

The Hermeneutics of Anti-Anti-Semitism

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You knew where you were with the old anti-Semitism: anti-Semites hated Jews and were not ashamed to say so. They believed Jews were a cancer on the world and sought to either eliminate them or confine them so they would no longer be a ‘threat’. The old anti-Semitism was unambiguously intended and unambiguously felt as a threatening assault. Everyone knew where they stood.

Of course the ‘old’ anti-Semitism still exists. There are still individuals and organisations that come out and say they hate Jews and try their best to destroy them. But since the holocaust, most anti-Semites have come over all coy and bashful. So unpopular have the Nazis made anti-Semitism, that few will come out and openly long for the physical destruction of the Jews. Indeed, few anti-Semites will even celebrate their finest hour, the holocaust, preferring to hide behind outright denial.

The triumph of Zionism in 1948 has proved a boom for Jew-hatred. The pretext of confining one’s criticism to Zionism or Israel and then slyly facilitating a slippage between Zionists and Jews, allows for almost any manifestation of anti-Semitism to be explained away. Even al-Qaeda activists occasionally pay lip service to the fiction that they do not hate Jews *per se*. So felicitous have Zionism and holocaust denial proved in masking anti-Semitism, it is now only the most troglodyte and ineffective of neo-Nazis who will publicly own up to hating Jews.

The contemporary refusal of anti-Semites to speak openly of their hatred of Jews has had serious consequences for those concerned with Jewish survival. There is a fear that if anti-Semites seek to hide their hatred of Jews behind seemingly reasonable arguments and coded language, then anti-Semitism is in danger of becoming more acceptable. Fighting anti-Semites requires exposing them through interpreting their coded talk. The most highly prized skill in the defence of Jews of the Jewish people harm has come to be hermeneutics – the science of interpretation. The problem is that if Jew-hatred now speaks in code (albeit often thinly disguised), then how should the code be deciphered? And who gets to decipher the code? And to what end?

Given the importance of Zionism as a fig leaf for anti-Semitism, the majority of the hermeneutic effort within the Jewish community has been focused on the interpretation of criticism of Zionism and Israel. This is the hermeneutic battleground on which battles over anti-Semitism are fought. The question of what constitutes legitimate criticism of Israel is heavily contested. The question of whether criticism of Zionism is acceptable at all is also fought over with equal passion.

The question of the so-called ‘new anti-Semitism’ has generated most heat of all. The argument goes that in recent years anti-Semitism has spread to the liberal intellectual elite

and is manifested in a concerted attempt to de-legitimise Israel and Zionism. The new anti-Semitism is seen to be most blatantly manifested in the media. Passionate accusations and counter-accusations have flown around on this topic great intensity. On the one hand, liberal leftists are accused of double-standards in overlooking racism towards Jews whilst defending Muslims and other groups. On the other hand, leftist critics of Israel accuse Jewish groups of attempting to use accusations of anti-Semitism to silence any kind of criticism of Israel.

What is so striking about contemporary debates about anti-Semitism is how sophisticated they are. Jewish organisations and individuals committed to fighting anti-Semitism spend their time engaged in minute analyses of language, of 'bias', of complex questions of historical interpretation. The question of whether an individual or article is anti-Semitic generally comes down to fine judgements that are in their turn often refuted with an equal complexity. Increasingly this process has become mired in casuistry, obfuscation and bad faith on all sides.

The nadir (so far) in the hermeneutics of anti-Semitism has been the controversy over London mayor Ken Livingstone. As a consequence of his comparison of Jewish journalist Oliver Feingold to a concentration camp guard, the Board of Deputies referred Livingstone to the Adjudication Panel for England, who found him guilty of bringing his office into disrepute. The whole incident reflects the extraordinary world of contemporary anti-Semitic controversies: not only was Livingstone's insult bizarre in itself, it is equally bizarre to level the accusation of anti-Semitism at someone who sees comparing someone to a concentration guard as an insult. The incident became even more convoluted when, in a press release welcoming the Adjudication Panel's findings, the Board of Deputies seemed to deny that they were ever even accusing Livingstone of anti-Semitism, saying that they 'at no stage passed judgement on the motivation for the Mayor's comments' (8th March 2006). It seems that not only have discourses of anti-Semitism become so sophisticated that they are phrased in anti-Nazi terms, but that *anti-*anti-Semitic discourses are so sophisticated that they do not even attack anti-Semitism!

The Livingstone affair illuminates what controversies over anti-Semitism are increasingly becoming – an elite bitch-fest. So coded has the whole issue become that concern about anti-Semitism easily degenerates into score-settling and mean-spirited sideswiping. Given the overwhelming focus on the hermeneutics of anti-Semitism, and given the conviction that the hermeneutic process is complicated and difficult, concern about anti-Semitism has increasingly become an obsession of community leaders. Concern about anti-Semitism has become professionalized, embodied in think tanks, articles, websites and watchdogs. Similarly, those who are accused of anti-Semitism are drawn increasingly from the ranks of intellectuals, the media and community leaders.

What is in danger of becoming lost in this increasingly self-referential world is the actual *experience* of anti-Semitism. We have to remember that hatred of Jews is designed to hurt Jews themselves. An overwhelming focus on the hermeneutics of anti-Semitism can lead to an over-estimation of the power of 'texts' of anti-Semitism. The contexts within which anti-Semitic discourses are produced and received can often be overlooked. At the

moment the enormous concern with the hermeneutics of anti-Semitism has led to a neglect of the *sociology* of anti-Semitism.

Looked at sociologically, we can have a more balanced approach that tempers panicked fears of a contemporary 'tsunami' of anti-Semitism (in the Chief Rabbi's words). It is clear that in sections of the Muslim world there is rampant anti-Jewish rhetoric and holocaust denial, often thinly disguised as 'mere' anti-Zionism. It is clear that there has been a rise in anti-Semitic incidents in the UK (Iganski, Kielinger et al. 2005). It is clear that in some places, France being the most important example, many Jews have come to feel so threatened that they have started to emigrate in serious numbers. It is also clear that significant numbers of Jewish intellectuals and communal leaders themselves feel worried and threatened about anti-Semitism. These are all significant and worrying phenomena.

What is much less clear is how far elite concerns about anti-Semitism translate into any kind of existential crisis amongst 'rank and file' British Jews. Certainly, my research (Cohen and Kahn-Harris 2004) suggests that British Jews seem as secure and comfortable as ever, if perhaps mildly disgruntled about perceived media bias.

It is also unclear as to how far many of those who criticise Israel and Zionism are motivated by a hatred of Jews. Even if there are many Jews who consider any opposition to Zionism as *da facto* anti-Semitism and even if there are many anti-Zionists who make little attempt to hide their dislike of Jews, an anti-Zionism of good faith *is* possible. After all, it was not so long ago that large sections of the UK mainstream Jewish community were dubious about Zionism.

A consideration of the sociology of anti-Semitism should be the bedrock of any attempt to penetrate anti-Semitic discourse. It requires research on *people*, Jews and non-Jews, in their full complexity. It requires intellectual openness and bravery rather than posturing and casuistry.

The best way of investigating anti-Semitism is, perhaps paradoxically, not to do so directly. Much better is to devote time and resources to research on Jews in the contemporary world and in particular to their relationships to and perceptions of non-Jews. As a sociologist myself you would perhaps be forgiven for accusing me of promoting my own self-interest. I have opinions and agendas just like everyone else, but the difference between a well-grounded sociological treatment of anti-Semitism and a hermeneutic decoding of anti-Semitism is that social research has much better procedures for dealing with, allowing for and challenging one's own preconceptions.

Ultimately, unless those who hate Jews start to develop the courage of their own convictions, fighting anti-Semitism looks likely to remain a controversial and difficult process. Better then that the fight takes place in a spirit of fearless intellectual endeavour, rather than one of bad-tempered point-scoring.

References

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