

Seminar: “The Rumour About the Jews”. Antisemitism in Contemporary Europe January 13, 2011

Introduction by Henrik Bachner

The last couple of years have seen a deeply troubling increase in anti-Muslim sentiments in several European countries. Sweden is no exception, made clear not least by the Sweden Democrats entry into parliament after last year’s election.

This development has led to a much needed debate on the character, causes and prevalence of anti-Muslim attitudes in European societies. There is now a growing awareness of the fact that the problem is real, dangerous and needs to be confronted.

However, if you follow this debate you are also repeatedly being told something that is not true: namely that Islamophobia has “replaced” antisemitism in Europe, that Jew hatred belongs to the past and does not constitute a serious problem anymore.

Needless to say, these kinds of claims are often politically motivated, but I fear that they to some extent also reflect a wide spread ignorance of antisemitism as a phenomenon, its continued presence in Europe and Sweden in the post war era, its various transformations and, not least, its deeply disturbing revitalization during the last decade.

Since the year 2000 there has been a dramatic rise in anti-Jewish incidents and hate crimes in several European countries. And, in contrast to what is often being said, antisemitism still plays a fundamental role in much of the radical right. In Hungary, ultra-nationalist Jobbik gained significant support in the 2010 elections, selling a message that combined hatred against the Roma with antisemitic conspiracy theories. Antisemitism is also a central component in radical Islamist ideology and propaganda. And through the policies pursued not least by the Iranian government it has – once again, one could say – become an issue of growing importance on the global political arena. It is also highly plausible that antisemitism stemming from Islamist and other Middle Eastern sources – specifically if combined with anti-imperialist, anti-American and anti-Zionist rethoric – serves to reinvigorate anti-Jewish sentiments and notions in Europe. Yet again, to reduce antisemitism to a problem that primarily can be explained with reference to Islamist propaganda or to attitudes among parts of Europe’s Muslim communities would be a grave mistake.

As has been shown by a number of survey studies, antisemitic attitudes and perceptions are fairly wide spread in many European countries, and certainly not confined to any specific group, whether political, ethnic or religious. Qualitative studies also points to a more visible and to some extent more accepted anti-Jewish discourse within the political mainstream, including mainstream media. Parallel with a gradual erosion of the post-war taboo on Jew hatred, new factors, historical and political issues and controversies – be they about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, American foreign policy, globalization or the Holocaust and its place in contemporary political culture – seem to trigger or serve as a pretext for a renewed reproduction of stereotypes and animosity towards Jews.

Sweden has not been untouched by this development. During the last couple of years there have been frequent reports on the harassment of Jews in Malmö and elsewhere. In 2009 the number of reported antisemitic hate crimes rose with 57 percent, from 159 to 250. Also in Sweden ultra-nationalist and white supremacist groups as well as radical Islamists continuously incite against Jews, using the Internet as one of their main tools. And let's not forget that Radio Islam, run by the Swede Ahmed Rami, is one of the major antisemitic websites in the world.

Perhaps even more worrying, though, is the increased visibility and tolerance of certain forms of anti-Jewish thinking within the broader political debate. This is seldom a discourse that in a direct sense attacks Jews, but rather a form of argumentation that through innuendo, euphemism and code words like "Zionists" or "lobby groups" transports images of Jewish omnipotence, cunning and conspiracies, that reproduce notions of Jewish control or manipulation of US policies or, for that matter, of Swedish media.

It is also a discourse in which anti-Jewish resentment and stereotypes are invoked in the debate on Israel, and are being justified as criticism of Israeli policies. This does not mean that criticism of Israel's policies in a general sense is colored by prejudice. There is no basis whatsoever for such a claim. But there are arguments, notions and images that frequently are being used in the discussion on Israel – primarily but certainly not solely within parts of the Left – that go beyond what can reasonably be conceived as factual and legitimate criticism. What I am referring to here is for example the invocation of images of "Old Testament vengefulness", of Crucifixion, or of accusations that can be seen as modernized versions of the blood libel – such as the claim made last year in an article in Sweden's largest daily, that the State of Israel systematically captured and killed young Palestinians in order to harvest their organs and did so in collaboration with American rabbis. What I am also referring to is the almost obsessive use in some quarters of analogies between Israel and Nazi-Germany and between Israel's policies and the Holocaust.

Deeply troubling, moreover, is the tendency to hold Jews in the Diaspora accountable for Israel, including the argument that Jews should distance themselves from Israel or otherwise be prepared to pay the price of a strengthened antisemitism. Related to this is of course the recurring claim that Israel's policies are the root cause behind present day antisemitism. Few people would make or even less buy the argument that anti-Black racism in Europe is caused by government policies in various African countries. Most people, I think, would not only see this as an implausible explanation, but probably also remind themselves that racism against Blacks has quite a long history in Europe and that blaming the victims for the racism they suffer is part of that history. But when the same is said about antisemitism and Israel, it is often taken as a reasonable and legitimate argument.

Theodor Adorno captured something essential when he wrote that "Antisemitism is the rumour about the Jews". This "rumour" is still out there, circulating, it seems, more intensely than in a long time. It is crucially important that we learn more about this development, and that we have an informed debate on antisemitism, a discussion that also integrate results from the growing body of research that exists.

What are the characteristics and causes of antisemitism in contemporary Europe? Are we dealing here, as some would argue, with a “new” form of antisemitism, and, if so, in what way is it different from its older versions? How prevalent are anti-Jewish attitudes, how are they transmitted, and in which contexts do they emerge? How can stereotypes and demonization be distinguished from legitimate and factual criticism, and how are we, in this context, to understand anti-Zionism in its various forms?

Few people are more qualified to analyze these undoubtedly complex questions than our two guest speakers. On behalf of the Per Ahlmark Foundation, the British Council and the Goethe Institut, I would like to extend a warm welcome to Anthony Julius and Andreas Zick.