

## Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer

### ELEMENTS OF ANTI-SEMITISM

#### The limits of Enlightenment

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**F**OR SOME PEOPLE TODAY anti-Semitism involves the destiny of mankind; for others it is a mere pretext. The Fascists do not view the Jews as a minority but as an opposing race, the embodiment of the negative principle. They must be exterminated to secure happiness for the world. At the other extreme we have the theory that the Jews have no national or racial characteristics and simply form a group through their religious opinions and tradition. It is claimed that only the Jews of Eastern Europe have Jewish characteristics, and then only if they have not been fully assimilated. Neither doctrine is wholly true or wholly false.

The first is true to the extent that Fascism has made it true. The Jews today are the group which calls down upon itself, both in theory and in practice, the will to destroy born of a false social order. They are branded as absolute evil by those who are absolutely evil, and are now in fact the chosen race. Whereas there is no longer any need for economic domination, the Jews are marked out as the absolute object of domination pure and simple. No one tells the workers, who are the ultimate target, straight to their face – for very good reasons; and the Negroes are to be kept where they belong: but the Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth, and the call to destroy them like vermin finds an echo in the heart of every budding fascist throughout the world. The portrait of the Jews that the nationalists offer to the world is in fact their own self-portrait. They long for total possession and unlimited power, at any price. They transfer their guilt for this to the Jews, whom as masters they despise and crucify, repeating *ad infinitum* a sacrifice which they cannot believe to be effective.

The other, liberal, theory is true as an idea. It contains the image of a society in which irrational anger no longer exists and seeks for outlets. But since the liberal theory assumes that unity among

men is already in principle established, it serves as an apologia for existing circumstances. The attempt to avert the extreme threat by a minorities policy and a democratic strategy is ambiguous, like the defensive stance of the last liberal citizens. Their impotence attracts the enemy of impotence. The existence and way of life of the Jews throw into question the generality with which they do not conform. The inflexible adherence to their own order of life has brought the Jews into an uncertain relationship with the dominant order. They expected to be protected without themselves being in command. Their relationship with the ruling nations was one of greed and fear. But the arrivistes who crossed the gulf separating them from the dominant mode of life lost that cold, stoic character which society still makes a necessity. The dialectical link between enlightenment and domination, and the dual relationship of progress to cruelty and liberation which the Jews sensed in the great philosophers of the Enlightenment and the democratic, national movements are reflected in the very essence of those assimilated. The enlightened self-control with which the assimilated Jews managed to forget the painful memories of domination by others (a second circumcision, so to speak) led them straight from their own, long-suffering community into the modern bourgeoisie, which was moving inexorably toward reversion to cold repression and reorganization as a pure "race." But race is not a naturally special characteristic, as the folk mystics would have it. It is a reduction to the natural, to sheer force, to that stubborn particularity which in the status quo constitutes the generality. Today race has become the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual integrated within a barbaric collective. The harmony of society which the liberal Jews believed in turned against them in the form of the harmony of a national community. They thought that anti-Semitism would distort that order which in reality cannot exist without distorting men. The persecution of the Jews, like any other form of persecution, is inseparable from that system of order. However successfully it may at times be concealed, force is the essential nature of this order – and we are witnessing its naked truth today.

[. . .] Modern society, in which primitive religious feelings and new forms of religion as well as the heritage of revolution are sold on the open market, in which the Fascist leaders bargain over the land and life of nations behind locked doors while the habituated public sit by their radio sets and work out the cost; a society in which the word which it unmasks is thereby legitimized as a component part of a political racket: this society, in which politics is not only a business but business the whole of politics, is gripped by a holy anger over the retarded commercial attitudes of the Jews and classifies them as materialists, and hucksters who must give way to the new race of men who have elevated business into an absolute.

Bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic reason: the concealment of domination in production. In earlier ages the rulers were directly repressive and not only left all the work to the lower classes but declared work to be a disgrace, as it always was under domination; and in a mercantile age, the industrial boss is an absolute monarch. Production attracts its own courtiers. The new rulers simply took off the bright garb of the nobility and donned civilian clothing. They declared that work was not degrading, so as to control the others more rationally. They claimed to be creative

workers, but in reality they were still the grasping overlords of former times. The manufacturer took risks and acted like a banker or commercial wizard. He calculated, arranged, bought and sold. On the market he competed for the profit corresponding to his own capital. He seized all he could, not only on the market but at the very source: as a representative of his class he made sure that his workers did not sell him short with their labor. The workers had to supply the maximum amount of goods. Like Shy lock, the bosses demand their pound of flesh. They owned the machines and materials, and therefore compelled others to produce for them. They called themselves producers, but secretly everyone knew the truth. The productive work of the capitalist, whether he justifies his profit by means of gross returns as under liberalism, or by his director's salary as today, is an ideology cloaking the real nature of the labor contract and the grasping character of the economic system.

And so people shout: Stop thief! – but point at the Jews. They are the scapegoats not only for individual maneuvers and machinations but in a broader sense, inasmuch as the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to them. The manufacturer keeps an eye on his debtors, the workers, in the factory and makes sure that they have performed well before he pays them their money. They realize the true position when they stop to think what they can buy with this money. The smallest magnate can dispose of a quantity of services and goods which were available to no ruler in the past; but the workers receive a bare minimum. It is not enough actually to experience how few goods they can buy on the market; the salesmen continue to advertise the merits of things which they cannot afford. The relationship between wage and prices shows what is kept from the workers. With their wages they accept the principle of settlement of all their demands. The merchant presents them with the bill which they have signed away to the manufacturer. The merchant is the bailiff of the whole system and takes the hatred of others upon himself. The responsibility of the circulation sector for exploitation is a socially necessary pretence.

The Jews were not the sole owners of the circulation sector. But they had been active in it for so long that they mirrored in their own ways the hatred they had always borne. Unlike their Aryan colleagues, they were still largely denied access to the origins of surplus value. It was a long time before, with difficulty, they were allowed to own the means of production. Admittedly, in the history of Europe and even under the German emperors, baptized Jews were allowed high positions in industry and in the administration. But they had to justify themselves with twice the usual devotion, diligence, and stubborn self-denial. They were only allowed to retain their positions if by their behavior they tacitly accepted or confirmed the verdict pronounced on other Jews: that was the purpose of baptism. No matter how many great achievements the Jews were responsible for, they could not be absorbed into the European nations; they were not allowed to put down roots and so they were dismissed as rootless. At best the Jews were protected and dependent on emperors, princes or the absolute state. But the rulers themselves all had an economic advantage over the remainder of the population. To the extent that they could use the Jews as intermediaries, they protected them against the masses who had to pay the price of progress. The Jews were the colonizers for progress. From the time when, in their capacity as merchants, they helped to spread Roman civilization

throughout Gentile Europe, they were the representatives – in harmony with their patriarchal religion – of municipal, bourgeois and, finally, industrial conditions. They carried capitalist ways of life to various countries and drew upon themselves the hatred of all who had to suffer under capitalism. For the sake of the economic progress which is now proving their downfall, the Jews were always a thorn in the side of the craftsmen and peasants who were declassed by capitalism. They are now experiencing to their own cost the exclusive, particularist character of capitalism. Those who always wanted to be first have been left far behind. Even the Jewish president of an American entertainment trust lives hopelessly on the defensive in his cocoon of cash. The kaftan was a relic of ancient middle-class costume. Today it indicates that its wearer has been cast onto the periphery of a society which, though completely enlightened, still wishes to lay the ghosts of its distant past. Those who proclaimed individualism, abstract justice, and the notion of the person are now degraded to the condition of a species. Those who are never allowed to enjoy freely the civil rights which should allow them human dignity are referred to, without distinction, as “the Jew.” Even in the nineteenth century the Jews remained dependent on an alliance with the central power. General justice protected by the state was the pledge of their security, and the law of exception a specter held out before them. The Jews remained objects, at the mercy of others, even when they insisted on their rights. Commerce was not their vocation but their fate. The Jews constituted the trauma of the knights of industry who had to pretend to be creative, while the claptrap of anti-Semitism announced a fact for which they secretly despised themselves; their anti-Semitism is self-hatred, the bad conscience of the parasite.

[. . .] The howling voice of Fascist orators and camp commandants shows the other side of the same social condition. The yell is as cold as business. They both expropriate the sounds of natural complaint and make them elements of their technique. Their bellow has the same significance for the pogrom as the noise generator in the German flying bomb: the terrible cry which announces terror is simply turned on. The cry of pain of the victim who first called violence by its name, the mere word to designate the victim (Frenchman, Negro, or Jew), generates despair in the persecuted who must react violently. The victims are the false counterparts of the dread mimesis. They reproduce the insatiability of the power which they fear. Everything must be used and all must obey. The mere existence of the other is a provocation. Every “other” person who “doesn’t know his place” must be forced back within his proper confines – those of unrestricted terror. Anyone who seeks refuge must be prevented from finding it; those who express ideas which all long for, peace, a home, freedom – the nomads and players – have always been refused a homeland. Whatever a man fears, that he suffers. Even the last resting place is emptied of peace. The destruction of cemeteries is not a mere excess of anti-Semitism – it is anti-Semitism in its essence. The outlawed naturally arouse the desire to outlaw others. Violence is even inflamed by the marks which violence has left on them. Anything which just wants to vegetate must be rooted out. In the chaotic net regulated escape reactions of the lower animals, in the convolutions of the sudden swarm, and the convulsive gestures of the martyred, we see the mimetic impulse which can never be completely destroyed. In the death struggle of the creature, at

the opposite pole from freedom, freedom still shines out irresistibly as the thwarted destiny of matter. It is opposed by the idiosyncrasy which claims anti-Semitism as its motive.

The mental energy harnessed by political anti-Semitism is this rationalized idiosyncrasy. All the pretexts over which the Führer and his followers reach agreement, imply surrender to the mimetic attraction without any open infringement of the reality principle – honorably, so to speak. They cannot stand the Jews, yet imitate them.

There is no anti-Semite who does not basically want to imitate his mental image of a Jew, which is composed of mimetic cyphers: the argumentative movement of a hand, the musical voice painting a vivid picture of things and feelings irrespective of the real content of what is said, and the nose – the physiognomic *principium individuationis*, symbol of the specific character of an individual, described between the lines of his countenance. The multifarious nuances of the sense of smell embody the archetypal longing for the lower forms of existence, for direct unification with circumambient nature, with the earth and mud. Of all the senses, that of smell – which is attracted without objectifying – bears clearest witness to the urge to lose oneself in and become the “other.” As perception and the perceived – both are united – smell is more expressive than the other senses. When we see we remain what we are; but when we smell we are taken over by otherness. Hence the sense of smell is considered a disgrace in civilization, the sign of lower social strata, lesser races and base animals. The civilized individual may only indulge in such pleasure if the prohibition is suspended by rationalization in the service of real or apparent practical ends. The prohibited impulse may be tolerated if there is no doubt that the final aim is its elimination – this is the case with jokes or fun, the miserable parody of fulfillment. As a despised and despising characteristic, the mimetic function is enjoyed craftily. Anyone who seeks out “bad” smells, in order to destroy them, may imitate sniffing to his heart’s content, taking unrationalized pleasure in the experience. The civilized man “disinfects” the forbidden impulse by his unconditional identification with the authority which has prohibited it; in this way the action is made acceptable. If he goes beyond the permitted bounds, laughter ensues. This is the schema of the anti-Semitic reaction. Anti-Semites gather together to celebrate the moment when authority permits what is usually forbidden, and become a collective only in that common purpose. Their rantings are organized laughter. The more terrible their accusations and threats and the greater their anger, the more compelling their scorn. Anger, scorn, and embittered imitation are actually the same thing. The purpose of the Fascist formula, the ritual discipline, the uniforms, and the whole apparatus, which is at first sight irrational, is to allow mimetic behavior. The carefully thought out symbols (which are proper to every counterrevolutionary movement), the skulls and disguises, the barbaric drum beats, the monotonous repetition of words and gestures, are simply the organized imitation of magic practices, the mimesis of mimesis. The leader with his contorted face and the charisma of approaching hysteria take command. The leader acts as a representative; he portrays what is forbidden to everyone else in actual life. Hitler can gesticulate like a clown, Mussolini strike false notes like a provincial tenor, Goebbels talk endlessly like a Jewish agent whom he wants murdered, and Coughlin preach love like the savior whose crucifixion he portrays – all for the sake of still more

bloodshed. Fascism is also totalitarian in that it seeks to make the rebellion of suppressed nature against domination directly useful to domination.

This machinery needs the Jews. Their artificially heightened prominence acts on the legitimate son of the gentile civilization like a magnetic field. The gentile sees equality, humanity, in his difference from the Jew, but this induces a feeling of antagonism and alien being. And so impulses which are normally taboo and conflict with the requirements of the prevailing form of labor are transformed into conforming idiosyncracies. The economic position of the Jews, the last defrauded frauds of liberalistic ideology, affords them no secure protection. Since they are so eminently fitted to generate these mental induction currents, they serve such functions involuntarily. They share the fate of the rebellious nature as which Fascism uses them: they are employed blindly yet perspicaciously. It matters little whether the Jews as individuals really do still have those mimetic features which awaken the dread malady, or whether such features are suppressed. Once the wielders of economic power have overcome their fear of the Fascist administrators, the Jews automatically stand out as the disturbing factor in the harmony of the national society. They are abandoned by domination when its progressive alienation from nature makes it revert to mere nature. The Jews as a whole are accused of participating in forbidden magic and bloody ritual. Disguised as accusation, the subconscious desire of the aboriginal inhabitants to return to the mimetic practice of sacrifice finds conscious fulfillment. When all the horror of prehistory which has been overlaid with civilization is rehabilitated as rational interest by projection onto the Jews, there is no restriction. The horror can be carried out in practice, and its practical implementation goes beyond the evil content of the projection. The fantasies of Jewish crimes, infanticide and sadistic excess, poisoning of the nation, and international conspiracy, accurately define the anti-Semitic dream, but remain far behind its actualization. Once things have reached this stage, the mere word "Jew" appears as the bloody grimace reflected in the swastika flag with its combination of death's head and shattered cross. The mere fact that a person is called a Jew is an invitation forcibly to make him over into a physical semblance of that image of death and distortion. [. . .]