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Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to “Holocaust”

by Moishe Postone

The great and profound response to the tv film “Holocaust” in West Germany raises questions concerning the relation of anti-Semitism and National Socialism and their public discussion in the Federal Republic of Germany.¹ This discussion has been characterized by an apparent antinomy.

In emphasizing the discontinuity between the Nazi past and the present, liberals and conservatives have focused attention on the persecution and extermination of the Jews when referring to that past. Hence, other aspects central to Nazism have been deemphasized. The emphasis on anti-Semitism has served to underline the supposed total character of the break between

1. With regard to the film itself, a great deal of the criticisms in West German publications concentrated on its commercial character and its tendency to trivialize. In my opinion, other aspects of the film were, within the context of the Federal Republic, far more important. Particular weaknesses of the film were precisely its strengths in evoking public response.

The portrayal of the fate of a single Jewish family, for example, allowed for and induced sympathy with the victims. A German public found itself identifying with the Jews, an identification process facilitated by the portrayal of an assimilated, middle-class family. The awareness of the murder of six million Jewish *people* was thereby heightened. This portrayal and response, however, remain bound within the liberal response to racism and do not confront their own majoritarian implications. By simply reacting to the racist and anti-Semitic negative evaluation of the Other, they tend to negate the fact of, and right to, Otherness. What was therefore veiled was that not only were millions of Jewish lives destroyed, but also the life of European Jewry. In strengthening the possibility of identification, the film weakened the perception that what was exterminated was another people, another culture.

Another weakness of the film was that the depiction of conditions in the ghettos and in the camps was mild compared to the horrors of the reality. Yet, this very fact allowed for a feeling of horror on the part of the public. People could be open in a manner most can't when confronted with documentary footage which present an almost inconceivable horror, show the victims as dehumanized skeletons — living or dead — and which, therefore, frequently elicit a negative reaction, defensive in character.

Finally, the film treated the persecution and extermination of the Jews purely phenomenologically. No attempt was made to explain anti-Semitism or indicate the social and historical dimensions of National Socialism. Yet, perhaps this very lack forced people to confront the raw phenomenon itself and not hide behind analytic categories or moralizing pieties.

the Third Reich and the Federal Republic and to avoid a confrontation with the social and structural reality of National Socialism, a reality which did not completely vanish in 1945. It is telling that, whereas the West German government pays reparations to the Jews, it rarely does so to communists and other radical opponents of the Nazis who had been persecuted. The Resistance officially honored is that of June 20, 1944. In other words, what happened to the Jews has been instrumentalized and transformed into an ideology of legitimation for the present system. This instrumentalization was only possible because anti-Semitism has been treated primarily as a form of prejudice, as a scapegoat ideology —a view which has obscured the intrinsic relationship between anti-Semitism and other aspects of National Socialism.

On the other hand, the Left has tended to concentrate on the function of National Socialism for capitalism, emphasizing the destruction of working-class organizations, Nazi social and economic policies, rearmament, expansionism and the bureaucratic mechanisms of party and state domination. Elements of continuity between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic have been stressed. The extermination of the Jews has not, of course, been ignored. Yet, it has quickly been subsumed under the general categories of prejudice, discrimination and persecution.² In other words, the extermination of the Jews has been treated outside of the framework of an analysis of Nazism. Anti-Semitism is understood as a peripheral, rather than as a central moment of National Socialism. The intrinsic relationship between the two has been obscured by the Left as well.

Both of these positions share an understanding of modern anti-Semitism as anti-Jewish prejudice, as a particular example of racism in general. They stress the mass psychological nature of anti-Semitism in a manner which precludes its incorporation into a socio-economic examination of National Socialism. In the second half of this essay, I will outline an interpretation of modern anti-Semitism which will indicate its intrinsic connection to National Socialism, as an attempt to overcome this interpretative antinomy, and as an approach to understanding the extermination of European Jewry.

The weaknesses of the understanding of anti-Semitism outlined above emerged with particular clarity in the discussions on the “Holocaust” film held after each showing on West German television. The panel members were at their best when presenting information: conditions in the concentration camps; the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* and their composition (police as well as SS units); the mass murder of Gypsies; and the material difficulties and extent of Jewish resistance. They were at a loss, however, when they attempted to explain the extermination of European Jewry. They dealt with the question primarily in terms of a lack of civil courage in the

2. All Jews in East Germany, regardless of their political background, receive higher pensions from the government. They do not, however, receive these pensions as Jews, but as “anti-fascists.”

population (thereby implying that the overwhelming majority of the German population was at least passively opposed to Nazi anti-Semitism); or in general terms of suspicion and fear of the Other; or in terms of individual psychology (“the potential Dorf in each of us”).³ There was relatively little talk of anti-Semitism, and no attempt was made to define modern anti-Semitism more closely and to relate it to Nazism. Consequently, the question of how such a thing could have happened remained necessarily rhetorical, as an expression of shame and horror.

The horror and shame evoked by the film focused discussion on the question of whether Germans had known what had been happening to the Jews, a question discussed very heatedly and emotionally on television as well as in the press.⁴ By showing mass shootings of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen*, “Holocaust” undermined the fiction that Nazi genocide was the affair of a small handful of people operating within a context hermetically sealed off from most of the soldiers as well as the rest of the German population. The fact that millions of Jews, Russians and Poles were murdered or starved to death outside of the camps with the knowledge and, at times, active help of the Wehrmacht, could no longer be repressed from public consciousness.⁵ Public reaction to “Holocaust” made clear that millions of Germans had, in fact, known, even if many had not known all the details.

This fact of knowledge raises the problem of the typical post-war German insistence on not having known about the extermination of European Jewry and other Nazi crimes against humanity. It is clear that this denial of knowledge was an attempt to deny guilt. It could, however, be argued that, even had people known, there was little that they could have done. Knowledge of Nazi crimes need not necessarily imply guilt. Moreover, what was the significance of this denial of knowledge *after* the war, when most people certainly did know?

The post-war insistence on not having known should probably be interpreted as a continued insistence on not *wanting* to know. “We didn’t know” should be understood as “we *still* don’t want to know.” Admission of knowledge — even if *post factum* acquired — would have necessarily demanded an internal distancing from past identification and would have led to political and social consequences. Had people been open to this

3. Dorf was the name of the (fictional) central Nazi character in the film.

4. Whereas Rudolf Augstein of *Der Spiegel* wrote an editorial emphasizing (but not excusing) his lack of knowledge, Henri Nannen of *Stern* wrote one condemning himself for knowing and not acting, and even continuing to wear a Luftwaffe uniform with pride. A dramatic moment occurred on television when, after many statements pleading ignorance had been made, a newscaster, who had been reporting on the public reaction, broke his report to make a personal statement. During the war he had served on a submarine in the Atlantic. They had known about Auschwitz even there.

5. As early as 1940, internal memoranda of Heydrich’s SD (security service) refer to the “problem” of German soldiers — most of whom were, after all, on the eastern front — coming home on leave and describing their experiences.

knowledge after the war, that which was conspicuously lacking might have occurred — a massive public reaction of horror and the demand for justice. Perhaps it wouldn't have been possible for so many Nazi civil servants, lawyers and judges to continue exercising those functions in the Federal Republic.⁶ Mass anti-Nazi revulsion was not, however, on the agenda. The goal was “normalcy” at all costs — one to be achieved without dealing with the past. The strong identification with that past was not overcome, but simply buried beneath a surfeit of Volkswagens.

The result was psychic self-denial and repression. There are many interpretations of the nature of this massive psychic repression: fear of punishment, shame, continued identification, or denial of what had been a very strong identification, rather than its overcoming (Mitscherlich's thesis of the inability to mourn). That such a repression took place is indisputable. A kind of collective somnambulism resulted, with the majority of the population sleep-walking its way through the Cold War, the “economic miracle,” the reemergence of politics with the student revolt, repressing the past.

That sleep-like state has been shattered, at least momentarily, by “Holocaust.” This is probably as much a function of time as it is of the film itself. Thirty-four years after the end of World War II, history has slowed down. The forward-directedness of the post-war era — the rapid restructuring of the world into two camps; the period of economic expansion, when happiness was to be achieved through consumerism; the period of the student and youth revolt, when happiness was to be achieved through experiential politics — is over. The past, which was thought to have been left far behind, has reemerged. It had always been in tow, one step behind. That has now become apparent. However, it is too early to determine if the reactions to “Holocaust” will lead to a confrontation with the past which will have long-range consequences, or whether they will prove to have been a passing catharsis.

II

The problem of knowledge of the Nazi past has played a very specific role in the German New Left, one not immediately obvious. This past and its collective psychic repression were very important moments in the emergence of the New Left. Yet, despite the fact that there has been discussion of Nazism and the Holocaust within the Left, many recent conversations in Frankfurt have revealed a remarkable phenomenon. While most of the older generation of the New Left had, in the 1960s, concerned themselves intensively with the problem, a great many, perhaps most, of the

6. I don't believe that the lack of such a reaction can only be attributed to the conservative policies of the Allies after 1945. The “Antifa” committees were small and isolated. Anti-fascists released from Nazi camps found little popular acclaim.

younger generation politicized in 1968 and afterwards, had never seen documentaries or read documents on the extermination of European Jewry. For this generation, “Holocaust” was a shock. It was the first time that they had concretely and viscerally been confronted with the fate of the Jews. They had known, of course, but apparently only abstractly. The reality of that horror had never been concretely confronted. The absence of this confrontation was reflected in the treatment of history by the post-1968 German New Left and in its understanding of National Socialism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the New Left devoted far more attention to the history of the working-class movement, especially from 1918 to 1923, and to resistance against the Nazis, than to the history of National Socialism itself. The study of history became the search for identification — a search which was particularly strong, given the Nazi past. A historical confrontation with the Third Reich was, however, thereby avoided. The focus on the revolutionary moments following World War I obscured the fact that this history came to an end, at the very latest in 1933 and no longer represents a living historical tradition — whether in the FRG or the GDR. The need for identification led to an emphasis on resistance to Hitler which avoided coming to terms with the popularity of the Nazi regime. It also served to block an understanding of the situation of the Jews in Europe 1933-1945. “Lack of Jewish resistance” became an implicit accusation rather than the point of departure for closer examination.

The lack of real knowledge of Nazi activities and policies in Poland and the Soviet Union, in the ghettos and extermination camps, led to an incomplete image of Nazism. The result was an analysis of National Socialism which drew upon those moments of the phenomenon most apparent in the years 1933-39: a terroristic, bureaucratic police state operating in the immediate interests of big capital, based on authoritarian structures, glorifying the family and using racism as one means of social cohesion. This sort of analysis was strongly reinforced by the communist habit of speaking of fascism rather than Nazism, thereby emphasizing its class function to the exclusion of other moments. In other words, both the non-dogmatic Left and orthodox Marxists tended to treat anti-Semitism as an epiphenomenon of National Socialism. Hence, Nazi crimes against humanity were isolated from a socio-historical examination of National Socialism. One result is that the extermination camps appear as instances of imperialist (or totalitarian) mass murder in general, or they remain inexplicable.

The insistence on a confrontation with the *specificity* of Nazism and the extermination of European Jewry has frequently been misunderstood in Germany — by the Left as well — as an accusation that terror, mass murder, racism and authoritarianism are a German monopoly, a misunderstanding that produces defensive reactions. A typical example: the mention of Nazism to a German is followed immediately by “answers” with examples of other atrocities in Vietnam and Palestine, etc. Left theories of National

Socialism also tend to express this defensiveness. Objectivistic theories either collapse Horkheimer's dictum *relating* fascism and capitalism into a posited *identity*, or mediate the two economically. Subjectivistic theories (such as that, for example, of Theweleit, which deals with Nazism in terms of male fantasies⁷) also neglect the specificity of National Socialism. The Third Reich comes to be identified with capital or patriarchy, i.e., understood in historically non-specific terms.

Theory itself became a form of psychic repression. Concepts were used in order to *block* an unmediated perception of Nazism rather than being used to *grasp* that reality and render it understandable. This transformation of the function of analysis resulted, in my opinion, from the abhorrence and guilt felt by the post-war generation in relation to the Nazi past. This sense of guilt was elusive and difficult to deal with, inasmuch as it wasn't the result of real guilt. The combination of abhorrence and guilt led to a concern with Nazism — but one characterized by defensive reactions which prevented a coming to terms with the specificity of the past. An admission of that specificity became associated with an admission of guilt. The result has been a tendency to treat Nazism as an empty abstraction, one associated with capitalism, bureaucracy and authoritarian structures — an exaggerated species of the “normality” we all know. The specificity of the German past has not only been thereby avoided, but the term “fascism” has been subject to a rhetorical inflation which has devalued its meaning. On the one hand, this one-sided emphasis on the above-mentioned moments of National Socialism ignored its anti-bourgeois aspects: the revolt, the hatred of the Establishment and of the greyness of capitalist everyday life. On the other hand, the struggle against the authoritarian capitalist present in the FRG, a present with important elements of continuity with the Nazi past, could be interpreted as a direct struggle against fascism, an attempt to make up today for the lack of German resistance then. Such tendencies strongly informed

7. Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, Roter Stern Verlag, Frankfurt 1977. The book is a rich source of documents and interpretations on male fantasies. As an analysis of sexist psychic structures, its weakness is that the examination of the relation of patriarchy and Nazism is fore-shortened as an attempt to explain the latter essentially in terms of the former. Nazism was, of course, sexist. However, that was not its distinguishing hallmark. By collapsing the two, Theweleit makes use of a category non-specific to National Socialism in order to explain the specificity of that phenomenon (analogous to the use of “capital” in objectivistic theories). That specificity becomes thereby dissolved and the problem becomes posed in terms of whether it is at all possible to speak of “non-fascist” men (p. 44). In other words, the attempt to examine the subjective dimension of a historically specific phenomenon becomes transformed into a subjectivistic, transhistorical, non-specific ideology.

Männerphantasien has been a huge success in Germany. It was extensively covered and richly praised by the liberal press. (*Die Zeit* gave it a full page.) At the same time, it has been extremely popular in the Left “scene.” In my opinion, precisely what I have criticized is the reason for its popularity: the interpretation of the Nazi past is trendy — an inauthentic homage to the women's movement — and is so non-specific that the problem of the success of National Socialism in Germany is dissolved into the problem of men in general, out of time and place.

political discussion in Frankfurt during the 1970s, which was determined to a great degree by a confrontation with the theory, strategy and tactics of the West German underground.

A great deal of political activity in the FRG is presented in terms of "learning from the past." The foci of political concern and activity in West Germany today are the struggles against repression, *Berufsverbot*, the infringement of civil liberties, court procedures, the appalling mistreatment of political prisoners (of all prisoners, in fact), discrimination of foreign workers, racism, and atomic energy in its political as well as ecological consequences. Do they, however, require learning from the Nazi past? They are all, of course, directed against an authoritarian state. That determination, however, by no means exhausts that of National Socialism. To present these campaigns — as important as they are — as "learning from the past" is somewhat equivocal, for here the learning is somewhat too quick and represents, in part, a flight from the specificity of that past as well.

The effects of this flight have been ambiguous. I doubt if there is another Left in the West as open to, and aware of, developments in other countries, as that in West Germany. Yet, one senses an underlying desperation, a search for identity, in the degree to which large segments of the non-dogmatic Left have attempted to relate to developments abroad in an unmediated fashion — from the Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969, through Panther Defense, Palestine, Portugal, alternative projects in the USA, the Italian "metropolitan Indians," French "New Philosophy," etc.

These problems of learning and repression, flight and the search for identification, were expressed most clearly in the attitudes of the German New Left towards Israel. No western Left was as philo-Semitic and pro-Zionist prior to 1967. Probably none subsequently identified so strongly with the Palestinian cause. What was termed "anti-Zionism" was in fact so emotionally and psychically charged that it went far beyond the bounds of a political and social critique of Zionism. The very word became as negatively informed as Nazism, in the one country where the Left should have known better.⁸ The moment of reversal was the war in 1967. I would suggest that a process of psychological reversal took place in which the Jews as victors became identified with the Nazi past — positively by the German Right, negatively by the Left. Their victims, the Palestinians, became identified as

8. A not infrequent reason given by some leftists for refusing to look at "Holocaust" was that they heard it was a piece of Zionist propaganda. This neglects the obvious fact that the extermination of European Jewry was the reason that most Jews became sympathetic to Zionism after 1945. This was not only because of the Nazis, but also because of the eagerness of Rumanian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Croatian, Flemish and French anti-Semites and fascists to help them, as well as the policy of "benign neglect" pursued by the Americans and British. Zionism, as a nationalist response, became convincing to many Jews after having experienced how the projected image of the Jewish World Conspiracy became realized as its opposite: a world "conspiracy" against the Jews. *Understanding* the grounds for mass Jewish support of Zionism does not, however, necessarily entail accepting and *condoning* Zionist policies.

the Jews. It is significant in this regard that the trigger for such a reversal was *not* the expulsion and the suffering of the Palestinians which, after all, began long before 1967. It was, rather, the victorious “Biltzkrieg” of the Israelis. Philo-Semitism revealed its other side: if Jews aren’t victims and therefore virtuous, and if Israelis are brutal and racist, they must be “Nazis.” Moreover, after the battle of Karamah in 1968, the Palestinians proved themselves to be the “better Jews” — they resisted. An opportunity was finally given to identify with the “Jews” *and with their resistance*. The struggle against Zionism was transformed into the long-yearned-for struggle against the Nazi past, *freed of guilt*.

This cycle of psychic reversal was most grotesquely manifested in Entebbe in 1976. An Air France plane had been hijacked and all non-Jewish passengers had been released. The hostages held were the Jewish passengers. (Not simply all the Israelis — which would have been bad enough.) This process of “selection” was undertaken, among others, by two young German leftists, less than four decades after Auschwitz! *There was no public negative response — not to speak of a general outcry — within the German New Left*. “Learning from the past” has been far from realized. It had been blocked by guilt, hindered by ignorance, and repressed by the overwhelming need for objects of unequivocal identification.

It may very well be that the immediate problems facing a German Left have much more to do with an increasingly authoritarian technocratic capitalism, than with Nazism and anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, the weight of that past has been too heavy to be ignored; the attempt to push aside the past in order to confront the present has not worked. The repressed past has remained, has continued to operate subterraneously, and has helped determine the mode of dealing with the present.

III

An important aspect of confronting this past would entail trying to come to terms with anti-Semitism and its relation to National Socialism, to try to understand the extermination of European Jewry. This cannot be done so long as anti-Semitism is understood as an example of racism *sans phrase* and so long as Nazism is understood only in terms of big capital and a terroristic bureaucratic police state. Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Maidanek, Sobibor and Treblinka should not be treated outside of the framework of an analysis of National Socialism. They represent one of its logical endpoints, not

Similarly, understanding Palestinian responses to decades of Zionist oppression does not necessitate agreeing with the politics of radical nationalists such as Habash or Wadi Haddad. Such distinctions are really not so difficult to make. That can’t be the problem. Does a German leftist not have to deal with the extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis because of the realities of Zionism?

simply its most terrible epiphenomenon. *No analysis of National Socialism which cannot account for the extermination of European Jewry is fully adequate.*

My intention here is not to explain *why* Nazism and modern anti-Semitism achieved a breakthrough and became hegemonic in Germany. Such an attempt would entail an analysis of the specificity of the development of German history, about which a great deal has been written. The attempt in this essay is, rather, to examine *what* it was which achieved a breakthrough — i.e., to suggest an analysis of those aspects of modern anti-Semitism which indicate its intrinsic connection to National Socialism, as an approach to understanding the extermination of European Jewry. Such an examination is a necessary precondition to any fully adequate analysis of why it succeeded in Germany.

The first step must be a specification of the Holocaust and of modern anti-Semitism. The lack of a serious and intensive consideration of modern anti-Semitism renders inadequate any attempt to understand the extermination of European Jewry. The problem should not be posed quantitatively, whether of numbers of people murdered or of degree of suffering. There are too many historical examples of mass murder and genocide. (Many more Russians than Jews, for example, were killed by the Nazis.) The question, is, rather, one of *qualitative specificity*. Particular aspects of the extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis remain inexplicable so long as anti-Semitism is treated as a specific example of prejudice, xenophobia and racism in general, as an example of a scapegoat strategy whose victims could very well have been members of any other group.

The Holocaust was characterized by the sense of mission, the relative lack of emotion and immediate hate (as opposed to pogroms, for example) and, most importantly, its apparent lack of functionality. The extermination of the Jews was not a means to another end. They were not exterminated for military reasons, or in order to violently acquire land (as was the case with the American Indians and the Tasmanians), or in order to wipe out those segments of the population around whom resistance could most easily crystallize so that the rest could be exploited as helots (as was Nazis policy towards the Poles and Russians), or for any other “extrinsic” goal. *The extermination of the Jews not only was to have been total, but was its own goal — extermination in order to exterminate — a goal which acquired absolute priority.*⁹

No functionalist explanation of the Holocaust and no scapegoat theory of anti-Semitism can even begin to explain why, in the last years of the war, when the German armies were being rolled over by the Red Army, a significant proportion of vehicles was used to transport Jews to the gas chambers, rather than for logistical support. Once this *qualitative specificity* of the

9. The only recent attempt in the West German media to qualitatively specify the Nazi extermination of the Jews was made by Jürgen Thorwald in *Der Spiegel*, Feb. 5, 1979.

extermination of European Jewry is recognized, it becomes clear that attempts at an explanation which deal with capitalism, racism, bureaucracy, sexual repression or the authoritarian personality, remain far too general. The specificity of the Holocaust requires a much more concretized mediation in order to even approach its understanding.

The extermination of European Jewry is, of course, related to anti-Semitism. The specificity of the former must be related to that of the latter. Moreover, *modern* anti-Semitism must be understood with reference to Nazism as a movement — a movement which, in terms of its own self-understanding, represented a revolt.

Modern anti-Semitism, which should not be confused with everyday anti-Jewish prejudice, is an ideology, a form of thought, which emerged in Europe in the late 19th century. Its emergence presupposed centuries of earlier forms of anti-Semitism, which has almost always been an integral part of Christian western civilization. What is common to all forms of anti-Semitism is the degree of power attributed to the Jews: the power to kill God, unleash the Bubonic Plague and, more recently, introduce capitalism and socialism. In other words, anti-Semitic thought is strongly Manichean, with the Jews playing the role of the children of darkness.

It is not only the degree, but also the quality of power attributed to the Jews which distinguishes anti-Semitism from other forms of racism. Probably all forms of racism attribute potential power to the other. This power, however, is usually concrete — material or sexual — the power of the oppressed (as repressed), of the “Untermenschen.” The power attributed to the Jews is not only much greater and “real,” as opposed to potential, it is different. In *modern* anti-Semitism it is mysteriously intangible, abstract and universal. This power does not usually appear as such, but must find a concrete vessel, a carrier, a mode of expression. Because this power is not bound concretely, is not “rooted,” it is of staggering immensity and is extremely difficult to check. It stands behind phenomena, but is not identical with them. Its source is therefore hidden — conspiratorial. The Jews represent an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy.

A graphic example of this vision is provided by a Nazi poster which depicts Germany — represented as a strong, honest worker — threatened in the West by a fat, plutocratic John Bull and in the East by a brutal, barbaric Bolshevik Commissar. Yet, these two hostile forces are mere puppets. Peering over the edge of the globe with the puppet strings firmly in his hands is the Jew. Such a vision was by no means a monopoly of the Nazis. It is characteristic of modern anti-Semitism that the Jews are considered to be the force behind those “apparent” opposites: plutocratic capitalism and socialism. “International Jewry” is, moreover, perceived to be centered in the “asphalt jungles” of the newly emergent urban megalipoli, to be behind “vulgar, materialist, modern culture” and, in general, all forces contributing to the decline of traditional social groupings, values and institutions. The

Jews represent a foreign, dangerous, destructive force undermining the social "health" of the nation. Modern anti-Semitism, then, is characterized not only by its secular content, but also by its systematic character. Its claim is to explain the world — a world which had rapidly become too complex and threatening for many people.

This descriptive determination of modern anti-Semitism, while necessary in order to differentiate that form from prejudice or racism in general, is in itself not sufficient to indicate the intrinsic connection to National Socialism. That is, the aim of overcoming the customary separation between a socio-historical analysis of Nazism and an examination of anti-Semitism is, on this level, not yet fulfilled.

What is required is an *explanation* of the anti-Semitism described above which is capable of mediating the two. It must be grounded historically in the same categories which could be used to explain National Socialism. The intention is not to negate socio-psychological or psychoanalytical explanations,¹⁰ but rather to elucidate a historical-epistemological frame of reference within which further psychological specifications can take place. Such a frame of reference must be able to ground the *specific content* of modern anti-Semitism and must be historical, i.e., must contribute to an understanding of why that ideology became so prevalent when it did — beginning in the late 19th century. In the absence of such a frame, all other explanatory attempts focused on subjectivity remain historically indeterminate. What is required, then, is an explanation in terms of socio-historical epistemology.

A full development of the problematic of anti-Semitism would go beyond the bounds of this essay. The point to be made here, however, is that a careful examination of the modern anti-Semitic worldview reveals that it is a form of thought in which the rapid development of industrial capitalism with all of its social ramifications is personified and identified as the Jew. It is not that the Jews merely were considered to be the owners of money, as in traditional anti-Semitism, but that they were held responsible for economic crises and identified with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid industrialization: explosive urbanization, the decline of traditional social classes and strata, the emergence of a large, increasingly organized industrial proletariat, etc. In other words, the abstract domination of capital, which — particularly with rapid industrialization — caught people up in a web of dynamic forces they could not understand, became perceived as the domination of International Jewry. This was particularly true in countries such as Germany, in which the development of industrial capitalism was not only very rapid, but occurred in the absence of a previous bourgeois revolution and its consequent hegemonic liberal values and political culture.

This, however, is no more than a first approach. The personification has been described, not yet explained. It has not been grounded epistemologically.

10. For example, see N. Cohen *Warrant for Genocide*, London, 1967.

There have been many attempts at an explanation. The problem with those theories, like that of Max Horkheimer,¹¹ which concentrate on the identification of the Jews with money and the sphere of circulation, is that they cannot account for the notion that the Jews constitute the power behind social democracy and communism. At first glance, those theories, such as that of George Mosse,¹² which interpret modern anti-Semitism as a revolt against modernity, appear more satisfying. The problem, however, with that approach is that “the modern” would certainly include industrial capital which, as is well known, was precisely *not* an object of anti-Semitic attacks, even in a period of rapid industrialization. What is required, then, is an approach which allows for a distinction between what modern capitalism is and the way it appears, between its essence and appearance. The concept “modern” does not allow for such a distinction.

These considerations lead us to Marx’s concept of the fetish, the strategic intent of which was to provide a social and historical theory of knowledge grounded in the difference between the essence of capitalist social relations and their manifest form.¹³ When one examines the specific characteristics of the power attributed to the Jews by modern anti-Semitism — abstractness, intangibility, universality, mobility — it is striking that they are all characteristics of the value dimension of the social forms analyzed by Marx. Moreover, this dimension — like the supposed power of the Jews — does not appear as such, rather always in the form of a material carrier, such as the commodity. The carrier thus has a “double character” — value and use-value.

11. Horkheimer, *Die Juden und Europa*, 1939.

12. George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, New York, 1964.

13. The epistemological dimension of Marx’s critique is immanent to all of *Capital* but was explicated only within the context of his analysis of the commodity. What underlies the concept of the fetish is Marx’s analysis of the commodity, money, capital as social forms and *not* merely as economic concepts. In his analysis, capitalist forms of social relations do not appear as such, but are expressed in material form. As expressions of alienation, these materialized forms of social relations acquire a life of their own and reflexively form social action as well as social thought. The commodity as a form, for example, represents a duality of social dimensions (value and use-value) which interact such that the category simultaneously expresses particular “reified” social relations and forms of thought. This is very different from the mainstream Marxist tradition in which the categories are understood in terms of an “economic base,” and thought is considered superstructural, to be derived from class interest and needs. This form of functionalism cannot — as was argued above — adequately explain the non-functionality of the extermination of the Jews. On a more general level, it cannot explain why a form of thought, which may very well be in the interests of particular social classes or other social groupings, has the specific content it does. The same applies to the Enlightenment notion of ideology (and religion) as the product of conscious manipulation. The popular belief in a particular ideology implies that it must have a resonance, the source of which must be explained. On the other hand, the Marxian approach, further developed by Lukács, the Frankfurt School and Sohn-Rethel, stands opposed to those one-sided reactions to traditional Marxism which have given up any serious attempt to ground forms of thought historically and view any such attempt as “reductionist.”

At this point we can commence with a brief analysis of the way in which capitalist social relations present themselves in order to explain the personification described above and to solve the problem of why modern anti-Semitism, which railed against so many aspects of the “modern,” was so conspicuously silent, or was positive, with regard to industrial capital and modern technology.

I will begin with the example of the commodity form. The dialectical tension between value and use-value in the commodity requires that this “double character” be materially externalized in the value form, where it appears “doubled” as money (the manifest form of value) and the commodity (the manifest form of use-value). The effect of this externalization is that the commodity, although it is a social form expressing both value and use-value, appears to contain only the latter, i.e., appears as purely material and “thingly”; money, on the other hand, then appears to be the sole repository of value, i.e., as the manifestation of the purely abstract, rather than as the externalized manifest form of the value dimension of the commodity itself. The form of materialized social relations specific to capitalism appears — on this level of the analysis — as the opposition between money, as abstract, as the “root of all evil,” and “thingly” nature. Capitalist social relations appear to find their expression only in the abstract dimension — for example as money and as externalized, abstract, universal “laws.”¹⁴

One aspect of the fetish, then, is that capitalist social relations do not appear as such and, moreover, present themselves antinomically, as the opposition of the abstract and concrete. Because, additionally, both sides of the antinomy are objectified, each appears to be quasi-natural: the abstract dimension appears in the form of “objective,” “natural” laws; the concrete dimension appears as pure “thingly” nature. *The structure of alienated social relations which characterize capitalism has the form of a quasi-natural antinomy in which the social and historical do not appear.* This antinomy is recapitulated as the opposition between positivist and romantic forms of thought. Most critical analyses of fetishized thought have concentrated on that strand of the antinomy which hypostatizes the abstract as transhistorical — so-called positive bourgeois thought — and thereby disguises the social and historical character of existing relations. In this essay, the other strand will be emphasized — that of forms of romanticism and revolt which, in terms of their own self-understandings, are anti-bourgeois, but which in fact hypostatize the concrete and thereby remain bound within the antinomy of capitalist social relations.

14. Proudhon, who in this sense can be considered one of the forefathers of modern anti-Semitism, therefore thought that abolishing money — the manifest mediation — would suffice to abolish capitalist relations. He did not realize that capitalism is characterized by mediated social relations, objectified in the categorial forms, one of whose *expressions*, not *causes*, is money. Proudhon, in other words, mistook a form of appearance — money as the objectification of the abstract — for the essence of capitalism.

Forms of anti-capitalist thought which remain bound within the immediacy of this antinomy tend to perceive capitalism, and that which is specific to that social formation, only in terms of the manifestations of the abstract dimension of the antinomy. The existent concrete dimension is then positively opposed to it as the “natural” or ontologically human, which stands outside of the specificity of capitalist society. Thus, as with Proudhon, for example, concrete labor is understood as the non-capitalist moment which is opposed to the abstractness of money. That concrete labor itself incorporates and is materially formed by capitalist social relations is not understood.

With the further development of capitalism, of the capital form and its associated fetish, the naturalization immanent to the commodity fetish becomes increasingly biologized. The mechanical world view of the 17th and 18th centuries begins to give way; organic process begins to supplant mechanical stasis as the form of the fetish. The proliferation of racial theories and the rise of Social Darwinism in the late 19th century are cases in point. Society as well as historical process become increasingly understood in biological terms. I shall not develop this aspect of the capital fetish any further here. For our purposes what must be noted are the implications for how capital becomes perceived. As indicated above, on the logical level of the analysis of the commodity, the “double character” allows concrete labor to appear as a purely material, creative process, separable from capital. social relations, and allows the commodity to appear as a purely material entity rather than as the objectification of mediated social relations. On the logical level of capital, this “double character” allows industrial production to appear as a purely material, careative process, separable from capital. *Industrial capital then appears as the linear descendent of “natural” artisanal labor, in opposition to “parasitic” finance capital.* Whereas the former appears “organically rooted,” the latter does not. Capital itself — or what is understood as the negative aspect of capitalism — is understood only in terms of the manifest form of its abstract dimension: finance and interest capital. In this sense, the biological interpretation, which opposes the concrete dimension (of capitalism) as “natural” and “healthy” to “capitalism” (as perceived), does *not* stand in contradiction to a glorification of industrial capital and technology. Both are on the “thingly” side of the antinomy.

This is commonly misunderstood. So, for example, when Norman Mailer, in a defense of neo-romanticism (and sexism) in *The Prisoner of Sex*, wrote that Hitler spoke of blood, to be sure, but built the machine. The point is that, *in this form of fetishized “anti-capitalism,” BOTH blood and the machine are seen as concrete counter-principles to the abstract.* The positive emphasis on “nature,” on blood, the soil, concrete labor, and *Gemeinschaft*, can easily go hand in hand with a glorification of technology and industrial

capital.¹⁵ This form of thought, then is not to be understood as anachronistic, as the expression of historical nonsynchronism (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*), any more than the rise of racial theories in the late 19th century should be thought of as atavistic. They are historically *new* forms of thought and in no way represent the reemergence of an older form. It is because of the emphasis on biological nature that they *appear* to be atavistic or anachronistic. However, this is itself a part of the fetish which presents the “natural” as more “essential” and closer to origins, and the course of history as one of increasing artificiality. Such forms of thought become prevalent *with* the development of industrial capitalism. They are *expressions* of that antinomic fetish, which gives rise to the notion that the concrete is “natural,” and which increasingly presents the socially “natural” in such a way that it is perceived in biological terms. It is precisely the hypostatization of the concrete and the identification of capital with the manifest abstract which renders this ideology so functional for the development of industrial capitalism in crisis. National Socialist ideology was in the interests of capital not only for the very obvious reason that it was virulently anti-Marxist and that the Nazis destroyed the organizations of the German working class. It was also in the interests of capital in the transition from liberal to quasi-state capitalism. The identification of capital with the manifest abstract overlaps, in part, with its identification with the market. The attack on the liberal state, as abstract, can further the development of the interventionist state, as concrete. This form of “anti-capitalism,” then, only appears to be looking backwards with yearning. As an expression of the capital fetish its real thrust is forwards. It is an aid to capitalism in the transition to quasi-state capitalism in a situation of structural crisis.

15. Theories of National Socialism which present it as “anti-modern” or “irrationalist” cannot explain the interrelation of these two moments. The term “irrationalism” tends not to call into question prevailing “rationalism” and cannot explain the positive relation of an “irrationalist,” “biologistic” ideology to the *ratio* of industry and technology. The term “anti-modern” tends to ignore the very modern aspects of Nazism and cannot account for the attack on some aspects of “the modern” and not on others. In fact, both analyses are one-sided and represent only the other, the abstract, dimension of the antinomy outlined above. They tend to defend prevailing, non-fascist “modernity” or “rationality” in an uncritical fashion. They have therefore left open the possibility for the emergence of new one-sided critiques (this time from the Left), such as those of M. Foucault or A. Glucksmann, which present modern capitalist civilization only in terms of the abstract. All of these approaches not only do not allow for a theory of Nazism which provides an adequate explanation of the relation of “blood and the machine,” but also cannot show that the opposition of the abstract and concrete, of positive reason and “irrationalism,” does not define the parameters of an absolute choice, but that the terms of these oppositions are *related* to one another as the antinomic expressions of the dual manifest dimensions of the *same* essence: the social relations characteristic of the capitalist social formation. (In this sense, Lukács, in *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* — horrified by the unspeakable brutality of the Nazis — fell behind his own critical insights on the antinomies of bourgeois thought which he developed 25 years earlier in *History and Class Consciousness*.) Such approaches further retain the antinomy rather than theoretically overcoming it.

This form of “anti-capitalism,” then, is based on a one-sided attack on the abstract. The abstract and concrete are not seen as constituting an antinomy where the real overcoming of the abstract — of the value dimension — involves the historical overcoming of the antinomy itself as well as *each* of its terms. Instead there is the one-sided attack on abstract Reason, abstract law or, on another level, money and finance capital. In this sense it is antinomically complementary to liberal thought, where the domination of the abstract remains unquestioned and the distinction between positive and critical reason is not made. The “anti-capitalist” attack, however, does not remain limited to the attack against abstraction. Even the abstract dimension also appears materially. On the level of the capital fetish, it is not only the concrete side of the antinomy which is naturalized and biologized. The manifest abstract dimension is also biologized — as the Jews. The opposition of the concrete material and the abstract becomes the racial opposition of the Arians and the Jews. Modern anti-Semitism involves a biologization of capitalism — which itself is only understood in terms of its manifest abstract dimension — as International Jewry.

According to this interpretation, the Jews were not merely identified with money, with the sphere of circulation, but with capitalism itself. However, because of its fetishized form, this did not appear to include industry and technology. Capitalism appeared to be only its manifest abstract dimension which, in turn, was responsible for the whole range of concrete social and cultural changes associated with the rapid development of modern industrial capitalism. The Jews were not seen merely as *representatives* of capital (in which case anti-Semitic attacks would have been much more class-specific). They became the *personifications* of the intangible, destructive, immensely powerful, and international domination of capital as a social form. Certain forms of anti-capitalist discontent became directed against the manifest abstract dimension of capital, in the form of the Jews, because, given the antinomy of the abstract and concrete dimensions, capitalism appeared that way — not because the Jews were consciously identified with the value dimension. The “anti-capitalist” revolt was, consequently, also the revolt against the Jews. The overcoming of capitalism and its negative social effects became associated with the overcoming of the Jews.

IV

Although the immanent connection between the sort of “anti-capitalism” which informed National Socialism, and modern anti-Semitism has been indicated, the question remains why the biological interpretation of the abstract dimension of capitalism found its focus in the Jews. This “choice” was, within the European context, by no means fortuitous. The Jews could

not have been replaced by any other group. The reasons for this are manifold. The long history of anti-Semitism in Europe, and the related association of Jews with money are well known. The period of the rapid expansion of industrial capital in the last third of the 19th century coincided with the political and civil emancipation of the Jews in central Europe. There was a veritable explosion of Jews in the universities, the liberal professions, journalism, the arts, retail, i.e., the Jews rapidly became visible in civil society, particularly in spheres and professions which were expanding and which were associated with the newer form society was taking.

One could mention many other factors. There is one which I wish to emphasize. Just as the commodity, understood as a social form, expresses its “double character” in the externalized opposition between the abstract (money) and the concrete (the commodity), so is bourgeois society characterized by the split between the state and civil society. The split is that between the individual as citizen and as person. As a citizen, the individual is abstract. This is expressed, for example, in the notion of equality before the (abstract) law or in that of one person, one vote (at least in theory). As a person, the individual is concrete, embedded in real class relations which are considered to be “private,” that is, pertaining to civil society, and which do not find political expression. In Europe, however, the notion of the nation as a purely political entity, abstracted from the substantiality of civil society, was never fully realized. The nation was not only a political entity, it was also concrete, determined by a common language, history, traditions and religion. In this sense, the only group in Europe which fulfilled the determination of citizenship as a pure political abstraction, were the Jews following their political emancipation. They were German or French citizens, but not really Germans or Frenchmen. They were of the nation abstractly, but rarely concretely. They were, in addition, citizens of most European countries. The quality of abstractness, characteristic not only of the value dimension in its immediacy, but also, mediately, of the bourgeois state and law, became closely identified with the Jews. In a period when the concrete became glorified against the abstract, against “capitalism” and the bourgeois state, this became a fatal association. The Jews were rootless, international and abstract.

V

Modern anti-Semitism, then, is a particularly pernicious fetish form. Its power and danger is that it provides a comprehensive worldview which explains and gives form to certain modes of anti-capitalist discontent in a manner which leaves capitalism intact, by attacking the personifications of that social form. Anti-Semitism so understood allows one to grasp an essential moment of Nazism as a foreshortened anti-capitalist movement, one characterized by a hatred of the abstract, a hypostatization of the

existing concrete and by a single-minded, ruthless — but not necessarily hate-filled — mission: to rid the world of the source of all evil.

The extermination of European Jewry is the indication that it is far too simple to deal with Nazism as a mass movement with anti-capitalist overtones which shed that husk in 1934 (“Roehm Putsch”) at the latest, once it had served its purpose and once state power had been seized. In the first place, ideological forms of thought are not simply conscious manipulations. In the second place, this view misunderstands the nature of Nazi “anti-capitalism” — the extent to which it was intrinsically bound to the anti-Semitic worldview. Auschwitz indicates that connection. It is true that the somewhat too concrete and plebeian “anti-capitalism” of the SA was dispensed with by 1934; however, not the anti-Semitic thrust — the “knowledge” that the source of evil is the abstract, the Jew.

A capitalist factory is a place where value is produced, which “unfortunately” has to take the form of the production of goods. The concrete is produced as the necessary carrier of the abstract. The extermination camps were *not* a terrible version of such a factory but, rather, should be seen as its grotesque, Arian, “anti-capitalist” *negation*. Auschwitz was a factory to “destroy value,” i.e., to destroy the personifications of the abstract. Its organization was that of a fiendish industrial process, the aim of which was to “liberate” the concrete from the abstract. The first step was to dehumanize, that is, to rip the “mask” of humanity away and reveal the Jews for what “they really are” — “Müsselmänner,” shadows, ciphers, abstractions. The second step was then to eradicate that abstractness, to transform it into smoke, trying in the process to wrest away the last remnants of the concrete material “use-value”: clothes, gold, hair, soap.

Auschwitz, not 1933, was the real “German Revolution” — the real “overthrow” of the existing social formation. By this one deed the world was to be made safe from the tyranny of the abstract. In the process, the Nazis “liberated” themselves from humanity.

The Nazis lost the war against the Soviet Union, America and Britain. They won their war, their “revolution” against the European Jews. They not only succeeded in murdering six million Jewish children, women and men. They succeeded in destroying a culture — a very old culture — that of European Jewry. It was a culture characterized by a tradition incorporating a complicated tension of particularity and universality. This internal tension was duplicated as an external one, characterizing the relation of the Jews with their Christian surroundings. The Jews were never fully a part of the larger societies in which they lived; they were never fully apart from those societies. The results were frequently disastrous for the Jews. Sometimes they were very fruitful. That field of tension became sedimented in most individual Jews following the emancipation. The ultimate resolution of this tension between the particular and the universal is, in the Jewish tradition, a function of time, of history — the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps, however, in the face of secularization and assimilation, European Jewry

would have given up that tension. Perhaps that culture would have gradually disappeared as a living tradition, before the resolution of the particular and the universal had been realized. This question will never be answered.

“Learning from the past” must also include learning the lesson of anti-Semitism, of foreshortened “anti-capitalism.” It would be a serious mistake if the Left today were to view capitalism only in terms of the abstract dimension of the capital antinomy, whether in terms of technocratic domination or in terms of abstract Reason. Similarly, more than a small degree of caution should be exercised towards phenomena such as “new” forms of psychotherapy which hypostatize the emotions in opposition to thought, or biologicistic understandings of the social problem of ecology. Any “anti-capitalism” which seeks the immediate negation of the abstract and glorifies the concrete — instead of practically and theoretically considering what the historical overcoming of both could mean — can, at best, be socially and politically impotent in the face of capital. At worst it can be dangerous, even if the needs it expresses could be interpreted as emancipatory.

The Left once made the mistake of thinking that it had the monopoly on anti-capitalism or, conversely, that all forms of anti-capitalism are, at least potentially, progressive. That mistake was fatal, not least of all for the Left.

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