CHAPTER FIVE
GLOBAL ANTI-SEMITISM

Today the hypothesis of a renewal of anti-Semitism is frequently associated with a specific group which is said to be much more involved in it than others, namely, ‘youths of North African immigrant descent’ who identify with the Palestinian cause and radical Islamism. However valid this association and however strong this identification, it invites us to look beyond the framework of the nation-state and to consider the globalisation of anti-Semitism.

Even in the dim and distant past, hatred of Jews has never been confined to a restricted geographical area. It has often been spread over vast territories while at the same time becoming anchored locally where it has manifested itself in a specific form. Consequently, we cannot consider present-day anti-Semitism in France without setting it in a context of time and space. Furthermore, we have to consider whether the term ‘anti-Semitism’ which we have used unquestioningly to date is the most appropriate word to use. Can we use the same term for a phenomenon which has undergone considerable changes in history? Are we not committing the error of anachronism by applying it to experiences other than the one in which it was forged?

Anti-Semitism, Anti-Judaism and Judeophobia

The vocabulary in use today provides us with three major terms to designate our object.

The word ‘anti-Semitism’ with the current meaning was popularised (but not created, as is frequently suggested), and with dazzling success, by a German advertiser, Wilhelm Marr, in 1879.¹ Against the background

¹ The term was apparently used for the first time in 1860, by Moritz Steinschneider. He criticised Ernest Renan for his ‘anti-Semitic’ prejudices—Renan is in fact referring to ‘Semites’ in general, and not only to Jews. Cf. M. Steinschneider, Hebräische Bibliographie. Blätter für neuere und ältere Literatur des Judentums, vol. III, Berlin, A. Ascher & Comp., 1860.
of the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as of the racist ideologies that were rife which had not as yet been criminalised by Nazism, the term was established, laden with biological connotations. From this point on, the Jews were to constitute a race, which was Semitic, with presumed physical characteristics which were the basis for moral or intellectual attributes and for their malignity. This does not mean that modern anti-Semitism is homogeneous. On the contrary, it is even characterised by its capacity to amalgamate in plain language the most contradictory meanings. It may well accuse the Jews of personifying modernity and ushering in its most harmful aspects while at the same time preventing modernity with their religion or their traditional way of life. In this sense, anti-Semitism is as much a perversion of the legacy of the Enlightenment as it is a product of Christianity. As factors of modernity, Jews may be detested for their presumed role as the ruling class, their capitalist power, their control of the media or even for their presumed identification with intellectual, political or social protest movements, the revolution or with Communism. Similarly, they are just as likely to stand accused of ensuring the infiltration of industry or of modern financing at the expense of traditional ways of life as of depriving other potential candidates of the possibility of playing a modernising role. When it is a question of accusing them of preventing modernity, they are perceived primarily as traditional communities, defining themselves first and foremost in terms of their religion, endeavouring to appear as a ‘nation’, including in the public sphere where there is little room for the expression of their specificity. Depending on the time and place, they are sometimes one, sometimes the other and sometimes both at once—figures, then, of absolute evil. Why this should be so has continued to be a challenge to many researchers down the centuries. For Leon Poliakov, for example, the Jews ultimately enabled those who turned against them to have ready to hand an elementary and exhaustive set of causes to explain their difficulties, while for Yves Chevalier, anti-Semitism is associated with a scapegoat mentality which ensures processes for regulating social crises in symbolic terms.

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