

The need to be resolute in the fight against anti-Semitism

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Anti-Semitism is witnessing a resurgence in France at the moment, and is even being stirred up from abroad. In this op-ed article Mediapart co-founder Edwy Plenel argues that neither the fact that it is being exploited to help Israel's cause, nor the fact that there are also other racisms that need combatting, can justify underestimating the dangers involved in this rise of anti-Jewish sentiment.

Contents

- [‘Socialism of fools’](#)
- [The central core of racism](#)
- [The far right kill two birds](#)
- [The lesson of Dominique Sordet](#)

Speaking at the 92nd congress of the human rights organisation the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH) recently held in Bordeaux, its outgoing president Patrick Baudouin expressed alarm at the “intolerable resurgence of anti-Semitism, which must be distinguished from anti-Zionism and criticism of the Israeli authorities”. He went on: “The LDH, whose creation was linked to the rectification of an injustice relating to anti-Semitism, also intends to let nothing pass now.” He added that it would fight with the “same commitment” against the “already evident risk of a growing number of Islamophobic acts”.

This welcome reminder must, however, go beyond mere rhetoric in order to break down the inertia within parts of the Left in the face of this resurgence of anti-Semitism, something which understandably fuels the concern, if not the fear, of the Jewish community. Even if the criminal investigation ultimately concludes that it was the isolated act of an unstable individual, the [attempted arson of the synagogue in Rouen](#) in northern France on May 17th is an indication of a toxic environment, much as the 2019 [attack on a mosque in Bayonne](#) in south-west France by a solitary octogenarian signalled the potentially deadly normalisation of Islamophobia.

However, this across-the-board vigilance against all forms of everyday hatred, exacerbated by the surge of the far right electorally and in the media, must not let us underestimate the specific danger of anti-Semitism. Far from being just another variant of racism, anti-Semitism is its focal point. On this continent, and in this country, we must never forget. It was in Europe, in the mid-20th century, that the industrial extermination of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany took place. And it was in France, at the end of the 19th century, where modern anti-Semitism emerged, with a backdrop of ancient Christian anti-Judaism serving as its ideological weapon.

Rabbi Chmouel Lubecki of Rouen in northern France shows the damage caused by the synagogue fire on May 17th 2024. © Photo Magali Cohen / Hans Lucas via AFP

We cannot dismiss a past like this, for its crimes are immeasurable and, consequently, enduring. In its desire to stoke French tensions for the purposes of geopolitical destabilisation, the [fascistic regime](#) of Vladimir Putin is well aware of this. Current investigations suggest that we cannot exclude the possibility that his secret services, via Moldovan and Bulgarian channels, orchestrated the anti-Semitic provocations involving [Stars of David painted on walls](#) in the 14th *arrondissement* of Paris and the recent [blood-stained hands targeting the Holocaust Memorial](#). These provocative acts, rooted in the long tradition of the Russian secret services from the days of the Tsar to Stalinism, highlight the need for a response that does not further add to the confusion.

‘Socialism of fools’

There is a trap laid here for those, especially the young, who get involved, demonstrate and become politicised in the face of oppression and discrimination, and more particularly in the face of the long-standing injustice towards the Palestinian people. This trap is to underestimate or, worse, to abandon the fight against anti-Semitism on the grounds that it is being championed by their conservative and reactionary adversaries or even, in a grim paradox, by the far right itself. Promoted by Israeli leaders and their unconditional supporters, but sometimes embraced by some misguided defenders of the Palestinian cause, the identification of French Jews with the state of Israel transforms this trap into a snare.

It is here that a reminder of the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme’s origins and creation is both useful and necessary. Founded on June 4th 1898, a few months after the publication on January 13th 1898 in *L’Aurore* of the famous “[J’accuse...!](#)” article by Émile Zola, it represented the resurgence of the progressive camp in defence of the innocence of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. He had been the victim of an anti-Semitic plot in 1894 and was then deported to Devil’s Island in French Guiana.

This represented a resurgence because for four long years the indifference to Dreyfus’s unjust fate had been fuelled by a racist prejudice that knows no social boundaries and, in this instance, identified Jews with usury, and thus with money and, by extension, with capitalism.

This “[socialism of fools](#)”, to use the expression attributed to the late 19th century and early 20th century German social democrat [August Bebel](#), which at the time manifested as Judeophobia within the political and social Left, abandoned the universality of human rights. It was cloaked in ideological sophistries - which covered over class selfishness - to justify turning their backs on Dreyfus on the grounds that, being bourgeois, a military officer, and moreover Jewish, Alfred Dreyfus deserved his fate.

The battle on behalf of Dreyfus, with the young LDH as its banner, remains one of those rare moments in history where the moral fate of an entire people was played out over the destiny of a single individual, because it upheld the cause of boundary-less equality to the utmost degree.

It is essential to reject this relativist poison of a competition between victims and of a hierarchy of oppression, in which the hope of a common humanity and the construction of true universality are destroyed.

In contrast, modern anti-Semitism, epitomised by [Édouard Drumont's *La France juive*](#), published in 1886 by Flammarion, systematically sought to destroy this promise of equality, which is fundamental to all emancipation - regardless of origin, belief, appearance, and so on. Claiming to be anti-capitalist, Drumont's newspaper *La Libre Parole* bore the subheading: "[France for the French](#)." This proclaimed xenophobia went hand in hand with the radicalisation of ideologies about superior civilisations and races that accompanied the colonial expansion of European imperialism. Following anti-Jewish riots, Drumont was elected as the Member of Parliament for Algiers in 1898 and remained so until 1902.

This is the principal reason why one must never abandon the fight against anti-Semitism: in order to reject this relativist poison of a competition between victims and of a hierarchy of oppression, in which the hope of a common humanity and the construction of true universality are destroyed. This point was emphasised by lawyer Arié Alimi, now vice-president of the LDH, in '[Juif, français, de gauche... dans le désordre](#)' ('Jewish, French, leftwing...in any order'), by recalling his resolute participation in the march against Islamophobia on November 10th 2019, while at the same time urging the Left never to abandon Jews in the face of anti-Semitism. He urged the Left to hold this line even if it meant rubbing shoulders with former anti-Semites who now "display a façade of Philosemitism to the detriment of Muslims" who have become their main enemy.

This had been the warning from Frantz Fanon, that eminent figure in anti-colonial struggles from Martinique to Algeria, whom we have previously invoked on Mediapart in response to the comedian Dieudonné, in an article entitled '[The clown who isn't funny](#)'. This was in the form of a passage from '[Peau noire, masques blancs](#)' ('Black Skin, White Masks') from 1952 in which Fanon quotes his Antillean philosophy professor: "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you."

Not only did this mean that "I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my brother", commented Fanon, he also later realized that "he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro".

Because, in addition to this principled stance - never to divide the fight against racism, the mortal enemy of equality - there is another crucial underlying issue: the particular place of anti-Semitism in ideologies that posit the rejection and hatred of the other.

The central core of racism

Racism functions like a Russian doll, each racism fitting into and sustaining each other in a cycle that inevitably drags in anti-Semitic thinking and its conspiratorial tones. Here the 'other' is depicted as an intruder, an infiltrator, an enemy within, a foreign body, a kind of virus whose proliferation threatens the supposedly authentic identity of a nation and a people.

In this sense, anti-Semitism is ideologically at the very core of racism, as it establishes and radicalises the rejection of mixing and blending, of displacement and movement, of interbreeding or [creolization](#). It was a Frenchman who provided the most complete theorisation of this idea, a Frenchman whose intellectual legacy continues to inspire and shape today's far right. This was Charles Maurras, the founder of the far-right movement [Action Française](#), whose heritage a not untalented philosopher, [Pierre Boutang](#), sought to salvage after World War 2.

Right up until his death in 1952, including in written notes defending himself against the legal purge that followed the Liberation of France, Maurras laid claim to and defended “state anti-Semitism”. He distinguished this from the biological anti-Semitism of Nazism - thus supposedly exonerating himself from all racism. “These people who are a people,” he wrote on December 12th 1944 to the judge who was investigating his case, “these Jewish people are not a people like others, in that they have no territory of their own. They inhabit the countries of others...”

Denouncing Jews as “a Nation within the Nation, a State within the State, a community within a community”, he attacked “Jewish power [*which*] is not a power like others”, because a “Jew who becomes French does not cease to be Jewish”. He concluded: “Our state anti-Semitism is a national defence and public safety measure.”

Fighting anti-Semitism with absolute clarity means to do so resolutely, despite the fact that there are people, even Jewish people, who have abandoned the democratic principle at stake: equality of rights for all.

These are just a few quotes from a long piece of reflection written in prison, whose apparent theoretical coldness reveals the inhumanity that haunts it when Maurras speaks of the “Jewish leprosy”, the “Israelite flood” and the “Jewish peril” from which France had to be saved. These are words of that era that amounted to death sentences for men, women, and children whose only fault was being born Jewish. Some Action française militants who became members of the Resistance due to their anti-German patriotism, such as Daniel Cordier, secretary to leading French Resistance figure Jean Moulin, fortunately came to realise this.

But from that point, they had to take this reassessment to its conclusion by questioning the very core of Maurrassian doctrine, this “full nationalism” that far-right polemicist and failed presidential candidate [Éric Zemmour claims](#) today. This theory posits a nation based on identity that only accepts another culture, religion, or origin - with all their differences and particularities - on the condition that they are separate, kept at a distance, or go somewhere else. The fantasy of the “[great replacement](#)”, with its corollary of the “re-emigration” of targeted populations, is but its most virulent expression.

Invoking this intellectual tradition of the French far-right clarifies the contemporary stakes in the fight against anti-Semitism which, in truth, affects all stigmatised and discriminated communities. These communities are instructed not to assert their identity, and to melt away and disappear, an injunction that fuels the pathological desire that they disappear altogether. In a revealing lapse in 2021, current interior minister Gérald Darmanin revealed his closeness to this intellectual legacy by comparing his battle against “Islamist separatism” to Napoleon’s policies regarding the “problem of integrating Jews into the French Nation”.

Fighting anti-Semitism with absolute clarity means to do so resolutely, despite the fact that there are people, even Jewish people, who have abandoned the democratic principle at stake: equality of rights for all. One’s origins offer no protection; only the present matters. To conflate the condemnation of French anti-Semitism with unconditional alignment with the policies of the Israeli

far-right, which espouses identity-based nationalism even in its religious dimension, is paradoxically to play into their hands right here and now.

The far right kill two birds with one stone

It is not only the endorsement of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism that the Israeli far right embraces. It also gives credence to an anti-republican vision of the nation, one that is fundamentally resistant to plurality and diversity, based on a supposed (and very recent) Judeo-Christian identity, even as the French Republic has had to painfully shed Christian anti-Judaism, borne of two millennia of anti-Jewish persecutions.

By aligning with policies in Israel that deny equal rights to Palestinians, the far right kills two birds with one stone: on the one hand, it makes itself seem normal, establishing itself as an institution; on the other, it preserves its core doctrine, which rejects mixing and integration, seeking an illusory purity of identity through the exclusion of those deemed foreign - immigrants, Arabs, Africans, Muslims and so on.

In this grim game, French Jews will eventually lose if they do not, like Frantz Fanon, listen closely when these others are being denigrated.

In his *'Histoire des haines nationalistes'* ('A history of nationalist hatred'), the historian Pierre Birnbaum, whose main title for the book - [La France aux Français](#) - echoes the slogan of the anti-Semite Drumont's newspaper, thoroughly documented a far-right tradition that supported Zionism as a Jewish nationalist movement whose great merit would be to rid France of its Jewish population.

That such a brutal discourse would be unthinkable and unsayable today does not prevent the ideology behind it from still being active.

In May 1943, the wartime collaborator Marcel Déat, a former socialist who became pro-Nazi, signed a proclamation entitled "Towards a Jewish State," in which he said: "A territory, a state, a nation, that's the magnificent gift Europe says it is ready to offer to the Jews. But on one condition: that all of them reside there, that the twelve tribes gather there in full."

In fact, as early as 1890, in order to get rid of the Jews Édouard Drumont proposed "sending them all back to Palestine". In short this meant "the Jews at home, the French at home," explained one of his most loyal disciples, Jacques Ploncard. Under the wartime Vichy regime, other collaborators would write bluntly that "the solution to the Jewish problem lies in full Zionism, in hundred percent Zionism. And in mandatory Zionism for the accursed people. [...] Today, as an outline of legal anti-Semitism takes shape in France, we dream of a new world. We dream of a world without Jews. We dream of a world where Jerusalem would be the capital of the new kingdom of Judah."

That such a brutal discourse would be unthinkable and unsayable today does not prevent the ideology behind it from still being active. Any abandonment by the Left of the fight against anti-

Semitism plays into the hands of the extreme right, allowing them to use it as an ideological lever to promote identity over equality. Neither the misguided belief of a section of the French Jewish community, who think they can protect themselves by aligning with the heirs of their persecutors, nor the criminal policies of the Israeli far right, which fuels anti-Semitism by seeking to tie global Judaism to its own downfall, can justify giving an inch in this vital battle.

The lesson of Dominique Sordet

If further evidence were needed to convince the hesitant, it comes in the form of a journalist who was a significant but now forgotten figure of wartime media collaboration in France. He is [Dominique Sordet](#), the founder of the Inter-France news agency, who manipulated the press under the Occupation in the service of Vichy and Hitlerism, including the press in the [free zone](#).

In June 1944, as he and his world were on the verge of losing everything, he published '*Les derniers jours de la démocratie*' ('Last days of democracy'). The contents of this booklet have the merit of extreme candour, resonating with the present day when the far right is gaining traction by imposing the notion of the identity of peoples, nations, and states in order to destroy the principle of equality, which is the cornerstone of emancipation.

"What is democracy? The ideologues of democracy posit a first principle, that of the equality of men," wrote Sordet. And then he revealed his true intentions: "The democratic state descends from Judaism. Equality is a Jewish passion. At the opposite end from the egalitarian mindset, the notion of hierarchy is essentially Aryan."

One has to quote the entire text, so much does this ideological and - let us never forget! - murderous delusion highlight the current political stakes of a resolute, unreserved, and unambiguous fight against anti-Semitism. "Israel," writes this French fascist who was a distinguished musicologist, "has, to a great degree, spread into those civilizations marked by its influence the poison of a passion for equality."

One can be a defender of the Palestinian cause, and as such a resolute opponent of the current policies of the state of Israel, and still defend and lay claim to that Israel on behalf of all humanity, the Israel abhorred by the fascists of yesterday and today: the universal promise of equality.

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P.S.

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• English version by Michael Streeter.

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