

Antisemitism Reading Group - Session 1

JVP - On Antisemitism

Extract from Preface by Judith Butler.

In our contemporary world, there is a great deal of conflict about how to identify forms of antisemitism. First, antisemitism is sometimes cloaked as something else. It takes a fugitive form when, for instance, a discourse emerges that presumes that there is a group that owns all the banks, or that actively makes use of conspiracy theories to explain how political events take place. The word “Jew” hardly has to be mentioned to be already nefariously at work in such a discourse. The same can be said about any reference to the “blood libel”—a scurrilous rumor that has been tenaciously circulated against the Jewish people for centuries, justifying attacks on and murders of Jews in Eastern Europe. The more explicit forms of antisemitism not only subscribe to gross generalizations based on ostensible anatomical or physiological characteristics, the attribution of a “Jewish character,” concocted histories, or the projection of sexual proclivities, but also engage active forms of legal discrimination, for sequestration, expulsion, or active oppression or death. Genocide is the most extreme version of antisemitism. And boycotts against Jewish businesses, especially in the history of Germany, are also clearly part of the history of antisemitism. These are all examples of antisemitism, but they do not, taken together, give us a single definition that could serve our purposes. In fact, far more important than a single definition of antisemitism would be an account of its history and its various forms: the language, the attitudes, actions and practices, the policies. That is the only way to know what it is, and that means we cannot expect that a single definition will hold for all cases. Or rather, if we do establish a single definition, it will of necessity be so broad that we will not be able to say immediately how and when it should be applied. After all, the charge of antisemitism depends on the ability to identify antisemitism in its various instances, and here is where the matter of interpretation does come into play.

Hannah Arendt - The Origins of Totalitarianism

Extract from Chapter One: Antisemitism as an outrage to common sense

In order to establish a totalitarian regime, terror must be presented as an instrument for carrying out a specific ideology; and that ideology must have won the adherence of many, and even a majority, before terror can be stabilized. The point for the historian is that the Jews, before becoming the main victims of modern terror, were the center of Nazi ideology. And an ideology which has to persuade and mobilize people cannot choose its victim arbitrarily. In other words, if a patent forgery like the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is believed by so many people that it can become the text of a whole political movement, the task of the historian is no longer to discover a forgery. Certainly it is not to invent explanations which dismiss the chief political and historical fact of the matter: that the forgery is being believed. This fact is more important than the (historically speaking, secondary) circumstance that it is forgery.

The scapegoat explanation therefore remains one of the principal attempts to escape the seriousness of antisemitism and the significance of the fact that the Jews were driven into the storm center of events. Equally widespread is the opposite doctrine of an "eternal antisemitism" in which Jew-hatred is a normal and natural reaction to which history gives only more or less opportunity. Outbursts need no special explanation because they are natural consequences of an eternal problem. That this doctrine was adopted by professional antisemites is a matter of course; it gives the best possible alibi for all horrors. If it is true that mankind has insisted on murdering Jews for more than two thousand years, then Jew-killing is a normal, and even human, occupation and Jew-hatred is justified beyond the need of argument.

The more surprising aspect of this explanation, the assumption of an eternal antisemitism, is that it has been adopted by a great many unbiased historians and by an even greater number of Jews. It is this odd coincidence which makes the theory so very dangerous and confusing. Its escapist basis is in both instances the same: just as antisemites understandably desire to escape responsibility for their deeds, so Jews, attacked and on the defensive, even more understandably do not wish under any circumstances to discuss their share of responsibility. In the case of Jewish, and frequently of Christian, adherents of this doctrine, however, the escapist tendencies of official apologetics are based upon more important and less rational motives.

Jean-Paul Sartre - Anti-Semite and Jew
Extract from Chapter One.

The majority of the anti-Semites, on the contrary, belongs to the middle class, that is, among men who have a level of life equal or superior to that of the Jews, or, if you prefer, among the "non-producers" (employers, merchants, distributors, members of the liberal professions, parasites). The bourgeois in fact does not produce: he directs, administers, distributes, buys, sells. His function is to enter into direct relations with the consumer; in other words, his activity is based on a constant commerce with men, whereas the worker, in the exercise of his trade, is in permanent contact with things. Each man judges history in accordance with the profession that he follows. Shaped by the daily influence of the materials he works with, the workman sees society as the product of real forces acting in accordance with rigorous laws. His dialectical "materialism" signifies that he envisages the social world in the same way as the material world. On the other hand, the bourgeois — and the anti-Semite in particular — have chosen to explain history by the action of individual wills. Do not the bourgeois depend on these same wills in the conduct of their affairs? They behave toward social facts like primitives who endow the wind and the sun with little souls. Intrigues, cabals, the perfidy of one man, the courage and virtue of another — that is what determines the course of their business, that is what determines the course of the world.

Anti-Semitism, a bourgeois phenomenon, appears therefore as a choice made to explain collective events by the initiative of individuals. No doubt the proletarian caricatures "the bourgeois" on posters and in newspapers in exactly the same manner as the anti-Semite caricatures "the Jew."

But this external resemblance should not deceive us. To the worker, what constitutes the bourgeois is his bourgeois status, that is, an ensemble of external factors; and the bourgeois himself is reducible to the synthetic unity of these externally apparent manifestations. It is an ensemble of various modes of behaviour. For the anti-Semite, what makes the Jew is the presence in him of "Jewishness," a Jewish principle analogous to phlogiston or the soporific virtue of opium. We must not be deceived: explanations on the basis of heredity and race came later; they are the slender scientific coating of this primitive conviction.