

On the Sociology of German Anti-Semitism

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ABSTRACT The cause of German anti-Semitism should not be sought at the level of individual attitudes but, firstly, in the context of German history and social development, and, secondly, in the changing social position of the Jews within that setting. During the Middle Ages, when the estates- and guild-orders prevailed, there were severe tensions between Christians and Jews. These began to be moderated with the development of capitalism, as members of the Christian middle class became involved in a struggle to end traditional restrictions. In that context, independently of their attitudes towards them, emancipation of the Jews appeared to middle-class Christians as a precondition for the emergence of Jews as good German citizens, and Jewish merchants and bankers became welcome allies in economic expansion. However, once the struggle of the middle classes against the nobility had been won, the Christian sections of the newly dominant ruling class underwent a political u-turn; hostility against the Jews, who had become a middle class of second rank, increased. It increased still further with the loss of the First World War and the crises that followed it, especially among the most economically constricted strata. In that situation, the Jews were socially conspicuous but relatively powerless. They had few resources for struggling effectively against what had become, for them, a crippling social order. Better to fight for a home in Palestine, or at least to accustom themselves to behaving in a self-aware but unobtrusive way. [Translators' text.]

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There are two fundamentally different viewpoints on the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. One, which we may call 'the enlightenment view', holds that the mass of the German people have been roused against the Jews by certain more or less malicious or at least self-serving people, that anti-Semitism is, as it were, 'constructed', and that one should combat this arousal as far as possible by means of a

programme of intensive educational work that will then check or even eliminate the anti-Semitism.

The other viewpoint, the 'sociological' one, holds neither that anti-Semitism is invented, or 'made up' and then spread by individual people, nor that certain people are in general 'guilty' of it – though there are many malicious people, or people who have been 'incited' to take part in it, who could be 'enlightened' – but rather that the cause of anti-Semitism is to be sought in the peculiar social position of the German Jews. Expressed more precisely, this view holds that the German Jewish community has to be understood through its positioning among the different strata of the German people and in relation to the specific areas of friction, that is, the conflicting economic, intellectual and social interests that, in correspondence to this social positioning, arise between the people of the Jewish community and the members of the other social strata of the German people.

According to this point of view, one cannot understand the rise and fall of anti-Semitism in Germany through Jewish history in the customary sense, that is, if one looks at the fate of the German Jews in isolation. Rather, one can only understand the curve of anti-Semitism in the overall context of German history. From this it follows that attitudes towards the Jews are by and large the direct expression of a quite specific political view. They are a part – and usually not even the most important part – of the general attitude of a person to the political, social and ideological questions of his time. So, the carriers [*Träger*] of a conservative world-view in Germany are and always were – sometimes more and sometimes less – hostile to the Jews. The carriers of true liberalism and the carriers of democratic ideas are and never have been markedly anti-Semitic. Now and again they have even been in differing degrees friendly towards the Jews. The representatives of socialism and likewise the communists stand, and earlier stood more strongly, in a position of conscious opposition to every anti-Semitic trend. Because of friendship for the Jews? No! In anti-Semitism they are fighting against one part of a whole political current that is hostile to them.

Let us look at the originating constellation of this whole development, at the time of the French Revolution. The strata who had ruled Germany until then – the princes, nobles and in part also the clergy – wanted to preserve the estates- [*Ständestaat*]order, the authoritarian or police state, and naturally had a strong interest in preserving the status quo of 'enlightened absolutism'. Up to the French Revolution, to these strata the existing order appeared self-evident, inviolable, eternal. As a result of the experience of the French Revolution, preservation of the existing order and form of ruling became a conscious political programme of the interested strata. They became 'conservative'. And their best means of publicity was provided by drawing attention to the bloody events of the French Revolution, just as today the best propaganda material of all the conservative strata with an interest in preserving the status quo is provided by pointing to the events of the Russian Revolution. The Jews in that period,

however, belonged quite unambiguously to the broad middle mass of those who were in no way interested in the preservation of the existing order of estates. Their position was even more depressed than that of the Christian middle class.

There were necessarily severe tensions between Christian town-dwellers and Jews so long as the medieval guild-order and the related pattern of thinking prevailed – at a time, that is, when the German economy had hardly become caught up in the expansionist tendencies of capitalism. In the year 1817, for example, the City of Frankfurt protested quite explicitly against the abolition of the medieval restrictions on Jews by pointing out how the granting of equal rights to Jews must necessarily lead to an increase in competition between them and the Christian traders. But it was in this period that the industrial and capitalist development of the German economy was gradually beginning. Such a development was only possible with the total removal of all medieval restrictions on trade. The Christian middle class was becoming locked more and more firmly into a struggle against all traditional restrictions. It began more and more consciously to fight against the prevailing estates-order for the free play of social forces – meaning, for example, fighting for economic and political arrangements based on competition between free and equal individuals. This expansion of the German economy made competition seem fruitful and forward-looking rather than dangerous. What did, on the contrary, appear to be dangerous was every traditional restriction on freedom; and in this situation, the attitude of the German Christian middle class to the question of the emancipation of the Jews changed decisively. The less well-bred Jewish merchants and bankers now seemed to them to be welcome allies in the expansion of the German economy. The liberal Christian middle class now began to fight against that part of the traditional restrictions on liberty that were enshrined in the traditional legislation concerning the Jews and, indeed, against the estates-order overall. Emancipation seemed to them to be the first precondition for the education of the Jewish masses as good German citizens. One can see here quite unambiguously how the attitude towards the Jews is a function of the overall social situation and of the perceptual field that corresponds to it. The liberal merchant necessarily saw in the Jew something quite different from what the conservative noble landowner saw. That the conservative elements of this time were against the emancipation of the Jews was not a result of malice or a consequence of incitement but a special case of the general conservative attitude,¹ which was against any change in the prevailing estates social order and the structure of ruling that corresponded to it.

Similarly, the support of all liberal elements in this period for the emancipation of the Jews was not the expression of a special fondness of the Christian middle class for the Jews, but a necessary consequence of the specific social situation and aims of this liberal bourgeoisie. There are examples of influential leaders of the liberal movement who, a short while after being involved in heated personal clashes with Jewish bankers, supported the emancipation of the

Jews in parliament. Under different social and ideological circumstances, however, the chances of bad personal experiences with individual Jews being generalized into an 'anti-Semitic disposition' are, likewise, likely to be correspondingly greater.

Let me turn from this initial constellation to the present day. The following points are decisive for an understanding of the change in the position of the German Jews since that time. First, the u-turn that the German middle class underwent during the last century: one hundred years ago, as sketched above, the battle-front of the German middle class faced basically towards the right, against the ruling order of nobles and the prevailing estates-absolutist order. At that time, the German middle class was anything but conservative. It was genuinely liberal and in part democratic. Today, however, the middle class's fight against the nobility is finally over. The nobility no longer has any special political rights. In economic terms and correspondingly in terms of real power in the state, it stands far behind the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie has won. It has itself become socially, economically and politically the ruling stratum; its battle-front no longer faces towards the right but towards the left, against the newly rising stratum of the proletariat. And just as, formerly, the nobility sought to defend the prevailing order – its own rule – against the rising bourgeoisie, so today the middle class defends the existing order against the stratum which is next in line. It has itself become a stratum with something 'to protect'. The contradiction between conservatism and liberalism has by and large been transcended. And with differing gradations, the ideology of the middle class represents a synthesis of conservative, liberal and, in part, also democratic ideas – think, for example of Mahraun's Manifesto,² where that was explicitly stated.

The position of the German Jewish community in this process is a quite peculiar one. Economically, their position is roughly the same as that of the middle-class Christian community. The Jewish community, too, has its battle-front facing to a large extent towards the left, defending the prevailing economic order against the new stratum of the rising proletariat. Socially, however, they do not stand in an identical position with the solid Christian middle class but are regarded by the latter as something like a second-rank middle class. And this difference between their economic position (in the camp of the ruling bourgeoisie, confronting the advancing proletariat) and their social position (as a middle class of second rank being pushed in the same direction as the working class and hence into disapproval of and even struggle against the existing social order in some form or another) is the source of many conflicts. And besides, it contributes, as we know, to a peculiar restlessness and laxity in the lives of many Jews.

How is the evaluation as second rank to be explained? There are many reasons for it, but only two of the most important need concern us here. First, there are the inner and outer differences between the majority of German Jews and the majority of German Christians. Whether one prefers to explain them more

by reference to descent, more by reference to upbringing, or by reference to both – that is, to the totality of historical differences and the corresponding social fates – these differences are undeniable. They do not form the basis of the Jews being judged to be ‘second rank’ but, in a conflict situation, they could contribute to such an evaluation. In fact, these differences do become a topical reality for the Christian middle class in specific social situations and relevant as a point of argument in social disputes. In the years of the first great expansion of capitalism in Germany, such differences did not provide the middle class with any cause for hostile arguments. In those days, competition from the Jews may have been noticeable among small shopkeepers but it was not particularly noticeable in the leading strata of the German middle class. In that epoch, Jews – and it was never very many who came into consideration – were accepted into the student fraternities. From then onwards, however, the curve of anti-Semitism has gradually risen, and the crest of the wave coincides, as always, with moments when the economic situation has grown tense and when conflicts of interest and, above all, competition – including naturally, in the first instance, competition between people who are different – have become particularly stark and apparent. However, I cannot discuss this in detail here. As an example, the present situation is enough.

. Through the loss of the war, the economic space of all Germans became extraordinarily constricted. But it has not become constricted for all strata of the German people to the same extent. It can be shown quite clearly that anti-Semitism is strongest in those strata of the middle class whose economic space, compared with before and during the war, has been the most constricted. It can be said that in the present phase of social development, specific strata find themselves, if not completely ruined, then nevertheless quite clearly locked into a downwards spiral. These include, above all, formerly independent small businesses, in part also big businesses, and, in addition, specific branches of medium-sized manufacturing industry that have been forced increasingly into dependency. Similar in many ways, depending on the degree of disadvantage of their situation, are many sections of the peasantry and of the big landowners. It is precisely these strata, above all their young people, who form the core of the National Socialist Movement. For them, the distinctiveness, the otherness of Jews is a reason for attacking them. If one adds to this the fact that, in the post-war period, Jews began to be represented more strongly than before in prominent positions in the state, some of them even as leaders of the working class, then one begins at least to get an overall perspective on the structure of the prevailing anti-Semitic wave. The peasant knows the Jew above all in the mask of the cattle-dealer and small trader, town-dwellers and the owners of large estates even more particularly in the mask of the banker, the finance minister (for example, the fight of National Socialism against ‘debt slavery’). Mortgages, taxes and bank debts are, for all these strata, the most threatening, the most abstract of burdens. To give just a few more

examples, the small trader also knows the Jew, if not directly as a competitor, then at least in the mask of the department store owner. Other threatened existences – those of lumpenproletarians, the unemployed, agricultural labourers – are swept along by simple propaganda against strangers. And it is here, among these in part downwardly mobile and in part most severely constricted strata, that one finds the coarsest forms of anti-Semitism. But tensions that result in hostility to Jews also arise in the relations between heavy industry and finance capital³ and in the competition between Christians and the Jewish lawyer or doctor. It is not possible to go into details here. It is enough to show what is fundamentally most important. Members of the German Christian middle class who have become conservative have, to varying degrees in the constricted economic space of Germany, a struggle on their hands. Through their anti-Semitism, they are conducting a fight against Jewish competitors and fellow bourgeois whose interests are in conflict with their own. The former, their Jewish competitors, are members of a separate group that is more or less conspicuous. On account of its second-rank position, furthermore, it provides an indication of tendencies towards decomposition and ‘decay’ in the prevailing order. The Jews are also the easiest to strike and render harmless as opponents. And according to their social position, Christian Germans fight Jews sometimes with rougher, sometimes with more cultivated means, sometimes with this, sometimes with that ideological superstructure. And they conduct this struggle as a socially and ideologically based conflict of interests in exactly the same sense in which they conduct their struggle against the socially rising stratum of the proletariat.⁴

This is the diagnosis. There can be no talk in this connection of a therapy. Or to put it more precisely: it follows from this diagnosis that, in the present social state, there is no chance of a therapy, of a full-scale healing of the social body from the evil of anti-Semitism. The surge of anti-Semitism is the function of economic and social developments that cannot be altered by the small group of German Jews and scarcely influenced by them to any degree. The Jewish community in this regard is far more driven than driver. From such an understanding and in conjunction with other experiences, one can draw the conclusion that a social order in which a group of gifted, often spiritually and intellectually rich and creative people are consciously degraded, devalued and so powerfully crippled is not worth preserving and must be fought against. It can also lead one to decide to go to Palestine, because the fight for a national home for Jews appears more promising than the fight for social equality for Jews in Germany. For those who are unwilling to draw such conclusions, there remains only resignation. A clear understanding of one’s own position is preferable in any case to self-deception. That is, one thing always remains possible for German Jews as an answer to anti-Semitism: they can accustom themselves to the unobtrusive, determined and self-aware demeanour that is the only way of behaving appropriately in their position.

Notes

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1. For further details on conservative thinking and on the sociological way of approaching such issues in general, see Karl Mannheim, 'Das konservative Denken', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 57(1), 1927.
2. A. Mahraun, *Das jungdeutsche Manifest: Volk gegen Kaste und Geld*, Berlin: Jungdeutscher Verlag, 1927. [Translators' note.]
3. Ludwig Bernhard, *Der Hugenbergkonzern*, Berlin: J. Springer, 1928, p. 27.
4. It is, in the final analysis, no accident that the National Socialists fight precisely against Jews, Social Democrats and Communists.