Notes on the term "anti-Semitism"

rosza daniel lang/levitsky

In some of my writing and analysis (most recently, some work on Zionism and anti-Zionism in U.S. women's movement periodicals), I follow the language my subjects use, much of which uses "anti-Semitism" to refer to anti-Jewish actions and beliefs in general. I do that to avoid clunky paraphrases, but I feel like it's useful and important to point out in proper detail that this is a politically weighted use of language, a terminological maneuver that had a significant impact on political and cultural debates and conflicts, and continues to distort our conversations and strategies today.

1.

"Antisemitism" is the self-designation of a specific political movement and ideology which emerged in the 19th century among German integral nationalists, and created the phrase specifically to distinguish their racialized, "scientific" beliefs from earlier anti-Jewish political and social positions – the ones central to Christianity, in particular. The term was quickly adopted into English and other western European languages, and used in the same way, to name a specific, new, modern anti-Jewish political position.

The use of "anti-Semitism" as a term for all anti-Jewish bigotry is much more recent – taking hold largely after the Nazi attempted genocide. It is, at heart, an attempt to assert that all forms of anti-Jewish bigotry are part of one exterminationist project, and to declare that project to be a structural societal force parallel to white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. Both of these assertions are dubious at best, and serve in several ways to make resisting attacks on Jews more difficult. And both directly serve Zionist political priorities.

2.

The collapse of all things anti-Jewish into a single "anti-Semitism" obstructs efforts to understand the very varied experiences of Jewish communities, especially those outside of Europe. For example, both the oppressive and the autonomy-enabling aspects of the Ottoman Empire's religiously-structured "millet" system for the empire's thousands of Sefardi and Mizrahi Jewish communities are incomprehensible through that lens. In the present, it sets up an inability to distinguish between, for example, liberal NGO staff saying things implying all Jews are well-off economically, a fellow tenant saying something reflecting the material reality that in sections of Brooklyn many residential landlords are visibly Jewish, and a politician using far right dogwhistles about Jewish control of the media – which have very different implications and require very different responses – treating them instead as instances of the a single phenomenon.

Further, it defines Jewish experiences of oppression out of any commonality with others – even, for example, the Ottoman Christian communities structured by that same "millet system", or the widely varied ethnic communities whose lives in the Russian empire and then the U.S.S.R were structured (in varying ways) by the same shifting attitudes towards "inorodtsy" as the Yiddish, Bukhorian, Juhuri, Krymchak, and other Jewish communities of the empire (whose experiences differed radically from

each other as well). This exceptionalism also works to undermine solidarity based on common experiences of attempted genocide, whether with other communities targeted in the 20th century, like Armenians, Bosnians, and Crimean Tatars, or those that have survived much longer genocidal projects, like western-hemisphere indigenous and Black communities.

3.

The claim that anti-Semitism is in itself a structural force does this same work of conflation and exceptionalism, but even more forcefully. First, it further exceptionalizes Jewish experiences of oppression, mythologizing them out of their historical realities, rather than seeing them as shifting products of an interweaving of forces that affect others as well (often more directly and intensely): Christian supremacy, xenophobia, conspiracist thinking[1], and at times white supremacy. This further undermines solidarity with those facing parallel interweavings of the same oppressive forces – most obviously, in the U.S., Muslims, adherents of traditional indigenous and Afro-Atlantic diasporic ritual practice, and trans women.

Second, it drives a depoliticization of anti-Jewishness, encouraging a view of it as too all-encompassing to be directly addressed except as an individual / psychological matter. This model has driven the past few decades' responses to what they describe as "anti-Semitism" by the progressive Jewish 501(c) sphere, which have been manifestly ineffective, and in many ways – especially by emphasizing "anti-Semitism on the left" as a threat equivalent to (if not directly conflated with) the White Nationalist far right, but much easier to confront without actual risk – have actively supported the expansion and deepening of liberal Zionist anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism and hatred of Muslims. This pairing of exceptionalism and depoliticization undermines many possibilities of solidarity and undercuts any concrete strategy for directly contesting anti-Jewish political movements and ideologies.

4.

This is very useful for Zionism, which depends for its legitimacy on defining Jews as both eternally under threat and eternally separate from all other communities. This dual exceptionalism is both a version of the divinely assigned "chosenness" found (like the divine land-grant of Palestine) in Biblical mythology, and a sign of the premises Zionism holds in common with the original Antisemites, as another late-19th-century integral nationalist movement launched in the German-speaking lands. The two movements share a core understanding of Jews as inherently "alien" and unassimilable to "the nations", and of diasporic Jewish communities and cultures as irredeemably "degenerate" – and their solution to the "Jewish Question" is likewise the same: mass relocation. This deep commonality, which has guided the Zionist movement's consistent alliances with anti-Jewish far right political forces (from the junta's Argentina and apartheid South Africa in the 1980s to the contemporary U.S. and Hungary), also makes it particularly useful for them to have anti-Semitism understood as a diffuse structural force rather than a specific ideology and movement with identifiable tenets.

---

1 Specifically, the "secret child-killing counter-society" conspiracy module which Norman Cohn traced in *Europe's Inner Demons* from the political invective of the Roman Republic through Christian heresiology to the early modern European witch hunts, nodding as well to its twentieth-century revitalization in an anti-Jewish form. Many of its contemporary U.S. versions – from QAnon to the "sex trafficking" moral panic – include Jews among their targets, while taking aim more centrally at trans people (especially trans women), sex workers, and immigrants.

The generalized use of "anti-Semitism" is hard to separate from the establishment of Zionist hegemony over U.S. Jewish communities, both historically and in its function. In the conflicts within the U.S. women's movement, for example, its exceptionalism was used to definitionally separate Jewish women's experiences ("anti-Semitism") from those of women of color ("racism"), even – perhaps especially – when many of the concrete experiences being described were identical (for example, being singled out as "loud", "pushy", "argumentative", or "oversensitive" in movement spaces) or transparently motivated by the same things (for instance, avoiding scheduling conflicts with Christian observances, but not dates significant for Muslims, Jews, or Candomblé practitioners). Simultaneously, its expansiveness was used to define opposition to a specific political movement – anti-Zionism – as a position that inherently targets Jews in general, rather than one that can be misused for anti-Jewish ends precisely because the Zionist movement declares itself the only legitimate voice of all Jews. These two moves are still active in movement spaces, feminist and otherwise.

5.

Finally, some have used "anti-Semitism" in a third way – an anti-racist deployment of the term to refer to hatred of all those placed in the Biblically-derived racial category of "Semites" (Jews, Arabs, Phoenicians, sometimes others), or all speakers of languages categorized as "Semitic" (a label based, ultimately, on the same Biblically-derived racial category).[2] This usage has nothing to do with the historical use of the term "anti-Semitism", and is a fairly recent move, usually intended (implicitly or explicitly) to reclaim the term from the Zionist implications of the current dominant usage. In my experience, it's a well-meaning gesture that in practice mainly just confuses the matter – in particular by almost always provoking a fairly circular semantic argument – as well as giving legitimacy to a category that's inseparable from its roots in theology and racial pseudoscience.

2 I should mention that I recently encountered this use of the term being used for the opposite purpose by a leading figure of the Irish far right who insists that she is not anti-Semitic, since she is *only* opposed to Jews. My sense is that this terminological move isn't particularly common, but I may well be wrong.