

THE ANTI-SEMITIC IMAGINARY

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‘The collective is nothing but the subject of the individual’
Jacques Lacan ([1966] 2006: 175)

1.

November 2023: I attend a seminar with Ukrainian psychoanalysts and psychologists. I tackle the question of xenophobia discussing urban legends and fake news. I ask the participants to talk to me not about manifest, explicit ethnic prejudices, but about a latent, subtle, hidden aversion. I ask them if there are rumours, jokes, or clichés regarding foreigners, for example, Italians. I obviously exclude Russians. The fact that all the contributions, some of them even passionate, are about Jews, strikes me.

Everyone insists that no one in Ukraine is anti-Semitic. They draw my attention to the fact that Catherine the Great created areas of Ukraine reserved for Jews in the Odessa region. It was the Stalinist regime that was anti-Semitic, not the Ukrainians. In fact, I’m told that when a mass emigration of Jews from Ukraine to Israel took place in the 1980s, many non-Jews were disappointed and asked for an explanation: ‘Why are you abandoning our beautiful country?’ They say they are outraged by a certain propaganda, especially Russian, that portrays them as anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi. This is by no means true, and they point out that on the contrary, Ukrainian Jews are particularly active and efficient in the resistance against the Russians. After all, isn’t their president, Zelensky, whom they elected with a landslide victory in 2019, Jewish?

But strange tales emerge nonetheless. After the outbreak of war with Russia in 2022, rumours spread in Ukraine that Putin wanted to conquer the Donbass to build a new Jerusalem. The idea was to evacuate the people living there and bring the Jews to this new Jerusalem. Another war-related legend also surfaced: that Putin’s ultimate goal is to break up Ukraine and divide it between three states – the US, Poland and Israel. Why Israel? To bring back the Jews who left in the 1980s?

And then, finally, the key rumour: that when the Israelis reach Ukraine, it will be the end of the world – the Apocalypse. This echoes a biblical prophecy that says that the world will end when the Jews will have dominated the Middle East. This prophecy is one reason why the American Christian right is fully aligned with Israel: if the Jews do not dominate, how could the world end? In our case, the world will end when the Jews will dominate Ukraine.

These are not individual dreams or myths, but collective ones – should we still analyse them as psychoanalysts? Is there such a thing as a collective unconscious, or does the unconscious, even at the individual level, possess collective elements? In any case, the meaning of these rumours seems to shine through clearly. And the meaning appears to be clearly anti-Semitic – a meaning that stands in stark contrast to the too often repeated denials of such sentiments.

In fact, the enemy, Putin, is not accused of wanting to fully integrate the Donbass into Russia – evidently one of the explicit aims of his war – but of wanting to give it to the Jews. In fact,

to make it the land of Judaism – Jerusalem is envisaged as a Jewish city, not a multi-ethnic one. Ukraine given to two foreign states, the US and Poland, but also to Israel, the Jewish state. And then, the icing on the cake, if Ukraine becomes Jewish... the end will come. The end of the world, or rather our end, because our end is always, for us at least, the end of the world.

In short, the hated Putin is portrayed as an Israeli agent. And in fact, until recently, relations between the Russians and the Israelis were excellent; no more so.

In short, this discussion led me to the conclusion that in Ukraine, despite the denials, there is a burgeoning anti-Semitic sentiment beneath the surface. But is there a subject of this anti-Semitism? Or rather, of this fear of ‘either the Jews or us’?

I am not saying this to suggest that Ukraine is an anti-Semitic country! If we were to analyse legends and rumours about Jews in other countries, we would discover similar anti-Semitic impulses, even in countries above suspicion. Here we are discussing an unconscious dimension that seeps through what I would call the myths of today.

2.

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, the controversy between anti-Zionists and pro-Israelis exploded too. One of the accusations that many anti-Zionists find particularly searing is the suggestion that they are essentially anti-Semitic. This accusation prompts countless rebuttals: ‘It is abusive to assume that because we’re against Israel we’re anti-Semites! Quite the opposite, we admire the Jewish people!’ Among goyim (non-Jewish) anti-Zionists, only certain fringes of the far right and some Muslims are openly anti-Semitic. This is the manifest discourse.

In fact, accusations of anti-Semitism towards those who condemn Israel appeal to a distinction that is a staple of psychoanalysis: the difference between *latent* and *manifest* content. It is as if the accusations were saying: ‘Of course you, those who want to eliminate Israel and replace it with a “secular” state, are not overtly anti-Semitic; you are unconsciously so, between the cracks’. Back in the days of communist cultural hegemony, even in Western Europe, some would say that self-proclaimed leftists were ‘*objectively reactionary*’: that is, they believed they were revolutionaries, but actually had a reactionary function because they held an incorrect line. Today, many are *objectively* anti-Semitic.

We can all distinguish between objective and subjective anti-Semitism thanks to a figure that has become something of a cliché, the type who says, ‘I’m not anti-Semitic, but... Jews really are obnoxious!’ We do not say that such an individual is in bad faith, we think that they do not understand their own way of thinking; theirs is an involuntary anti-Semitism, one that does not cross the threshold of consciousness.

Hence, an ‘anti-Semitism without anti-Semites’ can emerge, a ‘thought without a thinker’ as W.R. Bion said.

I will try to show, however, that the accusation of anti-Semitism levelled at pro-Palestinian or pro-Hamas supporters misses a fundamental element of left-wing anti-Semitism, if you want to call it that: the Jew is not detested as the devious other that nests within our Christian-Aryan identity, not as the dangerous *other* disguised as a person identical to me (like it was seen by Nazism), but on the contrary, the Jew is detested as the mirror image of ourselves, whom we detest.

Anti-Semitism is rare in Italy, this has been confirmed to me by several Jewish friends. This does not take away the fact that even in Italy there exists a kind of creeping, unspoken, I would say oblique anti-Semitism.

When I was 12 and living in Naples, in an adult discussion about a Japanese girl in Italy, an adult man said: 'Oriental people are clean, they smell nice. Whereas, you know, Jews have a bad odour'. There were no anti-Semitic undertones in his statement, he merely stated it as a notorious biological *fact*, an objective observation like saying that Africans have dark skin or that Scandinavians tend to be tall and fair-haired. So much so that even I, as a young boy, believed it. But then I remembered that my desk mate, whose surname was Coen, a very likeable boy, had by no means a bad odour.

Among ordinary people, the ethnic others, those who are not like me, are initially evaluated in olfactory terms. The question is whether they wash or not, whether they have a pleasant or bad smell. The 'good races' are those whose members are odourless or genetically fragrant, the 'bad races' are those whose members smell bad. A social psychologist friend of mine conducted research in Hungary into what makes a person more or less acceptable and found – through a sophisticated analysis – that the least socially acceptable people are those who "smell bad". And who smells bad are especially the poor. The real, deep-seated racism is against the poor: aporophobia. Hatred of immigrants is really hatred of the poor. I have never heard of xenophobic feelings in Italy towards wealthy Americans, Germans, or Scandinavians who come to live in our country! Of a wealthy African-American in Italy, who behaves like a rich person, nobody in Italy will say that s/he stinks.

Why do 'righteous citizens' find the sight of vagrants in the city, of rough sleepers, of beggars in cafes and restaurants intolerable? Why do gangs of young thugs mostly pick on the down-and-out, on wretched immigrants, on street prostitutes? I think it is because destitution and decay are perceived as exposing my own destitution and decay, as if a soiled person were living in my house and fouling it. I feel that my town is my home, and it's as if the poor, always 'improper', had seized it from me, dispossessed me of it. Those who have nothing symbolically infect me with their lack; I become poor too by metonymy, as if spatial contiguity had the value of a symbolic contagion.

But the point is that modern anti-Semitism is no longer hatred of the poor and marginalized. Although there are poor Jews, the social image of the Jew is that of an educated and wealthy individual. 'The Jews had the atom bomb', my parents used to say when I was a child, referring to Fermi and Einstein. And I believed that Jewish common people, living in Warsaw's ghetto, possessed the knowledge for the atomic bomb. In short, modern anti-Semitism is the reverse of aporophobia: it is hatred of those among us who are intelligent and powerful.

Now, latent, unconscious anti-Semitism often takes the form of objective knowledge. Anti-Semitism manifests itself in an oblique manner, sold off as a 'statement of fact'. As becomes apparent in a classic urban legend; that of the *white slave trade stores*.

3.

In 1967, a strange rumour spread through a French town south of Paris, Orléans. Such a rumour had appeared several times in other parts of the world – and would appear again and again – in very similar forms. It claimed that in some women's clothing stores in the centre of town, while girls were in the fitting rooms trying on clothes, they were being drugged, locked in a trunk, and taken to Far Eastern countries where they would be forced into prostitution. The rumour spread, and the tension in the town began to grow. Obviously, no girl from Orléans had

disappeared. The sociologist Edgar Morin set up a team to investigate the phenomenon, and a few months later he published *La rumeur d'Orléans*, a book that became a success (Morin 1971). But after the *rumeur* ended, not much later, in Amiens, a small town north of Paris, a similar rumour spread about certain women's fashion shops in the centre. At the same time as Morin's book on Orléans, was prominently displayed in the main bookshops in Amiens (Morin 2017).

As I said, this rumour emerged in various parts of the world with only a few variations. Between 1965 and 1984 alone, 'recurrence' of this rumour were reported in at least twenty provincial French towns. (Kapferer 1987: 105). One concerned a fashionable clothes shop in Rome in the 1980s, to the point that the owner had the brilliant idea of putting wooden mannequins in the window that recreated the imaginary scene: shoppers could admire a drugged girl being locked in a trunk (Bermani 1991).

In Orléans and Amiens, however, there was one interesting detail: the owners of the shops suspected of engaging in the white slave trade were all Jewish. A mere coincidence? Not everyone who believed in the *rumeur* knew that the owners were Jews, and yet, as chance would have it, the owners of all these shops were indeed Jews. Should we therefore interpret this "urban legend" as an obfuscated form of anti-Semitism?

According to a theory I developed in my volume on rumours and gossip (Benvenuto 2000), every urban legend has a 'moral', like in the old tales. A moral that is usually implicit or elliptical. It takes the form of a warning, or even the confirmation of a prejudice – 'I told you so!'. Significantly, the implicated shops sold cutting-edge youth fashion, considered extremely daring, like mini-skirts. So, the latent voice of the rumour said: 'Girls! If you dress like a whore, you'll end up being one!' To which an anti-Semitic note was added: 'I told you so: Jews are good at getting rich, but in cahoots with the underworld!'.

Let's not forget that anti-Semitism has a vigorous tradition in France, not least because the Jewish community in France is particularly large. France was torn apart between 1894 and 1906 by the Dreyfus Affair: A French officer of Jewish origin, Dreyfus, was falsely accused and convicted of being a spy in the service of the Germans. The nation became sharply divided, teetering on the brink of civil war. At this time, a series of prejudices against the Jews spread in France, which convinced an Austrian Jew, Theodor Herzl, to found Zionism... with all the immense historical consequences that we are still witnessing today.

But were those who believed in the accusations against the fashion stores in Orléans and Amiens aware that they were expressing anti-Semitism? In other words, is there *a subject of a rumour*? A kind of collective unconscious that often becomes conscious, along the lines of what we do in our analytical interpretations? Is there such a thing as a collective unconscious?

But here too we see that the anti-Semitic connotation is far from being aporophobic: it is rich Jewish shopkeepers, people more or less on the cutting edge as promoters of trendy youth fashion, who are targeted by the urban legend. Today we would say that these 'shady' Jews are an integral part of the gentrified world.

4.

In Christian societies, the Jew is a strong signifier. We live in a culture where being Jewish is not something straightforward. This applies not only to anti-Semites but also to Semites-philés

– I would even say that the two polarities, anti- and -philes, often coexist within the same person. This may seem absurd, but I have often found it to be the case.

Many goy friends of mine say they have great admiration for the Jewish intellectuals they know. They speak of them with envy: ‘They’re not only very cultured, but extremely intelligent too. Their creative abilities are extraordinary!’ I sometimes point out that their argument is racist in that it suggests that they believe in a Jewish race. You are racist not only when you believe that a race other than your own is inferior, but also when you believe it is superior. Even saying ‘the Jews are not a race, but they have a culture and family life all of their own’ does not exclude racism, because racism is not only biological, today it can take on an ethno-cultural guise. After all, many left-wing intellectuals explicitly refer to the theories of the Nazi philosopher Arnold Gehlen, who spoke of culture as the second human nature (Gehlen 1961; 1980; 1987). If Jewish culture is the second nature of so-called Jews, then we can also say that they are *naturally* superior or inferior. (The truth is that a great many Jews are such only because they are Jewish on their mother’s side, but in fact they are completely imbued with the culture of the country in which they live).

And in fact, the most remarkable thing is that these friends who idealise the abilities of Jews also loathe Israel and support Hamas. If you point out this dissonance to them, they reply: ‘You can clearly see that I’m not anti-Semitic, on the contrary, I have a pro-Jewish bias! I loathe Israel, not Jews.’ But indeed, positive prejudice is the flip side of negative prejudice. Are not those who despise the Jews also those who admire them in many other ways? In short, anti-Semitism is an octopus with many heads, one that can take many forms, even opposing ones.

For example, those researchers who believe they have proved that the black (African-American) race has inferior abilities compared to the white race, are the same who say that ‘the yellow race’, the Asians, has superior abilities compared to the white race¹. Of course, these researchers are mostly non-Asian whites, and they say ‘how can we be racist if we recognise that there are superior races to our own?’ But the point is believing in the concept of race, not considering another race superior or inferior to one’s own.

The clash between Israelis and Palestinians has a huge significance for us Westerners (i.e. Christians and post-Christians), one that goes far beyond siding with one ethnicity or the other in a conflict. It does not seem to me that we are passionate about the eternal struggle of the Kurds, for example, who have never been granted a state, struggle against the Turks, Arabs and Iranians. I do not see us being outraged about the Uyghurs being dominated by the Chinese, the Armenians having been recently invaded by the Azerbaijanis, the Sri Lankan Tamils being dominated by the Sinhalese, the Shia or Al-Muhamashīn Yemenis being dominated by the Sunni Yemenis, or the Turkish Cypriots... and the list could go on and on. Perhaps we are a little more affected by the Tibetans colonised by the Chinese, given the Dalai Lama's popularity among us. Whereas the plight of the less than three million Palestinians in the West Bank has for decades inflamed the hearts of the left and caused students to riot in New York or Paris. I would like to offer my opinion on the reasons for this passionate divergence.

The fact is that the Palestinians are assimilated to the ‘poor victims of oppression’, while the Israelis are assimilated to the ‘wealthy Western oppressors’ – a questionable dichotomy, given that most Israelis are not actually from Europe or the Americas, but from other Islamic

¹ This is the case of the 1994 book R. J. Herrnstein and C. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press).

countries. But it fits into a well-established narrative, that of mean rich countries versus virtuous poor countries. Now, this difference triggers certain reactions, like salivation in Pavlov's dogs.

In fact, Kurds, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Armenians, Tamils... are oppressed by peoples or nations that belong to the developing world, which, according to the dominant narrative, fall into the category of the oppressed. As a struggle between oppressed peoples, it is in fact of little interest to our Western narrative. Because the machine that discriminates between the oppressed and the oppressors, like a well-sharpened guillotine, always cuts cleanly through the two sides. It is so efficient that it even cuts through the Jews themselves: some say that Ashkenazi Jews are oppressors while Sephardic Jews are oppressed! I do not believe, however, that Adolf Eichmann, when he sent Jews to Auschwitz, cared to distinguish between Sephardic and Ashkenazi. But the guillotine is constantly self-severing: oppressed peoples can be oppressors in some respects, or vice versa. For instance, the Palestinians of Hamas may be oppressed by the Israelis, but there the men certainly oppress the women far more than the Israeli men oppress their women, etc. In almost everyone we can see the oppressed side and the oppressor side. But evidently in the politically correct code the opposition *oppressed versus oppressors* is hierarchically more important than the opposition *women versus men*.

But the fact that this incarnation of Western Evil is of Jewish stock is not irrelevant. In this way the clash in Palestine between two peoples of two different religions that cannot live together is interpreted as a Manichean narrative of a struggle between the Oppressed and their Oppressors.

When I say that *Jew* is a signifier, I also mean that it is by no means a concept in itself: this signifier can cover various concepts, even contradictory ones. The referent – the Jews designated by this signifier – does not actually exist. And in fact, no one today is able to define what we should take 'Jew' to mean. Is it a racial concept? But genetics does not believe in races. Is it a religious one? But many Jews are non-believers. Is it a historical heritage? But so many Jews do not identify with this heritage in any way. Yet the signifier *Jewish* still works. We should ask ourselves why our post-Christian societies ultimately still need this signifier, and need to take sides in relation to it.

Interestingly, signifiers outlive what they originally signified, often by far. Jews as a separate community living in ghettos have long since ceased to exist in our hyper-industrial societies, yet both anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism (which, as we have seen, is the other side of anti-Semitism) persist more than ever. Jewishness is a signifier that polarises us, that stirs great passions in us. Indeed, signifiers can fascinate us even when they have no real referents; just think of vivid figures like vampires, zombies, aliens, UFOs, ghosts, zodiac signs, etc. Before Nazism, many Jews themselves were ready to strip the concept of 'Jew' of any relevance, but then... How can anyone deny the gravity of being-Jewish after millions of Jews were exterminated simply because they were assigned such a label? Today, when even a newborn baby is assigned a gender, a label like Jew is obviously an assignment.

But even if a signifier does not have a precise meaning, since it can have many, what distinguishes the Jewish signifier today for anti-Zionists, for those who want to eliminate Israel and create a secular Palestinian state, which would include both Muslims and Jews? As we know, a signifier is such because it is distinguished from all other signifiers. As we have seen, this unspoken anti-Semitism, hidden in the folds of our conceptualisations, has nothing to do

with the anti-Semitism of the Christian or racist Aryan tradition. I think that this crypto-anti-Semitism is actually an *anti-ego-idiotism*, a being-against oneself.

We in the West may side with all the oppressed peoples of the world, including the Palestinians, but this does not change the fact that the oppositional machine has already placed us on the side of the oppressors, a side in which we do not recognise ourselves. We are oppressors insofar as we are white Westerners of Christian background and descend from non-colonised colonising countries. ‘Jewish’ makes this tortuous contortion possible: ‘Jewish’ is the oppressing part of us oppressors. Precisely because for the Western left the figure of the Jew is idealised: Marx, Trotsky, Freud, Einstein, Chomsky were or are all of Jewish descent. Our *maîtres-à-penser* enshrined in the Pantheon of the leftist narrative are Jewish. They are the ideal mirror of our desires. But since we ourselves are necessarily on the fatal side of the oppressors, the Jew today becomes the emblematic figure, the supreme signifier, of the oppressors we are. The Jews are the alter ego that we must hate today, precisely because they are ego, and therefore alter.

And in fact Israel is not seen by anti-Zionists as a refuge where Jews, a minority in every other country in the world – and therefore always in the ideal position as potential targets of persecution – can feel themselves to be majority, and therefore more self-confident. In their Manichaean narrative Israel is a splinter of the oppressing West implanted in the universe of the oppressed. Israel is not Israel; it is the embodied representation of the Oppressor of the world thrust into the bowels of the poor Arab masses. The Israelis are not seen as men, women, elderly citizens and children, but as ourselves giving our best in our position as oppressors. For a political narrative like that of the eternal left, men, women, elderly citizens and children are just cannon fodder for political signifiers. Not even the Palestinians are men, women, elderly people and children, they are the flesh of the Oppressed whose slaughter must be exposed and denounced. After all, of what use would the flesh of the oppressed be if not to prove *coram populo* that the baddies are using it as meat to slaughter? Is this not what history produce it for?

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