Marcel Stoetzler (ed.): *Critical Theory and the Critique of Antisemitism*, London / New York: Bloomsbury, 2023, 293 pages.

Critical Theory and the Critique of Antisemitism, published in 2023, contains 11 chapters by as many authors and a substantial introduction. The volume is part of the Critical Theory and the Critique of Society series, published by Bloomsbury Academic, and is edited by Marcel Stoetzler.

The volume begins from the premise that studies of antisemitism were integral in shaping early Critical Theory and states that, "Critical Theory's critique of antisemitism … treats antisemitism as a symptom … of the [social] structures", 'not a bug but a feature' (2). On this premise, the volume addresses both the historical developments of antisemitism studies in Critical Theory and the contemporary "Frankfurt School-inspired perspective" (3) on present-day antisemitism.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part contains theoretical and historical outlines of the central concepts used by the Frankfurt School to discuss antisemitism, while the second part contains texts inspired by early Critical Theory which examine a range of contemporary instances of antisemitism. It uses concepts from Critical Theory to unfold and redefine the critique of antisemitism today. A guiding thread throughout this volume is a critique of particularised identity positions in relation to critiques of capitalism.

The volume takes antisemitism as the central lens through which it examines Critical Theory. However, this is not the only lens used, as various authors also touch upon topics related to economy, identity, activism, the meaning of introducing an intersectional analytical framework to the study of antisemitism, and the role local national histories play in the treatment of antisemitism (with Poland as a case study). Thus, while the title of the volume may seem to indicate a narrow perspective on Critical Theory, the chapters touch upon many topics covered in previous works on the Frankfurt School (e.g. *Jeffries* 2016; Wiggershaus 1995; Benhabib 1986).

PART 1 – ELEMENTS OF THE CRITICAL THEORY OF ANTISEMITISM

Jordi Maiso's chapter *The Critical Theory of antisemitism and the limits of enlightenment* (29-50) examines how Horkheimer and Adorno's seminal work *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (originally published in 1947) was largely written against the backdrop of "the persecution of Jews and its social consequences" (29). According to Maiso, Horkheimer and Adorno show that the persecution of Jews cannot be seen merely as a "residue from the dark Middle Ages" (ibid.) but was rather part of

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the central dynamics of modern, bourgeois, capitalist society, a society that understood itself as the product of the Enlightenment. Hence, the eruption of antisemitism during the twentieth century was not the return of age-old persecution but the underbelly of contemporary civilisation and its violent urge to destroy itself.

Werner Bonefeld's chapter *Antisemitism and the critique of society as economic object* (75-90) posits that "Critical Theory … formulates the critique of antisemitism as the critique of bourgeois society" (75). Central to this chapter is the idea that capitalist society produces antisemitism as "a personalized critique of a crisis-ridden dynamic of real economic abstractions … and their regulation by the invisible hand of the market" (76). Critical Theory, in its opposition to capitalism and its abstractions, emphasises that, in capitalist society, antisemitism blames the Jew as the alleged bringer of hardship—thereby personalising the figure of the Jew as the guilty party in the impersonal processes of reified economic forces.

The critique of antisemitism and bourgeois society, as it developed in Critical Theory, became the broader critique of what Adorno later called "the bad economic determination of existence" (Adorno 2005: 43[§22]). These are two central motifs of critique that, in Critical Theory, are intertwined so that each implies the other. Antisemitism and *bad economic existence* confront us with the limits of enlightenment and of reason by demonstrating that the enlightenment is inherently driven to renege on its promise of emancipation, leading to a situation where it becomes increasingly impossible to live, since "[w]rong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 2005: 39[§18]).

An account that posits antisemitism and bourgeois society on one side of a dichotomy and anti-capitalism on the other, would, of course, be simplistic and fail to acknowledge that antisemitism is not a solely right-wing phenomenon. Antisemitism can also be found on the left-wing spectrum of politics, especially when we look at the anti-capitalistic gestures inherent in some forms of antisemitism.

On this theme, Matthew Bolton's contribution, *Antisemitism in the British 'New Liberalism' movement* (51-74), examines the antisemitic tendencies inherent within the pre-WW1 British social reform movement. The chapter locates a kernel of antisemitism in the movement, which functions as a central basis for the movement's criticism of capitalism.

A similar case is presented in Marcel Stoetzler's chapter *Antisemitism, anti-capitalism, community* (111-139), which examines this ambiguity through an inquiry into how critique of capitalism (Left and Right) intersects in its rejection of

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capitalist reality, while being simultaneously divided into nationalist (Left and Right) and fascist (far-Right) ideologies. A central premise of Stoetzler's argument is that the latter differs from the former insofar as Nazis and fascists believe that Jews are the ultimate cause of all social wrongs, while non-fascist antisemites differ insofar as ('ordinary') nationalists (Left and Right) blame the Other (e.g. Jews) for the social wrongs inherent in the bad economic conditions created by capitalism more transparently as scapegoats.

Stoetzler makes an unusual attempt to make the meaning of the concepts 'left' and 'right' central to the discussion, when these concepts usually remain undefined but present. The argument suggests that left-wing antisemitism accuses 'the Jews' of obstructing progress, whereas right-wing antisemitism accuses them of being too progressive. Moreover, at least in the nineteenth century, capitalism was still viewed, for good and for bad, as the principal driver of progress. In this sense, Stoetzler argues that reflection on the difficult, dialectical relationship of capitalism and emancipation is an important key to understanding antisemitism.

Following a similar line of examination, Christine Achinger's chapter *Jews and other 'others'* (91-110) investigates how the struggles of Jews and other 'others' converge around an opposition to "racism, nationalism, antisemitism, misogyny, homo- and transphobia" (91). However, Achinger's chapter also problematises the rise of certain kinds of identity politics that recognise wrongs towards one's own group above wrongs towards other groups. According to Achinger, Critical Theory (understood broadly) may bridge such group divisions *qua* its focus on providing a thorough, critical examination of modernity, capitalism, and how rationality produces "systematic irrationality" (92).

This brings us back to Maiso's insight that modern antisemitism, which emerges as a distorted critique of capitalism, presents itself as a kind of identity politics that seeks to remedy the wrongs of capitalist reality by blaming these wrongs on the Jews (in particular) or 'other Others' (in general), as suggested by Achinger. Moreover, Stoetzler's contribution reveals how this antisemitic identity politics manifests differently across the political spectrum, while Bonefeld's analysis deepens this understanding by demonstrating how antisemitism functions as a "personalized critique of a crisis-ridden dynamic of real economic abstractions" (76), and Bolton's text shows how this dynamic operates even within seemingly progressive politics, revealing that the antisemitic form of identity politics identified by Maiso is not confined to ex-

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tremist movements but can emerge within mainstream liberal and left-wing critiques of capitalism.

All of the *Elements* presented in this part skilfully introduce the reader to the theoretical foundation that the later contributions derive from, emerge out of, and build upon.

PART 2 – EXTENSIONS OF THE CRITICAL THEORY OF ANTISEMITISM

The second part of the volume can be understood as a collection of case studies that examine particular instances of the fundamental problems outlined in Part 1. The chapters in the second part maintain an analytical perspective on populism (left and right) and, consequently, a commitment to accurate sociological analysis; that is, they are committed to exploring the function that antisemitic tropes play in the anti-establishment ideologies, regardless of whether they nominally consider themselves to be on the right or on the left.

Most of these 'extensions' to a critical theory of antisemitism focus on contemporary activist movements, including antisemitic reactions to the murder of George Floyd (Ahern), the perceived revolutionary potential of January 6 (Wright), and Corbynism (Bolton & Pitts), while Joan Braune analyses the intersection between conspiratorial thinking and domains of esoteric knowledge.

Patrick Ahern's chapter (143-154) summarises the problems of left-wing critiques of Israel, noting that there is "a uniqueness to the tenor of the criticisms of Israel on the left that, rather than looking at the Israeli civil and political society in its complexity, addresses Israel as if it were a reified, homogenous and immutable entity in ways that are not reserved for the crimes and failures of other nations" (p. 151). Ahern pinpoints the need to maintain an analysis of society that avoids the conspiratorial tendencies that arise among populations arising from their powerlessness in capitalist societies.

Christopher D. Wright's contribution (175-202) is the longest and most ambitious contribution, focusing on the revanchist tendencies of populist movements, with the storming of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, as its point of departure. Wright's article is an impressive piece of contemporary critique that showcases the dangers inherent in the phenomenon of leftists seeking a potential alliance with these types of groups as a means of overthrowing capitalism, just as some Bolsheviks had thought they could work with the Nazis because they saw a hidden revolution-

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ary energy beneath their violence and hatred. Wright argues that, today, some left-leaning people are making a similar mistake by thinking they can benefit from the movement around Trump. With Trump's re-election, these considerations seem ever more relevant as leftist movements around Europe (both mainstream and fringe) try to embrace more populist approaches to win back political influence.

The chapter by Matthew Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts (253-274) contains another case study, which shows how contemporary leftist movements adopt unhelpful populist strategies. With the distinction between productive and unproductive classes, they stipulate how members of the British Labour Party and the circle around Jeremy Corbyn, because of their protectionist vision of politics, ended up embracing antisemitic stereotypes. The most interesting aspect of this article is its detail on how ideas of a 'rigged system' produce an idea on the left of a 'good' (Keynesian) form of capitalism that 'worked' for the local British population before neoliberalism and its greedy global financiers destroyed it.

Bolton and Pitts argue that the left is not actually engaging in a critique of political economy but reproducing the discourse of bourgeois economists such as Ricardo. Applied to our contemporary context, Corbyn's populism amounts to carrying over a liberal understanding of class struggle "into analyses of capitalist social relations, [whereby] there is no qualitative difference between the bourgeois critique of feudal society and the socialist critique of capitalism" (p. 261). Accordingly, populist politics points to a scapegoat that is the financial elite, coupled with anti-Zionist sentiments, that once again creates the dangers of antisemitism. Within this framework, the problem that socialism needs to attack is not capitalism itself – its inability to provide producers with material wealth predicated on the fact "that in capitalist society, the relation between a concrete act of labour and access to the means of subsistence is not direct and immediate, but indirect and socially mediated" (p. 264) – but those actors who prevent free participation in this process, who are designated as nefarious global forces.

Joan Braun's chapter (155-174) takes its point of departure in Adorno's *Los Angeles Times* astrology column essay *The Stars Down to Earth* (Adorno 2002), after which she goes on to address the *History Channel*'s self-styled documentary, *Ancient Aliens*. Braun's article describes how fringe media products with a flimsy or silly appearance become catalysts for sinister theories about unknowable forces that influence and control the world behind the scenes. Just as the astrology column that Adorno analysed becomes an outlet for citizens who feel powerless under late capi-

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talism, David Icke's theories of lizard people, for example, popularised through documentaries such as *Ancient Aliens,* give back a feeling of control by way of understanding the forces that make late-capitalist subjects powerless. The strength of the chapter is not so much that it discounts the validity of such narratives but also that it underscores the inadequacy of positivist, fact-based refutation. The proliferation of conspiratorial thinking is a reaction to capitalism, which disenchants every aspect of life; it hearkens back to the classical thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the enlightenment project falls back into barbarism as it wants to standardise every experience to the same rationalised metric.

Jonathon Catlin's chapter (203-230) addresses the critique of Critical Theory associated with Horkheimer and Adorno of supposedly treating Auschwitz unilaterally as the greatest form of victimhood and catastrophe. The charge is that their exclusive attention to analysing antisemitism overlooks the horrors and crimes that preceded the Holocaust, such as European colonialism in Africa and incidents like the Armenian genocide. Catlin's chapter shows against this that Adorno held the paradigm of 'After Auschwitz' not as a danger exclusively inherent to antisemitism but also saw it expressed in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the war in Vietnam, designating them as part of a 'hellish unity'. Thus, even the most classic expressions of Critical Theory, despite being mainly preoccupied with the Holocaust as a problem for analysis, did leave open a space for analysing other forms of mass killings.

While Catlin's chapter emphasises the particular aspect of antisemitism as a reflection of broader tribalistic tendencies of subjugation, exclusion and destruction, Anna Zawadska's chapter (231-252) discusses exactly such an example of a particular, nationally framed case of antisemitism. Hers is an important description of the history of antisemitism in the development of the Polish nation-state in the 20th century. While the crimes of the Holocaust are largely recognised in Poland as one of the greatest crimes on the European continent, Zawadska details that Poland has never recognised these crimes as having been overwhelmingly directed at Jews. Zawadska describes how the Second World War was followed by three phases of Jewish emigration to Israel, in 1946-9, 1956-60, and 1968, thus underscoring the othering of Jewish identity by Polish national identity. A central point of Zawadska's chapter is to finetune our use of terms such as antisemitism, but also racism and anti-Zionism, according to the context in which we find them.

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The book contains a thoughtful and well-articulated collection of chapters, which serve as a great point of departure for those interested in reactualising the tools of Critical Theory in a contemporary North American and European context, whether for studying the social dynamics of populist movements or the shifting uses and tendencies of antisemitism today. It is also an uncomfortable, but perhaps necessary, description of how left activist projects can stray in their articulation of their own political projects by picking shared enemies rather than maintaining a critique of political processes (referring again to the chapters by Ahern, Wright, Zawadska, and Bolton & Harry Pitts).

It would be remiss to ignore the particular historical context unfolding at the time of the book's publication, and, while we ought to maintain a steadfast criticism of the way the Israeli military has been waging its war in Gaza and the nationalistic fervour behind it, the topic of antisemitism more than ever must be theorised through a thorough and nuanced sociological and analytical lens.

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