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Psychoanalysis of Anti-Semitism II: Splitting and Narcissism

The enemy outside

The idea that the Jews as a separate and historically denigrated 'out-group' serve as suitable cultural recipients for the split-off, unacceptable elements of the anti-Semite's psyche is a pervasive one in psychoanalytic theorising on the subject. The general notion is that psychic life is made up of contradictory unconscious impulses or ideas sufficiently defended against so that they can be organised into reasonably integrated patterns. Under some circumstances, such as personal or social trauma, those impulses that are most disturbing to the individual are experienced as powerful enough to threaten the person's stability, leading to impending fragmentation and breakdown. Preserving the psyche becomes urgent, a matter of life and death, and extreme measures are often taken to accomplish it, including ejecting the unwanted impulses into some form of outside carrier. This process of ejection, known in psychoanalysis as *projection*, constructs a useful enemy out of what is available in the outside world; in the case of anti-Semitism, the Jew is thus made into the carrier of what is hated and threatening to the integrity of the anti-Semite's psychic life.

The general model here is best described in the language of Melanie Klein (1946), who roots it in normal development. In her view, the very young infant is threatened by the intensity of her or his own destructive emotions and projects them outwards into the mother's breast; this has the relieving effect of reducing the conflict in the psyche, the threat from within, but it also creates paranoid sensations, a threat from without. The loved and depended-upon breast becomes also the potential source of attack, as it carries the infant's own projected destructiveness; writ large, this links with the combination of

fascination, fear and hatred characteristically shown by people – including racists – for their denigrated 'other'. For Klein, things only improve when the infant experiences the outside world – the giving breast – as primarily benevolent, allowing destructiveness to be overshadowed by love, producing gratitude and making integration of envious and positive feelings possible. This allows for gradual integration of the psyche without denial of negativity; that is, it makes tolerance of ambivalence possible, with an accompanying capacity to feel more deeply, for example to experience guilt and loss and form intimate relationships. If, however, developmental circumstances are such that the infant never feels secure in the basic loving capacity of the depended-upon other, the paranoid state will be exacerbated and integration will be impossible. The 'paranoid-schizoid position' is then preserved as the dominant way of experiencing the world, giving rise to continued projection and persecutory feelings, powerful hatred with concomitant anxiety, recourse to splitting, and at the extreme, 'border-line' or psychotic states of mind.

Although explicit deployment of the Kleinian model is not very widespread in psychoanalytic investigations of anti-Semitism, there is much use of the general idea that splitting is engaged in to protect the psyche against its own destructive urges and that these urges are then projected into the hated figure of the Jew. This in turn is held in many accounts to lead to the anti-Semite's characteristic combination of fascination with, and derogation of, the Jew – a combination familiar in other instances of racism (Frosh, 1997). Anti-Semitism is thus seen as a mechanism offered by Western culture for maintaining the psychic equilibrium of the disturbed individual, but like all symptom-formations this occurs at the price of damaging the psyche even though its function is to protect it. At the cultural level, Simmel (1946b) draws a familiar parallel here:

Applying our method of psychoanalytic-dialectic thinking, we must infer not that anti-Semitism annihilates the achievements of civilization, but that the process of civilization itself *produces* anti-Semitism as a pathological symptom-formation, which in turn tends to destroy the soil from which it has grown. Anti-Semitism is a malignant growth on the body of civilization. (p. 34)

For Simmel, thinking back on the Nazi phenomenon, anti-Semitism is a mass psychosis, a 'social disease', despite the individuals concerned not being psychotic; or rather, it is the existence of this mass psychosis