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Ferenc Laczó

Antisemitism Contested

The Emergence, Meanings and Uses of a Hungarian Key Concept

Abstract

Antisemitism has emerged as a key concept of the Hungarian sociopolitical vocabulary during the last decades when it has been chiefly employed by its critics. The paper lists four main reasons that are in turn historical, transnational, intellectual and political behind the much increased importance of this concept. Through the methods of conceptual history, it subsequently aims to show that the meaning of antisemitism has undergone significant changes since the fall of the communist regime. The three most important semantic shifts identified are its moralization, extension and politicization. While moralization is meant to indicate the complete unacceptability of antisemitism, its extended conception tends to depict it as a most complex and dangerous form of prejudice. Both the moralized and extended conception of antisemitism was also politically employed by Hungarian left liberals to contest the legitimacy of the conservative rightist forces. The latter have in turn aimed to redefine antisemitism as a political as much as a social or cultural issue, thereby contributing to its further politicization. More recent years have also brought about the visible revival of antisemitism – in spite of the concept having been recurrently and critically used in public discussions of recent decades.

Introduction

The term antisemitism is derived from the Biblical name of Shem, the first son of Noah. It draws more directly on linguistic and ethnological theories of the Semites that were developed from the late 18th century onwards and got racialized around a century later. While antisemitism literally refers to Semitic speakers as a whole and would thereby include animosity towards Arabs, among others, more often than not it has been taken to mean animosity towards the Jews in particular. As such it has often been related to but also contrasted with anti-Judaism, the latter being qualified as a religious-based phenomenon. Antisemitism, on the other hand, has typically been conceived as a modern, interethnic, political, socioeconomic or psychological phenomenon, though it has recurrently been conceded that it derives many of its defining concepts, images and agendas from the Christian religion.¹

Antisemitism as a term first appeared around 1860, the year in which Moritz Steinschneider, an eminent scholar of Judaism in his age, published a polemical piece on Ernest Renan in German with the subtitle *antisemitische Vorurteile* (antisemitic prejudices). The meaning of the term was also shaped by its first political propagators some two decades later, most famously Wilhelm Marr, who was not only among the founders of the modern antisemitic movement but numerous authors have falsely credited him, if that was the word, with having invented the term. The Hungarian fellow politician of Marr, Győző Istóczy established an infamous but rather short-lived National Antisemitic Party as early as 1883.² Soon afterwards, so the conventional historiographical argument, antisemitism would get

¹ An impressive recent attempt to analyze this millennial tradition under the label of anti-Judaism is Nirenberg, David (2013): *Anti-Judaism. The Western Tradition*. New York: W.W. Norton.

² The blood libel case of Tiszaeszlár and the accompanying wave of antisemitic violence was the most significant. On Tiszaeszlár, now see Kövér, György (2011): *A tiszaeszlári dráma*. Budapest: Osiris.

encoded in a more encompassing worldview of autocratic ethnicism.³ It would therefore no longer be used to self-identify political parties.

The argument of this essay about the much more recent conceptual history of antisemitism in Hungary begins with the observation that even though the concept was occasionally employed prior to 1989, a veritable explosion of discussions took place around it after the fall of the communist regime that appear to be far from over. These manifold discussions dealt with various issues such as the intellectual origins, political history, societal strength or the contemporary uses of antisemitism. In other words, coinciding with the fall of communism and the rise of representative democracy, the term antisemitism has not only come to largely replace its Hungarianized synonym *zsidóellenesség* (that closely resembles the meaning of the German term *Judenfeindlichkeit*) but has clearly emerged as one of the key concepts in the Hungarian sociopolitical vocabulary. The most significant change in the use of this concept may appear so evident by now that it is unnecessary to elaborate on it at any greater length: while in the 19th century antisemitism was also heavily circulated by its propagators, in more recent decades the concept has almost exclusively been employed by its critics. In Hungary, they were occasionally labeled anti-antisemites and 1995 in fact saw the launching at the MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport (The Judaic Studies Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) in Budapest of a short-lived series titled *Anti-antiszemita füzetek* (Anti-antisemitic booklets).

First, I shall provide four contextual reasons why antisemitism could become a key concept in late 20th and early 21st century Hungary. They are in turn of a historical, political, intellectual and transnational nature. Subsequently, I will aim to show that the conceptual historical changes of recent decades have not only seen a much more frequent use of this concept but resulted in significant semantic shifts too. The three major such shifts I wish to trace and illustrate are the moralization, expansion and politicization of antisemitism.

The Context

First a few words on each of the four major reasons why antisemitism could become a key concept in Hungary around the fall of communism. The reason I have to mention first is a rather obvious historical one: Hungarian co-responsibility for the Holocaust was arguably among the most sensitive questions in postwar Hungary, even if it was only rarely explicitly discussed. After early postwar confrontations with the extermination of Hungarian Jewry in the forms of war crimes trials, historical works, published memoirs or interview projects where antisemitic practices were presented in a detailed manner, the consolidated Hungarian communist regime of the 1950s and 60s largely tabooed the events of the Holocaust and its prehistory while also aiming to embed them in a larger anti-fascist frame. With the gradual decline of communist ideological control in the 1970s and 80s, mandatory anti-fascism lost much of its persuasive power exactly when the question what led to the deportation of Hungarian Jews by other Hungarians could already be more prominently discussed. Arguably both of these intellectual developments helped to approximate national historical realities much better in a country that was massively involved in the Holocaust but

³ On neo-conservatism and right-wing radicalism in the era of the Dual Monarchy, see Szabó, Miklós (2003): *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története, 1867-1918*. Budapest: Új Mandátum.

did not have a fascist dictatorship during most years of the Second World War. These two major developments in how history was being discussed, i.e. decreasing interest in applying the theory of fascism and an increasing one in the Holocaust, can be viewed as the first reason why the concept of antisemitism started to acquire much added importance.

Since 1989, the international environment of the country has massively changed too. The post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s greatly contributed to the sense that Eastern European nationalism is not only especially strong but there is also something particularly sinister about it. Monitoring local nationalisms and the threats they posed thus became a mainstream preoccupation. Around the same time, a self-critical consciousness about national history started to be more widespread internationally. Based especially on what was perceived to be the German model of dealing with the past, national self-criticism became an important part of projects of historical reconciliation and, more generally, European identity building. It was thus repeatedly measured to what extent the post-communist states that were being integrated into European structures had managed to complete a move from a type of historical culture based on modern teleologies, supposedly heroic triumphs and national self-assertion to one focused on the memory of crimes and their perpetrators as well as their victims, suffering and trauma. Through the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum, confrontation with the history of the Holocaust in particular emerged as a cornerstone of the shared European sense of recent history. These developments helped make antisemitism into one of the chief historical and political evils in the larger international environment of Hungary and thereby made their contribution to the emergence of antisemitism as a Hungarian key concept.

Besides such local historical and transnational reasons, the third and fourth ones concern intellectuals and politics in post-communist Hungary more directly. The opposition between *népi* and *urbánus* (populist and urbanite) intellectuals as well as the closely related Jewish question, which is often used in quotation marks nowadays, has remained rather significant throughout the decades of the Hungarian communist regime – in spite of the fact that the regime aimed to simultaneously restrict the expression of Jewish identity and antisemitism. Both issues went much more public right after the end of the dictatorship though. The *populist-urbanite* opposition was originally a fierce polemic among intellectual during the 1930s. In the eyes of numerous observers, it was re-launched right after 1989 when many leading intellectuals entered politics and the major governing party considered the former, while the major opposition party the latter side of the debate to belong among its chief intellectual precursors.

It is therefore unsurprising that intellectuals heavily debated the intertwined Jewish question during the 1990s as well. Two major monographs were devoted to its history around this time that, rather characteristically, articulated sharply different perspectives. János Gyurgyák's book argued from a national conservative position that the strength of antisemitism was a reaction to the unfortunate official denials of the Jewish question in the context of Jewish assimilation being widely demanded but not actually completed.⁴ At the same time, in his much more liberally oriented book, Tamás Ungvári presented the Jewish question as the product of racial antisemites who aimed and temporarily succeeded at

⁴ Gyurgyák, János (2001): *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon*. Budapest: Osiris.

excluding already integrated Jews from Hungarian society and culture.⁵ It was indicative of the divergent perspectives of the two authors that only the latter used quotation marks to refer to his subject.

The widespread perception of a repeat of the populist-urbanite debate and the elaborate scholarly polemics over the history of the Jewish question were undeniably at least partly due to the presence of intellectuals both of Jewish, non-Jewish and mixed origins and affiliations among members of the Hungarian intellectual elite and their rather divergent historical narratives.⁶ Such differences have tended to acquire political coloring. In 1992-93, for instance, historian László Karsai published separate anthologies devoted to texts of Hungarian thinkers who cherished inclusivist and exclusivist attitudes towards Jews.⁷ In an eminently political move, the volumes practically identified the left liberal tradition with the laudable former and the conservative-rightist one with the condemnable latter attitude.

In short, it seems to me that antisemitism could become a key concept in Hungary during recent decades due to four main reasons: the new discussions of national history once communist ideological control declined, the transformation of the international environment of the country, major public debates among intellectuals and, last but not least, the symbolic-identitarian components of the major political contests that arose right after the fall of the communist regime.

Three major semantic shifts

What has happened to the meaning of antisemitism in Hungarian public discussions since it much increased its relevance? The three major conceptual historical shifts of more recent decades I have identified may be called the moralization, expansion and politicization of the concept.

First, the concept of antisemitism was employed in an increasingly moralizing way meant to indicate its complete unacceptability. This clearly had to do with the fact that recent discussions of antisemitism were closely related, sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly, to those of the Holocaust – a term that in recent decades came to largely replace alternative terms in Hungarian such as *vészidőszak* (roughly “the age of ruin”). The close connection posited between antisemitism and the Holocaust and the strong moral critique of antisemitism are both made explicit in one of the most frequently quoted sentences of Hungarian Nobel-prize winning author Imre Kertész who stated that “Before Auschwitz, an antisemite was a latent murderer, after it he is a self-declared one.”⁸

One way to illustrate the strength of this negative moral encoding of antisemitism after the Holocaust and communism is that it would even impact those who were widely perceived to be among its chief propagators. István Csurka, the leading radical rightist politician after 1989 whose Christian nationalist discourses tended to maintain that there was

⁵ Ungvári, Tamás (1999): *Ahasvérus és Shylock. A “zsidókérdés” Magyarországon*. Budapest: Akadémiai.

⁶ On a community of memory in Hungary (*emlékezetközösség*) and potential Jewish – non-Jewish divergences, now see the *enquête* of the Jewish political and cultural journal Szombat.

⁷ Karsai, László (ed.) (1992): *Kirekesztők. Antiszemita írások, 1881-1992*. Budapest: Aura; Karsai, László (ed.) (1993): *Befogadók. Írások az antiszemitizmus Ellen 1882-1993*. Budapest: Aura.

⁸ Kertész, Imre (1997): *Valaki más. A változás krónikája*. Budapest: Magvető.

a strict opposition between Christian Hungarians and Jewish “others”, repeatedly denied accusations of being an antisemite. The generally sensed moral odium of being qualified as an antisemite led Csúrka to add unconvincing clarifications after repeatedly articulating antisemitic prejudices. While scholars discussed the phenomenon of “antisemitism without Jews”, his far from unique case thus reveals a conceptually intriguing alternative phenomenon that may be called antisemitism without antisemites.

The moral charge of the concept meant that even secondary antisemitism, i.e. statements that may qualify as antisemitic, could now appear much more suspect. It is illustrative of this trend that the largest debate among Hungarian historians in recent years was launched in the summer of 2012 when András Gerő attacked Ignác Romsics, both leading authorities on modern Hungarian history, of antisemitism. Gerő argued that some of Romsics’s texts *may be read* in an antisemitic key. As Gerő highlighted, some of Romsics’s recent publications referred to the Jewish origin of certain communist historians but not to the origins of others and cited antisemitic interpretations of the communist takeover without critical comment.⁹ It seems that the morally dubious discursive practice Gerő complained about came down to Romsics making factually not untrue statements that were, however, often interpreted in an antisemitic key and doing so without explicitly distancing himself from such interpretations.

Drawing on a morally charged understanding of antisemitism, Gerő could maintain that even potentially antisemitic communication could have harmful effects and was morally dubious. It is worth adding that the numerous critics of Gerő’s polemic did not question his moral encoding of antisemitism, even though they tended to reject what they saw as his unjustified *ad hominem* attack on Romsics. In other words, participants of the debate agreed that antisemitism was morally unacceptable and “merely” disagreed whether Romsics ever intended to send such messages.

Besides its moralization, the concept of antisemitism gradually expanded to mean a most complex, virulent and dangerous form of prejudice that not only proved to be a recurrent cause of violence but ultimately also the source of its worst form in 20th century Europe. One indication of this is that the expression “nationalism and antisemitism” has come to be repeatedly used in discussions of contemporary Hungary. It seems that in phrases of this kind antisemitism has practically replaced that of racism. The latter used to be widely understood as a more encompassing category and antisemitism was rather pictured as its special subcategory. It seems to me worth suggesting an admittedly somewhat schematic contrast here: while the Hungarian term *zsidóellenesség* tended to denote specific anti-Jewish discourses and deeds that were *localizable parts* of culture and history, antisemitism would increasingly be understood to shed critical light on culture and history *as a whole*. In line with this expanded understanding of antisemitism, confrontations with its profound presence could be defined as an unavoidable part of the necessary self-critical reevaluation of traditions.

Rather similarly to the debate the article of Gerő launched among historians, literary scholar András Lengyel penned much discussed articles in 2009-10 that dealt with the originally anonymously released radical rightist journal articles of Dezső Kosztolányi from

⁹ On the debate as a whole, see Rigó, Máté (2013): A Hungarian version of the Historikerstreit? A summary of the Romsics Gerő debate among Hungarian historians (2012). URL: <http://www.imre-kerteszkolleg.unijena.de/index.php?id=415&l=0>, last access: 27.08.2013.

the early 1920s. Lengyel aimed to prove that Kosztolányi, one of the most celebrated Hungarian writers and poets of modern times, published texts in which antisemitism may have remained implicit but was nonetheless a structural given. Lengyel analyzed key terms in Kosztolányi's vocabulary such as his much loved "Latin clarity" to arrive at the conclusion that they only acquire their full meaning when their implicit contrast with negative and supposedly Jewish characteristics are understood.¹⁰ In other words, according to Lengyel, Kosztolányi articulated an antisemitic symbolic hierarchy, even if the inferior parts of this hierarchy were not specified. Kosztolányi was qualified here as an antisemitic publicist according to an expanded meaning of the term, through which larger systems of thought could be seen to be profoundly implicated in the history of antisemitism.

Third, accompanying the rightward shift of Hungarian politics that started in the fall of 2006, not only have there been recurrent reports on the increased visibility and acceptance of antisemitism but the concept has become more strongly politicized too. Critics of the current government have been especially keen on reporting on Hungarian antisemitism both in the moral sense of the intolerable being outrageously tolerated and in the expanded sense of them being ethnic nationalists and thereby representing a Hungarian political and cultural tradition profoundly tainted by antisemitism. Most prominently, perceptions of the threat posed by contemporary Hungarian antisemitism led the World Jewish Congress to hold its plenary assembly in Budapest in May 2013. At the same time, as the longitudinal quantitative studies of András Kovács have revealed, the political determinants of attitudes towards antisemitism have substantially grown in recent decades.¹¹ While the mainstream right has become increasingly committed to a form of Hungarian nationalism that indeed harbors rather ambivalent attitudes towards Jews, left liberals have repeatedly charged them with outright antisemitism.

In this increasingly divisive political situation, the concept of antisemitism was further politicized. An eminent occasion of this was when Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel visited the Hungarian Parliament in 2009 and Zoltán Balog, a member of Fidesz and one of his discussion partners there, complained to him about the political abuse of the antisemitic label in Hungary. Balog's statement reveals that to conservative-rightist forces antisemitism means not only observable animosity towards Jews that has to be rejected but also a politicized concept in the left liberal vocabulary.

The conservative-rightist strategy in reaction to the perceived politicization of the discussion of antisemitism has thus been to endow the concept with an alternative meaning. In their vocabulary antisemitism is as much a problem of malevolent political exaggeration requiring defense as it is a significant social and cultural issue. In other words, Hungarian conservative-rightists are at times more likely to critique the antisemitic label used against them as they are to directly critique Hungarian antisemitism. It is indicative of their sense of the political problems created by anti-antisemitism that the expression anti-anti-antisemitism was employed for the first time in 2012 – even if it might not be an entirely serious term.¹² In

¹⁰ See, among others, Lengyel, András (2009): Kosztolányi „latin világossága”. In: Kalligram (2009/2), p. 66–75.

¹¹ See Kovács, András (2010): *The Stranger at Hand. Antisemitic Prejudices in Post-Communist Hungary*. Leiden: Brill.

¹² See Hartland, Holger (2012): *Anti-anti-antisemitizmus*. URL: <http://hartland.blog.hu/2012/12/01/anti-anti-antisemitizmus>, last access: 27.08.2013.

sum, it seems to me that Hungarian left liberals have politicized the concept of antisemitism by recurrently employing it in their critiques of the conservative-rightist forces. In turn, conservative-rightist have further politicized it by redefining claims of antisemitism as part of a political attack.

In conclusion, antisemitism has not only become a key concept of the Hungarian sociopolitical vocabulary in recent decades but its meaning has also undergone significant changes. The concept has been increasingly presented in a moralized key while its realm of applicability expanded and its uses were further politicized. It is indeed a melancholy lesson that, in spite of the concept having been recurrently and critically used in public discussions during the last decades, more recent years have brought about the revival of the phenomenon.

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