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Conversations with Robert: “Jews as Jews” and the Critique of the Critique¹

David Seymour

I first met Robert some twenty-five years ago. I had just begun my PhD. As time passed, it was evident that things were not working out between me and my then supervisor, and Robert, whom I had met earlier, stepped in and offered to take over. After a little hesitation (and for the very reasons Robert had identified), I agreed. I think it would not be an overstatement to say that without that intervention, I would have simply given up.

Robert had an uncanny way of building up what was, by then, my shattered confidence. It was only after I had finished that I realized how Robert put me back together both emotionally and academically. Robert would respond to my work, first, by saying how good it was, how insightful, and then spend the rest of the time gently taking it (but not me) to pieces while at the same time moving me in directions and making connections I did not see myself.

Robert seemed to know me well—all our supervisions took place over meals! We would chat about everything: from football to art, from sociology to philosophy (spiced with some gossip) and then we would turn to my thesis. I would come home from Leamington with reams of paper serviettes covered in notes, arrows, and underlinings which I would later lay out on my desk and try to piece together! Most importantly, they felt less like supervisions and more like conversations. It is an approach that I now try to adopt with my own post-grads.

Needless to say, we maintained this relationship—which was now a full-blown friendship—for the following years. I got to know—and like—Robert’s family, his brother Tony, who

sadly passed a few months before Robert, his “uncle Harry” whose Yiddish-inspired humor would have me in tears, Glynn, and Shoshana. And, always our conversations continued. We would share ideas and criticisms of our work and others as well. Yet, other than on a few rare occasions, Robert was never as dismissive as I was at that time. He would see something of relevance and of interest in most works.

It was as a result of this generosity and openness, that I learnt something important. That the shortcomings of any work was not so much the initial idea or part of an idea *but that the initial insight became the whole thing*, that, to use the language of his last work, it was pushed from an interesting particular into an oppressive universal; or, what we would now say, “was made to do too much work.”²

In what follows, I would like to draw on that insight as well as one the very first things Robert told me: “If you want to know anything about Jews, don’t look to the antisemites!” He also had a habit, which I am not sure I fully understand today, of highlighting the conjunction “as if.” Again, that is something I want to work through today, albeit briefly.

As I write these words, I am in constant conversation with Robert as I have been in the past. By now, I would have spoken to him several times from when I had the first germ of the idea through to its finished (or, what I thought was finished) article. My conversation today has been a culmination of all our past conversations and all those parts of my work that he knew so intimately.

The subject of my PhD was “Critical Theories of Antisemitism.”³ It focused on the

ways in which critical theory (understood in a broad sense) had tried to make sense of antisemitism and the Holocaust. It ranged from Marx to, at that time, Lyotard and Agamben, but, since that time, has also included the work of Alain Badiou. In the time that is left, I would like to revisit that work—and the critiques it made—through reference to a slogan (for that is what it is) that has become popular over the last few days and weeks—that, “antisemitism is hostility to Jews as Jews.”⁴ As, I hope will become clear, Robert’s insights about antisemites and their inability to speak the truth about Jews (assuming there is “a Truth”), about how a particular becomes the entirety, and how the “as if” plays out in this subject are the prism through which I will be revisiting mine—and Robert’s work.

ANTISEMITISM AS HOSTILITY TOWARD “JEWS AS JEWS”

The slogan “Antisemitism is hostility toward Jews as Jews” is a simplification of Brian Klug’s somewhat positivist attempt at a definition of “antisemitism.”⁵

This slogan, for Klug, is used, as he says, as a “starting point,” but, despite what Klug sees as its utility, is quickly dismissed. To cut a longer argument short, Klug argues, rightly, that there is a dissonance between “Jews” as it appears as the subject of the sentence and “Jews” as the object or predicate. As it stands, however, the slogan marks no difference, there is no distinction between, what Klug calls “real” Jews (what Robert called, “flesh and blood Jews”) and the concept of “the Jews” as it appears in the antisemitic imagination. Klug is correct when he notes that,

Spelling it out, it comes to this: antisemitism is a form of hostility to Jews as Jews, where Jews are perceived as something other than what they are. Or more succinctly: hostility to Jews as *not Jews*. (We appear to have turned our working definition [“starting point”] on its head). For, even if some real Jews fit the stereotype, the

“Jew” towards whom the antisemite feels hostile is not the real Jew at all: the figure of the “Jew” is a frozen image protected into the screen of a living person. The fact that the image might on occasion fit the reality does not change its status: it remains an image. . . . And there’s the rub: thinking that Jews are really “Jews” is precisely the core of antisemitism. (p. 5)

To put the matter in other terms, at the heart of the slogan, “Antisemitism is hostility toward Jews as Jews” is the idea that the latter (unmarked on, undifferentiated) antisemitic concept of “the Jews” speaks to a truth about “real” or “flesh and blood Jews.”

Two points emerge from this alleged symmetry between “flesh and blood” and the antisemitic image of “the Jews.” First, and most obvious, is the legitimization of the claim made by antisemites that antisemitism is but a “logical” or “rational” response to real Jews’ malevolence; that they are merely “responding” to the wrongdoings of Jews.

Secondly, and pointing in the completely opposite direction, is that, as the definition stands, there never is, now or in the past, antisemitism. As Klug illustrates, and as all of us here know, antisemites have *never* attacked Jews *as Jews*. Rather, they have attacked Jews as Christ-killers, usurers, communists, capitalists, anti-national, cosmopolitans, nationalist (Zionists), the anti-race, and so on and so forth. Remember here Klug’s comment that, “[t]he fact that the image might on occasion fit the reality does not change its status: it remains an image” (p. 5).

Yet, the problem Klug identifies here, the lack of critical distance between “real” Jews and the antisemitic concept of “the Jews” (and the definitive article is central to this distinction) is not confined to populist slogans and apologists of (a now impossible) antisemitism. Rather, it is present in many *critical* accounts of antisemitism. However, this problem of its conflation is not only one of theoretical error—although it is that as well—but also runs the risk of becoming

a resource in the canon of antisemitism itself. And, as will shall see, it is as much a case of "intended consequences" as "unintended."

Underpinning this part of my presentation is two further maxims that Robert often states. The first, which appears overtly in *Political Investigations*,⁶ but acted as a guide to almost all his writings, was what he termed *a critique of the critique*—that is, a critique of the critique made in the name of human emancipation, or what Robert refers to, in *Ten Reasons Why I Oppose Boycotts Against Israeli Academics (And Why You Should Too)*, "a battle for our future political life."⁷ It is, moreover, a maxim that I have always associated with a truly critical theory, one practiced according to, as Robert notes in the same text, "norms of openness, understanding, inquiry, criticism, self-criticism and dialogue." The second maxim, and one equally important and which flows from the first, is the *lack of critical distance* one finds in many "oppositional" works. Robert's response to the call for the boycott of Israeli academics is an exemplary illustration of these guiding principles.

I want to illustrate the utility of these maxims through reference to three accounts of antisemitism and the Holocaust; one in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, (Adorno and Horkheimer); the second, from the era of "post-modernism" (Lyotard) and the third, more recent, from the "return to the political" (Badiou). I conclude the essay with a discussion of Hannah Arendt, a thinker with whom Robert was in dialogue over the past few years.⁸

In all of these instances we see not only the idea that antisemitism in general and Nazi genocidal antisemitism in particular is a response to the realities of Jewish existence but also to an abstraction and reification of that reality which, *inter alia*, converts Jews into "the Jews."

ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER

This idea of the lack of critical distance between real Jews and the anti-Semitic concept of "the Jews" appears in arguments that imply that

antisemitism's (genocidal or otherwise) "hostility toward" Jews is premised on an actually existing characteristic of real Jews. We see this common thread within "critical thinking" as early as Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁹ For Adorno and Horkheimer, modern (genocidal) antisemitism arises as by-product of the rise and dictates of monopoly capitalism that emerged from market or bourgeois capitalism. Monopoly capitalism points to the dominance of commodification in which everything can be exchanged for anything else. At the level of the individual, the dictates of commodification—in which the universal prevails over the particular—entails a loss of subjectivity and the rise of the masses, or what they refer to as "subjects without subjectivity." This aphorism points to the idea that, like universally exchangeable commodities, individuals also sacrifice and repress their own selves; that in taking on the characteristics of the commodity's abstract universal exchange-value, they have no option but to deny their own particularity, their own unique individual attributes.

Inherent in this shift from market (or bourgeois) capital to monopoly capital are the realms of production and consumption that merge under into the control of monopolies and cartels. An important consequence is the destruction of the market, the realm of exchange. It is this realm that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, was the site for, and guarantee of bourgeois property and the related phenomena of individual juridical rights, the rule of law, abstract justice, the division of state and civil society, and so on. Although critical of such rights as they actually existed, Adorno and Horkheimer saw them as products of enlightenment and emancipation that contained within them, at the very least, the potential of human freedom; a potential undermined and reversed by the inexorable logic and rationality of capital itself.

It is within this loss of the realm of exchange that Adorno and Horkheimer locate the emergence of modern (genocidal) antisemitism. Their thesis turns on their historical presentation

of the Jews as the embodiment of the now defunct realm of the market. Inherent in this account is that the Jews correspondingly are said embody the freedoms and values inherent in that realm. The continued presence of the Jews, therefore, stands as a reminder of the promise and potential of an emancipation and that, in order to survive, needed to be and have been repressed by the masses. Understood in this light, the Jews' very existence becomes a provocation; a reminder of the freedom that has now been endless deferred. Genocidal antisemitism appears on the scene when this anti-Jewish subconscious *ressentiment* is permitted to be released; a release that, because of the discharge of energy as well as the lack of actual damage it inflicts on the structures of monopoly capitalism, does nothing other than serve the dominant economic, special, and cultural interests.

For present purposes, it is interesting to note that the antisemites' image of the Jew as the embodiment of the market, that is, "the middleman," the agent of the market, the buyer and seller of others (congealed) labor, the necessity and dominance of money (as well as of law and potential freedom) coincides with what Adorno and Horkheimer treat as the actuality of both Jewish modern history and modern Jewish experience.

The shortcoming of Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis on antisemitism is not only its lack of critical distance between the antisemites' concept of "the Jews," but also, their failing to apply their critical account of the nature of modern society to their own work. In the same way that Adorno and Horkheimer criticize the world of domination brought into existence by monopoly capital, that is, the destruction or repression of the particular at the expense of the universal; so too do they treat the antisemites' "universalizing" of the concept of the "economic Jew" as if no other aspects of Jewish particularity exist. It is *as if* the antisemites' concept of "the Jew" speaks the "truth" and makes invisible the multi-dimensional uniqueness and particularity of flesh and blood Jews (including, of course, Jews's own universal aspects). It may

not be too much to say, therefore, that it is these aspects of Jewish existence that, having been excluded by antisemites unwittingly also escapes Adorno and Horkheimer's own critical thinking; a thinking that, ultimately, falls short of the critical distance between an understanding of antisemitism and its critique.

JEAN-FRANCOIS LYOTARD

We see a similar lack of critical distance between real Jews and the antisemitic concept of "the Jews" being carried forward within post-modern thinking.

For example, for Lyotard, it was "the Jews" who, as "the People of the Book," whose fate was to serve as the moral conscience of Europe.¹⁰ The Jews' extermination followed on from centuries of "Europe's" attempt to rid itself of this *differend*, of a morality that cannot be incorporated into the prevailing "discourses" without risking their disturbance, but which nonetheless remains in "Europe's" un- or subconsciousness. Yet, the continued presence of "the Jews" as moral conscience, resulted in sporadic violent attempts to be rid of such a "bad conscience." The *Shoah* was not only one such attempt, but also, in its scope and scale, the final one. In the face of that finality, it is no longer "the Jews" who are the embodiment of "Europe's" disavowed moral conscious, it is, what he terms, "Auschwitz." In the post-holocaust world—a phrase that marks the *Shoah* as both beginning and end—it is "Auschwitz" that replaces "the Jews" as the contemporary moral *differend*. Taking place within the European unconsciousness and unable to be consciously recognized, Auschwitz, like "the Jews" it swallowed runs the risk of disturbing the conscious "discourses" of the present at any given moment.

Two things come into relief here, first, the idea that antisemitism in general and genocidal antisemitism in particular, is treated as a *reaction* to not only an alleged characteristic of "real" Jews, but also to a particular characteristic that is treated *as if* it was the whole thing. Read,

perhaps ungenerously, not only does antisemitism and the *Shoah* appear as a reaction to something said to be *a* or *the* characteristic of Jews, but also, that this characteristic, this one-dimensional view of "the Jews," served as a *provocation*, an *irritant*, that antisemitism sought to counter. In other words, for Lyotard, "the Jews" of the antisemitic imagination speak—to some extent—to the existence of socially existing "real" Jews. To this point, one can add, that as with the antisemites, Lyotard's anti-antisemitism, abstracts and reifies Jews into "the Jews," albeit for seemingly opposite reasons.

Yet, herein lies the rub. As noted, for Lyotard, the moral or ethical *differend* is no longer "the Jews," but now "Auschwitz" which, as I have mentioned is not only seen as the "latest" episode in "Europe's" "history" of antisemitism, but the "final one" (Here, I will let this idea and its connection to the Nazi euphemism "the final solution to the Jewish Question" hang in the air). It is now "Auschwitz" that becomes the *differend*, residing in, but still, at an unconscious level, making its disturbing presence felt as an unidentifiable thorn in the flesh of "the West." In other words, the potential remains that, at one point or another, "Europe" will vent its fury on this moral notion of "Auschwitz" as it did upon the moral presentation of "the Jews."

However, it is important to recognize that this *philosophical* shortcoming has important *political* consequences. Nowhere is this consequence more in evidence than in this quote from Sara Roy;¹¹ the idea that not only have real Jews betrayed the supposed morality of Lyotard's "the Jews," but also, they have done so by betraying the post-holocaust *differend* of "Auschwitz."

What did my family perish for in the ghettos and concentration camps of Poland? Yet, they [Holocaust survivors] stood as a moral challenge among us as living embodiments of a history, way of life that long predated the Holocaust and Zionism (and that Zionism has long denigrated). . . . I wonder what is truly

left to take their place, to fill the moral void of their absence.

For Roy, and for so many others, real Jews today; what she calls "Zionists," are guilty of a double betrayal—of both their being "the Jews" (embodied morality) *and* of a Holocaust ("Auschwitz") that "Zionism has long denigrated." If anyone, therefore, has not learnt the supposed (moral) "lessons" of the Holocaust, it is the real Jews present in this world. What adds to this alleged failing, is that it was "the Jews" themselves that were destined to carry that moral burden in the first place. Finally, as Nietzsche observes so well, since it is in the register of "morality" and not law, the *ressentiment* against these betrayals know no limit; and so the cycle far from ending, just begins again.

ALAIN BADIOU

Like Lyotard, Badiou also implies that the reason for the Nazi persecution and murder of Jews was a consequence of something "the Jews" really were.¹² What is interesting about Badiou's work is that, despite his insistence that he is speaking of the Nazi, antisemitic, *concept* of "the Jews" and seeks to distinguish that concept from real Jews, he, nonetheless, in a similar vein to Roy, reshapes it as a weapon against contemporary Jewry.

Using the dialectic of universal and particular—precisely the critique Robert and Philip use to open up critique's history of the "Jewish Question" and to discuss Badiou briefly in their recent work—Badiou argues that the Nazis could not but see their own particularity (their "Germaness" or "Aryanism") as "universal." As such, they could not but come into conflict with what Badiou treats the "true universal"—"the Jews"; a conflict that could only be resolved by the "true universal's" destruction.

Far from challenging the Nazi image of "the (universal) Jew," Badiou verifies it. He does so by drawing on one particular historical moment of Jewish history—the revolutionary zeal of sections of Eastern Europe Jewry at the

turn of the twentieth century—as if it spoke a universal Jewish ‘truth.’ Shorn of its baroque Heidigerianism, Badiou claims that this ontological “truth” and its abstract universal content is masked or blocked by any and all expression of Jewish identity. For Badiou, therefore, the “true” Jew, the “real Jew,” “the universal Jew” is the one who discards his Jewish particularity. This point is made explicit where he states:

An abstract variation of my position consists in pointing out that, from the apostle Paul to Trotsky, including Marx and Freud, Jewish communitarianism has only underpinned creative universalism in so far as there have been new points of rupture with it. It is clear that today’s equivalent of Paul’s religious rupture with established Judaism, of Spinoza’s rationalist rupture with the synagogue, of Marx’s political rupture with the bourgeois integration of a part of his community of origin . . . (*Polemics*, 215)

Badiou fails to break free of the Nazism’s image of “the Jews,” and as a consequence falls into ways of thinking associated with contemporary antisemitism. He argues that since Nazism did not target Jews because of the virulence of their own antisemitic imagery, but rather imagined “the Jews” as personifications or embodiments of an abstract, human (“un-Jewish” universalism) any connection made between those murdered Jews and those identifying as Jews today is an illegitimate. Indeed, for Badiou, not only is it illegitimate, the alleged connection serves to offer Jews an unwarranted “privilege” in today’s world; most notably in connection with matters relating to the State of Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians.

In short, Badiou’s argument on this point is little more than a reworking in form, but not content, of the contemporary antisemitic myth that, “the Jews” use the *Shoah* to not only “silence criticism of Israel,” but also to give Israel itself a free pass for contemporary Jewish (i.e. Israeli) crimes. Again, Badiou’s thinking is clear on this point. The quote just given continues with the view that today, the equivalent

of Paul, Marx, Freud, Trotsky, Spinoza who to play a role in “creative universalism” have abandoned their Jewish identity,

[I]s a subjective rupture with the State of Israel, not with its empirical existence, which is neither more nor less impure than that of all states, but with its exclusive identitarian claim to be a “Jewish state” and with it draws incessant privileges from this claim, especially when it comes to trampling underfoot what serves us as international law. (*Polemics*, 215)

The ultimate irony of Badiou’s account of antisemitism, therefore, is not so much the constant universalizing of the particular (both in terms of Jewish history and of “theory”), nor his lack of critical distance between antisemitic conception of “the Jews” and the realities of “actually-existing Jews,” but, rather, as with antisemitism itself, the ways in which the “idea” of “the Jews” is treated as if it somehow speaks “the Truth” about a hitherto hidden Jewish “essence.” If, for the Nazis, such thinking resulted in their physical deaths, for Badiou, it is a call for their political, social, and cultural erasure; an erasure that, not for the first time, is made in the name of human emancipation.

At this juncture in the essay, it is worth reflecting on a problem that has emerged from the above discussion. I have illustrated the ways in which critical thinkers have, either consciously or not, failed to achieve a critical distance between the antisemites’ concept of “the Jews” and the actually existing or “flesh and blood” Jews. This shortcoming turns on the idea that, ultimately, the antisemities’ concept is treated *as if* it captured some “truth” or “essence” of “flesh and blood” Jews; be it “moral” (Lyotard), “political” (Badiou), or “economic” (Adorno and Horkheimer).

HANNAH ARENDT

The question remains, therefore, how can we account for antisemitism without falling into this trap? How can we offer an account of the

connection between "flesh and blood Jews" and the antisemite's concept of "the Jew" or "the Jews"? It is these questions that Hannah Arendt set herself in her extended discussion of antisemitism that forms the first typic of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹³ where she asks how the "ludicrous story of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* . . . [came to] explain . . . the improbable tale contained enough plausibility to be useful to anti-Jewish propaganda to begin with" (p. 9).

In answering this question, Arendt steers a course between two dangers. The first danger is a refusal to offer an account that blurs the distinction between Jews and "the Jews," and the second danger she confronts is the ways in which what she terms "eternal antisemitism" and/or "scapegoat theory" writes the Jews out of the world in which antisemitism is present. Arendt notes the irony of the correspondence with this absence and the aims of antisemitism itself.

In place of these two common approaches, Arendt investigates the relations between Jews and non-Jews that developed in the context of the emergence of modern Western and Central European nation-states. She argues further that it was these relations that were captured in the *ideology* of antisemitism albeit in a manner that completely distorted and, eventually, broke free of the history it claimed to articulate.

One of the strengths of Arendt's account, and in my opinion, one of her most insightful observations—is that without at least some connection to the actually-existing world, ideologies in general and the ideology of antisemitism in particular, would simply not have the power, the traction, to convince population after population (or, at least, large sections of them) of its claim to explain (away) the complexities of history; past, present, and future. Without that connection, the seeming explanatory promise of antisemitism to explain the world would appear as fantastical as explaining history by reference to the existence of dragons!

For Arendt, ideologies appear to offer "keys to history" through which entire swathes of human history, along with all its conflicts and

complexities, contradictions and chance, are shoehorned into one discrete and determined "theory." As Arendt noted,

Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the world historical processes—the secret of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas. (p. 604)

Taking the word *ideology* seriously, Arendt observes that its *logos* (its "-ology") refers not to its erstwhile content, but rather that it is the *idea* that possesses its own logic, its own "unfolding." Ideology, in other words, tells us next to nothing of the historical development it claims to capture, but, rather, tells us everything about the *idea* itself; it is the "idea" that masquerades as the "subject-matter of science" rather than the world on which it preys. The ideology of antisemitism, therefore, can tell us nothing about Jews, but tells us everything about the nature and development of the antisemitic *idea* of "the Jews." For Arendt, the study of the *ideology* of antisemitism is the study of an *idea* and the logic of its own propulsion,

Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a constancy that exists nowhere in the realm of reality. (p. 607)

With these points in mind, a productive way of reading Arendt's account of antisemitism in the first section of *Origins* is the way in which actually existing relations between Jews and non-Jews in the emergence and development of the modern nation-state comes to be re-read through the distorting prism of the ideology of antisemitism. It was through this ideology that, beginning with an admixture of the Enlightenment's legacy of "the abstract Jew" as a "principle of evil," the fantasies of "crackpots and charlatans"¹⁴ and the haunting of the past into the present, the entirety of modern Jewish existence collapsed into one long liturgy of

anti-Jewish hatred. It is a tale that, as Arendt notes, tells us far more about antisemitism than it does about the Jews.

Arendt's connections and disconnections between the *actual* situation of Jewish and non-Jewish relations and its representation through the distortions of ideology can be traced clearly in her work on antisemitism.

In Arendt's account, we read how and why Jews came to be involved in the financing of both the absolute monarchs and of the early-modern state. We read how and why, in this political context, Jews maintained, and were expected to maintain international connections between themselves and how such connections resulted in financing not only sometimes opposing armies, but also the peace conferences that followed. We read how and why Jewish emancipation's uneven development (which sections of Jewry were emancipated and when) was intimately connected to this Jewish-state intimacy. We read also, how and why the "sons" of these Court Jews and State Jews came to be attracted to the liberal professions and what we would now call the professions and the "cultural" or "creative industries" (i.e. the law, the arts, the media, etc.) and how, finally, the social conditions brought about in the wake of these political interactions gave rise to what came to be called "Jewishness."

It does not take a great leap of the imagination to see how these political realities fed into an *ideology* of antisemitism and captured within its unfolding web of nonsense came to

be presented as Jews bring the "power behind the throne," of the malevolent and dominating power of "the Rothschilds" or of "Soros," or the idea that Jews inaugurate all wars for their own nefarious interests, or the idea of a transnational "Jewish World Power" or "Jewish Lobby," or how Jews are said to "control the media," or how "Jewishness" came to be presented in the faux-biology of "race," and so on.

Although not without its problems, Arendt's approach to understanding antisemitism (and not only in its genocidal manifestation), succeeds in offering a clear demarcation between actually-existing, politically and socially located Jews and the antisemitic contrivance of "*the Jews*." Moreover, in so doing, her thinking on antisemitism in general comes closest to matching that very first piece of advice Robert offered me as I was embarking on the study of this subject—if you want to know anything about Jews, never listen to antisemites.

CONCLUSION

In times past, this would be the moment that I would email Robert with the essay and ask for his comments. All I can do instead is to draw on Robert's insights and thoughts that I was fortunate to share and, one would like to think through those conversations, help clarify. This essay is one such attempt.

And, at this point, I can do no more than quote Samuel Beckett, "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

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