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Nationalism, Postnationalism, Antisemitism: Thoughts on the Politics of Jürgen Habermas¹

Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, wie Antisemitismus in den politischen Schriften Jürgen Habermas', speziell im Zusammenhang mit seiner Vorstellung einer postnationalen Konstellation, thematisiert wird. Dabei wird auf die Grenzen eines Ansatzes verwiesen, der in der Auseinandersetzung mit Antisemitismus die Dichotomie von national – postnational als zentrale analytische Kategorie verwendet. Der letzte Teil des Artikels analysiert einen Wandel in der postnationalen Theorie selbst: von einer kritischen Beschäftigung mit dem Erbe des europäischen Antisemitismus zu einem Beurteilungsstandard, in dem ein idealisiertes Bild Europas als postnationale politische Gemeinschaft einem spezifischen Bild Israels als Inbegriff der Mängel des Nationalismus gegenübergestellt wird. Diese unkritische Wende ist jedoch nicht auf einen Wandel in Habermas' Werk selbst zurückzuführen, sondern auf eine falsche Anwendung seiner Theorie, die jedoch auch in dem, was falsch angewendet wird, wurzelt. Der Artikel lenkt den Blick auf das Symbolische, durch das der Antisemitismus funktioniert.

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1. Introduction

The question of antisemitism has hovered in the background of much of the political thinking of Jürgen Habermas. Over the decades he has sought to come to terms with the actuality of antisemitism first and foremost in Germany, second in Europe as a whole, and finally in global society. In general Habermas associates the genocidal antisemitism of the modern era with the development of modern forms of political community and in particular with the rise of ethnic nationalism. A felt need to respond to the destruction of European Jews has always played a vital role in his critique of nationalism and theorising of postnationalism as the normative potential of our age. It is one of the great strengths of Habermas' political thought that he puts antisemitism close to the centre of his reconstructive critique of modern political community. In this regard he is heir to a tradition of "anti-antisemitism" that was much in evidence in the classics of social theory. Habermas inherited the mantle of Hegel's critique of Fries, Marx's critique of Bruno Bauer, Durkheim's critique of the anti-Dreyfusards, and Weber and Simmel's critique of Sombart; that is, of classical sociology's endeavour to provide an understanding of modern capitalism independent of and opposed to antisemitic ways of thinking. Habermas should be read in this universalistic and anti-antisemitic tradition. He is no historian of antisemitism but his reconstructive politics was a response to the challenges posed by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, especially that of genocidal antisemitism.

Habermas' attempt to confront the conditions of political community that allowed antisemitic movements to thrive provides a key to his thinking about the transition from nationalism to postnationalism. As has been widely discussed elsewhere (e.g. Fine 2007; Ingram 2010), Habermas conceives the "postnational constellation" as a multi-layered global order consisting of a reformed basis of solidarity within the nation state, the development of transnational forms of political community such as the European Union with new forms of solidarity to match, and the enhancement of international laws and institutions regulating relations between states and guaranteeing the rights of global citizens. The postnational constellation, as Habermas envisages it, entails a complex architectonic of legal and political forms as well as a complex re-invigoration of our ways of thinking and acting in the world. Habermas sees this multi-layered order not only as a desirable idea for the future but also as a tangible social reality in the current period – albeit one that has a precarious hold and is contested by political movements of various stripes. Indeed the title of a recent book of his is *Europe: The Faltering project* (2009).

It seems to me that the struggle to come to terms with German and European antisemitism has been an important motivation behind the postnational project. The assumption guiding its elaboration is that antisemitism is a product of definite forms of political community and that the link between nationalism and antisemitism is a strong one. Postnationalism may be viewed as the expression of a political order in which the conditions of antisemitic regeneration are overcome. In this exploratory paper I want to pay tribute to Habermas' determination to keep the question of antisemitism centre-stage in contemporary politics, but also to think about the limitations of an approach to the antisemitism question which grants key analytical status to the nationalism/postnationalism dichotomy. My aim is not to deny the validity of this conceptual distinction but to question whether either side of the dichotomy – the association between nationalism and antisemitism in the past and the dissociation between postnationalism and antisemitism in the present – is as secure as it might seem at first sight.

2. Habermas' engagement with antisemitism

The ties that bound, and perhaps continue to bind, nationalism and antisemitism in Europe is a re-iterated thematic of Habermas' writing. For example, in his discussion of "The European Nation-State" he argues that the *Volksnation*, the nation of the people, was a modern democratic invention that nonetheless crystallised into "an efficient mechanism for repudiating everything regarded as foreign, for devaluing other nations, and for excluding national, ethnic, and religious minorities, especially the Jews. In Europe nationalism became allied with antisemitism, with disastrous consequences" (Habermas 1998, 111). Habermas maintained that the historical strength of nationalist sentiment was due to its capacity to act as a binding power enabling individuals to coalesce around commonly shared symbols and that the formation of the modern state was dependent on the development of a national consciousness to provide it with the cultural substrate for civil solidarity. As he put it in the same paper, only "a national consciousness, crystallised around the notion of a common ancestry, language and history, only the consciousness of belonging to 'the same' people, makes subjects into citizens of a single political community – into members who can feel responsible for one another" (Habermas 1998, 113). Habermas accepts however that nationalism is a Janus-faced phenomenon characterised above all by normative ambiguity (Chernilo 2007, 156). He argues that today it has largely become a regressive credo that unreflectively celebrates the history, destiny, culture or blood of a nation and in place of this

regression he presents constitutional patriotism as a type of national consciousness appropriate for contemporary nation-states seeking to inspire *rational* loyalty on the part of their citizens (Habermas 2001, 64). He acknowledges that some kind of national consciousness is needed to inculcate a willingness on the part of citizens to do what is required of them for the common good, such as the maintenance of public services through taxation or the acceptance of democratic decisions as legitimate. The particular virtue of constitutional patriotism, as he sees it, is that it can perform these integrative functions in ways that no longer exclude categories of people deemed not to belong to the nation in question. This is because constitutional patriotism bridges the gap between shared attachments towards universalistic principles *and* the actualisation of these principles through particular national institutions (Habermas 1998, 118–126). The national aspect is not extirpated but is rendered benign.

Habermas adopted the concept of constitutional patriotism in the German context as an antidote to the kind of ethnic nationalism that led Nazi Germany to destroy the Jewish population of Europe, and more positively as a device designed to re-integrate the Federal Republic of Germany and then a united Germany as a pluralistic and multicultural national community. He deployed the idea of constitutional patriotism against manifestations of a resurgent German nationalism. This was exemplified in the well known “Historians’ Debate” where Habermas was critical of Michael Stürmer’s search for “a higher source of meaning” that only nationalism could provide; Andreas Hillgruber’s call for historical identification with “the desperate and costly struggle of the German army in the east (...) who were trying to save the population of the German East from the Red Army’s orgies of revenge”; and Ernst Nolte’s normalisation of Auschwitz as responding to a “more original Asiatic deed” (Habermas 1991, 215–224). He maintained that in Germany national identity could only be rebuilt on the basis of a sense of joint responsibility for the past which carries over into the next generations, so that the dead would not be cheated out of the one thing that can still be granted to them: “memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands”. For Habermas it was not resurgent nationalism but the liberating power of “reflective remembrance” that could rebuild German identity. In Germany, Habermas insisted, national identity could only be rebuilt through a sense of joint responsibility to keep alive the memory of Jews and the millions of others murdered by German hands, a responsibility which carries over from one generation to the next (Habermas 1992, 240).

Nor was Habermas prepared to dissolve the murder of *Jews* into some general reference to victims of Nazism. In a discussion of the Berlin Holocaust memorial in *Die Zeit* in 1999 he considers the argument that “exclusive reference to the murdered Jews now reflects a particularism that ignores the victims of other groups” and seems to represent “an injustice to the Sinti and Roma, the political prisoners, the mentally handicapped, the homosexuals, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the deserters which demands some redress” (Habermas 2006, 48). He acknowledges that the moral intuition to which this universalistic argument appeals is a powerful one and comments that the special “significance of the Jews for us Germans must not neutralise the unconditional obligation to show equal respect in commemorating all victims” (*ibid.*, 49). However, he cannot in the end accept this line of argument – not because it is universalistic but because it is abstract. He writes: “Were we to ignore the special relevance of the Jews for the social and cultural life of Germany, the historically fraught, quite specific proximity and distances of both these unequal poles, wouldn’t we once again be guilty of a false abstraction?” (*ibid.*, 48) The intuition behind Habermas’ discussion is utterly convincing: there is no contradiction between attention to the specificity of the murder of Jews and the drawing of universalistic ethical conclusions.

If the murder of European Jews had robbed German nationalism of its last traces of innocence, the German condition highlighted for Habermas what he saw as the central fact of modern times: that national identity, defined by the unity of cultural, linguistic and historical forms of life, can no longer coincide with the organisational form of the state. On the tentative premise that the trend toward a postnational self-understanding of the political community was more pronounced in the former Federal Republic of Germany than in other European states Habermas presented Germany as a model for Europe: the nation which, by virtue of its learning from past nationalist excesses, now most fully acknowledges nationalism as a horrific regression (Habermas 2006, 47). Habermas recognised the curiously German inflection to this critique of nationalism. It was as if Germany above all other nations had the critical resources required for a genuinely “critical appropriation of ambiguous traditions”. Paradoxically, it was because nationalism was no longer defensible in Germany that Germany could serve as a model for the political community to come. As Charles Turner observes, the critique of nationalism might have appeared less persuasive to those nations whose recent history was one of national suppression, including East European nations seeking freedom from Russian rule. In Central and East Europe “the source of pain was not ‘nationalist excess’ alone but rather six years of Nazi occupation followed by forty years of Soviet domination” (Turner 2004, 303). For Habermas, this difference was precisely why Federal Republic of Germany was special.

Habermas was criticised by myself amongst others for offering his own negative nationalism when he presented Germany as the privileged site of a refreshed civic ideal (Fine 1994). He articulated very well the normative content of this ideal: rejection of nationalism, loyalty to the constitutional principles of the state, the cultivation of a reflective and critical consciousness, the relativising of one’s own way of life, the extension of a system of rights to grant strangers the same rights as ourselves, recognition of the heterogeneity of populations, inclusiveness of all citizens regardless of origin, colour, creed or language, and so forth. But there was ambiguity in Habermas’ approach as to whether constitutional patriotism was a desirable and realistic goal for German reconstruction or whether Germany was a privileged site of constitutional patriotism. We can endorse the former proposition more readily than the latter. Habermas himself reformulated constitutional patriotism as operating in a space “between facts and norms” (Habermas 1997). He was prepared to walk a tightrope between what the Federal Republic actually was and what it might become.

If the German inflection to the theory of constitutional patriotism makes it appear closer to nationalism than Habermas wanted, this was perhaps one of the reasons why he was quick to relocate constitutional patriotism from the German to European stage. It seems to me that this relocation performed two parallel functions as far as coming to terms with the history of antisemitism was concerned. First, it gave explicit recognition to the fact that antisemitism was a murderous ally not only of German nationalism but of nationalism throughout most of Europe. After all, there were few countries in Europe where active complicity with the murder of Jews did not occur. It was not only Germany but Europe at large that needed to learn from this particular catastrophe.

In the introduction to Habermas’ *New Conservatism* Richard Wolin cited Thomas Mann’s aphorist comment that there “are not two Germanys, an evil and a good, but only one which, through devil’s cunning, transformed its best into evil” (Habermas 1991, vii, from Mann’s *Germany and the Germans* 1945). However, the dialectic of culture and barbarism expressed in this quotation reached out far beyond Germany into Europe as a whole. Second, the extension of constitutional patriotism to a Europe-wide canvass served to address the fear that Habermas was in effect smuggling in a new German nationalism, as if the capacity to learn from catastrophe was

present in Germany alone. Habermas was at pains to acknowledge that there is something about Europe as a whole, and not merely Germany, that gives it the resources to learn from the murderous antisemitism of its past. He refers to the values and form of life Europe espouses, the civic tradition and ethos it shares, the model of society it advances, in order to represent Europe as “a society that is capable of learning and of consciously shaping itself through its political will” (Habermas 1998, 124). The anti-*gemeinschaftlich* image Habermas paints of Europe avoids any formulation of European identity along essentialist lines but a similar temptation remains: not only to advance a postnational project for Europe but to represent Europe as the privileged site of postnationalism.

Does this mean that for Habermas the problem of antisemitism is a problem of the past as far as Europe is concerned? I don’t think so. What to my mind rescues Habermas from this mode of “historicising” antisemitism, that is, locating it in the past, is the active and practical engagement with the memory of the Holocaust he demands of the new Europe. He was one of those protagonists of the new Europe who in the words of Tony Judt saw it as “bound together by the signs and symbols of its terrible past” and as “forever mortgaged to that past”. The commitment Habermas expresses is to teach afresh to each passing generation the story of Europe’s murder of its Jews in order to “furnish Europe’s present with admonitory meaning and moral purpose” (Judt 2007, 831). In *The Germans and their Memorial* Habermas places an ongoing demand on Germans to commemorate the victims of European violence first and foremost for the sake of the victims but also as a means of “reassuring ourselves of our own political identity” (Habermas 2006, 41). The threat of a “new conservatism” is an ever-present one. What was key for Habermas, as he wrote in *Learning from Catastrophe*, was not just to keep in mind “the gruesome features of a century that ‘invented’ the gas chambers, total war, state-sponsored genocide, and extermination camps, brainwashing, state security apparatuses, and the panoptic surveillance of entire populations”. It was not just to restate the fact that the twentieth century “generated more victims, more dead soldiers, more murdered civilians, more displaced minorities, more torture, more dead from cold, from hunger, from maltreatment, more political prisoners and refugees, than could ever have been imagined”. What is important is to *confront* this history: not to remain “transfixed by the gruesomeness of the century” but to return again and again to “a conscious assessment of the horror that finally culminated in (...) the annihilation of the Jews of Europe” (Habermas 2001, 45). This active stance toward learning from the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century profoundly shapes Habermas’ work.

The history of European antisemitism also provides for Habermas the crucial normative substrate for the third stage of his extraordinary political journey – the stage of world society, global institutions, international law and human rights. His central argument is that the normative effect of the “monstrous mass crimes of the twentieth century” is to acknowledge that “states as the subjects of international law forfeited the presumption of innocence that underlies the prohibition on intervention and immunity against criminal prosecution under international law” (Habermas 2008, 444). Habermas did not reject the principles of classical international law: self-determination of peoples, respect for treaties, non-intervention in the internal affairs of other peoples and agreed norms regulating the conduct of war. But his emphasis was on the transition from classical international law to cosmopolitan law, according to whose norms states are bound to honour human rights, the principle of non-intervention may be suspended in the case of major atrocities, and the authority of international organisations such as the United Nations must be upheld over that of nation states. This vision of a “constitutionalised” international order-to-come represented a form of order fundamentally different from and incompatible

with the framework of power that made the murder of Jews possible (Habermas 2006, 130–132). In response to states that commit atrocities against their own or other people, Habermas defends the principle that the international community has a legal as well as moral duty to intervene (where it can) to stop or even prevent these atrocities taking place. Atrocity-committing states should not be allowed to hide behind the fig-leaf of national self-determination or the norm of non-intervention.

Habermas acknowledges that this global vision is far from an accomplished fact and that in anticipation of its becoming so human rights norms remain open to abuse. They are vulnerable to the charge that they serve to conceal the strategic power-plays of some states behind a mere rhetoric of universalism (Cohen 2004, 10) and that they are capable of demonising other states as if they were enemies of humanity itself (Fine 2010a; Habibi 2007). He also acknowledges that human rights interventions are fraught with difficulties. It may be necessary, for example, to choose between on the one hand endorsing *illegal* action by a state or coalition of states designed to protect individuals from serious human rights violations and on the other adhering to an international legal regime that is incapable of offering an effective regime of rights protection. He argues, however, that the abuse of human rights is due to the restricted reach of existing global remedies: the International Court of Justice lacks compulsory jurisdiction, the International Criminal Court lacks adequate definition of war crimes, the Security Council is in urgent need of reform, the UN does not have its own army, etc. Once a fully fledged legal framework is established to protect people from the violence of their own state or of other states, Habermas expects to see the end of this kind of abuse. There is a side to Habermas that thinks that these difficulties arise only because the transition from classical international law to cosmopolitan law is incomplete. I don't share this faith in a constitutional order to come but Habermas is to my mind right when he says that in the here-and-now we have to rely on our judgments: on the seriousness of the rights-violation in question, on the implications of intervention, on the legitimacy of the intervening authorities, on the persuasiveness of labelling this or that state "criminal", on the treatment of states designated as human rights violators (Carter/Virdee 2008; Smith/Fine 2004; Shue 2002, 314). The cultivation of our judgment as "citizens of the world" is the final piece in the Habermasian jigsaw.

3. Habermas and contemporary antisemitism

Much more could be said about Habermas' response to the twentieth century catastrophe in general and to the phenomenon of genocidal antisemitism in particular. To my mind the theory of postnationalism contains all manner of idealisations but it offers a way of re-affirming the post-Holocaust commitment to "Never Again" that is active, serious, enlightened and practical. And yet I wonder how far it can still match up to the demands of recent times. Between a didactic interest in the past (Europe's murder of its Jews) and a normative interest in the future (an imagined moral and legal community to come) I wonder if the theory of postnationalism takes its eye off the present and loses its sociological thrust. If we turn our attention to the actual journeys of postwar European antisemitism, I would suggest that the picture soon becomes more complicated than is containable within the nationalism/postnationalism dichotomy.

Let me develop my argument by digressing for a moment from Habermas and look at one of his sources of inspiration, John Rawls. In *Law of Peoples* Rawls maintains that those "Peoples" who uphold human rights should be recognised as equal members of the Society of Peoples and

he includes within the Society of Peoples non-liberal regimes insofar as they are “reasonable” or “decent”; that is, insofar as they do not have aggressive international aims, respect some basic human rights, have some idea of consulting their citizens and acknowledge to some extent the authority of the Law of Peoples itself. Rawls understandably excludes “outlaw states” which fail to meet minimum standards of human rights respect or have especially aggressive international aims. One limitation of this approach is that Rawls’ “ideal theory” is designed to have little to say about the institutional dynamics of exclusion. How serious would a rights-violation have to be to exclude a state from the Society of Peoples? Which international body has the authority to determine exclusion and on what basis? The politics of labelling “outlaw” states remains largely outside his purview. A second problem concerns his preference for the category of “peoples” over that of “states”. Rawls argues that the concept of “Peoples” emphasises membership of states in a legal order in which sovereignty is mediated through law and must respect the human rights of its citizens. The aim is to break from the assumption that international law allows for unrestricted state sovereignty in the pursuit of national interests. The downside to this vision of a law of peoples is that the terminology it employs threatens to collapse a distinction vital to political thought between the state and the people over whom the state rules. Rawls would doubtless not wish to exclude a *people* from the *Society of Peoples* on the grounds that their *state* fails to observe basic human rights. However, the concept of “peoples” raises a problem. Could there not be a temptation to exclude a “people” from the society of peoples on account of acts committed by the state to which the people in question belongs? Such a move would pathologise a “people” because of the actions of the state that acts in their name. Whilst this outcome is not an inevitable result of the Law of Peoples, it is a potentiality within it. As Hannah Arendt writes in another context, it is one of the seductive temptations of political life to “judge and even condemn whole groups of people, the larger the better”. It means that distinctions can no longer be made, names no longer named, individual responsibility no longer identified (Arendt 2004, 297). I do not think for a moment the designation of certain peoples as “pariah peoples” is the end Rawls sought; on the contrary, it is what he opposed; but it illustrates what can happen when a good idea is, as it were, turned into stone.

Can a similar point be made about the Habermasian approach to postnationalism? Its universal categories may start life as a critical resource in the struggle against European antisemitism but they can turn into an uncritical denial of the existence of antisemitism in Europe. It is tempting to say simply that the Holocaust has served Europe as a learning experience and that the extremity of its horror has taught Europeans a lesson. We may look back with a sense of horror to a period of European history when antisemitism was written into the very texture of political life in Europe but quickly console ourselves with the thought that today antisemitism has been empirically marginalized and normatively discredited. It is true that there are few people in Europe who proclaim a positive adherence to antisemitic ideologies or are comfortable making use of explicitly antisemitic stereotypes. On the contrary, the charge of antisemitism typically meets with a fury of denial (Butler 2004). We may conclude that to speak of antisemitism in these circumstances is to raise an anachronism (Beller 2007). Such a view might seem to resonate with post-national motifs but lacks Habermas’ sense of anti-antisemitism as an ongoing engagement. The “Habermas” I wish to retain recognises how much the past continues to weigh upon the present and to recreate afresh for every generation the need for critical and reflective judgment. It may be an index of a crisis of the Left that postnationalism is being converted from a demand for European self-reflection on its own murderous past into an uncritical resource by means of which we Europeans can again label the Other barbaric and defend ourselves as the civilised continent.

Let me try to concretise what I mean. In Europe today the question of antisemitism has re-emerged in a new form that has much to do with Europe's relation to Israel. It is said that a "new antisemitism" is arising in Europe, manifested *inter alia* in the depiction of Israel as a uniquely illegitimate state or people, Zionism as a uniquely noxious ideology, supporters of Israel as a uniquely powerful lobby and memory of the Holocaust as a uniquely self-serving reference to the past. Alarm about the rebirth of European antisemitism is intensified by the range of political forces that seem to subscribe to its discriminatory logic: not only ultra-nationalist, fundamentalist and overtly antisemitic parties but also significant sections of liberal and left political opinion in Europe that are deeply opposed to antisemitism as part of a more general opposition to racism (Judaken 2008). At the same time the idea of a *new* antisemitism emerging in *contemporary* Europe has been strongly criticised from *within* radical circles (e.g. Judt 2008; Butler 2004). While we all agree that antisemitism was a terrible stain on Europe's past, a stain from which we must all learn, the question becomes far more difficult when those who raise the spectre of a new antisemitism in Europe's present are themselves accused of reverting to a national and un-European exclusivity.

We hear it said, for example, that those dubbed "new antisemitism theorists" exaggerate the extent of antisemitism in Europe; obscure the existence of worse forms of racism against Muslims, Roma and new immigrants; manifest their own racist ways of thinking when they stigmatize whole categories of people as antisemitic – "Muslims", "Arabs", "the left", "liberals", even "Europe"; misappropriate the memory of the Holocaust by privileging the suffering of Jews over the suffering of others; and finally perhaps translate legitimate criticism of Israel into the false charge of antisemitism and thus devalue the language of "antisemitism" itself. It is difficult not to agree with the principles that lie behind these criticisms: we should not exaggerate the extent of antisemitism in Europe to obscure other racisms; we should not isolate the question of antisemitism from more general questions of racism; we should not stigmatise whole collectivities of people as antisemitic; we should not deploy memory of the Holocaust for merely national ends; we should not abuse the language of antisemitism to camouflage wrongs committed by the Israeli state. But who is the target of this critique? Doubtless there are those who fit the picture painted of them: who think exclusively of Jewish national interests just as in the larger world of antiracism resistance may take a more or less national form. But equally many of us who are concerned about the rise of a new antisemitism bend over backwards to display commitment to universal values; for example, to treat the Holocaust not only as an event in Jewish history but also as a warning of more general propensities to genocide in the modern world (Fine 2009). Something very valuable in the spirit of the Habermasian conception of postnationalism is lost when the term is used to dismiss concerns about the rise of a new antisemitism as regressively nationalistic and therefore invalid.

The temptation that flows from the reification of postnationalism is to give the story of European antisemitism a happy ending and to pay tribute to the success of the new Europe in transcending its longest hatred. Antisemitism is safely tucked away in history, overtaken by the defeat of Nazism, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the European Union. In this static reformulation of the postnationalism approach, antisemitism is associated with a period of political modernity in which nationalism was prevalent in Europe, especially the ethnic nationalism that took hold of Germany and much of Eastern Europe, whilst the New Europe is understood as spelling the end of antisemitism as we know it. This reassuring narrative looks back to an era in which antisemites saw themselves as guardians of the ethnically pure nation-state and forward to a postnational Europe in which antisemitism along with other forms of racism are remembered

only as a residual trauma or museum piece. This way of thinking represents a significant shift in European thought – from the active radicalism Habermas has stood for to a reconstituted liberalism more inclined to endorse a moral division of the world between us and them: “we” the civilised and postnationalist European; “they” who believe in the purity of the nation and act with corresponding barbarity.

Israel can play a key symbolic role in this worldview just as, say, Dreyfus, played a symbolic role in the antisemitism of the past. The nationalist/postnationalist dichotomy can serve to represent Israel as the Other of an idealised new Europe, the incarnation of all the negative properties postnational Europe has allegedly thrown off – racism, colonialism, ethnic cleansing, violence, even genocide. If I am right in thinking there is a temptation to turn postnationalism from a critical theory into an absolutist doctrine, “Israel” can serve this doctrine not as a real country embroiled in real conflicts but as a vessel into which postnational Europe can project all that is bad in Europe’s past and preserve the good for itself. The function Israel performs for this kind of European self-confidence is to divest it of its own negativity.

Within the more radical wing of the European Left we hear a different story but one with a curiously similar ending. In this story nationalism and racism are treated as recurring phenomena within Europe, rooted in Europe’s colonial experience and reinstated in Europe’s “fortress” relations to the non-European world. A refusal to admit that antiracism had made any progress in Europe offers a counterpoint to the perceived postnational faith in Europe’s transcendence of its past. This narrative admits to a circulation of racisms but not to an overcoming of racism itself; it shares the conviction that in the new Europe antisemitism has run its historical course but declares that it has given way to new racisms – against Muslims, Roma and new immigrants, etc. The race question, as one commentator has put it, is no longer whether Jews can be good Germans, good Frenchmen or good Brits, but whether Muslims, Roma and new immigrants can be good Europeans (Bunzl 2007). In this less than reassuring narrative we find an apparently sceptical view of postnationalism coupled with its instrumentalisation as the benchmark against which to find others wanting. The struggle against Israel is represented as a struggle against all the old European colonial proclivities that existed prior to the postnational turn – racism, ethnic cleansing, even genocide – whilst for the victims of racism this universal narrative accepts or even advocates the “nationalism of the oppressed” – that is, forms of resistance that are anything but universal. In the trajectory of postnationalism we have come a long way from Habermas’ engagement with the legacy of European antisemitism.

4. Conclusion

Slippage into “categorical” ways of thinking which mirror the racisms to which we are opposed is a strong temptation in this business. Thus the temptation we face in confronting antisemitism is to represent antisemites as inhuman monsters. If antisemites racialise “Jews” as a unitary, otherised category, the temptation is to respond with an act of reversal and treat antisemites as an equally unitary, otherised category (Cousin 2010). Such reversal is understandable but it excludes regard for what we share or could potentially share as complex human beings. The sociologist Raymond Aron raised this issue in his discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Antisemite and Jew*. Aron admired this text but argued that Sartre’s treatment of the antisemite mirrored the antisemite’s depiction of the Jew:

Anti-antisemites tend to present all the colonisers, all the antisemites, all the whites as essentially defined by their contempt for natives, hatred of Jews, desire for segregation. They paint a portrait of the coloniser; the antisemite or the whites that is as totalising as their stereotypes of the Jew, the native or the Blacks. The antisemite must be wholly antisemitic. (Aron 1969, 87f.; my translation)

The temptation to dehumanise those who are seen as dehumanising ourselves seems to me a repeated problem for social and political thought. If ultra-nationalists in Israel racialise Arabs and turn them into a unitary “otherised” category, the response is to treat “Zionists” as an equally otherised category and place Palestinians in a single identity script as victims.

What I am suggesting is short and provisional: it is that the array of universal and inclusive concepts Habermas put forward as an antidote to antisemitism in Europe – constitutional patriotism, postnationalism, civic ethos, even human rights – are for us essential categories of understanding and standards of judgment. However, they can be re-deployed in ways that corrode their critical content. A valid distinction between nationalism and postnationalism can be turned into a categorical opposition that demonises the one as much as it idealises the other. In place of a critique in which the confrontation with European antisemitism is never far from the stage, we find ourselves confronted with far less critical thematics: *denial* that criticism of Israel can ever be antisemitic; *resistance* to the notion that antisemitism is any longer a major problem in and for Europe or that it may take new forms; *suspicion* of the motives of those who raise the antisemitism question; *projection* onto Israel Europe’s worst defects; *translation of the overt* antisemitism of some political movements in the Middle East into the more acceptable language of anti-imperialism; and not least *a dulling of the nerve of outrage* in the face of the more general growth of nationalism and fundamentalism in many European and Middle Eastern countries, as well as Israel.

In my view stripping postnationalism of its critical content is not the work of Habermas himself, though there are aspects of his own approach that can be cited in support of this turn, but it seems to me that contemporary antisemitism raises issues that Habermas has simply not kept his eye on. Perhaps this explains Habermas’ “fright” when he was confronted with an instance of “new antisemitism” coming not from the new conservatism but from the Left. He recommended for publication a book by a Marxist philosopher which drew conclusions he could not share by failing to “distinguish political evaluation of Palestinian terrorism from the moral justification of it” and made generalising statements that made him “groan slightly” such as this: “Having been the principal victims of racism in history, Jews now seem to have learned from their abusers.” In response to a letter charging the book with antisemitism Habermas wrote that he could not agree: “sentences like this can always be used for antisemitic purposes, even against the author’s intention, if they are taken out of context.” At the same time he wrote: “I can well understand the reasons and fears of an apparently large section of our Jewish population. (...) If I have offended these feelings by my recommendation of this book, I am sorry.” (Habermas 2004) Whether we agree or not with Habermas’ particular judgment in this case, it is both nice to see the spirit of engagement with European antisemitism still in evidence but disappointing not to find a more critical purchase on the European singling out of Israel. The difficult task remains: to confront what is actually happening to European antisemitism between the horrors of the past and the idealisations of the future.

NOTE

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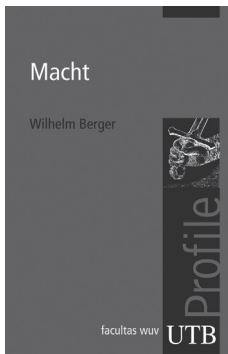
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