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# The Anti-Semitic Disease

*Paul Johnson*

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THE INTENSIFICATION of anti-Semitism in the Arab world over the last years and its reappearance in parts of Europe have occasioned a number of thoughtful reflections on the nature and consequences of this phenomenon, but also some misleading analyses based on doubtful premises. It is widely assumed, for example, that anti-Semitism is a form of racism or ethnic xenophobia. This is a legacy of the post-World War II period, when revelations about the horrifying scope of Hitler's "final solution" caused widespread revulsion against all manifestations of group hatred. Since then, racism, in whatever guise it appears, has been identified as *the* evil to be fought.

But if anti-Semitism is a variety of racism, it is a most peculiar variety, with many unique characteristics. In my view as a historian, it is so peculiar that it deserves to be placed in a quite different category. I would call it an intellectual disease, a disease of the mind, extremely infectious and massively destructive. It is a disease to which both human individuals and entire human societies are prone.

Geneticists and experts in related fields may object that my observation is not scientifically valid. My rejoinder is simple: how can one make scientific judgments in this area? Scientists cannot even

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agree on how to define race itself, or whether the category exists in any meaningful sense. The immense advances in genetics over the last half-century, far from simplifying the problem, have made it appear more complex and mysterious.\* All that scientists appear able to do is to present the evidence, often conflicting, of studies they have undertaken. And this, essentially, is what a historian does as well. He shows how human beings have behaved, over long periods and in many different places, when confronted with the apparent fact of marked racial differences.

The historical evidence suggests that racism, in varying degrees, is ubiquitous in human societies, so much so that it might even be termed natural and inevitable (though not irremediable: its behavioral consequences can be mitigated by education, political arrangements, and intermarriage). It often takes the form of national hostility, especially when two countries are placed by geography in postures of antagonism. Such has been the case with France and England, Poland and Russia, and Germany and Denmark, to give only three obvious examples.

The degree of this hostility can increase or diminish as a result of historical change. Thus, the

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\* This is vividly brought home in one recent study, *Race: The Reality of Human Differences*, by Vincent Sarich and Frank Miele (Westview, 320 pp., \$27.50). The book was dismissively reviewed in the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* (February 25, 2005) by Jerry Coyne, a professor in the department of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago.

Scots and the French were natural allies and on very friendly terms when they had a common enemy in the English; but after the union of Scotland with England, the Scots absorbed the broad anti-Gallicism of the British nation. Similarly, the creation of the European Union has diminished cross-border nationalist hatred in some cases (especially between France and Germany) while increasing it in a few others (Germany and Denmark).

By contrast, anti-Semitism is very ancient, has never been associated with frontiers, and, although it has had its ups and downs, seems impervious to change. The Jews (or Hebrews) were “strangers and sojourners,” as the book of Genesis puts it, from very early times, and certainly by the end of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. Long before the great diaspora that followed the conflicts of Judea with Rome, they had settled in many parts of the Mediterranean area and Middle East while maintaining their separate religion and social identity; the first recorded instances of anti-Semitism date from the 3rd century B.C.E., in Alexandria. Subsequent historical shifts have not ended anti-Semitism but merely superimposed additional archaeological layers, as it were. To the anti-Semitism of antiquity was added the Christian layer and then, from the time of the Enlightenment on, the secularist layer, which culminated in Soviet anti-Semitism and the Nazi atrocities of the first half of the 20th century. Now we have the Arab-Muslim layer, dating roughly from the 1920’s but becoming more intense with each decade since.

WHAT STRIKES the historian surveying anti-Semitism worldwide over more than two millennia is its fundamental irrationality. It seems to make no sense, any more than malaria or meningitis makes sense. In the whole of history, it is hard to point to a single occasion when a wave of anti-Semitism was provoked by a real Jewish threat (as opposed to an imaginary one). In Japan, anti-Semitism was and remains common even though there has never been a Jewish community there of any size.

Asked to explain why they hate Jews, anti-Semites contradict themselves. Jews are always showing off; they are hermetic and secretive. They will not assimilate; they assimilate only too well. They are too religious; they are too materialistic, and a threat to religion. They are uncultured; they have too much culture. They avoid manual work; they work too hard. They are miserly; they are ostentatious spenders. They are inveterate capitalists;

they are born Communists. And so on. In all its myriad manifestations, the language of anti-Semitism through the ages is a dictionary of non-sequiturs and antonyms, a thesaurus of illogic and inconsistency.

Like many physical diseases, anti-Semitism is highly infectious, and can become endemic in certain localities and societies. Though a disease of the mind, it is by no means confined to weak, feeble, or commonplace intellects; as history sadly records, its carriers have included men and women of otherwise powerful and subtle thoughts. Like all mental diseases, it is damaging to reason, and sometimes fatal.

Irrational thinking is common enough in each of us; when anti-Semitism is added in, irrational thinking becomes not only instinctual but systemic. An experienced anti-Semite constantly looks for “evidence” to confirm his *idée fixe*, and invariably finds it—just as a Marxist, looking for “proof,” constantly uncovers events that confirm his diagnosis of how the world works. (Not surprisingly, anti-Semitic theory as evolved by the young Hegelians played a major role in the evolution of Marx’s methods of analysis.)

Anti-Semitism is self-inflicted, which means that, by an act of will and reason, the infection can be repelled. But this is not easy to do, especially in societies where anti-Semitism has become common or the norm. What is in any case clear is that anti-Semitism, besides being self-inflicted, is also self-destructive, and of societies and governments as much as of individuals.

An important instance of this historical law is the expulsion of the Jews (along with the Moors) from Spain in the 1490’s, and the subsequent witchhunt of New Christians, or converted Jews, by the Inquisition—a process that took place at precisely the moment when Spain’s penetration of the New World had opened up unprecedented opportunities for economic expansion. The effect of official anti-Semitism was to deprive Spain (and its colonies) of a class already notable for the astute handling of finance. As a consequence, the project of enlarging the New World’s silver mines and importing huge amounts of silver into Spain, far from leading to rational investment in a proto-industrial revolution or to the creation of modern financial services, had a profoundly deleterious impact, plunging the hitherto vigorous Spanish economy into inflation and long-term decline, and the government into repeated bankruptcy.

The beneficiaries of Spanish anti-Semitism, in the near term, were the northern (Protestant) areas

of the Netherlands, where an influx of Jewish refugees settling in Amsterdam and Rotterdam led to the accelerated development of the mercantile and financial sectors and the establishment for a time of Dutch global economic supremacy. In the longer term, the beneficiaries were England and the United States of America. England ceased to practice institutional anti-Semitism in the mid-17th century, when Jews, who had been expelled from the country in 1290, were permitted to re-settle there (and practice their religion) without the need for special privileges. This pattern was repeated in the English colonies in America, so that the new republic became, *ab initio*, an area where anti-Semitism never had any force in law.

By the end of the 18th century, the world's first industrial revolution was an accomplished fact in Britain, and by the end of the 19th century the United States had emerged as the world's leading industrial and financial power, which it remains to this day. Theorists of comparative economic efficiency, like Max Weber and R.H. Tawney, used to point to the role of Protestantism (especially Calvinist "salvation panic") in the development of "Anglo-Saxon" industrial supremacy. The trend now is to stress the role of immigration, with Jews playing a significant role.

**I**N THE evolution of modern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, anti-Semitism once again proved self-destructive. The occupation of Alsace-Lorraine by Germany after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 led to a significant exodus of local Jews to Paris and the rapid growth of anti-Semitism in a country already long harboring the disease. One consequence was the Dreyfus affair—the Dreyfuses were an Alsatian family—which convulsed France for the better part of two decades.

The ensuing cultural civil war weakened France in a number of ways, not least militarily, and in the early years of the 20th century helped to persuade the Germans that France would prove an easy target, as indeed it was in 1914. A longer-term effect of the Dreyfus affair was felt in the French collapse and capitulation to the Nazis in 1940, as well as in the character of the subsequent Vichy regime.

Another outstanding case was Czarist Russia. Under Catherine II, the early elements in what was to become a complex system of anti-Semitic laws were introduced in the late 18th century after the partition of Poland, which gave Russia a large Jewish minority for the first time. Thereafter, prohibitions and restrictions were constantly enlarged and made more stringent, and were reinforced by offi-

cial encouragement of "popular" pogroms. The result was a large-scale migration of Jews to the West, particularly to Britain and the United States—again to the economic and cultural benefit of the Anglo-Saxon powers. Russia was correspondingly weakened, not only by the loss of talent but also by the immense increase in administrative corruption produced by the system of restrictions.

The country was damaged in another way, too. The legal enforcement of Russian anti-Semitism became a model for the subsequent Soviet system of internal control, which can be understood as an extension to the population as a whole of laws that once oppressed Jews only. The aftereffects, including rampant corruption, are still to be felt at all levels of Russian society today.

But the most notable "victim" of anti-Semitism was Germany under Hitler. Among historians, it is still considered morally essential to demonize Hitler and to condemn unreservedly everything he and the Nazis did. But there are compelling reasons, quite apart from the interests of objective scholarship, why this should end. Hitler was not a demon but a human being, just as were Attila and Barbarossa, Luther and Wallenstein, Frederick the Great and Bismarck.

Though from a humble background and poorly educated, Hitler possessed a fierce intelligence, a strong artistic imagination, and great powers of articulation. His career as a soldier in World War I testified to his courage, and everything he caused to happen afterward showed a strength of will rare at any time. To this he added formidable organizational powers, the capacity to inspire loyalty, strategic clarity balanced by tactical flexibility, and oratory of a high order, spiced with a valuable talent for making people laugh. His creation, virtually from scratch, of a nationwide mass political party that he drove forward to electoral victory in what was then perhaps the best-educated country in the world, all in little over a decade, has few parallels in the history of politics.

All this bears witness to Hitler's abilities. As for his criminal defects and deformations, we are rightly aware of them: his inveterate thuggishness and brutality, his narrow chauvinism, his seemingly unappeasable lust for conquest and domination. And, above all, his anti-Semitism, which, while exacting its toll in millions of innocent human lives, in the end proved fatal to his own world-conquering ambitions.

It is not clear from the record exactly how, why, and when Hitler became a strident anti-Semite. What is clear is that by the early 1920's, he was al-

ready a violent hater of Jews. As time went on, his anti-Semitism grew until it took entire possession of his intellect and became the dominant factor in all his strategies and decisions.

It is often assumed that Hitler's anti-Semitism helped pave his way to office. I have never seen any convincing attempt to prove this with detailed, statistical arguments. In Austria and parts of southern Germany, anti-Semitism was indeed widespread. But in central and northern Germany, Jews were well assimilated and performed obvious services; there, anti-Semitism had to be incited. My own belief, considering Germany as a whole, is that Hitler's anti-Semitism, along with the street-brawling to which it led, was rather an obstacle to electoral victory. It repelled more voters than it attracted, and diverted attention from the four policies that undoubtedly put him in a position to win large numbers of votes: his absolute opposition to the terms of the Versailles treaty; his radical call for an end to the Weimar economic system, which had promoted hyperinflation and so stripped the middle class of its savings; his equally radical proposals for ending mass unemployment; and, not least, his vehement hostility to Communism, which most Germans hated and feared.

If Hitler achieved power not because of but despite his anti-Semitism, once he was in power his unrelenting obsession with the Jews corroded his judgment at every turn. His increasingly violent persecution of Jews also alienated other nations whose publics might otherwise have been won over to at least some of his aggressive demands in foreign policy. So central was anti-Semitism to his view of the world that the repugnance of others merely confirmed, for him, the existence of the very Jewish conspiracy against which he had warned for many years. It was this same conspiracy, he threatened, that would be to blame for any war that might break out, and this war would in turn provide both occasion and justification for implementing his "final solution" to the "Jewish problem."

Anti-Semitism thus led Hitler to fight a needless war against Britain and France and then, military dominance having been effectively achieved in mainland Europe, to extend the war in such a way that he could not possibly win it. He invaded the Soviet Union, his formerly compliant and quiescent ally, thereby giving Germany a war on two fronts—precisely the configuration he once argued had been fatal to Germany's chances in World War I. Then, when Japan attacked the United States in December 1941, he made the totally irrational decision to declare war on America. Both these acts

of madness bore the marks of a collapse of judgment brought on by the intellectual disease of anti-Semitism, the first of them pursued in order to extend the "final solution" eastward and the second out of the lunatic notion that the rulers of the United States were themselves a key component of the Jewish world conspiracy. At the beginning of 1941 Hitler had been in a position of enormous global power; at the end of it, his country's eventual defeat and his own annihilation were certain.

AS AN example of the self-destructive force of anti-Semitism, the case of Hitler and Nazi Germany is paralleled only by what has happened to the Arabs over the course of the last century.

The year 1917 saw both the issuance in London of the Balfour Declaration, authorizing the creation of a Jewish "national home" in Palestine, and the wartime British occupation of Jerusalem, followed thereafter by an international mandate to govern the country. In the Balfour Declaration the British pledged to use "their best endeavors" to further the national-home project, but "without prejudice to the rights of the existing inhabitants." At this stage, many Zionists themselves did not necessarily envisage a sovereign Jewish state emerging in Palestine. Thus, Chaim Weizmann, the prime mover behind the Declaration, imagined that Jewish immigrants, whose ranks included a growing number of scientific and agricultural experts as well as many entrepreneurs, would play a key role in enabling the Arabs of the Middle East to make the most effective use of their newly developing oil wealth.

Had Jewish-Arab cooperation been possible from the start, and had money from oil been creatively invested in education, technology, industry, and social services, the Middle East would now be by far the richest portion of the earth's surface. This has been one of history's greatest lost opportunities, comparable, on a much greater scale, to Spain's mismanagement of its silver wealth in the 16th century. Anti-Semitism, helped by an ingenious forgery, was the key to the disaster.

In the 1890's, the Czarist secret police, anxious to "prove" the reality of the Jewish threat to Russia, had asked its agent in Paris (then, with Vienna, the world center of anti-Semitism) to provide corroborating materials. He took a pamphlet written by Maurice Joly in 1864 that accused Napoleon III of ambitions to dominate the world; re-wrote it, substituting the Jews for Napoleon and dressing up the tale with traditional anti-Semitic details; and titled it *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It resurfaced

in Russia after the 1917 coup by the Bolsheviks, who were widely believed by their White Russian opponents to be Jewish-led, and thence made its way to the Middle East. When Weizmann arrived in Jerusalem in 1918, he was handed a typewritten copy by the British commander, General Sir Wyndham Deedes, who said: “You had better read all this with care. It is going to cause you a great deal of trouble in the future.”

In 1921, after a full investigation, the London *Times* published a series of articles exposing the origins of the tract and demonstrating beyond all possible doubt that it was a complete invention. But by then the damage that Deedes had warned about was done. Among those who read, and believed, the forgery was Adolf Hitler. Another was Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, head of the biggest landowning family in Palestine. Al-Husseini was already tinged with hatred of Jews, but the *Protocols* gave him a purpose in life: to expel all Jews from Palestine forever. He had innocent blue eyes and a quiet, almost cringing manner, but was a dedicated killer who devoted his entire life to race-murder. In 1920 he was sentenced by the British to ten years’ hard labor for provoking bloody anti-Jewish riots. But in the following year, in a reversal of policy for which I have never found a satisfactory explanation, the British appointed a supreme Muslim religious council in Palestine and in effect made al-Husseini its director.

The mufti, as he was called, thereafter created Arab anti-Semitism in its modern form. He appointed a terrorist leader, Emile Ghorri, to kill Jewish settlers whenever possible, and also any Arabs who worked with Jews. The latter made up by far the greater number of the mufti’s victims. This pattern of murdering Arab moderates has continued ever since, and not just among Palestinians; we see it in Iraq today.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, the mufti rapidly established links with the Nazi regime and later toured occupied Europe under its auspices. He naturally gravitated to Heinrich Himmler, the official in charge of the Nazi genocide, who shared his extreme and violent anti-Semitism; a photo shows the two men smiling sweetly at each other. From the Nazis the mufti learned much about mass murder and terrorism. But he also drew from the history of Islamic extremism: it was he who first recruited Wahhabi fanatics from Saudi Arabia and transformed them into killers of Jews—another tradition that continues to this day.

Over the last half-century, anti-Semitism has been the essential ideology of the Arab world; its

practical objective has been the destruction of Israel and the extermination of its inhabitants. And this huge and baneful force, this disease of the mind, has once again had its customary consequence. Just as Hitler ended his life a suicide, having failed in his mission of destroying the Jewish people, so 100 million or more Arabs, marching under the banner of anti-Semitism, have totally failed, despite four full-scale wars and waves of terrorism and *intifadas* without number, to extinguish tiny Israel.

In the meantime, by allowing their diseased obsession to dominate all their aspirations, the Arabs have wasted trillions in oil royalties on weapons of war and propaganda—and, at the margin, on ostentatious luxuries for a tiny minority. In their flight from reason, they have failed to modernize or civilize their societies, to introduce democracy, or to consolidate the rule of law. Despite all their advantages, they are now being overtaken decisively by the Indians and the Chinese, who have few natural resources but are inspired by reason, not hatred.

Yet still the Arabs feed off the ravages of the disease, imbibing and spreading its poison. Even as they keep alive the *Protocols* itself, now published in tens of millions of copies in major Arab capitals, they have embellished its lurid fantasies with their own, homegrown mythologies of Jewish wickedness. Recently the *Protocols* was made into a 41-part TV series, filmed in Cairo and disseminated throughout the Muslim world. Turkey, once a bastion of moderation, with a thriving economy, is now a theater of anti-Semitism, where hatred of Israel breeds varieties of Islamic extremism. At a time when at long last there is real hope of democracy taking root in the Arab and Muslim world, the paralysis continues and indeed is spreading.

**I**N EUROPE, too, anti-Semitism has returned after being supposedly banished forever in the late 1940’s. Fueled by large and growing Muslim minorities, whose mosques and websites propagate hatred of Jews, it has also been nourished by indigenous elements, both intellectual and political. It has even penetrated mainstream parties anxious to garner Muslim votes—New Labor in Britain being a disturbing example.

No less worrying, to my mind, is a related European phenomenon—namely, anti-Americanism. I say “related” because anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism have proceeded hand in hand in today’s Europe just as they once did in Hitler’s mind (as the unpublished second half of *Mein*

*Kampf* decisively shows). Like hatred of Jews, hatred of Americans can similarly be described as a form of racism or xenophobia, especially in its more vulgar manifestations. But among academics and intellectuals, where it is increasingly prevalent, it has more of the hallmarks of a mental disease, becoming more virulent, widespread, and intractable ever since the United States began to shoulder the duties of the war against international terrorism.

After all, to hate Americans is against reason. For centuries, and never more so than at present, the U.S. has harbored the poor and persecuted from the entire world, who have found freedom and prospered on its soil. America continues to receive more immigrants than any other country; its most recent arrivals, including the Cubans, the Koreans, the Vietnamese, and the Lebanese, have become some of the richest groups in the country and are enthusiastic supporters of its democratic norms. Indeed, since American society is now a vibrant microcosm of the human race, I would say that to hate Americans is to hate humanity as a whole.

That anti-Americanism shares many structural characteristics with anti-Semitism is plain enough. In France, as we read in a new study, intellectuals muster as many contradictory reasons for attacking the U.S. as for attacking Jews.\* Americans are excessively religious; they are excessively materialistic. They are vulgar money-grubbers; they are vulgar spenders. They hate culture; they are pushy in promoting their own culture. They are aggressive and reckless; they are cowardly. They are stupid; they are exceptionally cunning. They are uneducated; they subordinate everything in life to the goal of sending their children to universities. They build soulless megalopolises; they are rural imbeciles. As with anti-Semitism, this litany of contradictory complaints is fleshed out with demonic caricatures of particular individuals like George W. Bush. Just as 14th-century Christians once held the Jews responsible for the Black Death, Americans

are blamed for all the ills of today's world, starting with (real or imaginary) global warming. Particularly among French intellectuals, such demonization has become almost a culture, a way of life, in itself.

Especially disturbing is the spread of the cult in Germany. There, in the 1920's, anti-Semitism was a feature of the social demoralization produced by defeat in World War I. Germany is now becoming demoralized again, for a variety of reasons: appallingly high unemployment; falling living standards relative to the U.S., Britain, and other advanced nations; declining population figures, giving rise to anxiety about the future of the workforce and the security of the pension system; and the inability of the country's leaders to address any of these problems.

In the post-World War II period, ironically, Germany prospered mightily by looking *to* the U.S. for entrepreneurial inspiration as well as political and military leadership. For the past quarter-century, it has fallen increasingly under the spell of France and the French fantasy of a European superstate that will rival America. Precisely during this period of French hegemony, Germany has entered upon an accelerating economic decline, already relative and soon to be absolute.

For Germany now to turn on America as the source of its woes makes no sense at all. But then a country in the grip of a disease of the mind cannot be expected to behave rationally. Despite all its efforts, Germany, it seems to me, has not learned the essential lesson of its Nazi past, namely, to flee the plague of unreason. Looking at Europe as a whole, and at the continuing malaise of the Middle East, I suspect we are approaching a new crisis in the pathology of nations. Once again, America is the only physician with the power and skill to provide a cure, and one can only pray the hour is not too late for the patient to be revived.

\* *The American Enemy: the History of French Anti-Americanism* by Philippe Roger, University of Chicago Press, 536 pp., \$35.00.