

The Shifting Uses of Antisemitic Tropes

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The charge of antisemitism is often leveled not because of an explicit statement about Jews, but after someone deploys a trope: some subtle (or not so subtle) dog whistle pushing nefarious ideas about Jewish people. A politician does not need to say, “Jews have no real loyalty to their nations,” because they can instead say, “globalists are out to destroy us.”

These are tropes and to understand and fight antisemitism today, we need to be able to recognize tropes but also be able to recognize when the allegation has been wrongly alleged.

Antisemitic “tropes” are phrases or images that evoke myths, stereotypes, and conspiracy theories about Jews rather than state them explicitly. As shorthand tools to express hatred towards Jews or Judaism, they are directly and indirectly responsible for sparking and stoking violent persecution of Jews over many centuries. They can also be expressed inadvertently – though still dangerous in the hateful emotions and myths they evoke – because of their cultural embeddedness in Western civilization. Sometimes their fame as tropes is tapped ironically by comedians, Jewish and not, as parody.

Critically, they can also be invoked cynically as a method of falsely smearing individuals or ideas with the broad brush of antisemitism by accusing them of expressing an antisemitic trope.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TROPES

The list of tropes has evolved and grown over the past two thousand years, though earlier layers continue to operate both purposefully and inadvertently.

Anti-Jewish animosity dates to antiquity. The early Christian church attacked Jews for rejecting Christ and blamed them collectively for crucifying him. In other words, they blamed Jews collectively for the crime of deicide. The Gospel of John in the New Testament was particularly vitriolic, accusing Jews of being Satan’s children. The fourth century church father John Chrysostom called them demons intent on sacrificing the souls of men.

Medieval Christians built on to this foundation of tropes connecting Jews to Satan. They added new myths, such as the infamous blood libel: the lie that Jews ritually murdered Christian chil-

dren for their blood. Other myths accused them of poisoning water wells or desecrating the consecrated host of the Eucharist to reenact the murder of Christ. Some even claimed that they had inhuman biology such as horns or that they suckled at the teats (and anus) of pigs. This trope became known in German as *Judensau*, or “Jew Pig,” and its image still appears on German churches to this day.

In the 19th century, these myths were supplanted by the additional element of race – the claim that Jewishness was immutable and could not be changed via conversion. Though this idea first appeared in 15th-century Spain, which developed the idea of “Jewish blood,” it was especially connected to the rise of modern nationalism. Nineteenth-century ethno-nationalists rejected the idea of a political nation united in a social contract with each other. They imagined the nation as a biological community linked by common descent in which Jews might be tolerated but could never truly belong.

Finally, in 1879, the German journalist Wilhelm Marr popularized the term “antisemitism” to reflect that his anti-Jewish ideology was based on race, not religion. He chose the term because he imagined the Jews as a foreign, “semitic” race, referring to the language group that includes Hebrew since language was then imagined as a racial category. The term has since persisted to mean specifically anti-Jewish hostility or prejudice.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Library of Congress

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THE MODERN ERA

Modern antisemitism built on those premodern foundations, which never completely disappeared, but was fundamentally different. It emerged as part of the new politics of the dem-

ocratic modern era. Antisemitism became the core platform of new political parties, which used it to unite otherwise opposing groups such as shopkeepers and farmers, anxious about the modernizing world. In other words, it was not merely prejudice – it was an ideology that explained the entire world to its believers by blaming all its faults on this scapegoat.

Unlike anti-Jewish hatred in this past, its tropes were less about religion, that Jews rejected or killed Christ, and more about political and social issues. Antisemites believed the conspiracy theory that Jews all over the world controlled the levers of government, media, and banking, and that defeating them would solve society's problems. Thus, one of the most important features of modern antisemitic mythology was the belief that Jews constituted a single, malevolent group, with one mind, organized for the purpose of conquering and destroying the world.

The central trope of modern antisemitism was the “international Jew,” a shadowy figure they blamed for leading a global conspiracy, strangling and destroying society. Antisemitic books and cartoons often used claws or tentacles to symbolize him. Others depicted him as a puppet master running the world. In the late 19th century, Edmond Rothschild, head of the most famous Jewish banking family, was villainized as the symbol of international Jewish wealth and nefarious power. Today, it is more often the billionaire liberal philanthropist George Soros who is often portrayed in similar ways. Caricatures of Soros portray him as a puppet master secretly controlling all levers of government, media, the economy, and even foreign migration.

This myth that Jews constitute an international creature plotting to harm the nation has inspired massacres of Jews since the 19th century, beginning with the Russian pogroms of 1881 and leading up to the Holocaust. For example, German antisemites after the First World War accused Jews collectively of a “stab in the back,” that they attacked Germany from behind and thereby weakened them and cost them victory. The theoretical basis of this slur were actual socialist and communist uprisings, which were then connected to Jews because of the antisemitic trope of “Judeo Bolshevism” – that communism was embodied and pursued by Jews – a trope that would play a central role in Nazism and the Holocaust. Nazis also coined the phrase “cultural Bolshevism” to refer to the Jewish conspiracy to subvert German society with “modern” values. In the 1990s, this trope was reborn as “cultural Marxism,” arguing similarly that a Jewish conspiracy led by Jewish academics was leading a cultural war to replace America's Christian values with progressive ones.

TODAY'S TROPES

Modern antisemites ascribe many immutable negative traits to Jews, but two are particularly widespread. First, Jews are said to be ruthless misers who care more about their ill-gotten wealth than the interests of their countries or other people. Greed and stinginess are thus common contemporary antisemitic tropes. Second, Jews' loyalty to their countries is considered suspect because they are said to constitute a foreign element. Among the most common tropes here is the “rootless cosmopolitan” or “globalist,” who is contrasted with the rooted

member of the folk. It is evoked, for example, when New York Jews are contrasted with white Protestant farmers from the “heartland.” Other times, Jews are accused of “dual loyalty,” that their true loyalty lies with international Jewry rather than the nation-state in which they live. Since Israel’s establishment in 1948, this hatred has focused on the accusation that Jews’ primary loyalty is to Israel, rather than to the countries in which they live.

Tropes appear explicitly in overt antisemitic texts like the Nazi journal *Der Stürmer* and equally in Nazi propaganda like their feature film, *Jud Süss*. The latter packs a remarkably large collection of ancient and modern tropes into one film. The text most associated with modern antisemitic tropes is certainly *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The text – first produced by the Russian Tsarist regime but widely distributed in the United States by Henry Ford – is the imagined minutes of a meeting of international Jewish conspirators that accuses Jews of an incredibly wide range of sins, including apparent opposites like communism and capitalism. These are connected as symbols of modernity, which threaten the rooted nation.

Since the Holocaust, all these tropes continue to circulate, both purposefully and accidentally, but the accusation of a sinister world Jewish conspiracy headed by a powerful mogul like Soros or by a nefarious “Jewish lobby” continues to lie at their center. A particularly popular version in America today is the “Great Replacement Theory.” This posits that Jews are leading a “white genocide” by orchestrating the replacement of the white population with nonwhite immigrants. This was the meaning of the famous chant at the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, “Jews will not replace us.” This also motivated Robert Bowers to murder 11 Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 because he was convinced that Jews, collectively under the guidance of George Soros, were working to destroy America by facilitating the mass migration of nonwhite people into the country.

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Identifying malicious use of tropes today can be challenging for several reasons. First, as noted, some have become so embedded in our culture that those who repeat them may be doing so inadvertently. Some study of their persistent use of such tropes and response to criticism of it would be necessary to evaluate their purposes.

Second, increasingly politicians and other figures may use clearly antisemitic tropes despite their expressing seemingly pro-Israel sympathies in other ways. For example, Donald Trump has repeatedly evoked the trope of “dual loyalty,” that Jews’ true loyalty is to Israel or that they are “disloyal” if they do not support him, as well as the trope of Jewish obsession and innate talent with money.

Finally, tropes can be invoked cynically by politicians and others to attack people and ideas without merit. The clearest example of this is certainly Israeli leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu

who accuse critics of the slaughter in Gaza – or other Israeli violence – of propagating a “blood libel.” Equally, tropes that would be antisemitic when referring to Jews globally might not be when referring to Israel. For example, “Jewish power” would be an antisemitic trope when referring to global Jewry. However, there is Jewish power in Israel, in the territory that Israel controls, and it is not antisemitic to identify or discuss it. Similarly, referring to an “Israel lobby” might be a dog whistle reference to global “Jewish power” or a nefarious Jewish conspiracy, but it also might refer to registered, legal groups like AIPAC that do lobby and fund candidates to benefit Israel.

There *are* antisemitic tropes. There have been for centuries. They do impact our politics; they do make Jews less safe. The difficulty in identifying them – and identifying the intent of those who use them – does not mean it should not be done. However, the purposeful conflation of antisemitic tropes with descriptions of reality is not only a cynical political ploy to unfairly smear people. It also makes it more difficult to identify and push back against the actual use of antisemitic tropes—and the hatred they promote.