



The return of antisemitism? Waves of societalization and what conditions them

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Abstract

This essay employs societalization theory to explain the disturbing renewal of publicly antisemitic beliefs and actions in contemporary Western societies. These new explosions of anti-Jewish hatred are caused, not by increases in antisemitic feelings, but by the weakening of prohibitions against their public expression. Since Western civil spheres introduced such prohibitions in the early nineteenth century, there have been waves of societalization stigmatizing antisemitism and continuous backlash movements against them. The German backlash culminated with the Holocaust and triggered a powerful societalizing movement that allowed massive Jewish incorporation into Western societies. This post-Holocaust societalizing movement, however, was highly variable, both temporally and spatially, and in recent decades the deleterious effects of such incompleteness have been exacerbated by declining Holocaust memory, new symbolizations of Israel, and shifts in progressive ideologies. Utopian hopes for “never again” have been dashed. Yet, even as antisemitic narratives are *once again* providing cultural fodder for backlash movements, another wave of societalizing protest is gathering force inside Western civil spheres.

Keywords Societalization · Antisemitism · Culture structure · Civil sphere · Comparative framework

This essay offers a new theoretical framework for understanding and explaining the explosion of publicly antisemitic speech and action in Western societies today. Rather than linking this resurgent bigotry to increased antisemitic feelings, we argue, it reflects the weakening of prohibitions against their public manifestation. To explain this weakening prohibition, we advance a more elaborated, historically nuanced model of societalization (Alexander 2018a, 2019). Post-Holocaust, public

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expressions of anti-Jewish feeling came to be widely sanctioned in Western societies, but this societalizing process was highly uneven. Acknowledging the obdurate cultural power of antisemitism and the extraordinary variations in national efforts to fight it, we suggest that societalization is not a one-time only occurrence, but an iterative process manifest in periodic waves. These “waves of societalization” are path dependent, building upon memories, cultural structures, and social policies of earlier efforts at civil repair. It is the inability to achieve thoroughgoing societalization—along with declining Holocaust memory, new symbolizations of Israel, and shifting progressive ideologies—that has allowed antisemitism to once again become a readily available stigmatizing narrative, one that backlash movements can deploy to “explain” grievances in conspiratorial, anti-Jewish ways.¹

The explosion of anti-racist movements like BLM and anti-sexist movements like #MeToo have dominated public attention space, along with the anti-democratic populist backlash movements against them, to which the jet fuel of anti-immigration has been added. Hidden in plain sight amidst these hugely combustible confrontations, however, has been the revival of publicly antisemitic words and deeds.

In Hungary, the right-wing government led by Viktor Orbán, although outwardly pro-Israel and bearing a façade of being Jew-friendly, is notable for flirting publicly with antisemitism, e.g., using antisemitic stereotypes in its ongoing campaign against George Soros. In Poland, antisemitism is state *sanctioned*. The government and public discourse openly promote antisemitic discourse, mostly in the form of Judeo-Communist stereotypes. Poland’s right-wing discourse equates antisemitism with “anti-Polonism” (Polonophobia/anti-Polish sentiment), attributed to both Jews from Israel and the US. The rise of the far right in Germany, particularly the AfD, has been accompanied by frequent public demonstrations of antisemitism; and, despite its relative regional and electoral isolation—less radically right leaders have left the party—the AfD is in the process of receiving millions of Euros from the Federal government. Fifty years ago, in the south of France, Jean-Marie Le Pen started the National Front, whose ideology was as much antisemitic and Holocaust-denying as anti-immigrant and anti-EU; the party gained 10-15% of the national vote in the late 1980s and 1990s, and in 2002 actually defeated Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of presidential elections. In the UK, antisemitism and Holocaust denial is also on the rise. On the left of the Labour Party, there has been a decades-long, highly public identification with the “liberation struggle” of the Palestinians. Whether such support is anti-Jewish is a matter of intense debate,² but what is not disputed is that Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership between 2015 and 2020 triggered such widespread allegations of antisemitism that key Labour leaders resigned in protest. In the U.S., antisemitism has also publicly re-emerged. Amidst shocking, if episodic, episodes of anti-Jewish violence, far right demonstrations against racial minorities have begun to feature antisemitic slogans from the pre-war era (Lipstadt 2019), updating a long-standing American legacy of conspiracies and bigoted tropes

¹ There is a growing literature elaborating and revising the concept of societalization. See, e.g., Park (2019), Lee (2019), Wright and Henry (2019), Brammer et al. (2020), Lo and Hsieh (2020), and Kudla et al. (forthcoming).

² See Chad Goldberg’s contribution to this symposium.



(Beirich 2021; Ward 2017; Winston 2021), as when, in Charlottesville, Virginia, *Unite the Right* marchers chanted, “Jews will not replace us.”

Democratically minded social observers in the centers of Western societies, critical social theorists, and Jewish spokespersons of every political persuasion have framed these events as indicating the “revival of antisemitism” *tout court*. This widespread alarm is morally refreshing and politically significant, triggering a new wave of societalization in the name of an open, religiously pluralistic civil sphere. We believe, however that the sweeping statement “antisemitism is on the rise in Western society” is misleading, for it fails to reflect, not only national variations in the renewal of antisemitism, but all-important variations in the societalizing reactions against it.

A social dispute becomes “societalized” when it is constructed as something much larger and more widely disturbing than a routinely occurring social problem that affects particular victims; conceived as a crisis that endangers the moral self-regard of society as such, it becomes a trauma “for all humankind” (Alexander 2018a, 2019). For millennia, antisemitism was treated as a routine and ongoing event in Western, Christianized societies. In the aftermath of the Enlightenment, antisemitism became societalized, but it was not eliminated, and it has dangerously surged many times in the centuries since. In response, there have been repeated waves of societalization, building upon memories, cultural structures, and social polices of earlier efforts at civil repair. We are now in the midst of another waxing of antisemitism. The question is whether it will wane. The answer to this question is a matter of comparative societalization, of where, how, and to what degree antisemitism can once again become subject to the scrutinizing criticism of the civil sphere.

Contemporary research on the revival of antisemitism is certainly abundant. There are arguments about how it should be precisely defined (Engel 2009; Judaken 2018; Waxman et al. 2021; Weiser 2021); investigations of country-specific dynamics and histories (Kushner 2017; Silverstein 2008; Wieviorka 2007); studies that map its geographical extent (Feldman 2018; Jikeli 2015a); efforts to link the revival to specific ideological contexts, whether to the left (Staetsky 2017; Rich 2018), the right (Weisman 2018; Wodak 2015), or to religious affiliation (e.g., Meer 2013; Renton and Gidley 2017; Wistrich 2010). Volkov (1978) has shown how antisemitism functions as a marker of identity. Other explanations focus on the decline of Holocaust memory (Jikeli 2020; Wetzel 2013), the crisis of capitalism (e.g., Becker et al. 2011; Stoenner 2011), or the influx of immigrants from Muslim countries (e.g., Bunzl 2005; Jikeli 2015b).

Our aim is not to challenge these explanatory efforts but, rather, to provide a broader historical, comparative, and theoretical framework within which they might be better understood. What is needed, we argue, is an approach that goes beyond a specific country or a particular religious or ideological context³.

³ In so doing, our approach diverges from the recent *Society Forum: Decolonising the Holocaust?* (2022). Addressing the “Possibilities and Limits of New Attempts to Understand and Situate the Holocaust in Comparative Contexts” (Hess 2022), contributors to the forum focused their attention on recent debates from Left oriented scholars that challenge existing perspectives about the Holocaust and suggest alternative frameworks such as addressing the Holocaust in a colonial perspective.



Before presenting our new model, we will address the obdurate power of anti-semitism in Western history and the relatively recent but highly significant struggles against it, struggles whose success has depended on the emergence of a civil sphere. These considerations will lead us to consider the extraordinary variation in how antisemitism has been societalized, in the postwar period and more recently. We argue that societalization is not a one-time only occurrence, but an iterative process manifest in periodic waves. These waves are path dependent, the likelihood of societalization in the present depending on—though not determined by—whether, and in what form, it has previously occurred. Looking at waves of societalization provides the basis for a comparative understanding of variations in contemporary responses to the renewal of antisemitism.

Antisemitism as a culture structure

Antisemitism is a culture structure that has exercised an extraordinarily polluting power over the entire course of Western history (e.g., Nirenberg 2013). Attaching the meta-signifier sacred/profane to the signified of Jewishness, Jews became a polluted symbol, a living embodiment of moral and emotional disgust that had to be extruded for collectivities to feel physically safe, morally pure, and esthetically beautiful or sublime.

As a polluted sign, antisemitism took on different social forms, from interactional micro-aggressions to institutional discrimination, legal exclusion, ghettoization, sporadic violence, and mass murder. The contents of the polluted sign—what antisemitism actually meant in a particular context—varied with the nature of the sacred side of the binary to which it was tied. If the sacred was Christianity or Islam as religion, then the polluted other was the Jewish religion. If the sacred was Christianity or Islam as a way of life, then what was profaned were Jewish everyday practices. If the sacred was the master Aryan race, then Jews were polluted as a dark and dirty subject people. If the sacred was Western, Judaism became polluted as oriental. If nationalist, Jews were symbolized as cosmopolitan. If socialism or communism was sacralized, Jewishness was polluted as moneyed and capitalist. If conservative capitalism was symbolized as pure, then Jewishness was polluted as liberal, socialist, or communist. If anti-imperialism was the sacred, Jews were identified as colonialists. If Islamic Palestine was sacred, then Jews became the defiled competitor, polluted as occupiers.

What each of these extraordinarily diverse and often contradictory designations have in common is the role they have played as polluted ciphers of Jewishness, no matter how the particular content of that protean sign has been defined.⁴

Antisemitism is among the most obdurate of the polluted culture structures that have marked, and shamed, Western history. Its long-lastingness derives from

⁴ They have also shared in the same process of materialization, for the pollution of Jewishness is iconic as well as discursive. The culture structure of antisemitism expresses itself aesthetically, e.g., Jews give off a repulsive odor; they have ugly physiognomies, such as small eyes, long noses, an overabundance of body hair.



its location inside the heart of Christianity, whose origin myth recounted the Jewish effort to kill its new God and whose early decades of historical advancement depended on polluting and replacing the Jewish faith. The historical “Christianness” of antisemitism ensured that it would become an intrinsic feature of the collective identities of Western nations, which identified not only as political but as religious entities, not only for many centuries past but, in still significant ways, right up until today.

Emergence of a civil sphere

The struggle against antisemitism, the effort to cleanse Jewishness of its polluted associations, was for millennia principally a Jewish fight. Gradually, however, there emerged a sphere of society that promoted “civil” rather than “primordial” solidarity. Certainly, there were themes in Christianity that promoted more universalistic social ties; just as important, however, were more secular republican and liberal ideologies, the first born in Greece and Rome, the second emerging in early modern times. These efforts to create a “civil sphere” (Alexander 2006)—discursive, institutional, interactional—opened up pathways for non-Jewish people, whether secular or religious, to join the struggle against Jewish pollution.

Throughout the centuries of this conjoined struggle, the relatively autonomous, highly idealized “discourse of civil society” has been critically deployed, challenging the pollution of Jews as an irrational, unfair, sometimes violent, and always anti-humanistic form of particularizing discrimination. This ideological critique of antisemitism intensified as a broad and diffuse Enlightenment spread across Western societies in the 18th and 19th centuries, deepening the commitment to a civil form of solidarity and triggering world-historical movements of democratization, if only rarely functional political democracies. Throughout Europe, Jews—newly defined as rights-bearing citizens—were allowed to leave places of confinement and become incorporated into national societies. On the condition that they shed their still polluted Jewish *qualities*, or practice them only in the invisible world of private life, Jewish *persons* were allowed to imbibe, and perform, the public culture of civil modernity. This was the bargain of assimilation, which soon proved to be a hard bargain indeed (Alexander 2006, Part IV).⁵

Backlash against civil incorporation

For as Jewish persons took advantage of opportunities for assimilative incorporation, anti-civil backlash movements emerged that actually intensified the pollution of Jewish qualities, fighting to dis-incorporate Jews and, more broadly, to re-primordialize the solidarities that defined national societies: Pogroms in

⁵ In their contribution to this symposium, Zuckerman and Feldt discuss how Denmark’s assimilative mode of Jewish incorporation—powerfully inclusive yet, at the same time, patronizing and limiting—has affected that nation’s societalizing reaction to earlier and contemporary outbreaks of antisemitic violence.



Russia, the Dreyfus affair in France, *volk* movements in Germany, antisemitic and anti-immigration organizations and laws in Britain, anti-Jewish quotas and barriers in public and private associations throughout the United States. Everywhere, the newly expanded civil spheres of Western societies became compromised, not only by the intense renewal of antisemitism among key segments of the population, but by the waves of White racial animosity that accompanied imperialism and anti-immigrant discourses about ethnic succession. Among these sordid challenges to Western civil spheres, the backlash against Jewish incorporation was persistent and prominent.

The “Jewish question” preoccupied leading thinkers from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and answering it provided a litmus test that distinguished progressive and democratic from right-wing, authoritarian theories and movements. It was the antisemitic answer to the Jewish question that triggered Nazism, which spread like wildfire across Europe in the years after World War I. Arguing that primordial should replace civil solidarity as the basis for national identity, Nazism during the interwar period won more often than it lost.

In the wake of the Nazis’ political victory in Germany and their military triumph throughout the continent, European civil spheres were pulverized. In the folkish party state, violence and hierarchy defined the communicative and regulative institutions of social life, and the critical leverage of public opinion was destroyed. Antisemitism became hegemonic, and other racist and primordial ideas given free reign. Six million Jewish people were murdered, along with a million other despised minorities. The Holocaust marked a cathartic moment for the antisemitic narrative that, for millennia, had defined Jews as the principal barrier to a moral social life.

Restoration of the civil sphere and postwar anti-antisemitism

When the Axis powers were defeated by Allied forces, this primordial and anti-democratic narrative suffered what seemed a mortal blow. Since Nazism was defined by its primordial and anti-civil character, the defeat of this enemy triggered widespread efforts to construct healthier civil spheres throughout the Western world. With the shocking discovery that the Nazis had carried out civilian mass murder on a hitherto unimaginable scale, antisemitism became an enemy that leading powers in the newly reconstructed postwar world were determined to destroy. For the first time in Western history, broad numbers of Christian people identified with the suffering of Jews. As the “trauma drama of the Holocaust” gathered performative power (Alexander 2004), and citizens in Western democracies began to perceive Jewish people as more fully human beings, antisemitism became societalized (Alexander 2018a) as a corrosively anti-civil sentiment. With antisemitism established as a crime, French Jews “were allowed to become more visible” (Wieviorka 2018, p. 43), enjoying protection and a new status as respected citizens. In the UK, public expressions of racial hatred of Jews became unacceptable, and, in the decades after WWII, such expressions of antisemitism were forced underground (Beckman 2013; Sonabend 2019). In America between



1945 and 1950, to evoke the title of Leonard Dinnerstein's (1981) famous essay, antisemitism became "exposed and attacked." In the decades following, not only Jewish persons but eventually even Jewish qualities became identified—among broad swaths of the citizenry of Western nations—with the sacred side of the civil (see e.g., Slezkine 2004).

Variations of societalization

This broad-brush picture of sweeping, *Weltgeschichte* change is compelling, but it does not do justice to the variation that actually existed on the ground (Alexander 2009). In Europe, the societalization of antisemitism was more halting than in the United States. In the Western, non-communist region, it took more time, sometimes even decades, for members of national civil spheres to make the suffering of Jewish victims their own; such civil identification, moreover, was typically less thorough going and remained more decidedly assimilative than multicultural.

In European nations, in contrast with the U.S., non-Jewish persons had also suffered grievously during the war years; as a result, they were less likely to identify with the distinctive suffering of the Jewish people.

In the UK, whose citizens experienced years of the Nazis' brutal air war, societalization of antisemitism did not happen immediately after the war, and even then, only partially. In the aftermath of the war fascist groups such as Jeffrey Hamm's British League of Ex-Servicemen and, later, Oswald Mosley's Union Movement continued to publicly engage in antisemitic activity. In 1947, anti-Jewish sentiments became even more widespread in response to the conflict in Palestine between British Mandate forces and Zionist groups. The "43" group, led by British Jewish ex-servicemen, waged physical battle against the far right until 1950, when the immediate threat to British Jews dissipated. It was widely believed that antisemitic attitudes also existed in the Attlee government (Wistrich 2011) and within the British intellectual sphere (cf., Eban and Adrian 2006). Indeed, according to Kushner (1989; cf., Schaffer 2014), antisemitism was formally rejected by the UK government only with the 1965 Race Relations Act,⁶ which was expanded by the 1968 Race Relations Act banning "racial discrimination in public places" and "made the promotion of hatred on the grounds of 'colour, race, or ethnic or national origins' an offence."⁷

Much of France had been directly occupied by Hitler's soldiers, and the pervasive postwar resistance myth, which portrayed every French person as victim, delayed until the 1990s official French acknowledgment of the distinctive suffering of French Jews and the shameful national collaboration that had facilitated it (Rousso 1991).

⁶ By the time the Bill was debated in Parliament, fighting against the discrimination of Britain's black communities occupied the attention of a majority of politicians. However, the legislation was also shaped by the need to protect the Jewish community from fascism, its success relying on the lobbying efforts of British Jewish communities (Schaffer 2014).

⁷ <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections/race-relations-act-1965/race-relations-act-1965/>.



In 2014, citing *laïcité*—the republican proscription against public religiosity—the French Jewish organization SPCJ described antisemitism as “a structural problem that has not been fought as such and has not been halted yet.”⁸

In Germany, for decades after the war, most citizens denied prior knowledge of the Holocaust, much less their active or passive participation in effecting it. Only with the performative power of the ‘60s generation did Germans begin to experience the “perpetrator trauma” that societalized antisemitism, giving to Jews, retrospectively and in contemporary time, an honored position of respect in the newly democratic German civil sphere (Giesen 2004; Heins and Langenohl 2011; Heins and Unrau 2020).

Among the nations of Eastern Europe, during the Soviet occupation, the societalization of antisemitism was blocked altogether. According to state-communist ideology, it was classes and nations, not primordial religions or races that the Nazis had targeted. In this way, the massive suffering of Jewish people in Eastern Europe, and within the Soviet Union itself, failed to elicit widespread guilt and sympathy, and Jewish people did not become objects of civil identification. For example, in Poland, a nation riven by antisemitism before, during, and immediately after the war, the anti-Slavic, anti-Polish sentiments of Nazism were highlighted, while the fate that millions of Polish Jews suffered was for many decades put aside (Gross 2001, 2007; Bilewicz and Krzeminski 2010). In Hungary, under the newly established Communist regime, any attempt to acknowledge Jewish suffering and/or Hungarian responsibility for it was suppressed, tabooed from public discourse (Braham 1994). Mátyás Rákosi’s regime created a paradoxical situation for the Jewish community: Hungarian Jews looked for support and defense from the very party that had vilified Zionism and stirred antisemitism (Gantner 2013; Kenez 2001). After the 1956 uprising, and during the National Communist era that followed, a form of “personal antisemitism” within the Communist Party, coupled with ideological anti-Zionism, was intensified by the increasing geopolitical tensions in the Middle-East.

With these historical and comparative variations in mind, we will now specify our explanatory model in propositional form.

Antisemitism Returns: Toward an Explanatory Model

Proposition 1: Incomplete societalization

To the degree that a national community failed to societalize Jewish hatred in the postwar period, to that degree antisemitism has publicly re-emerged and thrived. This is our core proposition.

In Hungary and Poland, antisemitism has publicly advanced, with civil protest against it confined to increasingly powerless opposition.⁹ By contrast, in Germany the upsurge in public antisemitism has been primarily in the eastern, post-Soviet

⁸ SPCJ Report on Antisemitism in France in 2013, p. 8.

⁹ As with any generalization, one can find significant exceptions, for example the philo-semitism that has emerged in Krakow, Poland, as a counterpoint to the national trend (Zubrzycki 2022).



Lander, where far right, neo-Nazi political parties and social movements have thrived. In the regions of former West Germany, the situation is vastly different. Antisemitic incidents have triggered massive protest marches and rallies in these regions, which have proved far less hospitable to the AfD and other far right, anti-Jewish parties. Beyond public indignation, the German government consistently works to push back against antisemitism, not only strongly condemning antisemitic incidents, but also putting resources into research and educational projects to fight hatred of Jews.¹⁰ In France, the Holocaust-denying, antisemitic themes of Jean-Marie Le Pen eventually faced harsh criticism not only from the left but from conservative political parties; in response to such mainstream pushback, Marine Le Pen expelled her father from the movement, declared herself anti-antisemitic, publicly supported Israel, and narrowed her party's hate-filled rhetoric to focus on anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, and other traditionally "national" themes¹¹. Additional measures to combat antisemitism were recently introduced by the French government, among them a bill to combat online hate-speech; calls for the dissolution of various extremist right-wing groups; steps to redefine antisemitism according to the definition advocated by IHRA¹²; and hate speech and incitement of violence inquiries into antisemitic banners seen at various demonstrations.¹³ In the UK, outspoken critics drew widespread attention to allegations about the antisemitism in Corbin-led Labour and, after Corbin's resignation, public efforts were made to distance the party from antisemitic members¹⁴; new exhibitions at museums and education centers showcased efforts to battle antisemitism¹⁵; construction began for Britain's first national Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre next to the Houses of Parliament in Westminster¹⁶; and an outspoken Holocaust-denier, David Irving, was imprisoned after his conviction in a widely publicized trial.¹⁷

In the propositions that follow, we contextualize this argument about incomplete societalization.

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-religion-germany-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-fa89d2d28c2e0d79ed9ff3cf3c5420a3>; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/germany-giving-over-40-million-to-fight-antisemitism-jews-germany-berlin-police-jewish-b1896697.html>.

¹¹ French historian Jacques Julliard has gone so far as to say: "The new antisemitism in France today is a Muslim antisemitism. But it is not being said, because people are afraid of stigmatizing Muslims or setting off a wave of Islamophobia." <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/05/03/599515300/alarm-grows-in-france-over-antisemitic-violence>. We do not agree with this self-serving characterization; we present it, rather, as an indication of the anti-antisemitism of the non-Islamic core group of the French civil sphere.

¹² <https://www.france24.com/en/20190220-macron-announces-measures-combat-anti-semitism-france-crif-definition-anti-zionism>.

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/16/hate-speech-inquiries-launched-in-france-over-antisemitic-protest-banners>.

¹⁴ <https://www.wsj.org/en/articles/2022/01/26/corb-j26.html>.

¹⁵ <https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/exhibition/fighting-antisemitism-from-dreyfus-to-today/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.ukholocaustmemorial.com/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/20/austria.thefarright>.



Proposition 2: The secular decline of Holocaust memory

In East European countries, which had neither “remembered” nor societalized the Holocaust during the postwar years, attempts to construct Holocaust memory after the collapse of communism were often strained and artificial, gestures frequently made merely in response to international (Western) pressure (Echikson 2019). In Hungary, after 1989, as part of the attempt to be accepted in international circles, victims of the Holocaust received physical and discursive recognition and remembrance was institutionalized (Kovács 2016). At the same time, a form of local remembrance emerged, minimizing the responsibility of the Hungarian nation and portraying the nation as itself a victim of Nazi Germany (Baer and Sznajder 2015; Karakaya and Baer 2019). In Poland, 1989 unlocked the previously silenced public discourse about witnessing and indifference, and even direct complicity (Forecki 2013). This triggered backlash, defensive confrontations against Holocaust memory that created a right-wing “politics of history” (Hackmann 2018), a movement that strongly intensified after 2005 when the Law and Justice governments came to power (Cadier and Szulecki 2020).

Memory and memorialization have also declined among national societies that *had* remembered the Holocaust and *did* societalize anti-Jewish hatred. In these nations, the citizens who, despite societalization, had continued to privately harbor antisemitic feelings—not an insignificant minority—no longer were shamed into silence. In the UK, despite its relatively early and still powerful Holocaust consciousness (Adams and Lederman forthcoming), Holocaust distortion and Holocaust denial are on the rise. Recent polls and surveys demonstrate profound gaps in knowledge of key historical Holocaust facts, including events that relate to the UK’s own connection to these historical events.¹⁸

This is also true in the United States. Despite how broadly and deeply Holocaust memory was imbedded in postwar American cultural history, polluting anti-Jewish cultural structures have publicly re-emerged. Not only are there critical gaps in knowledge about the Holocaust¹⁹, but there is also an alarming rise in Holocaust distortion and denial (most evident in social media)²⁰. Holocaust memory is receding, particularly among younger American generations.

Proposition 3: The tarnishing of Israel as a civil symbol

In the decades after WWII, admiration for Israeli’s independence struggle and its democratic socialism helped inspire a more civil and less primordial representation of Jewishness. In recent decades, this civilizing process has been reversed, and Israel

¹⁸ <https://www.claimscon.org/uk-study/>; <https://www.hmd.org.uk/news/we-release-research-to-mark-holocaust-memorial-day-2019/>; <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Continuity-and-Change-Data-Release-1-KS3-Squeeze-for-website.pdf>.

¹⁹ For instance, see <https://www.claimscon.org/study/>; <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/01/22/what-americans-know-about-the-holocaust/>.

²⁰ <https://www.state.gov/why-confronting-holocaust-distortion-and-denial-matters/>.



has come to be viewed—by influential members of Western cosmopolitan societies—as primordial and anti-civil.

As a nation constructed at least partly in response to the Holocaust, the Israeli public and its political elite have persistently utilized Holocaust memory to further their national ambitions, interpreting the lessons of the Holocaust as more narrowly about the Jewish fate than about universal norms (Alexander and Dromi 2011). The Holocaust has been used to justify an Israeli moral claim to victimization (Adams 2020). In the aftermath of the '67 war, more than 250,000 people fled to the eastern bank of the Jordan River; Israel's military occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; massive Israeli settlements were established; and aggressive military efforts to counter rising Arab-Palestinian nationalism were engaged. All these drew intense and increasingly critical international attention. Israel has been widely—though far from universally—condemned as an Apartheid state, and a global sanctions movement (BDS) has emerged. Under the umbrella of “new antisemitism” (see e.g., Rensmann and Schoeps 2011; Rosenfeld 2015), the debate centers on the notion that the source of contemporary hostility to Jews has shifted, that it now rests more on the Arab-Israeli conflict than on the primordial opposition to Jews-as-Jews, e.g., Bernard Lewis' (2006) argument about the third, or ideological, wave of antisemitism²¹. On the flip side, the conflation of antisemitism with anti-Zionism is seen by pro-Palestinians as a deliberate attempt to intimidate and silence the movement for Palestinian rights, the so-called weaponization of antisemitism and Holocaust memory.

Proposition 4: The increasing centrality of the Palestinians struggle in progressive ideology

In the wake of the six-day war, Israel's military superiority and occupation of the West Bank and Gaza triggered horrendous, widely publicized acts of PLO terrorism, which received ideological support and funding from Arab states and state-communist countries in Eastern European. Decades of continuing Israeli settlement in Palestinian territories, however, made the Occupation seem more colonial than strategic, and, as Israeli military power grew exponentially, Palestinian protests began to include mass mobilization and guerilla tactics—Palestinian stone-throwing during the first Intifada, suicide bombings and attacks on civilians in the 2000s, and the firing of rockets, mortars and missiles into southern Israel in the years after that. Despite the violence of such actions, the framing of Israeli as anti-civil perpetrator and Palestinians as innocent victims steadily gained traction, triggering international aid to Palestinians from a wide range of foreign governments and international non-governmental organizations and significant sympathy for anti-Israeli demonstrations and the sanctions movement. Throughout this period, but quickening during

²¹ Public antisemitism in Sweden—slowly diminishing between 2005 and 2020 (The Living History Forum 2020)—has been characterized as “Israel-derived antisemitism” (Dencik and Marosi 2017; Enstad 2017). “In no other country,” according to Dencik and Marosi, “do the Jews feel that they are blamed ‘all the time’ for anything done by the Israeli government as frequently as in Sweden” (2017, p. 19).



the 2010s, military conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and terrorist insurgencies in Nigeria and Pakistan brought waves of Arab, mostly Islamic refugees to Europe and Northern America. The anti-Israeli activism of the Palestinian diaspora exercised increasing performative power; supported by high-profile mainstream figures in entertainment and sports, academia and business, its messages were effectively projected via social media. Today, identification with the Palestinian cause extends deep into the Jewish diaspora itself, with younger Jewish Americans much less supportive of Israel, and organizations like J-Street gaining mainstream political support.

While skepticism, and even downright antagonism, to Israeli policy vis-à-vis Palestinians has not led to anti-Jewish public expression among America's liberal elites, the same cannot be said in the UK, where antisemitic prejudice had long been entrenched as a feature of the old aristocracy and the reactionary right (Gidley et al 2020; Mullhall 2020). In recent decades, as we have noted, this underlayer of antisemitism has found its way into the other side of the political spectrum: "Sympathy for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel has become the default position for many on the left: a defining marker of what it means to be progressive" (Rich 2018, p. 9).²² Whether such a transformation of feeling—the British left, as the American, had earlier embraced Israeli as a progressive paradigm—can be described as antisemitic is, of course, a matter of intensive and often vituperative debate. What cannot be contested, however, is that significant segments of the British citizenry believe it to be. If much of the British left now pollutes the world's only Jewish state as ferociously anti-civil, it is likely that such profaning sentiments will extend, to one degree or another, to Jewishness itself. Antisemitism on the left frequently "emerges out of the ostensibly democratic discourse of criticism of Israel" (Hirsch 2018, p. 2).

Proposition 5: Shifts in Left ideology toward race, gender, and post-coloniality

In the decades after the uneven societalization of antisemitism, the focus of progressive ideology has shifted away from what might be called "the lessons of anti-Nazism." In response to sentiments generated by cresting global social movements, new critical theories have built upon coloniality, gender, and race (Bell 1995; Risman 2004). Within the terms of each of these new intellectual-cum-moral movements, the dangers of antisemitism have been displaced. The German debate termed *Historikerstreit 2.0* is one such example. Debating the relationships between Holocaust, colonialism, and other genocides, scholars are arguing about post-Holocaust German memory, raising questions about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the ability to compare it to other genocides. Some are even suggesting imperialism and colonialism as explanatory paradigms for the Holocaust—as compared to antisemitism (Moses 2008, 2010, 2021a, 2021b; Zimmerer 2007).²³ In turn, if Israel is seen

²² Antisemitism on the Left is not an entirely new phenomenon. For instance, one of Lipset's arguments in his 1959 article on authoritarian personality types is that even Western Europe's Marxist Socialist movement was not immune to antisemitism.

²³ For an extended discussion on what has been termed the Catechism Debate, see the *New Fascism Syllabus* May 25–June 2, 2021, also Spencer (2022).



as a “racist white settler-colonial Apartheid” state, then “Islamic antisemitism and antisemitism in relation to the State of Israel... are often ignored or trivialized” (Klävers 2022, p. 23). If Jews are coded as Western, white, male, and privileged, the idea of Jews as a vulnerable social group disappears, and anti-Jewishness may be seen less as vicious prejudice than as anti-elitist common sense (Goldstein 2006). Baddiel’s (2021) *Jews Don’t Count* links the broadly assumed privileged status of Jews—“although marginal,” he writes, Jews “are not thought of as *marginalized*” (p. 28)—to the blinkers that facilitate left wing antisemitism.

Theorizing waves of societalization

The restriction of societalization vis-à-vis anti-civil social strains has been theorized in terms of polarization and marginalization (Alexander 2018a, pp. 1067–1069). Our findings in this paper, however, demonstrate that, alongside these structural, or synchronic, considerations, there is also a diachronic, temporal dimension. There are waves of societalization, the first wave setting a cultural and institutional framework—of path dependency—for societalizing reactions that may emerge in response to later events. In Germany, France, the UK, and the US, antisemitism was societalized—not for the first time, and still incompletely—in the postwar era. The existence of such reconstructed background representations, and the institutions they helped create, set the stage for another wave of societalizing outrage and social mobilization in response to the antisemitism that has recently publicly re-emerged. Just as the first wave of societalization was variable, so is the second: The incompleteness of the second wave is proportionate to the varying incorporation of Jewish people, and their qualities, into the civil spheres of national societies.²⁴ However, the inability to achieve thoroughgoing societalization in the first wave is not the only factor that has affected responses to rising antisemitism. The decline of Holocaust memory has decreased the performative power of societalizing protest, as has the tarnishing of Israel as a culturally powerful democratic symbol. The transformation in the moral sentiments and objects of political identification among progressive ideological groupings has also played a significant role.

Conclusion

Because antisemitism is such an obdurate culture structure of hate, it seems unlikely that it can ever be entirely eliminated from Western societies. Despite being subjected to repeated waves of societalization, antisemitism remains a narrative that backlash groups can employ to “explain” injuries to their emotions, identities, and material fates.

In response to the frontlash of progressive social change (Alexander 2018b), masses of contemporary Western citizens continuously suffer feelings of traumatic

²⁴ For detailed reconstruction of waves of societalization in Denmark, see Zuckerman and Feldt’s contribution to this symposium.



displacement (Eyerman 2022). Caught up in cultural and social backlash movements, they avail themselves of conspiratorial explanations and authoritarian solutions, antisemitic beliefs and actions conspicuously among them. Yet, aggrieved minorities do not always feel entitled to publicize their scapegoating, much less to mobilize reactionary social movements inside such conspiratorial frames. Inhibited by old memories and newly civil norms, they may feel compelled to confine their reactive and polluting feelings to private life. In this brief essay, we have presented a new model for explaining why such inhibitions against public expression of anti-semitism are weakening. At the same time, we have stressed that this resurgence of anti-Jewish hatred is triggering a new wave of societalization, one which can be fully understood only in a comparative way.

There is no assurance that Western civil spheres will be able to sustain this new wave of anti-antisemitism, much less the positive recognition of Jewish qualities that undergird a multicultural society. Whether Western societies can deepen the civil repairs they initiated in the wake of the Holocaust will affect, not only the fate of the Jews, but the vitality of the civil spheres that sustain hopes for a democratic life.

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