



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Racism Is Recognized as Intrinsic to Western Societies. Why Isn't Antisemitism?

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,626, July 5, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many understand that racism is an intrinsic part of Western societies. So is antisemitism, yet this is acknowledged by very few. Antisemitism was on display during mass demonstrations about the coronavirus pandemic and the problem of racism, but was scarcely remarked upon. There has also been an outpouring of new mutations of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in the wake of the pandemic. As has occurred for millennia, western cultures are interweaving their antisemitism into issues of the day.

On May 25, 2020, a 46-year-old black man, George Floyd, was asphyxiated and killed by police in Minneapolis. His murder led to huge anti-racism demonstrations in the US. Some were accompanied by extreme violence and looting. Anti-racism demonstrations also took place in several European countries, including the UK and France.

Many people understand that racism is, to varying degrees, an intrinsic part of western societies, and they view it as a problem to be eradicated. Antisemitism is also an intrinsic part of Western society with a very long history, yet this obvious fact is only acknowledged by a few.

The societal integration of antisemitism exposes itself clearly from time to time. In the past few years, the institutional antisemitism of the British Labour Party drew international attention. This was partly due to the inaction about complaints by the party's then leader, Jeremy Corbyn, a self-declared "friend" and "brother" of genocidal Arab terrorist organizations.

In the past few months, the presence of antisemitism in Western societies has shown itself in two contexts: the coronavirus pandemic and the massive anti-

racism manifestations. Antisemitism often infiltrates mass demonstrations that have no relation to Israel or Jews.

This is the case at the “hygiene demonstrations” currently taking place against the coronavirus lockdown in Germany. Thousands have participated in these protests. In some cases, demonstrators threw bottles at the police, who responded with pepper spray and arrests. Among the demonstrators were conspiracy theorists and right-wing populists.

At several demonstrations in Germany, protestors wore yellow stars to falsely equate the lockdown measures with the Nazi persecution of Jews, as well as to compare the country’s government with Hitler’s regime. “Not vaccinated” or “Covid 19” was often written on the stars. The city of Munich has since prohibited the wearing of yellow stars at these gatherings. Occasionally, demonstrators wore the clothing of concentration camp inmates and carried signs reading “Mask Makes Free.” Coronavirus-related demonstrations in several German cities promoted by the right wing AfD party have featured Nazi symbols and references to the Holocaust.

In the US, a number of anti-racism demonstrations were accompanied by burning and looting. Some of the worst violence took place in Los Angeles. Jewish shops were destroyed in the Fairfax district and Jewish institutions were damaged, including synagogues and a school. A statue of Raoul Wallenberg, a virtuous Swede who saved Jews during the Holocaust, was smeared with antisemitic slogans. In Richmond, Virginia, a Reform congregation had its windows smashed by rioters.

The anti-racism protests in Paris on June 13 focused on the death of Adama Traoré, a Malian Frenchman who died in police custody in 2016. Some of the protestors shouted “you dirty Jews,” and some carried placards reading “Israel: Laboratory of Police Violence.” Though there is video of these incidents, the leader of the leftwing “Unbowed France” party (La France Insoumise), Jean-Luc Melenchon, falsely accused the police of peddling antisemitic gossip.

The way in which antisemitism has infiltrated recent demonstrations—none of which had anything to do with Jews or Israel—has many recent precedents. In November 2018, “yellow vest” demonstrations started taking place on Saturdays in France. (They took their name from the highway safety jackets the demonstrators wore.) The protesters demanded economic justice in the face of rising fuel prices and a high cost of living. Yet almost every Saturday, the demonstrations also included verbal attacks on the Jewish community.

In January 2014, a mass rally took place in Paris. This “Day of Anger” was meant as a protest against French President François Hollande’s economic plans. However, groups of participants started to shout antisemitic slogans. These included: “Jews, France doesn’t belong to you” and (Holocaust denier) “Faurisson is right,” as well as “the Holocaust was a hoax.”

Similar outbursts of antisemitism occurred at the 2011 “Occupy Wall Street” protests in New York. For the most part, the participants were not antisemites, yet antisemitism tainted the protests. In a video of the demonstrations in New York, one can see Jews being attacked and blamed for the financial crisis and for US financial assistance to Israel. Signs included “Gaza Supports the Occupation of Wall Street” and “Hitler’s Bankers.”

October 27, 2005 was the beginning of a three-week period of major riots in France. On that day, two youngsters in Clichy sous Bois, near Paris, were accidentally electrocuted when they entered the transformer house of the national electricity company. Their friends claimed they were fleeing the police. The government declared the riots “officially” over on November 17, as the number of cars torched the night before had finally fallen below 100.

The rioters were almost all North Africans, and their main targets were the police and the government. Yet synagogues at Pierrefitte and Garges les Gonesse were attacked with Molotov cocktails.

As a follow-up to the recent anti-racism riots, there has been violence against statues in the US, the UK, and other countries, mainly—but not only—directed against those of slave owners. The first incident was when anti-racism demonstrators tore down the statue of Edward Colston, a major benefactor of the British town of Bristol and a slave owner, and threw it in the harbor. In several other locations, statues were removed by the authorities.

While the removal of statues of people now deemed to have a problematic past is a subject of great interest for the world’s media, almost no attention is paid to the existence of extremely antisemitic sculptures in Europe. In Germany, at least 30 religious Christian buildings contain a “Judensau” (a Jew committing an obscene sexual act with a female pig) sculpture dating back to the Middle Ages.

A few months ago, in the town of Calbe, a Judensau carving was taken down for repairs. In March, the parish decided it was too offensive to return to the buttress and should be hung elsewhere—but the Building Authority of the area decided the object had protected status. It has been restored to its original place and will remain covered until a final decision is made.

Earlier this year, there was a court case concerning a thirteenth century bas-relief on the church in Wittenberg, a building associated with Martin Luther. It depicts a rabbi peering into a pig's anus while other figures suckle from its teats. A panel of judges found that the image "did not harm Jews' reputation because it was 'embedded' in a wider memorial context," according to the statement of the presiding judge.

Cologne also has a Judensau at the choir of the local cathedral. Next to it is an illustration of the blood libel, an old antisemitic motif.

Judensau sculptures are not only found in Germany. There is one in Switzerland, one in Belgium, one in Sweden, one in Austria, and two in France.

Another classic antisemitic trope that has been in the news in recent months is anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, many new mutations of which have proliferated in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. These claim that Jews or Israel are somehow responsible for the virus. A study by the Kantor Center at Tel Aviv University found that the pandemic has "unleashed a unique worldwide wave of antisemitism...The new wave of antisemitism includes a range of libels that have one common element: The Jews, the Zionists and/or the state of Israel are to blame for the pandemic and/or stand to gain from it."

A study by scholars at the University of Oxford found that one in five English people believe to some extent that Jews created COVID-19 to collapse the economy for financial gain.

These cases only refer to issues currently in the public eye, but the centuries-old interweaving of antisemitism with Western culture continues to show up in many other ways. Major elements of medieval antisemitism still exist. There is much Holocaust distortion and promotion of the libel that Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians is comparable to that of the Nazis. In many new ideologies, movements, and intellectual currents, expressions of antisemitism eventually come to the fore. This hatred can focus on Jews or on Israel.

Despite all this, there is only minute awareness that antisemitism is intrinsic to western culture and societies.

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center, a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and author of The War of a Million Cuts. Among the honors he has received was the 2019 International Lion of Judah Award of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research paying tribute to him as the leading international authority on contemporary antisemitism.