

Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Racism: Europe's Recurring Evils?

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(Translated by Paul A. Silverstein)

Having read Matti Bunzl's article in one sitting, I completely agree with the historical perspective he brings to questions of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. He sets out distinctions which are absolutely vital, given the general confusion on these issues which currently exists in a Europe in the process of trying to construct a supranational identity, but where opposition to its project remains strong. Paradoxically, this opposition is not always directly connected with

Europe itself. In the case of France, the 2004 debate around the adoption referendum for the European Constitution crystallized around domestic political issues, over fears of globalization and the establishment of a neo-liberal economy which threatened to call into question social benefits jealously defended by French citizens. It goes without saying that nationalist (*chauvines*) considerations also played a role in the no-votes in France and the Netherlands.

If Matti Bunzl underlines anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the construction of a New Europe, it is because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the aftermath of September 11th has reinforced the everyday character of these two sides of racism and exclusion. There are certainly distinctions to be made between these two phenomena, but I would not necessarily make them in the same way that he does. Without a doubt, anti-Semitism, born in the nineteenth century and persisting into the twentieth century almost to the point of the extermination of Europe's Jewry, tended to protect "the ethnic purity of the nation-state," while Islamophobia today seeks to safeguard the "future of European civilization." The author takes the necessary precautions to avoid making gross generalizations over this distinction, all of which makes his essay all the more intellectually honest.

I will begin with anti-Semitism. Today in a Europe trying to atone for its guilt in the Holocaust, there is no longer any place for anti-Semitism as a political ideology. No politician seeking credibility would dare to adopt such an ideology that would effectively cost him his position. In a country such as France, the

memory of the genocide has been transformed into a veritable national obsession. The cardinal place granted to the Holocaust serves to otherwise absolve the country from other dark moments of its history for which it has balked at publicly recognizing responsibility, including, until recently, slavery and colonialism. Politicians distinguish themselves by their (occasionally prejudicial) efforts to be the first to publicly speak out at sites where anti-Semitic acts have just been committed, efforts not made in the case of racist attacks against Arabs or Blacks. Politicians were even victims of their own zeal in 2004 when, after publicly apologizing for two supposed "anti-Semitic attacks," further investigations proved that the attacks had been staged.* Through acts of public compassion for Jewish suffering during the Second World War, and, by extension, for every anti-Semitic attack since committed, politicians also shield themselves from criticism of their discriminatory policies against other visible minorities.

Ulterior motives may also play a role in the "Judeo-centrism" of certain politicians. Some of them sustain a fantasy of Jewish power, particularly in terms of Jewish control over the media, which makes them apprehensive of not acting accordingly. In a country which claims to be a bastion of secularism (*laïcité*) and anti-sectarianism, all that seems to matter for political leaders is their attendance at the annual dinners of the Representative Council of Jews of France (CRIF), a

*The attacks in question were the "RERB affair," in which a young non-Jewish woman simulated an anti-Semitic attack on a suburban commuter line, and the burning of the Jewish community center on Rue Popincourt in the heart of Paris, which was later proven to be the work of a Jewish employee of the center.

political organ, out of fear of offending Jews. All of which not only bolsters this institution, granting it a legitimacy which it otherwise does not have, but also reinforces for Arab-Muslims and Blacks, who consider themselves to be excluded from the political process, the notion that Jews are *insiders*, while they remain *outsiders*. Moreover, Jews themselves boast of being the "sentinels of the Republic," thus confirming their status as *insiders* and provoking resentment from other visible minorities. Reproducing the "royal alliance," an earlier political arrangement characteristic of the Jewish condition during the Middle Ages, Jews today expose themselves anew to attacks from groups resisting the state. In the past, such a unilateral alliance proved to be more dangerous than imagined. Today, even without the obvious need of adopting such a strategy, insofar as Jews have full citizenship, they nonetheless have done so, becoming thus, despite their insider status, all the more vulnerable to future discrimination. As long as Jews remain protected under the Republic, they risk little. However, with the rise in social status of other minority groups in the decades to come, with these groups coming to occupy positions of political responsibility and strategic power, and with their populations voting in greater and greater numbers, Jews risk losing, for electoral reasons alone, the privileges which today protect them. Having failed to make alliances with other minorities, due to considerations relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they may find themselves in an unfavorable position in a future socio-political configuration of France.

Meanwhile, given the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Arab-Muslims tend to identify with the plight of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, assimilating the injustices which they face in Europe with the victimization of their "brothers" under the Israeli occupation. The next step of conflating all Jews with Israelis is one easily taken. One must also take into account the role played by anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish propaganda, sometimes of the worst kind and calqued from common tropes of European pre-war anti-Semitism, emerging from the Arab world and introduced into Arab-Muslim homes in Europe via satellite television; also note the role played by certain fundamentalist imams from the suburbs (*les banlieues*) who have tended to include anti-Semitic themes in their repertoire in the hopes of attracting more worshippers.

The anti-Semitism found among Arab-Muslims and, to a lesser extent, among Blacks is connected to this complex conjuncture of resentment, identification with the Palestinian cause, and the experience of heightened discrimination. Arab-Muslims and Blacks face veritable barriers to social mobility in an Old World where a system of social class, networks, residence, and education has come to replace meritocracy. In contrast, in the United States the myth of the *self-made man* persists, and dreams of success through merit alone, while generally unrealized, remain strong.

In terms of the anti-Semitism which plagues Europe today, I find myself differing from Bunzl's assessment that it is fundamentally new and no longer emerging from far Right or Catholic circles. Even if I completely agree that today's anti-Semitism no longer

In addition, over the last few years, the Jewish leadership's contacts with these parties have deepened. Such contacts were evidenced in 2006, during a protest march which followed the torture and assassination of a young Jew named Ilan Halimi by a group of delinquents whose leader was a Black man of Muslim faith and was suspected of anti-Semitism, although the investigation had yet to be concluded. For the march, the President of the Representative Council of Jews of France, Roger Cuikerman, had authorized the participation of the head of the far Right, Philippe de Villiers, as well as several of his acolytes, and later strongly condemned their last-minute expulsion from the procession by young Jewish participants. Islamophobia, and especially anti-Arabism, thus serves to unite the Jewish leadership and the far Right at this particular historical conjuncture.

On the question of anti-Semitism, Matti Bunzl distinguishes between the alarmists and the deniers, forgetting the role played by the Jewish leadership in Europe which has deployed anti-Semitism in order to defend Israel from the media and public opinion which has been won over by the Palestinians as their new, emblematic victims. In France, the Jewish leadership has similarly deployed anti-Semitism and moreover has utilized it to provoke a wave of emigration to Israel that has been greatly coveted by Israeli authorities who see France as having the largest supply of Jews in Europe. Such efforts at soliciting a mass exodus have failed. As Cécilia Gabizon and Johan Weisz have demonstrated in *OPA sur les Juifs de France: Enquête sur un exode programmé (2000-2005)*, the annual

number of emigrants has not surpassed 3,000, at which rate it would take two or three centuries to empty France of its Jews. Jewish organizations, manned by a young generation of organic intellectuals, gained a new momentum after September 11th, when they launched a publicity campaign intended to burnish Israel's reputation which had been largely tarnished by the second Intifada. They profited from the Right's presidential campaign which was based on a security platform, and accused the ruling Left of having downplayed the threat of anti-Semitism. Soon after, the Right adopted pro-Jewish domestic politics, all the while maintaining a pro-Arab foreign policy. This conjuncture did not help in the larger fight against anti-Arab-Muslim racism.

One question continues to haunt me: Why have we not witnessed an outburst of anti-Semitism in the wake of the recent Israeli bombing of Lebanon, an attack unanimously supported by all Jewish institutions, organic intellectuals, and the majority of European Jews? According to the prevailing logic, such an explosion should have occurred. It is impossible to account for this lack solely with reference to the state's vigilant combat against anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, regardless of the precise cause, it clearly would have been counterproductive for the Jewish leadership to launch even a minimal campaign against anti-Semitism at that time, given the prevailing public opinion against the war and the powerful images transmitted by the media. Such a campaign would not have had the slightest effect on the media portrayal, on political decision making, or on general public opinion. It would have

even probably had the inverse effect. Hence the low profile which the leadership adopted.

In addition, particularly in Belgium and France, the Jewish leadership's conflation of a critique of Israel with anti-Semitism has given rise, especially in France, to a number of court cases brought by Jewish activists against journalists and intellectuals in order to silence them. None of these trials have ended in a guilty verdict of anti-Semitism, in spite of the activists' best efforts.

In sum, despite several points of divergence, I find myself in general agreement with Matti Bunzl's analysis. My main hesitation centers on his use of the word, "Islamophobia," which he borrows from the EUMC's project: "The Fight against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Bringing Communities together." Using this word reduces the larger struggle to one of religion. Arabs are commonly referred to as "Muslims," even when their religion is not actively practiced and only functions as a mode of cultural belonging, as it does for the majority of Jews today. We must not over-emphasize the religious dimensions of what is, at its core, racism. In 2003, in a country as anti-sectarian and avowedly secular (*laïque*) as France, Nicolas Sarkozy organized Muslims — which is to say Arabs — around a religious institution, the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), much as Napoleon had in 1808 for the Jews in creating the Jewish Consistories. The CFCM, whatever its intentions (the desire to have a single interlocutor, to promote cultural adaptation, etc.), is an index of the government's inability to imagine Arabs outside of

their religion — effectively depriving them of any purely political standing. It is true that Pierre-André Taguieff has recently revived the term "Judeophobia," previously used by Léon Pinsker, one of the first advocates of Zionism in the nineteenth century, in reference to the pogroms — but Taguieff implies a very different meaning for the term. Must we necessarily introduce the neologism "Islamophobia" in order to counter the ambiguous concept of "Judeophobia"?

Finally, I am less inclined than Bunzl to mark a clear distinction between anti-Semitism and "Islamophobia," even if I agree with his judicious contextualization of the two. It is impossible to deny that the same rejection of the Other operates in the two cases, both emerging from a general xenophobia that for years swept through the West and which continues to rampage today. Neither the instigators nor the causes are identical, but the two function in essentially similar ways and include common themes of exclusion. On the eve of the 2005 French National Assembly vote over the law prohibiting manifest religious signs in public schools — a law which in point of fact principally targeted the wearing of the veil — President Jacques Chirac gave a memorable speech, the main themes of which were already present in the text of Abbé Grégoire on the emancipation of Jews. For Chirac, Muslims' emancipation would occur through the liberation of their women — a conventional defense that treats the veil as the most significant problem in France, as if the approximately 1500 veiled girls could threaten the Republic. The governments emerging from the French Revolution, following the path of

Abbé Grégoire, had also called on Jews to re-make themselves, to effectively erase all distinctive signs of their religious identity, in order to qualify for citizenship. The advocates of emancipation also considered Judaism to be obscurantist and incompatible with European mores of the time, to lack respect for women, and to display a marked tendency for high birth rates, as Henri-Baptiste Grégoire has shown in *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs*. One could similarly cite the anti-Semitic campaigns of the nineteenth century and of the decades preceding the Second World War, all of which also claimed that Jews were not assimilable. The only thing missing in today's anti-Arab campaigns is the denunciation of the Rothschilds' fortune, an organizing canard of anti-Semitism on both the Left and the Right for many years.

In times of crisis, France constructs its identity in opposition to the Other. It did so in the nineteenth century, during the rise of a modernity which threatened its traditional social configuration. It did so, in part, through the birth of modern anti-Semitism. Germany is likewise not exempt from such crises, including the economic crisis which led to the Nazis attaining power. One could cite many such examples. Today, the expansion of the European Union, unfettered globalization, and economic neo-liberalism have resulted in the hardening of identities and the growth of nationalisms. This time, the Other is the Muslim Arab, who replaces the Jew of yesteryear. The latest example of this transformation was the law against the denial of the Armenian genocide, voted into effect on

12 October 2006 by National Assembly deputies from both the Left and Right, united not only out of electoral concerns (given the approximately 500,000 Armenians living in France), but also in order to construct a final obstacle to Turkey's entry into the European Union as the first Muslim country. In the matter of xenophobia, will history repeat itself?