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Saying Things “Jewish” in the University After October 7: A Context for Understanding a Predicament

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Abstract

Particularly in the post-October 7 period, the use of the word or utterance “Jew,” or “Jewish,” is (once more) a pertinent example for understanding conflict, geopolitics, and the relation between religion and politics. Based on my ongoing ethnographic work, which explores how this is experienced in the Greek university world, I provide here a mode of understanding dominant ideological and/or intellectual origins of people’s stances in the academic workplace when they use, or encounter, the “Jewish” signifier. I do not provide ethnographic material as much as I provide a context for understanding the ethnography of a specific academic–intellectual universe. As a particular public sphere, the academic workplace has its own attitudes and strategies for handling ideological and politico-philosophical differences within itself. This condition, I suggest, can accommodate a felt predicament among interlocutors, colleagues, and other interrelated actors, as has been the case particularly during the last couple of years. The conflict in the Middle East brings the geopolitical into the classroom and onto campus in ways that may reconfigure and unsettle power relations and sentiment in the community. I trace the origins of this predicament through a synoptic genealogical trajectory from the 1960s to the present.

Keywords: Middle East; October 7; university; academia; antisemitism; antizionism; Greece; anthropology; Jew; Jewish; Arabic; Israel; Palestine



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1. Introduction

I need to make a disclaimer first, which has to do with the word “Jew,” in order to prevent assessments about crudity, offensiveness, or aberration. Being aware that the word still carries certain remnants, or, otherwise, that certain semantic fields are still powerful, I dare say that I use it descriptively. In case this is not theoretically convincing (i.e., since indeed no description is neutral), then I shall simply resort to a common (in our field) response, which is that I am redeploying the term and re-assigning qualities to it: legitimate, affirmative, and existent. Also, I can invoke practicalities: it is easier to say “a Jew” than to say “a Jewish person” (as in “a Greek” vs. “a Greek person”). To complete the argument, however, my use of the word “Jew” is not so prosaic: it is not merely intended to be devoid of the pejorative; it also contains a grain of irony or sarcasm about the past semantic regime. The user is aware that the word carries a history within it and that the word has a historical trajectory that one cannot deny. By saying “Jew,” the user declares to have an awareness (of this historical past), which also makes this utterance a political statement. I hope this complexity legitimizes my use of this noun, which, otherwise, and at certain time periods in history, was used to make many people in the world feel deviant.

In this paper I provide a context, by means of a brief historical and political account of an intellectual trajectory, for the purpose of understanding the consequences of the post-October-7th historical moment¹ in the academic workplace (universities in Greece) in relation to the use of the signifier (and utterance) “Jew,” or “Jewish,” and the subsequent layers of meaning for “Jew” or “Jewish.” To be more precise, this paper is not an ethnographic account of such consequences in the academic workplace but rather an attempt at a historical and political grounding that may help explain these consequences. Post-October-7th ideological and intellectual repercussions become palpable and perceptible even in the most minute processes of the everyday job routine and in collegial/professional exchanges and relationships (classrooms, offices, hallways, department meetings, socializing spaces on campus, etc.). They symbolize more than what we refer to as “the Middle East.” They relate to ideological (and philosophical) affiliations and belongings in the academe and the various intelligentsias. As such, they affect power relations within them. This means that, subsequently, they also affect individual people’s lives, i.e., their professional alliances and networks, friendships, futures, careers, emotional states, and other significant things. Because these consequences are deeply political, I deem it necessary to provide a context for understanding certain intellectual origins and routes that explain these politics.

While collecting ethnographic material from everyday life in the (Greek) university workplace, I have focused on specific effects of the sound of the utterance “Jew” or “Jewish,” their derivative words and meanings, and “of the Jew” as a theme emerging in discussion or casual dialogue. I have explored gamuts of sentiment as they remain unchanged over the years, but also during changing political circumstances, such as in the post-October 7 period, in particular. Based on personal lived experience from my daily job environment as a member of the academic community, I observe as well as become part of encounters, meetings, casual get-togethers, and various communicative events containing condensed material available for close reading and interpretation, whether as discursive material or a body of language. As a person who teaches on Jewish cultures and contemporary Middle Eastern societies, I admit that it was inevitable that I became aware of this, and was affected by it, sooner and more intensely, compared to other colleagues and coworkers.²

There is one main reason for the ethnographic value of such material. Academics, scholars, intellectuals, and their respective institutions, as overlapping universes, comprise a world that is theoretically and axiomatically one of free speech and democratic values. At the same time, it is a world that, necessarily, reflects social reality (prejudices, inequalities, preferential politics, etc.), albeit simultaneously a world that has, or must have, the capacity to provide intellectually nuanced advocacy. As such, it constitutes a very particular public sphere. Thus, it is an anthropological challenge to discern the workings of power within it in the work life of the actors involved (academics), particularly in moments of (political) crisis, and particularly in their discreet, implicit, tacit, or non-discursive manifestations.

Therefore, although analyzing such valuable ethnographic material has been my main pursuit, I shall not delve into it for the purposes of this paper. Rather, I shall provide a glimpse of the ethnographic landscape, with the sole intention of getting to the “larger” picture, i.e., the conditions that generated it. In what follows, then, first, I provide a brief idea of what happens in the academic workplace when, metaphorically speaking, “the Jew enters the room.” By this I mean what takes place at work as a consequence of the utterance “Jew” (or “Jewish”), particularly during the aftermath of October 7. In the main part, the task is a little more elaborate, whereby I provide what I perceive as an intellectual-historical context for understanding the consequences of using this word and utterance and its linguistic and semantic cognates. By “context,” I mean the dominant ideological and/or intellectual origins of my interlocutors’ stances when they use, or encounter, the “Jewish” signifier. I demonstrate that these origins can be located in the 1960s, and they

pertain to dominant debates on the definitions of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. These intellectual exchanges have crucially influenced the dispositions of the subjects involved in the ethnographic settings I examine. The subjects or actors, who happen to be my interlocutors and colleagues, relate themselves in various ways to the intellectual history that I will discuss, while many are shaped by this history as scholars; thus, they have developed their respective ideological engagements and loyalties accordingly.

There are difficult coexistences in the academic workplace at present. The uncertainty, the tension, and the “chilling” or “numbing” effect following specific utterances, with their implied and perceived meanings and ideological positionings, render this situation a predicament. I do not view this predicament as a new condition for our workplace, or for the overall (Greek) public sphere, but as one reawakened in the political moment of post-October 7. By this I mean that it re-emerges in different recent historical moments.³

At the level of discourse, every such moment establishes a conflation of Jew and Israeli and an essentializing of both. The utterance Jew can become politically flammable. Consequently, the uttering itself can become an emotional and intellectual ordeal for subjects (speakers) at moments of political crisis by re-launching awkwardness, hesitation, and self-consciousness. The uncertainty of meanings, which can be a feature of moments of crisis, renders subjects uncertain about what meanings they convey or ought to convey. The same holds for many other words (utterances) that are semantically implicated, as I discuss below. There are clusters of linguistic uses that become politically liable in this process.

I propose that this felt predicament is indicative of ideological and intellectual exchanges and hegemonies not merely pertaining to the Greek academic context but, rather, to a broader Western intellectual/scholarly public sphere and its trajectories from the 1960s to the present. Having said this, I must acknowledge that the Greek academic context is unexplored in this topic and that it deserves its own ethnographic analyses, as does every socio-cultural context with its own history and national history. I will briefly come back to the particularities of the Greek context later. The reason I do not discuss or scrutinize the Greek context *per se* is that it does not appear necessary in this text, for a number of reasons. Academics, scholars, or intellectuals in the social sciences (and humanities) working and producing in Greece are influenced by, and draw on, the intellectual-ideological debates and exchanges from the 1960s onwards, discussed below, which are products of Western traditions of thought. For the majority of them (my generation included), education and scholarly careers have been/are realized and inspired in the same Western intellectual environments, which were hubs for the emergence of these traditions (Anglo-Saxon Universities predominantly in the social sciences; French academia, a less preferable choice today, remaining nevertheless an intellectual-spiritual source). On a more tangible level, in addition, there is much and long-established European mobility among higher-education institutions (research, teaching, grants, and residencies abroad). The fact that the Greek academic world can be considered peripheral in certain respects⁴ does not mean that it does not partake in these ideological and intellectual traditions or that it lacks a sense of belonging in them. Quite the contrary. Because of the strong ideological-cultural influences and hegemonies in question, which shape faculty members’ trajectories, the social category of Greek social scientists can be subsumed into the same broader, and Western, ideological kinship groups. What matters more, therefore, is that there is a shared discursive and interpretive universe, which can be dominant, particularly at times of political crisis. Lived experience in the Greek academic and scholarly world at present appears to be imbued with the sense that the word or utterance Jew becomes a location of a specific kind of tension, when religion-cum-ethnicity is politicized and the geopolitical is intellectualized.

Before discussing these intellectual traditions, I provide a glimpse into the field.

2. On an Ethnography of Discreet Conflicts and Subtle Tensions

The sound of the word “Jew” or “Jewish” may cause a certain feeling of discomfort; the same holds for derivative words, metonymies, and modulations of the above, or any language use or utterance that may generate free association related to the above (Israel, Israeli, Islam, Zionism, Arabic, Palestine, Palestinian, Iran, US, truce, aid, et al.). It is the political–historical conditions that render words and utterances cognate that, in other circumstances, would be random and unrelated. The politicization of language (words, phrases, utterances) produces kinship relations, in the sense of semantic kinship. Any political–historical conjuncture can become a source of kinship ties among linguistic uses (such as “Jew” or “Jewish”), thus producing groups of meanings and connecting language uses that would not be relatable in another historical conjuncture.

Lived experience in the academic workplace confirms an array of such linguistic uses as politically cognate. This has been the case increasingly in the political landscape of the last few (or last couple of) decades, as I discuss later. Nevertheless, more intensely after October 7, the word “Jew” or “Jewish,” along with the various words and meanings attached to it, and in the ways it is used in many Western academic institutions/worlds, has become a source, or space, of a particular discomfort lying in the heart of the discussed predicament.

The ethnographic setting comprises spaces and daily life instances on a (Greek) campus,⁵ such as a hallway in the building, an office, a classroom, or a campus cafeteria; also, it comprises moments from the work process (teaching, research, any form of collective work) and moments of sociality at work (whether in the academic or the administrative realm) in these very spaces. My ethnographic material includes attitudes, mentalities, planned or non-planned responses and reactions, public statements, discursive rituals, and various types of communicative events taking place when it comes to talking or speaking about things “Jewish.” These speech acts or events are performed, or take place, programmatically or spontaneously, publicly or non-publicly, and in official or non-official moments, within the larger institutional setting.

Particularly in the post-October 7 period, almost any mention related to the “Jewish” signifier is governed by the condition of this discomfort. A Jewish-themed film (e.g., on Netflix); a Jewish-themed conference or workshop; a class on diaspora, displacement, or nationalism; a book fair with Shoah-related themes; or a cooperation with any academic institution in the Middle East, for example, are not neutral topics that can be discussed in an unperturbed manner. Whether this concerns teaching, faculty gatherings, campus events, or small talk, these are topics of “uncomfortable” discussion. As such, they become very appropriate opportunities for an ethnographer to observe the large gamut of subjects’ positions in academic/university communities, and the predicament in question.

When “the Jew enters the room,” therefore, subjects/speakers/interlocutors (many of them my own colleagues) share a reflex reaction, regardless of their political–ideological position. This stems from an acknowledged reality that there is a specific layer of meanings attached to the word Jew (or Jewish), which condenses it to the politics in the Middle East at present, or, more broadly, to the politics around the tumultuous formation of the map of the Middle East during the last few decades. This is not merely a widely accepted perception but also a dominant view, as my lived experience of the workplace confirms.

They may, or may not, subscribe to this dominant semantics. What matters more is that they are aware of this condition and alert to it. Thus, when discussion brings up matters “Jewish,” they appear to have a common concern, as well as pressure: a sense of an obligation to speak, or not speak, or find a way to speak, or otherwise take an “appropriate” stance (about the Arab–Israeli conflict), thus indicating to their interlocutor/s what they perceive as political consciousness and ethos analogous to a scholar/intellectual/informed individual who is working in an educational institution.

They may or may not consent to a widely accepted view of the “Jewish” as imbued with the history of the Israeli–Arab conflict. What is crucial, however, is that they share a, by now familiar, tension and sense of obligation to participate in politicizing the “Jewish.” This sharing simultaneously divides them ideologically (they may not agree in interpreting the matter at hand) and unites them as an imagined collectivity of thinking subjects (they feel they must take a position, vocal or silent).

Consequently, then, the “Jew” becomes a semantic field with some or numerous ethical concerns. For instance, a workshop on Greek Judaism (20th century) that took place in the post-October 7 period, and which would have been a routine scholarly event otherwise, triggered (unexpected) responses from within the academic community pertaining to the plausibility of talking about Jewish identity during a time of humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The annual cultural event co-organized by a university and the local historical Jewish community was cancelled this year because of similar concerns about raising ethical issues. In one of my classes on the history of Jewish communities in the Greek nation state, I was asked by an irritated student what I had to say about the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Desires, ideologies, goodwill, and ignorance of facts may all mingle at a moment of crisis.

A war is a devastating event that challenges our certainties about value systems and, at the same time, generates affect abundantly; this is understandable as well as anticipated. The humanitarian, however, can be political, too; it can also be ideological. As such, a humanitarian perspective may entail its own interpretations of history (“What is a Jew?”). In the present historical conjuncture, the “Jew” produces mainly one kind of connotation. There are many such examples in which the norm is to subsume the category “Jew” to the very specific history of nation-state formation in the near Middle East, and the Israeli nation state, in particular.

Mainly, in this process, the category “Jew” is moralized. A hierarchy of pain underlies this logic, according to which a sense of worthiness and, inevitably, a sense of humanity are constructed. I am concerned with the conditions of the signifier “Jew” (“Jewish”) acquiring such moral dimensions at present, in academic and intellectual worlds. Experiencing daily life situations in the academic workplace, I can see that the “Jewish” signifier makes our collegial encounters lose the “normalcy” of everyday interaction at work; it causes awkwardness, silences, hesitations, and various kinds of pending, suspended, unfinished, open-ended dialogues and communicative events. Hence, the discomfort I introduced above as a makeshift term for naming this emotional state cum predicament.

This predicament stems from a felt need of speakers to position themselves vis-à-vis the war and thus construct (what is perceived as) an appropriate public image for themselves. Also in this process, their position as scholars and as subjects in an academic institution can determine the manner of the response. Being conscious of one’s institutional position may or may not enable sentiment or distanciation and detachment, vocal or non-vocal responses, and an overall sense of liberty or containment of expression. Position in the academic hierarchy and related networks determines the ability to make such choices. In this process, power relations in the workplace are affected and restructured, thus politicizing our verbal exchanges.

As products of a specific discomfort (cerebral and/or visceral), interlocutors’ responses and stances when the “Jew enters the room” make sense within a tradition of politicized intellectual and ideological dialogues and struggles, which have been influential and formative for a large part of the Western academic world during the last few decades, including Greece. There is a specific political–ideological–intellectual trajectory at the roots of the predicament in the university world I am discussing.

This trajectory is outlined next, in the main section. The point of the main section is not to provide a historical account. It is to provide an understanding of main trends of

thought that have governed the ethnographic landscape in the Greek university world as depicted above during the post-October 7 period and at all times of related political crisis. For this reason, the sources used are indicative and not exhaustive of the literature. I will also address further why it is necessary to have this story generally and for Greece in particular.

3. Genealogies

I do not treat the post-October 7 period as an entirely new moment but, rather, as an instance in a larger historical moment that has politicized the word “Jew” (or “Jewish,” etc.) by inscribing it in the history of (what is known as) the Middle East. The word “Jew” (or “Jewish,” etc.) has been politicized multiple times in history, and it would be redundant to go over this well-known biography here. It is important, however, to have in mind the trajectory since 1948, as a historical phase that rendered the word “Jew” as inextricably linked with the national entity called Israel and with the Arab world and the worlds of Islam (and Arabic Christianity, to a lesser extent). The existence of the nation state, in other words, has added a new range of significations to the word Jew, whereby it may function, e.g., as a synonym or an antonym.

As far as synonyms are concerned, what has been established since then is a common interchangeability of notions such as Jew and Israeli, Jewishness and Israeliness, and so on. The subsequent conflation of the two identities (i.e., the ethno-religious and the national) may function as a political statement on the side of the utterer. The conflation of Israeli and Jew is deployed by different actors (institutions, organizations, states, individuals) in different circumstances of a political/geopolitical nature. With the emergence of Israel as a national entity, Israeli-ness was the new and thick layer of meaning that became available for the “Jewish” signifier. As such, the “Jewish” signifier is always intensified at times of conflict. Such was the case with the Six-Day War in 1967, for instance, which affected two (then) opposing nationalisms by boosting a sense of Israeli national identity and causing a sense of defeat of Arab nationalism (or pan-Arabism).

Approximately during the last three to four decades, there has been a complex thread of dialogue, discussion, and controversy on how to define and identify contemporary anti-Jewish sentiment, as I show in this section. This was triggered by what was felt/perceived as a new condition after the postwar/post-Shoah era. It was and is concerned with the question of whether there is a continuum of antisemitism (as known), whether there exists a new antisemitism, or whether this new condition is something else that needs to be addressed differently. Therefore, how to name it, whether it is possible to name it, and whether we are talking about one and the same thing have been complex issues. Although there have been differing views on its origins, they revolve around a main referent: a key relationship, the one between Israel and Palestine (Palestine understood as the political entities of the West Bank and Gaza), which, consequently, has rendered very acute the opposition Jew–Arab. This opposition has been emblematic and almost of an ontological nature in these intellectual exchanges.

Two main approaches can be identified, representing a divergence that began to occur mainly at the end of the 1960s in light of significant geopolitical changes in the Middle East and the intellectual and ideological movements that marked this decade in the West. One approach is that of the “new antisemitism,” a term that was already on the table in the 1970s, which posits that prejudice against Jewish identity can also be prejudice against Israel. It locates the beginnings of this new condition in the Six-Day War in 1967, an Israeli military victory, when much of the Western intellectual world (a large part of which was identified with the “Left”) became hostile and critical vis-à-vis Israel regarding the occupation of the new territories. As a note, this military development rendered the map of the state

approximately as it looks today. Pierre-André Taguieff, a French philosopher and major figure in this approach, called this the “new Judaeophobia” (Taguieff 2004) (“la nouvelle judéophobie,” Taguieff 2002). The aftermath of the Six-Day War was, for this approach, the starting point of a grave intellectual and political development, which was the construction of “Zionism” as another kind of racism, a racism that is seen to be materialized politically (by Israel, aided by Western nation states) and to exercise discrimination and oppression (of the Palestinian people).

It is established knowledge that the decline of pan-Arabism and the rise of political Islam were part of this war’s aftermath. Specific political entities/political movements emerged and were empowered in this process for a common cause (“resistance,” “struggle”): some without violence and armed conflict (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood) and others with a more militant or radical stance relying on violence (e.g., Islamic Jihad, such as al-Qaeda and Isis, Hezbollah and Hamas). In these movements, hostility towards Israel is realized by means of denunciation (and vilification) of Zionism. Specific episodes in this historical course have contributed to the heightened use of Zionism as malicious power and to an acute sense of incongruence between Jew and Arab, or, otherwise, Jewish and Palestinian. Such moments are, for instance, the first two Intifadas (1987 and 2000), particularly the more severe second one, and the Israeli–Palestinian escalation of conflict, particularly after 2005, with considerable human losses, increasingly identified as an Israel–Gaza/Israel–Hamas conflict.⁶ Within the broader web of power relations of political Islam, the official discourse of Iran always (i.e., since 1979) discredited “Zionism” and “the Zionist state,” connoting the equation of Jewish and Israeli and attributing moral consequences to all these related utterances.

In this approach, Islam in present-day Europe is a space of new antisemitism (Europe having been, at the same time, a society where Arab–Muslim immigrants have experienced various forms of discrimination). France is brought up as the European example with the gravest and most frequent violence against Jewish people/French Jews in recent years as well as against a perceived Western culture and lifestyle contemptuous of its subaltern populations.⁷

The approach ascribes a degree of responsibility to the “anti-Zionism” argument and the Left⁸ for the emergence of the new condition, i.e., the new antisemitism. By narrating, and thereby interpreting, the political stance of Israel in the Arab–Israeli conflict (and the more recent Gaza–Israel conflict) as part of the history and domination of Zionism, the Left was/is seen as co-creating the new gamut of meanings for Zionism: the equation of Israel with Western domination and colonization—both because of the establishment of the state of Israel itself and because of its subsequent policies and politics regarding the Palestinian territories (e.g., Israel as the “apartheid state”)—and the rendering of Israel as the personification of Europe/the West in the East, in the way it purportedly produces and reproduces “capitalism” and “neoliberalist” politics.

The new antisemitism approach claims that this process is fraught with increasing identifications of the Jew/Jewish with the Israeli nation state, a fact that facilitates depictions of Jews as Israelis, colonizers, and “white” colonizers. A main consequence of this is the rendering of the “Palestinian cause” as opposed to “Zionism.” Furthermore, what is invoked as “legitimate criticism of Israeli policy” may contain prejudice towards Jewish identity. Thus, condemnation-of-Zionism-cum-criticism-of-Israel as a political act in favor of the weak contributes to new significations of the Jewish by activating the new kind of anti-Jewish sentiment.⁹ Therefore, this approach denounces what it views as a co-production process of the new antisemitism: it denounces an apparent congruence between otherwise unusual co-partners, i.e., contemporary Islamist ideologies and movements and Western intellectuals/intelligentsias.

Robert Wistrich (2012) and Alvin Rosenfeld (2015, 2019) have been strong advocates of the “new antisemitism” approach and critical of the Left in what is by no means a homogeneous intellectual circle. Also, Jean Améry (2022) provides a historically informed criticism of the Left from the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ As a first generation of thinkers addressing such criticism, based in Europe, the US, or Israel, this is also, largely, a historical generation speaking from within an intellectual and academic elite, which, if Jewish, experienced the Shoah or its aftermath in terms of antisemitic prejudice. David Hirsh (2017, 2021) in/on Britain can be seen as representing a younger cohort in this line of criticism,¹¹ which also extends to the criticism of developments such as BDS.¹² In both successive cohorts/generations of critics, members may be both of Jewish origin and of Left-leaning or Labour-leaning beliefs (depending on which side of the Atlantic one is).

The other main approach and critical line of thinking, more widely known as “anti-Zionism,” centers its criticism around the politics of Israel and the ways it has enacted its presence in the Middle East since the late 1960s,¹³ viewing the new-antisemitism thesis as blind to an increasingly alarming political reality between Israel and the Palestinian territories (the West Bank and Gaza). As such, it posits a different interpretation of the trajectory of anti-Jewish sentiment historically. While the presence of antisemitism is undeniable, there is no *new* antisemitism; rather, the argument and moral indignation around the existence of a new antisemitism is purportedly a new modus for not exerting criticism on Israel and the Western world regarding their geopolitical role in the Middle East. Many of its advocates belong to what was known as the New Left from the 1960s onwards, which, also including a Jewish Left, has been sharply critical of the “West,” Israel, and “Zionism.”

The term “neo-Zionism” has also been used to contribute to this approach (Uri Ram 2001), meaning a political culture, as well as a nationalist ideology, dominant in Israel post-1967, which features a (nationalist) aggressiveness regarding the Israeli sense of ownership of the newly occupied lands, as a result of the Six-Day War.

Generating widespread criticism against the state of Israel and its conduct towards the West Bank and Gaza (also pertaining to Lebanon and Syria, recently¹⁴), the “anti-Zionism” approach lays emphasis on the escalation of “repression,” the changing political landscape in Israel with religious nationalism and the rise of the extreme right, and the “instrumentalization” of the Shoah and the new-antisemitism argument used for preventing criticism of Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue. A main axiom is that criticism of the state of Israel is legitimate, that it is not by definition antisemitism, and that it is *not* a new antisemitism: it is anti-Zionism. Besides an ideology and a project of self-determination of Jewish people, Zionism was also, according to the argument, a project of European/Western expansion into non-Western lands and, as such, another “settler” project. In this process, Jewish nationalism has been seen through the lens of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial critique and postcolonial theory.

Inverting the criticism directed at them, i.e., that anti-Zionism accommodates antisemitism, advocates of this approach respond that Israel as a state, along with a host of related international official/institutional entities and fora, are themselves redefining antisemitism: the term “new antisemitism” serves to imply (and declare) that all criticism directed against Israel is antisemitic. More specifically, advocates of the anti-Zionism approach see a political necessity for actors (states, political bodies, political-intellectual fora, etc.) to be talking about a new antisemitism because of failure to think politically and/or for the purpose of diverting attention from the grave issue of the Israeli–Palestinian question (also for the purpose of undermining other interconnected issues, such as islamophobia¹⁵). Prejudice and hostility vis-à-vis Israel can indeed be antisemitic, but not as a rule. Israel is not “the Jewish collective” or the “collective Jew,” as an oft-cited phrase goes (e.g., Klug

2003; Lerman 2022b). Prominent in this approach has been, for instance, the intellectual circle around the British journal *Patterns of Prejudice* (Lerman 2012, 2022a; Klug 2004, 2023) or the US journal *Jewish Currents* (e.g., Beinart 2025).¹⁶

In the landscape of these debates, the role of the Left remains a main theme. The Left, albeit impossible to describe as a unified political, social, or cultural entity, has been a main source of critical thinking, almost a metonymy for critical thinking, in much of the academic–intellectual world in the social sciences.¹⁷ At the same time, whether from within the Left itself, or outside, there has been much discussion regarding its own prejudices and much contention regarding its own antisemitism.¹⁸ Having long roots historically, the issues about the role of the Left and the questioning of what critical thinking is are making a renewed entry following October 7, as also triggered by diverse, publicly made positions in Western academic intelligentsia and by turmoil in the university world. A main criticism is that the discourse that we used to recognize as “critical” or “progressive” (anti-racist, against discrimination of all kinds) may produce antisemitism at present. Debates have become increasingly polarized, reproducing the two main approaches that were already there long before October 7: criticizing “pro-Palestinian” advocacy as having ulterior motives on the one hand or criticizing Jewish “exceptionalism” on the other.

A useful example for understanding such debates would be the positions of Judith Butler (2023, 2024; see also Butler 2006)¹⁹ and Eva Illouz (2024a, 2024b), with each side offering a different version of what critical thinking is regarding the situation in the Middle East and the ways we ought to be thinking about “being Jewish” in relation to Israel’s role. I am referring to these two as representing two main axes of criticism that are, at the same time, dominant and opposing positions concerning October 7. From the point of view of the anti-Zionism position, Butler represents a category of intellectuals and academics who offer definitions of “resistance” (to Israel), relating religious and radical Islam (e.g., Hamas on October 7) to a “global Left.” Among other things, reasoning on the use of “violence” has caused a stir in the world that imagines itself as the Left today and to which Illuz and other critics belong, too. Illuz represents those who speak of a contemporary antisemitism being generated within this very Left. In condemning the “alliance” between the Left and religious–radical Islam, the choice of a camp (islamophobia or antisemitism), and the use of violence from either side (Israel or political Islam), this position wishes to point to the following: there is a contradiction between established ideas of tolerance and the recognition of (gender, racial, etc.) difference in and by the Left and a simultaneous absence of criticism of Islamist movements on these very matters, in and by the Left. This condition, which she calls “a deficit of compassion,” renders the Jew/Jewish a hateful subject but also “disempowers the left’s ability to fight effectively the extreme right” (Illouz 2024b).

October 7, therefore, should not be seen as a new moment but rather as a moment that contributes to reproducing more acutely what was already in motion: a surge of criticism relating to the “Jewish” signifier, whereby the word/attribute Jewish functions as a metonymy for Israel. While this is no novelty, it seems that, during the current moment, “Israel” and its semantic field almost imbue the semantic universe of the “Jewish.” Drawing from daily life in the academic workplace, one may sense that the “numbing” or “chilling effect” is becoming more acute, too: the conflation of Jew and Israeli renders the sound of the word “Jew” difficult to handle. This is a gravely politicized process of signification. One may assume that it happens at every new moment of this political crisis, the only difference being that in the last couple of decades, Gaza has had a dominant nuance in this signification process. Hence, Israel as antithet for Gaza, Jew as antithet for Gaza, and so on. It is for these reasons that I would not treat October 7 as a new boundary. It does not launch a new era; rather, it confirms continuities. As such, it ought to be subsumed into the larger intellectual history discussed in this text.

Analyses regarding the post-October 7 historical moment and its effects on the signifier “Jewish” have already emerged, albeit with very few on the ethnography of the academic workplace (e.g., [Freedman and Hirsh 2024](#)).²⁰ In today’s Greece, Salomi [Boukala \(2024\)](#) provides one of the few analyses on this topic by exploring the social categories of intellectuals and politicians, including university faculty, with the aim of discussing antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the Greek Left through discourse analysis. This valuable study pertains to a domestic social category of professionals and thinkers identified with the university and the academic workplace today. Because antisemitism on the Left has been largely a taboo topic to discuss in Greece, such analyses have been long overdue. Although more concerned with public discourse and manifestations, what makes it very relevant is that it discusses anti-Jewish sentiment as related to perceptions of Israel; as such, it contributes to thinking about the contentious conflation of the two signifiers, i.e., Jewish and Israeli.

This trajectory does not end; neither does the political problem. In any case, it provides a version of a history: the intellectualization of a very encompassing political subject. There are two questions that need to be addressed more adequately. One is why such a story pertains to Greece (in other words, why tell a “Western” story to talk about Greece). I admitted earlier that the Greek ethnographic landscape in academia and related intelligentsia deserves a thorough analysis. I explained why I believe that the Greek case equally connects to such a genealogical account since we share intellectual heritages as “westernized” academics. However, the discussed predicament in the Greek context deserves a more exclusive analysis, which remains to be conducted. What can be said for the sake of the current topic is that one needs to consider a number of factors in Greece’s political biography of the recent decades in order to understand in depth the political weight of linguistic uses within its context. For instance, one needs to consider the dominant sentiment vis-à-vis the Jew in the long-durée history of a Christian-majority Greek-speaking population with archaic-religious anti-Jewish mentalities. At the same time, at the institutional level, one needs to consider the contemporary turn to multiculturalist politics and rhetoric in the Greek state and (among other identities) the visibility of the “Jewish” in the Greek public sphere. Another crucial factor is Greece’s foreign affairs policies in the long run in regard to the eastern Mediterranean region (Greece–Turkey affairs, new alliances such as Cyprus–Greece–Israel–Egypt). One needs to take into consideration the dominant pro-“Arabic” sentiment in the Greek public sphere, constructed in the context of Greece’s foreign policy since the mid-20th century, and specifically with emblematic Libyan, Syrian, and Palestinian leaders in the picture (and intensely during and after the first Intifada, with Andreas Papandreou/PASOK in power).²¹ As a result of this steady feature at the level of political leadership in Greece, there has been a culture of “solidarity” with the “Arab world,” which has played its role in constructing a perception of the Jew at present. Let me also note that this view has received its share of criticism in Greece. It is with these factors in mind that one needs to trace the biographies of the Greek intelligentsia and scholars in the social sciences and humanities (academic affiliations/destinations abroad/extroversion). The interconnectedness of such aspects, I suggest, can contribute to understanding more thoroughly the Greek academic context and its ideological-political stances; hence, the strains and vicissitudes of uttering things “Jewish” on campus; hence, the more vocal presence of the anti-Zionism approach in the social sciences (and humanities). However, while it is certainly necessary to be aware of the local history and cultural context, I would like to reiterate that this is not a priority issue for the present analysis. The Greek academic context shares intellectual trajectories with other (Western) academic worlds, and it is these commonalities that need to be reflected on here.

The other question is, perhaps, more basic: Why tell such a story at all? Why genealogies? After all, it, and the bibliographic references, are well-known to the ones involved: scholars and protagonists.

It is always necessary, I believe, to be able to trace the parameters accountable for the picture of the ethnographic landscape we are doing fieldwork in, be they historical, philosophical, etc. This is also one way of performing anthropology, a quite common one. In this respect, language uses, e.g., the words we say, acquire political weight depending on the historical moment when they are uttered and have an ideological–political biography that needs to be discerned. This is one prominent reason why it is important to think biographically/genealogically. However, I discovered another good reason while in the field, which may be academic, or it may be idiosyncratic. As actors in the field (faculty and independent scholars/intellectuals, advanced students, and various individuals with a presence in the social sciences and humanities), we are not always aware, or not aware at all, of these biographies and historical trajectories. In other words, we are not always aware of the intellectual and cultural roots, or origins, of current discourses, expressed ideological positions, and affective states, in this case, when speaking of, or encountering, the “Jewish” signifier (particularly at contentious political moments such as this). I suggest that it is always helpful and conducive to critical thinking to have an informed idea of intellectual kinships, inheritances, and traditions. I also suggest that it helps us, as thinkers, to revisit and update them.

4. Concluding Remarks

The affect-related consequences “when the Jew enters the room” (chilling, numbing, or unsettling in different ways) reflect a long intellectual trajectory in the Western world of thinking about the category Jew, or Jewish, in relation to the political role of Israel. It is a trajectory that contains conflicting exchanges and struggles around specific meanings: should/could the “Jewish” signifier be treated as independent of the semantic field “Israel” (as a political entity)? Should/could Jew and Israel be a tautology?

I need to make a distinction here. Identifying Jewish and Israeli as synonyms can be a feature of nationalist ideologies. For entirely different reasons, it also happens to be a common ideological locus in university worlds. It is the latter I discussed in this paper. The unsettling effect caused by the utterance “Jew” or “Jewish” can be seen as the internalization of an ideological precondition: that there is something about the “Jewish” signifier that renders it “always already” organically connected to Israel (as a political entity). This attaches particular moral weight to the “Jewish” signifier, not because of the Shoah, but because of the Israel–Gaza war. This process is the source of what I view and experience as a current predicament in the (Greek) academic workplace, as it imposes vocabulary regimes and affects and shapes power relations at work among subjects (colleagues and friends).

My broader project is an ethnography of academic workplaces in Greece and the effects of using the category Jew or Jewish (and any related vocabulary) as an utterance or subject of dialogue, particularly in the post-October 7 period. What I chose to provide here is what I view as a historical–biographical account that frames these effects. I offered an account of an intellectual trajectory for the purpose of understanding the consequences of the post-October-7th period at the level of politics of the everyday. The felt discomfort of using the discussed words or utterances for our work and in our workplace reflects specific intellectual and ideological exchanges since the 1960s that have been formative and influential for scholars, academics, and intellectuals active in (Western) academic institutions today. My purpose was to discuss this intellectual tradition with reference to two main approaches, i.e., antisemitism and anti-Zionism. In the aftermath of October 7, almost every related communicative event or dialogue is imbued with the tensions and polarizations of debates

within this very tradition. Understanding this, I suggest, contributes to understanding the (political) flammability of specific linguistic uses. The subject is unexplored in the Greek academic/scholarly context. I have provided a picture of the Greek context, stating that it also deserves its own individual analysis as an ethnographic locus.

I do not treat October 7 as a day that changed the world as far as dominant sentiments vis-à-vis the “Jew” are concerned. It did change the world in unforeseen ways, as geopolitics in the Middle East is crucially transformed and the map of the Middle East itself is at risk of being recharted, with all potential seismic global effects entailed in this process. Nevertheless, the post-October 7 historical moment reminded us that the familiar distinction–reduction Jew vs. non-Jew can be assigned to mean Israeli vs. non-Israeli (and by extension, Israeli vs. Arab, Israeli vs. Palestinian, etc.) and that, as such, this distinction acquires moral weight.

Speaking of things “Jewish” has become (once more) a politicized act: an act that is imagined as par excellence containing the political, an act that installs various sentiments governing dialogical and communicative events. It is fascinating for an ethnographer, as well as daunting, what words can do. Words can de-normalize speaking, and this depends on the particular historical moment of the utterance. As such, words can make us reflect on the conditions of politicized affect. It appears that certain utterances are more liable, or accountable, for these effects than others. This is not because they are assigned a relentless historical destiny. Rather, there is indeed such a thing as destiny, but it is another word for politics.

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Notes

- ¹ By October 7, I mean the day of the Hamas assault in Israel in 2023. The unprecedented incursion of Hamas, from Gaza, on Israeli territory, resulted in heinous violent acts on a large scale.
- ² I admit that the “situationality” of the researcher is an issue that deserves further elaboration, not as peripheral but as central to the problem. I am saving these reflections for a whole other analysis, for reasons of maintaining a necessary economy of the text. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who emphasized this for me—the term is theirs.
- ³ Moments of Israeli–Arab conflict, moments of political decisions pertaining to the Israeli–Arab conflict, and, overall, moments when the role of the West is seen as contentious in regard to the fate of Middle Eastern societies.
- ⁴ The term “peripheral” can be contentious. One may imply cultural and ideological proximities and hegemonies, or they may imply quantitative criteria, such as international rankings. Personally, I do not mean the latter.
- ⁵ In regard to the broad terms “Greek campus” and “Greek university workplace,” I ought to explain that they do not refer to one academic institution. By these I mean that my experience at such a workplace is aggregate and condensed. Therefore, it draws on my campus workplace at present, as well as other university campuses or related scholarly institutions where a faculty member finds themselves working or socializing at, or being invited to, in Greece, as part and parcel of our academic life and routine.
- ⁶ This cycle of conflict began after 2005, the year when Israel withdrew from Gaza, but mainly after 2007, when Hamas took over in Gaza, having won the elections in the Palestinian territories and having parted with Fatah. Thus, because of the failure of a united government (Fatah–Hamas) for the Palestinian Authority, the territories were separated, with Fatah leading the West Bank and Hamas leading Gaza. Since then, there have been major hostilities between Israel and Hamas-ruled Gaza (e.g., 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021). One could say that the last (ongoing) phase of this conflict is what started in the post-October 7 period.
- ⁷ Such argumentation draws on events in France, such as, e.g., the case of the journal *Charlie Hebdo* or the Bataclan theater attack, both of them in Paris.
- ⁸ It would be presumptuous of me to attempt a definition of the “Left” in this paper, as much as it feels necessary. It is also an overwhelming task, even as a summed-up history. The fact that there is no *one* Left makes it more complicated. By means of an indirect answer, I would like to say that the discussed ethnography is destined for a readership that coincides with the very

people of this ethnographic field (intellectuals, academics, etc., i.e., a world that is marked very much by the “Left”). I dare think, then, that it is a readership that is very aware of these historical categories and definitions, most likely because of personal intellectual trajectories. I have a more self-reflexive note in Note 17.

The argument goes that this is “. . .the kind of antisemitism which is tolerated, or which goes unacknowledged in apparently democratic spaces: trade unions, churches, left-wing and liberal politics, social gatherings of the chattering classes and the seminars and journals of radical intellectuals.” (Hirsh 2017, book description).

“Anti-Zionism contains antisemitism like a cloud contains a storm” (=“wie das Gewitter in der Wolke”), he said in 1969, in an article in *Die Zeit* (“Der ehrbare Antisemitismus” [=“The virtuous Antisemitism”], no 30, 25 July 1969), oft-quoted by now.

See also the entire volume *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism* 2021; the British website/journal *Engage*, already from two decades ago; and the journal *fathom*. From the US, see (Arnold and Taylor 2019; Arnold 2022) for a critique from “within.” Also, (Becker 2021), on social media.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement against Israel.

Also discussed by (Pappé 2014).

Respectively, the war with Hezbollah in 2024, within the post-October 7 phase, and operations on the Syrian border, after the fall of the Asad government in December 2024.

See how the argument of islamophobia is articulated, e.g., (Traverso 2016).

“Support for Israel and opposition to antisemitism have over the past two decades become increasingly closely connected causes” (Sutcliffe 2024, p. 3). Adam Sutcliffe has called this “anti-antisemitism,” (meaning, the “new antisemitism” approach), at the same time providing a brief and valuable trajectory of the ideology of Zionism as experienced and, as advocated or rejected, from the 1960s to the present (Sutcliffe 2022, 2024). From the US, see (Penslar 2023) on Zionism for an analysis of the identification of the anti-Zionism approach with antisemitism.

I am saying this with much skepticism and in anthropological self-reflection mode. Some or many of us in this profession have belonged to, still belong to, or have withdrawn from what in Greece, too, is called “the Left.” Far from anything ideologically homogeneous, the Left has been a significant formative influence on the academic workplace, as well as a large part of the Greek intelligentsia, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, while today some feel that they (still) speak from within, and others have judged it necessary to distance themselves. This certainly affects their post-October 7 positionings.

Some references, see Note 10.

On this, see, e.g., (Bherer 2024).

Particularly vol. 3, *Universities*. See also (Becker et al. 2024).

Since the middle of the 20th century, Greek foreign affairs have had a pro-Arabic stance, which has remained unaffected by the changes of governments and their different party profiles, whether it was Konstantinos Karamanlis or Andreas Papandreou. Thus, this is a fact regardless of whether the government has been right-leaning or center- and center-left-leaning. Mainly, it has to do with the role of Turkey in the region, as perceived from the Greek side. On foreign policy towards the Arab world, see, e.g., (Grigoriadis and Tsourapas 2022).

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