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New Perspectives for German-Jewish Studies

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ANTISEMITISM REVISITED

ANTHONY D. KAUDERS

PSYCHOHISTORY HAS A bad name, and for good reason. Historians are loath to psychoanalyze individuals, whether these be dead or alive, and they are equally loath to pass judgment on personalities, whether these be ordinary or pathological. Students and laypeople, however, find the idea of combining history with psychology attractive, even commonsensical.¹ The appeal may be misguided and confirm the reservations mentioned above. But I would like to suggest that the interplay between psychology and history makes perfect sense, even though this interplay need not be called psychohistory and even though the interplay I am concerned with highlights the benefits for the historian rather than the advantages for the psychologist.

It makes perfect sense on several grounds: it is, for example, presumptuous to suppose that hundreds of scholars working in either field are somehow deluded and that their findings should therefore be discounted. The benefit of today's much-touted interdisciplinarity is to recognize the possibility that experts dedicating their lives to an area of study (related to one's own research) are doing so in good faith and not in order to delegitimize other disciplines. While historians may question the search for laws and behavioral patterns, they can profit from psychological theories. Not only are these often derived from clinical observation or methodologically innovative experimentation, they also proffer explanations that can refine the more mundane approaches encountered in the historical literature. Finally, historians have regularly appropriated ideas and models from sociology, economics, anthropology, literary theory, and gender studies. To critically exploit the work of Weber, Marx, Foucault, or Butler, but to refuse to consider the equally pathbreaking oeuvre of Freud, Lewin, Tajfel, or Sherif is hard to justify.

The aim of this chapter is twofold: First, I would like to remind readers that psychological theories have always informed the study of antisemitism. Historians have repeatedly invoked psychological concepts, often assuming that these references sufficed as explanations. Historians have also resorted to psychoanalytic interpretations, often relying on sweeping judgments that are difficult to sustain. Second, I would like to suggest that past practice—believing that allusions to psychological terminology will do and relying unduly on Freudian theory—has led scholars to abandon the search for alternative (social) psychological models that might allow for a better understanding of antisemitism. I hope to be able to show that revisiting the psychology of Jew-hatred is well worth the effort and that it may contribute to future research in German-Jewish history.

THE USES AND ABUSES OF PSYCHOLOGY IN ANTISEMITISM STUDIES

Hayden White's *Metahistory*, the most prominent attempt to disclose the narrative conventions underlying historical research, refers to archetypal plotments (romantic, tragic, epic, pastoral, farcical, comic) that have determined the way in which historians write about the past.² Far from being neutral conveyors of meaning, narrative plots reveal political proclivities, moral attitudes, and religious sentiments. "As a symbolic structure," White writes, "the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events with different emotional valences."³ Aside from contributing to debates about the epistemological status of history, White's perspective is helpful in uncovering narrative routines that, in the case of antisemitism studies, have shown little concern for the relevant theoretical underpinnings. Although the list of works that have used psychological terminology in this manner is extensive, I would like to illustrate my point by focusing on two classic studies in the field, Robert S. Wistrich's *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* and David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism*.

Wistrich is sensitive to the psychological dimensions of antisemitism. Although he concedes that, initially at least, antisemitism may have been a reaction to "Jewish exclusiveness" (which, clearly, also suggests a psychological explanation), he goes on to stress the ubiquity of Jew-hatred in places where the Jewish population had been expelled, such as medieval England or Spain after 1492. This kind of "free-floating anti-Semitism," Wistrich argues, thrived on "archetypal fears, anxieties and reflexes that seem to defy any rational analysis."⁴ What is more, his accounts of both Christian and modern antisemitism rely on psychological explanations, including projection, repression, and feelings of guilt. According to the doyen of antisemitism studies,

Christianity's "morbid fear of all sexuality (. . .), the unrestrained invective against women and the downgrading of marriage to mere procreation were of a kind with the projection of all the repressed 'sinful' (i.e. sexual) impulses onto the 'carnal' Jew."⁵ Repression was also at work in assaults on the Jews throughout the medieval period. Degrading their legal status and turning them into pariahs in European society, for instance, testified to the "latent doubts" Christians hoped to silence concerning the meaning of central tenets of their faith, most prominently transubstantiation.⁶ These doubts persisted and contributed to the "well-poisoning hysteria" and subsequent conspiracy theories such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In all these cases, the notion that Jews wished to take "revenge on their subjugators" suggested an underlying bad conscience about the way in which the Christian majority had treated the Jews in the past.⁷ In short, Wistrich's plot relies on concepts culled from psychology, but he either dismisses these as beyond "rational analysis" or assumes that they are self-explanatory. References to the psychological literature are missing.

Nirenberg's aim is to establish how Judaism became a category with which non-Jews made sense of and criticized their world. Yet the absence or unimportance of anti-Judaism in certain cultures ("the vast seas of indifference") is left unexplained,⁸ although the reasons for the difference between, say, Babylonia and Egypt would allow for an appreciation of why Babylonians did not require the "category" of Judaism to interpret their universe. But Nirenberg also wishes to downplay social or political explanations for the emergence of Egyptian anti-Judaism, including the argument that Egyptians resented the Jews as allies of the Persians, whom they regarded as oppressors.⁹ Instead, he prefers to focus on "foundational" ideologies and "deep" antagonisms. The "infectious theory of knowledge" he associates with Mark, Matthew, and Luke, for example, suggests that several psychological processes were at work, including the fear that the emerging Christian order (or social dominance) was precarious and demanded ever stronger distinctions to uphold one's own self-categorization. It is only toward the end of the volume that Nirenberg draws attention to the underlying "goal" of his "project," namely to "encourage reflection about our 'projective behavior,' that is about ways in which our deployment of concepts into and onto the world might generate 'pathological' fantasies of Judaism."¹⁰ Like Wistrich, Nirenberg is sensitive to the psychological dimensions of antisemitism, but his broad claims about "infection," "pathology," and "projection" imply that there is consensus on the meaning of these concepts and that the purported processes mentioned in this connection operate according to the same criteria, regardless of theoretical background, social category, and historical context.

Not all scholars of antisemitism have used psychological notions unselfconsciously or cursorily. In fact, there is a rich literature on the subject based in large part on Freudian theory. Much of this scholarship has alerted historians to the possibility that,

in addition to cultural, economic, and political factors, psychology too can explain manifestations of Jew-hatred. Psychoanalytical readings of antisemitism range from the speculative and spectacular to more modest accounts of the phenomenon. Let me begin with a few of the former.

According to Bela Grunberger, monotheism installed an all-powerful father whose role it was to nip Oedipal desire in the bud. The Jews were identified with paternal authority, and antisemitism became the Gentile revolt against castration anxiety.¹¹ Rudolph Loewenstein similarly emphasized Oedipal dynamics to explain the persistence of antisemitism. The ancient conflict between Jews and Christians represented the struggle between an older and a younger faith—a religion standing for the fathers and a religion standing for the sons. The Jew, like the real father image of the antisemite, is hated, loved, and feared. The Holocaust, this reading suggests, was an attempt to destroy this personification of the superego.¹² Otto Fenichel maintained that antisemites responded to the uncanniness of the Jews. Jewish rituals, in particular, provoked feelings of apprehension. The practice of circumcision implied that Jews were a source of punishment and that this punishment took on sexual forms. Castration was written into the Jewish tradition, as it were. Like all human beings, Gentiles also repressed their sexual greed and murderous tendencies, projecting these cravings onto the Jews instead. As a result, the Jews were equated with the carnal, licentious, polluted, and deadly.¹³

It is easy to reject most of the arguments put forward by Grunberger, Loewenstein, and Fenichel. There is indeed little point in positing causal connections between antiquity and the twentieth century or in examining the way in which Jews have figured as the personification of the superego or in linking circumcision with castration anxiety and castration anxiety with Jew-hatred. Several counterarguments, ranging from the methodological (causality, representativeness, contingency) to the historical (antisemitism in non-Christian societies, circumcision in Islam, Jewish lack of power in the diaspora), rule out any meaningful consideration of these explanatory models. Some elements of the psychoanalytic approach, however, can be taken more seriously, not least “regression,” “ambivalence,” and “projection,” all of which allow for slight modifications that can be assimilated to less totalizing accounts.¹⁴

A brief discussion of projection may illuminate the way in which an important Freudian term has been employed to great effect. *The Authoritarian Personality* remains the best-known attempt to analyse antisemitism with recourse to projection. For Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, R. Nevitt Sanford, and Daniel J. Levenson, Jew-hatred amounted to “a kind of compromise between underlying urges and hostile stereotypes on the one hand, and the demands of conscience and the weight of concrete experience on the other.”¹⁵ The absence of an inner superego required the individual to “seek some organizing and coordinating agency outside of himself.”¹⁶ The

belief in and devotion to authority figures followed from such a search for an external superego. At the same time, unconscious impulses that could neither be integrated in the self nor expressed against the externalized authority were displaced or projected onto other groups. This process was not simply scapegoating, as the “authoritarian *must*, out of an inner necessity, turn his aggression against outgroups. He must do so because he is psychologically unable to attack ingroup authorities, rather than because of intellectual confusion regarding the source of his frustration.”¹⁷ Projection was therefore a device for “keeping id-drives ego-alien.”¹⁸

This is a subtle analysis that tries to grasp projection not merely as the inability to confront one’s own (carnal, sadistic, destructive) urges, but maintains that antisemitism exists because authoritarian personalities cannot vent their aggression against those whom they need as stand-ins for immature or unstable “superegos” (internalized social rules or consciences). A diverse group of historians has since then used projection to describe different forms of antisemitism: Jan Gross, for instance, has argued that Poles projected their own attitude of gratitude and relief toward the German occupiers in 1941 onto an “entrenched narrative” about how Jews allegedly behaved vis-à-vis the Soviets in 1939;¹⁹ and Helmut Walser Smith has suggested that Germans in the Kaiserreich projected the unthinkable idea that the Eucharist resembled ritual cannibalism onto Jews whom they consequently blamed for ritually murdering Christian children.²⁰

Mindful of specific contexts, such applications of “projection” (or “ambivalence” and “regression”) can indeed provide insight into antisemitic behavior. Still, questions remain about the use of psychoanalytical models. Aside from the common critique that Freudian terminology connotes diseased minds (psychic weakness, psychopathology, mass delusion), there are several reasons for being prudent in this respect: first, scholars writing in the Freudian tradition do not distinguish between the personality psychology that this tradition rests on and the social psychology that they seek to invoke when analyzing antisemitism. From the perspective of personality psychology, differences in human beings are enduring dispositions that are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior. Social psychologists, by contrast, wish to fathom how persons are affected by or transformed into collectives. They accentuate the dynamic and situational elements of group behavior. Groups, they believe, arise in specific situations and do not depend on individual characteristics or specific social makeups. Given the performative nature of group behavior, social psychologists share a common belief in the volatility of behavior.

Second, because scholars beholden to Freudian discourse do not differentiate between personality and social psychology, they themselves tend to project notions traditionally associated with personality psychology (character/character structures, personality/personality structures) onto groups, peoples, and societies. In so doing,

they tend to ignore the fact that personality psychology cannot tell us anything about the *truth* of certain assertions or about the *content* of certain cultures. From the point of view of such a personality psychology writ large, most societies in the past, with their torture chambers, auto-da-fés, witch hunts, infanticides, and crusades, must be diagnosed as psychologically disturbed, to say the least. Not only do historians reject such anachronistic approaches, personality psychologists themselves contend that the “big five” personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience) can be found in the same proportion of people across time, disputing the conclusion that some societies are more *prone* to psychopathological behavior than others.²¹

Third, psychoanalytical studies of antisemitism do not provide tenable narratives of historical change. Relying on the premise that certain forms of primary socialization produce deep character flaws, scholars working in this tradition must invariably presuppose rigid child-rearing practices to explain authoritarian conduct. They must also presuppose that these ingrained attitudes can only be changed through psychotherapy. Yet many cultures in the past (and present) have embraced such practices without distinguishing themselves as exceptionally prejudiced or antisemitic. In a similar vein, the relatively rapid decline of (overt forms of) antisemitism in West Germany since the Holocaust cannot be immediately linked to changes in child-rearing.²² It would be impossible, finally, to postulate that the rise of Islamophobia and Judeophobia today, whether in Western Europe or the United States, was due to parenting styles that suddenly emerged one or two generations ago.

FUTURE AVENUES

Should historians of German Jewry dispense with psychology altogether, the occasional reference to projection (ambivalence, regression) notwithstanding? Although psychoanalysis has often proved fruitless in understanding the past, the case for integrating psychology into the study of antisemitism is difficult to dismiss. While attention to “discourse” enables us to imagine deep structures that transcend individual psyches, specific situations, or cultural boundaries, “discourse” fails to render intelligible how a particular semantic stock turns into praxis: the language of antisemitism, after all, does not do the maiming or killing on its own. Even Shulamit Volkov, a scholar recognized for formulating a particularly compelling semantic approach (“cultural code”), has made passing references to the “authoritarian personality” or the “therapeutic function” of Jew-hatred.²³ Indeed, she has also, in a later contribution, indicated that “cultural codes” prevail “in times of stability, or even growth and prosperity,” not in “days of wrath.”²⁴ The processes

by which codes engender “days of wrath” or “days of wrath” transcend codes are left unexplored. Or, to put it in slightly different terms: just as it is impossible to predict behavior from emotions (fear, for example, elicits all sorts of responses), so it is impossible to predict behavior solely on the basis of the tenacity or popularity or ubiquity of a distinct discourse.²⁵

Before I suggest how and where psychology can complement historical work, it is important to remind readers that a psychology that pertains exclusively to the field of Judeophobia, as if the minds of antisemites functioned differently from the minds of other racists or bigots, cannot exist. Psychological findings provide tools to comprehend Jew-baiters and Jew-hatred alike, but they do not provide definitions of *the* Jew-baiter or Jew-hatred *as such*. Applying psychology to the history of antisemitism must therefore be based on the much more modest hope of coming to grips with disparate forms of antisemitism rather than trying to identify one theory that can explain every antisemitic act, past and present. It also means that the psychology employed to this end can be used to address other forms of prejudice as well. Some scholars have criticized this caveat as foregoing any attempt at delimiting the specificity of antisemitism. But for historians who are convinced that behavior is always also context-dependent, psychology is meant to serve as a means to appreciate better how antisemitism came about rather than as a means to transform antisemitism studies into a sociology-inspired theory.

If one had to venture a guess as to which work on Jew-hatred that explicitly appropriates psychological findings has had the greatest impact, Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* immediately comes to mind.²⁶ Browning did not discount ideology as a motivating force, but sought to demonstrate that members of Police Battalion 101, most of whom belonged to Hamburg’s working class, participated in the mass murder of Jews for several equally important reasons: careerism, the pressure for conformity, and the desensitization and brutalization that came with the killing routine. Browning engaged critically with the theories of well-known social psychologists, including Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. Later genocide scholars followed suit, bringing further concepts (deindividuation, diffusion of responsibility) and further social psychologists (Leon Festinger, Henri Tajfel) into play.

Browning has been criticized for failing to assess the relative significance of the various contributing factors mentioned in connection with the Holocaust.²⁷ The response to this legitimate objection, however, cannot be yet another overarching system of thought. Rather, it would behoove historians to try even harder to grasp the “pathways leading to certain outcomes.” To achieve this goal, that is, to differentiate between “essential variables and contextual conditions,”²⁸ psychological theory may figure as an additional means, building on Browning’s pathbreaking study. This interdisciplinary path, needless to say, should not be confined to genocide studies.

In the following section, I would like to discuss briefly several exemplary social psychological theories (social identity, cognitive redefinition, cognitive dissonance, escalating commitments) that, alongside other similarly powerful methods, could prove promising in future work on antisemitism. I will concentrate on social psychology for the simple reason that personality psychology is usually too static for the historian, positing as it does dispositional differences that would make it difficult to detect change over time. If there are approximately the same number of extroverts and introverts or neurotic and emotionally stable personalities in a given population, this information will hardly allow us to discern antisemitic prejudice, unless we state the obvious, namely that the extroverts can be found among the rabble rousers and the neurotics among the particularly sadistic perpetrators. The relatively stable (and low) number of “psychopaths” in a given society cannot account for recurrent mass violence, massacres, and wars in human history. In fact, people with so-called “antisocial personality disorders” would have hardly succeeded in the organizations (military, killing units, police battalions, SS, Reichssicherheitshauptamt) responsible for the Holocaust.²⁹ While the tendencies attributed to different personalities permit us to distinguish between *generalized* patterns of behavior (the quiet introvert, the conscientious academic, the agreeable cleric), they do not permit us to predict how people will act in specific situations, when otherwise consistent comportment is disrupted by unexpected circumstances. In short, antisemitism in large sections of the population cannot be put down to the traits of the individuals comprising these substantial groups of people.

How are the theories mentioned above relevant to antisemitism studies? According to *social identity theory*, individuals do not lose themselves (deindividuation) in groups or crowd-like situations, but shift their self-categorization from the individual to the group level. Social identity is therefore “understood as tied to action in the world.”³⁰ This action regularly involves emotions toward other groups, the intensity of which waxes and wanes depending on the “salient levels of self-categorization.”³¹ When a group categorizes itself in a certain way (American or women), this can lead to higher levels of anti-Muslim sentiments, for instance. If the self-identification changes to other categories (such as students or citizens of the world), these feelings may diminish.³²

Groups *re-categorize* or *redefine* themselves regularly, depending on the situation they find themselves in. Individuals, too, engage in cognitive redefinition, often forming new groups in the process. Sometimes, neighbors and business associates become strangers, even enemies. Whether friends remain friends or business associates remain business associates depends on the power of rival modes of self-categorization (transforming the Jewish cattle dealer from a business associate to an enemy of the people, for example).³³ More dramatically, redefining one’s own behavior allows perpetrators to fend off self-doubts or self-censure. Thieves, plunderers, rapists, and (mass) murderers thereby “preserve their view of themselves as moral agents even while they are inflicting

extraordinary evil on others.” Sometimes the victims are blamed for their victimhood in an effort to confirm processes of recategorization.³⁴

Historians of both German antisemitism and the Holocaust have *alluded* to the psychology behind social identity theory. Alon Confino is perhaps the most vocal proponent of the view that Germans in the Third Reich ostracized, humiliated, and murdered the Jews in order “to strengthen the self and build an emotional community that defied this inner sense of transgression.”³⁵ But he is not alone. Committing crimes against Jews and other groups, another prominent scholar writes, enabled Germans to unify the nation between 1933 and 1945, creating “a particular kind of belonging.”³⁶ Various works have traced this development on the micro-level. During the April 1933 anti-Jewish boycott, for example, members of the police requested that the rights of Jewish citizens be curtailed so that the law enforcement officers would no longer have to be forced to protect the minority.³⁷ When the SS came together for “comradely” gatherings, moreover, they not only did so to enjoy each other’s company or express their anger, but “also to consider themselves members of a community of fate.”³⁸

These forms of self- or recategorization can have a number of causes, including *cognitive dissonance*. When persons are confronted with an acute conflict between their ethically problematic beliefs or actions on the one hand and their own self-image (based on moral injunctions internalized over time) on the other, they must decide how to deal with the situation. Sometimes it may be possible to ignore the conflict or postpone its resolution, but more commonly a swift response is required. Restructuring one’s self-image in such a manner as to conform to the morally problematic beliefs and actions is a typical strategy of dealing with cognitive dissonance.

Several historians have either touched on or directly addressed cognitive dissonance. Research on antisemitism in the German countryside, for example, has revealed the existence of a relatively mild form of cognitive dissonance, at least in light of the immediate consequences. Although Protestant peasants lit fires for the Jews on the Sabbath, accepted Jews into the local veterans’ associations, and invited them to local festivities, the antisemitic movement in some villages gained between 74 and 84 percent of the vote in the late nineteenth century. This paradoxical behavior, it can be argued, was an attempt to accommodate both the relatively amicable relationship between Jews and Gentiles of the past and the more recent apprehension that the Jews were wielding too much power in the present. The “downfall” of the antisemitic parties in the years to come can be read as a sign that many peasants wished to rid themselves of this emotional quandary.³⁹ Cognitive dissonance has also been used as an explanatory model for the enactment of genocide. In the words of Aristotle Kallis, by “relativizing the problematic nature of the action” or “endorsing new definitions of what is acceptable,” perpetrators rendered the “option of elimination more desirable or accessible.”⁴⁰

The conflict that is cognitive dissonance may stem from beliefs or actions. Some beliefs that collide with moral injunctions are due to comparisons between our experiences and our expectations. *Relative deprivation* rests on perceptions of injustice, usually distributive injustice—feeling that one’s group has less than it deserves relative to other groups. Individuals tend to reflect on their own group’s experience of social, cultural, or material capital and expect the future to be similar. The perceived status of other groups “generates expectations for how well we think our own group should be doing. In turn, we feel respectively deprived or gratified.”⁴¹ Prejudice against groups who appear to be thriving compared to one’s own group may result from this interplay between experiences and expectations.

Relative deprivation can serve as a useful rejoinder to the strong reservations voiced by some researchers about the so-called correspondence (or “realist”) theory of antisemitism. These experts have denied that Judeophobia proceeds from a real conflict between Jews and Gentiles, going so far as to declare that “antisemitism has nothing to do with real Jews.”⁴² This misgiving is understandable in view of the concern that Jews might appear responsible for the enmity that led to their persecution and mass murder.⁴³ But although there are plenty of instances where real conflict did exist and where real conflict was used as a pretext to conjure up antisemitic stereotypes, relative deprivation allows us to reframe the issue from one about conflicts over resources or theological truths to one about perceptions of social or cultural capital. Accordingly, we can acknowledge the psychological mechanisms at work without at the same time ignoring the transformation of German Jewry after emancipation. We can also avoid psychologizing about “the lack of self-confidence” among Germans, as if feelings of relative deprivation are confined to weak-willed and fainthearted people.⁴⁴

Actions that challenge moral norms and occasion cognitive dissonance usually take the form of “a sequence of seemingly small, innocuous steps—a series of *escalating commitments*.”⁴⁵ Social psychologists have dubbed this the “foot-in-the-door-phenomenon,” pointing to the common occurrence that people who commit themselves to small requests subsequently comply more easily with larger requests. The literature on escalating commitments suggests that initial, relatively inconsequential immoral acts can make subsequent evildoing less troublesome. Even so, once the evildoing is apparent, cognitive dissonance demands a redefinition of the act. Self-categorization—“I belong to a group that is threatened by another group and therefore needs to protect itself”—is a likely reaction to the dilemma. As in much of the foregoing discussion, it is genocide scholars who have recognized the advantage of social psychological theorizing, in this case with regard to escalating commitments. Some have described the matter in terms of a continuum, at the beginning of which stands something seemingly harmless that eventually culminates in extermination. Others have used

the image of a “chain reaction” that, once set in motion, “*may* catalyse the transition from desire to concentrate intention to the enactment of genocide.”⁴⁶ Common to this analysis is the notion of “small incremental steps” that help facilitate the illusion of “minimal change.”⁴⁷

THESE ARE SOME of the ways in which historians of antisemitism, in their quest to ascertain the interconnection between discourse and action, can borrow from psychology. A handful of Holocaust historians have already ventured along this path, most notably Christopher Browning. Yet colleagues in related fields, this essay proposes, might follow in his footsteps, all the more so because much academic work on the subject remains wedded to antisemitism as semantics, rhetoric, and ideology. The germination, proliferation, and dissemination of this hostility, as well as its metamorphosis from “linguistic violence” to arson, looting, boycott, assault, and murder, are bound to be understood with greater sophistication if we take notice of the way in which psychologists have endeavored to explain how collective behavior produces groups in the first place, why groups try to distinguish themselves from other groups, how group identity is strengthened through criminal acts, why criminal acts lead to further criminal acts, and how crime is viewed as indispensable in the struggle for group survival. This appeal to psychology does not mean that we should discount other methods, whether culled from sociology, anthropology, or political science. And it does not mean that we should discard more familiar psychological interpretations, especially “projection” and “regression.” It simply means that we should embrace ideas and tools from all disciplines insofar as they make antisemitism more intelligible.

NOTES

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