

The Paradox of Anti-Semitism by Dan Cohn-Sherbok. Continuum 2006.

Antisemitism and Modernity: Innovation and Continuity by Hyam Maccoby.  
Routledge 2006.

To assert that anti-semitism is good for Jews is about as popular and likely to be well-received in Jewish circles as the assertion that a young woman, dressed in party clothes who gets raped after an inebriated night's clubbing was 'asking for it'. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, in his latest book, acknowledges that his thesis - that anti-semitism has acted, inadvertently, as a binding factor keeping Jews together in the face of external hostility - is unlikely to be enthusiastically endorsed by his co-religionists.

The Paradox of Anti-Semitism is a development of this thesis; Cohn-Sherbok divides his book into two parts, the first, The Enlightenment and the Disintegration of the Jewish Way of Life, tracing the development of different forms of Judaism and Jewish life, from traditional to humanist Judaism via Reform and the second, Anti-Semitism and Jewish Renewal considering different aspects of Jewish history and Jew hatred, culminating in Zionism, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. Cohn-Sherbok has an easy prose style and presents an engaging study of Jewish history and the development of Jewish thought, albeit with a sub-text with which some may profoundly disagree. There is more, perhaps, to his thesis than might be comfortable, but for this reviewer the idea that the bloody history of the Jewish people was 'good for the Jews' in any way at all is one that profoundly disturbs me. Some of Cohn-Sherbok's terminology is also open to question, particularly the phrase 'Jewish nation', which has unconsciously anti-semitic undertones of separation and otherness, and the appropriateness of which many today would reject out of hand.

Antisemitism and Modernity, published posthumously by Hyam Maccoby's widow following his death in 2004, is a masterpiece that expresses the author's quiet genius and forensic analysis to the full. Maccoby divides his text into four parts, The historical background, From theology to philosophy, The Jews in myth and imagination, and The Holocaust and after. Following a magisterial historical overview, Maccoby investigates his subject through the lives and attitudes of some great historic anti-semites, like Luther, Voltaire and Marx, and as represented in the arts by writers such as Shakespeare, TS Eliot and Ezra Pound.

The final section, which includes a chapter on Muslim antisemitism, as well as a conclusion with a hierarchy of 22 causes of the Holocaust, is probably the most powerful, and Maccoby's explanation of the rationale behind Islamic Jew hatred is as good as one could ever read.

Reading both books, but especially Maccoby's, it is salutary to ponder the enduring nature of anti-semitism, and its extraordinary ability to metamorphose in response to changing social and socio-political circumstances. Today anti-semitism is at its most virulent in the Islamic world, but it bubbles below the surface in many other countries and because of the polarisation of attitudes over the State of Israel is often a 'cover' for anti-Americanism.

My own conclusion is that it is time the phrase anti-semitism was ditched. The term has been used so much that it has ceased to have much impact at all; it is high time it was replaced with Jew hatred, which is what it amounts to, an ugly term for an uglier attitude that should long ago have become acceptable in modern, democratic societies.

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