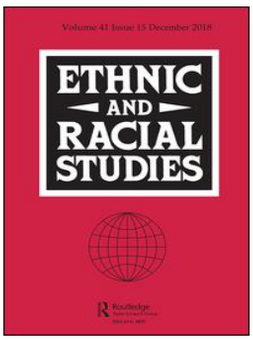

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Arguing about antisemitism: why we disagree about antisemitism, and what we can do about it

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ABSTRACT

Antisemitism has returned as a major issue across the Western world. But while concern about antisemitism is growing, agreement on what constitutes antisemitism is shrinking. Nowadays, charges of antisemitism are hotly disputed, often accompanied by accusations of bad faith, particularly when they concern criticisms of Israel or anti-Zionism. This article contends that one reason why antisemitism has become increasingly contested is because there are different ways of thinking about antisemitism and identifying it. We examine four common and contrasting approaches to identifying antisemitism, highlighting the challenges each presents when it comes to identifying antisemitism in practice. Since these alternative approaches yield different answers about whether something is antisemitic or not, disagreement and debate over allegations of antisemitism is unavoidable. Hence, we conclude by offering suggestions for how antisemitism claims should be addressed in a way that minimizes conflict and promotes greater awareness about the various ways that antisemitism can operate.

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Antisemitism[1] has returned as a major political and social issue across the Western world. With hate crimes against Jews, including deadly violence, rising,[2] and antisemitic extremist groups thriving, barely a week goes by when antisemitism is not in the news headlines in the United States and Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic, there is increasing public concern, especially among Jews, about this resurgence of antisemitism. But while concern about antisemitism is growing, agreement on what actually constitutes antisemitism is shrinking. To be sure, violence against Jews, vandalism of Jewish sites, and Holocaust denial are almost universally accepted as being antisemitic,[3] but there is no longer agreement on what other kinds of acts, views and speech are antisemitic. At a time of mounting anxiety about

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antisemitism, there are frequent public controversies over whether something or someone is or isn't antisemitic. Some of these controversies have escalated into major political crises – most notably, the issue of antisemitism in the UK Labour Party.

Thus, as antisemitism has become an increasingly salient social and political issue, arguments about antisemitism have abounded. Growing concern about rising antisemitism has elevated the issue of antisemitism on the public agenda, led to more scrutiny of cases of alleged antisemitism, and hence generated more arguments about it. But this is by no means the only reason why antisemitism has become a topic of frequent debate and controversy. Antisemitism has also become increasingly politicized in recent years because it has become enmeshed in debates about the ongoing conflict over Israel/Palestine, with the Israeli government and its supporters often charging that Israel's opponents are guilty of engaging in a "new antisemitism" that takes the form of anti-Zionism (see, e.g. Iganski and Kosmin 2003; Harrison 2006; Rosenfeld 2015), while individuals and groups supporting the Palestinians often claiming that charges of antisemitism are being used to silence and suppress them (Palestine Legal 2015). Domestic politics, partisanship and political polarization have also politicized antisemitism: politicians of all stripes have accused their rivals of engaging in antisemitism, or at least tolerating it, and members of the public are now more prone to perceive and condemn antisemitism when it comes from the other side of the political spectrum (a tendency amplified by social media and its "echo chamber"). But while the politicization, and, no doubt, occasional "weaponization" of antisemitism charges have fuelled many of the controversies concerning antisemitism in recent years, these controversies have also arisen because in many instances antisemitism is not obvious or incontrovertible. In other words, antisemitism has become contentious not only because charges of antisemitism have sometimes been deliberately deployed for political gain, or because many people on the left only see antisemitism on the right, and vice versa. It is also because antisemitism today is not always easy to identify or even define. Because there is no single, easy way to define or detect antisemitism, responding to antisemitism is inevitably complicated and contentious.

While some cases of antisemitism are clear-cut, many are not. Antisemitism, like racism, is not always easy to spot. In this article, we argue that identifying antisemitism can be difficult and often contentious because there are different ways of thinking about antisemitism, and these different approaches can yield different conclusions about whether something is antisemitic or not. Moreover, even the same approach to thinking about antisemitism can be applied in different ways, and result in very different conclusions regarding whether particular phenomena (rhetoric, arguments, statements) are or are not antisemitic. In short, people can disagree in

good faith over whether or not something is antisemitic. While this may seem tritely obvious, it is an important observation to make precisely because large swaths of the discourse about antisemitism are suffused in allegations of *bad* faith: the beliefs that antisemitism allegations are, alternatively, maliciously weaponized in service of ulterior agendas or cavalierly dismissed in order to shield favoured political programmes.

The need for a more robust understanding of antisemitism has become apparent in the heated debates over various antisemitism "definitions."[4] These include the "working definition of antisemitism" promulgated by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016, and more recent alternatives like the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and Nexus Antisemitism document (IHRA 2016; Nexus 2020; Jerusalem Declaration 2021). Much of the debate over which definition is preferable has tracked larger debates over, for example, whether or in what cases anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel is antisemitic. These debates have remained largely intractable in part because they fail to recognize the *plurality* of active, reasonable understandings of the meaning of antisemitism. A more robust taxonomy of the different potential modes of understanding antisemitism may not eliminate disagreement, but it can reduce tensions by illuminating circumstances where real disputes are not reducible to simple partisan posturing.

In the next section, we explain why antisemitism – whether on the left or the right – can be hard to spot. Following this, we outline four different approaches to thinking about antisemitism and the different implications of these approaches (of course, in practice, people may draw on all of these approaches to varying degrees). Finally, since we contend that claims about antisemitism will continue to be contested, we conclude by offering some suggestions for how we should respond to future controversies about antisemitism. Our main recommendation is that when antisemitism is unintentional – as it often is – it is better to respond to it through education than public shaming and punitive actions. This recommendation, however, requires acknowledgment that antisemitism *can be* unintentional – that is, a claim of antisemitism is not falsified by the absence of a conscious hostile motive. We also emphasize that the lived experience of people dealing with antisemitism matters. Perceptions of antisemitism are not a conclusive sign of antisemitism, but they must be treated seriously and not dismissed as mere bad faith: they are a crucial trigger for further investigation.

Difficulties in spotting antisemitism

When many people think of antisemitism, Nazis and fascists immediately come to mind. This is, of course, understandable given the centrality of the

Holocaust in our collective memory of antisemitism and its lethal consequences. Contemporary neo-Nazis and neo-fascists, therefore, are easily recognized as antisemitic, even if they do not dress or speak like their twentieth century predecessors. Similarly, although many far-right political parties now tout their pro-Israel stances in an effort to inoculate themselves against charges of antisemitism (for example, France's National Front party or Hungary's Fidesz), few dispute the fact that antisemitism is prevalent on the far-right of the political spectrum. Far-right antisemitism can be easy to identify when it explicitly and self-consciously targets Jews. Moreover, since the origins of many contemporary far-right groups can be traced back to overtly antisemitic Nazi, fascist, or white supremacist movements in the twentieth century, and in many cases they still use their slogans and symbols, it is relatively easy to classify them as antisemitic. Hence, nobody seriously claims that today's neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, and "white nationalists" are not antisemitic, and the horrific history of these ideologies has attuned and alerted most people to the dangers of their contemporary variants in the United States and Europe.

Yet the obviousness of far-right antisemitism can sometimes occlude recognition of antisemitism in other varieties – not just on the left, but among more mainstream right-wing actors. To the extent that our stock image of an antisemite is a committed Nazi, antisemitism that lacks these distinct markers (overt, unmediated hatred) may be illegible. The inability to fit many alleged cases of antisemitism into the far-right paradigm can render many common incidents, typical of both left- and mainstream right-wing actors, virtually invisible.

Antisemitism on the left, for instance, often is alleged to exist notwithstanding its passionate, public disavowal by some progressives. There is, of course, a long history of leftwing antisemitism (some scholars trace this back to Karl Marx's treatment of "the Jewish Question", see Jacobs 1992), which found its fullest expression in Soviet antisemitism (Fine and Spencer 2017). However the left today, whether in Europe or the United States, tends to stridently condemn antisemitism, along with other forms of racism and prejudice. If leftists are accused of antisemitism, they typically firmly reject such charges. The controversy, therefore, focuses on whether they secretly harbour antisemitic views, unwittingly traffic in antisemitism, inadvertently promote it, or simply fail to recognize it. These controversies frequently arise when leftists strongly oppose Israel's existence as a Jewish state or harshly criticize Israel's treatment of Palestinians.[5] There's heated debate over whether this opposition or criticism is a legitimate expression of political opinion or is really driven by latent hostility towards Jews? Some dismiss any suggestion of the latter as nothing more than conceptual confusion: conflating Jews (the targets of antisemitism) with Israel or Zionism (the targets of these leftist critiques). However, this response fails to recognize

that, although the State of Israel is distinct from the Jewish people, Israel's identity as a self-declared "Jewish State" means that it at least *could* become a convenient target for antisemitism (just as other identifiably "Jewish" entities – from the ADL to the Rothschild family – can do so).

Some writers on contemporary antisemitism have argued that left-wing antisemitism is more "insidious" than rightwing antisemitism because it is harder to spot (see Weiss 2019, 86). However, antisemitism on the mainstream right – for example, the politician who supports conservative Jewish causes but decries the influence of "Soros money" over his political opponents – can also be obscured by the paradigm of the committed Nazi. Once one moves outside the realm of the far-right, neo-Nazi or White Supremacist archetype, antisemitism of all political orientations can be difficult to identify. In most cases, there will be at least some mitigating or countervailing evidence; some possibility for reinterpretation or contestation. This suggests that discourse about antisemitism may suffer insofar as our modal representative of an Anti-Semite is one who openly and self-consciously declares their hatred of all Jews-qua-Jews – a standard that "nobody except a crazed Nazi" could ever meet (Hirsh 2013, 91). The pristine clarity of that case misleads us in two ways: first, by suggesting that cases which are not so clear are – by virtue of their contestability – therefore not even candidates for being instances of antisemitism; second, by implying that in those circumstances where we do successfully make an allegation of antisemitism "stick", what has been established is that the subject *is* tantamount to a "crazed Nazi." Even the now-ubiquitous discourse around antisemitic "tropes" often stays locked in this framework – the debate over whether a "trope" has been employed frequently collapses into an inquiry into the speaker's psychological affect towards Jews. Once again, the choices ossify into two unsatisfactory poles: if the trope is antisemitic, then we have prima facia established that those who use it possess vicious attitudes towards Jews; if we are unwilling to conclude the users have such attitudes, then the alleged trope must be dismissed as innocent or harmless.

In reality, many if not most politically salient cases of antisemitism will involve cases where there is active contestation. But the discourse about these cases exhibits several common features which belie this complexity. First, they tend to be framed in binary, "either-or" terms (e.g. the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions [BDS] movement targeting Israel either is or isn't antisemitic). Second, they often feature accusations of bad faith and dishonesty. Individuals and groups – generally Jewish – charging antisemitism are frequently accused of being disingenuous because their "real" intent is purportedly to stifle, if not silence, criticism of Israel and/or smear Israel's critics. Likewise, when individuals and groups accused of antisemitism reject this charge, their denials may be dismissed as dishonest and self-serving. Finally, whereas left-wing critics of Israel often respond to

antisemitism allegations by insisting on a sharp, categorical distinction between "criticism of Israel" and antisemitism,[6] right-wing supporters of Israel often respond to antisemitism allegations by asserting that their support for Israel precludes any possibility that they might be antisemitic. In either case, the specter of Israel or one's position on Israeli policy (favourable or critical) is wielded to preemptively falsify any claim of antisemitism that might arise. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these controversies frequently become polarizing, generating lots of heat but little light on the question of what is or isn't antisemitic.

In what follows we survey four different ways of identifying antisemitism, noting in each case how it can help us move beyond the far-right, neo-Nazi paradigm while also noting some of the difficult issues that arise when we attempt to apply each approach in practice.[7]

Four approaches to identifying antisemitism

Focus on the perpetrator's motives

Neo-Nazis are widely understood as antisemitic insofar as they are motivated by both a deep-seated hatred of Jews as well as a world-view according to which Jews are genetically defective, perhaps even non-human. Their overt hostility towards Jews and negative beliefs about them leave no room for doubt about their antisemitic motives. Perhaps with this example in mind, many people focus on motives in order to identify antisemitism, asking whether or not someone harbours hostility toward Jews or is prejudiced against them. This common approach to identifying antisemitism also underlies how many people think about discrimination. A common way of discerning whether an action is discriminatory is to look at the *motivations* behind the act and see if they are problematic. It would be a classic case of discrimination if, for example, a gay employee is fired due to prejudice or a black student is denied access to a university because an admissions officer believes in a genetic hierarchy of races.

Neo-Nazis notwithstanding, however, hatred of Jews is rarely expressed openly any longer. Does this mean that antisemitic motivations are now rare as well? Not necessarily. There likely is not a perfect one-to-one correlation between prejudiced attitudes and their open expression, and so a motivational account of antisemitism must also be attuned to cases where antisemitic attitudes exist in persons who publicly deny holding such views. And, as we will explain, the range of possible motivations that count as antisemitic goes beyond conscious intentions to harm Jews to include, for instance, certain forms of affect, as well as unconscious sources of behaviour. In this section we explore two potential avenues through which antisemitic motives might exist without overt public expression: pluralistic

ignorance and unconscious biases. We also note the special case where the causal arrow runs in the opposing direction: certain political positions, by stipulation *not* motivated by antisemitic attitudes, over time come to generate antisemitic dispositions.

One issue with identifying antisemitic attitudes is that people who consciously hold racist (or antisemitic) attitudes may decline to publicize them because they perceive such views as socially unacceptable. The simplest explanation for why they perceive such views as socially unacceptable is because they *are* unacceptable. However, it is also possible that far more people secretly harbour antisemitic attitudes than is generally recognized; those holding these attitudes keep quiet because of a mutually shared *mis*-apprehension that their neighbours would not tolerate their expression – a phenomenon known as "pluralistic ignorance" (Taylor 1982).

A second way in which antisemitic attitudes can be obscured is that they can be unconscious. Some who hold antisemitic attitudes may try to psychologically suppress them. The concept of "aversive racism" describes the mechanics whereby prejudicial attitudes are consciously disavowed insofar as they are incompatible with one's self-image as a liberal, egalitarian actor, but instead of disappearing take up residence in the subconscious (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004). These attitudes continue to exhibit influence in cases where ambiguities and a multitude of potential interpretations allow for discriminatory conduct to at least plausibly be defended as in comportment with neutral, liberal requirements. For example, one can imagine a manager who would hire a clearly qualified Black candidate over an unqualified White one, but in cases where it was unclear which candidate was more qualified (that is, cases where there was a viable non-racist reason for choosing either candidate) the manager would persistently end up favouring the White applicant. If antisemitism operates similarly, we would expect to see antisemitic attitudes have an effect in cases where the agent can plausibly articulate a neutral, non-antisemitic reason for disfavouring a Jewish actor.

The range of possible antisemitic motives is also broader than just antipathy towards Jews, whether overt, disguised or subconscious. A full assessment of antisemitic motives could include certain kinds of affect – such as hatred, disgust, fear, resentment – as well as certain kinds of belief. What they have in common is being in some way in tension with relating to others as equals. Relating to other people as equals requires that you think of them as having the same fundamental worth as yourself and everybody else. It also means having a set of emotional responses where you react to them as people who count, so that you respond with concern when they are hurting and attention when the raise their voice, rather than finding their needs disgusting, feeling anger whenever they raise their voice, etc. This suggests that the sorts of "motives" that may generate an inference of antisemitism are more expansive than might be expected at first blush.

And individuals can certainly have these motivations without any conscious awareness: I may think that I am angry with someone's contribution to a debate simply because of its content, when in fact I would not have the same reaction to a non-Jewish speaker making the same point. And again, a self-conception as a liberal, egalitarian person may make it especially hard for me to accept that I am subject to such influences.

Finally, a well-known problem with relying on motivations to determine antisemitism is evidentiary – we cannot really know other people's hearts and minds, especially in the cases that are more controversial (unlike the easy case of Neo-Nazis, who avow their hatred of Jews openly). Both the disguised and subconscious antisemite will deny they harbour any prejudice against Jews, the former lest their cover be blown, the latter because their psychological self-concept is dependent on the earnest belief that they do *not* hold such attitudes. And if the aversive racism framework is right, the subconscious Anti-Semite will likely present a further difficulty: they will only act upon their antisemitic attitudes in cases where they have a plausible, legitimate basis for doing so. The researchers on aversive racism solve this problem via aggregation – we can see the discriminatory effect because of the disparity in how many Black versus White applicants are hired in cases where either one should have an equally strong chance of being selected. But it cannot offer any guidance in individual cases – some of which, no doubt, truly *are* based on perfectly legitimate criteria.

So how can we really know whether someone is motivated by antisemitism when it isn't overt or admitted? How do we know if any particular statement had a problematic motive, given the wide variety of possible motivations? And what sort of evidence could overcome a speakers' own account of their motivation, given that they have privileged access to their own mind? The motivational account of antisemitism is "epistemically self-privileging": it relies on facts that are most reliably known, if they are known at all, by the subject of the antisemitism allegation (Schraub 2020a). Absent smoking-gun evidence such as the use of racial slurs or open denunciations of Jews-qua-Jews, we typically need to know much more about the context, the life of the speaker, and so on before we make a judgment about the motivation behind any particular act or expression that will retain credence in the face of their denial.

Take the contentious case of someone who espouses anti-Zionism. It's certainly possible that such a person is *motivated* by negative beliefs or emotions about Jews (for example, the anti-Zionism of David Duke or Louis Farrakhan), but although some anti-Zionists may be motivated by antisemitism, there is no reason to assume that all anti-Zionists have this motivation. Palestinian anti-Zionism, for instance, is driven by their historical and current experiences with Zionism (notably, displacement, dispossession and occupation). Zionism is an ideology, centred upon Jewish national self-determination in Israel/

Palestine. Challenging or questioning the ideology of Zionism, just as challenging or questioning any other political ideology, is legitimate. There are, in fact, many possible motives a person might have for opposing the ideology or practice of Zionism. For instance, you could believe (as some Jews themselves do) that Jews are a religious group, rather than a nation that has a right to self-determination. Even if you accept that Jews are a nation, you could believe that nations are not entitled to their own states; or you might think that Jews, like other nations, do not have the right to establish and maintain a state for themselves at the expense of others (especially another group residing there). And even if you accept that, in principle, Jews do have a right to their own state, you might still insist that Palestinians have an equal right to self-determination and that this mutual right can now only be realized in the form of a single, binational state.

In short, anti-Zionism is not necessarily motivated by negative feelings or beliefs about Jews.[8] But – given problems of subconscious (or disguised) motives – it is difficult to reliably distinguish those cases where such motives are operative from those where they are not. Indeed, it is a feature of the motivational account that *identical* views on Zionism could be legitimate or illicit based on the underlying motive that caused particular proponents to arrive at their position. The anti-Zionism that is motivated by resentment towards Jews would be antisemitic; the identically structured and defended anti-Zionism which does not stem from such motives would be innocent. Given the haziness of ascertaining motive, in many cases antisemitic and non-antisemitic forms of anti-Zionism may be observationally equivalent – at least if motive alone governs the claim.

Thus far, we have considered malign motivation as a causal mechanism, which generates certain dispositions towards Jews or Jewish institutions – someone's negative disposition towards Jews *motivates* them to, for example, take up a certain hostile position towards Israel. To be complete, however, a motivational account must also consider cases where the causal arrow runs in the other direction: a position on Zionism (or George Soros, or left-wing Jewish intellectuals), originally arrived at without any antisemitic impulses, acts to *generate* antisemitic attitudes which previously did not exist.[9] Imagine an activist who knows very little about Jews; lacking any particular positive or negative disposition towards them. The activist starts reading about Israel and decides (fairly or not, but by stipulation not *antisemitically*) that it's a terrible state, and accordingly identifies as an anti-Zionist. Noticing that Jews are the dominant group in Israel and even outside of it tend to be supporters, they consequently develop a dislike of Jews (they would say, in the same way that if they noticed a group of people who were overwhelmingly sympathetic to racism they would dislike them too). In this way, their anti-Zionism doesn't appear to be motivated by antisemitism, but their antisemitism is motivated by their anti-Zionism. And, having

"organically" developed these antisemitic views, it is likely that they will further buttress the originally wholly innocent anti-Zionist sentiments.[10]

Similarly, anti-Zionists who begin with no negative attitudes towards Jews whatsoever may end up spending a lot of time in pitched and emotional political fights where Jews make up a disproportionate and high-salience presence on the other side. Even though antisemitism is not the foundational motivation for their political beliefs, they nonetheless may become more prone to reacting dismissively or angrily when Jews raise their voices. It is not inevitable that this will occur, but the risk exists.[11] This iteration of antisemitic motives can be overlooked insofar as observers only check to see if antisemitism was the original, foundational motive for a given actor's arrival upon a political position.

Focus on the victim's perception

Another seemingly straightforward way of identifying antisemitism is to simply label anything perceived by Jewish people to be antisemitic as antisemitic. According to this approach, Jews get to define antisemitism because they are the victims of antisemitism (just as Black people, for instance, are sometimes said to get to define what counts as racism) (Pildis 2018). The subjectivity of the motivational approach, where antisemitism exists inside the mind of the alleged perpetrator, is here inverted – under this view antisemitism exists in any act perceived as such by the nominal victim. Put simply, whatever is threatening or offensive to Jews is antisemitic.

There are some significant difficulties in relying solely on perceptions to ground a claim of antisemitism, however. For one, surely it goes too far to say that in *any* case where, say, a Jewish college student feels offended, threatened or excluded by campus activism it is antisemitism. Moreover, if any Jewish feeling of marginalization suffices to label an action antisemitic, what happens if Jews (as they are liable to do) disagree? Jews have diverse perceptions of antisemitism and their tolerance for and sensitivity to certain kinds of discourse and practice varies widely; Jews don't agree among themselves about what counts as antisemitism, especially when it concerns Israel and Zionism. In many circumstances, activism perceived as antisemitic by one Jewish student may have been facilitated and promoted by another; in some circumstances competing claims of antisemitism may be mutually incompatible with one another. For example, while some Zionist Jews believe that denigrating transnational Jewish feelings of connectivity to Israel is antisemitic, some anti-Zionist Jews argue that asserting such inherent connections is what is antisemitic – either by conflating Jewish religious identity with Israeli national identity, or even by raising the specter of Jewish "dual loyalties."

Another possibility is to defer not just to any Jewish opinion, but to the Jewish *majority* opinion. But this raises the obvious problem of identifying what the majority opinion is. Jewish communal organizations may have some claim to speak for "the community", but there rarely are robust lines of democratic accountability ensuring that their positions reflect majority communal sentiment (Waxman 2016, 182–183). And even if these organizations do reliably reflect the outlook of the Jewish majority, appeals to the majority view carries an additional risk of unduly marginalizing the perspectives of particular members of the community who may be especially poorly represented in communal institutions. It is highly likely, for instance, that various Jewish sub-groups – including (to name just a few) Mizrahi Jews and Jews of Color, young Jews, anti-Zionist Jews, and ultra-Orthodox Jews – may have discrete experiences and understandings of antisemitism that may not be adequately represented or reflected in the majority view. While it might be reasonable to insist that Jews with dissident opinions on antisemitism not be used to ignore or discount the majority sentiment on the subject, it seems wrong to suggest that their accounts of antisemitism can be automatically discounted any time it deviates from the "consensus" view.[12]

Thus, one cannot draw a straight line from perceptions of antisemitism to a finding of antisemitism. This does not mean that perceptions are not relevant. The historical and contemporary experiences of Jews mean that they are especially likely to be able to detect signs of antisemitism. Hence, their perceptions should not be discounted or dismissed: those perceptions have a crucial role to play as a trigger for further investigation into whether antisemitism, of the forms that we discuss elsewhere in the paper, is present. To take a prominent example, Jewish members of the British Labour Party complained of receiving an increasing number of antisemitic comments from party members after Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader (Jewish Labour Movement n.d.).[13] Senior Labour officials, including Corbyn, responded defensively and dismissively to these complaints. Despite demands from British Jewish communal organizations to seriously address the problem, the party's leadership continued to insist that the antisemitism problem was overblown and that allegations of antisemitism were being "weaponized" to discredit Corbyn's brand of pro-Palestinian progressivism (see Syal 2016). It was only after Corbyn was replaced as party leader and a damning report came out by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission concluding that Labour had failed to address numerous cases of antisemitic harassment and discrimination within the party (EHRC 2020), that the party's leadership finally acknowledged the severity of the problem, apologized to the Jewish community, and promised "zero-tolerance" of antisemitism and a "culture change" in Labour (O'Mahony 2020). If the party's leadership had responded to the initial complaints by Jewish members of

the party by taking them seriously as compelling serious and impartial investigation, it might have avoided the crisis altogether.[14]

Focus on objective effects or outcomes

Moving away from subjective motivations and perceptions, one can focus on the objective outcome or effects of an expression or action. This fits with another common way of thinking about racism and xenophobia (see, e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2003). What we should consider, according to this approach, is not intent, but whether a given act or expression wrongfully *harms* Jewish people.

A difficulty with this approach to antisemitism is how we determine exactly what to count as harm, or at least as a sufficiently grave form of harm. Some argue, for instance, that it is antisemitic for pro-Palestinian student activists to promote BDS resolutions or stage "Israel Apartheid Week" on college campuses because the outcome of such activism is to create a "hostile environment" for Jewish students (at least for those who identify as Zionists). Sometimes, the case that such activity is antisemitic is relatively clear – an incident at York University where Jewish students were forced to barricade inside a Hillel amid a hostile mob shouting "die bitch, go back to Israel" and "die, Jew, get the hell of campus" seems straightforward enough (Cheifetz 2009). Yet sometimes the mere fact of student "discomfort" is alleged to suffice as evidence of antisemitic effect. While it may well be that many Jews are discomforted by Israel Apartheid Week activity, it is difficult to distinguish this sort of "harm" from the normal tribulations and challenges that exist in any academic environment.[15] University classes (to say nothing of student activism) may often wade into contentious political questions; the resolutions of which carry serious personal stakes for portions of the student body. But can we really say that students are "harmed" when forced to encounter arguments about, say, the morality or immorality of abortion or disputes over the proper legal standards to prosecute sexual assault allegations? After all, any number of things someone might say or advocate could discomfort or disturb members of different groups. For example, bringing up statistics of male violence committed against women might be uncomfortable for men, but that discomfort is not itself proof of sexism.

What we are most concerned with when we are defining racist (or sexist) conduct is preventing *oppression*: the reinforcement of systematic, group-based hierarchies. What makes it so troubling when a shopkeeper follows a Black person around a shop is not simply the irritation of being monitored while going about your business but the fact that in this case the monitoring is part of a much more general pattern of Black people being surveilled and treated as suspicious, a pattern that makes it harder for them to participate in society as equals. Likewise, sexism can be understood as a system of

oppression: women are systematically poorer, more subject to violence, less respected and so on. Hence, sexist actions are whatever reinforces that pattern. Antisemitism too, it might be said, should be understood as a system of oppression of Jews, who have historically faced systematic disadvantages. Antisemitic *actions*, according to this conception of antisemitism, are those that reinforce these systematic disadvantages. And that can be true whether or not those disadvantages are intended by the actor or even noticed by the majority of Jews affected by the actions.

Concerns about antisemitism, therefore, are often driven by a desire to prevent the marginalization or oppression of Jews and to be vigilant about any forms of expression or action that would exacerbate it. Unlike the understanding of antisemitism as grounded in Jewish perceptions, however, an effects-based account of antisemitism requires not only that Jewish people feel threatened or excluded by a given action, but that this feeling actually correspond to objective, material, and wrongful deprivations. A given action (or statement, or practice) is antisemitic insofar as it results in Jews being significantly impeded from participating in the relevant social institution as equals. Consider a rule in an apartment complex banning tenants from hanging any adornments on their doorways – a rule interpreted even-handedly to apply equally to sports pennants, Halloween decorations, and *Mezuzot*. It is possible, of course, that such a rule was motivated by antisemitism (though it may not be); and it is likely that a rule applied as such would be perceived as antisemitic by many Jewish residents. But under an effects-based conception it is neither perception nor motivation alone, but the actual effect of the rule to seriously impede observant Jews' ability to live in the residence, that justifies the label of antisemitism.[16]

Focus on discourse and representation

Another way to avoid some of the messy judgments involved in assessing motivations or intent is to stop looking at what might be behind the words and/or actions and just focus on the words or actions themselves: see if the *content* of what someone is saying or doing is unacceptable. There are some things you just shouldn't say, the idea goes, irrespective of what you feel. Slurs, such as the n-word, are the clearest cases of unacceptable racial/ethnic speech, and of course there are also slurs for Jews, such as the word "kike." Other words, like "parasite" or "bloodsucker", can also easily be identified as antisemitic because of their past usage in dehumanizing Jews. In these cases, we have a word or phrase that has so often been used historically to humiliate and demean that any use of it now, even with innocent intentions, still carriers a deeply negative resonance.[17] The same logic applies to certain symbols (most notably, a swastika) and visual representations of Jews. Indeed, the use of any word, phrase or image that draws upon negative

stereotypes about Jews (for example, stereotypes about Jews being avaricious or clannish) should be ruled out, regardless of intentions, according to this approach. Consider the college student who wears blackface to dress up as a rapper for Halloween. Even if the student is completely clueless about the history of blackface, his actions still trigger the associations created by that history: all of the demeaning stereotypes of black people embodied in minstrel shows. Likewise, a person who is not motivated by any kind of malice can unwittingly invoke the long history of demeaning stereotypes about Jews (a cartoonist, for instance, who depicts a Jewish person with a long nose). Hence, someone's speech can be antisemitic if it invokes antisemitic stereotypes or tropes, even if the speaker doesn't intend any negative message (this is particularly likely to occur in compacted forms of communication like placards, cartoons and tweets, where the medium allows little or no room for nuance or complexity). Criticism of Israel, therefore, can cross the line into antisemitism when it draws on classic antisemitic tropes or themes (such as Jewish conspiracies or blood libels[18]), when it uses antisemitic images (such as a swastika), or when Israel is depicted as somehow representative of the stereotypical "Jew."

Under this approach, antisemitism is an ever-present danger because it continues to subsist in our political culture. For example, almost any critique of the pro-Israel lobby runs the risk of being labelled antisemitic because it could be said to draw – deliberately or not – upon longstanding antisemitic myths that have depicted Jews as collectively wielding excessive political and economic influence. Similarly, consider the case of criticizing George Soros as a "globalist" whose wealth allows him to unduly influence political society. Such critiques often are thought to tread uncomfortably close to antisemitic stereotypes, even absent any malign motivations. But those who critique Soros will contend, plausibly, that it cannot be intrinsically invalid to criticize the impact of concentrated wealth on politics; and while Soros should not be singled out for approbation on the basis of his religion, neither should he be able to claim immunity because of it. Perhaps these critics might be willing to abandon a particular term (such as "globalist") if it is viewed as especially problematic or offensive – but only if another, acceptable term could be nominated to replace it. The difficulty is that as soon as another word rose to prominence as a replacement for "globalist", it might quickly find itself attached to the same antisemitic associations as did the original.

The problem identified here is, in essence, that whenever someone speaks about George Soros and the alleged malignancies of global capital the risk of antisemitism is always lurking in the background. It is not (just) that speaking of Soros may well produce antisemitic effects – perhaps by casting suspicion that all Jews are rootless cosmopolitans, loyal only to their collective wealth. It is also, more fundamentally, that antisemitism is part of the deep cultural patrimony that shapes or frames what we think of when speaking of

someone like Soros (or even powerful concentrations of capital generally). In discourses touching on Jews, antisemitism often offers the "path of least resistance" – it is what feels natural and familiar, priming us to accept arguments that fall into deep cultural grooves. The association of Jews with malign global capital may result in the critic of "globalism" finding that someone like George Soros is the most accessible example. And the listener hearing the critique may find it more harmonious with their priors, more in tune with their intuitions, when it is illustrated by reference to someone like Soros. Even if nobody has malign motives, and even if the tangible negative effects on the Jewish community are relatively attenuated, it still would be the case that antisemitism is doing important work in producing the trajectory and power of the discourse on globalism. And this could be the case in any discourse where Jewishness is a salient feature (including discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

Antisemitism thus may resist being quarantined into particular taboo words, images, positions, or practices. Instead, it acts as a discursive resource that can channel and condition discussions where Jews play a role. In this respect, antisemitism might be thought of as a "cultural reservoir" of stereotypes, myths and narratives that can be easily and unwittingly drawn upon by people who are not personally antisemitic (in the sense that they have no antipathy towards Jews). As Ben Gidley, Brendan McGeever and David Feldman have recently written about antisemitism in the U.K.:

> […] in Britain the problem is not one of limited pockets of committed, ideological antipathy. Rather, the problem is more widespread: negative and stereotypical ideas about Jews which have accumulated over centuries and are embedded deeply within our culture. […] we see people reaching for antisemitic ideas at a particular moment to provide a simple and, apparently, persuasive account of a problem they care about. (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020, 416)[19]

Antisemitism, in other words, supplies people with ready ideas, frames and narratives that they can draw upon, often unconsciously, as explanatory devices. And antisemitism likewise makes these ideas, frames, and narratives more plausible and tractable than they might otherwise be.

According to this conception of antisemitism, therefore, there is no easily codified way to avoid antisemitism in discourses about Jews and/or the Jewish state: it would not suffice to simply ban a list of terms, for example. But if it is the case that the risk of antisemitism permeates all discourse about Jews in a way that no individual speaker can extract themselves from, then it also must be the case that the mere fact that a discourse carries this risk does not *in itself* render that discourse illegitimate. It means instead that we must constantly be vigilant of the creep of antisemitism into our thought and speech and work together to mitigate its influence. It

is an important collective project to, for example, help each other see when we may be unwittingly falling into an antisemitic cultural narrative or conspiratorial form of thinking, and to try to change the broad cultural narratives themselves to create more positive associations with Jews.

Talking about antisemitism under contested frames

So, where does all this leave us? Hopefully this exploration of different criteria for assessing whether particular phenomena (rhetoric, arguments, statements) are or are not antisemitic has at least made clearer what the different paradigms are through which something might be antisemitic, as well as what it takes for something to be antisemitic in one of these ways. But the broader takeaway is that antisemitism can be conceived in various ways and will, therefore, inevitably be contested. Identifying antisemitism can be difficult, no approach to identifying antisemitism is perfect, and applying any approach in practice can be tricky. If we focus on motives, as many people do, we will often end up arguing about them because we cannot read other people's minds. If we ignore motives and focus only on effects and outcomes, we may still disagree about which outcomes/effects are sufficiently harmful to Jews to be classified as antisemitic. And if, instead of motives and outcomes, we focus on antisemitic discourse – certain words, phrases, tropes, symbols, etc. – we might end up making it difficult to have any public discourse about Jews since antisemitic ways of thinking are deeply rooted in our culture.

If antisemitism is bound to be contested, then how should we respond to future controversies? Rather than trying to craft knockdown principles that definitively resolve controversial antisemitism claims – a futile endeavour, precisely because the difficult issues of antisemitism are contestable and so not amenable to clear-cut standards – we recommend a willingness to work through these claims without resorting to immediate dismissals or assertions of bad faith. What would this entail?

First, it would be helpful to clarify which of the many potential understandings of antisemitism those making or rebutting antisemitism claims are utilizing. Is it allegedly a case of antisemitic motives held by a particular individual or group? Or is it perhaps a case of unintentional antisemitism, due to the effects someone produces or the discourse that they invoke? Clarifying what exactly is being charged might make it easier for people to reach some kind of an agreement about the case in question. At the very least, it may dissipate charges of bad faith, as a claim of antisemitism that appears transparently ridiculous under one frame may have genuine plausibility under another.

Second, while it is unreasonable to suggest that the mere fact that some Jewish person, somewhere, takes offense at a given statement or practice

suffices to deem it "antisemitic" per se, it is reasonable to insist that persons who encounter a Jewish claim of antisemitism at least adopt a presumptive disposition towards taking that claim seriously and considering it with an open mind. Jewish claims of antisemitism are not themselves sufficient to determine whether or not something actually is antisemitic, but these claims should not be ignored or dismissed out of hand. Thus, when a Jewish person experiences an incident as antisemitic this incident should be investigated as potentially antisemitic.[20] A claim of antisemitism does not need to be the end of a conversation, but it should be the start of one. Hopefully an understanding that a finding of antisemitism need not be a finding that anyone is a neo-Nazi, makes it possible to have these conversations more easily without people immediately resorting to defensiveness or hostility.

Finally, if many cases of antisemitism are not, in fact, intentional then our responses to antisemitism need to be subtler than always turning to moral outrage or punitive actions. To be sure, there are times when people act with such gross negligence (see Shiffrin 2017, 199) towards the interests of Jews that they deserve condemnation despite their not harbouring any particular animus towards Jews as a group. The perpetrator of several hoax bomb threats that targeted Jewish Community Centers across the United States in early 2017, whose motive was apparently not antisemitic antagonism but rather a desire to frame an ex-girlfriend as part of an elaborate revenge plot, is a clear example (Dienst 2017). But other cases deserve a different response. For example, it is quite possible for someone who bears no hostility towards Jews and tries to be a friend to the Jewish community to unwittingly invoke antisemitic tropes. Or for someone who is thinking about general economic issues that seemingly have little to do with any particular ethnic group to all the same be influenced by an antisemitic train of thought. Punishing someone for speech or actions that are not motivated by antisemitism is neither ethical nor productive. Educating them about how their speech or behaviour is antisemitic, regardless of their intentions, is a more constructive response. Just as growing numbers of people have come to acknowledge systemic racism and recognize how insidious racist stereotypes and tropes can be, antisemitism should also be understood as a pernicious form of racism that can operate in subtle and sometimes unconscious ways. Hence, people need to learn what is antisemitic and how to avoid it; even as it is acknowledged that both "what is antisemitic" and "how to avoid it" remain very much projects-in-process.

That education and constructive engagement is an ethically and practically superior manner of responding to many cases of antisemitism does, however, impose a parallel obligation on those who are alleged to have engaged in antisemitic behaviour. They must seriously consider the validity of the claim being made, and accept at least the *possibility* that it could be

true, without preemptively dismissing it as impossible, outlandish, or a smear. There is, in short, a mutual disarmament that should occur: those making antisemitism claims must not treat all their targets as if they are tantamount to Nazis, and those on the receiving end of antisemitism claims cannot recoil as if they've been accused of a crime tantamount to Nazism. If both parties obey these maxims, discussions about antisemitism can be far less heated and far more fruitful than we typically observe today.

Notes

1. We prefer "antisemitism" (without the hyphen) to "anti-Semitism" – a term coined by self-defined "anti-Semite" Wilhelm Marr – because there is no "Semitism" which antisemites oppose, and rendering it with a hyphen may wrongfully imply that the term is meant to encompass all those who speak Semitic languages.
2. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) documented 2,107 antisemitic hate crimes in the United States in 2019, the highest number since it began its annual audit in 1979 (Diaz 2020). Worldwide, there were 456 violent antisemitic hate crimes documented in 2019, an 18 per cent increase over 2018 and the highest annual tally since 2014 (Liphshiz 2020).
3. Though occasionally even these cases are contested (see Wildman 2017).
4. There has never been scholarly agreement regarding antisemitism's definition. Some scholars have even argued that we should dispense with the term "antisemitism" altogether (Engel 2009; see also Judaken 2018).
5. These controversies have become increasingly common as leftwing criticism of Israel and protests against it have become a staple of progressive politics in the West, especially on many college campuses. The group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), for instance, has regularly been accused of fomenting antisemitism (Stern 2020, 127).
6. Interestingly, this defense is raised even in some cases where the alleged antisemitism has nothing to do with Israel (see Hirsh 2018, 28).
7. We thus endorse a pluralist account analogous to Blum's (2002) account of anti-Black racism.
8. Similarly, we cannot simply assume that anyone accusing Israel of "apartheid" or calling for it to be boycotted is motivated by antisemitism. Nor is devoting disproportionate attention to Israel's alleged crimes and misdeeds proof of antisemitic motives. While in some cases an obsessive or single-minded focus on Israel may well stem from antisemitic motives, many people have valid personal or professional reasons for dedicating specific attention (whether positive or negative) to Israel (Nexus 2020).
9. On the difficulty of determining causal directionality even where a significant link between anti-Israel and antisemitic attitudes has been established, see Shenhav-Goldberg and Kopstein (2020).
10. This may help account for the fact that antisemitism is particularly widespread among those most hostile to Israel. A study from 2006 found that more than half of those who expressed the most radical form of criticism against Israel also expressed antisemitic attitudes (Kaplan and Small 2006).
11. By the same logic, there is a similar risk that Zionists who begin with no negative attitudes towards Muslims or Arabs but – in the course of debating Israel and Zionism – end up spending much time in heated political fights with

members of these communities can correspondingly develop anti-Arab or Islamophobic impulses.

12. On the legitimate and abusive uses of so-called "dissident minorities" to mediate engagement with a larger minority group, see Schraub (2020b).
13. Frequently, though not always, these antisemitic remarks came with at least a veneer of anti-Israel or anti-Zionist ideology (for example, accusing Jewish party members of being Israeli agents). See Jewish Labour Movement (n.d.).
14. For analyses of the UK Labour antisemitism crisis see Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman (2020); Rich (2018).
15. Importantly, in legal terms a "hostile environment" does not refer to any situation where a student or employee feels uncomfortable. In order to be legally actionable under American law, discriminatory actions must be sufficiently "severe and pervasive" such that they effectively alter the terms and conditions of employment or access to a service. See Faragher v. City of Boca Raton, 524 U.S. 775, 787–88 (1998).
16. See Bloch v. Frischholz, 587 F.3d 771 (7th Cir. 2009).
17. Controversy arises, however, when a word or phrase has *sometimes* been used to demean, but has also been deployed without any intent to disparage. The word "Yid", for example, has been used as a slur for Jews, but it is also used by supporters of the football club Tottenham Hotspur – which has a large Jewish following – who proudly refer to themselves as "Yids".
18. On the history of the antisemitic blood libel, see Kieval (2021). On the role of conspiracy theories in antisemitism, see Byford (2011, 79–92).
19. In a similar vein, historian Jonathan Judaken notes that: "Antisemitic codes thus serve as a short cut to explain the operational forces of anxiety in people's lives, when they do not have the language or analytic sophistication to name them properly" (Judaken 2008, 546; see also Volkov 2006, 51–62).
20. This accords with the conclusion of the MacPherson Report exploring racism in the British policing system, the most famous recommendation of which was to define a "racist incident" as "any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person." This definition was meant to be used for the reporting, recording, and investigation of such incidents – but was not meant to demand that the ultimate resolution of the case align with the victim's allegation (MacPherson 1999, Chap. 47, Secs. 12–14).

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