A Pluralistic Framework for Fighting Prejudice: The Roles of State and Civil Society in Addressing Social Problems

On 27 January 2013, London’s *Sunday Times* published a cartoon by Gerald Scarfe which caused great furore. It depicted an evil-looking, hunched, big-nosed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu constructing a wall on top of Palestinians with red cement, which resembled blood.¹ The offence caused within some quarters of the Jewish community by the use of an old antisemitic motif in a political context was exacerbated by the fact that it was published—accidentally, as the paper later reassured the public—on Britain’s annual Holocaust Memorial Day. There is little reason to doubt the sincerity of subsequent assurances by both the cartoonist and the newspaper that this had been a regrettable mistake and was not meant to offend Jews.² However, this case—like so many other, similar ones—provides a good example of how even in the absence of any racist intent, discursive products themselves can be deeply antisemitic. It shows that sometimes, antisemitic images or themes are used by individuals who, truly and genuinely, do not harbour any negative feelings or thoughts about Jews as an ethnic or religious group.

Nevertheless, it remains true that at its heart, nearly all manifestations of antisemitism can in some way be traced back to prejudice. Whether later manifested in thought, literature, hate speech, or discriminatory action, hostility towards Jews is the origin of most expressions of antisemitism. The medieval blood libel was born in a social and historical context in which Jews were despised and vilified. Thus, at some point in the past, when the antisemitic trope of the blood-thirsty Jew was created, and also when it was later perpetuated, anti-Jewish prejudice played a key role. Later this idea, like countless other antisemitic fantasies, blended into the wider sphere of culture and collective consciousness. People unaware of their background may draw upon this

reservoir and consequently repeat the antisemitic themes, even if they are actually not antisemitic, as in the case of the aforementioned cartoonist. But without anti-Jewish prejudice, it would be unlikely that today, the absurd belief that Jews bake matzot with the blood of children—or any others for that matter, including those involving Jewish conspiracy, power, subversion, dual-loyalties, and so many more—would exist at all. Likewise, without anti-Jewish prejudice in the contemporary world, antisemitic myths would probably not be continuously disseminated to the extent they are.

Thus, the concept of prejudice is a very important one for understanding and explaining antisemitism. Prejudice is most generally defined as “a negative attitude toward a particular social group and its members.” Like all attitudes, prejudice can consist of several components, primarily cognitive, affective, and behavioural ones. It is therefore a very comprehensive concept that encompasses stereotypes, negative sentiments like ‘hatred,’ as well as discrimination, the practice of unfairly disadvantaging particular social groups, or individuals because of their membership in a social group.

On the other hand, this does not mean that the psychological dimension alone is sufficient for explaining prejudice such as antisemitism. Social, political, ideological, and other factors can all be relevant in accounting for its emergence, or the genesis of its specific variants. Likewise, as the following section will show, socio-psychological research has come to acknowledge that in order to effectively address prejudice within modern societies, not only one dimension must be considered, but multiple.

An awareness of the complexity of prejudice, the multiplicity of explanatory factors, and, accordingly, the appropriateness of multi-pronged counter-approaches also has important implications for the fight against antisemitism. It is particularly relevant to gain a realistic expectation of the wide range of social and political institutions and actors that are needed as part of a comprehensive response, in those societies intending to address the problem of antisemitism.

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