



“Antisemitism-Lite” in Contemporary Germany

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Let’s face it: Israelis aren’t interested in the problem of antisemitism. This is a mistake, as antisemitic views, in their diverse formulations and disguises, continue to influence international attitudes regarding the Jewish State. In Germany, the lumping of antisemitism together with other hatreds has resulted in a form of “antisemitism-lite” that remains as insidious as its earlier incarnations.

On December 10, 2020, the English edition of *Haaretz* published an article under the headline “In Germany, a witch hunt is raging against critics of Israel. Cultural leaders have had enough.” The piece discussed the Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit (not the first of its kind), a statement of opposition by over 30 directors of German cultural and research institutions against a resolution of the German parliament (the Bundestag) from May 2019 that condemned the BDS movement. “At the center of our initiative lies a common struggle against antisemitism, racism, right-wing extremism and any form of violent religious fundamentalism,” the statement said. That aim was impaired, so say the critics, by the Bundestag’s position: “By invoking this resolution, accusations of antisemitism are being misused to push aside important voices and to distort critical positions.”

What do contemporary Germans mean by “antisemitism”? In recent years, the subject has attracted much attention via books, articles, and declarations. A trend has emerged in German scholarly and public thinking: to combine Jew-hatred with other cultural positions, as in the statement above. The idea is that antisemitism and anti-Islamism, say, are both expressions of hatred, and Germans oppose antisemitism just as they oppose hatred of all foreigners.

The result is a kind of “antisemitism-lite” that is not so much an argued position as an attitude—one that is very influential and widely shared. It

amounts to a softening of the issue, and thus represents a problematic understanding of Judeophobia. The moment the word "and" appears, antisemitism is pushed into a corner.

Compounding the problem is that the connections made are often wrong. For one thing, treating the issue as a problem of xenophobia is misguided, as modern Jews are not foreigners in their own countries. Albert Einstein, Liese Meitner, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Walter Rathenau, and many more were well integrated citizens in their countries and leading lights of Western culture.

Nor does antisemitism have anything to do with anti-Islamism. Their coupling is the result of a superficial mix of the psychological and social meanings of the word "hate." Judeophobia and anti-Islamism have nothing in common in terms of historical roots, cultural content, or present significance. With regard to racism, antisemitism was a major factor in Nazi Germany but now fulfills no role. Nevertheless, in present public discourse antisemitism is rarely mentioned on its own. It has become politically correct to bind Jew-hatred to some other negative cultural or social factor in public life.

Further confusion in the probing of antisemitism originates in the social sciences. Through an improper adaptation of views from the 20th century Frankfurt School of critical theory, antisemitism is described as an anti-modern position. However, historical analysis shows that antisemitism was never anti-modern—it always adapted itself to the current cultural and political trends of the time, as it has done in the new anti-Israelism. Then there is the idea that antisemites are unable to think in abstract terms. On the contrary: Jew-haters always thought and still think in abstract terms. Their conceptions of Jews and Judaism are not and never were based on reality.

More generally, antisemitism is frequently described as a right-wing ideological phenomenon, tempered by the occasional shocked revelation: "Antisemitism has reached the middle of society!" In fact, Jew-hatred never emerged from some ideological corner and suddenly "arrived" in polite society. Judeophobia was always established in the social middle and then moved in this or that ideological direction, depending on the circumstances.

In our day, the anti-Israel pattern of Jew-hatred has much support among liberals and leftists, people who preach tolerance and understanding for all except the Jewish state. They support or participate in the BDS movement, which is a wolf in sheep's clothing: It is a political undertaking whose aim is the destruction of Israel in the name of democratic and humanistic values.

How to explain such ideological disarray, which blurs understanding of Jew-hatred and pulls efforts against antisemitism in different directions? A major reason seems to be the peculiar way the historical dimension of Judeophobia is dealt with in terms of public perception. The scholarly historical approach, well expressed by Poliakov, Katz, Bauer, Wistrich, Schwarz-Friesel, Nirenberg, and many others, explains antisemitism as a cultural factor deeply rooted in Western culture, with a millennial history behind it. The chameleon-like character of antisemitism is emphasized: It changed its expressions and maxims along the centuries and adapted to shifting cultural trends and social conditions in Western societies, but always remained the same: hatred of Jews and Judaism.

For centuries, the basic Judeophobic arguments were religious, while in modern times they have become mostly secular. From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the racial approach was dominant. A transformation occurred from the late twentieth century onward: the “Israelization” of antisemitism. The Jewish State—the most vibrant expression of present-day Jewish life—has become the target of a new generation of antisemites. That shift began in the 1960s and was described as early as 1969 by Jean Améry.

However, the internalization of the historical approach in present academic and public understanding (when it indeed occurs) follows a dubious pattern. A basic tenet of the historical position is simply disregarded: that Jew-hatred is unique. A tacit unreadiness has emerged among scholars and public figures to accept Judeophobia as a phenomenon that exists and persists *on its own* in Western cultural awareness, occasionally linked but basically unrelated to racism, xenophobia, anti-modernity, or any other social or ideological position.

A muted resistance has established itself against the recognition of Judeophobia not as prejudice but as doctrine, one deeply embedded in Western culture. As stated by Jean-Paul Sartre back in 1954: “What [the antisemite] wishes [for], what he prepares [for], is the death of the Jew.”

Why the ambiguity about antisemitism? There seems to be a split in contemporary Western awareness between the objective and the subjective comprehension of Judeophobia. The situation is not helped by the fact that the verbal prowess of certain scholars engaged in the subject exceeds their cognitive clarity—in other words, it is hard to understand what they actually mean. Jew-hatred seems to be a phenomenon society has come to recognize—but only up to a point.

The preposterous presentation of Jews and Judaism as a danger to humanity and the recent horrors of the Shoah forced people toward a reckoning. We slip here into the thorny realm of subjective public demeanor, which demands caution: seemingly, a full recognition of Jew-hatred as an independent factor with deep roots in Western culture (which means, ultimately, something present, consciously and unconsciously, in the cognitive and emotional attitude of each individual) demands a measure of self-reflection and insight that is difficult on the personal level and perhaps impossible in the broader social sphere. Obviously, centuries of Jew-hatred cannot be overcome by several decades of soul-searching (as far as this has happened). As it is, people, including learned academics, lean toward a soft antisemitism—one that is comparable and adaptable, even negatively so, to existing social and cultural categories such as racism, xenophobia, anti-modernity, anti-Islamism, etc. The result is “antisemitism-lite.”

The above-mentioned Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit, directed against the Bundestag 2019 BDS resolution, is an example of the “antisemitism-lite” approach. In typical fashion, the statement mixes antisemitism, racism, extremism, and fundamentalism together. The main argument—that “accusations of antisemitism are being misused to push aside important voices and distort critical positions”—is a clear indication of confusion between two different matters, anti-Israelism and criticism of Israel. The muddling of the two is a result of the non-acceptance of the historical approach to Jew-hatred among those who traffic in “antisemitism-lite.”

The historical position, which explains Judeophobia as an evolving phenomenon, considers anti-Israelism a leading expression of contemporary antisemitism. This has nothing to do with criticism of positions taken by the Israel government. Israeli policies are criticized every day, including in Israel itself. But to oppose the very existence of the Jewish state, or to demand its abolition or “transformation,” is Jew-hatred in new garb.

What moved the signatories to the statement above? To use an Americanism, “What makes them tick”? Hatred of Jews does not appear to be the impelling element. Their understanding of antisemitism seems as limited as the one they intended to criticize.

“Antisemitism-lite” generates material for long articles, loud statements, large conferences, and well-endowed research programs. The result is that it nudges aside real Jew-hatred, which is very much alive and dangerous as ever. Recently, a German professor who describes himself as a humanist wrote to the Israel Embassy in Berlin that “Israel is an anomaly and should be dissolved peacefully, for the sake of us all.”

The frightening side of Judeophobia—its eternal dimension, adaptability to modern circumstances, and evil vitality in the shadows of Western “culture”—is concealed under a layer of “correct” platitudes.

Considered with clear eyes, “antisemitism-lite” is an expression of the intellectual disarray the topic that currently exists among many Germans (and Europeans). It is high time to reconsider such attitudes. Antisemitism continues as much as ever, and there is nothing “lite” about it.

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