

Why the Jews?

Thoughts by an Anarchist Jew on the Rise in Anti-Semitism

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A Jewish joke from World War II: *A Nazi officer stopped an old Jewish man and demanded that he answer, "Who started the war?!" Knowing what was good for him, the old man answered, "The Jews!" The Nazi nodded, but the old Jew continued, "...and the bicycle riders." Puzzled, the officer asked, "Why the bicycle riders?" The Jew shrugged. "Why the Jews?"*

There has recently been an increase in anti-semitic actions in the U.S., as well as in other Western countries. From 2017 to 2018, according to the Anti-Defamation League, attacks on Jews more than doubled, to 39. All "anti-semitic acts" in this period totaled 1,879. (While recognizing that Arabs may also be called "semites," I use "anti-semitic" to mean "anti-Jewish.")

On April 27th, 2019, a shooter opened fire on a synagogue during a passover service, in San Diego County, California. He shot four people, killing one. Previously he had posted an online statement about how he wanted to kill Jews. This followed the earlier shoot-up of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which killed 11 Jewish worshippers. And the 2017 torchlit march of U.S. Nazis and Klanspeople in Charlotte, Virginia, chanting, "*Jews will not replace us!*"—which resulted in one murder and several injured. (*NY Times*, 5/1/19; p. A22)

This has been surprising to many. In the aftermath of the Nazi genocide of about 6 million Jews, Jews have done well in U.S. society. Most have made it into the "middle class," which is to say have mainly become upper working class ("white collar" workers and "professionals") or small businesspeople. Some have made it into the highest levels of corporate wealth and power, as well as political power. Through intermarriage and cultural assimilation, Jews have been dissolving into white America—much to the dismay of Jewish religious leaders. (I am myself a humanistic, secular, Jew, married to someone who is only partly Jewish, and our nonreligious son married a non-Jew.) The U.S. establishment right (Republican party, evangelical churches, etc.) speaks of "America's Judeo-Christian heritage." Evangelical Christians are among the strongest supporters of Israel.

This is why it was so astonishing when the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, would not denounce the U.S. Nazis for their Charlotte manifestation. (Instead, he said there were "*good people on both sides*"—fascists and anti-fascists—as well as "*bad people on both sides.*") In horrified reaction, the Nazis were denounced by leading right wing politicians, religious leaders, the biggest of the corporate rich, and top military officers. As a whole, the U.S. ruling class was not prepared to endorse anti-semitic fascism—at this time anyway.

The rise in anti-semitism is connected to the general rise in racism, nativism, homophobia, misogyny, and overall hate-filled political "tribalism," of which Trump is both a symptom and an encourager. U.S. (and world) society has been roiled by economic crises, long-term stagnation, spreading areas of poverty, environmental crises, the looming threat of climate catastrophe, wars around the world, and a massive increase in the migration of people from nation to nation. These tensions have increased political stalemate in the governments of the U.S. and other states. (Why these problems have arisen and increased in this period is another question. See Price 2012.) There is massive discontent in all sectors of U.S. society. There has been a political polarization, with Nazis marching on one hand, while alternately there has been an increase in acceptance of various minorities (sexual, religious, cultural, etc.), opposition to racism and nativism, the #MeToo movement, and the growth of an openly "socialist" movement. The "middle" falls away and extremism grows on the Right and the Left (speaking as an extremist of the anarchist Left).

The man who assaulted the San Diego synagogue claimed that he had set a fire at a neighboring mosque. He was inspired, he wrote, by the gunman who attacked two New Zealand mosques in March. The murderer who attacked the Tree of Life Synagogue wrote that he was enraged because

a Jewish agency helped Latinx asylum seekers. “White nationalists” do not limit their mad hatred to Jews. (President Trump, who would not denounce the Nazis at Charlotte, has focused his racist hostility on Muslims and on Latinx people.)

But why do they include Jews at all? Jews are a tiny part of the population (1.5%) and are almost all white. The increase in racist, nativist, etc. tensions has not caused a return to bigotry against Catholics, who were once oppressed and discriminated against. The Klan used to be virulently anti-Catholic. We might expect anti-immigrant fanatics to notice that the Catholic Church has generally been pro-immigrant and that Latinx asylum-seekers are mostly Catholic. Despite this, there has been no rise in anti-Catholicism. Similarly, there is still a good deal of anti-Mormon feeling in the U.S. (which surfaced during Romney’s presidential run). Yet no one has marched, chanting, “Mormons won’t replace us.”

Nor does fascism absolutely have to be anti-semitic. The original Italian fascism of Mussolini was not (until their German allies insisted on it). Even in the U.S., there has been non-anti-semitic fascism. For example, Randall Terry of the anti-choice Operation Rescue, advocated the overthrow of bourgeois democracy and its replacement with a theocratic dictatorship—with him and his friends to speak for God, of course. This may imply anti-semitism—the theocracy would have been “Christian” after all—but was not explicit about it.

So, then, why the Jews?

“Traditional” Anti-Semitism

The causes of anti-semitism may be divided into two groups. One is the traditional causes, applied to today’s tensions. The other is affected by a new factor, namely the state of Israel. Let me start with the first group of motives. (Of course, it is not anti-semitic for Christians, Muslims, or atheists simply to disagree with the Jewish religion or even to try to convert Jews to their views.)

Nationalists seek a mythical homogeneous nation, a single people, the same clear through. Such an imagined unity serves to disguise the real divisions in the country between capitalists and workers, among other divisions. This search for homogeneity may seem ridiculous in the U.S., where everyone is descended from immigrants except Native Americans. But one thing almost everyone had in common for generations was that they were Christians. Except for the Jews, who not only were not Christians of any type but who had “rejected” Christianity. For all the talk of a “Judeo-Christian civilization,” the Jews do not quite fit into a homogeneous America. Those seeking such a mystical national unity are likely to react to this. (This is also a reason for fascists to reject Muslims, despite talk of there being three “Abrahamic religions.”)

An essential part of fascist ideology is the existence of a secret cabal which rules from behind the scenes, seeking total control and world domination. In fact there is a powerful minority which rules from behind the scenes, namely the capitalist class (despite its divisions and factions). This is not, however, a conspiracy. It is a social system. The fascist belief in an evil elite conspiracy both includes elements of reality (since there is elite minority power) and fantasy (which directs attention away from the actual rulers, the corporate rich).

Who could be projected as a secret but powerful elite? White nationalists see African-Americans as the enemy. But their stereotypical fantasy about African-Americans is of stupid and lazy people. Using this absurd lie, the racists cannot then portray Black people as a powerful,

smart, wily, elite who rule great institutions. The same goes for their prejudiced images of Latinx, Arabs, and most People of Color. (Asians might be another matter).

But the historical stereotypes about Jews fit what the fascists need for their ideology. The Jews are supposed to be smart, sly, tricky, selfish, sticking-together, greedy, great at business, rich, and so on. There are centuries of prejudiced imagery about them, from the original Christian religious hostility, to crackpot racial theories developed in the 20th century.

There have been attempts to invent others to fit the image of the secret cabal. Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority movement tried to talk up the “*secular humanists*” who were out to take over the U.S. But this never caught on. There are other imagined conspiracies such as the “Illuminati.” But the Jews are already here and are “available” to be portrayed as the evil conspiracy—distracting the working population from the real ruling elite, the bourgeoisie and their agents.

Therefore, when this society starts to go into crisis, it should not be surprising that the far right should raise the Jews as the terrible conspiracy which is out to “replace us.”

Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism

After World War II, a new factor arose to effect anti-semitism. This was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, fulfilling the Zionist program. **Previously, many people hated the Jews (as a people and as individuals) for no justifiable reason—that was anti-semitism. Now many people hated the state of Israel for good and justifiable reasons—anti-Zionism.** These two conceptions interacted in various ways.

Israel was established mostly by Europeans immigrating into a poor, colonized, “Third World,” country. The colonizers took over the country, taking the land, driving out most of the native population and dominating the rest. They established their own state, defined as the state of “the Jewish people” and not of all those who lived in the country. They set up a capitalist economy and became part of the world market. Economically, militarily, and politically, the Israeli state became closely tied to U.S. imperialism. It served as the U.S.’s agent in the region, when needed.

One of its chief justifications has been the Holocaust, the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis. However, Israel was not built on German land nor did it expel local Germans. It was built on land on which Palestinian Arabs lived, who had had nothing to do with the German state’s genocide of Jews.

Establishing a “Jewish state” has not done what the Zionists had hoped for. It has not become a “safe haven” for persecuted Jews. In fact, Jews are more in danger in Israel than in many other countries—certainly than in the U.S., despite the upswing in anti-semitic acts. It has not served as a magnet to draw all the Jews of the world into “their” country. Most Jews in the U.S. or Europe have no intention of leaving their countries to migrate there. On the contrary, many Israelis are migrating out. Finally, Israel was to make the Jews safe by no longer having to rely on the non-Jewish states. But the Israeli state depends completely on the support of Western capitalist (non-Jewish) states. If the U.S. were ever to cut its financial and military support of Israel, it would be the end of the Zionist institution.

The Palestinians, and other Arabs as well as Muslims, have opposed the Israeli state from the beginning. They objected to being disposed from their land and their country. They have been right to struggle as a people (most of which is peasants and workers, as well as small merchants). It is only just that anarchists, radicals, and progressive people everywhere have also opposed the

Israeli state and generally been in solidarity with the Palestinian people. (Being in solidarity with an oppressed people does not necessarily mean agreeing with the political and strategic programs of the leaders of various factions. In particular, anarchists do not agree with nationalism as a program, either for the Jews or for the Palestinians.)

Not surprisingly, many (not all) Palestinians and their supporters think in nationalistic, bloc, terms. Just as the Zionists saw all Germans as “Nazis,” and all Palestinians as supposed “terrorists,” so many Palestinians and others see Zionists as “the Jews.” It is true that the Israeli state is overwhelming supported by its Jewish citizens. And Jewish people in the U.S. and Europe also give large-scale support to Israel. Official Jewish institutions, religious and political, are strongly in support of Israel. The pro-Israel lobby is a powerful influence on the U.S. government.

Still, it is a terrible mistake to see all Jews as Zionists and to see the Jewish people as the same as the Zionist state. This overlooks the many Jews who have supported the Palestinian cause. It overlooks the young Jews who have less of an attachment to Israel. It ignores the many Jews who support the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement against Israel. It ignores the fact that most Jews in the U.S. and Europe, whatever their views, have no control over the actions of the Israeli state and gain no benefits from its existence.

Some supporters of the Palestinians are definitely also anti-semites. But there are many supporters of the Palestinians who may sometimes make anti-semitic mistakes. But anti-semitism is not central to their anti-Zionism or important to these people.

It is different with the overt Jew haters, such as U.S. Nazis. It goes without saying that they have no genuine sympathy for the Palestinians. White nationalists despise Arabs and Muslims. They use anti-Zionism as a cover for their anti-semitism. They exaggerate the power that Israel has in the world, in order to make the Jews seem more frightening. They portray Israel as controlling U.S. foreign (and domestic) policy. While the Left condemns Israel as an agent of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, the Right condemns Israel as a major world power which dominates the U.S.

Despite occasional differences between the U.S. and Israel, U.S. politicians support the Israeli state because they think that this is in the interests of U.S. imperialism.

There are activists and theorists on the U.S. Left whose anti-Zionism goes over into anti-semitism. There are even self-styled “anarchists” (calling themselves “National Anarchists”) who are anti-semites and fascists. Keith Preston’s website, “*Attack the System*,” includes ads for their literature and reports on their conferences (see Price 2017). But they are a tiny current and much less important than the overtly right-wing fascists.

Zionists try to equate anti-semitism on the left with that on the right. They seek to make all opposition to Israel seem the same as anti-semitism. For example, Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt said, “Neither side of the political spectrum is exempt from intolerance. The idea that this is a problem with only one side is wrong.” However, the ADL’s own statistics found that of the 1,879 anti-semitic acts committed in the U.S. in 2018, 71 % were done by rightists. No such acts (0 %) were committed by left-wing individuals. Four were committed by “Islamist” individuals. (Adkins 2019) The danger to U.S. Jews is primarily from the right.

Political Conclusions

The danger of an anti-semitic, racist, fascism arises during a period of decline, chaos, and increased popular suffering. From below, people look for answers, and some (perhaps many) are

attracted to the right, including the far-right. Meanwhile, from above, sections of the capitalist class must conclude that the (relatively) “democratic” system is not working to their advantage, that there is a threat from leftists, workers, People of Color, women, and others—a threat which must be repressed. Then the capitalists become willing to “hire” the fascists to take over the state.

We are not at that stage. There is a large turn to the right, as expressed in the approximately 40 % of the population which supports Trump no matter what, as they closely follow Fox News. These people are mostly not fascists. They do not want to overthrow the capitalist representative democracy. But they are supportive of authoritarianism in various ways, and motivated by nativism and racism. Meanwhile big business circles are certainly not prepared to overturn capitalist democracy. But they have supported Trump and put up with his vile racism.

If the future brings prosperity, social peace, and stability, then the danger of fascism—and the concomitant upsurge of anti-semitism—will die down. But if the next period holds social decay, economic decline and crises, environmental catastrophes, increasing wars, and further instability—as I believe it does—then we can expect further political discontent and polarization. This will mean a political decline of the conventional “middle.” There would be an increase of an authoritarian right (including fascists) and a socialist left (both a libertarian/radically-democratic Left and an authoritarian-statist Left). Anti-semitism can be expected to grow on the right.

Therefore opposition to anti-semitism should mean opposition to fascism and the political right. More, opposition to anti-semitism means opposition to capitalism and the struggle for a better social system of cooperation, production for use, participatory democracy, and ecological balance.

Anti-semitism must be an integral part of all progressive struggles. It must be fought as part of the decaying capitalist political culture, along with white nationalism, nativism, sexism, homophobia, class privilege, Islamophobia, and all forms of prejudice and irrational hatred. The real enemy is the capitalist ruling class, its state, and all forms of oppression.

Anti-Zionism is not in itself anti-semitism. Solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposition to the Israeli state should be part of an internationalist program of liberation. But anti-Zionism must not be allowed to be used as a cover for a real program of hatred for Jews.

Anti-semitism cannot be treated as a problem in itself, distinct from the other tensions of a crisis-ridden capitalist society. It will only be ended when all forms of exploitation and oppression are ended.

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