

The Background Noise (Book review)

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The Background Noise

Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Reviewed by Lesley Klaff*

“[Antisemitism] *is the background noise against which we live our lives.*”
— p. xvi

Anthony Julius’s book *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* is a detailed, scholarly, and fluent account of four antisemitisms, each with a uniquely English provenance: the antisemitism of medieval England; English literary antisemitism; modern English antisemitism; and “contemporary anti-Zionism,” which, although also currently prevalent in Europe, has an exclusively English association because of England’s involvement with the Zionist project from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-1950s. In showing the many ways in which England *arrived first* in the history of antisemitism, Julius dispels the myth of English tolerance and accommodation toward Jews: “The antisemitism of no other country has this density of history. The anti-Semitism of no other country is so continually innovative” (xlii).

What is so exceptional about the book, and what sets it apart from all existing histories of antisemitism, is that it describes my own experience as a member of Anglo-Jewry in a way that is truly revelatory. Julius speaks to me personally throughout the entire book, but principally in his chapter, “The Mentality of Modern English Anti-Semitism” (349–440), where he discusses the “*unthinking*” antisemitism that demoralizes Jews by excluding us, insulting us, regarding us with condescension or with a certain amused contempt, or with prejudiced curiosity, or by treating us with “Jew-wariness” or “Jew-distrust” (351). Julius notes that this modest antisemitism, although barely visible much of the time, is nevertheless “powerful enough to influence the very formation of modern Anglo-Jewish identity” (352). Quotidian antisemitism of this kind—“best characterized as a prejudice rather than a preoccupation” (355)—frequently manifests itself in the making of an antisemitic remark or the telling of an antisemitic joke:

Question: What’s the shortest book in the world?

Answer: The Jewish book of gifts.

The exchange is one of essential inequality, in which the maker of the remark or joke is taken to declare: “I have nothing to fear from Jews. I can approach them unarmed. I can risk offending them, because they are of no account.” (370). One recent personal experience comes to mind: I was at lunch with two male colleagues, each of whom purports to be a close acquaintance of mine. One of them addressed me directly and asked, “What’s the shortest book in the world?” When I replied that I didn’t know, he said, “The Jewish book of gifts.” My refusal to laugh drew the comment, “Can’t you take a joke?”

The book also causes me to rethink how I deal with antisemites. I have, in the past, spent hours, even days, arguing with pro-boycott advocates and wrangling with all manner of anti-Zionists on the Internet. I have presented them with factual refutations of their position. I have appealed to their humanity and reason. In short, I have engaged them in good faith. I now know that their positions are non debatable because they are informed by hostility, even malice, toward Jews and Jewish projects. So from now on I shall ignore them. I have endured the humiliation of antisemitic jokes and remarks, and I have been treated as an object of curiosity with repeated and amused questions about Jewish observance. I shall tolerate this no longer. Julius has given me the insight and the confidence to walk away.

The book also stands above existing histories on antisemitism because of the sheer wealth and breadth of information presented. Indeed, Julius's exposition of each of the four English antisemitisms is a book in itself: the reader is treated to a synthesis of all the relevant literature in conjunction with the author's own brilliant analysis and insight. Thus, in the chapter on medieval English antisemitism we learn that the Jews were defamed, that their wealth was expropriated, that they were subjected to discriminatory and humiliating legal regulation, that they were injured and murdered, and that they were finally expelled in 1290 by King Edward I. In providing the details of their expulsion, Julius portrays their multiple dislocations and losses, their loss of identity and livelihood, in a way that captures the fear, anxiety, and sadness that accompanies the loss of one's home and country. Of the two antisemitic libels that were invented in medieval England, "Coin Clipping" (the bleeding of the Gentile body politic) and the "Blood Libel" (the bleeding of Gentile bodies), the latter has survived and flourished to the present day, not only in England, but throughout the world. The protean nature of the Blood Libel, which "converts the single event of the Passion into an open series of murders" (74), gives it pride of place in the "discourse of denunciation" (14) that characterizes antisemitism.

The Blood Libel, or the accusation that Jews drink Christian blood for their rituals, has featured extensively in English literature. Julius's chapter on English literary antisemitism, no less than his earlier *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and the Literary Form* (London 2003), demonstrates his impressive skill in the art of literary critique. He declares that the anonymous thirteenth-century ballad, *Sir Hugh or the Jew's Daughter*, which alludes to the Lincoln Blood Libel, marks the start of "a murderous anti-Semitism into a national literature" (p. 164). This trend flourished throughout the period of the Jews' exile with, for example, Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* (1387–1400), Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (1592), and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1596–7) (where the Blood Libel plays out its master theme of "Jew as aggressor/revenger"). It continued after the Jews' readmission, in works such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Rudyard Kipling's *Life's Handicap* (1891), George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909), although the latter four are "[A]mong the less cloying, less hysterical, engagements with anti-Semitic tropes, ones conducted at a somewhat more challenging literary level" (216).

The Blood Libel presents itself in today's English literature in the form of literary critiques of Israel and Zionism. For example, Tom Paulin's poem *Killed in the Crossfire*, published in the widely circulated *Observer* newspaper in 2001, and Caryl Churchill's play, *Seven Jewish Children*, performed in 2009 at the Royal Court Theatre, London, each portrays Jews as people who wish Gentiles harm, as people who intentionally

murder Gentile children: “Jews manipulate, exploit, or otherwise prey upon Gentiles, but the poor dumb beasts do not see what is happening, until the sage or poet arrives to explain it” (239). In this way, the Blood Libel association of children/Jews/danger continues as strongly as it did in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*.

As elsewhere in the book, Julius’s chapter on English literary antisemitism (which covers many more texts and authors than those mentioned above) makes it clear to the reader that a harmful antisemitism *can* be present in the written and spoken word. This is important because there is a tendency in England to think of antisemitism only in terms of the Holocaust, in terms of state-sponsored genocide. This is partly because antisemitism faded from political consciousness after the Six Day War, and partly because of ignorance of antisemitism’s long pre-Holocaust history. There is “[A] new illiteracy . . . concerning anti-Semitic language and iconography” (517). Antisemitism in its literary form *does* hurt Jews: “There are two canonic works, then, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Oliver Twist*, each bearing the name of the Gentile victim of a Jew, and they thrive in a continuous present, endlessly circulating in the culture, studied, performed, adapted. And if one asks the question of English culture, which Jews today are the most potently, most vividly, *present*? The answer will be Shylock and Fagin. They represent a character-prison from which actual Jews still struggle to escape” (203–4).

The third antisemitism with an English provenance is that of the modern period. This is a quotidian antisemitism of insult and partial exclusion, a “mute though not altogether harmless prejudice” (246–7), fired by a “certain residual wariness” and “a discomfort barely able to articulate itself” (246) toward Jews. The chapter considers this “minor” (as opposed to “lethal”) antisemitism from the time of the Jews’ readmission in the 1650s to the late twentieth century. It discusses the readmission controversy, Jewish naturalization and emancipation, the Boer War, The Balfour Declaration and the Zionist Project, The British Mandate in Palestine, World War II, and the debate over the passing of the War Crimes Act in 1991. Throughout the explanation of this dense and distinct Anglo-Jewish history, Julius brings to life the “discourse of violence” in the expressions of hostility toward Jews (considered to be physically ugly as well as malign), and in the revival of old antisemitic canards. The chapter further explores the question: “Could Britain have done more to minimize the tragedy of the Holocaust?” The answer appears to be “Yes,” certainly with respect to immigration policy. The British government prevented the possibility of escape to England for Jewish refugees at the start of the war by invalidating previously granted visas to enemy nationals. It also limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 between the crucial years of 1939 and 1944. One has to wonder whether this failure to facilitate the admission of Jewish refugees to Britain or Britain-administered Palestine was the result of antisemitism. Julius considers the argument both ways and concludes that while antisemitism was not decisive in blocking aid to Jews, it informed a “principle of non-obligation.”

The fourth and final antisemitism that Julius addresses is “contemporary anti-Zionism,” which surfaced in England in the 1960s and 1970s. This is a combination of the “new anti-Zionism” (a secular, leftist, or post-leftist anti-Zionism) and three “confessional anti-Zionisms” (Muslim, Jewish, and Christian). It has a uniquely English provenance because of its distinct configuration, and also because of England’s historical connection with the Zionist project, as a result of which “anti-Zionist positions tainted by antisemitism were already circulating in England in the aftermath of World War I” (442).

Contemporary anti-Zionism is strongly represented in the English public sphere, making England an attractive and welcome home to American anti-Zionists, Israeli anti-Zionists, Palestinian writers, intellectuals, and academics, and to radical Islamists. In considering the question of contemporary anti-Zionism's antisemitism, Julius gives many examples of hostility to Israel and the Zionist project that use antisemitic tropes ("conspiracy," "control of the media," "Jewish criminality," "Zionism = Nazism"), and that resonate with antisemitism's history (the boycott campaign). He also analyzes their use of counter-histories and counter-narratives that resist all factual evidence to the contrary. The Palestine/Israel conflict is viewed as "total innocence confronts total guilt." Those accused of antisemitism deny it. They claim to abhor antisemitism. They refer to their "Jewish friends." In their defense, they name Jewish anti-Zionists who agree with them; they make the counterclaim that the charge has been made in bad faith to deflect legitimate criticism of Israel. In so doing they betray their antisemitism because they rely on antisemitic tropes: Jewish admission of wickedness to incriminate, Jewish use of money and power to silence. But Julius distinguishes between those who culpably adopt antisemitism and those who are culpably indifferent to it, and he concedes that many contemporary anti-Zionists bear this latter, lesser responsibility. They are "fellow travelers." The downplaying or indifference to antisemitism is still a major concern, however: "Fellow travellers do not care, or they care in the wrong way, about complaints of anti-Semitism" (530).

So, the essential message of the book is not a good one: England has been both innovative and original in the history of four distinct antisemitisms. Despite this, the book's impartiality and balance redeems England, if only momentarily, at certain points in the narrative. For instance, during the medieval period, "[M]any Jews lived and died peaceful lives; more than a few Jews prospered; friendships and other relationships of trust, were formed between Jews and Christians." (108). In the literary world, there were books that *spoke up* for Jews, such as Cumberland's *The Jew* (1794), Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817), and Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819). Then there was George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a book that stood *inside* Judaism and Jewish life and challenged received thinking about Jews. In modern times, there was a strongly philo-Semitic body of opinion that advocated Jewish interests and praised the virtues of Judaism and the Jewish character. Moreover, lethal, state-sponsored antisemitism of the kind seen in Europe did not take hold in England because of a unique ideological privileging of the values of "common sense," "fair play," and "religious tolerance," combined with a broader mistrust of all fanaticism, and the fact that English intellectuals do not form public opinion. Nor has contemporary anti-Zionism yet become "a staple of what might be termed current public doctrine; it is not part of some broad national consciousness" (443).

Given the book's impartiality and balance throughout, I am surprised that there is no mention of the Kindertransport. This was the "rescue operation," voted by Parliament within hours of Kristallnacht, that was responsible for saving the lives of approximately 10,000 (mostly) Jewish children between December 1, 1938, and September 1, 1939, by arranging for them to be settled in England. There are a few surviving "kindertransports" in my own Jewish community, and they remain incredibly grateful to this country for saving their lives, while the rescue operation itself remains a source of national pride.

Nevertheless, as Julius points out early on in his book, “[F]or Anglo-Jewry in general, antisemitism is the background noise against which we live our lives” (xvi). Only yesterday I encountered a typical “Palestine Solidarity Campaign” anti-Israel demonstration outside the Sheffield Town Hall. The protesters comprised Far Left anti-Zionists and Muslim anti-Zionists, an alliance I did not understand at all until I read Julius’s book. As there has been no recent conflagration in the Israel/Palestine conflict to warrant an anti-Israel protest, the group held up a large banner, which stated in red (a color invariably chosen for its association with blood): “Remember Gaza.” Libels published by the protesters against Israel were “Apartheid State,” “Illegitimate State,” “Stolen Palestinian Land,” and “Stolen Goods.” They were urging a boycott of all Israeli goods. Instead of trying to debate the issues with them as on previous occasions, I merely photographed them (with their permission).

On the last page of the book, Anthony Julius poses the following question in relation to the writing of it: “Has there been any merit in the exercise?” (588). He expresses the hope that there has, as he has committed a great deal of time to it. I can categorically and unequivocally assure him that *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* has made a profound and original contribution to the body of knowledge and understanding on the subject of English antisemitism. It not only provides an important history, but also speaks in a most personal and touching way to the experience of the English Jew. In that sense, no review can do it justice.

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