Detlev Claussen

What Do We Mean by Antisemitism?
A Response to Brian Klug

Jewish Museum Berlin

Detlev Claussen
What Do We Mean by Antisemitism?
A Response to Brian Klug

After reading Brian Klug's paper, I travelled several times on the No. 73 bus. During these journeys I had occasion to reflect on one of my fellow passengers, namely Ludwig Wittgenstein. Can he help us to understand anti-Semitism? There is no need to explain anti-Semitism to him since he left Vienna in good time and arrived safely in England. Wittgenstein casts new light on words by examining their use. In so doing he finds himself in an honorable tradition, one that pays tribute to the power of words. An analysis using the methods he employs is primarily a process of definition that confronts us with straightforward questions. What do we mean by anti-Semitism? In order to answer this apparently simple question we have to leave the bus in search of other companions. We meet up with Nietzsche. He too is not someone to whom we have to explain anti-Semitism. He was alive when the catchword came into existence. The term anti-Semitism conceals the fact that anti-Semitism has a history. If we are bent on exploring the nature of anti-Semitism, a process of definition does not go far enough, as Nietzsche points out: 'All concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined.'[1]

The situation is actually even worse than that. Anti-Semitism is not a concept at all, but an expression that has emerged from the self-descriptions of the anti-Semites themselves. The term gained currency for the first time in the dispute about anti-Semitism in Berlin in 1879. Nietzsche was perceptive enough to see where the spread of anti-Semitism in Germany would lead. He was badly shaken by Wagner's anti-Semitism, which in his view had entered into a baleful union with the German nationalism of the Wilhelminian era. Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for anti-Semites. He regarded their views as the expression of their feelings of resentment.

'Anti-Semites – a name for losers (*die Schlechtweggekommenen*)'.[2]

When it comes to anti-Semites Nietzsche doesn't pull any punches, but he refuses to glorify the catchword anti-Semitism with the name 'concept'. We have to leave the No. 73 bus if we wish to uncover the history of the word. The term spread like wildfire in the wake of the aggressive nationalism that raged throughout Germany and continental Europe in the last third of the nineteenth century. The anti-Semites felt fortified in their campaigns since it had been their claim that the Jews were everywhere, and they felt legitimated in their anti-Jewish activities because they could see, or claim to see, anti-Jewish resentments stirring everywhere they looked. The anti-Semites make play with the fact that anti-Semitism is more than a word; it is a call to a discriminatory practice and in the final analysis it represents a threat to unleash violence against Jews.

Social practice is what gives the word its meaning; defining that meaning is a mere intellectual expedient that fails to grasp anti-Semitism's socio-historical char-

1   Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality, Trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge 1996, p. 57.
2   Friedrich Nietzsche, Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre, in: Nietzsche, Werke, ed. Karl; Schlechta, Munich 1966, vol. III, p. 707.

acter. The call to discriminate against Jews presupposes a putative social equality. In comparison to the western nations, the granting of civil equality to Jews came very late to Germany; it only began with the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. Jewish emancipation was part and parcel of the triumph of bourgeois society[3] and it became the target of anti-Semitic agitation in the last years of this so-called *Gründerzeit*. Emancipation was discussed in the second half of the eighteenth century, during the European Enlightenment, under the name of the 'Jewish Question'. During the French Revolution this question received a response in the shape of equal rights for Jews. In Germany, however, there was a significant delay. The Jewish Question only became a topic for debate in the run-up to the 1848 Revolutions; only with the emergence of the German Empire did the state became strong enough to bring its legislation into line with the needs of modern bourgeois society. It was this liberal solution to the Jewish Question that became the target of a frontal attack by the anti-Semites. Following their agitation, the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was promised around 1890, a promise that the National Socialists turned into concrete reality with their mass murder of the Jews of Europe.

Anti-Semitism has a history; the form it takes depends on the society in which it appears. If you free anti-Semitism from its concrete social context, you fall into the trap set by the anti-Semites, who maintain that anti-Semitism has always existed everywhere. The anti-Semites link their anti-Semitism to real, living Jews whom they wish to discriminate against and persecute. But the Jews they speak about are an abstraction. Converting Jews into Jews calls for a violent intellectual and physical operation. The Yellow Star on Imre Kertész's chest with the designation 'Jew' turns him into a victim, makes of him an object that is available for *Sonderbehandlung*. This designation has no connection with his own concrete understanding of himself; but he will be unable to free himself from the violence he has experienced. His entire body of writing testifies to that. The task of research on anti-Semitism is to lay bare this socially produced violence. To forestall a possible misunderstanding, I should say that I am entirely in agreement with Brian Klug here. We need to take account of the words, for, as Hegel reminds us in his *History of Philosophy*, 'Words are very crucial, efficacious actions'.[4] Anti-Semitism can be understood as a form of practice designed to harm Jews in word and deed.

When anti-Semites began to refer to themselves as anti-Semites, they wanted to appear respectable and so adopted a scientific-sounding name. They wished to distinguish themselves from the 'anti-Semitism of the rabble' (*Radauantisemitismus*)that were still fresh in people's minds from the so-called 'hep-hep riots' of the early nineteenth century or the so-called 'caterwauling'

---

3   I have used the term "bürgerliche Gesellschaft" (civil society), introduced into German by Hegel's readings in English. I relate it historically to the "bürgerliche Epoche" (bourgeois era), what Eric Hobsbawm called the "long century" (ca. 1770 to 1914). The meaning of "civil society" is broader and used at present to provide a contrast to institutions of the state.

4   'Words, however, are actions between human beings, highly crucial, efficacious actions. Of course, people often say they are mere utterances and be saying this they wish to demonstrate the harmlessness of speech. But such talk is idle chatter and the sole advantage of chatter is that it is harmless.' (G.W.F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke in 20 Bänden, vol. 12, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 13)

(*Katzenmusik*) of the period of the failed 1848 Revolutions. The anti-Semites inflamed popular opinion and poisoned the mind of the public with their intolerable propaganda, which even penetrated middle-class drawing rooms in respectable journals such as the *Gartenlaube*. They felt confirmed in their views by the Dreyfus Affair in France, their hated neighbour, and by the periodical pogroms breaking out in the Czarist Empire. They justified their aggressive propaganda by making use of every weapon that came to hand. Anti-Semites might make use of racist stereotypes but were no less dangerous if they did not do so. Anti-Semitism was used as a political weapon with which to mobilize the masses.

The Nazis made use of the same methods but went one step further once they had seized power. They made use of the state, i.e. the police and the law, to fix the image of Jews as Jews: anti-Semitism was put into practice. Hitler called National Socialist anti-Semitism 'rational anti-Semitism' (*"Antisemitismus der Vernunft"*), in contrast to the 'emotional anti-Semitism' (*"Antisemitismus des Gefühls"*) from the time of the Empire. I am grateful to Brian Klug for his reference in his lecture to the *Reich*'s Night of the Broken Glass (*"Reichskristallnacht"*). This was not a Nazi euphemism, but a contemporary expression of a popular Berlin reaction. '*Reichskristallnacht*' is an ironic gloss on the Nazi manipulation of language, on the supposedly spontaneous nature of this anti-Semitic night. The SA wanted to trigger a pogrom but it went wrong. It is a cruel irony of history that the relative failure of this pogrom strengthened the position of those Nazis who sought to carry out their promise to bring about the '*Endlösung der Judenfrage*' in semi-obscurity, as an administrative act of mass murder An act of this kind presupposes a functioning state apparatus and state organizations with the power to command and to exact obedience. There was no need to incite the population; indifference was enough. 'We knew nothing of all that' (*"Wir haben von allem nichts gewußt"*) was the customary German formula after 1945, even though anyone who wanted to know could have found out easily enough.

No great intellectual effort is needed to recognize anti-Semitism as an assault on Jews in word and deed. Anti-Semitic aggression always makes itself clear in a social context. The formula 'Surely we should be allowed to point out...' (*"Man wird doch wohl einmal sagen dürfen..."*) is an unambiguous pointer to a contemporary anti-Semitism whose representative disguises his aggressive intent by insinuating that he is being denied free speech. I like to refer to this new Antisemitism as a 'Yes, but...' anti-Semitism (*"Ja, aber-Antisemitismus"*). The public debate which rightly leads Brian Klug to ask 'What do we mean by anti-Semitism?' has been made more difficult by the inflationary use of the term. Because nowadays there is effectively a global taboo on anti-Semitism, even though it is still widespread, scarcely anyone is prepared to stand up in public and claim to be an anti-Semite. But there are many people who will use the accusation of anti-Semitism to discredit others. Especially the

debates about the conflict in the Middle East provide us with a battlefield that is particularly rich in opportunities for mutual accusations of anti-Semitism and racism. This conflict is political at bottom and it can be understood and resolved only in political terms. Because it is a conflict between two sides with right on their side, a decision will always be the result of force. But since force cannot

provide any solution, peace can be brought about only by mutual recognition. Irreconcilable attitudes become manifest in a series of masks – some people disguise themselves as anti-Zionists, others as warriors against terrorism. And both parties have their supporters among the international community. If you look closely you have no difficulty in seeing the manipulated emotions at work when one side denounces the other as anti-Semites and while the other side abuses the first group as racists. Let us conclude by inviting Nietzsche to join us in our No. 73 bus. In this dialogue of the deaf both parties make use of anti-Semitic methods familiar to us from his writings. 'The anti-Semites always resort to the same trick of casting moral aspersions on their opponents while reserving for themselves the right to administer justice and punishment.'[5]

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

---

5   Friedrich Nietzsche, Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre, ibid. p. 530.