated, nationalist, paranoid, narrow-minded settler-types with rifles. As a Jew, you have the choice between the two. If you denounce the policies of the State of Israel or the very state itself, you are a good member of the tribe. If you do not, then God help you, for you are willy-nilly creating or enhancing the antisemitism that will eventually hit you, too. In other words, stay clear of the State of Israel.

Selecting Jews along these lines—or even putting them into this position where they have to face such questioning—reflects an antisemitic pattern of thought. Once again, Jews are denied their status as individuals by being viewed as a group through a prism that automatically attributes to them stereotypical characteristics. The consequence of this is twofold: An outsider people is effectively replaced by an outsider state. Only distancing yourself from this state as a member of that people can save you from discrimination and attack.

It should actually come as little surprise that some Jews have made use of this apparent offer of integration, which promised them both a reprieve and an important role as chief witnesses against their own guilty flock. There have been historic precedents for Jews turning on other Jews due to the pressure of persecution, even to the extent that they fully appropriated the attitudes of their persecutors or even went beyond them. What is new here is the degree to which such Jewish figures have gained prominence in the public in some European countries, not to mention the recent international conference of Holocaust deniers in Tehran.

It is this replay of antisemitic patterns that characterizes much of the public activity in Europe's long-delayed confrontation with its tortured past. The knee-jerk condemnation of Nazism in many quarters has enabled people to detach themselves from that evil as if it were something wholly external, thereby preventing any critical confrontation with their own prejudices. Such superficial antifascism has been the result of a preoccupation with the past that exhibits more similarities to behavioral therapy than to psychoanalytic soul-searching—representing more of an adjustment to than a confrontation of. It bespeaks a lack of understanding of what antisemitism is—"the rumor about the Jews," as Adorno put it, namely a delusion with no rational justification whatsoever. Rather than debating, therefore, whether antisemitism has been the result of the conflict in the Middle East, one ought to ask to what extent it has, in fact, fuelled the conflict in the region, been exported to Europe and been linked with European secondary antisemitism.

In this context, three ideas should become clear:

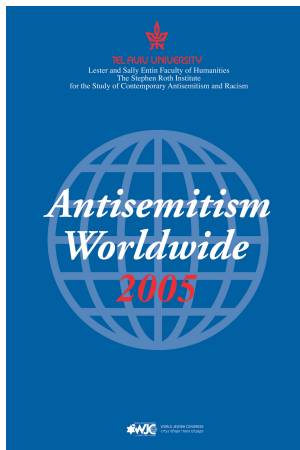
- that antisemitism and anti-Zionism (though historically distinct phenomena) cannot today be disentangled—the latter serves as a modern and socially legitimate manifestation of the former;
- that there indeed exists the phenomenon of "Jewish antisemitism" or "self-hatred" that fulfils an important legitimizing function in current antisemitic discourses; and
- that the "new antisemitism" is not a phenomenon *sui generis*, but actually constitutes the product of a transformation and contextualization of the antisemitism that indeed did not die in Auschwitz.

Without taking these insights into account, the fight against antisemitism will not only remain impotent, but will also create the impression that the problem is being dealt with appropriately—even while antisemitic attitudes are being transformed into less obvious forms. A genuine confrontation of antisemitism must not confine itself to a reflexive response to right-wing extremism. It also has to address those strains of antifascism that compete with right-wing extremism for the authorship of the same ideologemes—namely the rancor against the icons of modernity—Israel and the US, globalization and capital. A critical notion of the old and new antisemitism would expose these contradictions. It would confront both right-wing extremism as well as its false enemies and our false friends. Not less important, it would confront the racist stereotype maintained by many Europeans, namely that Arabs and Muslims cannot be antisemitic and the patronizing notion of the noble savage that is not a fully-fledged human subject with both a free will and a moral capability to differentiate between right and wrong. Enlightenment is the strongest weapon in our arsenal—perhaps the only one.

Notes

- ¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (1959). The essay was translated by Timothy Bahti and Geoffrey Hartmann and published as "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" in Geoffrey Hartmann (ed.), *Biburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 121f.
- ² Henryk M. Broder, *Der ewige Antisemit. Über Sinn und Funktion eines beständigen Gefühls* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), p. 11.
- ³ An Israeli psychoanalyst is generally credited for the following bon mot in this respect: "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz." See Joseph Joffe, "Trotzki und Tätervolk – Die Antisemiten können den Juden Auschwitz nicht verzeihen," *Die Zeit*, November 13, 2003.
- ⁴ See John J. Mearsheimer & Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2007).
- ⁵ See James Brooks, "The Israelization of America," December 7, 2002, <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/brooks1.html>; Ludwig Watzal, "Eine Israelisierung der Welt?" *International*, March 2004; Joel Beinin, "The Israelization of American Middle East Policy Discourse," *Social Text*– 75, XXI:2 (Summer 2003).

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