



Editor's Note: Historicizing Anti-Semitism

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Abstract: This is a note by the journal editor to the Spring 2009 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge*, focusing on "Historicizing Anti-Semitism." He argues that, to be more faithful to the co-editor's conceptual and historical analysis, it may be much more helpful, especially given the socio-political context of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict going back especially to the mid-twentieth century (if not earlier), to introduce a fourth type of its own to the three-fold typological model (of anti-Jewish antisemitism, anti-Arab/Muslim anti-semitism, and anti-Afro-Arab/Muslim anti-semitism), i.e., that of "semitic anti-semitism." While the latter is significantly present and discussed at length as a possibility in the co-editors' introduction, it is for some reason lacking in the overt typological modeling. What he would like to add in favor and as part of this addition, though, is the historical reality and possibility of what one may call "intra Jewish anti-semitism" and "intra Arab/Muslim anti-semitism." The editor concludes that the cultivation of the sociological imagination, the pursuit of what the sociology of self-knowledge also seeks in a different way and language, of reflexive understanding of one's (personal and people's) troubles in light of world-historical public issues, is not just a scholarly preference and slogan. Their pursuit can be liberating or their lack deadly. They go to the heart of what may prevent more holocausts subtly brewing amid the lands and peoples we occupy, the ghettos we engineer, the separation walls we build, and the presumably "legal" phosphorous bombs we dump on the innocent civilians we force into ever larger, desperately fragmented, concentration camps and slow-moving "trains" to the neverland. And history is a witness, if only we can learn the right lessons so as not to repeat it amid its manifold, slippery, world-historical typologies germinating anew in our here-and-now everyday lives.

Lewis R. Gordon, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants, as co-editors of this issue of *Human Architecture* on anti-semitism, have provided in their following introduction a comprehensive world-historical overview of what they call "global anti-semitism" and a succinct survey of all the contributions herein. This thankfully leaves

me with an opportunity to briefly reflect on their own introductory, but substantively consequential, world-historical sketch of the topic in light of other contributions, while adding a few observation and commentaries of my own, hoping that they may prove helpful in the important and sensitive conversation that follows.

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I opted to title this issue “Historicizing Anti-Semitism” particularly to re-emphasize, as co-editors and all contributors do, the need for developing and maintaining a world-encompassing, *historical* approach to the subject. An historical sociological approach, moreover, requires theoretically-informed considerations of the subject matter, taking into account not only the world-historical variations of the object of study, but also an effort in defining and delineating with required precision what the object of study is.

Co-editors have helpfully contributed to this conceptual clarification in their introduction, by suggesting that anti-semitism has in fact taken, world-historically, a variety of forms (or “components”), the principal of which the co-editors identify as the three-fold “Anti-Jewish Anti-Semitism,” “Anti-Arab/Muslim Anti-Semitism,” and “Anti-Afro-Arab/Muslim Anti-Semitism” (p. 3, 5). Elsewhere, they also refer to “semitic anti-semitism” (p. 4) when referring specifically to the early historical cases of anti-Jewish anti-semitism perpetrated by Arab/Moslems, cases were, the co-editors admit, were relatively lesser in scale in comparison to the major European anti-semitism that followed. Co-editors do recognize that instances of historically more recent cases of anti-Jewish anti-semitism by Arab/Muslims have occurred that have been alarming, but, again not as widespread in scale in comparison to the perpetrations of another sub-type of “semitic anti-semitism,” in this case against Arab/Muslims, particularly of Palestinian descent, perpetrated by especially imperial components of world Jewry represented especially by the dominant Zionist interests and policies of the state of Israel occupying the Palestinian lands.

So, following the co-editors’ own analysis, the three-fold typology of anti-semitism as constructed needs to be qualified, by recognizing that especially in the first and the second types, there is a common sub-

type world-historically in operation, which is that of some Jews and Arabs perpetrating anti-semitism against one another, in the form of “semitic anti-semitism.” After all, if we take the three-fold typology per se into consideration, it does not necessarily follow or is not readily apparent from the type’s labeling that “semitic anti-semitism” may be in operation—that is, “anti-Jewish anti-semitism” does not in and of itself, as a category signify the possibility of that pursued by Arab/Muslims, nor does “anti-Arab/Muslim anti-semitism” presume the possibility of the kind perpetrated by Jews.

Therefore, to be more faithful to the co-editor’s conceptual and historical analysis, it may be much more helpful, especially given the socio-political context of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict especially going back to the mid-twentieth century (if not earlier), to introduce a fourth type of its own to the three-fold typological model, i.e., that of “semitic anti-semitism.” While the latter is significantly present and discussed at length as a possibility in the co-editors’ introduction, it is for some reason lacking in the overt typological modeling.

What I would like to add in favor and as part of this addition, though, is the historical reality and possibility of what one may call “intra Jewish anti-semitism” and “intra Arab/Muslim anti-semitism.” In regard to the latter, the cases of ethnic rivalry particularly in Lebanon may come to mind as an example, where a pattern similar to what the co-editors have aptly cited in terms of the attitude of imperial Ashkenazi Jews against the local, Sephardic Jews in Israel may be observed when conservative Christian Arabs, citing their “Phoenician” roots seek to distinguish themselves from the “rest” of Arabs. This was particularly pronounced in the attitude of the Lebanese Social Democratic Party (“*Phallange Libanaises*” in French or *Kataeb* in Arabic) and its social base toward Arabs during the Lebanese Civil War, and especially during the Israeli invasion in 1982 where the Phalange-

dominated Lebanese Forces militia groups collaborated with Ariel Sharon and the Israeli army to perpetrate the Sabra and Shatila massacres against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians. Generally, it will not be hard to find patterns similar to the intra-Jewish anti-semitism among the Arabs/Muslims in the Middle East and wider region, where the more affluent, Westernized, Europeanized, and "imperialized" (in terms of collaboration with the West in suppressing internal dissent) part of the population treat the rest of their own people as "lesser," traditional, and "backward."

So, it seems to me, a typological addition for "semitic anti-semitism" in all its cross- and intra- forms is in significant need of addition, in favor of the their own penetrating analysis in substance, to the three-fold model explicitly introduced by the co-editors. Aside from its descriptive utility in pointing to more nuanced and easily dismissed forms of anti-semitism, the articulation and heightened visibility of "semitic anti-semitism" further serves to enrich the theoretical/conceptual landscape of the co-editors' historiography (and those of the contributors) of anti-semitism by further illuminating the fact that "anti-semitism" is NOT a monolithic and historically unchanging and unidirectional racial artifact, but one that has historically taken, and is taking, a variety of forms, more or less hidden or visible, at times and in places subtle and undercurrent, and other times and places becoming volcanic and genocidal. A typology that includes intra-/crossed-forms of anti-semitism within the semitic population, in addition, disempowers the notion that anti-semitism per se is always an ethnic-racial phenomena, and that it is and may be significantly shaped by class, gender, religious, national, and other relations and processes whose further analysis can reveal the artificiality and pretextual use at times of anti-semitism for purely political purposes to pursue pragmatic interests of time and place. This is particularly

evident in the case of the Israeli government's pretextual use of the charge of "anti-semitism" to pursue its aims as a remaining classical colonial settler state in the post-colonial age.

It is in the interests of the exposure of such ideological and political agenda that *historicizing* anti-semitism using appropriately conceptualized theoretical models of anti-semitism finds its scholarly and practical purpose, to which the scholars and co-editors of this volume make significant contributions.

Another reason why historicizing anti-semitism is important, particularly from the point of view of battling dystopistics—spelling being intentional here, as represented by the mixing of dystopianism, reactionary mystical/religious pretexts, and instrumentalist scientific and highly technical and socially engineered means in pursuit of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands—is in terms of the preventive functions critical scholarship can serve in preventing potentially new holocausts. What good is the purpose of any scholarship if the sole purpose of it is merely to describe the past and not learn the necessary lessons for the future? If one thing the contributors to and co-editors of this volume have made clear—whether more or less focusing on the horrible experience the Jewish community went through in recent times in a Holocaust that was predominantly a Western, European, and ethnically Christian invention—is that the very point of doing meaningful and useful scientific and scholarly research is to see the subtler signs and currents of new holocausts emerging, and to be able to study their root world-historical and contemporary social causes in favor of resolving such possibilities in embryo rather than at a time when it is already too late.

Pretextual uses of the charge of "anti-semitism" to pursue policies that are obviously genocidal and "ethnic cleansing," even if in a presumably "lesser" scale than the Jewish Holocaust—as the Israeli policy

toward the Palestinian identity and homeland has been throughout the decades—only reveals the hypocrisy of the arguments and policies advanced and alarmingly points to the possibilities of new holocausts to come, albeit in newer forms. To monopolize the identity of being “semitic” only to oneself—which is what is obviously implied when the Israeli government charges others for anti-semitism—and forego the possibility that one’s policies toward other semitic populations is excluded from one’s horizon of charges of “anti-semitism” alarmingly points to a dualism and personality split that lies at the heart of what made Nazism and Fascism, and the Jewish Holocaust, possible in the first place. Once self-reflexivity is side-lined and the enemy is seen solely in an “other,” therein the seeds of possible new holocausts may be cast.

Robert Jay Lifton, in his *Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (1986), writes:

Dr. B. observed that each SS doctor could call forth two radically different psychological constellations within the self: one based on “values generally accepted” and the education and background of a “normal person”; the other based on “this [Nazi-Auschwitz] ideology with values quite different from those generally accepted.” The first tendency might be present one day, the second the next, and it was hard to know which to expect on a given occasion or whether there would be a mixture of both.

Only a form of schism or doubling can explain the polarities of cruelty and decency in the same SS doctor. Klein is perhaps the best illustration here. This cruel and fanatical racist was seen by Dr. Magda V. as profoundly hypocritical and simply a “bad man,” and by another prisoner physician, Olga Lengyel, as “one of

the fervent zealots” who ran the Nazi annihilation project. Yet this latter doctor also spoke of him as a person capable of kindness, as when he brought her medicine for her patients and protected her from cruel SS personnel...; he was, Lengyel said, “the only German in Auschwitz who never shouted.” (p. 212)

I can’t find a better explanation as to why a peace prize winning head of state shouts in public, and in the presence of other heads of state, in defense of his government’s phosphorous bombing of a people under his government’s absolute occupation. It is such a social psychological schism that may explain why a people traumatized by such a horrific Holocaust at the hands of the Western European reaction could resort to such a horrible, decades-long, still-brewing, ethnic cleansing against their own semitic brethren.

The cultivation of the sociological imagination, the pursuit of what the sociology of self-knowledge also seeks in a different way and language, of reflexive understanding of one’s (personal and people’s) troubles in light of world-historical public issues, are not just scholarly preferences and slogans, in my view and experience. Their pursuit can be liberating, and their lack deadly. They go to the heart of what may prevent more volcanic holocausts now subtly brewing amid the lands and peoples we occupy, the ghettos we engineer, the separation walls we build, and the presumably “legal” phosphorous bombs we dump on the innocent civilians we force into ever larger, though desperately fragmented, concentration camps and slow-moving “trains” to the neverland. And history is a witness, if only we can learn the right lessons so as not to repeat it amid anti-semitism’s manifold, slippery, world-historical typologies germinating anew in our here-and-now everyday lives.