

**Instrumentalizing Antisemitism**

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## **Instrumentalizing antisemitism**

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In March 1941, Max Horkheimer wrote in a letter to the British Labour Party intellectual Harold Laski: “Just as it is true that one can only understand antisemitism by examining society, it seems to me that society itself can only be understood through antisemitism.” This two-pronged observation is the key to *The Politics of Unreason* (referred to below as PU), the extensive and detailed analysis of the writings of the Frankfurt School on antisemitism by the professor of European Politics and Society at Groningen University, Lars Rensmann. He formulates Horkheimer’s claim in even stronger terms, when he argues that antisemitism is a “constitutive element of modern global society” (PU 11-12). Beyond the mutual clarification of modern society and antisemitism, Rensmann aims to shed new light on Critical Theory as well. Primarily, he wants to draw attention to the idea that Critical Theory offered a theoretically and empirically rich account of modern antisemitism as the quintessential, yet deeply pathological, projection of modern subjectivity. But more radically, Rensmann argues that the reflections on antisemitism are crucial for understanding Critical Theory as an intellectual project. These claims are presented in seven chapters, in-between lengthy introductory and concluding chapters, discussing the development of ideas on antisemitism of the Frankfurt School in more or less chronological order, yet at the same time in terms of increasing concreteness, from a more or less universal theory of subjectivity to an analysis of political mobilization and propaganda in twentieth-century Germany. In sum, this is an account of “the Frankfurt School’s signature contribution to our understanding of modern judeophobia and antisemitism theory at large: the link between antisemitism and critical theory of modern society” (PU 216).

In the first chapters, Rensmann focuses on Critical Theory as a philosophical anthropology of subject formation, initially in terms of the repressive nature of civilization, or as a reflection on the alienating conditions of subjectivity in a modern, bourgeois or capitalist society. In these chapters, Rensmann tries to locate the discussion of antisemitism within the context of the psychoanalytic turn of Critical Theory in the late 1920s. From this perspective, “the Jew” emerges as the repressed Other, turning antisemitism into a primordial act of subject formation. Remarkably, Rensmann here circumvents the problem already identified in 1978 by Erhard

Bahr, that despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that almost all of its members were Jews, the early Frankfurt School was not particularly interested in antisemitism (Bahr 1978). Martin Jay also demonstrated this lack of interest in his 1973 history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, *The Dialectical Imagination*, by the fact that antisemitism wasn't even an item in the index. Jay made this more explicit in his 1980 article "The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism" by arguing that antisemitism only became a topic of manifest concern in 1939 with Max Horkheimer's article "Die Juden und Europa." But even then antisemitism and the fate of the Jews of Europe were discussed in a highly derivative way, opening with the statement that "Wer den Antisemitismus erklären will, muss den Nationalsozialismus meinen", only to reduce the issue even further along classical Marxist lines by arguing that "Wer aber vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte auch vom Faschismus schweigen" (Horkheimer 1939, 115). Given the virulence of antisemitism in the interwar period, and the fact that most Frankfurters decided to flee Germany to escape persecution, the absence of any consideration of antisemitism in the first phase of the Frankfurter Schule is rather remarkable. As Rensmann fails to signal how remarkable that actually is, he therefore also does not attempt to explain that absence.

Despite this initial lack of attention to antisemitism, Rensmann argues that "the full-fledged "Freudian turn" of the Frankfurt School theorists implies that they began to view the rise of authoritarianism and antisemitism as *symptoms* of the irrationality and prevailing patterns of social domination of the time" (PU 30-31). This claim carries a threefold burden of proof, first to demonstrate that the early Frankfurters at the time were aware of these implications; secondly, that antisemitism had a separate and even primary status in relation to authoritarianism; and thirdly, that antisemitism was actually not just a symptom, but a constitutive element of patterns of contemporary social domination. This is the starting-point for a detailed analysis of the psychoanalytically inspired arguments of Critical Theory about "postliberal subjectivity" in support of the position defended in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, that "all historical forms of subjectivity have been entangled in domination, producing identities plagued by powerful conflicts and precariously holding the self together in sadomasochistic structures" (PU 60). Seen from this perspective, antisemitism is a projection of the self, in which "the Jew" appears as a hated powerful authority of the super-ego, and at the same time as the inferior

entity which the ego loves to hate, feeding stereotypes of the vengeful, powerful and greedy “Jew”.

This line of reasoning finds its culmination in extensive discussion in the penultimate chapter of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, “Elemente des Antisemitismus. Grenzen der Aufklärung”, which, according to Rensmann, is “arguably until this day the most instructive theory-guided resource for reflecting on antisemitism as a sociopolitical problem” (PU 26). Yet Rensmann here also echoes the suggestion, initially made by Rolf Wiggershaus, that the “Elemente” should be interpreted as the hidden core of the book (Wiggershaus 1986). Rensmann devotes a whole chapter to the discussion of these elements, formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in 1943-1944 with an important input from their colleague Leo Löwenthal (whom Rensmann presents as his intellectual mentor when as a young student in the early 1990s he embarked on a study of the Frankfurt School). Rensmann wants to argue that the theory of antisemitism Adorno and Horkheimer aimed for is much more than an application of the general theory of human subjectivity to the case of antisemitism. Instead, the Frankfurters see antisemitism as in some way constitutive of subjectivity. Its “mimesis of death” is the pathological way in which the ego tries to assimilate the Other, by way of an unreflective “false projection” in which all that is unfamiliar is perceived as an existential threat. The antisemitic denial of the Jew is the archetypical way in which modern subjectivity is based on the denial of the Other.

As Rensmann argues, the “Elements” also contain an analysis of the transformation of Christian antisemitism, a critique of bourgeois liberalism as the cradle of fascism, and an interpretation of antisemitism as a derailed critique of capitalism. Yet in Rensmann’s view the final “Element”, written by Horkheimer only in 1947, seems to return to a more global critique of universalism. Its provocative opening sentence – “Aber es gibt keine Antisemiten mehr” – is meant to underline the idea that reflection has succumbed to cliché: antisemitism has been reduced to stereotypical thinking as such, in which antisemitism is no longer “eine selbständige Regung, sondern eine Planke der Plattform: wer irgend dem Faschismus die Chance gibt, subskribiert mit der Zerschlagung der Gewerkschaften und dem Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus automatisch auch die Erledigung der Juden.” Yet such “ticket-mentality” is in the end no different from Hollywood’s replacement of “Erfahrung” by “Cliché”, or the replament of “kategoriale Arbeit” by the schemes of the “Welt als Serienproduktion”: “Das Urteil beruht

nicht mehr auf dem wirklichen Vollzug der Synthesis, sondern auf blinder Subsumtion” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969, 209-211).

Rensmann is not wrong to conclude that “in this section, distinctions seem to blur almost entirely”. The problem is not just that fascism and Hollywood, capitalism and Auschwitz, or analytical statements and genocide, are presented as interchangeable concepts, but as Rensmann notes, these sections are also a symptom of “all too abstract social theory” (PU 316). The latter criticism points to a more general problem of the Frankfurt School’s analysis of antisemitism, i.e. the tendency to assimilate it to instrumental rationality as such. The Frankfurters were able to overcome the Marxist reduction of antisemitism to a distorted response to bourgeois liberalism and capitalism by overturning the Marxist hierarchy of relations of production and utilitarian ideology. But they replaced it by an even more radical reduction of antisemitism to modern subjectivity, or even to civilization as such. The deeper antisemitism was rooted, the more abstract its analysis became, at the cost of precision and relevance.

However, this is only one side of the story Rensmann has to tell. The other part is the development of empirical studies, notably carried out in the USA after the transfer of the Institute of Social Research to New York. These studies followed the trajectory initiated by research projects of the 1920s and early 1930s, most importantly a survey on authoritarian attitudes among German workers based on questionnaires assembled in 1929-1930, in which antisemitism played no role whatsoever. After Horkheimer’s first ruminations on the fate of the Jews in 1939, he and Adorno embarked on what they called the “Antisemitismus Projekt”, which resulted in a research outline published in the final issue of the *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*. Rensmann only quotes a German draft of the document, in which Horkheimer still downplayed the relevance of antisemitism: it “belonged to the ascendant phase of fascism. At most, antisemitism in Germany is a safety valve for the younger members of the SA. [ ...] The pogroms are aimed politically more at the spectators than the Jews. [ ...] The great antisemitic propaganda is addressed to foreign countries” (PU 16; Horkheimer 1988 [1941], 408).

But Rensmann fails to discuss in detail the further development of the studies that started with the “Research Project on Anti-Semitism” (1941). This project was initiated from a mixed set of motives, partly inspired by the growing evidence of the assault on European Jewry, yet also by the concern to formulate an interdisciplinary project that could involve most of the members

of the Institute of Social Research, and by the need to find funding. The first actual studies were instigated by the American Jewish Labor Committee, resulting in a voluminous yet unpublished collection of analyses of antisemitic attitudes among American workers. A large grant from the American Jewish Committee facilitated the continuation of these studies, resulting in five volumes of *Studies in Prejudice*, of which the first, *The Authoritarian Personality*, is the most well-known.

These studies were primarily conducted from the perspective of social psychology. As explained in the introduction of *The Authoritarian Personality*, the contributors started from a “non-interactionist” and “non-rationalist” perspective: antisemitism could not be analyzed as the result of interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Not only would this suggest that anti-Semitism was in some way a rational response, as if Jews were in some way to blame for the hatred they evoked; also, “[t]he fact that people make general statements about ‘the Jew’, when the Jews are actually so heterogeneous—belong to every socioeconomic class and represent every degree of assimilation—is vivid evidence of this irrationality” (Levinson 1950, 57). Instead “anti-Semitism is based more largely upon factors in the subject and in his total situation than upon actual characteristics of Jews, and [...] one place to look for determinants of anti-Semitic opinions and attitudes is within the persons who express them.” The contributors to the book also express their awareness that they might have “placed undue stress upon the personal and the psychological rather than upon the social aspect of prejudice” – a bias they justify by the practical aim of contributing to the eradication of prejudice: “Eradication means re-education, scientifically planned on the basis of understanding scientifically arrived at. And education in a strict sense is by its nature personal and psychological” (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, 1950, vi and 2).

Nevertheless, the societal aspect was not lacking altogether. Historical and sociological aspects were always seen as an essential element of an empirical study of antisemitism. For instance, the first part of the 1941 outline of the “Antisemitismus Projekt” mentioned above consisted of a historical sketch of antisemitism and mass movements from the medieval crusades to the German nationalists, and an account of antisemitic tendencies in “modern humanism” from Voltaire, via Herder, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Goethe, to Zola. The second half contained a sociological typology of antisemites, an analysis of “The Jews in society”, and an account of

the “Foundations of National Socialist Anti-Semitism”, to be concluded with an experimental set-up which “approximate[s] as closely as possible the concrete conditions of present day life” in order “to visualize the mechanism of anti-Semitic reactions” (“Research Project on Anti-Semitism”, 142 and passim). Also, of the five *Studies in Prejudice*, the volume by Paul W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction* was a historical study of political antisemitism in Imperial Germany, while the volume *Prophets of Deceit* by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman presented a largely sociological study of the techniques of the American agitator. Moreover, prominent members of the Frankfurt School wrote relevant social and political analyses, such as Franz Neumann’s 1944 study of the structure and practice of National Socialism, *Behemoth*.

None of these works figure prominently in Rensmann’s account of the Frankfurter’s empirical studies of antisemitism. His main focus is on the psychological analyses informed by the increasingly abstract formulations of the “Elemente des Antisemitismus” in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. This seems not only a rather one-sided perspective, but it also obfuscates some serious disagreements among members of the Frankfurt School, notably about the methodological question of the relation between the critical analyses of social formations, including the perceptions and conceptions historical actors formulate about them, versus the largely positivist study of individual attitudes which informs much of the *Studies in Prejudice*.

More prominent in Rensmann’s analysis is a second issue, namely the relation between these individual psychological attitudes and the social circumstances in which they are mobilized. As Nathan W. Ackerman and Marie Jahoda, psychologists responsible for *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder*, the third volume of the *Studies in Prejudice*, emphasized, “anti-Semitism is a historical phenomenon; its causes must be sought in social and economic factors of the past and present.” Even more revealingly, they concluded that “an analysis of the case studies reveals that anti-Semitism is not linked to any one type of personality structure nor to any one type of personality disorder” (Ackerman and Jahoda 1947). As Horkheimer already admitted in July 1943 in a letter to Herbert Marcuse, “The problem of anti-Semitism is much more complicated than I thought in the beginning. On the one hand, we have to differentiate radically between the economic-political factors that cause and use it and the anthropological elements in the present type of man that respond to anti-Semitic propaganda as they would respond to

other oppressive incentives; on the other hand, we must show these factors in their constant interconnection and describe how they permeate each other” (Horkheimer 1996 [1943], 463; quoted from Rabinbach 2013, 261).

These issues dominate, and to some extent also complicate, Rensmann’s final two chapters before the conclusion. In the chapter “Politics of Paranoia” Rensmann underlines the point that, according to the Frankfurters, the rise of totalitarian antisemitism was “neither inevitable nor some negative telos of modern society” (PU 326). In the end, it is a political act by which antisemitic predispositions are mobilized by propaganda. Yet “the political-psychological functions of manipulative agitation can only be fully effective against the backdrop of authoritarianism and socially inherited ideological repertoire” (PU 333). This process was conceptualized by Leo Löwenthal as “psychoanalysis in reverse”, in which the agitator mobilizes antisemitic attitudes in his audience, and “paves the way for the relief of the malaise through discharge of the audience’s aggressive impulses by blocking the way toward real understanding of its cause”, thus exacerbating the social malaise he mobilizes (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949, 18). The idea of the mobilization of latent resentment allows for the idea that, while there were no more manifest antisemites, antisemitism was still latent, also in apparently democratic societies, thus both in the United States and in post-war West-Germany as well. As Adorno argued in 1959, “National Socialism lives on” in the guise of “crypto-antisemitism” as “a function of authority that stand[s] behind the prohibition of open anti-Semitic display” (PU 337). Antisemitism lives on in a coded form, as a critique of Zionists or East Coast intellectuals – a rhetoric tainted according to Adorno by “the lure of innuendo” (PU 339). Yet it also transferred to target other weak groups, such as refugees, in acts of “collective-narcissistic gratification” (PU 346).

According to Rensmann, the Frankfurter’s conceptualization of antisemitism allows us to understand how it is modernized, only to return in disguised form. Rensmann claims that it even reappeared as human rights discourse: “employing double standards, human rights violations are only lamented if ‘the Jews’ can be blamed” (PU 356). This phenomenon is further analyzed in chapter 8 of the *Politics of Unreason* as “secondary antisemitism”, a concept initially explored in the Group Experiment, the first research project after the Institute’s return to German soil. Based on structured group discussions among various social groups conducted in 1950-



1951, Adorno produced a series of analyses presented in the study *Schuld und Abwehr* (Adorno 1986) and later in the famous lecture “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit” (Adorno 1960). In these contributions, Adorno argued that Jews were blamed for the German guilt complex. They acted as a moral superego of “unwanted Holocaust remembrance” at the cost of the German national identity. This kind of secondary antisemitism also manifested itself in rationalizing the antisemitism of the past, but also in the mobilization of older tropes of vengeful, powerful and greedy Jews. At the same time though, Rensmann sees Adorno’s work as part of a “dialectic of closure”, as a result of which all attempts to terminate Germany’s coming to terms with the past are “doomed to failure” (PU 387).

As instructive as these observations are, they hardly count as a thorough analysis of the historical, social, or political aspects of antisemitism. There is little reference to historical events or empirical observations that might confirm the validity or fruitfulness of these speculations, and the few examples of such analyses Rensmann offers appear rather superficial. It might be unfair to evaluate a philosophical reconstruction of Critical Theory on this point, yet as Rensmann emphasizes in a footnote to the first chapter, his aim is that he “reconstructs and engages with Critical Theory’s empirical and theoretical findings on antisemitism, and their philosophical and political origins and impact” (PU 424). Despite these goals, Rensmann approaches the work of the Frankfurt School largely from an exegetical point of view, and thus offers a very lucid exposition of the philosophical arguments of Critical Theory but very little evaluation in terms of their intellectual, historical, or empirical contexts.

Notably, the claim that Critical Theory offers “until this day the most instructive theory-guided resource for reflecting on antisemitism as a sociopolitical problem” would have required a confrontation with alternative theories of antisemitism. At the same time that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Löwenthal published their work, equally important studies on the same topic were published by Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernst Simmel, Talcott Parsons - to name but the most famous of the many scholars who after 1945 became involved in the study of antisemitism. This is all familiar terrain for Rensmann, who wrote lucid studies on the theories and postwar manifestations of antisemitism. Actually, in his own work on postwar antisemitism, he identified, next to antisemitic attitudes, a series of institutional and strategic political

aspects contributing to the presence of displaced forms of postwar antisemitism – aspects that are not easily derived from Critical Theory (Rensmann 2004; 2010).

The lack of context also applies to Rensmann's reconstruction of Critical Theory as an intellectual project. As noted above, from the multifaceted scholarship of the members of the Frankfurt School, Rensmann mainly selects the work that delves into the anthropological and psychological aspects, largely disregarding the historical and sociological analyses of antisemitism as a social movement, as demonstrated in the work of Massing, Neumann, and to some extent also Löwenthal. Despite Rensmann's emphasis on the contradictions within Critical Theory, these are mainly internal contradictions in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, notably the theoretical aporias in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Yet we hear little about the disagreement among the members of the Institute for Social Research precisely about the meaning and relevance of antisemitism, as analyzed for instance in the recent studies by Eva-Maria Ziege and Jack Jacobs, which cover much of the same ground as Rensmann (Ziege 2009; Jacobs 2015).

Still less do we hear about the later developments in Critical Theory. Rensmann only talks about its first generation for whom antisemitism was evidently an important topic. Yet it remains puzzling why this topic disappeared completely from the agenda of its later generations. Jürgen Habermas obviously expended a lot of ink on the German "Vergangenheitsbewältigung", but it would be hard to identify a piece in which he specifically engages with antisemitism; and with the third generation, antisemitism disappeared altogether. It is largely absent from the work on recognition by Axel Honneth, and even Seyla Benhabib, who has written substantial work on exclusion and on the Jewish experience, has never engaged head-on with the issue of antisemitism. The journals *Praxis International* (1983-1993) and *Constellations* (1994-), which cover much of the more recent work in Critical Theory, have not even published one article on antisemitism. Nor, for that matter, has *Krisis*. All of this makes it questionable as to what extent the analysis of antisemitism is crucial to Critical Theory; yet it also makes Rensmann's *Politics of Unreason* a welcome reminder of the need to engage with lasting forms of discrimination and hatred, in practice as well as in theory.

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