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# The World's Oldest Obsession

*Walter Laqueur*

**The Changing Face  
of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient  
Times to the Present Day**

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*228 pages.*

*Reviewed by Alexander H. Joffe*

Few scholars have lived as enmeshed in their subjects as has Walter Laqueur, an estimable voice on the history of the twentieth century. Born in Germany, he left for Mandatory Palestine in 1938. As a journalist, he covered the Middle East and the creation of the State of Israel. He left to study in England, where he eventually became director of the Institute of Contemporary History and the Wiener Library, the premier research center on anti-Semitism, and was a founding editor of the *Journal of Contemporary History*. Laqueur also taught at Brandeis and Georgetown universities, and was chairman of the International Research Council at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Now in his ninth decade,

he continues to produce books and essays on a regular basis. His present volume, *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism*, forces us to confront the problem at hand starkly.

This synoptic book is something of a departure for Laqueur. His renowned studies of Zionism, the Holocaust, the Weimar period, and the Soviet Union, to name a few, all addressed discrete forms of calamity and responses to it. But in this new volume, Laqueur undertakes a survey of anti-Semitism from its beginnings in Greek and Roman antiquity to its modern incarnation among Muslims and the radical Left. In a slim volume he manages to cover the entire trajectory of a global phenomenon in a comprehensive yet accessible way. And in the end, the picture of anti-Semitism that emerges is of a phenomenon perhaps more consistent, and rather less evolving, than Laqueur himself is willing to admit.

At one level, Laqueur shows that nothing has changed since antiquity. While prejudice and xenophobia were hardly uncommon

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among the ancient Greeks and Romans, the focus on Jews as an insular and clannish people was especially tenacious. Indeed, Ptolemy's characterization of the Jews as comparatively "more gifted in trade and exchange... more unscrupulous, despicable cowards, treacherous, servile, and in general fickle..." could easily describe the sentiments of anti-Semites millennia later.

Indeed, it could be argued, Christianity merely added allegations of deicide and resistance to the existing litany of anti-Jewish complaints. The repudiation of Christianity by the Jews was met by hostility that "became sharper with every generation of Christian interpreters," including Justin Martyr, St. Augustine, and John Chrysostom, and was operationalized through countless decrees, prohibitions, restrictions, and persecutions. Still, these paled before the organized violence and mass slaughter of Jews in Central and Western Europe launched with the First Crusade. Blood libels, allegations of well poisoning, and the depiction of the Talmud as the archetype of secret evil knowledge followed, along with new and bloodier massacres. But, as always, writes Laqueur, "there is much evidence that those attacking the Jews were motivated, as in the First Crusade, not only by fear and religious fervor but by greed and envy."

Interplay between the theological and socioeconomic bases of anti-Semitism prevailed throughout the remainder of European history. In both a generous assessment of Protestant "tolerance" and an ominous foreshadowing of things to come, Laqueur quotes Martin Luther's suggestion that Jews be sent to the realm of Islam, for "the Turks and other pagans do not tolerate what we Christians endure from these venomous serpents."

Yet Laqueur's assertion that with respect to Islam, "Jews had committed no basic sin as in Christianity" may be contested. Is it really true that it "is impossible to summarize the attitude of the Koran toward the Jews simply because the evidence is contradictory"? There were indeed occasional bright spots of Muslim tolerance and cultural symbiosis, but as Laqueur himself points out, the "Golden Age of Spain" trope served mostly as a counterpoint to contemporary and historic European intolerance. Theologically, Muslim attitudes invariably reset to Koranic norms. The vehemence and violence of the Medinan suras are unambiguous, and speak to a deep-seated sense of Jewish "original sin." Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, the ninth-century Muslim historian and Koranic exegete, takes his interpretation of suras even further, saying:

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In my opinion, [the Christians] are not like the Jews who always scheme in order to murder the emissaries and the prophets, and who oppose God in his positive and negative commandments, and who corrupt his scripture which he revealed in his books.

Islam found itself in a parallel yet different conundrum with respect to its progenitor faith than did Christianity. The latter's debt to Judaism was all too obvious. For Christianity, the problem of Jesus as a Jew was instantly recognized and addressed during its first centuries: The subjugated position of the living community of Jews was convenient evidence of God's having transferred his allegiance to Christians, and the Jewish covenant's having been replaced.

For Islam, however, the wholesale cultural expropriation and conceptual inversion of the Jewish Bible (and the Gospels) was declared sealed by the finality of Muhammad's prophecy. Yet one suspects that that is precisely what must have gnawed. The new pastiche of Judaism, Christianity, paganism, overblown messianism, and pedantic legalism—with a smattering of other traditions thrown in for good measure—turned biblical and post-biblical traditions on their heads. It is hard to believe that the creators of Islam did not regard Jews as a threat simply on that basis. Accusations of Jews falsifying Scripture and Islam

superseding previous revelations were thus fundamental to the invented tradition, preoccupied with the purity of its revelation.

Laqueur is correct that, as with Christianity, Islamic anti-Semitism waxed and waned with various conditions. Moreover, the importation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European anti-Semitism was also key to the form (and, in the case of direct Nazi and Soviet efforts, to the organization and content) of Islamic anti-Semitism. But it fell on theologically fertile ground.

Racial anti-Semitism, by contrast, came to the forefront in the nineteenth century. Laqueur recounts the decline of religion and the growing role of the sciences, first linguistics and then biology, in providing new "justifications" for anti-Semitism and, increasingly, fueling Aryan mythology. The emergence of nationalism also provided entirely new frameworks from which Jews could be excluded.

But, as with nationalism, there are strong indications that "race" as a category predates the nineteenth century. What are we to make, for example, of the following:

Our people observing thus the occupations of the Jews and the Christians concluded that the religion of the Jews must compare unfavorably as do their professions, and that their unbelief must be the foulest of all, since they are

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the filthiest of all nations... the Jews, by not intermarrying, have intensified the offensiveness of their features. Exotic elements have not mingled with them; neither have males of alien races had intercourse with their women, nor have their men cohabited with females of a foreign stock. The Jewish race therefore has been denied high mental qualities, sound physique, and superior lactation. The same results obtain when horses, camels, donkeys, and pigeons are inbred.

Far from a nineteenth-century Muslim reification of European racial theory, the quote in fact originates with the Arab polymath al-Jahiz of the mid-ninth century. It reflects what might be called late-antique racial sociology, a cross of sorts between Herodotus and Ibn Khaldun. Either way, the racial animus is clear. The disagreement with Laqueur, then, is not over the claim that predominant forms of and rationales for anti-Semitism changed. Rather, it is that a continuous thread across two millennia of Occidental and Oriental thought viewed Jews as a theological and “racial” community dedicated to maintaining its independence.

On the subject of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitism, above all the Holocaust, Laqueur recounts the descent into horror with clarity and authority. He emphasizes here the break with past

anti-Semitism, explaining that while Christians and Muslims at least held out to the Jews a theoretical possibility of conversion, along with legally defined second-class status, for the Nazis this was inconceivable. The Jews were utterly unique and transcendently evil, deserving only of an absolute fate.

By far the most striking development of the past decades—and, thus, one that occupies fully a third of Laqueur’s book—is the shift of anti-Semitism from the Right to the Left. The growing number of Muslims in Europe is the single most important generator of anti-Semitism today. On this, Laqueur acidly notes that European anti-racist ideology and laws, created in the wake of the Holocaust, perversely serve to shield the identity of the new anti-Semites. As he points out, the infamous report by the European Monitoring Center on Xenophobia and Racism that spelled out Muslim anti-Semitism “had to be substantially rewritten because it called a spade a spade and not an agricultural implement.”

Anti-Semitism of the Right was easily explained as a function of xenophobia and conservative religious ideology. But left-wing anti-Semitism poses theoretical problems. As Laqueur states, “Left-wing spokesmen have maintained that... the Left, standing for peace, progress, and equal rights for

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all, cannot possibly be motivated by anti-Semitism. This is true if the yardstick is the religious anti-Semitism of the Churches or the Koran or the racialist anti-Semitism of the Nazis. Seen from this perspective, even the extreme Left cannot possibly be defined as anti-Semitic—they do not want to exterminate the Jews, they simply want them to disappear as Jews.”

This is where Israel enters the picture. As Laqueur explains, it is one of the fundamental tenets of belief of the extreme Left that “while other nations have the right to their own state, the Jews have not. They did live after all for two millennia without a state, and any attempt to turn back the wheels of history is essentially reactionary. It is bound to conflict with the vital interest of other people and dispossess them.” Therefore, he continues, “the extreme Left concludes that Arab and Muslim enemies of Israel are progressive because they are anti-American and anti-capitalist, however illiberal their ideology in other respects; they should be supported, whereas Israel and those affirming its right of existence are a priori enemies of progress and peace.” Laqueur, it should be noted, is hardly forgiving of Israel’s misdeeds. But he insists that, for Arabs and Muslims at least, “were it not for Israel and the occupied territories, the underlying aggression would find other outlets.”

It is self-evident that anti-Israelism is a modern manifestation of anti-Semitism; this particular Jewish collective is hated with all the accusations traditionally reserved for Jews at large. It stands accused of lying, stealing, cheating, racism, poisoning of wells, hating non-Jews, and all the rest, what might be described, in the words of the late Gavin Langmuir, as “realistic hostility” long transcended by “chimerical assertions.” Not surprisingly, Soviet anti-Semitism provides the pattern and perhaps inspiration for the new anti-Semitism and its focus on Zionism. The fall of modern communism saw adherents in search of a new creed, and the new internationalism of human rights, anti-globalization, and “transnational progressivism” fit the bill. And, as during the early days of Soviet Communism, when revolution failed to take hold throughout the world, the alleged bourgeois nature and imperialism of Jewish nationalism became a convenient target, a diversion from having to explain the empirical failure of twentieth- and twenty-first-century anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism.

The alliance between the extreme Left (a category in the West that includes a goodly number of intellectuals and academics), the “progressive” forces of radical Islam (whose excesses must, of course, be forgiven), and anti-globalization activists (for, after

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all, Israel and the United States are the quintessential engines of modern capitalism) is now fundamental. Globally, the movement of far-right paranoia about Jewish power and conspiracies, whose archetype is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, has completely cross-fertilized the radical Left of Trotskyite anti-globalization activists and Muslims. Paranoia then migrated to the academic Left; the Elders transmuted to neo-cons, doing the unholy “clean break” work of the Likud party, guided by the evil spirit of Leo Strauss and aided by the omnipotent Israel Lobby. These latter developments are uniquely American, thanks lately to the neo-Larouchian analysis of Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, which have in turn been globalized. Therefore, if there is anything “new” to the “new anti-Semitism,” it is precisely this fusion of Left and Right, where anti-Semitism overcomes gravity and friction thanks to the Internet.

The primary self-defense strategy of Jews in the West was to emphasize their contribution to host societies. There were other strategies as well, such as Zionism and assimilation. Even so, Laqueur concludes, “as far as many assimilated Jews were concerned, the burden of being Jewish outweighed the positive elements.” But for some Jews, at least, the Jewish Question would not be solved by

assimilation alone. Jewish self-hatred was the next logical step.

The “non-Jewish Jew,” as formulated by Isaac Deutscher, is a key that links Marxism and today’s Jewish Question. It was, according to Laqueur, the

unwritten party line according to which some groups were more progressive than others and Jews were considered reactionary. The very least that was demanded of Jews in order to be accepted as equals was to disassociate themselves totally from Judaism, not only from the Jewish religion or sympathies with Zionism but from any identification with other Jews, and to actively struggle against all national Jewish feelings. Only on these conditions could these non-Jewish Jews... hope to be treated as comrades in the fight for justice and progress. Even in these circumstances a residue of suspicion and hostility remained.

The central role of Jews in today’s opposition to Israel, from the truly scurrilous like Norman Finkelstein to the merely distasteful like Tony Judt, shows the degree to which some must go to escape the burden of Jewishness. Even Jewish tradition has been subverted to the cause of passing as progressive, as the cause of *tikun olam* and tendentious “social justice” readings of the prophets are enlisted to depict Israel and its supporters as a unique evil. The price of admission to respectable society has always been high.

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Despite its various sources and iterations, however, Laqueur is clear that modern anti-Semitism radiates most powerfully from the Muslim world. Muslim ideologues of our own day are forthright in explaining their hatred of Jews as deeply rooted and essential to Islam. The re-export of the new hybrid from the Muslim world back to Europe—partly traditional European, partly re-Islamified, yet imbued with old-new apocalyptic vigor—completes the circle.

Laqueur's approach usefully exposes the sheer unoriginality of anti-Semitism from antiquity through the post-modern period. The elements of the discourse are recombinant, and only occasionally updated. Anti-Semitic "discourse" is almost infinitely mutable; Jews are indicted on the basis of the universal or the particular, and obvious or hidden features; they are even hated in their absence. The result seems less of an identifiable anti-Semitic tradition than a system with a coherent "logic". Anything and everything can be assimilated and explained, no matter how contradictory. Little wonder an early academic approach regarded anti-Semitism as a manifestation of mental illness.

Do societies, cultures, or even civilizations require Jews to be transcendently or uniquely evil? The concepts of the "other" and "alterity" are severely shopworn, thanks to persistent

overuse by "scholar-activists." But to posit Jews as the Universal Other is to assert a psycho-social explanation that predicts similar results everywhere in all times. Recourse to the collective unconscious is not satisfying.

Refining this one step further, however, allows Jews to be seen as an unlikely duality that combines contradictory forces of innovation and tradition, both of which engender negative reactions. Jews are communities of interpretation, with some energies focused on maintaining group cohesion and identity, and others on diffusion and escape. The sheer tension of the contradiction has driven immense creativity—and not a few Jews to despair and self-loathing. Jews are engines of modernism as well as islands of conservatism. Put simply, there is something for everyone to dislike.

This conclusion puts Jews at, or at least near, the center of history, another assertion that drives anti-Semites mad. Is this yet another variation of the "lachrymose version" of Jewish history, but one where Jewish suffering is instrumental, possibly even a good and necessary feature of civilization? Or is it, to use an older vernacular, a sign of God's having chosen the Jews for a historical mission? Where does all this lead? Eternal anti-Semitism? Eternal scapegoat? Eternal damnation? Laqueur is wisely silent, but the conundrum remains.

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It is hard to come away from this book without a sense of despair, but the measure of its success is the thoughts, both negative and positive, that it inspires. Ours is a new Romantic Age where chimeras may be downloaded by the gigabyte. Laqueur has provided us with an admirable guide to the problem. Thus forewarned, we

set out once again in search not of the answer, but merely of the latest solution.

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