

In the Name of the Other: Reflections on the Coming Anti-Semitism

Alain Finkielkraut

For more than half a century now, the Jews of the West have benefited immeasurably from the defeat of Nazism. Hitler, as Georges Bernanos famously put it, gave anti-Semitism a bad name.

This bad name was thought to have been the last word. But time has proven otherwise: What we once took for granted we now see was a passing phase. And it is in France, home to the largest number of European Jews, where the parenthesis closes with a bang. It is here that synagogues have been burned, rabbis assaulted, and cemeteries profaned. By day we clean the walls of community centers and colleges that are covered with obscenities at night. Only the very brave dare to wear a *kipa* in the harsh neighborhoods known as *cites sensibles*, or on the Paris subway. Every day, another intellectual denounces Zionism as a crime, and teaching the Holocaust has become impossible at the very moment when it has become imperative. Schoolchildren are taught to make a mockery of the ancient Israelites, and the epithet “dirty Jew” has again become a staple of school yard slang. The hearts of the Jews are heavy. For the first time since the war, they are afraid.

This fear is a strange mixture of two contradictory sentiments: Humiliation and *deja vu*. It is terrifying, but not disorienting; every incident has its precedent, every assault reopens an ancient wound. There is nothing in the hatred of Jews that does not seem familiar. Overwhelmed by the onslaught, the Jews say to themselves, “Now that we thought it was over, it has started again. The past has not passed. Hidden in the folds of public virtue, it was only playing dead, waiting for better days. Now those days are here. Taboos are broken, censure lifted, barriers defied: After fifty years, *hell has risen from purgatory*, evil breathes deep and stretches its arms open wide.”

Old Demons, New Debates: This was the title that the YIVO Institute gave to last year’s international conference on anti-Semitism in the West. The conference’s brochure drove the point home more clearly: “To a number of observers, what had been repressed has suddenly and forcefully returned. Political, social, and cultural Europe once again appears marred by its most ancient and base prejudice.” These observers do, of course, have a point: Anti-Semitism is not a new idea in Europe. Yet they err when they confuse what is happening in Europe today with what happened back then—a confusion that is derived from past experience. Yet to see only the past in present events is to dream with one’s eyes open and to call it wisdom. And to invoke the subconscious, or the periodic eruption of immutable drives, is surely to take the easy way out. For to speak of a *return* is to clothe new demons in old arguments.

Young demons, old arguments: If we are ever to face reality, we must escape from our retrospective prison. Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic*, quoted Rebecca West to the effect that the Jews, who have seen the greatest of evils, have “an unsurrisable soul.” This, however, is precisely the problem: To understand our new world requires a *surprisable* soul. Being disabused of illusion is not the same as attaining truth. Pessimism has no right to laziness, for even bad news can be news. Even demons can glow with the innocence of youth.

What are the foundations of today's Europe? Does it rest on culture? On a shared admiration for particular immortals like Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Pascal, Cervantes, Giotto, Rembrandt, Picasso, Kant, Kierkegaard, Mozart, Bartok, Chopin, Ravel, Fellini, and Bergman? Does it share in the continuity of a glorious past? Does it seek to honor its common ancestors? No, it has broken with its bloody past, intent on remembering only its radical evil. Traumatized by Hitler, Europe cannot be satisfied with a simple repudiation of anti-Semitism; it must unburden itself by switching from an *admiring* humanism to a *reviling* one. It is a humanism perfectly captured in the cry, "Never again!" Never again a politics of power. Never again empire. Never again warmongering. Never again nationalism. Never again Auschwitz.

Time has not eroded the memory of Auschwitz. On the contrary, that memory has struck deep roots. The Holocaust, writes Francois Furet correctly, "has gained even more depth as the negative companion to the democratic conscience, and the incarnation of the Evil to which this negation leads." But why, precisely, the Holocaust? Why has Auschwitz, and no other doctrinaire carnage, no other horror of hate, come to play this unique role in democratic society? Because *democratic* man, the man of human rights, is man as such—abstracted from his origins, his social rank, his nation and race, his merits, his service record, and his talent. In proclaiming the right of a race of overlords to purge the land of people judged injurious, the criminal creed of the Nazis, and it alone, took aim at universal humanity. As Habermas wrote, "Something happened in the death camps that, up until now, no one could have thought possible. A profound solidarity among all that bears a human face was reached there." This is why the United States felt authorized to erect a Holocaust museum in the heart of its capital, and to make it a focus of national attention. Not just because America went to war against the Nazis, but because the Nazis' unprecedented assault against the idea of democratic man presents the Americans, more than any other political collective, with an opposite image of themselves. For

the democracy of the New World is unique in that it is not only constitutional, it is also *consubstantial* with the nation. In a homeland without an *ancien regime*, no distinction may be drawn between polity and homeland. The form *is* the content of national sentiment, as embodied in the Statue of Liberty.

To be sure, America has not always lived up to its own ideals: There is plenty of room in Washington for a Museum of Slavery as well. But to accuse America of trying to divert attention from its own moral failings by evoking a faraway genocide would be to pick the wrong fight with the United States. A sincere awe, a genuine sense of horror inspired this memorial. As the museum's advisory board reminds us, "As an event of universal significance, the Holocaust has a special importance for Americans. By their deeds and by their words, the Nazis denied the very founding values of the American nation."

Democratic America and democratic Europe find their common principles in the commemoration of the Holocaust. But there is a crucial difference: America is victorious; Europe plays the roles of vanquisher, victim, and criminal all at once. The Final Solution took place on its land; the decision was a product of its civilization; and the enterprise found no shortage of accomplices, mercenaries, executors, sympathizers, and even apologists well outside Germany's borders. Democratic Europe may have won the war against Nazism, but Nazism was nonetheless European. The Holocaust reminds America of its calling, Europe of its fragility. It affirms the creed of the New World and deprives the old one of its validity. To the latter it is an abyss, to the former a confirmation. It nourishes both American patriotism and the European aversion to Eurocentrism. What unites Europe today is the repudiation of war, of hegemony, of anti-Semitism, and of all the catastrophes that it has brought about—every form of intolerance and inequality to which it has given life. Inasmuch as the American call of "never again" plays itself out in its response to external threats, the post-criminal Europe is what Camus called a "penitent-judge": One who takes pride in his penitence and is always on guard against himself. "Never again me!" promises

Europe, and she kills herself to fulfill that oath. Democratic America fights her adversaries; Europe crosses swords with her ghosts. The call to vigilance is expressed in America through the active defense (sometimes with little regard for means) of the free world; in Europe it is embodied in the undying slogan, "Fascism shall not pass."

II

B*rown Morning*: Such is the title of a book that was immensely successful in France in the last few years. The author, Franck Pavloff, was unknown, and the book received little critical attention, yet several hundred thousand copies were sold by virtue of word of mouth alone. This lucid and edifying tale recounts in twelve pages the story of two average people—neither heroes nor villains—who, to keep the peace, do whatever the state demands of them. It comes to pass that the government orders all citizens to round up domestic animals that are not brown. The two are a bit surprised, but they comply: One hands over his dog, the other his cat. They similarly acquiesce when it is decreed that all books containing the words "dog" and "cat" unaccompanied by the adjective "brown" be removed from the library. But then a new crime is announced: To have ever been in possession of a non-brown dog or cat. The two are arrested. End of story.

When, on April 21, 2002, to everyone's surprise, the National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen edged out the socialist incumbent Lionel Jospin and thereby qualified for the second round of the French presidential elections, readers of *Brown Morning* shuddered. "Here we are," they thought. "The apocalypse is upon us. If we do not take action now, tomorrow morning will be brown." Suddenly reality seemed to follow a predetermined script. They took to the streets, sickened but radiant, and proud to be on time for their rendezvous with the Beast. They would not be like

prior generations, who were careless, conciliatory, accommodating, and, ultimately, willing. So it was, on the first of May, that hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children marched in Paris and in the provinces in a bizarre display of anti-fascist reverie: “We wanted to sing: ‘Le Pen, we love you,’” one of the demonstrators declared candidly. “He woke us up. We were sleeping, we were bored. Now, everyone is smiling.”

Never had the first of May in France been so exciting, so colorful, so jubilant, so youthful, so effervescent. Here was a true miracle: Real life was so much in keeping with the cataclysmic vision, and so kind as to offer an opportunity to make amends. It was euphoria mixed with terror. The hour was at once dramatic and ecstatic. Resistance and turbulence marched in step. Unanimity reigned, humanity glowed. Society painted a rainbow. A festive solemnity illuminated every face: Each grand smile was that of a life suddenly relieved of the burden of the banal, illuminated by its moral superiority over the past. “We declare ourselves to be here,” said this smile. “We will not be pushed around. Mauras and Petain, take note: We are the glorious defenders of our endangered Republic.” The mobilization paid off. Five days later, the polls laid the Beast to rest. A hybrid France defeated the heirloom hydra, and the smile of protest became a smile of satisfaction.

Having voted with the republican majority, I naturally share in its satisfaction. Like all those who fear the dawn of a brown morning, I too am relieved, and I savor the victory of decency over obtuseness. But I will not join in the celebration, for it is the celebrants themselves who have made life difficult for Jews in France today. Not all the celebrants, to be sure; but one would have to be blinded by the tragic past not to see it: The future of hatred is in *their* camp, and not in that of Vichy’s faithful. It is in the camp of the smiles, not of the gritted teeth. In the camp of humane, and not barbaric, men. In the camp of integrated *society*, rather than that of the ethnic *nation*. In the camp of respect, not of rejection. The future of hatred is in the expiatory camp of “Never again me!” and not in that shameless camp of “French first!” It is in the ranks of the devoted admirers of the Other, and not among the narrow-minded petit bourgeois who love only the Self.

III

What the Jews must now answer for is not the corruption of French identity, but the martyrdom which they have imposed—or allowed to be imposed in their name—on the Palestinian alterity. We Europeans no longer denounce the Jews' cosmopolitan vocation; on the contrary, we exalt it, and we reproach them for having betrayed it. We lament that “Jewishness” is no longer what it once was, with the admirable exception of a few righteous men, a few dissidents and stubborn prophets who will not be intimidated and who dare to think freely. Yet instead of appreciating the disquieting foreignness of the Jews, we take them to task for joining us Europeans at the very moment when we are taking leave of ourselves. We are upset about their *untimely* assimilation among the nations, about the winding path that led them to the idolatry of Place just when the enlightened world has switched en masse to borderlessness and wandering. Instead of accusing these inveterate nomads of conspiring to bring about the deracination of Europe, we now charge these latecomers to autochthony with falling into that very state which characterized the Europeans before remorse gnawed at their egos and compelled them to put universal principles above territorial sovereignty.

The Italian journalist Barbara Spinelli, in a sensational essay published in November 2001, contrasted Jewish self-confidence with the humility of the Catholic Church, which repented for its sins of omission, indifference, and violence. “If one feels that there is something missing in Judaism,” she writes, “it is precisely this: A *mea culpa* towards the populations and the individuals who had to pay the price in blood and exile for allowing Israel to exist.” The result, according to Spinelli, is that Judaism today is uninhibited in its aggressive and barbarian urges. It has no conscience to curb its arrogance; nothing stops the self-affirmation of its will.

All European peoples, all states, institutions, and professional associations, have learned to look their past in the eye and bravely admit their faults. All proscribe the teaching of intolerance and doggedly practice a pedagogy of repentance. All confess the crimes that they committed or let others commit. All admit their share of darkness. All accept humbly the civilizing burden of guilt. All adopt a reflective distance with regard to what they are. All make it a point of honor to free themselves of themselves and to rein in their immutable drives through all manner of devices. All distrust the Nazi that sleeps within them. All have a hangover.

All, that is, except the Jews. For them, there is no obligation of memory and reparation. Used to *being* the superego of the Old World, they forget to *have* a superego. Full of excuses, they feel no sense of duty. Thrilled by their sovereign power, filled with their existence as a national state just in time for the great penitential deconstruction of nation states, they alone, concludes Spinelli, live in a condition of absolute liberty. In other words, they look remarkably like the anti-Semites of old. Indeed, the Jews pick up where fascism left off.

Just as Barres beheld Dreyfus as representative of another species, so too, the champions of contrition insist, does Israel flout the religion of humanity to which Europe converted when it recognized its own anti-Semitism. “Whosoever endangers a human life, endangers the liberty of a man and the honor of a man, and inspires in us a feeling of horror in every way analogous to that of a believer who sees his idol profaned,” wrote Durkheim when justifying his Dreyfusard commitments. So, too, in our own day, has the political scientist Emmanuel Todd concluded that, “The incapacity of more and more Israelis to perceive the Arabs as human beings in general is obvious to the people who follow the news in print or on television.”

And yet, as the philosopher Michael Walzer pointed out in an essay in *Dissent*, not one but four wars are under way between the Israelis and the Palestinians: The Palestinian war of attrition to obliterate the Jewish state (under which heading fall both suicide bombers and the refugees’ “right of return”); the Palestinian war for the creation of an independent state; the

Israeli war for the security and defense of the State of Israel; and the Israeli war to strengthen the settlements and annex as much of the territory conquered in 1967 as possible. Those “people who follow the news in print or on television” must be blind to this quadruple reality (and the two internal battles that perpetuate it), and also to the unbearable and monotonous *obviousness* of the terrorist iniquity that flaunts itself before their scandalized eyes. Indeed, thanks to round-the-clock media coverage, they can simultaneously see everything that goes on in the conflict and, following the example of Emmanuel Todd, see nothing for what it really is. They sweep the events from their vision like dust from a shelf. Is it mean-spiritedness, or frivolity, that guides them? No. It is the dread of radical evil, the egalitarian fervor, the cult of tolerance. Their illusions proceed from their most honorable qualities.

We find ourselves confronted with a hypermnesiac fever that spreads like a plague—one which, in a world simplified to the extreme, allows for only two types: Nazi and victim. We lived in fear of the reappearance of racial hatred, and from this fear was born an anti-racist exuberance that recasts every tragedy—contemporary or ancient—in terms of the dichotomy of tolerance and opprobrium. We so wished to be above reproach, to avoid the repetition of history, that we came to see history everywhere repeating itself. We swore, “Never again!” with such ardor, such force of conviction, that we have come to believe that it has, indeed, happened again. We condensed the infinite array of human experiences into a single story line, a single and monumental opposition: It is all solidarity or segregation, openness or ethnocentrism. In short, we were so utterly concerned for the Other that the figure of the Other eventually replaced that of the *enemy*. Thus, the Palestinians are no longer the enemies of the Israelis, but their Other. The result is clear: Being at war with one’s enemy is a human possibility; waging war on one’s Other is a crime against humanity. For in the former case, the relationship is political, and may eventually result in a compromise, despite any extreme views which are held by the other side. In the latter case, however, the relationship is charged with racism, and everything racist must disappear.

Thus, the enemy stands squarely in the camp of recognition, while the racist, by virtue of his words and his actions, is excluded from it. With the claims of the enemy—with both his grievances and his belief that he is the master of his historical fate—one can find common ground. The claims of the racist, on the other hand, are repulsive, his grievances base, and the scandal of his very existence calls for punishment. Conclusion: Where morality has made room for the enemy, he re-emerges, recast in a demonic form, as the *enemy of the Other*—that is, as the enemy of humanity. With this enemy, there can be no compromise. The inexpiable imposes its law.

Strengthened by the memory of crime and neglect, we have stood at the ready, awaiting our encounter with iniquity. But now we are taking fire from the forces of anti-racism; the best of intentions have produced the worst of effects. Even the virtuous call to remember has paved the road to ideological hell.

IV

Like all Jewish intellectuals—like all public figures who do not hide their Jewish identity—I receive unpleasant letters from time to time. After the April 2002 demonstration against anti-Semitism and terrorism, for example, one of my regular correspondents, infuriated, wrote me as follows: “There I was, forced to watch the police search the people who wanted to cross through the procession of Israeli flags waved by excited youth in blue and white skullcaps, so sure of their holy right. On the square, a young Arab, not ten years old, shouted as his friends held him back, ‘If only I had a Kalashnikov, I would show them myself!’ And I knew well that I felt closer to the truth of that pathetic child’s words than to all those youth in their blue and white skullcaps, triumphant in their self-sufficiency and contemptuous, ignorant passion.”

The “pathetic child” in question has no Kalashnikov. And in all likelihood he never will, nor will he ever go beyond verbal provocation. Yet it would be a mistake to feel at ease, since the words he hears all around him—and thus, the words that he himself has begun to articulate—are part of the language of Islam, not of progress. The class struggle means nothing to him; he is enchanted by *jihad*. His heroes are religious figures, and not the usual revolutionary icons: Salladin rather than Che Guevara. He lives in another universe. What infuriates him is not the yoke of capitalism and imperialism over the workers of the world, but the specific humiliation of Muslims in all countries. Conditioned to viewing Israel as a thorn in Islam’s side, he is no longer even anti-Zionist: He sees only Jews, and in his eyes and words, they are no more than that.

But while this rebellious child turns his back on progress, the progressives, who are blind to his intentions, continue with an unerring solicitude and an unfailing love to celebrate his rebellion. To my correspondent, Madeleine Gaudin, he is the Other. And in her eyes, it is unthinkable that the same fertile womb from which the foul Beast came forth has now given birth to the Other. For the Beast and the Other are, according to this view, ontologically incompatible: The Beast yearns to cloak himself in the Other’s skin, while the Other is the Beast’s prey. The Other is wholly innocent, and even if his intentions are revolting, even if he comports himself as a *declared enemy*, it is never anything other than a legitimate defense. If the Other commits reprehensible acts, it is only in reaction to the spirit of reaction—in response, for example, to the apartheid practices and the harsh security measures to which he has been unfairly subjected. If he is angry, it is because exploitation and exclusion have made him dream of opening fire on the crowd; it is because his rights have been violated in France and his brothers murdered in Palestine. If he is a fanatic, it is because of the degradation to which the Gaudins and the Zionists have condemned him.

Such people are conscious only of the Other’s disgrace: These penitent-judges beat their breasts; these symbols of the Self try to make things right; these born and bred French nurse their genealogical arrogance by taking

stock of all the closets in which the skeletons of national history are hidden. These natives of a single land strive, with all their hearts, for a glorious, universal redemption. These baptized children reject the church yet fight for the right to wear the Islamic veil in schools. Uncomfortable with their own inheritance, they detribalize, Europeanize, cosmopolitanize, and globalize, and cannot suffer the jingoistic, chauvinist, colonial, pious, collaborating past of which they are the guardians. All this is opposed to the “Zionists,” who defend the ethno-religious purity of Israel and everything that goes with it—which is to say Sharon, which is to say Hitler—and who thereby demonstrate their complete imperviousness to the maxims of universal morality.

The ubiquitous shadow of Hitler indeed gave anti-Semitism a bad name, and now exposes Israel to the remonstrations of those same indignant penitent-judges. In other words, if it is indeed true that the Final Solution dealt a fatal blow to the hateful vision of French nationalists like Edouard Drumont, as Bernanos claimed, it is not to the advantage of Dreyfusard Zionists like Bernard Lazare: The latter’s disciples now wear the same mantle of nationalist and reactionary ignominy as do the students of that publicist who invented the slogan, “France for the French.”

The pillorying of French Jewry, tied up together with the old demons of French ideology, is worrisome. But it is possible that the thinking behind it is not, at the end of the day, either as juvenile or as original as it seems. Perhaps this really is an old idea, finding new strength deep beneath the surface. In the wake of that brief period during which the West expressed itself in the idiom of racism, Western discourse now accuses the chosen people of believing themselves superior to other nations and of rejecting the gospel of a common, universal identity. Perhaps it is really the ancient condemnation of the Jew—for his worldliness, his particularism, his exclusivity, his national egoism, his closed fraternity—which, under the increasing burden of the Nazi trauma, is living a new youth, reveling in its flashy modern clothes. Perhaps there is a resonance of the Epistle to the Romans in the affirmation that the people of Israel, that self-infatuated people, exempt themselves from

the ordinary human condition and except themselves from all the nations, thus denying the equal dignity of men and obeying only their own laws. Perhaps this sudden condemnation, coming from the religion of humanity, and its paradoxical incitement to anti-racist hate, unknowingly resurrects an ancient theological debate, of which the secularized masses know little or nothing at all. Perhaps—and this is a frightening thought—the penitent-judges are incapable of condemning the scientistic belief in the struggle of the races and the survival of the fittest without resuscitating the Pauline spirit. Perhaps this is what makes the descendants of Abraham stiffen their resolve, affirming their dynastic birthright and holding firm to ties of blood when they are offered a union of hearts.

Perhaps. What is clear, however, is that we should not mistake the current wave of violence against Jews in France for a return of French anti-Semitism. Greeted with silence precisely because it is not coming from the *petit blancs* of the old France, this principally Muslim-Arab violence has found, if not public approval, then at least a positive reception, or a sympathetic interpretation, from the anti-chauvinist Gaudins who today chant, “We are all immigrants!” even as they intoned yesterday, “We are all German Jews!” and who have culled from history precisely one, impeccably generous, lesson: No matter what happens, take the side of the Other.

Alain Finkielkraut is a lecturer in the social sciences at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. A version of this essay originally appeared in book form in French (Editions Gallimard, 2003).