

THE IDEA OF JEWISH ANTI-SEMITISM AND RECUPERATING THE ‘SEMITES’

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Introduction

This paper reflects my preoccupation with the discursive construction of categories of identity and what they allow and disallow, how they define and exclude and what kinds of political practices they support. I want to ask questions about the categories in use by others, and the categories that ‘we’ – that ‘weasel word’ as Richard Sennett has called the pronoun – tend to use. I will focus on three elements: A reinvigorated Israeli anti-Arabism and its contradictions; Jewish antisemitism and the need to historicise socio-cultural categories; and a possible political recuperation of the ‘Semites’.

Israeli anti-Arabism

By the end of summer 2014 in Israel, there was widespread evidence of a more vigorous and widespread anti-Arabism. This was not a new phenomenon by any means, but the force with which both the state and ordinary people indulged in it was perhaps unprecedented. There is plenty of evidence that demonstrates this, so the following examples are just a taste:

In July 2014, David Sheen conducted an analysis of Twitter feeds from young Israelis, which carried lots of pictures of teenage girls in skimpy bikinis sporting slogans such as: ‘I spit on you, you stinking Arabs’, ‘Arabs should be torched’, ‘Death to those fucking Arabs’ and ‘death sentence for leftists and Arabs’.¹

There has been considerable violence, including killings and fire-bombings of public and private buildings. There were also incidents of attacks on mixed Israeli-Palestinian weddings, trying to prevent them from being consummated. When Minister of Environmental Protection Amir Peretz, of the Hatnuah party, made a condolence call to the family of a Palestinian teenager who had been lynched by Israelis, he faced dozens of calls for his assassination and hundreds of comments inciting racism and violence on his Facebook page.

Police violence against Arab Israelis, documented by Israeli journalist Akiva Eldar², goes unpunished. Arabic is being erased as a language from public use and Arab villages are being omitted from public signs. Meanwhile, strong evidence of anti-Arab racism amongst school children was documented recently by sociologists Idan Yaron and Yoram Harpaz.³

In November 2014, the Israeli cabinet voted 14-6 in favour of a new law defining Israel as a Jewish national state and the historic homeland for the Jewish people. Indeed, Netanyahu followed up this law by stating publicly that any Palestinian citizens of Israel who demonstrate 'against the state' would be invited to move out (to the West Bank or Gaza).

The Adalah Legal Centre in Haifa suggests there are more than 50 laws which discriminate against the Palestinian minority, limiting their access to resources, especially land, stifling their political expression and limiting employment. Foreign minister, Avigdor Liberman, has spoken about territorial and population swaps being 'part of the solution', although quite what he thinks the problem is for which that would be the solution is another matter (let alone the irony of a Jewish politician evoking a terrifying historical precedent).

Serious and systematic research is needed to examine the uncritical, even collusive, role of the Israeli media in disseminating this rhetoric. It appears that inside Israel only *Haaretz* newspaper and a handful of brave journalists act as regular critics of government actions.⁴ There are, of course, numerous websites such as *Mondoweis* and *Tablet* that monitor and show the most egregious examples.⁵ By the autumn of 2014, rhetoric and actions had become so inflamed that even Israel's president Reuven Rivlin, no radical, spoke out against the 'disease of racism' afflicting Israelis and in support of the civil liberties of all Israeli citizens.

One rationale for this discursive structure is that the state of Israel and Israelis dare not name Palestine and the Palestinians. But the adoption of an 'anti-Arab' stance produces a very sizeable enemy. It includes not only the Arabs who are citizens, albeit second-class citizens, within Israel – about 1.6 million people or 20 per cent of the nearly 9 million that make up the population. It also includes over 300 million Arabs across the Maghreb and Mashreq, who are outside the borders of Israel, including those in the Arab states, most notably Egypt and Jordan, that have accommodated Israel to some extent. It, therefore, invites a far wider enmity than perhaps its protagonists imagine, let alone desire. But perhaps even more significantly, it renders schizophrenic the many Arab Jews who live in Israel (and who as Mizrahi often find themselves viewed as lower-class citizens within the Ashkenasi-defined hierarchy) and those who live outside the state.

It suggests that the categories of Arab and Jew are mutually exclusive. It places some of 'one's own' in the category of the Other. (Foucault has helped us to understand how all discourses 'do' violence, both literally and figuratively in this case.) In some ways, this process is politically deliberate, unthinking the potential consequences for others, obliterating any sense of mixedness and blurring identity formations. The main point being that discursive structures of identity always over-run the categories into which they are supposedly confined. Thus, ongoing discussions about 'intersectionality' by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Nira Yuval-Davis are important, not so much because they help us recognise the multiplicity of 'identity-formations' under which we are invited to live. But more importantly, in that recognition, we avoid the hypostatisation of such categories as fixed descriptors of the world. The world always escapes our languaging of it.

Jewish antisemitism

I continue to find it fascinating how ‘we’ at one and the same time disavow the material existence of 19th century categories of ‘race’ as ways of dividing up the human species, yet at the same time continue to argue about the existence of racism and use categories that themselves have emerged from this old set of racial categorisations. Numerous writers, including Barry Kosmin and Shlomo Sands, have been using and trying to promote a different terminology. The term Judeophobia has been suggested as exemplifying a generalised hostility toward Jews; this perhaps homophonically offers a useful parallelism with Islamophobia. Manfred Gerstenfeld talks of anti-Israelism (although he wants to elide this with antisemitism, which I do not). The ‘Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Racisms and the Question of Palestine/Israel’ conference talked of racisms in the plural. These discursive struggles show our unease with existing categories and our inability to transcend them; our recognition of the dynamics of racism without race, our stuckness. And antisemitism has stuck.

The term ‘Semites’ used to include both Jews and Arabs (as well as Arab Jews/Jewish Arabs). These ‘peoples’ shared the same linguistic group and inhabited the same part of the world for a long time, if in intermittent periods. And, indeed, at various points, both inhabited the category. Gribetz describes how the early Zionists – returning to Palestine after the decline of the Ottoman Empire – and the Arabs saw each other not as ‘strangers competing for territory’, but as religious and racial cousins ‘with intertwined histories, culture, beliefs, even blood’⁶. Gribetz suggests that the question of who Israelis and Palestinians are needs to be seen as one question. So that instead of focussing on separate, parallel histories, their existence as ‘neighbours’ demonstrates their interconnectedness. For example, they recognised each other’s faiths and worshipped near each other. Latterly, Jews were seen by many Arabs as being acculturated in Europe and thought of as Semites, precisely to acknowledge the achievements of Semites (in contrast to an increasingly Aryanised and Christianised Europe). So there existed a complex intertwining of religious and quasi-racialised understandings amongst these groups, long before the question of nationality emerged. In this way, different and multiple categorisations were introduced, with perhaps a sense of the ‘narcissism of minor differences’ that separates Jews from Arabs (mainly Muslim), at the same time as both acknowledged their common identity as ‘Semites’.

A longer historical analysis of these supposedly ‘cross-cutting categories’, such as race, religion and ethnicity, is provided by Gil Anidjar. In his book *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*⁷, he provocatively suggests that both groupings have been defined by European Christianity: the Jew was defined as the religious Other within, while the Arab was seen as the political Other without (leading in fascinating ways to the division between religious studies and political theory, but that is another story). He states ‘simply... these two political identities – the Jew, the Arab – have been co-constituted by, and most importantly *within*, Europe’.⁸

In *Semites*, Anidjar goes on to argue that:

by now noticeably less invisible than the term Aryan... the term Semites has... lost much of its currency, even if popular perceptions continue to construe it in its highly segregated neighbourhood, in the vicinity of European racial and racist phantasms...⁹

He continues,

the discursive shift from Semites to Jew and Arab rewrites fantasmatic alliances and reconfigures the distinction between race and religion, religion and politics, and ethnicity and race, while occluding or even excising, as it were, the Aryan and racist elements from the equation... perhaps more important, the shift both produces and sediments ancient oppositions along even older theologico-political tracings, rendering its history invisible'.¹⁰

Anidjar also suggests a provocative rereading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*¹¹. He claims that Said provides the elaboration of 'a wider logic of contemporary (19th century) discriminating separations and divisions into nations, races, and cultures (as well as sexual difference)... It is the full extent of this complex and internally divided, highly hierarchical apparatus as it emerges from the Christian West, which is what Said's *Orientalism* demonstrates – and opposes'.¹²

Anidjar analyses literary production, but music and other cultural forms come to mind, as expressions of this shared, vibrant – and, for want of a better term and revaluing the old one – semitic culture. Café Noah is one example, a café in Tel Aviv where, in the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish immigrants from Baghdad and Cairo used to play a shared 'oriental' music that is now extremely popular in Israel¹³.

Over the years, Arabs were no longer seen as Semites and the crude antisemitism of the late 19th century and beyond attached itself singularly and solely to Jews. But what this kind of genealogical analysis of discourses opens up is the bizarre, perhaps delicious, proposition of considering anti-Arabism as a form of Jewish – or more specifically Israeli – antisemitism. Perhaps this can be seen as an *enantiodromia*, as Jung via Heraclitus called the process whereby something turns into its opposite.

The other obvious point to make is that the roots of antisemitism are both European in origin and pre-date the reality of a country called Israel. It is thus disconcerting to find, in June 2015, copies of *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* openly on sale in the Beirut airport bookshop, albeit next to the *Diary of Anne Frank*, in a wonderfully ecumenical display. The fusing of European antisemitism and the political critique of Zionism makes for a volatile mix, which means that, analytically, it is important to acknowledge their different historical trajectories.

Towards a political recuperation of the 'Semites'?

Given the multiple discourses that have been at work historically and that are summoned into play in the contemporary period, I wonder what the politics might be of trying to turn the old semitic nail on its head? What if the label of 'Semite' were to be readopted by Arabs and Muslims as part of their identity-formation, so that any antisemitism would also include them? As other negative and hostile discursive tropes – think of nigger and queer – have been decathected and turned on their head in ironic appropriation and realignment, so could 'Semite'.

At an international level, this might recoup some of the long history of mixed-up and fascinating Jewish-Arab encounters and social practices and take the steam out of both Hasbara propaganda and Arab state

hostility. In a utopian imagining, it could also be the renewed basis for a single, egalitarian state.

Meanwhile, in Britain, echoing the rush to be Charlie Hebdo, imagine the possibility that placards claiming 'I too am a Semite' might put off some proto-fascists demonstrations. Protests about the 'Jewification of Britain' could indeed be matched by a plethora of claims that 'we (we!) are all Semites now'. I did once promise to produce some T-shirts with that slogan, a promise I have not yet fulfilled. Anybody want one?

Notes

¹ D. Sheen, 'Terrifying tweets of pre-Army Israeli teens', 10 July 2014, <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/07/terrifying-tweets-israeli> (last visited 4 Sep. 2015).

² <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/israel-police-shot-kafr-kana-israeli-arab-or-commission.html>, 10 November 2014, (last visited 4 Sep. 2015).

³ I. Yaron and Y. Harpaz, *Scenes from School Life* (in Hebrew), 2014.

⁴ <http://www.haaretz.com>

⁵ <http://mondoweiss.net>; <http://www.tabletmag.com/tag/israel>

⁶ J.M. Gribetz, *Defining Neighbours: Religion, Race and the Early Zionist Encounter*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2014, 235.

⁷ G. Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.

⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ G. Anidjar, *Semites*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 2003 (new edition).

¹² Anidjar, *Semites*, 62.

¹³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2010/10/2010101871221949705.html>

Biographical note

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