The History and Psychology of Anti-Semitism

Psychology of Anti-Semitism and Philo-Semitism

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There are very few things in human history that have a history of 2,000 years. Anti-Semitism is one of them. Historians, sociologists, and psychologists have been scratching their heads for centuries in an effort to get at why this is so. The classic Jewish Rabbinic formulation, going back nearly two millennia, hypothesizes "Esau hates Jacob"—Esau, the anti-Semitic ancestor of Edom, Babylonia, Rome, and Christendom: anti-Semitism incarnate, anti-Semitism universal, and above all anti-Semitism eternal. Is this indeed the case? What is the psychology of hatred? How can we shed light on the dynamic of bigotry and hatred in order to understand the history of anti-Semitism?

First, what *is* anti-Semitism? There is no immediately apparent answer to this deceptively simple question. Approaches to this question range from the one-liner "An anti-Semite is someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary," to Justice Potter Stewart's declaration in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (originally referring to pornography), "I know it when I see it." Perhaps the best definition is a workmanlike one: anti-Semitism is expressed hatred of Jews, without sufficient cause or warrant.

For the purpose of our discussion, we telescope the many different varieties and eras of anti-Semitism into three periods: ancient anti-Semitism, which was primarily *cultural*;

Christian anti-Semitism, which was *religious*; and modern anti-Semitism, which was (and is) primarily *racial*.

While we do not know the ultimate etiology of anti-Semitism, we do know something about the human dynamics that express themselves in anti-Jewish animus—in a word, in psychology. But even here there is no clarity. There are a dozen psychological theories as to what makes an individual an anti-Semite, but there is no satisfactory explanation. Having said this, we can suggest a number of constructs that inform a psychology of anti-Semitism.

What about *philo*-Semitism? Unlike anti-Semitism, philo-Semitism has not been studied extensively, but we can bring some clarity with respect to the psychological makeup of the philo-Semite from my experience studying the social psychology of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust—where a sub-set of the rescuers were found to be "Judeophiles," synonymous with philo-Semites.

A comprehensive understanding of anti-Semitism is the interaction between socialization in childhood, personality factors, and how situational factors come into play for an individual to act out one's "dislike of the unlike," as historian Salo Baron cannily characterized anti-Semitism. Social psychologist Gordon Allport adds in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice*, "Attitudes are not prejudices unless they serve a private, self-gratifying purpose for the person who has them" (p. 12).

Despite rampant anti-Semitism in Europe before World War II—anti-Semitism was embedded in the institutions of power—the early psychoanalysts did not inquire into the phenomenon. Freud was a notable exception. In 1900, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud wrote about his reaction to anti-Semitism in two dreams: "My Uncle with the Yellow Beard" and "My Son the Myops." In 1909, in the Little Hans case, Freud writes that "the deepest unconscious root of anti-

Semitism is the castration complex." This idea is further elaborated in his 1919 essay on Leonardo da Vinci, where Freud linked circumcision and castration. A few years later, in 1921, Freud used the example of the Aryan's repugnance for the Semite when distinct groups of people have ongoing intimate relations. He later said in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that such contact becomes an outlet for aggression and facilitates cohesion among group members. In Freud's last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), he explored those factors required for anti-Semitism and elaborated on the unconscious motivations of it. These include the fact that the Jews are different; that there is jealousy of the Jews, the "Chosen People"; that Jews are aliens and therefore a convenient target for hostility; and that Jews are successful despite a history of being persecuted.

Beginning with Erik Erikson in 1942, Jews who escaped Nazi-occupied Europe started to think about the tragic fate of their people. In 1946 George Simmel espoused theories that blamed the Jews for provoking anti-Semitic attitudes toward them. Simmel also added that some anti-Semites may be latent homosexuals who use hate as a defense.

In the late 1940s there was major fear in the United States that the Jewish condition would become just as fragile as in Europe, with similarly dire consequences. In order to understand this threat, the American Jewish Committee commissioned a number of the social psychologists who escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930s to study the authoritarian personality in order to understand the potential for serious threats to Jewish security in the United States. The landmark study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950, found that those who score high on anti-Semitism are also prejudiced toward other minority groups. The socialization and personality traits of these individuals include: rigid personality exemplified by "there is only one way to do anything," which stemmed from harsh, unjust, and threatening discipline as

children; strictness; glorification of the parents accompanied by unconscious cynicism; aggression and lack of affection; lack of independence; and submission to authority. The major flaw with the research was that the subjects who were tested with questionnaires, interviews, and projective tests were not individuals who had acted out their hatred of other groups at the time of the study, nor were they avowed fascists.

At the same time as the authoritarian study was published, a more direct study of anti-Semites was conducted by psychoanalysts Nathan Ackerman and Maria Jahoda, who treated 40 anti-Semites, including eight Jews, in psychoanalysis. The transference was facilitated by the fact that the analysts were Jews. Ackerman and Jahoda concluded that anti-Semitic patients tended toward psychopathic and paranoid personalities, exaggerated vulnerabilities, and identity diffusion that manifested itself in inferiority, homosexual tendencies derived from passivity, poor interpersonal relations, and a need to conform. The sense of weakness the anti-Semites feel is defended against by attacking Jews, who are perceived as a weak group. As for their socialization, Ackerman and Jahoda discovered that these anti-Semitic patients grew up with parents who had poor marital relations and felt rejected or narcissistically exploited by the parents.

More than two generations later, the psychoanalyst Martin Bergmann, in an essay on "Antisemitism and the Psychology of Prejudice" noted that "prejudice is always based on unconscious needs" ("Antisemitism and the Psychology of Prejudice" in J.A. Chanes, ed., *Antisemitism in America Today: Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths*, 1995). Bergmann continued, "Prejudice implies that we do not see the person as an individual but only as a member of a group. Ego boundary is relatively weak and requires the protection of prejudice in order to maintain it. What is projected are unacceptable and repudiated parts of the self" (Bergmann,

pp.110-113).

Given the right circumstances to act out one's prejudices, motivations will vary, but a consensus has developed around the notion that there is a proclivity toward becoming an anti-Semite if one has experienced certain socialization and possesses a rigid, authority-fearing, dogmatic, or insecure personality.

The same might be said of philo-Semites. Eva Fogelman had an opportunity to interview non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. One group of rescuers was motivated because of love for individual Jews or of the Jewish people. In *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, Fogelman writes that the affinity toward Jews could come from many sources. Some Christians had childhood friends who were Jewish. Others remembered being "*shabbos goyim*," non-Jews who helped observant Jews by turning on lights, lighting ovens, and performing other household chores so that the Jews might be able to observe the Sabbath. Children were often given sweet treats for performing these simple tasks. This helped establish a close relationship with them. A case in point is Oskar Schindler, who lived next door to a rabbi and his family. Another dynamic: some non-Jews suspected that they had Jewish blood. Raoul Wallenberg, for example, was known to have a great-great-grandfather and another relative on his mother's side that were Jews. Other Judeophiles developed close ties to Jews as adults in an intimate love relationship, a professional bond, or an economic dependence. Some felt a closeness to the Jewish people that came from reading and understanding the Hebrew Bible from early childhood. Some of these Judeophiles had never met a Jew, but given the opportunity to rescue one during the Holocaust, they were more than willing. Of course, there are unconscious affinities to Jews, such as feeling that by associating with Jews one's status will be enhanced.

Despite different relationships to Jews, there are commonalities in the childhoods and personalities of these Judeophiles. They grew up with loving parents who explained misbehavior and taught by word and example a tolerance and acceptance of people who are different. Parents or other role models were involved in altruistic behavior and involved the children as well where possible. In early childhood, many of the rescuers experienced a loss and were given empathy and support. The personality that developed from such an upbringing led to an independent individual who did not fear authority, had the ability to withstand anxiety, and was competent.

Ultimately, Judeophiles during the Holocaust did not fear authority and were able to transcend German propaganda that Jews were unworthy of life because they were able to see the Jew as a human being just like themselves. The anti-Semites, in contrast, feared authority and collaborated passively or actively in the destruction of European Jewry.

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