Introduction: universalism and the Jewish question

Prejudices, like odorous bodies, have a double existence both solid and subtle – solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo, or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness. (George Eliot, Middlemarch)

Two faces of universalism

Universalism is an equivocal principle. It shows two faces to the world: an emancipatory face that looks to the inclusion of the other on the assumption that the other is a human being like ourselves, but also a repressive face that sees in the other a failure to pass some fundamental test of what is required for membership of humanity. Supporters and opponents of universalism both capture something real and important about the phenomenon itself. Supporters remind us of universalism’s emancipatory content – that it has proven to be a vital principle of civil, political and social inclusion. Opponents focus on universalism’s dark side – that it has been used as a means of stigmatising, excluding and at times eliminating the ‘other’. Universalism thus appears to be a complicated ‘ism’. The idea that it is always ‘work in progress’ toward an unreachable goal is tempting but treats it as an abstract ideal that loses touch with its own social origins; the idea that it is always exclusive and exclusionary threatens to abandon any idea of universal human solidarity.

In its emancipatory aspect, the principle of universalism entails a family of ends: to treat all human beings as human beings regardless of their particular differences; to translate the abstract conception of humanity into practical legal, political and social consequences; to challenge the legitimacy of all forms of exclusion; to understand the particular differences we construct and with which we may identify – such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, etc. – as relative to an inherently diverse humanity; and not least to acknowledge the singularity of every individual human being. Universalism implies recognition that it is true of all human beings that our common humanity, our
particularities and our unique forms of singularity enable us to shape who and what we are.

In its repressive aspect the principle of universalism serves to represent whole categories of people as inhuman, or not fully human, or not yet human, or even, in the language of Roman Law, as ‘enemies of the human species’ (*hostis generis humani*).\(^2\) Many different categories of people have been turned into ‘others’ in analogous ways, including the enslaved, the colonised, the exploited, the orientalised, and those labelled deviant. Power and knowledge are, in this sense, deeply and mutually imbricated.

Jewish experiences of universalism have been correspondingly equivocal. Universalism has acted as a stimulus for Jewish emancipation, that is, for civil, political and social inclusion; it has also been a source (though by no means the only source) of anti-Jewish prejudice up to and beyond the classic antisemitism of the modern period. While the experience of Jews is by no means unique in this respect, one of the peculiarities of the ‘anti-Judaic’ tradition has been to represent Jews in some important regard as the ‘other’ of the universal: as the personification either of a particularism opposed to the universal, or of a false universalism concealing Jewish self-interest. The former contrasts the particularism of the Jews to the universality of bourgeois civil society; the latter contrasts the bad universalism of the ‘rootless cosmopolitan Jew’ to the good universalism of whatever universal is advanced – be it the nation, the race or the class. It is this negative face of universalism that has shaped what was once commonly called ‘the Jewish question’. The struggle between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question has been a struggle waged over the spirit of universalism itself and is the topic of this book.

The idea of ‘the Jewish question’ is the classic term for the representation of Jews as harmful to humanity as a whole. The fundamental questions it asks are about the nature of the harm Jews supposedly inflict on humanity, the reasons why the Jews are so harmful, and what is to be done to remedy this harm. The ‘answers’ it finds to these ‘questions’ are diverse within a certain semiotic unity. Among the harms Jews have been supposed to inflict are economic harms like usury and financial manipulation; political harms like betrayal and conspiracy; social harms like exclusivity and indifference toward others; moral harms like greed and cunning; and cultural harms like abstract intellectualism and contempt for nature. Among the reasons given for the harmfulness of Jews, we find reference to the restrictive conditions in which they were once forced to live, the ‘tribal’ assumptions of Judaism as a religion, the ‘self-promotion’ of Jews as the ‘chosen people’, the ‘virulent’ character of ‘Jewishness’ itself, and as Jean-Paul Sartre observed, the self-fulfilling effects of antisemitic labelling. Among the ‘solutions to the Jewish question’ that have been proffered, we find seemingly benevolent solutions such as improving the social and political conditions in which Jews live, improving the ‘defective’ moral character of the
Jews themselves, and combating the mindset of antisemites, as well as manifestly malign solutions like rolling back the rights of Jews, expelling Jews from their host countries to some foreign territory, and eradicating the Jews from the face of the earth.

The Jewish question signifies an asymmetric relation of others to Jews. It is an expression of the distorted face of universalism, a question that never really was a question in the first place, a question whose answers are the pre-given conditions of the question itself. And yet we find that the Jewish question keeps re-appearing in different shapes, at different times, in different places. It is like a ghost that haunts how others see Jews and sometimes how Jews see themselves. It interpellates social relations between Jews and non-Jews, Judaism and Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the Jewish nation and other nations, Jewish ideas and other ideas, etc. as if they were conflicts of a metaphysical kind between the abstract forces of inclusive universalism on one side and those of exclusive particularism on the other.

The Jewish question is premised on tearing apart the universal, particular and singular aspects of the human condition and setting them in opposition to one another. Jewish experience of the modern world has been thus punctuated by the prejudices of those who present Jewish particularity as incompatible with human universality – an opposition that may be illustrated by the Enlightenment credo that the Jew can only become a human being when he or she ceases to be a Jew, or by the antisemitic credo that the Jew \textit{qua} Jew can never become a proper human being, or by the prejudices of those who contrast Jewish particularity with individual singularity, a contrast illustrated by the notion that \textit{this} Jew is an \textit{exceptional} Jew, not like the others, not like ‘the Jews’ as collective category, or by the antisemitic notion that the singularity of every Jew is overridden by their Jewish provenance.

The modernity of antisemitism

The term ‘antisemitism’ was not used until the late nineteenth century but hostility to Judaism and Jews is much older. It goes back to Greek and Persian antiquity when Judaism forbade the idol worship practised in pagan religions, but it was with the coming of Christianity that powerful anti-Judaic myths were constructed and entered deep into the structures of Western thought. Its persistence across the centuries was largely assured by the influence of religions that issued from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which in spite of their many ethical debts to Judaism affirmed their superiority by prioritising anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism metamorphosed over time and was partly secularised in the modern period in the domains of biology, culture and politics. In the 1870s the term ‘antisemitism’ was coined as an expression of resentment toward Jews by a German journalist, Wilhelm Marr, who maintained that Germans and Jews were locked in a conflict,
that Jews were winning as a result of Jewish emancipation and that this conflict could only be resolved by the forced removal of Jews from Germany. Antisemitism subsequently became a crucial element of Nazi ideology and helped justify the Nazi genocide of Jews. After the military defeat of Nazism, and termination of the Holocaust, antisemitism did not simply vanish from the political landscape of Europe or majority-Muslim societies and today there are strong signs of antisemitism expressing itself afresh. Anti-Judaic ideas certainly go back to a distant past but there is also a sense in which the Jewish question is a creature of the modern age.3

To speak of the modernity of the Jewish question is to suggest first that it is not a natural or eternal ‘question’, second that it is reproduced and reconfigured by the conditions of modern life even at times we least expect it, and third that it is open to contestation and rarely goes uncontested. In what may broadly be termed ‘the modern age’, the Jewish question has been as repeatedly challenged as it has been advanced: in eighteenth-century debates on Jewish emancipation, in nineteenth-century debates on the pathologies of capitalism and aims of socialism, in twentieth-century debates on antisemitism and the ‘final solution’, and in twenty-first-century debates on Zionism and memory of the Holocaust. The recurrence of the Jewish question is evidence of the enduring power of inversion in the modern world. When Walter Benjamin famously pronounced that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’,4 the force of this inversion was perhaps nowhere more tested than in the two faces universalism revealed to Jews. The Jewish question has multiple affinities to other modern prejudices and forms of domination that involve processes of de-humanisation, of disallowing the humanity of the other in the name of humanity, but it is the specificity of the Jewish question that concerns us here.

Left antisemitism

Antisemitism has again become an issue in our time. In recent years we have observed its re-emergence in a number of distinct political sites, including left antisemitism, Islamist antisemitism, Christian antisemitism, nationalist antisemitism and liberal antisemitism. Our focus in this book is on the contested origins of left antisemitism.

Historically, there has been no shortage either of antisemitism or of opposition to antisemitism within the left tradition. For example, the revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin wrote approvingly that ‘in all countries the people detest the Jews … so much that every popular revolution is accompanied by a massacre of Jews’. He maintained that this was a ‘natural consequence’ of the fact that ‘this whole Jewish world … constitutes a single exploitative sect, a sort of bloodsucker people, a collective parasite, voracious, organised in itself, not
only across the frontiers of states but even across all the differences of political opinion’. He went on to claim that ‘this world is presently, at least in great part, at the disposal of Marx on the one hand and the Rothschilds on the other’.\(^5\)

Bakunin was right only in one respect, that Marx was his antagonist. Marx’s close collaborator Friedrich Engels also pointed to oppositions within the left when he criticised his fellow socialist, Eugen Dühring, for his anti-Judaic prejudice: ‘That same philosopher of reality who has a sovereign contempt for all prejudices and superstitions is himself so deeply imbued with personal crotchets that he calls the popular prejudice against the Jews, inherited from the bigotry of the Middle Ages, a “natural judgment” based on “natural grounds”, and he rises to the pyramidal heights of the assertion that “socialism is the only power which can oppose population conditions with a strong Jewish admixture”’.\(^6\)

These two instances indicate how split the modern left tradition has been over the Jewish question: it has played a role both in representing ‘the Jews’ as the enemy of humanity and in combating the prejudices of those who see Jews through this lens. We should be wary of any generalisation to the effect that either ‘the left is fundamentally antisemitic’ or that there is no such thing as ‘left antisemitism’. It remains important for us to recognise that Marx, Engels and many of those they inspired contributed far more than is usually recognised to supporting Jewish emancipation and resisting the terms of the Jewish question. In spite of the dusty clouds of interpretation that surround his work, Marx’s actual writings reinforce our conviction that while there is a long tradition of left antisemitism, there is also on the left a strong critique of antisemitism and of the barbarism it represents. Marx’s famous essays ‘On the Jewish Question’ were in substance a critique of the very idea of the Jewish question.

We, the authors of this book, both come from a Marxist-socialist background, whose legacy has shaped our understanding of and responses to the various distorted forms of modernity that have preoccupied us: racism, antisemitism, genocide, crimes against humanity, apartheid, ethnic nationalism, totalitarianism, etc. We recognise of course that much has gone wrong, dramatically wrong, in the name of ‘Marxism’ and ‘the left’, so much so that these names have reached the threshold of total devaluation, and that the question of antisemitism is not the least of these problems. We take it as axiomatic that those who locate themselves within this tradition ought, as a matter of basic principle, to combat antisemitism whenever it raises its face, but we know this is not always the case. We ought to pay attention to the experiences of those who suffer or are exposed to antisemitism and we ought not treat the self-justifications of those they challenge as a sufficient guide as to the truth of the matter. We ought to acknowledge that not all antisemites wear their conviction on their sleeve, that sometimes people may not be aware of their own antisemitic temptations, and that antisemitism can be political and cultural as well as personal. We ought to do the work of learning what antisemitism is and what shapes and forms it takes.
In these respects our relation to antisemitism ought to be no different from our relation to other forms of racism: both should be open to the liberating power of education, research, engagement, criticism and self-reflection. It should not be controversial to say that the critique of antisemitism should now be part of any emancipatory movement that seeks to understand what has gone wrong in the development of modern capitalist society rather than simply blame it on secret conspiracies or particular scapegoats.

None of this should be controversial but it has become so. We hear on the left a different refrain: notably, that antisemitism no longer matters compared with other racisms; that antisemitism was once a problem in the past but is no longer in the present; that antisemitism was a European malady that had no presence in the Islamic world; that antisemitism is understandable today given the ways Zionists behave; that the charge of antisemitism is mainly put forward for dishonest and self-seeking reasons; that people cry ‘antisemitism’ in order to deflect criticism of Israel; that the stigmatising of individuals and groups as antisemitic is more damaging than antisemitism itself; that the Jewish state and its supporters are the main source of racism in the modern world. It is said, for instance, that those who ‘cry antisemitism’ do so in order to shut down debate on Israel. This may be true in particular cases but the reverse is more plausible: that there are many who cry ‘Israel’ in order to shut down debate on antisemitism. When the critique of antisemitism is viewed as a problem, the problem may lie with the viewer.

Political actors with very different political agendas can and do coalesce around such rhetorics to construct a discourse with its own semblance of internal unity, its own self-justifications, its own stereotypes of external enemies and its own defence mechanisms. As this book goes to press, the British Labour Party has been struggling to come to terms with the fact that one of its leading figures, Ken Livingstone, a former mayor of London, long-term ally of its elected leader and a standard bearer of the party’s left-wing, thinks that Hitler was sympathetic with Zionism before he ‘went mad’. One of its newly elected MPs, Naz Shah, posted a suggestion that the simple solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians was for the Jews in Israel to be relocated to the United States. Both have been accused of antisemitism and suspended from the Labour Party. In the first case, Ken Livingstone is refusing to apologise, which is consistent with the fact that for decades he has promoted the view that Nazism and Zionism are umbilically linked. By contrast, Shah has publicly acknowledged the damage such statements can make and has undertaken to reflect on the prejudice that underwrote her quip about the transportation of Jews. As we write, the Labour Party is undertaking a review of how widespread antisemitism has become in its ranks and what might be done about it. There is now more extensive public debate, of which this book is part, concerning how far ignorance and tolerance of antisemitism have affected thinking and practice within the left, most of...
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whose members rightly pride themselves on their antiracism, and what kinds of resistance they mount collectively to rectify this situation.

**A note on methodology**

Misrecognition of antisemitism is both underpinned and compounded by troubling methodological assumptions that have crept into the political culture of the left and into the work of radical scholars.

The first set of assumptions we draw attention to concerns what we call the ‘methodological separatism’ that obscures connections between antisemitism and other forms of racism.\(^7\) The language of antisemitism is different in important respects from that of anti-Black racism or Islamophobia and it may not be helpful to reduce them all to a generic concept like ‘prejudice’, partly because every form of prejudice has its own distinctive characteristics and partly because the idea of ‘prejudice’ does not capture all that is involved in these phenomena. To say, however, that they are not the same does not mean that they are not connected or best understood in relation to one another. A sense of the connectedness of racism and antisemitism was once viewed as the common sense of the antiracist imagination. For example, Frantz Fanon famously described Blacks and Jews as ‘brothers in misery’ on the grounds that racism and antisemitism both reveal ‘the same collapse, the same bankruptcy of man’.\(^8\) He cited the words of his philosophy professor: ‘Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you’, and Fanon commented that his professor was right in the sense that ‘an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro’.\(^9\) W.E.B. Du Bois remarked that it had never occurred to him that ‘race prejudice could be anything but colour prejudice’ until his visit to the Warsaw Ghetto gave him ‘a more complete understanding of the Negro problem’ as a form of ‘human hate … capable of reaching all sorts of people’.\(^10\) He commented that ‘The ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination, and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilisation was going to triumph and broaden in the world’.\(^11\) The disconnection of racism and antisemitism today is suggested by the alacrity with which some antiracists respond to racism and Islamophobia but not to antisemitism, or conversely by the suspicion they show to ‘charges’ of antisemitism that they do not show to other forms of racism. Such responses seem to us to indicate that something has gone seriously wrong with the universalism of the antiracist imagination.

A second set of assumptions we wish to draw attention to concerns what we call the ‘methodological historicism’ that positions antisemitism exclusively as a phenomenon of the past. A justified refusal to treat antisemitism as a natural and permanent feature of relations between Jews and non-Jews has given way to another problematic tendency: that of situating antisemitism emphatically in the
past. We may look back in horror to the period of history in which genocidal antisemitism was written into the very texture of social and political life, but console ourselves with the thought that antisemitism has, since that time, been empirically marginalised and normatively discredited. It may appear that the Holocaust has served as a learning experience concerning the dangers of antisemitism, that few in mainstream society still claim adherence to antisemitic ideologies, and that some ultra-nationalist movements are reluctant to embrace antisemitism. Liberals have paid tribute to the success of the new Europe in transcending ethnic nationalism and recognising rights of difference. Radicals have affirmed that many forms of racism still prevail in Europe but insist that antisemitism is no longer one of them. The positioning of antisemitism as a creature of the past – for instance, of a now superseded age of nationalism, late modernisation or organised modernity – serves to close our eyes to new forms it may assume in the present.

A third set of assumptions concerns the development of what we call the ‘methodological dualism’ that restricts our view of racism and antisemitism within a bifurcated world of ‘them’ and ‘us’. It addresses vital distinctions – between oppressor and oppressed, power and resistance, executioner and victim, enemy and friend, imperialism and anti-imperialism, etc. – but grants them a master status that overrides all other ethical considerations. It does not treat anti-imperialism as one element within a constellation of democratic principles but turns it into an absolute truth that prevails over all other democratic principles. It is the absolutising of anti-imperialism that allows some leftist intellectuals, like Judith Butler, to declare that Hamas or Hezbollah belong to the camp of anti-imperialism and should be supported regardless of other democratic deficiencies including antisemitism. The temptation on the left is simply not to see racism, antisemitism or sexism in those states and movements deemed to be in the camp of anti-imperialism, perhaps for no other reason than that they are opposed to America and Israel, and at the same time to withdraw solidarity from victims of racism, antisemitism and sexism within the camp of ‘anti-imperialism’. If we label this tendency the ‘anti-imperialism of fools’, following in the footsteps of the Second International’s labeling of antisemitism as the ‘socialism of fools’, this is not to indicate that anti-imperialism is foolish but rather that it is a foolish form of anti-imperialism that divorces it from wider democratic concerns. The problem of methodological separatism is reinforced when racism and antisemitism are situated in opposing camps: that is, when racism is condemned as the exercise of oppressive power while antisemitism is excused as a mislabelled or misguided form of resistance. Following what David Hirsh has called a ‘politics of position’, the same Marxist writers who deny the possibility of far-left antisemitism have been tempted to situate those who do raise concerns about antisemitism only and emphatically on the side of oppressive power and Western imperialism.
The final set of assumptions we need to mention here concerns the question of ‘methodological nationalism’ or rather the development of a cosmopolitan critique of methodological nationalism that re-instates precisely what it criticises when it singles out one form of nationalism, in this case Jewish nationalism, as the bearer of all the defects of nationalism in general. Cosmopolitans emphasise that racism and antisemitism are not only a problem for their immediate victims but also for humanity in general and correspondingly that the responsibility to combat racism and antisemitism is a universal human responsibility. They seek to resist the mimetic temptation to blame, say, ‘the Germans’ in the way antisemites blame ‘the Jews’. It may appear ‘natural’ that if we are attacked as Blacks, Muslims or Jews, we fight back as Blacks, Muslims or Jews, and this semblance of the natural is confirmed by the well-established leftist credo that represents the ‘nationalism of the oppressed’ as the natural and rational way of responding to the racism of the oppressors. The cosmopolitan consciousness is one that does not simply negate but seeks positively to supersede this reactive standpoint. What we find today, however, is the replacement of the cosmopolitan critique of methodological nationalism by a simulacrum of cosmopolitanism that projects onto one particular instance of nationalism the defects of nationalism in toto. Zionism becomes here the universal equivalent of the deficiencies of all nationalism. Such singling out of Jewish nationalism for special opprobrium threatens both to reconfigure old stereotypes about the ‘tribalism’ of the Jews and to erode from within the universalistic critique of methodological nationalism.

This is not of course an exhaustive list of methodological difficulties we face in studying the elements of contemporary antisemitism that concern us here, but they hopefully suffice to indicate the difficult nature of the task. They highlight the need to reconnect racism and antisemitism as twin expressions of the same human bankruptcy, to reconnect past and present in ways that recognise the emergence of new forms of antisemitism, to reconnect domination and resistance in ways that allow for a relational understanding of the complexities of power, and to reconnect nationalist responses to antisemitism with other nationalist responses to racism. The sensitising idea that guides our work is that of reconnection. All forms of modern political life are relative to one another and universalism itself should not be thought of in emphatically absolutist terms. The little suffix ‘–ism’ can do a lot of damage when it transforms what is relative and valid into what is absolute and invalid. As Theodor Adorno phrased it, the threat posed by universalism is to ‘compress the particular like a torture instrument’.

Jewish assimilationism and nationalism have both been subjective responses to the contradictions of living in an antisemitic society. One makes an ‘ism’ of assimilating to the norms of society as the only means of neutralising an otherwise understandable antisemitism; the other makes an ‘ism’ of the nation as the only
means of escaping an otherwise ineluctable antisemitism. Both bear witness to the immense contradiction under these conditions between recognising our unity with others and our separate existence. Cosmopolitanism offers itself as an attractive third way for Jews living in an antisemitic world, but this ‘ism’ contains its own pitfalls: not only that of aloofness as a cosmopolitan world citizen from one’s particular existence as a Jew but also that of accommodating to a reified cosmopolitanism that is set against the alleged particularism of Jews. We owe a debt of gratitude to cosmopolitan social scientists for putting universalism back on the agenda but to those who say that the ‘humanist’ universalism that once homogenised populations and repressed difference has now given way to a cosmopolitan post-universalism that respects heterogeneity and plurality, we should respond that the battle for the spirit of universalism has not so readily been resolved.18 It is as much the illusion of progress to lock the past in the past as if it contained no alternative voices, as it is to celebrate the present in the present as if we have definitively overcome our prejudices and learned the lessons of our catastrophic history.

The future

In rejecting antisemitism as an essentialist form of turning Jews into ‘others’, we raise the old bogey of ‘the Jewish question’ in order to come to grips with a categorical frame of reference that has allowed antisemitism to flourish in the first place and that restricts opposition to antisemitism within the terms of that which it opposes. In this respect the Jewish question is to antisemitism what ‘raciology’, as the sociologist Paul Gilroy calls it, is to racism.19 Sometimes antisemitism returns brazenly in the form of physical attacks on Jews qua Jews or on Jewish institutions. More often it slips into our political culture though the notion that something must be done to deal with the harm the Jewish state, the Jewish nation or its Jewish supporters are alleged to inflict on humanity at large.20 Such harm, we are told, needs to be identified, explained and ‘solved’ for the sake of the greater good.

In his comprehensive and erudite study of the tradition of Anti-Judaism in modern European thought, the cultural historian David Nirenberg traces the phenomenon of anti-Judaism far back in history as an almost continuous presence within European thought. His work captures very well the recurrence of the Jewish question both in traditional and modern societies, but it is less dedicated to working out what keeps it alive in the modern world and what resistance it encounters.21 Old prejudices continue, as George Eliot put it in Middlemarch, to ‘scent the darkness’ and ‘echo in the void’. The anti-Judaic tradition is part of our cultural world, even if it is fortunately not the whole story and rarely goes uncontested.

For much of our adult lives it looked to us that there has been some progress in transcending the barbaric forms of racism and antisemitism that emerged with
modern society – not least in the waging of total wars between nation states, in the brutality integral to Western domination of colonised peoples, and in the mass killings perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. For our generation, the idea of progress was given some sense of reality with the end of fascism and Stalinism, the dismantling of colonial rule, the democratisation of former dictatorships, the fall of apartheid, the unification of Europe, the development of new forms of global governance, international law and human rights, and the rise of antiracist movements. The relation between the idea and reality of progress has always been distant and difficult and faith in progress has not become any easier. Signs of barbarism were acutely visible in the 1990s in the mass murder of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo and the simultaneous genocide in Rwanda, and more indirectly indicated by the silence, if not effective collusion, with which these catastrophes were largely met in the ‘international community’. In addition, the scepticism with which many leftist groups and individuals responded to belated top-down attempts to put a check on mass murders – through humanitarian military interventions, the formulation of a Responsibility to Protect, the extension of the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity in international criminal law, the institution of international criminal courts, etc. – left us wondering how the idea of progress could be defended or resurrected from the bottom up.

As we moved into the new millennium, we continue to see that human rights, declared universal in 1948 in the aftermath of the Holocaust, have been denied to people in large parts of the world by a bewildering array of local tyrants and fundamentalist movements, often with the collusion of global powers who themselves can perpetrate some of the most egregious violations. The commitment made in the aftermath of the Holocaust to remove the scourge of genocide continues to be repeatedly ignored. Fleeing from violence inflicted by genocidal states, or by civil wars involving state and non-state actors, or by collapsing economies and ecologies, large numbers of refugees have sought asylum in parts of the world that appear more secure. Their journeys evoke images of human suffering present in the interwar years, which we hoped never to see again. Some find new homes but many are confronted by state borders designed to keep them out and by the hostility of populist movements. Put this together with the climate of insecurity caused by global financial crashes, state austerity programmes that pathologise the poor, and growing legitimacy problems faced by international institutions, and we may be forgiven for thinking that we find ourselves confronted by a crisis of the universal values that once underpinned our hopes of progress.

The emancipatory face of universalism remains very much in evidence – not least in the efforts of many citizens to respond personally and directly to the human suffering of minorities. ‘Love is stronger than hatred’, as the *Charlie Hebdo* slogan put it. And yet the crisis of universalism is deepened by a radicalism that turns its back on the universal and treats it at best as a subterfuge, at worst
as a weapon of mass destruction. The return of the Jewish question is one symptom of this current crisis of universal values, which, however incompletely, provided inspiration for the more progressive ethical developments of the postwar era and without which progressive ethical developments cannot be sustained.

What will follow in this book is a discussion both of the recurrence of the Jewish question within the intellectual and political thought of the left and of the resources mobilised within the left to resist this temptation. Our book is about a long-standing struggle within the radical tradition to supersede the prejudices contained within the Jewish question and to advance more enlightened ways of thinking about the universality, particularity and singularity of human beings. It has been a tougher struggle than one might expect.

In Chapter 1 we explore debates over Jewish emancipation within the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, contrasting the work of two leading protagonists of Jewish emancipation: Christian von Dohm and Moses Mendelssohn. The former justified Jewish emancipation from within the Jewish question; the latter looked for ways of countering the prejudice that Jews were in special need of regeneration. In Chapter 2 we revisit debates between supporters and opponents of Jewish emancipation within nineteenth-century revolutionary thought, in particular the emancipatory power of Karl Marx’s critique of Bruno Bauer’s opposition to Jewish emancipation and endorsement of *The Jewish Question*. In Chapter 3 we explore Marxist debates (1870–1945) over the growth of antisemitism. While most Marxists were opposed to antisemitism, the mainstream downplayed opposition on the assumption that it was provoked by the ongoing harmfulness of Jews after emancipation. Deep concerns over the persistence of the Jewish question were expressed by, among others, Luxemburg and Trotsky, but we focus on the more sustained critique put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno. In Chapter 4 we discuss Hannah Arendt’s critique of three types of Jewish responsiveness to antisemitism – assimilationism, Zionism and cosmopolitanism – in order to re-assess diverse ways in which the Jewish question has inserted itself into Jewish political consciousness. Chapter 5 explores debates within the left over the residues of antisemitism after the Holocaust. We focus on the endeavours of a leading postwar critical theorist, Jürgen Habermas, to counter the legacy of European antisemitism, and on the misappropriation of this project by parts of the left tempted to reinstate the Jewish question under the guise of critical theory itself. In Chapter 6 we enter into current debates within the left over representations of Israel and Zionism, focusing our critique on left antizionists who threaten to reinstate the Jewish question when they identify Israel and Zionism as the enemies of universalism. Our aim is not only to identify a tradition within the left whose thinking is deformed by the Jewish question, but also to identify a rival tradition, far more hidden from history, which has a nose for prejudice, even when it is sprayed with George Eliot’s ‘scent of hyacinth’, and understands that the Jewish question is *in nuce* a question of antisemitism.
Notes


2 The concept of *hostis generis humani* was originally deployed in the context of Jacobin revolutionary terror. See Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature and the French Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).


12 Judith Butler is quoted as saying: ‘understanding Hamas, Hezbollah, as social movements that are progressive, that are on the left, that are part of the global left, is extremely important. This does not stop us from being critical of certain dimensions of both movements … of raising whether there are other options besides violence’. In *Judith Butler on Hamas, Hezbollah and the Israel Lobby* in teach-in, UC Berkeley, 2006 radicalarchives.org.

13 Moishe Postone, ‘History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism’, *Public Culture*, 18 (1), 2006: 93–110. We shall discus the conceptualisation of antisemitism as the ‘socialism of fools’ in our chapter on Marxism and critical theory.


