Inside the Antisemitic Mind

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This scholarly investigation looks at present-day hostility toward Jews in Germany as expressed through the medium of language. Anyone presenting such a study must anticipate the question “What, yet another book on antisemitism?” Recent years have certainly seen a spate of studies on this topic. But this book is different. For one thing, the data that constitute its empirical basis differ markedly, both in quantity and in authenticity, from the data used in any other analysis of antisemitic discourse known to us. For another, the focus on the crucial significance of linguistic manifestations of hostility toward Jews and on the reciprocal effects of cognitive stereotypes and emotional attitudes that can be discerned in verbal antisemitic formulations sets this study apart. The specific characteristics of linguistically coded antisemitic attitudes generally do not receive the attention they deserve. Lastly, this investigation has an unusual interdisciplinary dimension in that it combines historical reflection with linguistic and cognitive textual analysis.

When we set out in 2002 to collect, classify, and analyze the thousands of e-mails, letters, postcards, and faxes sent from all regions of Germany by all sorts of individuals to the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, we did not know what to expect. In the intervening years, these linguistic manifestations have given us remarkable insights into the cognitive and emotional conceptualizations manifested by antisemitically oriented contemporary Germans. We encountered thousands of messages that verbalized irrational hatred and obsessive rage directed at Jews, in combination with ancient stereotypes that one might have expected to have been thoroughly exposed and discredited after the experience of the Holocaust. What came to light were forms of rejection, hostility, and defensiveness that all the decades devoted to memory work and education seem to have done remarkably little to dispel. As depressing as the crude and violent antisemitic ravings of right-wing extremists were to all of us who
worked on the project, we were far more appalled to encounter the hostile utterances by members of mainstream society. Scholars, lawyers, doctors, bank employees, clergymen, and students used language that revealed age-old Judeophobic resentments apparently impervious to education or reflection on the experience of Auschwitz; the language in which these resentments found expression revealed naked intolerance and delusion. To make things worse, when we spoke of our undertaking to colleagues, our findings elicited astonishment and disbelief, sometimes paired with rather ineffectual attempts to minimize our results or to pooh-pooh them with the assertion that the authors of such utterances must be “fossils,” “nut cases,” or members of the “lunatic fringe.” The conclusion forced itself on us that most Germans find it extremely difficult to acknowledge that for many of their countrymen the Holocaust and study of its origins and impact did not bring about a clean break in mindset when it came to hostile attitudes toward Jews.

Our data, together with analyses of thousands of views expressed in public venues, as well as on social media and in Internet chat rooms, show that the verbal expressions of antisemitism we describe cannot be passed off as marginal phenomena; indeed, they form part of largely habitual and widely accepted patterns. Hostility toward Jews was not, and is not, encountered only on the margins of society; it could not, and cannot, be classified exclusively as a form of psychopathology. It occupies a solid position in the very middle of society and can be observed among intelligent, highly educated, sensitive persons. Verbal expressions of this hostility have manifested themselves in Germans’ communicative and cultural memory for centuries. The linguistic patterns we analyzed are used widely—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—in everyday discourse. Their unreflexive (re)production transmits Judeophobic thinking to the entire realm of social communication. Linguistic utterances that convey anti-Jewish stereotypes have the potential to influence—decisively yet subliminally—content of consciousness, attitudes, and feelings. Language must thus be recognized as a dangerous tool of manipulation. Habitualized patterns of language usage can have a powerful effect on individual and collective thought and valuation processes.

On the one hand this book presents many variants of verbal hostility toward Jews that are remarkably homogeneous as far as their semantic content is concerned, while on the other it appeals for critical awareness of, and reflection on, the potential of language to exert power and promote violence. If verbal
expressions of hostility toward Jews have transmitted resentment and dislike from one generation to the next for centuries, showing how this mechanism works represents the only hope for defeating these patterns.

We would like to thank all our collaborators, who, despite the immense emotional burden imposed by working with this material, accepted the challenge and with unwavering dedication labored side by side with us for years to classify and analyze the texts. Although the devastating content of those texts often pushed us to the limits of our professional perspective as scholars, what sustained us was the conviction that it was crucially important to make our results available to the public.

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