

Educated Antisemitism and its denial: The Mbembe¹ Controversy as a case study on the distortion of Israel-related Jew hatred

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Seventy-five years after the experience of Auschwitz, hostility against Jews is once again a phenomenon of worrying magnitude. The attack on the synagogue in Halle and the rampant growth of anti-Semitic conspiracy phantasies circulating online and in the streets in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are only the most recent and most alarming indications of what scholars studying anti-Semitism have been warning about for more than a decade: the taboo over anti-Semitic language has been eroding steadily, and not only on the fringes of society; ordinary citizens openly and assertively express anti-Jewish ideas. Yet those who take up the fight against anti-Semitism in politics, the media, and the public sphere often misconstrue the causal relationship between the educated middle class and the social margins, a misapprehension reflected by headlines such as “Anti-Semitism Has Arrived in the Center.” Historically speaking, anti-Jewish ideas have in fact always originated in the center, in the writings of academics and educated authors, and from there spilled out into the street. That is because hatred of Jews is a cultural phenomenon first and foremost and only secondarily a matter of social psychology, and Judeophobic tropes are an integral element of Western religious and intellectual history. And so it bears repeating that anti-Jewish ideas and verbal patterns have been firmly and deeply rooted in Western cultural memory for two millennia precisely because art and culture—not just uneducated marginal figures but the thought leaders, the masterminds whose thinking has informed the cultural sphere of society—have perpetuated them over the centuries.² This tradition

¹ The case of Achille Mbembe, an African intellectual with a history of making extreme statements against Israel, launched a larger debate in Germany on freedom of expression and Israel-related antisemitism during the summer of 2020. Whitewashing Mbembes antisemitic rhetoric, the debate - including harsh criticism of the IHRA working definition- is still going on.

² For much of the long history of anti-Judaism, learned churchmen and priests were virtually the only ones who knew how to read and write and articulated Judeophobic ideas in their writings and sermons. That is why anti-Semitism is not a problem of the undereducated, as commentators are fond of claiming; in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Still, as the debates around the journalist Jakob Augstein and Günter Grass’s anti-Israel poem demonstrated, many in our society cling to the deceptively simplistic stereotype of the anti-Semite as a jackbooted boor. Education does not confer immunity to anti-Jewish resentment. In the U.S., for instance, the campuses of elite universities have recently emerged as the hotbeds of an alarming upsurge in anti-Semitism. See, e.g., Monika Schwarz-Friesel,

is still alive, as every debate over anti-Semitism of the past several years, including, most recently, the emotionally charged Mbembe controversy, has illustrated afresh.

Something is going seriously wrong in Germany. After the Halle attack, one might have expected uniform condemnation of Judeophobic comments disguised as “criticism of Israel.” One might have hoped that academics who resort to crude analogies and anti-Semitic tropes to demonize the Jewish state or irresponsibly toy with such linguistic structures would meet with adamant opposition. Instead, some public voices have defended and even endorsed such rhetoric, seconded by the now obligatory signature collections supporting the “freedom of opinion” and lending legitimacy to unequivocally anti-Israel movements like BDS. Most recently, seven hundred African artists and intellectuals expressed their firm belief in a letter to Angela Merkel that the accusations against Mbembe were “mendacious” through and through and that all his critics were exponents of the hard right.³

Yet not even ten thousand signatures would undo the fact that Mbembe’s writings attest to his irresponsibility in resorting to classical tropes of anti-Judaism. All public anti-Semitism debates of the past several years have demonstrated that for parts of German society, perceiving and acknowledging the reality and extent of contemporary Judeophobia is a massive challenge. Still, the fracas over Mbembe has revealed levels of ignorance, denial, willful misinterpretation, and double standards that far exceed anything previously seen in this regard. And it has revealed the tip of an iceberg: in today’s most important space of social communication, the Web 2.0, anti-Judaism manifests itself with unprecedented frankness and candor—as what it has always been and still is: resentment directed against the existence of Jews in the world.⁴ Anti-Semitism is not a prejudice, it is a singular unified belief system, a pure phantasm, since the cultural concept of the JEW in the minds of anti-Semites is an abstraction just as their image of Israel is a construct: the product of processes of projection. And so, right now, fantasies of conspiracy and annihilation flood the worldwide web. Minute by minute, the slogans are recirculated: “Israel bred the

“Antisemitismus an Universitäten: die lange Tradition gebildeter Judenfeindschaft,” in: *Gender, Politik, Universität. Gegen Diskriminierung an Hochschulen*, 2016, no. 1, TU Berlin: Die Zentrale Frauenbeauftragte, pp. 22–23, <http://www.audiatour-online.ch/2016/06/16/antisemitismus-an-universitaeten-die-lange-tradition-gebildeter-judenfeindschaft/>.

³ https://simoninou.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/brief-von-afrikanischen_intellektuellen_an-die-dt-bundeskanzlerin_-angela-merkel.pdf.

⁴ Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Judenhass im Internet. Antisemitismus als kulturelle Konstante und kollektives Gefühl*, Berlin 2019. English synopsis: https://www.linguistik.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/fg72/Antisemitism_2.0_short_version_final.pdf

coronavirus,” “Smash Israel!”, “Tod dem Zionismus,” “Death to Israel,” “Free Palestine.”⁵

No less alarming and perhaps even more profoundly concerning than the hate that people spew online are the irresponsible voices from the cultural scene and the academy who bring their capacity to deny, trivialize, or reinterpret the hatred of Jews to bear on its currently dominant form, anti-Israel anti-Semitism.⁶ Studies have shown that this form has been especially prevalent for years, which is why we scholars have long diagnosed an “Israelization of anti-Semitism”: Judeophobic stereotypes are projected onto the Jewish state, the most salient symbol of Jewish life in the world, and hatred toward Israel has become the glue holding all present varieties of Judeophobia together. Yet if there is one epithet that “renowned,” “well-known,” “prizewinning” comedians, writers, musicians, academics, and journalists who populate the post-Holocaust society indignantly reject, it is “anti-Semite.”

Instead, whenever anti-Semitic language is exposed to be just that and faces criticism, the defendant invariably responds with well-rehearsed protestations that he or she is “aghast,” “distracted,” even “stunned” by the charge of anti-Semitism. Extensive research has shown these defensive strategies to be an integral component of the discourse of anti-Semitism denial.⁷ Fully aware of the dangerous persuasive force of the verbal patterns they employ, public figures play with rhetorical fire; their defenders lionize them as champions of the freedom of speech. Displaying staggering ignorance, even intellectuals and university graduates keep regurgitating the same arguments and injecting them into the public discourse. These arguments have no basis in fact, are myopically trained on the surreal enemy stereotype ISRAEL, and are impervious to empirical data or the findings of experts:⁸ “criticism of Israel,” they claim, is off-limits (a notion

⁵ In many contexts, “Free Palestine!” is code for the incitement to make Israel vanish from the map, based on the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” Such codes have been a fixture for many years of anti-Semitic communicative indirection, which camouflages radical content by disguising it in de-radicalized form; see, e.g., Lars Rensmann, “Zion als Chiffre,” in: Monika Schwarz-Friesel (ed.), *Gebildeter Antisemitismus*, Baden-Baden 2015, pp. 93–116. See, as well, Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Educated Anti-Semitism in the Middle of German Society. Empirical Findings*. In: Fireberg, H./Glöckner, O. (eds.), *Being Jewish in 21st-Century Germany*. Boston, 2015, pp. 165–187.

⁶ See, e.g., Moshe Zuckermann in conversation with Johannes Nichelmann: https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/moshe-zuckermann-zur-debatte-um-mbembe-antizionismus.1013.de.html?dram:article_id=475490, and Micha Brumlik in conversation with Tanya Lieske: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/solidaritaetsbrief-fuer-achille-mbembe-vergleich-bedeutet.691.de.html?dram:article_id=475977. See also Evyatar Friesel, “The Inverted Ideological Pyramids of Anti-Zionist Jews: The Case of Moshe Zuckermann”, in: *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 436, March 30, 2017*.

⁷ See Monika Schwarz-Friesel and Jehuda Reinharz: *Inside the Antisemitic Mind. The Language of Jew-Hatred in Contemporary Germany*, Boston 2017, chapt. 10.

⁸ For a typical representative of these amateur contributions to the debate, see Yossi Bartal in conversation with Inge

not borne out by reality); political criticism must not be equated with hatred of Jews (as though anyone making a serious argument had ever identified one with the other); and it is ultimately difficult to draw a neat line between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel (even though the scholarship has long presented analytical criteria and decoding categories for a precise distinction⁹).

Yet many artists and academics, it appears, find it unthinkable that educated, sophisticated, liberal-minded voices might be spouting anti-Semitic ideas. “Witch hunt,” “lynching,” “repression,” “McCarthyism”:¹⁰ academics have brought out the heavy verbal artillery in support of Mbembe, without possessing expertise and without looking into what the genuinely relevant research has to say.¹¹ The latter distinguishes, for good reason, between verbal anti-Semitism (i.e., the linguistic manifestations) and conceptual anti-Semitism (the mindset): given the operation of language’s semantic dimension, anti-Semitic language is always also and especially effective on an unconscious level; it always adds to the circulation in society of stereotypes and clichés, regardless of who utters it and whether it is articulated with or without anti-Semitic intent.¹² Nor do educational attainment and the embrace of progressive ideals automatically prevent the production of Judeophobic verbal patterns, as the entire history of the Western world illustrates. Voltaire, Fichte, Hegel, Dickens, and many others were liberal-minded writers and men of learning, yet their works contain verbally explicit passages demonizing Jews. This was exactly the aspect on which the agitated debate around Mbembe ultimately hinged, but it was entirely lost in the highly emotionalized back-and-forth. Knowing about the potential of

Günther, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 24, 2019: “I experience the climate in Germany, especially after the Bundestag resolution on the BDS boycott movement, as one in which any fundamental critique of the situation in Israel/Palestine is marginalized or even criminalized.” This climate, Bartal asserts, “stifles a free discourse.” <https://www.fr.de/kultur/interview-yossi-bartal-juedisches-museum-berlin-12665805.html>. Reality gives the lie to such claims: legitimate critique of Israeli actions is widely and sharply expressed in the media and political discussions and by no means “criminalized” as anti-Semitism. There is virtually no issue that is debated more freely and with greater intensity than the Middle East conflict. See <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-08/israel-medien-kritik>. Moreover, an empirical study has demonstrated that the frequently invoked taboo over criticism does not exist; see Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Judenhass im Internet*, 135ff.

⁹ See Monika Schwarz-Friesel and Jehuda Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind*, chaps. 2-4, and Armin Lange, Kerstin Mayerhofer, Dina Porat, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (eds.), *Comprehending and Confronting Antisemitism. A Multi-Faceted Approach*, <https://www.degruyter.com/view/title/547255>.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the historian Andreas Eckert: <https://www.swr.de/swr2/leben-und-gesellschaft/antisemitismus-vorwurfe-gegen-achille-mbembe-anzeichen-einer-hexenjagd-104.html>, and the education scholar Micha Brumlik in a broadcast of the television station 3sat: <https://www.3sat.de/kultur/kulturzeit/der-fall-mbembe-100.html>.

¹¹ See, e.g., the pointers, references, and analyses at <https://www.stopantisemitismus.de/>.

¹² See, e.g., Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Sprache und Emotion*. Tübingen 2013, ch. 11, and Richard A. Friedman, “The Neuroscience of Hate Speech,” 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/31/opinion/caravan-hate-speech-bowers-sayoc.html>.

anti-Semitic rhetoric to shape the collective consciousness, we should—indeed, we must, if we are serious about combating anti-Semitism in society at large—criticize and reject language that encodes Judeophobic tropes and combines explosive catchwords without any exception and without regard to the individual speaker and his or her educational background or point of view.

It is primarily academics from philological disciplines outside anti-Semitism studies as well as journalists and artists who downplay this crucial aspect or altogether brush it aside. On the subject of ‘modern Judeophobia,’ they cannot point to basic research or empirical studies to buttress their beliefs. All they have is the emotional intensity with which they proffer their “opinions.” But opinions are no substitute for valid research findings that might be gained, for example, through quantitative and qualitative textual analyses conducted over years. A familiar problem comes into view: amateur communication¹³ has long shaped the public debates around anti-Semitism, in which the denial and willful misinterpretation of anti-Israel anti-Semitism are characteristic. One stock argument that has again proved irresistible in the present instance is the truism that “comparing is legitimate in academic scholarship and does not amount to equating.” That would be true—if the comparisons were based in fact and pertinent and not fantastic constructions upheld by catchwords from the repertoire of anti-Jewish rhetoric!

The recent debate over writings of the colonialism scholar Achille Mbembe in which he operates with the sort of surreal analogies and emotional superlatives that are characteristic of just such verbal patterns has illustrated this imbalance with a stunning clarity that should have galvanized political leaders, the media, and civil society. Yet nothing of the sort has happened. No cognitive progress has been made. Feelings rather than facts drive this discourse, which has turned into a fight for the prerogative of interpretation. The media and the public have in many ways reinforced the impression: instead of relying on categories proposed by experts and the relevant research, they give a platform to anyone who raises his or her voice, and the louder the better. The press prints, without critical comment, the remarks of educated laypeople on “anti-Semitism as general hostility toward humans,” which is an utter falsehood, or reports on the IHRA’s definition of anti-Semitism, which, for what it is worth, was developed by researchers of

¹³ Imagine a panel discussion with citizens, journalists, and politicians about possible therapies against tumor cells colonizing the brain to which no brain researcher or physician with a relevant specialization is invited. No one would take such a discussion very seriously. Yet that is exactly what happens almost on a weekly basis when it comes to anti-Semitism: publicists, journalists, activists, and others fill the screens and offer advice, ventilating possible causes and consequences. See also Schwarz-Friesel, “The Persistence of European Anti-Semitism,” BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,067, January 18. 2019.

international renown.¹⁴ Anti-Semitism, it bears emphasis, is hostility not toward humans but exclusively toward Jews. Jews are hated and stigmatized as Jews and not as one minority.¹⁵

Nor does anti-Semitism have much in common with xenophobia: Jews were not and are not ‘foreigners’ in the countries in which they live, having been well-integrated citizens for two centuries who have given no occasion for apprehensions of any kind. And Judeophobia is by no means correlated with an anti-modern and reactionary worldview; on the contrary, it is found in left-wing progressives who embrace multiculturalism and reject nationalism, forward-looking champions of an enlightened modernity and equality who nonetheless indulge in anti-Jewish hatred of Israel “in the name of humanism.” It follows that anti-Semitism must not be equated with racism (an equation that is expressed with particular frequency in the public discourse); it is also found in liberal-minded, educated people who espouse anti-racism. Their tolerance extends to all minorities and idiosyncrasies, with one exception: the Jewish state.

Judeophobia in the variant of hatred for Israel is the dominant form of modern anti-Semitism in the twenty-first century, and the form that meets with the weakest opposition. Monocausal explanations that trace anti-Israel anti-Semitism solely to the Middle East conflict misconstrue the true character of this manifestation of Judeophobia. Hatred of Israel continues the long cultural tradition of projection and is a typical expression of opportune adaptation. Yet the debates keep drifting away from this basic insight. How simple and effective it would if someone who articulates anti-Semitic tropes were to regret the dangerous verbal aberrancy of their rhetoric. In the controversy over Mbembe’s writings, however, the latter vehemently and irrationally made himself out to be a victim of “German racism.” He discredited the Liberal politician Lorenz Deutsch with vague insinuations of contacts into the neo-Nazi scene and imputed the “devilish idea” of an “anti-Semitic negro” to him.¹⁶ When the German government’s commissioner for anti-Semitism, Felix Klein, rightly criticized passages in Mbembe’s writings, pointing to valid research, Mbembe wrote that he would demand an apology “until my dying breath.”¹⁷ In fact, there was only one character in this absurd drama—though the laughter must

¹⁴ See, e.g., Peter Ullrich’s report on the IHRA definition: <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/41168/gutachten-zur-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-der-ihra>, and its unequivocal rejection by anti-Semitism researchers.

¹⁵ See, already, Léon Poliakov, *Bréviaire de la haine: Le IIIe Reich et le Juifs*, Paris 1951; translated as *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe*, Philadelphia 1954. Anti-Semites see Jews not as one minority but as ‘THE others,’ a label that has the status of an epistemological category. Jews embody the opposite of the anti-Semite’s own way of life and as such must be rejected and negated unconditionally and absolutely. See also Monika Schwarz-Friesel, *Judenhass im Internet*, pp. 33ff., pp. 144ff.

¹⁶ <https://taz.de/Mbembe-zum-Antisemitismusvorwurf/!5684094/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

stick in any anti-Semitism expert's throat—who should have apologized promptly for the entire string of verbal missteps: Mbembe himself.

Yet no such regret, which would have required the realization that he had employed dangerous and inadequate rhetoric, was forthcoming. After his self-justifying discourse (in which he took some liberties with the facts, as a commentator for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* pointed out¹⁸), he joined the fray, answering what he described in *TAZ* as a “giant smear campaign” with a round of self-pity and victim-blaming. He did not take back his anti-Israel statements. Is the “well-known and renowned scholar from Cameroon”¹⁹ unaware of the dangerousness of certain verbal patterns? Does he need to use the terms “Pharisees” and “Zealots” (which were in use as anti-Semitic invectives for centuries)²⁰ to label people whose views he does not accept? Does he need to quote the line “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” which is all over the anti-Semitic discourse? Does he really need to fabricate the charge of perpetrating an Apartheid “worse than in South Africa” against the Jewish state, does he need to accuse it of “fanatical extermination,” demand its “global isolation,” and derealize the “occupation of Palestine” as the “greatest moral scandal of our time”?²¹ What Mbembe is spreading with a populist gesture are crude superlatives and explosive metaphors; there is not a grain of serious scholarship in any of it.

Now, let us imagine the following scenario: the exact same statements would have appeared in the writings not of the scholar of colonialism Mbembe but in those of Alternative für Deutschland's right wing Björn Höcke.²² How different the reactions would be. The thought

¹⁸ Jürgen Kaube, „Wer hat Achille Mbembe gelyncht?“, 10.05.2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/antisemitismus-debatte-um-den-philosoph-achille-mbembe-16761907.html>.

¹⁹ Alan Posener, “Jörg Häntzschel oder die Unfähigkeit zur Selbstkritik,” April 29, 2020, <https://starke-meinungen.de/blog/2020/04/29/joerg-haentzschel-oder-die-unfaehigkeit-zur-selbstkritik/>.

²⁰ Gerald Beyrodt, “Antisemiten sind immer noch die anderen,” May 1, 2020, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/zur-causa-mbembe-antisemiten-sind-immer-noch-die-anderen.1079.de.html?dram:article_id=475841.

²¹ See Mbembe's preface in *Apartheid Israel: The Politics of an Analogy*, Chicago 2015.

²² Such hypothetical re-framing, which is to say, the placement of inherently problematic utterances in a different context, generally facilitates reflection on double standards in the assessment of anti-Semitic language and helps build awareness that it is the utterance as such that is the source of danger and not (necessarily) the utterer. A similar thought experiment proved helpful in the debate around the anti-Israel poem by Günter Grass, who, for what it is worth, was a Nobel Prize-winning writer (see Monika Schwarz-Friesel in conversation with Klaus Pokatzky, April 10, 2012, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/dieser-text-bediene-moderne-antisemitische-klischees.954.de.html?dram:article_id=147146). Anti-Semitic language has the potential to stigmatize and reinforce stereotypes by virtue of their semantic content. In other words, it is solely their signification that matters, not the individual and his or her intention, not his or her social status or ethnic background, and not the context. Human cognition has been shown to process language autonomously, which is to say, without regard to a speaker's intention and functional aspects (see n. 11). The same, it should be noted, is true of racist language: that is why people who are

experiment reveals a marked double standard when it comes to right-wing and left-wing hostility toward Israel that we have long known from the debates around BDS: the same people who “declare war” on neo-Nazis and the radical right keep their eyes wide shut in the face of left-wing anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism. This is no way to combat anti-Semitism in society at large. As long as we measure the dissemination of anti-Semitic language and ideas by two different standards, any effort to fight Judeophobia will remain ineffective. In the present instance, this pattern is moreover combined with the usual indignation theatrics—the “discussion around anti-Israel anti-Semitism” is said to detract from the “urgently needed battle against genuine anti-Semitism,” critics supposedly engage in a “character assassination campaign” and rely on an “inappropriate construal of anti-Semitism”—to carry the moralizing to extremes.²³ It brings out a “new German assertiveness” that both Jews and the State of Israel can and would prefer to do without. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, for example, opines that “Aleida Assmann has aptly characterized the conflict in these pages: ‘A line now separates those who seek to support the State of Israel with their criticisms and make it better, from those who are determined to immunize it against any criticism [...]’”²⁴ Is it “apt” when finger-wagging Germans presume to “make” the Jewish state “better”?

Statements like these should leave anyone who knows even a smidgen about the past and the history of Judeophobia uneasy. It is a sort of hubris that has been able to blossom because Germany has nursed the illusion of itself as an enlightened post-Holocaust society that has learned from the horrors of history and emerged chastened and reformed. Yet this supposedly comprehensive “cathartic” process never happened. As the historical and discourse-analytical scholarship of the past thirty years has documented at length, there was no genuine accounting for the past after 1945, no serious discussion about guilt and shame. What developed instead were blame-the-victim stratagems and a collective deflection of guilt based on the idea of the innocent perpetrators. Building on this tradition, many left-wing and right-wing intellectuals have adopted a know-it-all mentality that is disconcerting. As though driven by a kind of missionary urge, these moralizing self-appointed humanists, enlightened thinkers, and responsible citizens address Jews

sensitive to language do not use fraught terms such as *negroe*, which automatically and uncontrollably trigger discriminatory connotations and associations.

²³ See, e.g., <https://www.openpetition.de/petition/blog/einspruch-gegen-sprachregelungen-fuer-hochschulen>.

²⁴ <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/missbraeuchlicheindienstnahme-13751102.html>. The quote comes from an essay in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in which Assmann called the critical response to Mbembe’s anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric “denunciation” and offers “proposals for a definition of anti-Semitism” without referring to the relevant scholarship by experts in the field: <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/klima-verdachts-verunsicherung-denunziation-13749410.html>.

and Israelis from the pedestal of their superiority, as is illustrated both by public statements and, even more clearly, by the steady stream of letters from academics—complete with names, addresses, and profiles outlining their qualifications—that the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Israeli embassy in Berlin have received in recent years.²⁵ Far from deriving an ethical or emotional principle of shame and humility from the ‘Holocaust experience,’ they turn things upside down, using the past to legitimize a peculiar inflated self-confidence vis-à-vis the descendants of the victims. They address Jewish citizens and Israelis the way a wise teacher might speak to immature children who have supposedly learned nothing from history (only too often, that is the collective reproach), giving advice and stern lectures, offering proposals on how to organize Israel and resolve the conflict, and telling the Central Council how to behave.

This hubris flows from the false peace that Germans have made with the history of the Holocaust, their treasured illusion of complete catharsis, their sometimes positively celebratory sense of having been reformed. Restraint in criticizing Israel because of the German past? On the contrary: Germany’s specific historic responsibility has become the fount of a universal aspiration—a kind of global ethics—for the present and the past: from now on, Germans will speak up against any and all forms of injustice and discrimination. There is no critical awareness that Israel and the Middle East conflict end up being the primary and often even the only objects of this guardian-of-virtue mentality. Repeating in mantra-like fashion that they have “learned the lessons of history” and are determined “never to be silent again in the face of suffering and oppression,” these commentators demand that German Jews and Israelis “see reason at long last” and “show some humanity,”²⁶—in other words, they essentially suggest that the targets of their admonitions suffer from cognitive and emotional deficits. The Jewish people’s history of suffering only serves to make its fall from grace the more dramatic: not even the Holocaust has transformed Jews into “morally upright humans who feel compassion for the Palestinians.”²⁷ It is hard to imagine a more explicit or more self-satisfied coded inversion of the victim-perpetrator relationship. The recourse to anti-Judaic staples reveals the absurdity of these moralists’ entire reasoning, demonstrating that they have in fact learned nothing from history: their use of classic

²⁵ See the extensive discussion in the chapter “Hostility toward Jews as a Missionary Urge,” in Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind*, pp. 255ff.

²⁶ These formulas appear in hundreds of emails; see Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind*, pp. 255ff. and pp. 296ff.

²⁷ One conspicuous feature of many of these letters is the contrast the writers draw between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Jews: good Jews are those that were murdered in the Holocaust as well as those who condemn Israel, while those who like living in Israel and those who defend it are bad Jews; see *ibid.*, pp. 302ff.

Judeophobic and anti-Jewish rhetoric only makes the fact more glaring that the catharsis they routinely claim to have gone through is a fiction.

To see why, consider that advice to how Jews on how they need to behave, how they ought to live, how they should mimic the ways of the “good Christians” have a long tradition in the history of Western Judeophobia. Even emphatically well-meaning thinkers and politicians who were committed to the Enlightenment and the universal ‘good’ and advocated the ‘emancipation’ of the Jewish population (like the late 18th century’s Abbé Grégoire and Wilhelm von Dohm) found themselves incapable of accepting the ‘Jewish element’ as it was and demanded its assimilation to the “good Christians.” No one analyzed this primal core of Judeophobic resentment more trenchantly than Léon Poliakov in his book *Bréviaire de la haine* (1951, translated as *Harvest of Hate*) about the motivation behind the “Final Solution”: that Jews were killed for the single reason that they were Jews. It was not social envy nor economic or social developments that led to catastrophe, as some claim, misrepresenting the cause of the Shoah, but the centuries-old hatred of Western anti-Judaism. The singular monstrosity: annihilating Jews for the benefit of mankind (as Himmler put it in his speeches). The same demand is now expressed with regard to Israel: in radical form, as the demand for the dismantlement of the Jewish state, or, cloaked in benevolence, as the call for a “change in the name of humanity.” Where are these “humanist” voices when it comes to the true hot spots and hard issues of global politics: to ISIS, Syria, Russia, Turkey or China, to Poland and Hungary, to name but a few? That is where processes suppressing the freedom of opinion and undermine democracy are well underway. Yet the highly emotionalized single-minded focus is on Israel, a stable democracy.²⁸

Does this manifest double standard not give people pause?

It is precisely because these voices come from within the educated elite that they are especially harmful, making effective efforts to combat the resurgent anti-Judaism that much more difficult: unlike right-wing radicals or populists (who, it is worth noting, raise exactly the same demands), they do not set off the alarm triggered by the vulgar Judeophobia of simpler minds;

²⁸ Israeli policies are widely and harshly criticized. The Jewish state is not unimpeachable. Instances of injustice, corruption, police violence, discrimination, controversial government action, nationalist decision-making, and breaches of agreements occur in Israel as in any other country in the world. Such instances are invariably reported in the media (and not least importantly in Israel’s own press). What is crucial for the present discussion is not that criticism is expressed but which arguments are offered in its support and in which terms it is couched. Respectable critics, and there are many, do not resort to Nazi comparisons and Judeophobic tropes, nor do they preempt any possible charge of anti-Semitism with the communicative strategy of deflection and denial along the lines of “I’m not an anti-Semite, but ...”. Legitimate criticism needs no such self-justification.

large parts of society listen to them, nod, and privately think to themselves with profound satisfaction: “Yes, Israel is terrible, why should it be unimpeachable, they’re no better than the Nazis back in the day”—and effectively espouse a concept of the Jewish collective that is at heart of anti-Semitic thought and sentiment. The result is growing support for the extremists, the radicals, the fundamentalists and populists. It is growing support for extreme-right poster slogans like “Israel is our misfortune!”

To conclude: classic anti-Judaism is by no means on the wane or mostly absent from contemporary communication (as a growing number of commentators has recently taken to claiming)—the stereotypes and intense emotions on which Judeophobic resentment is based have lost none of their potency. Anti-Semitism is chameleonic, changing its outward manifestations over time, but its substance remains the same. Over the past two decades, however, many academics have not only learned nothing from the debates over and research on contemporary anti-Judaism, they are even taking a disastrous step backwards on the urgently needed effort to expose such resentment for what it is.

This paper is a synopsis of two German articles and a radio interview in Germany

1. <https://www.hagalil.com/2020/05/mbembe-2/>
2. https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/reaktion-auf-offenen-brief-zur-kritik-an-israel-das-ist-ein.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=481402
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