

ANTISEMITISM HERE AND NOW

Deborah Lipstadt, Scribe Melbourne/London, 2019, RRP \$29.99

A Commentary from Elisabeth Holdsworth

I have written many book reviews, essays and commentaries for outlets such as *Australian Book Review*, *Southerly*, *Transnational*, *The Wheeler Centre*, *The Monthly* and so on. I had finished writing a traditional review of Deborah Lipstadt's *Antisemitism Here and Now* moments before news of the shootings in Christchurch hit my inbox. Subsequently, I felt it necessary to allow the ramifications of this event to intrude into my writing.

Deborah Lipstadt is the Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies at Emory University. She has famously written about Adolf Eichmann and the holocaust denier David Irving. I can recommend the film *Denial* about the court case with the excellent Rachel Weiss as Lipstadt and Timothy Spall as David Irving.

Lipstadt's book asks: 'Is today's antisemitism the same or different from what we have seen before? Where is it coming from: the right or the left? Is it, as some would contend, all about Israel?' She answers these questions in a series of conversations between two composite figures; a post graduate student called Abigail and Joe Wilson, a professorial colleague and committed Christian. In this way Lipstadt personalises and brings immediacy to the issues raised. The opening chapter, THE PERPLEXED, signals that she is channelling Maimonides.

Lipstadt is quite definite that we are talking about 'antisemitism' not anti-Semitism or any of the other variant spellings. Is this important? Yes. There is no such entity as a Semitic people. The term was coined in the late 18th century to describe a group a group of languages – Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Amharic, Akkadian and Ugaritic – that have linguistic similarities. In the late 19th century the term *Antisemitismus* was further popularized in Germany to refer to Jews in a 'scientific' as opposed to a racist fashion. For no apparent reason the English added a hyphen. For Lipstadt and barrister Anthony Julius, who represented Lipstadt in her case against David Irving, no part of the word antisemitism deserves capitalization. That said, I note that in an exhibition called *Jews, Money, Myth* launched at the London Jewish Museum on March 19th the terms anti-Semitism, Antisemitism and anti-Semitic are all employed.

One of the first questions posed by Lipstadt's interlocutors is a definition of antisemitism. She recounts the long and persistent history of unreasonable attitudes toward Jews and discusses various definitions. The following comes from the sociologist Helen Fein:

A persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards *Jews as a collectivity* manifested in *individuals* as attitudes, and in culture as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in actions—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against Jews, and collective or state violence – which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace or destroy Jews as Jews.¹

Note how easily in the para above you can replace 'Jew' with Muslim, a person of colour, a member of the LBGTQ community and anyone else who happens to fall foul of racist ideologies.

Lipstadt identifies the polite dinner party antisemite and the clueless antisemite who have internalised stereotypical racist prejudices and unthinkingly perpetuate them. For instance: all German Bankers pre and post WWI were Jews. Or, maybe Jews had themselves to blame for the virulence of the Nazis because they flaunted their outrageous wealth. But it is in the wake of the Christchurch attacks that the enablers of antisemitism and those who knowingly take advantage of racial stereotyping for political ends require our attention.

Lipstadt calls Donald Trump, whom she believes is not himself an antisemite, an enabler who did not distance himself from the white nationalists and supremacists who supported his 2016 campaign for the presidency. Similarly, the Charlottesville riots of 2017 instigated by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement (NSM) were not acknowledged or decried by Trump as antisemitic and anti-Muslim.

Then there's Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the British Labor Party. He says he is not an antisemite but is opposed to Israel. Corbyn is supported by organizations that perpetrate the sort of myths that Jews run the world economies. Among his other supporters are Islamic extremists who espouse a perverted notion of Islam and who, although they call themselves Muslims, clearly are ignorant of the core of Islamic belief. Is Corbyn an enabler of antisemitism because he thinks it will gain him the prime ministership or, is he a deep seated

¹ Helen Fein, "Dimensions of Antisemitism: Attitudes, Collective Accusations, and Actions," Helen Fein, ed., *The Persisting: Sociological Perspectives and Social Contexts of Modern Antisemitism* (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 1987). Quoted in Lipstadt: pp15-16

antisemite? In the *Jews, Money, Myth*, exhibition mentioned earlier Corbyn is implicated in opposing a local council decision to remove a street art mural depicting bankers sitting around a table and oppressing the poor. Corbyn and the artist maintained the mural was not antisemitic. Check the link below and judge for your yourselves.²

Israel is a sovereign nation and is held accountable for her actions in various world bodies such as the United Nations and NATO³. Australia has been justifiably proud that we were one of the first countries in the world to recognise Israel's statehood; as a home for the Jewish people and for all those peoples, who may not be Jews, but who nevertheless are Israelis. There are many issues that have arisen in Israel over the years that I have disagreed with and many I have supported. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement against Israel was founded by Palestinian organizations in 2005. Many on the right and the left have embraced parts of their platform. I would argue that the Palestinian people deserve, and desperately need, a voice that is grounded in reasoned political discourse argument not antisemitic tropes. Lipstadt takes particular exception to the effects that BDS adherents on American campuses are having on academic pursuits. She also exhorts us to call out Israel when it is appropriate to do so.

At the end of WWII Jews came to the realisation that one in three of all Jews on the planet had been eliminated by a methodical, industrial scale political machine the like of which the world has never seen before and should never see again. Deborah Lipstadt believes we should not panic. She was writing before Pittsburgh, before Christchurch. I believe we need to be on heightened alert.

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/?p=2040328>

³ Disclosure: this author worked at NATO headquarters for eight years.