The Definition of Antisemitism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Defining antisemitism has always been complicated by the disreputable origins of the term, the discredited sources of its etymology, the diverse manifestations of the concept, and the contested politics of its applications. Nevertheless, the task is an important one, not only because definitional clarity is required for the term to be understood, but also because conceptual sophistication is needed for the associated problem to be resolved. This article will explore various ways in which antisemitism has historically been defined, demonstrate the weaknesses in prior efforts, and develop a new definition of antisemitism.

Building on the work of such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno, Helen Fein, and Gavin Langmuir, this article demonstrates that a theoretically sophisticated definition of this term must fully account for antisemitism’s ideological, attitudinal, and practical qualities; its persisting latent structure within Western cultures; its continuities and discontinuities with analogous phenomena; its chimerical quality; its potentially self-fulfilling character; and its role in the construction of Jewish identity. Most importantly, the definition must account for the participation of antisemitic discourses and practices in the construction of the individual and collective “Jew,” both as false image and as actual being. This process is equally critical to the understanding of antisemitism and to the development of means of counter-acting what might be called antisemitism’s chimerical core.

2. ANTISEMITISM AS RACISM

The first and most treacherous intuition of many commentators is to begin with etymology. To this day, some commentators insist that antisemitism cannot mean hatred of Jews, when the term “Semites” refers to speakers of a language family consisting of many historical Middle Eastern languages, including not only Hebrew but also Arabic. From the beginning, however, antisemitism has always meant hatred of Jews, not hatred of Arabs or Semites. Bernard Lewis has debunked the canard, sometimes offered on


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behavior of Arabs, that they cannot be antisemitic, since they themselves are Semites. “The logic of this,” he responded,

would seem to be that while an edition of Hitler’s Mein Kampf published in Berlin or in Buenos Aires in German or Spanish is anti-Semitic, an Arab version of the same text published in Cairo or Beirut cannot be anti-Semitic, because Arabic and Hebrew are cognate languages. It is not a compelling argument.2

The etymological approach is more broadly problematic because the term was coined (or at least popularized) by a self-confessed antisemite, Wilhelm Marr, who hoped that it would facilitate greater adoption of the racial hatred of Jews and Judaism which he and his compatriots promoted.3 Early definitions stressed the relationship between Jewish racial distinctness and repugnant moral attributes. For example, one 1882 German dictionary defined an antisemite as “[a]nyone who hates Jews or opposes Judaism in general, and struggles against the character traits and the intentions of the Semites.”4 The racial dimension is even clearer in a definition offered five years later by one of the architects of modern political antisemitism, who explained the concept as follows: “anti—to oppose, Semitism—the essence of the Jewish race; anti-Semitism is therefore the struggle against Semitism.”5 In recent years, no reputable authority would embrace a definition, like these, which assumes that Jews actually possess the character traits which their antagonists attribute to them.6

Nevertheless, some authorities continue to define the term in a manner that stresses the racial element in some forms of this animus. Those who define antisemitism this way tend to emphasize that racial Jew-hatred has been qualitatively different than other forms of this animus. They may point to the unique horrors of the Holocaust or argue that racist hatreds are more dangerous than other animus, such as religious bias, since racial characteristics cannot be eradicated other than by extermination. This approach has various disadvantages, such as its exclusion of even the most virulent forms of religiously motivated hatred of Jews and Judaism. More profoundly, such definitions have been criticized on the ground that that they appear to accept, or at least to assume, the discredited “Aryan myth” that Jews can be meaningfully described in terms of “race.”7

3. ANISEMITISM AS ETHNIC PREJUDICE OR XENOPHOBIA

Many modern formulations have defined antisemitism, instead, as a discrete but largely generic form of a more general phenomenon such as ethnic prejudice or xenophobia. For

2 Lewis, Semites and Anti-Semites, p. 16.
3 Wistrich, Antisemitism, p. xv.
5 Theodor Fritch, Antisemiten Katechismus (Leipzig, 1887), quoted in Dina Porat, “Historical Perspective.”
7 Ibid. For a discussion of the complexity of this question of Jewish racial distinctness, see Kenneth L. Marcus, Jewish Identity and Civil Rights in America (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010).