Marxism and the Critique of Antisemitism

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Received 1 September 2023 | Accepted 3 April 2024 | Published online 27 May 2024

Abstract

Antisemitism is an increasingly prevalent aspect of public life in the West, both as a consequence of the growth of the far right across the board and through its mobilisation against Palestinian liberation and Palestine solidarity activism. While synagogues are targeted and far-right politicians revive ideas of Jewish global power, it is the left, Muslims, and Palestinians that are continuously constructed as the source of the current rise in hatred and violence against Jews. If historically the Marxist tradition engaged actively with the so-called Jewish question, in recent decades the subject has receded from focus. This shift took place as other forms of racism – directed at Muslims, Black populations, or migrants – became the basis for reactionary politics in the West. This article argues that while some of the assumptions that underwrote classical Marxist texts on the issue have been found wanting – perhaps most notably the inevitable (or desirable) character of the trend towards assimilation – they remain important starting points for making sense of our present, both by their method and their political commitment to liberation.
Keywords

critique of antisemitism – The Jewish Question – Zionism – Palestinian liberation – structural racism

Antisemitism* has grown exponentially over the last decade or so. While it has done so in tandem with other forms of racism, oppression, and prejudice, fuelled by a growing global far-right, its recent trajectory from the periphery to the centre of Western racist ideas, discourse, and action deserves attention.

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, antisemitism could easily be considered to have become a fringe phenomenon. The Holocaust and its memory were central – as they still are – to Western states’ self-image, but not without irony (forgetting in the process that European ruling classes had fuelled antisemitism throughout the continent and supported fascism and Nazism as a counter force to the threat of Communism at home and abroad).¹

Simultaneously, a newly rising far-right appeared to have abandoned antisemitism altogether – or at the very least having pushed it to the outer edges of its political organisations. This process was most strikingly captured by the struggle within the French National Front (now renamed the National Rally), between Le Pen père et fille, over the place of antisemitism in the party and the centrality of Islamophobia as a mobilising mechanism.²

Yet, perhaps predictably, the stronger the far-right became, the bolder it grew and ideas that previously were considered to be incompatible with ‘dediabolisation’ resurfaced. Antisemitism reappeared more obviously within its arsenal and continues to be normalised as far-right parties take power (Hungary, Italy, Brazil, India) or exert growing influence over elected officials (the US government under Trump and most European countries). We are now in a situation in which antisemitic violence carried out against Jewish people and places of worship repeatedly occur, most strikingly in France and the United States, while antisemitic ideas about ‘globalists’ and ‘Jewish space lasers’ have taken central stage in the far-right’s rhetoric. They played a central role in the election of Donald Trump, are reappearing among the Tory right, and are now a

* The introduction to this article was finished before 7 October 2023 and we decided not to rework it.
1 See, for example, Traverso 2016 for a longer discussion of this phenomenon.
2 Peter Drucker’s excellent essay in this special issue returns to this question and discusses a comparable phenomenon with regard to the far-right’s relationship with homophobia.
regular feature in the public pronouncements of the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands, to name but a few.

The Left

In the face of such a striking and worrying phenomenon, one could be forgiven for assuming that the response of those who claim to maintain the liberal status quo would have been swift and uncompromising. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. While playing into the hands of the far-right on issues of migration, Islamophobia, trans rights, and law-and-order narratives – thereby severely constraining their ability to challenge its rise – centrist politicians, journalists, and commentators have turned their ire against the left and its support for Palestinian liberation instead. Through conflations of antisemitism with anti-Zionism – itself based on the antisemitic notion that Jews everywhere and the state of Israel are synonymous – pro-Israeli activists and lawmakers have constructed a narrative that the real dangers to Jewish people in the West are not those violently targeting them or resuscitating old and dangerous conspiracy theories, but left-wing parties, movements, and organisations. It is worth restating in passing that, more often than not, the very same organisations are at the forefront of the fight against the growth of the former.

While pro-Israeli – or indeed Israeli – politicians continue to cosy up with far-right demagogues (Steve Bannon), far-right governments (Italy and Hungary) or antisemitic politicians (Poland), they simultaneously aim to criminalise pro-Palestinian voices and movements as a threat to the Jewish people. They have done so through the widely discredited International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism (most recently rejected by the UN special rapporteur), as well as decrees aiming to outlaw the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in France, Germany, Austria, numerous US states, Canada, and (so-far unsuccessfully) Britain.³

The story of the ‘Hijacking Memory: The Holocaust and the New Right’ conference is a useful illustration in this regard.⁴ Organisers and participants – among them the leading specialists in their field – gathered in Berlin to discuss the importance of Holocaust memory and its (mis)use by the political right,

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³ See, for example, Gould 2020 for an overview and critique. For a full timeline, see Palestine Legal n.d.

⁴ Joshua Leifer’s account, ‘The Challenge of Defending Memory in Germany’, is instructive (Leifer 2022).
including the growing threat of outright Holocaust revisionism. One solitary contribution in the three-day conference came from a Palestinian participant, Dr Tareq Baconi, who pointed out the dangers of weaponising Holocaust memory in order to deny the Palestinian people’s right to liberation. Nothing, at first glance, controversial or out of place given the conference’s stated aims. Yet, first Baconi and then the conference organisers were accused of antisemitism, condemned in the German press, and even the venue where the conference was held was threatened with losing its funding by the state. The real danger in the eyes of the German establishment was not those weaponising or trivialising the Holocaust. It was the very people targeted by said weaponisation.

The tendency to flip reality on its head in order to delegitimise the left – and any anti-systemic critique that it might offer in a time of simultaneous ecological, economic, and political crisis – was perhaps most visible in the sustained campaign waged by pro-Israeli organisations and right-wing politicians (in both the Labour and Conservative parties) against Jeremy Corbyn. A life-long campaigner against racism and antisemitism was vilified as an existential threat to the Jewish people, while Tory politicians unveiled statues of Nazi-sympathisers and maintained friendly relations with Steve Bannon and Viktor Orbán. Unfortunately, many on the left similarly failed to see the wood for the trees and participated in the construction of a narrative of a specific, if not primarily, left-wing problem with antisemitism.

This issue is certainly not limited to Britain, or to those who failed to understand the attacks on Corbyn, the left, and the Palestine solidarity movement for what they were. As Leandros Fischer reminds us in his paper, the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, the characterisation of Palestine solidarity activism and migration as the sources of contemporary European antisemitism, and the failure to challenge the (often pro-Israel) far-right as the key driver of antisemitic reaction has a long history on the left, especially in Germany. In dissecting the political history and theory of the Antideutsch current, he offers us the tools to understand, critique, and challenge these wider processes that have become so familiar, well beyond the borders of the German state. Jean-Pierre Couture, in focussing on France and the specific history of

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5 Baconi is the author of *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Baconi 2018) and the president of the board of the Palestinian policy network Al Shabaka (<https://al-shabaka.org/profiles/tareq-baconi/>).

6 For an excellent discussion and analysis of the relationship between the Holocaust and the Nakba, see Bashir and Goldberg (eds.) 2019.

7 For a critical overview of this process see: Stern-Weiner (ed.) 2019; Nunns 2022; McNally 2020.

8 Tidman 2019.

9 See, for example: Renton 2021; Randall 2021.
the systematic (and wilful) misreadings of Marx, recasting the radical thinker and the movements that take inspiration from his thought as antisemitic, similarly helps us make sense of the current impasse and the intellectual tools necessary to break out of it.

This is where the impulse for this special issue is located. How to make sense of the contemporary rapid growth of antisemitism, its importance in the rise of the (far-)right, and the striking inability to name, locate, and fight it effectively that has paralysed much of the left? What can Marxism offer us in this process, beyond the well-rehearsed reflections on the Marxist classics of the beginning of the twentieth century? And if these classics remain of importance to our present moment, how are we to understand, engage with, and mobilise them today? How can the left rebuild an analysis of contemporary antisemitism – and social movements against it – which neither counterpose it to support for Palestinian liberation, nor isolate it from wider structures of racialised, gendered, or sexual oppression, discrimination, and violence. It is in the hope of addressing these issues – or at least to offer an impetus to the necessary discussion and debates surrounding them – that we put together this collection of essays. We hope that they will elicit critical engagement, reflection, and responses in the months and years to come.

Marxism and the Jewish Question

When discussing a Marxist approach to the issue of antisemitism, a number of texts are widely-shared reference points. This special issue contains papers discussing two of such texts; Marx’s essay ‘On The Jewish Question’ (written in 1843, published in 1844) and Moishe Postone’s 1979 essay ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism’. Both contain valuable insights but need to be read in their historical context.

Out of all of Marx’s writings, this article might be the most misunderstood. ‘On The Jewish Question’ has often been read as evincing antisemitic tendencies in Marx’s thought, or even as proof of the thesis of ‘an antisemitic Marx’, as Couture writes in his article on ‘The French Debate on “Zur Judenfrage”: From an Anachronistic Trial to the Crisis of Secularism’. For a supporter of this

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thesis, like the historian Pierre Birnbaum in his *Géographie de l'espoir*, ‘Marx advocated nothing less than the necessary and unavoidable end of the Jews’.11

Many readings of ‘On The Jewish Question’ are in fact anachronistic, missing the emergence of a specific, modern form of antisemitism. As Postone pointed out, ‘modern anti-Semitism’ (a term popularised in Germany in the early 1880s by the agitator Wilhelm Marr)12 should not be confused with ‘everyday anti-Jewish prejudice’ – it rather is an ideology, a form of thought, which emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth century.13 Although building on older forms of Christian hostility towards Jews, modern antisemitism drew on a wider field of references, themes, and identities than only the religious, such as national belonging and ‘scientific’ notions of race.14 A lack of attention to the historical specificity of modern antisemitism is part of the explanation for the many misreadings of ‘On The Jewish Question’.

To understand ‘On The Jewish Question’, it is necessary to keep the polemical character of the text in mind.15 ‘On The Jewish Question’ was Marx’s response to two articles by Bruno Bauer that had appeared in the two previous years, ‘Die Judenfrage [The Jewish Question]’ (1842) and ‘Die Fähigkeit der heutigen Juden und Christen, frei zu werden [The Capacity of Today’s Jews and Christians to Become Free]’ (1843). Before the break between the two authors in 1842, Bauer had been Marx’s closest friend, and he likely exercised a lasting influence on Marx’s conception of critique.16 Bauer argued that political emancipation entailed human emancipation but would only be possible after the state and its citizens had become ‘emancipated’ from religion.17 To become ‘truly’ free, the Jews needed to renounce Judaism, and the constitutional state needed to renounce Christianity. Any attempt by Jews to maintain themselves as a group defined by religion was thus incompatible with such emancipation.

Marx rejected this thesis and argued that the ideas of liberal democracy, such as freedom and equality, in practice are embedded in the bourgeois right to private property:

> But, the right of man [*Menschenrecht*] to liberty is based not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the right of this separation, the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn.

11 Quoted by Daniel Bensaïd in Marx 2006, p. 25.
12 Traverso 2000, p. 38.
17 Yago-Jung, p. 15.
into himself. The practical application of man’s right to liberty is man’s right to private property.

What constitutes man’s right to private property? [...] The right of man to private property is, therefore, the right to enjoy one’s property and to dispose of it at one’s discretion [à son gré], without regard to other men, independently of society, the right of self-interest. This individual liberty and its application form the basis of civil society. It makes every man see in other men not the realisation of his own freedom, but the barrier to it.\[18\]

According to Daniel Bensaïd, ‘On The Jewish Question’ marked a decisive moment in Marx’s surpassing of radical liberalism and its illusions.\[19\] It is the starting point of Marx’s critique of the limits of the French Revolution, of the democratic state, and human rights.\[20\] In this special issue, Igor Shoikhedbrod shows how Bauer’s opposition to the equal rights of Jews ‘is used by Marx as a foil for dissecting the potential and limitations of political emancipation within the framework of the modern constitutional state’ while simultaneously recognising the necessity of such emancipation, thereby informing a ‘Marxist internationalism – one that is sensitive to the global history of persecution and oppression’.

‘On The Jewish Question’ is first of all a critique of the limits of political emancipation, and was, perhaps unfortunately, of limited use for Marxist movements that were confronted, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the rise of modern antisemitism. The leaders and thinkers of these movements initially interpreted antisemitism as a response to economic crises and increased competition between different elements of the petite bourgeoisie. One of the most prominent leaders of the German SPD in that period, August Bebel, claimed that only in 1877 did antisemitism come out into the open as a political current in Germany. According to Bebel this was the ‘natural effect and consequence of the economic conditions’ that arose after the crash of 1873. It was economic misery and precarity that made the middle-layers of society susceptible to demagogues who scapegoated ‘Jewish’ exploitation. An accident of European history meant that Christian religious hostility against Jews had as an effect that they were over-represented in economic middle layers, in roles associated with finance and trade, and they thereby appeared as convenient scapegoats.

\[18\] Marx 1844.
\[20\] Marx 2006, p. 29.
This economic misery was however inescapable as capitalist development increasingly rendered intermediate social layers obsolete. According to Bebel, this meant that antisemitism itself was doomed to become obsolete as its bankruptcy would be revealed by the development of capitalism itself. Even expelling all Jews from German areas, Bebel concluded, ‘would not change the foundations of our society by one inch’; ‘not the Jews, but capitalism is the enemy of the anti-Semitic middle-layers’. It was inevitable that the ‘declining middle-layers’ would increasingly realise this; ‘and they will then come to the realisation that they have not only to fight against the Jewish capitalist, but against the rule of the capitalist class’. At this point, ‘against its will and by necessity’, antisemitism would ‘become revolutionary, and thus play into the hands of us, the Social Democracy.’

Bebel’s faith that the development of capitalism would force even antisemitism to play into the hands of socialism was an extreme example of a belief in progress that characterised much of the Marxist approach in this period. In ‘Rasse und Judentum [Race and Jewishness]’ from 1914, Karl Kautsky likewise expected that capitalist development would inexorably lead to the assimilation of Jews into wider society, thereby dissolving their difference and antisemitic hostility towards them. It had been in the interest of the development of industrial capitalism that the walls around the Jewish ghettos had come down in Europe, and the further development of capitalism towards socialism would end the last vestiges of antisemitism. Antisemitism was the regressive ideology of an outdated petite bourgeoisie, and especially in Tsarist Russia a device with which the state tried to divide the working class. Kautsky denied any historical resilience to the social and cultural distinctions of Jewish populations. Because of their specific social and economic functions and antisemitic hostility towards them, Jews formed a ‘caste’, according to Kausky. Otto Bauer shared a similar approach, explaining the existence of Jews as a national group in historical terms, as supposedly the outcome of their role as merchants in pre-capitalist societies.

‘Only in the ghetto,’ argued Kautsky, ‘in enforced isolation from their environment and under political pressure, without rights and amid hostility, does Jewishness persist.’ Wherever Jews were treated as free and equal, it supposedly dissolved as class contradictions developed among the Jewish population along parallel lines as in the rest of society. The way to their liberation, and

21 Bebel 1893.
22 Kautsky 1974, p. 90.
23 Traverso 1994, pp. 76–82.
hence their assimilation, for Jews was participation in the proletarian class struggle.25 As individuals, Jews had played revolutionary roles in the workers’ movement, Kautsky recognised, but Jewishness was only reactionary, a ‘feudal remnant’ that ought to disappear ‘the earlier, the better’ for the whole of society, clearing the way for the creation of a higher form of societal organisation.26

Bebel’s and Kautsky’s approach was shared by later writers. Otto Heller, a faithful Stalinist, in ‘Der Untergang des Judentums [The Decline of Jewishness]’ (1930) added that the Jewish question was partly a national one. ‘The demise of Jewishness in its social conception’ according to Heller meant ‘the dissolving of the Jewish caste, bourgeois emancipation and assimilation of the Jews in the West; the solution of the Jewish question where it is simultaneously a social and national question, in the East, through the proletarian revolution: all of this destroys the social preconditions for the return of antisemitism.’27

As Traverso writes in his survey of the Marxists and the Jewish Question, the ‘classic’ approach to antisemitism probably found its most sophisticated example in the work of Abram Leon, a young Belgian-Jewish intellectual who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of 26.28 In his work The Jewish Question, completed in 1942 but published posthumously in Paris in 1946, Leon built on earlier analyses of Jewish history as the outcome of the supposed ‘socio-economic function of the Jews’; ‘Above all the Jews constitute historically a social group with a specific economic function. They are a class, or more precisely, a people-class’.29 According to Leon, it was capitalism that posed the Jewish Question when, by destroying feudal society, it also ‘destroyed the function of the Jewish people-class’ while being unable to absorb ‘the Jew liberated from [this] social shell’.30 But this also meant that modern forms of antisemitism were only ‘manifestations of the economic antagonism created by capitalism’.31 ‘The plight of the Jews has never been so tragic’, wrote Leon, ‘but never has it been so close to ceasing to be that’.32 Supposedly, ghettos and yellow badges did not prevent ‘the workers from feeling a greater solidarity with those who suffer most from the afflictions all humanity is suffering’. Socialism would open the way for resolving the Jewish plight. Traverso observes that Leon concluded the traditional Marxist approach to the Jewish problem, ‘assimilation

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\begin{align*}
25 & \quad \text{Kautsky 1974, p. 115.} \\
26 & \quad \text{Kautsky 1974, p. 119.} \\
27 & \quad \text{Heller 1931, p. 150.} \\
28 & \quad \text{Traverso 1997, p. 225.} \\
29 & \quad \text{Traverso 1997, p. 226.} \\
30 & \quad \text{Léon 1970, p. 258.} \\
31 & \quad \text{Léon 1970, p. 266.} \\
32 & \quad \text{Léon 1970, p. 262.}
\end{align*}
\]
as a historical trend and an outcome of “progress”, ‘at a time when Auschwitz was sounding the death knell for a century of Jewish assimilation’.33

It was the horrors of Auschwitz that in the eyes of Adorno ‘makes all talk of progress towards freedom ludicrous’; ‘if freedom and autonomy still had any substance, Auschwitz could not have happened’. Confronted with the direct merger of politics with mass murder in Auschwitz and other camps, such talk becomes ‘the mere assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face and that thereby perpetuates it’.34 In his contribution to this issue, Traverso considers the work of one thinker who did look that horror in the face, Günther Anders. For Anders, Auschwitz and Hiroshima named the transition to a new historical epoch, one in which humanity itself was ‘exterminable’ (tötbar).35

Whereas the socialist movement has historically tended towards a linear vision of progress, there is a need for what Michael Löwy has called ‘a dialectical conception of progress, which takes into account the negative aspect of capitalist modernity’.36 In his contribution to this special issue, Löwy offers a reading of Kafka as an observer of one such aspect, of a bureaucratic ‘justice’ system ‘crushing the innocent individual under the wheels of the State machine’. In a different view of history, Ishay Landa calls to ‘complete the revolution of 1789 and to follow the process of modernity through’ by recognising the ‘locomotive of world history’ as a force for emancipation.

In a similar impulse to reassess the Marxist classics, Neil Levi subjects Postone’s essay to an immanent critique. Such a critique is all the more relevant because the essay has become a widely cited reference, including among Marxists who otherwise have little in common with Postone’s approach. Part of the explanation is the paucity of Marxist analyses of Auschwitz. While National Socialism and fascism have been the subject of intense scrutiny, much less attention has been paid to the analysis of Auschwitz and of the processes leading up to it.

Postone’s essay itself dates from 1979. An English translation was published the following year, in New German Critique. The essay starts by examining the West German response to the television drama series Holocaust and goes on to discuss the lack of attention to Auschwitz specifically among the West-German New Left. Only the second half of the text develops an analysis of antisemitism. According to Postone, this series marked the first time that the majority

35 Traverso 2020, p. 48.
36 Löwy 2000.
of the generation politicised after 1968 had ‘concretely and viscerally been confronted with the fate of the Jews’; ‘they had known, of course, but apparently only abstractly’.

For Postone, ‘The post-war insistence on not having known should probably be interpreted as a continued insistence on not wanting to know. “We didn’t know” should be understood as “we still don’t want to know.”’ Admission of knowledge – even if acquired post factum – would have necessarily demanded an internal distancing from past identification and would have led to political and social consequences. Such consequences would have required among other things that former Nazi officials could not have continued exercising their functions in the Federal Republic. But rather than an anti-fascist reckoning, ‘the demand was for “normalcy” at all costs, one to be achieved without dealing with the past. The strong identification with that past was not overcome, but simply buried beneath a surfeit of Volkswagens’.

At this point, Postone’s essay can be read as an implicit critique of the Holocaust’s use as a universal key to understanding antisemitism as such. The failure to reckon with the specific nature of Nazi antisemitism ‘was psychic self-denial and repression’. The German left’s lack of knowledge about concrete Nazi policies led, on Postone’s assessment, to an incomplete view of National Socialism. Against this, Postone insisted on the ‘specificity of Nazism and the extermination of European Jewry’ and argued against interpretations of the Third Reich in ‘historically non-specific terms’. According to Postone, German feelings of guilt and shame led to a concern with the Nazi past but one that avoided ‘the specificity of the past’. In other words, Postone’s essay was not intended to be an analysis of antisemitism in general, nor of murderous, ‘redemptive’ antisemitism, but of specifically National Socialist antisemitism.

The main argument that Postone developed is that Nazi antisemitism identified the figure of the Jews with ‘abstract’, financial capital as juxtaposed to concrete ‘industrial’ capital. Where purportedly the former was parasitic and rootless, the latter was productive. In Nazi antisemitism, Jews became identified not only with money and the circulation of capital, as they had been already in pre-existing forms of antisemitism, but ‘were identified with capital itself’. National Socialism was, in terms of its self-understanding, a move-

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39 It should be noted that at a later point Postone wrote that ‘modern anti-Semitism’ as such could be understood as a fetishized one-sided form of anticapitalism that ‘biologically identifies’ Jews with ‘abstract capital’. See Postone 2003a.
40 Postone 2003b, p. 93.
ment of revolt.\textsuperscript{41} Nazi leaders described their movement as driven by a ‘great anticapitalist yearning’, even a part of a ‘racial world revolution’.\textsuperscript{42} Clearly, this was a very specific form of antisemitism, and an analysis of this form of anti-Semitism cannot simply be generalised.

Regardless of the value of the analysis developed in the second part of ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism’, attention to the often neglected first part of the text should warn us against attempts to use it as a general explanatory model.\textsuperscript{43}

What then to make of the widespread use of the text and its analytical categories in ways that ignore Postone’s insistence on the specificity of German National Socialist antisemitism? ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism’ itself offers a critique \textit{avant la lettre} of this use of the text; by ignoring the specificity of National Socialist antisemitism, the antisemitism that had led to Auschwitz, other issues, such as the confrontation with authoritarian policies in the Federal Republic of Germany could be understood ‘as a direct struggle against fascism, an attempt to make up today for the lack of German resistance then.’\textsuperscript{44}

A similar mechanism can be seen in the contemporary so-called \textit{Antideutsch} (Anti-German) milieu analysed by Fischer. Although Postone’s essay gained cult status in such circles, Anti-German currents are a stark example of the mechanism of German deflection described by him: attention to the specificity of German National Socialism is replaced by opposition to a supposedly universal antisemitism. Instead of a reckoning with the German past and its consequences, the current focusses on attacks on the other, foremost on Palestinians and solidarity activists, and, as Fischer shows, a turn towards conformity with German \textit{raison d’état}. As Postone wrote in 1979, ‘What happened to the Jews has been instrumentalized and transformed into an ideology of legitimation for the present system’.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Antisemitism, Zionism, and Palestinian Liberation}

One important aspect of the contemporary debate – both because of the break it represents with most classical-Marxist interpretations of the early twentieth century, and because of its centrality in contemporary public

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Postone 2003b, p. 84.
\item Rosenberg 2015, p. 629.
\item For one recent critique of Postone’s thesis, see Sommer 2022.
\item Postone 1980, p. 102.
\item Postone 1980, p. 98.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
discourse – is the relationship between antisemitism, Zionism, and Palestinian liberation. As already pointed out above, the current dominant narrative propelled by pro-Israeli organisations and politicians, and given material form through IHRA policies and anti-BDS legislation, is that the roots of modern antisemitism are located in the activities of the Palestine Solidarity movements and, by extension, Muslim migrant populations in Europe. In this view, antisemitism is neither a European problem nor one that finds its roots in the classical arsenal of fascism on the one hand, and European nation-state formation on the other.

The so-called ‘New Antisemitism’ was theorised around the turn of the millennium by a series of French neo-conservative intellectuals, some of whom had roots in the 1968 left, who saw the rise of a new left and militant anti-racist politics in the banlieues as existential threats to the Republic – for its stability at home, and its interests abroad. At the very moment when fascism, in the form of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front, grew to become a key contender in national politics for the first time in postwar history (the same Le Pen who described the Holocaust as a mere ‘detail of history’), the French right launched a sustained attack on the left and Muslim populations as the key danger faced by Jewish populations in the Republic, to great and long-lasting effect. In recent years, for example, the Macron government – following in the footsteps of its predecessors –, anxious to demonstrate its ability to challenge the now-renamed National Rally to its right, took aim at so-called ‘Islamo-leftism’ while banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations and BDS initiatives. The echoes with the similarly racist and repressive scarecrow of Judeo-Bolshevism of a century ago are obvious.

In their early and still seminal critique of this phenomenon, Alain Badiou and Eric Hazan identified the centrality of Palestine to this process. The narrative functions in three steps: i) equate critiques of Israel and of French support for it with antisemitism; ii) claim that Jews are therefore under threat from growing support for Palestinian liberation, which in turn presupposes a perfect overlap between Jews and Zionism; iii) identify the left and Muslim populations’ support for Palestinian liberation with antisemitism – even (especially?) when those accused make a clear distinction between antisemitism and

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46 For a sustained and insightful reflection on the relationships between both over the longue durée, see Bashir and Farsakh (eds.) 2020.
47 For an excellent study of these processes, see Aked 2023.
49 Nadi 2021.
50 Badiou and Hazan 2013.
anti-Zionism. Any critique of Israel’s ongoing colonial rule over the Palestinian people is therefore not only pre-emptively silenced but also further proof of guilt: it is but a trick of the ‘New Antisemitism’ in order to hide its true colours. If, as Bensaïd wrote in 2005, antisemitism can become ‘the anti-imperialism of fools as it once was the socialism of fools’, the policies of the Israeli state and its allies will have done much to bring this about.  

Under this narrative, Palestinians and their treatment at the hands of the Israeli state – supported, armed, and financed by Western states – disappear from view. Their demands are ignored or, worse, immediately turned into suspicious attempts to ‘single out’ the only ‘Jewish state’ in the world. Jewish populations, on the other hand, are rendered collectively synonymous with Israel and thereby positioned, as a sort of ideological shield, between the states in question and those protesting their imperialist and colonial practices. This attitude points to a much longer-term historical shift in the imposed identification of Jewish populations in the West, under the dual influence of the Holocaust and the creation of the Israeli state.

Indeed, a number of the contributors to this special issue point to these much longer histories, both of attempts to delegitimise anti-Zionism by conflating it with antisemitism, as well as different forms of resistance against it. Salim Nadi, for example, introduces readers to the figure and work of Abraham Serfaty, a Marxist, Jewish, Moroccan revolutionary who thought through the connections between colonialism, antisemitism, and Zionism as a basis for revolutionary politics in the Maghreb. Readers are also presented with a text, previously unavailable in English, where Serfaty illustrates some of these connections and their practical consequences by focussing on the fate of Moroccan Jews, oppressed at home, exploited in Israel, and yet mobilised as cannon fodder by the reactionary regimes in both countries. Only internationalism, solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and the reclaiming of a pre-Zionist North African Jewishness can, for Serfaty, offer a way out of the impasse. If the text today reads more like a testimony of a road not taken, it points to a set of strategic commitments which remain nonetheless vital.

Benjamin Balthaser and Sune Haugbølle also return to the 1960s and 1970s, in the United States and Denmark respectively, to present us with historical examples of how the left engaged in solidarity with the Palestinian people,

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51 Bensaïd 2005.

52 In response to the imposition of the IHRA working definition in British universities, more than 120 Palestinian and Arab scholars, artists and intellectuals published a letter highlighting how their oppression – both historic and present-day – was being silenced and denied, while the struggle against antisemitism was being undermined by this weaponisation. See Abdallah et al. 2020.
addressed accusations of antisemitism, and fought to link their struggles together. Similarly to their incarcerated Moroccan comrade, these movements developed ways to think about their own liberation in connection with that of the Palestinians – different circumstances linked through the structures of capitalism, racism, and imperialism.

The period that these texts engage with is crucial if we are to understand the changes in the nature of Western antisemitism which have led to our current moment. Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, Western states shifted their attitude towards Jewish populations. Under pressure from growing anti-colonial movements in the Global South and anti-racist movements at home, Western states re-imagined their history as one centred around the lessons of the Holocaust. Remembering the Nazi genocide – without acknowledging the collective responsibility of European and North American ruling classes in financing the Nazi party and whipping up antisemitism in their own contexts – became a way to claim a newly imagined anti-racist identity for the very states that had either organised the extermination of the Jews in Europe, or been the fertile ground for half a century of antisemitic reaction in the run up to it. This white-washed Holocaust memory became, as Traverso has argued, a civil religion. As he warned: ‘Institutionalised and neutralised, the memory of the Holocaust thus risks becoming the moral sanction for a Western order that perpetuates oppression and injustice’.54

Indeed, alongside this process taking place from the early 1960s onwards in Western Europe and North America, Western support for Israel could then be self-construed not as the continuation of the very imperialist and colonial policies that were being challenged across the globe, but as a form of anti-racist solidarity and a commitment to the most narrow and reactionary interpretation of the slogan: ‘Never Again’.55 From pariahs and prototypical enemies of the state, Jewish populations were re-invented by their oppressors of yester-year as the defenders of Western civilisation par excellence. This defence was mobilised against racialised communities at home, and anti-colonial/imperialist struggles abroad. Far from protecting them or freeing them from oppression, Western states repositioned Jewish populations at the centre of their racist regimes, albeit in an inverted way. The consequences of this approach are all around us. Western states justify their support for Israel as support for

53 For a more detailed account of this process, see Englert 2018.
55 For a detailed account of the reimagination of the German State as an anti-racist actor and a friend to the Jewish people – via its support for Zionism – see the excellent Marwecki 2020.
an abstracted Jewish community, rather than as a self-interested imperialist policy. Jews who dissent are cast out. And the many hundreds of thousands who support Palestinian liberation and challenge their own states’ complicity are no longer anti-racist or anti-colonial activists but themselves antisemites.

Antisemitism, Structural Racism, and Oppression

In this context, the analyses which identify, as Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt once did, the continuity between Nazi exterminationist policies and the genocides carried out by the different European empires across the globe, help us to undermine these ideological constructions and to rebuild collective forms of solidarity and action. Already in 1942, Karl Korsch noted that: ‘[t]he novelty of totalitarian politics in this respect is simply that the Nazis have extended to “civilized” European peoples the methods hitherto reserved for the “natives” or “savages” living outside so-called civilization’. This approach, far from belittling the Holocaust or antisemitism, points to vital possible alliances in fighting all forms of oppression and exiting the system that produces them as a necessary component of its reproduction and survival.

The question of the comparability of the Holocaust remains controversial and fractious today. Accusations abound that placing the Nazi genocide in the context of the long history of colonial processes of racialisation, dispossession, mass murder, and extermination, is synonymous with undermining its gravity – or even akin to revisionism. Germany, where furious debate has raged over the nature of the Herero and Nama genocides and their connection to the Holocaust for the last decade, once again serves as a helpful example in this regard. As Jürgen Zimmerer has convincingly shown, it is not only appropriate but necessary to put the genocides carried out by German soldiers and settlers in Namibia in the early twentieth century in relation to the Holocaust in order to understand the latter fully.

Whether in terms of the development of ideas of racial superiority and purity, the need for the German Volk to secure its Lebensraum, or the actual overlap in personnel in developing colonial and occupation policy in Africa and Eastern Europe, or in settling the two territories, Zimmerer shows that

57 Korsch 1942.
58 Rogers 2023 provides a helpful English-language overview of these recent debates.
59 Zimmerer 2006. See also Wolfe 2016 for an excellent discussion of modern antisemitism within the general emergence of ‘race science’ and racism.
the connections are as fundamental as they are numerous. This is of course to say nothing of the ways in which Nazi officials, not least amongst them Adolf Hitler himself, were wont to make these connections and comparisons explicit in their thought – from the racialisation and genocide of Indigenous and African populations in North America to British colonial rule in India. Yet Zimmerer and others’ careful analyses of these parallels have been met with opprobrium in German public debate. To link the history of the Holocaust to that of colonial genocides is, in the eyes of the defenders of the official history, tantamount to undermining its gravity.

Leaving aside for now what this approach might tell us about the value such commentators attribute to the lives of former colonial subjects across the Global South, it is clear that positioning the Holocaust as an exclusive event, located almost outside of time, is key to the process described above: making its remembrance – ritualised and de-politicised – central to the West’s self-image, cleansing it of its racist past. If the Holocaust remains disconnected – and implicit in this disconnection is the idea that it is ‘worse’ in an imagined hierarchy of barbarism – from the long history of 500 years of genocidal violence across the world, then Western states can reconcile the recognition and remembrance of one, with the disavowal of the others. It is, in fact, very much this question of recognition and reparations for its colonial crimes in South West Africa which lies at the centre of the contemporary German controversy.

It is worth noting, however, that another form of comparison has, in certain quarters, become all pervasive. Both Fisher and Miriyam Aouragh discuss in the pages of this special issue the ways in which Palestinians are repeatedly recast as a modern embodiment of the Nazi party. This phenomenon is long-lasting and well documented in the history of Israeli depiction of the Palestinian national movement and its organisations. Not only are early Palestinian notables accused of being the ideological source of the exterminationist policies of the Nazis, despite ample historical evidence to the contrary, but Arab and Palestinian national movements are regularly recast as the contemporary expression of this supposed desire, not to free Palestine, but to wipe the Jewish people off the map.

As both authors show, the tendency to obscure European histories of colonial and racial violence by projecting responsibility for them onto their contemporary victims is not limited to Israel. Palestinians, the global solidarity movement, as well as other racialised groups – primary amongst which are

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61 Massad 2006; see especially pp. 132–4. See also Segev 1993.
62 For a careful and detailed debunking of these arguments, see Achcar 2009.
the Muslim populations in Europe – have been cast in much the same light by the propagators of the ‘New Antisemitism’ discourse. With the Western elites whitewashed and Israel made synonymous with Jewish people everywhere, any critique of the Israeli state can only be read through the prism of the unaddressed demons of the Western collective past. In this narrative it is not out of Europe that modern antisemitism emerged, nor is it in the re-emergence of its far-right parties and movements that the danger lies. Instead, it is immigrants, Muslims, Palestinians, and their supporters who are ‘importing’ the scourge of antisemitism into the enlightened West. We return once more to the image with which we started: while Jean-Marie Le Pen announced brazenly on national television that the Holocaust had been but ‘a detail’ of history, the French neo-cons argued it was from the banlieues that the danger came.

Comparison and connections are not only important to understand and identify the threat, but also in developing ways to fight it. If antisemitism is one specific expression of a wider framework of reactionary ideas and structures, then the struggle against it also needs to make these wider connections. Both Peter Drucker and Cihan Özpinar direct our attention to these issues. Drucker shows the striking parallels between the place that antisemitism and homophobia have and continue to play in the organisation of fascist and far-right parties. Both were key in the so-called period of ‘dediabolisation’ in the 1990s and early 2000s, when upholding supposedly Western values such as the equality of genders, religions, and sexualities in the face of imagined reactionary Muslim invasions became central to these movements’ narratives. It is also striking that as the far-right has grown in strength, this strategy has increasingly fallen by the wayside. Özpinar explores the connections between class and racialisation. While working-class Muslims are targeted and isolated from wider society through the ‘New Antisemitism’ discourse, Muslim elites are turned into disciplining agents of ‘their’ community. Both processes, Özpinar argues, work in tandem to disorganise and weaken movements of contestation among Muslim populations in Europe.

It is not possible to understand either the nature of antisemitism or its different expressions without placing it within a broader framework of oppression, repression, and racialisation. Failing to do so also undermines the possibilities to challenge it. Put plainly, in the words of the civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer: ‘Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.’

Where Next?

The need, then, for an adequate analysis of what antisemitism is, and how to recognise it and fight it, could not be clearer.

Although many of the conclusions of the classical-Marxist canon have proven mistaken – not least its emphasis on assimilation as a quasi-automatic (or desirable) process that would prove to be the solution to the oppression faced by Jewish populations –, its approach, which insists on historicising the problem and confronting it within specific and changing circumstances, remains crucial. Similarly, the emphasis on reading (and fighting) antisemitism as one part of a broader network of oppression and exploitation, so central to the reproduction of capitalism, is one which serves as an important corrective to contemporary tendencies to exceptionalise and de-contextualise antisemitism.

The Marxist tradition and the socialist movement itself should not be exempt from investigation. Brendan McGeever’s work on antisemitism in the Russian Revolution is a powerful example of this. Simon Pirani’s review discusses the crucial importance not only of acknowledging the ways in which the Bolshevik revolution was a crucial step forward in the struggle against antisemitic terror in Eastern Europe, but also of recognising the ways in which revolutionary movements are not hermetically sealed off from the hegemonic reactionary ideas of their time. Here too, reading antisemitism and the struggle against it in a situated, historically informed, and interconnected manner opens up important avenues for analysis.

Although the Marxist tradition has valuable insights to offer, which we hope the pages of this special issue demonstrate, we also suggest that there is a need to overcome a certain Eurocentrism within it, which projects European patterns of antisemitism onto the world stage. Too often have the contributions of non-European Marxists been neglected, as both Nadi and Aouragh demonstrate. The same is true in how we approach the European Marxist tradition and its classical texts. Levi demonstrates in his critique of Postone how crucial bringing in the wider history of empire, racialisation, and violence is if we are to understand antisemitism effectively.

However, if a Marxist approach to antisemitism is to be fruitful, i.e. to be useful both analytically and practically, it needs to turn its attention to the present. The late nineteenth century gave birth to a form of antisemitism that emerged out of the racialisations of the colonial world on the one hand and the emancipation of the Jewish populations in Europe on the other. Jewish difference was being made increasingly fundamental, biological even, at the very time when ‘the Jew’ from the mediaeval ghetto was vanishing from view.
No longer kept in place by religious persecution but granted civil rights, ‘he’ could be everywhere. No longer defined religiously but racially, ‘he’ could never assimilate. These processes are not those faced by Jewish populations in the present. If Marxism is to be relevant, it must recognise and engage with the new ways in which ‘the Jew’ is being constructed by the material and ideological structures we face in the present.

This Introduction and the special issue as a whole give some possible avenues for reflection: the connection with Islamophobia, the place of Zionism and Holocaust memory in the projection of Western power, the rise of a new far-right, and the shifting class position of both Jewish and other racialised communities, imperialism, and the ongoing crises of capitalism. We hope this special issue will not only reinforce the need to follow these paths of analysis and critique further, but also be a modest contribution to the renewed Marxist engagement with the critique of antisemitism – and the struggle against it.

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