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Publisher: Routledge

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European Societies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reus20>

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Version of record first published: 27 Apr 2012.

To cite this article: Philip Spencer (2012): EUROPEAN MARXISM AND THE QUESTION OF ANTISEMITISM, *European Societies*, 14:2, 275-294

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2012.676454>

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EUROPEAN MARXISM AND THE QUESTION OF ANTISEMITISM

Reactions to the Holocaust before, during and after the event

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ABSTRACT: Opposition to racism and antisemitism is often assumed to be a distinguishing feature of radical left politics. Before and during the Holocaust, the most radical case of antisemitism, most Marxists were slow to recognise the threat posed to the Jews. After the event, there has been little significant rethinking. There may then be difficulties if and when antisemitism reappears. There are, however, some neglected resources within Marxism which could help shape a more effective response to a problem which continues to trouble European and other societies even after this traumatic event.

Key words: antisemitism; Holocaust; Marxism; left; Frankfurt School

1. Introduction

One would expect opposition to racism to be one distinguishing feature of radical left politics, perhaps particularly for Marxists for whom a future socialist society will have no space for beliefs or practices that treat one set of humans as inherently inferior to another. It might therefore be assumed that Marxists would be swift to respond to antisemitism, indeed that the greater the threat, the swifter the response.

In the most radical instance of antisemitism, the Holocaust, however, this was not the case. Before the event, almost no Marxist (although they were no by no means alone in this) took seriously the possibility that Jews might be the victims of an unprecedentedly violent assault. Even as the Nazis openly advertised their hatred (Herf 2006), Marxists were reluctant to take their threats seriously (with an important exception in the case of Leon Trotsky, to whose perceptiveness we return later). After the event, there has been little significant rethink. Most Marxists have continued

systematically to minimise the significance of antisemitism, although there have been important exceptions, notably Traverso (1999) and Postone (1980, 2003). This minimisation may have consequences that go beyond this particular case. If Marxists found it hard to respond before, during and after the most radical case of antisemitism, they may continue to have difficulty if or when antisemitism reappears. There may, however, be some neglected resources within Marxism, which could be used to help to address this historic failure and to shape a more effective response to a problem which continues to trouble European and indeed other societies even after this traumatic event.

2. Marxists and Nazi antisemitism

We need to begin by making a distinction that can sometimes be ignored. There is a difference between responses to Fascism and to Nazism (not themselves identical) and responses to the Holocaust, even though obviously it was the Nazis who murdered the Jews. This is important because Marxists have often prided themselves on their resistance to Fascism and Nazism, and have produced a substantial body of theoretical work reflecting on and underpinning that response (Beetham 1983). But a concern with Nazi antisemitism has been largely absent from both of these.

This was true from the 1920s. Neither of the two major German Marxist organisations of the time, the Communist Party or the Social Democratic Party, grappled seriously with what was happening to the Jews. Before the Nazis came to power, the Communists on occasion resorted to dabbling with antisemitism, seeking to turn the Nazi rank and file against the leadership. Already in 1923, when Hitler first came to prominence, some leading communists made efforts to woo right wing nationalists. In a speech in August of that year, for example, Hermann Remmele argued that ‘you only have to go to the slaughterhouse during the Stuttgart cattle market to see how the cattle dealers, most of whom are Jewish, buy cattle at any price while the Stuttgart butchers have to come away empty-handed’.¹ This was not a completely isolated incident. In July of that year Ruth Fischer, the acknowledged leader of the Left in the Party, had encouraged Nazi students to ‘crush the Jewish capitalists, hang them from the lamp posts’. If she urged them to go on and hang other capitalists too, she had nevertheless not resisted the temptation to identify some

1. *Die Rote Fahne* no. 183, 10.8.1923. cited in Fischer (1990: 60). This same speech is also cited and discussed in Winckler (1984: 584), and earlier in Angress (1963), from which this translation is taken.

specifically as Jews.² The tactic was a complete failure but was resorted to again in the crisis of the early 1930s, when for example leaflets were issued by the Party depicting Hitler in league with Jewish capitalists.³ After the Nazis had seized state power and embarked on their sustained and systematic assault on German Jews, Communists gave antisemitism little specific attention (Herf 1994), only headlining the issue after *Kristallnacht* in 1938. The special issue of *Die Rote Fahne* that month made an impressive call against what it called ‘die Schmach der Judenprogrome’.⁴ But this was a rare exception to a general policy of silence on the question; by then Jews had been systematically removed from the German economy, society and polity.

The German Socialists too downplayed antisemitism, about which the party had arguably always been uncomfortable (Pulzer 1992; Fischer 2007).⁵ If they did not dabble with antisemitism, they too minimised its significance and paid it little direct attention. The prevailing assumption before the seizure of power was that Nazi antisemitism was not deeply held or serious and that it did not call for specific or sustained direct rebuttal (Niewyk 1971). Bankier (2000) has pointed out that after the Nazis had come to power and the rights of Jews were being systematically curtailed, no propaganda specifically challenging Nazi antisemitism was produced and no instructions were given to the underground to raise the question, largely it seems for fear that the party might be too associated to its detriment with the Jews.

2. This speech was reported in the Social Democrat newspaper *Vorwärts* and then denied by Ruth Fischer but has been cited by several studies of the KPD in this context. See for instance Fischer (1990: 59); Winckler (1984: 583), and, for a fuller discussion of the competitive relations between the KPD and the Nazis, Daycock (1980) to whom both Fischer (1990) and Brown (2009) defer. Daycock’s wry comment is that ‘as Fischer and Remmele borrowed some of the worst images from the anti-Semitic vocabulary, one has to wonder just who was influencing whom’.
3. See the cartoon from *Der Rote Angriff aus dem Prenzlauer Berg*, February 1931, reprinted in Brown (2009: 106).
4. Special Issue of *Die Rote Fahne: Sonderausgabe gegen Hitlers Judenprogrome*, November 1938, cited by Herf (1994: 263; no. 24).
5. Lars Fischer (2007) argues that even in its heyday before the First World War, philo-Semitism was seen by Social Democrats as a more serious problem than antisemitism. Peter Pulzer (1992) also argues that opposition to antisemitism had never been unanimous or unambiguous throughout the party’s history. Shulamit Volkov (2006: 118–29) is perhaps less critical, though she too notes the difficulties the Social Democrats had in arriving at or sustaining a consistently anti-antisemitic stance and how they struggled with the deeply ingrained antisemitism of many of their followers.

3. Critical theory and Nazi antisemitism

It might be argued in the defence of both parties that they were inevitably more preoccupied with their own survival. They were targets of severe repression; their leaders forced to flee; their members terrorised; their organisations proscribed and driven underground. But it is less clear why independent Marxists should also have been so inattentive. In the case of the Frankfurt School, the most sophisticated contemporary exponents of Marxism, there is a striking disparity between their sustained interest in Fascism and the little they had to say about Nazi antisemitism throughout the 1930s. When Max Horkheimer belatedly devoted some attention to the question (in 1939), he identified the Jews as representatives of commercial capital, now doomed to disappear as capitalism entered a new phase. 'The Jews are stripped of power as agents of circulation, because the modern structure of the economy largely puts that whole sphere out of action. . . The result is bad for the Jews. They are being run over. Others are the most capable today: the leaders of the new economy and the state' (Horkheimer 1989: 89). Antisemitism was described as but a temporary aspect of 'the ascendant phase of fascism. At most, antisemitism in Germany is a safety valve for the younger members of the SA. It serves to intimidate the populace by showing that the system will stop at nothing. The pogroms are aimed politically more at the spectators than the Jews' (Horkheimer 1989: 92). In addition to what Wiggershaus (1994: 364) has called its 'gloating and reproving tone', this article was seriously inaccurate, ignoring the substantial number of German Jews (and *a fortiori* the huge numbers of Jews further East) who were not capitalists of any description, commercial or otherwise. Horkheimer's basic assumption was that the attack on the Jews was essentially only a means to another end.

This kind of argument reappeared in a major work on the Nazi state, *Behemoth*, written in 1942 by a key member of the Frankfurt group, Franz Neumann. He insisted (at the very moment the extermination programme began in earnest) that the Nazis had no intention of annihilating the Jews.⁶ The Nazis would 'never allow a complete extermination of the Jews. The foe cannot and must not disappear' (Neumann 1967: 125). Antisemitism was not an end in itself but 'only the means to the attainment of the ultimate objective, namely the destruction of free institutions, beliefs and groups . . . the testing grounds for universal terrorist methods directed against all those groups and institutions not fully subservient to the Nazi system'. Antisemitism had rather to be

6. He was, of course, writing at some distance, but the confidence with which he made these pronouncements is nevertheless striking and disconcerting.

understood as ‘a spearhead of terror’. Like other forms of Nazi ideology, which were ‘mere *arcana dominationis*, techniques of domination’, antisemitism would be used or discarded to fit the needs of the day (Neumann 1967: 125, 551, 221, 467). Neumann even wrote to Adorno that one could quite properly ‘represent National Socialism without attributing to the Jewish problem a central role’ (Neumann to Adorno 14 August 1940, quoted in Rabinbach 2001: 184).⁷

Critical theorists were of course not alone in their inability to imagine what was to befall the Jews. There was an almost universal failure by other social theorists to predict what was to happen (Katz 1981), although Marxists may be perhaps particularly vulnerable on this score, because they have tended ‘to claim more for their special analytical tools’ (Legters 1988: 1919). Diner (2000: 335) defends Horkheimer against this criticism, arguing that there is no reason ‘why [he] should have imagined the unimaginable before it occurred’.

When evidence of the mass murder of the Jews began to get out, Horkheimer and Adorno were, however, deeply shaken by what they came to see as their earlier major misjudgement, which may have been predicated on some lingering optimism that Nazism would not last long (Hammer 2006: 530). Adorno confessed to Horkheimer that ‘under the influence of the latest news from Germany. . . I cannot stop thinking about the Jews any more. It often seems to me that everything that we used to see from the point of view of the proletariat has been concentrated with frightful force upon the Jews . . . who are now at the opposite pole to the concentration of power’ (Adorno to Horkheimer, 5 August 1940 in Horkheimer 1995: 764, no. 5, translated in Wiggershaus 1994: 275).

Horkheimer at the same time expressed his own deep anxieties that ‘after such a defeat, nothing more remains for the Jews’ and suggested to Adorno that he too was now ‘convinced that the Jewish Question is the question of contemporary society’ (Horkheimer to Adorno 24 September 1940 in Horkheimer 2007: 166), a view he reiterated to other correspondents. As he wrote to the British socialist Harold Laski a few months later, ‘just as it is true that one can only understand antisemitism by examining society, it seems to me that it is becoming equally true that society itself can now only be understood through antisemitism’ (Horkheimer to Laski 10 March 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus 1994: 690, no. 124⁸). He expressed

7. Herbert Marcuse, one of Neumann’s closer colleagues at the time, also initially subscribed to this ‘spearhead’ approach, seeing it as one way of relieving the pressure created by competing social interests (Müller 2002: 146). However, he soon began to have doubts about this thesis, writing to Horkheimer in 1943 that ‘the form in which we formulated it originally seems to me inadequate’ (Horkheimer 1996: 467).

8. In English in the original but corrected here by Wiggershaus’s translator.

the same view too to Adorno's brother-in-law Egon Wissing: 'every time I deal with this topic, I recognize again how crucially significant it is to understanding the present' (26 August 1941 in Horkheimer 2007: 183). Horkheimer now identified antisemitism as 'the focal point of injustice . . . where the world shows its most horrible face' (Horkheimer to Adorno October 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus 1994: 346). Adorno emphatically agreed. 'Antisemitism is today really the central injustice, and our form of physiognomy must attend to the world where it shows its face at its most gruesome' (Adorno to Horkheimer 2 October 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus 1994: 309).

It seems clear then, as Thomas Wheatland argues, that the problem of antisemitism had by 1942–1943 become quite central to their thinking (Wheatland 2009: 241). Horkheimer had indeed come to realise, as he wrote to Marcuse, that 'the problem of antisemitism is much more complicated than I thought'. To understand it, one had somehow to connect economic and political factors with anthropological ones, to 'show these factors in their constant interconnection and describe how they permeate each other' (Horkheimer 1996: 463–4⁹). He now acknowledged that the problem of antisemitism raised fundamental questions about civilisation, about the direction of historical development and even about the nature of humanity itself. As Horkheimer put it in a letter to Isaac Rosengarten in 1942, 'Whoever accuses the Jews today aims straight at humanity itself. The Jews have become the martyrs of civilisation . . . To protect the Jews has come to be a symbol of everything mankind stands for . . . The Jews have been made what the Nazis always pretended they were – the focal point of world history' (Horkheimer 2007: 223). Horkheimer had come to realise, as he wrote to Marcuse, that 'the problem of antisemitism is much more complicated than I thought'. To understand it, one had somehow to connect economic and political factors with anthropological ones, to 'show these factors in their constant interconnection and describe how they permeate each other' (Horkheimer 1996: 463–4).

This was potentially a remarkable shift. If the driving concern in German Marxism was with class exploitation of the proletariat as the key to understanding what is fundamentally wrong with society, the increasingly radical injustice meted out to the Jews now became a central focus. Adorno and Horkheimer in fact had already begun to sketch out what might be seen as a parallel 'convincing genealogy' of antisemitism (Schmidt 2000). In a 1941 research proposal, they suggested that this would require the study of (*inter alia*) the First Crusade, the Albigensian heresy, Jew-baiting in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England, the

⁹ In English in the original.

Reformation, the French Revolution, the German war of resistance to Napoleon and a study of antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Horkheimer and Adorno 1941).

In Adorno and Horkheimer's major work in this period, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the question of antisemitism assumed a prominent position (Rabinbach 2000). It was the subject of the final chapter and, as Dana Villa (2007: 24) has argued, the culmination of the overall argument. Many interpretations have seen this work as signalling a terminal break with Marxism (e.g., Slater 1977; Turner 2002). Much of the analysis involves a sustained reflection on the role of culture, on the significance of mimesis in the historical evolution of humanity, and the extensive use of psychoanalytic concepts, notably that of projection. But this is not in itself decisive. Throughout the 1930s they had attempted to bring Marxism and psychoanalysis into fruitful dialogue and it was arguably a major step forward to use psychoanalysis to think about antisemitism. Psychoanalysis was specifically not used here as an alternative to a social explanation. On the contrary, as Horkheimer wrote to Marcuse, a psychological explanation alone was inadequate (Horkheimer 1996: 464).¹⁰

The turn to psychoanalysis signalled an end to any lingering optimism that Nazi rule would be short-lived and to an essentially utilitarian understanding of antisemitism but the problem in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that this path was not fully taken. Instead the text exhibits a recurring tendency, whenever Marxism is used alongside psychoanalysis, to regress to Horkheimer's earlier reasoning. Having shown precisely what was specific and deep-rooted about antisemitism and why it casts a profoundly critical light on the origins and development of civilisation, Horkheimer and Adorno suddenly claim that it is just 'part of an interchangeable program ... the fascist leaders could just as easily replace the anti-Semitic plank in their program by some other, just as workers can be moved from one wholly rationalized production center to another' (1973: 207). The danger with what Wheeler (2001: 118) rightly identifies as a critical 'loss of specificity', is not just that it is inconsistent with their thinking about anti-Semitism but also risks losing sight of what was radical about Nazi antisemitism, whose distinct ambitions they

10. Horkheimer wrote that 'I don't believe in psychology as a means to solve a problem of such seriousness'. It is not entirely clear, however, what Horkheimer meant by psychology in this context. He seemed to identify it with anthropology, although he thought an anthropological dimension was vitally important. Later in the letter he announced his 'intention to study the presence of the scheme of domination in so-called psychological life, the instincts as well as the thoughts', which appears to run rather counter to the first comment.

identify at the beginning of the essay: ‘the Jews are marked out as the absolute object of domination pure and simple . . . the Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 168).

In fact, neither Horkheimer nor Adorno were happy with this conclusion. In exile in the USA, they pursued several projects in which antisemitism was a central focus, from the *Studies in Prejudice* (where, not co-incidentally, considerable dissatisfaction with Neumann’s approach can be detected; cf. Wheatland 2009) to the *Authoritarian Personality*. When they returned to Germany their concern grew, as they came to realise that this was the very subject that could not be talked about, even on the left. As Adorno (2003b: 3) caustically observed, the prevailing attitude appeared to be that ‘in the house of the hangman, one does not mention the noose, otherwise one might seem to harbour resentment’. Despite this continuing concern, they were unable to develop a systematic understanding of what had happened to the Jews. They resorted instead almost as a matter of principle, as Diner (2000: 115) has argued, to aphorisms, the effect of which largely is to undermine the prospect of *understanding* what happened. This is strikingly apparent in Adorno’s statement that ‘Auschwitz has demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed . . . all post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage’ (1973: 360).

4. Imperialism and anti-imperialism

In the case of the Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher, there was an acknowledgement of the same fundamental impasse, when he doubted ‘whether even in a thousand years people will understand Hitler, Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka better than we do now . . . [O]n the contrary, posterity may understand it all even less than we do . . . [T]he fury of Nazism, which was bent on the unconditional extermination of every Jewish man, woman, and child within its reach, passes the comprehension of a historian . . . [W]e are confronted here by a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human character that will forever baffle and terrify mankind’ (1981: 163–4). Deutscher’s humility was, however, not shared by others on the radical left. Almost immediately after the Holocaust, there was throughout Stalinist Eastern Europe a systematic refusal to foreground Nazi antisemitism. Any attempt to do so was treated increasingly treated as a ‘Zionist’ deviation, particularly once initial Soviet support for the foundation of a state of Israel in 1948 did not yield the expected diplomatic results. Even where the link to Zionism was not made overtly, historians working within the confines of Stalinism repeatedly downplayed antisemitism. According to Andreas Dorpalen, for

historians in East Germany (perhaps the most sympathetic of Stalinist states to the Nazis' Jewish victims [Kessler 2002]), 'prior to the war, anti-Jewish activities were viewed as psychological preparations for a... programme designed to consolidate German imperialist domination'. The Jews were not 'viewed as the main target of this overall programme; rather the chief victims of this policy of annihilation are Communists and all proletarian forces' (Dorpalen 1985: 451).

The theorists and organisations of the anti-Stalinist radical left have generally not offered any alternative to this perspective. Although their numbers never approximated to those of the communist or social democratic parties in their Marxist heyday, they cannot be completely ignored in this history. Before the Holocaust, the arguments advanced by the early Horkheimer and Neumann seem to have been widely shared among anti-Stalinist Marxists.¹¹ After the Holocaust, there was largely silence. Members of the influential *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, several of whose members went on to play important roles in shaping post-Marxist theories, made great efforts to think through the implications of the survival and spread of Stalinism and the scale and scope of mass murder in the Soviet Union (Gottraux 1997; Raynaud 2010). But they paid no similar attention to the place of antisemitism in the Holocaust. A similar neglect can be observed among the 1968 generation of European new leftists. This was the case in France, though many of its leaders were Jews personally marked by the Holocaust (Auron 1998), and in Germany (Kundnani 2009).¹² The record of more orthodox Marxists in the European Trotskyist movement was hardly better. In a set of detailed interviews with militants in France where the movement was most influential, Jean Birnbaum found (2005: 345) an 'almost perfect identity of the revolutionary position ... before and after the bloody caesura', an

11. The influential anti-Stalinist review *La Révolution Proletarienne*, for example, set up by the founding members of the French Communist party after they had been expelled for 'Trotskyism', argued that Nazi antisemitism was of minor significance and due essentially to the particular role Jews played in liberal, as opposed to corporate capitalism (Dreyfus 2009: 174–9).

12. In some cases indifference mutated into something graver. The adoption of the Palestinian cause led some on the radical left to flirt with antisemitic discourse and even on occasion to attack Jews, inverting the 'the Jews' from victims of genocide into perpetrators. One of the reasons why leaders of the most intellectually fecund Maoist group in France, *Gauche Proletarienne*, decided to dissolve the group was the fear that they were opening the way to antisemitism (Hamon and Rotman 1988). For an interesting rethink of how and why French Marxists of the time systematically ignored antisemitism, see Milner (2009). In Germany the equation of Jews with Nazis led to the extraordinary incident on the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* when a bomb was planted in a Jewish community centre in Berlin. For a detailed exploration of the some of the 'logics' involved here see Kundnani (2009).

insistence as a matter of principle on speaking as little as possible about antisemitism and on rejecting anything which drew attention to the particular fate of Jews.

There is one potential exception to this widespread inattention in the work of Ernest Mandel, arguably the outstanding post-war Trotskyist figure. In his first effort to think about the issue immediately after the event, he acknowledged (like Deutscher) the challenge to reason posed by the Holocaust, but then equated the annihilation of the Jews with the post-war expulsion of Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia. ‘The death trains have again begun moving but this time in the opposite direction with a different human freight . . . if Hitler constructed the trap for the Jews, it was the Anglo-Americans who sprang it . . . [T]he massacre of the Jews is borne equally with Nazism . . . by all of imperialism’ (Mandel 1946: 2–3). Some 40 years later, the same argument re-appeared in more nuanced form. Mandel acknowledged that ‘there can be no greater injustice than Auschwitz’ and wrote of ‘the extremity of Nazism’, its crimes described as ‘the worst in history’ (Mandel 1999: 200–2) but was also at pains to emphasise that the dehumanisation and slaughter of the Jews were not unique; the treatment of Roma and Sinti was already identical; the murder of others deemed sub-human was already being planned. All this was according to Mandel the result of a more general phenomenon, the emergence of the biological hyper-racism which accompanied and legitimated imperialist exploitation.

Mandel’s later, more complex approach may be seen to have foreshadowed the emergence of what is now a growing literature exploring the complex connections between imperialism and genocide, including the Holocaust (Moses 2008; Bloxham 2009; Stone 2010). This approach illuminates important elements of the Nazi project, especially in Eastern Europe where the bulk of the killing of Jews (and many others too) took place (Lower 2005; Mazower 2008). It cannot, however, be taken too far without falling back into yet another form of reductionism. First, the Jews were not ‘just’ one of many targets: they were the primary and central focus of the Nazis who sought to annihilate them. Second, the Jews were not colonial subjects to be exploited in or removed from the area of Eastern Europe but were brought there from all over Europe to be murdered. Third, antisemitism had deep roots that long preceded the imperialist epoch. Nazi antisemitism was different from earlier forms but nevertheless drew upon older ideas about the Jews. As Raul Hilberg (2003: 5) long ago pointed out, ‘the Nazis did not discard the past, they built upon it’, radicalising hatred of Jews to a point at which only their annihilation would suffice, what Saul Friedländer (2007) has defined as a ‘redemptive’ form of antisemitism. There were then significant differ-

ences, as well as similarities, between the way in which the Nazis conceived of the Jews and other forms of imperialist racism, a difference captured well by Enzo Traverso. 'In contrast to the imperialist view of the colonised, Nazism did not regard the Jews as a backward, savage, primitive people or one that was incapable of surviving the onward march of progress. It considered them not as an archaic element that had lingered on the path of civilisation but as civilisation's enemy' (Traverso 2003: 74).

None of this is to say, of course, that the Holocaust is not connected to other genocides in the epoch of imperialism, let alone that it is the only case of genocide. But it was the most radical case of genocide to date, not least because of the critical role of a radicalised antisemitism. Jews were targeted in sustained and specific ways (culminating in industrialised killing), as an over-riding ambition (even while the war was being lost when it would have made more sense to devote resources to defending what remained of Germany from the invading Allies), and with the specific aim of killing them all. The insistence on seeing only what was universal about the Holocaust is not always grounded (as it at first appears) in a principled desire to extend solidarity to all those experiencing genocide. It can also be rooted in an earlier failure to recognise the threat posed specifically to Jews by Nazis and in a failure after the event to acknowledge the distinctiveness of what had happened. The Holocaust had, as Robert Fine (2009) has argued, both a universal and a particular significance. Its particularity cannot be grasped unless antisemitism is taken seriously; its universality cannot be understood unless this particularity is taken into account.

5. Some resources within Marxism

This understanding of both the universal and the particular is also one of the virtues of Hannah Arendt's account of the Holocaust in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1967a) which combines both an appreciation of the specificity of antisemitism and the imperialist context in which the extermination of the Jews was conceived (in that order). In fact, in thinking about imperialism, Arendt drew on one of the few exceptional Marxists whose writings may provide some tools for rethinking this question, Rosa Luxemburg, who (along with Trotsky) was able to take seriously the idea of barbarism. Although she did this in the context of the First World War and therefore before the Holocaust, it can be argued that the very terms she uses to define barbarism are precisely those which characterised the catastrophe. In a remarkable passage in her bitter critique of the capitulation of German Social Democracy to the forces of

nationalism and imperialism at the time of the First World War, Luxemburg explicitly defined barbarism to mean ‘the destruction of all culture and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery’ (Luxemburg 1970: 269; cf. Spencer 2005). Indeed one might argue that if the Holocaust were not the prime example of barbarism as Luxemburg defined it, it is hard to know what would be. Luxemburg too on occasion dismissed particular concerns with Jews, famously admonishing her friend Mathilde Wurm for suggesting that she should have any special interest in the suffering of Jews (Luxemburg 2011: 375–6). But she was also, as Fischer (2007) has shown, the only Marxist in German Social Democracy to respond unequivocally to antisemitism and not to explain it away or reduce it to an effect of something else. Another Marxist who shared this sensitivity, as Norman Geras has argued (1998), was Leon Trotsky, who in 1938, seems to have intuited what lay in store, suggesting that ‘it is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war, the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the physical extermination of the Jews’ (Trotsky 1970: 29). Few Trotskyists appear to have been able to build on this singular insight, any more than most other Marxists have followed Luxemburg’s demand that they take the possibility of barbarism seriously (for an exception, however, see Fine 1988).

Antisemitism as a key indicator of barbarism, however, was precisely something that Adorno and Horkheimer had come to think about. As the most radical expression of antisemitism, the Holocaust showed that barbarism had in fact occurred, a point Adorno returned to repeatedly. ‘One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism’. ‘But it is not a threat – Auschwitz *was* this relapse’ (Adorno 2003a: 19). ‘The fear that must have motivated Marx is out of date. The regression has already taken place’ (Adorno 1977a: 769). ‘Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for?’ (Adorno 1977b: 53–4). One of the reasons they were able to see the Holocaust in this light has to do with another Marxist, Walter Benjamin, whose death had an ‘electrifying effect’ on them, acting as a catalyst for their thinking about the fate of the Jews (Müller-Doohm 261: 310). Benjamin, like Luxemburg, was preoccupied by the possibility of catastrophe, which he too thought was fatally ignored by contemporary Marxists. Countering what he saw as a profoundly mistaken belief in inevitable historical progress, he argued that it would be more accurate to see history as a ‘single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage’ (Benjamin 1973). Nowhere was this wreckage more evident and devastating than in the Holocaust, where a modern state in the heart of supposedly civilised Europe

consciously planned the destruction of a whole people. The attempted annihilation of the Jews was an assault on the diversity intrinsic to humanity. This argument was most forcefully made by Hannah Arendt (1967b) but it also appears as a major concern in Horkheimer and Adorno's rethinking of antisemitism (Benhabib 2008).

There are undoubtedly difficulties for Marxism, if it is conceived only as a class-based theory, in dealing with other particular differences (Traverso 1994). But, as Horkheimer understood,¹³ underpinning Marxism's desire to abolish class exploitation is a more profound radical and egalitarian stance which rejects any effort to single out one group as inherently undeserving and inferior, let alone as objects of an exterminatory hatred. Indeed, one way of reading Marx's own critique of the failure of his contemporaries to understand antisemitism in his writings *On the Jewish Question*, is to see it as an issue which throws light on what is wrong with society itself (Fine 2006).

As antisemitism was radicalised, it plunged society itself into a state of barbarism whose possibility was intuited by Luxemburg, Trotsky and Benjamin and whose actuality was recognised by Horkheimer and Adorno.¹⁴ Luxemburg defined what barbarism would mean in the modern world; Trotsky saw that it could be visited directly on the Jews; Benjamin saw this catastrophe built on others. This suggests that it was possible for some Marxists to have an inkling of what could and did happen to the Jews. The detail of how one builds systematically on these different insights is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. It might require, amongst other things, an elaboration of what is involved in Luxemburg's conception of barbarism and how this links with Benjamin's critique of the philosophy of history. It would need to develop Trotsky's intuitions about the depth of intent in Nazi antisemitism, not to reduce the latter to an aspect of Fascist rule.¹⁵ It would demand a more detailed mapping of Horkheimer and Adorno's genealogy to demonstrate how antisemitism became so radicalised and Jews perceived in such sweeping, abstract, reified and paranoid terms (Postone 2003). This task is arguably of more

13. Reflecting on Benjamin's *Theses*, Horkheimer proposed to Adorno that they take 'the idea of class struggle as universal oppression' as a theoretical axiom (Horkheimer 2007: 182).

14. Jäger (2004: 120) suggests that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was precisely an attempt to think through Luxemburg's question. Adorno in fact made a similar prediction to Trotsky in February 1938: 'there can scarcely be any room for doubt that the remaining Jews in Germany will be wiped out' (Adorno to Horkheimer 8 February 1938 in Horkheimer, 1995: 384, translated in Claussen 2008). Eerily, he referred to gassing (Adorno to Horkheimer 13 February 1938 in Horkheimer 1995: 392).

15. This is one of the weaknesses of Alex Callinicos's (2001) effort to argue that Marxism can have something to say about the Holocaust.

than historical concern, for the failures of understanding that have been discussed here may still be exerting an influence on contemporary responses to antisemitism.

6. In conclusion – a continuing influence?

A continuing impulse to minimise the significance of antisemitism may, for example, be involved in the suggestion that what are recorded as antisemitic expressions or attacks are not what they appear to be and that it is only a flawed definition which leads these to be labelled as antisemitic.¹⁶ A continuing impulse to minimise the significance of antisemitism may be found too in arguments that antisemitism today is but a secondary effect of something else, such as the Israel–Palestine conflict or the injustices experienced in Europe by Muslim populations, and the optimistic belief that antisemitism would disappear if these issues were addressed, as if it were ‘only’ a mistaken or distorted expression of some other, deeper problem. There is a danger too that the minimisation of antisemitism can lead to the adoption of problematic moral equivalences, in which the term genocide is applied to other disasters which, however terrible in their own right, are not of the same order: the elimination of the Palestinian *Naqba*, or the Israeli occupation of Gaza (analogised by some to the Warsaw Ghetto).¹⁷ However serious these were, they did not aim at the elimination of a particular group which (in the case of the Holocaust) was the Jews, who were the Nazis’ central target, if not their only one.

Such responses run the risk of repeating a fundamental failing of the past, the refusal to take anti-Semites at their word. When anti-Semites today say that Jews are responsible for all the evils of the modern world, or that they are to ‘blame’ for the French Revolution or for the Russian Revolution or for financial crises, they may mean what they say, as the Nazis did. The Nazis took antisemitism into new territory, beyond the hounding of Jews, or their expulsion, or even their localised murder, and sought to annihilate them entirely, as an end in itself. But they did so in

16. Some of the criticisms of the definition of antisemitism adopted in 2005 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights might be thought about in this light.

17. The most coherent effort to argue to the contrary (but only focused on the moment of 1948, which he clearly distinguishes from the events in Gaza) has been made by Shaw (2010). He does so, however, by using his own very particular definition of genocide as a form of degenerate war (see Shaw 2003) which goes substantially beyond most understandings of the concept and of the Convention. For a rebuttal of Shaw’s argument and approach, see the reply by Bartov (2010).

part by drawing upon an existing repertoire of ideas and tropes, even as they radicalised them and added new elements and emphases. Subsequent anti-Semites will not, therefore, be starting from scratch. Once the Nazis had committed this crime, they set a new 'benchmark' in the history of antisemitism which simultaneously threatened humanity itself. For, as Hannah Arendt (1967b: 273) argued, 'it is in the very nature of things human that everything that has made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality. . . once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been. . . If genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth – least of all, of course, the Jewish people, in Israel or elsewhere – can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence'.

It is possible for Marxists to think through the implications of this crime but only if they can take antisemitism more seriously as a threat both to the Jews and to the future of humanity. A Marxist critique of society that could do so more effectively, that did not ignore the threat antisemitism that posed in the not so distant past and continues to pose today, would arguably be significantly stronger and more persuasive as a result.

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