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Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism and Criticism of Israel in Germany The Dynamics of a Discursive Field

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**Antisemitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel in Germany –
The Dynamics of a Discursive Field**
Peter Ullrich¹

Introduction

Antisemitism, anti-Zionism and alleged illegitimate criticism of Israel as well as the relations between these concepts are pressing phenomena that need to be discussed theoretically and to be researched empirically. It may seem a little outdated to discuss them solely from an implicitly *comparative* angle, which forms the basis of the presentations at this conference, considering all the debates on transnationalisation, global history, post colonialism, *histoire croisée* and so on. Focusing on national states always runs the risk of reproducing “holistic nationalist clichés”, as Koopmans and Statham (2000:31) put it. Yet, there is no moral or conceptual common ground (Rabinovici et al., 2004; Zuckermann, 2005) in the discussion, and the forms these discussions take differ noticeably between countries (Ullrich, 2010, 2008). One can hardly overestimate the significance of nation states, or more precisely of nationally organized institutional settings and media publics (Baumgarten, 2014). They are, among other things, important *discursive context structures* (Ullrich and Keller, 2014) for antisemitic discourses, and they are especially important for the social dealings with antisemitism, societal reactions or debates on the phenomena in question. This is especially the case for Germany, for fundamentally obvious reasons.

The paper has two major parts, both of which deal with the keywords of this conference’s title. First, I highlight current *phenomena* of antisemitism, antisemitic anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel in Germany. Second, I focus on the ongoing debates and controversies – or, to follow the title of this conference, the “conflicts” in this area.

The phenomena

If we look at the problem from the perspective of opinion polls, we face awful results, although nothing completely surprising or new in the general European context. In an opinion poll we carried out in 2012 (Ullrich et al., 2012), the second highest ranking item on the antisemitism scale was “Due to Israeli politics Jews are becoming more and more dislikeable to me”, with which 24 % of the respondents entirely or largely agreed. Maybe more intriguing is the fact that 29% chose the undecided position, showing insecurity as to whether or not to support that ethnocentric prejudice. Or, put the other way around: Only 47 % of the respondents

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relatively clearly rejected the statement. Thus, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel semantics are interwoven. Of course, we have to keep in mind that not all such respondents are indeed antisemites; this would be a naïve fallacy. Although single items get affirmative response rates of over 40 %, the number of actual antisemites is much smaller. Continuously over the previous decade about 9 % have consistently replied to such queries in an antisemitic manner, i.e., on most or all dimensions of the questionnaire. I suggest considering this situation as a “fragmentation of antisemitism”. The decades of combatting antisemitism and putting it under a taboo (at least in public) have resulted in a situation where fragments of hostility, prejudice and stereotypes are present, albeit partly latent (Bergmann and Erb, 1991; Bergmann, 1994) and without forming into a full-fledged ideology.

Qualitative data, too, show instances of everyday antisemitism from the so-called “middle of society” (Decker et al., 2010, 2012). Most of the clearly antisemitic incidents – whether they are propaganda or violence – have no relation to Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The obviously most important current substantial motivation for antisemitism results from national identification, to which Auschwitz always poses a moral threat. Therefore, this is especially a phenomenon of the political right - to deny or to downplay the Holocaust and denounce the collective of its victims for own nationalist needs, so-called secondary antisemitism. The German Nazi Party “National Democratic Party of Germany” (NPD), for example, argues that “Jewish power groups are waging a war against the German people” in a thriving “guilt culture” (Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, 2011, p. 19). For them the real Holocaust was the bombing of Dresden. Yet, these sentiments are also easily and thoroughly connected to Israel. The alleged “guilt culture” is then interpreted as a planned deviation from “Israeli crimes” invented by Zionists (ibid.). So again we see an entanglement of national antisemitism (Holz, 2001) with the politics of state of Israel.²

Yet, an especially persistent problem for the political right is one to the rest of society as well – as not only the results of the survey show. There are expressions of such discourses in various political spectra. One of them may be found in the radical Islamist milieu, which has been the breeding ground for violent attacks on Jews. In this political current, there are clearly antisemitic organisations like the Hamas, Hisb-ut Tahrir, Hizb-Allah and supporters of the Iranian regime. They are all predominantly anti-Zionist, but they all also have strong links to outright antisemitism: the Hamas in their charter (Holz, 2005), the Hizb-Allah in their leaflets and TV-programmes, and so on. These networks do not strive too much for public visibility in Germany, though they sometimes stage events like the annual Al-Quds-Day, initiated by the Iranian regime, where anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist discourses again intermingle (Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, 2011, pp. 49 ff.).

The most complex - and most often discussed - problem is the position of left-wing and peace organisations (Brosch et al., 2007; Imhoff, 2011; Kloke, 1994;

² There is also another option at hand: embracing the victims. This dominates in the German mainstream. It allows identifying with the nation *and* not denying the Holocaust.

Knothe, 2009; Ullrich, 2013; Weiß, 2005).³ From the end of the 1960s on, this milieu developed a strong solidarity with the Palestinians, combined with a deep hostility towards Israel. Several of their texts or actions were also of an antisemitic nature. The best known expression was the bomb attempt against the Jewish Community Hall in Berlin 1969. It is well known that the left demonized Israel, often equating it with National Socialist Germany (Kloke, 1994). Today, we only find traces of such hatred, and the general situation has fundamentally changed. One example of such persistent antisemitism in anti-Zionism is the presentation of a placard at a peace column near Cologne Cathedral. This placard shows a person with a bib with a Magen David on it. The person (whose face cannot be seen) is eating a Palestinian child with a fork in the US colours and drinking his blood. Although from a Palestine solidarity demonstration, the reference to old anti-Jewish myths is more than obvious (Jews eating children).

Another recent example is a pamphlet written by a Stalinist group called “Communist Initiative” with the heading “One Front Against Imperialism, Zionism and War”. Although there is no mention of Jews, all elements of the traditional antisemitic anti-Zionism can be found (equation of Israel with National Socialism, particularistic hostility toward Jewish nationalism, dichotomy between “the peoples” on the side and “Zionism” – the “bridgehead of world imperialism” – on the other). Zionism lies at the very centre of the evil this group wants to overcome.

Yet, we must be very clear about one thing: Such examples are from the very fringes of the left and are especially rooted in remains of Maoist splinter groups and the like. Nowadays you will not see pictures or hear any remarks *of this kind* at a major left-wing demonstration. Or if such a thing were to occur, there will be major dissent and resistance. This is the result of a continuous and still ongoing debate in the radical left which started slowly in the 1980s, gained momentum after 1989/1990 and created two major results:

One result was the establishment of radical left or communist groups for whom the fight against antisemitism lies at the very core of their identity. Those groups are very friendly with Israel. In some cases they are even willing to embrace the most nationalistic or expansionist positions of the Israeli political right: the so-called pro-Israel or “Antideutsche” (anti-German) movement (Hanloser, 2004). Second, there was a learning process, sparked by these debates and being fuelled by the growing “Antideutsche” movement, which led to the relative marginalisation of extreme anti-Zionist positions and to a higher degree of awareness of antisemitism among the left. Its outcome was a more balanced criticism of Israel and a more complex judgement of the whole Middle Eastern situation. This holds true for the biggest left party “Die Linke” as well as for many of the autonomist or antifascist groups (Ullrich, 2013).

The background to this is the high salience of two interpretive frames for the German left-wing discourse. On the one hand, there is the overall left-wing solidarity with the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. But this framing of the conflict is

³ For a collection of summaries on the literature in this field see (Ullrich 2012; in German): http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Analysen/Analyse_Linke-u-Nahostkonflikt.pdf.

”broken” and has been interfered with by a different frame originating from the German politics of remembrance. The alternative frame suggests German responsibility for the Jews, including sensitivity toward antisemitism. In the real Middle East conflict both perspectives often contradict one another. The freedom fighters you support may be antisemitic or simply do not care about the Israeli population; the highly valued state of the Jews can commit war crimes. Taking sides so easily and with 100% conviction in a dualistically construed conflict, as so often happened in the past, is far from being hegemonic within the left today. Of course, there are some who ignore this fundamental structural ambiguity and resolve its inherent contradiction 100% one-sidedly (to reduce dissonance). Yet, on the collective level, a more complex debate has evolved which sees good and evil on both sides, both here and there, and reflects on the dangers of left-wing solidarity with the Palestinians sliding into the trap of antisemitism.

Interestingly, this German learning process concerning antisemitism was paralleled by a learning process concerning Muslim interests and anti-Muslim racism in the British left in a very different discursive context. This is my comparative background (Ullrich, 2008). On the one hand, the British left provides an interesting contrast: While the German left intensely argues about whom to support in the conflict, there is relative unanimity in Britain. Being on the British left clearly means being pro-Palestinian. Yet there is some disagreement - not on which side to support, but on how strongly to support the Palestinians. On the other hand, there is a structural similarity with opposite signs. There is a prevalent demonisation of Israel, which goes beyond rational critique; an obsession that is central to a left identity. The British discourse, on the other hand, in light of the British left being based on long-lasting anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggles, proved much more sensitive in terms of the plight of the Palestinians especially after 9/11 in the context of growing anti-Muslim racism. In the German and British cases, the enabling national discursive structures (i.e., for increased sensitivity towards one side) were simultaneously restrictions (i.e., insensitivity towards the legitimate needs and rights of the supposedly opposing side).

The newly developed post-anti-Zionist complexity described for Germany is not necessarily located in the minds of individuals (though partly it is), but is in fact mainly a collective, emergent phenomenon based in the institutionalisation and continuous clash of the pro-Israel and the pro-Palestine camp.

Yet, there remains a grey zone, where left-wing positions can partly resonate with antisemitic positions, although they are neither motivated by antisemitism nor fully expressed as such. Problematic elements of such position are, among others:

- radical identification with one side in the conflict
- double standards
- demonization of Israel
- ignorance concerning the legitimate interests of the Israeli population
- the use of ambiguous symbols or metaphors, which can be understood as being antisemitic

- downplaying antisemitism today as well as in the history of the political left and,
- most importantly, it is the readiness to collaborate with antisemites and ignore the fact of their antisemitism. Such things have repeatedly taken place, for example in the Mavi Marmara case.

Why do I call this a grey zone? First, in most of these cases, those demonised are not “the Jews” or Israel as a placeholder for the Jews. Hermeneutic analysis strictly has to show when and where this is the case (Globisch, 2013), and we have methodological tools for that (see Holz, 2001). With many visual expressions, symbols, metaphors and actions, there is an ambiguity. The call for boycott may be supported by some on the grounds of antisemitic sentiments or may be interpreted as antisemitic. Of course, for many, especially Jews, it evokes the memory of the Nazi boycott of Jews. On the other hand, there is no time-transcending antisemitic essence in boycotting goods. This is exactly the point where we enter the field of *realpolitik*, and any assessments of what is going on in this field will differ. And we also enter the area of perception. The public meaning of boycott is different in different countries. What surely seems insensitive towards Jews in Germany may evoke quite different connotations in, say Ireland (Vogler et al., 2011).

The second reason for calling this a grey zone lies in the very nature of antisemitism in modern Germany. It is fragmented, partly latent, publicly condemned, outlawed and prosecuted. And it is a genuinely social, i.e., a supra-individual phenomenon that exists in discursive structures, shared symbols, language, narratives and practices. It is not some psycho-pathological thing. The very character thereof results in antisemitism affecting the whole society (like sexism or racism), albeit to different degrees depending on several other factors. All the usually discussed “criteria” for antisemitism, like the 3D-rule or the EUMC criteria, are sensitising concepts in the meaning of grounded theory methodology. Only as a syndrome with a clearly Jewish other should it be classified as antisemitism. Sadly, that is still often enough the case.

One example may explain the inherent difficulty in defining the (non-) antisemitic character of such events. When we see a left-winger campaigning for those oppressed in Latin America or Africa and find out that his/her criticism is in fact biased, even Manichaeic, applying double standards and personalising social structures, we may find that simplistic or unjust, even appalling. Yet we would not consider it antisemitic. Discovering the same argumentative weaknesses with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would make us consider that this *is* in fact antisemitic. And rightly so – *sometimes!*

The Conflicts

Eventually we arrive in the field of conflicts. When we deal with the relationships of antisemitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel, we are stuck in some pre-existing webs of meaning, and we seem to deal with almost ontological questions of how to conceive of things (Klug, 2013). We are always asking ourselves:

Where do we draw the line? My answer is: We cannot draw such a line, because there is the grey zone of ambiguities. Moreover antisemitism and criticism of Israel do not lie on a one-dimensional continuum. Rather, they represent the entanglement of different lines of discourse that in many ways are mixed up and interwoven. The discourse on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is influenced, and sometimes taken over, by the antisemitic discourse and vice versa. Yet the *substantial* connection of these fields raises the likelihood of turning the criticism of Israel into antisemitism.

If we want to judge positions towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict morally, we always have to do so from at least two angles. That is unfortunately not always done. I already mentioned the harsh clashes that occur in that discussion, which you find in the general public as well as in the left. Although I highly praised the new complexity and the learning effects (at least in the latter), the state of the debate nevertheless still becomes quite often miserable. The inherently ambiguous character of the phenomena in the grey zones is often ignored and not reflected upon at all. There is an anti-antisemitic discourse in Germany painting a misleadingly black-and-white picture. Its means are the following:

- a strictly "moral communication",⁴ with the Holocaust as the ubiquitous yardstick for measuring current phenomena – which is not helpful for all phenomena
- a de-contextualisation of the real conflict, i.e., ignoring the fact that the conflict itself is a source of hatred in its own right besides any antisemitism present
- most importantly, this discourse almost completely ignores the genuinely social character of antisemitism and the implications it evokes.

I call this discourse the "Antisemitism of the others". Its main fault is that it does not reflect on the own entrapment in Germany's national socialist and antisemitic past and all the awkward attempts to come to terms with that. On the contrary, it is a hunt to make *others* responsible. The latest expressions of this discourse may be found in the campaign against The Left Party in 2011 and the Expert Report on Antisemitism prepared for the German parliament.

In case of the Left Party, some indeed problematic incidents at its fringes have been misleadingly generalised, giving room for blatant lies (Pfahl-Traugher, 2011; Salzborn and Voigt, 2011; Ullrich and Werner, 2011). The expert report prepared for the German parliament (Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, 2011) strongly presented antisemitism as a problem lying at the fringes of society. The main chapters dealt with the far right, the far left and radical Islam. Although more than 90 % of all incidents have a right-wing background, the commission equally blamed all of the government's most beloved enemies. This served to partly exculpate general society.

⁴ This is a mode of communication, which only differentiates between good and bad and suggests acting accordingly. Such communication is hardly compatible with the complexities social research deals with.

This discourse is intended to externalise antisemitism. Most importantly, it does not include a thorough reflection on the foam-at-the-mouth critics, the many deflated discursive rituals (Ullrich, 2013, p. Chapter 5) and always-the-same conflicts (Bergmann, 1997). This also needs to be taken into account.⁵

Conclusion

The picture I have painted shows the existence of antisemitism within the criticism of Israel. It also showed the many learning processes and harsh debates. In conclusion, I would like to point out two more problems we also have to deal with - besides the sad fact that there is still much antisemitic anti-Zionism.

The first is what Robert Fine called the “methodological separatism between Racism and antisemitism” (Fine, 2012). We face this problem not only in research, but also in political discourse, which is characterised by a strange antagonism of two alliances. On the one hand, there is the Palestine solidarity with their engagement against racism and the blind eye when it comes to antisemitism. On the other hand, there are those who are very critical of antisemitism and very friendly towards Israel, and who quite often downplay racism, especially the vast and growing anti-Muslim racism in our societies. In terms of antisemitism there is always a tension between the dangers of exaggerating it and the dangers of downplaying it.

If we focus on research and what is needed in the future, I would suggest adding to the field of antisemitism research the field of meta-research on antisemitism and related phenomena, reactions, antisemitism debates and scandals. There has not been very much really convincing research in that field since Werner Bergmann’s Book “Antisemitism in Public Conflicts”. I am convinced that antisemitism also has to be analysed as a part of the wider discursive field “Antisemitism/Jews/Israel/Philo-Semitism etc.”. It needs to be researched both theoretically and empirically, considering its complexity as a discursive field with its own inner dynamics. I am also convinced of the productive role Foucauldian or Post-Foucauldian critical discourse theory can play in this research (Jäger, 2005; Ullrich and Keller, 2014). Concepts like episteme, discursive formations, speaker positions, subjectification and struggles over meaning come to mind. This is work that still has to be done.

⁵ This relates to the question of the so-called “New Antisemitism”. In Germany the antisemitism researcher Klaus Holz, among many others, pointed out that there is no change in the semantic structures that are – and have always been - in anti-Semitic texts (reversal of victim-offender relationship; dichotomy “Jews” vs. “own people” and all other peoples; construction of Jews as a nonidentical collective; conspiracy theories and the personification of abstract social structures). If such a worldview is directed towards Jews as Jews or against Israel as the “collective Jew”, then this is antisemitism, nothing new. Also, the supposedly new groups are not really new to the field: neither the political left nor Muslims or Arabs, who are supposed to be the bearers of the new antisemitism. The Hamas Charter has been an anti-Semitic pamphlet since it was produced. It is consistent with the thoughts of its ideological mentor Said Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood (Holz, 2005). Parts of the left were anti-Semitic in the 1940s and 1950s under Stalin and later in the 1970s and 1980s as well (Haury, 2002; Keßler, 1993; Timm, 1997).

Abstract

The author describes instances of antisemitism in the German discourse, which variously relate to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians or neighbouring Arab states. He shows the presence of a clear link and a significant problem, predominantly among the political right but also among other political spectra that identify themselves nationally or as patriots as well as in radicalised Islamist milieus. Among the (left-wing) solidarity movements Ullrich discovers what he calls a grey zone of ambiguities, where criticism of Israel may resonate with a fragmented antisemitic discourse that may not necessarily be traced back to antisemitic intentions of the respective speakers. He also outlines the developments and learning processes that have taken place within the left. Years of criticism of the left's harsh anti-Zionism resulted in the establishment of countermovements, parts of which even developed into a militant identification with the Israeli political right. Both antagonist positions are shaping the ongoing political debate (and often harsh controversy).

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