

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DEREK J. PENSLAR, MICHAEL R. MARRUS and JANICE GROSS STEIN (Eds.) *Contemporary Antisemitism: Canada and the World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, 122 p.

This is one of the most thoughtful books ever written about antisemitism. The editors acknowledge an unexpected resurgence of this phenomenon and embrace the question of why antisemitism persists in Canada, North America, Europe, and the Middle East despite its moral opprobrium and decades of efforts to combat it. The question is not purely academic; the editors believe that the more sophisticated our knowledge of antisemitism becomes, the better equipped we are to fight it.

The discussion is loosely guided by three important questions. Is antisemitism an echo of the past or the product of today's political, economic and religious forces? How powerful or significant are the anti-Jewish trends that have been recently detected? How should liberal democratic societies respond to this new threat?

There's no easy answer to any of these questions, and this speaks volumes about the value of this book. The point is not to give a full, complete, or final answer to each question but instead to interrogate and engage the subject matter itself; to investigate how, where and why it flourishes; to examine the multiplicity of its forms and causes as well as its links and breaks with the past; and how to effectively address this serious problem. This approach allows the rich intertextuality of the components of the phenomenon to emerge in all of their nuanced complexities. The editors have adopted a constructivist approach in which multiple ideas about antisemitism are allowed to congeal, interact, coexist, or repel one another.

Consequently, the question of whether antisemitism is an echo of the past or the product of more recent forces is not easily answered given the evidence presented. Brian Mulroney's powerful essay reveals that Canada's history in the first half of twentieth century was deeply stained by prejudice against Jews. Current manifestations of antisemitism would appear to be a continuation of this mostly covered up legacy. Morton Weinfeld disagrees, arguing that Canadian antisemitism today is not the antisemitism of the past. Today it flows through Israel, and reflects global forces and ideologies. Derek Penslar's fascinating chapter explores both the historical continuities and ruptures between European antisemitism and the more recent Arab Anti-Zionism. Mark Tessler in his analysis of Arab

attitudes toward Israel argues that anti-Israel sentiment does sometimes express itself in anti-Jewish stereotypes, but that attitudes are largely shaped by the political relationship and change as the context changes.

The second question also presents a quandary to the reader looking for easy answers: how significant are the current threats? Steven J. Zipperstein suggests that terms such as antisemitism, unless carefully defined, can be overused to the point where they lose their meaning. This renders a clear evaluation of the current threats difficult. The situation becomes cloudier because the perceptions that Jews have of their present are unmistakably and justifiably influenced by their past as victims of unspeakable horror. However, this could result in an overamplification of current threats. Todd Endelman further suggests that the new antisemitism is worrisome but not yet threatening. Yet, he urges that analysts continue to have a responsibility to make significant heuristic distinctions (for example, between antisemitism and Anti-Zionism) to remain faithful to the evidence at hand, and to be on the alert for what is new.

Third, what can be done to solve the problem? There is a role to be played by individuals, politicians, and the state. Brian Mulroney urges politicians never to slide into complacency, or to use the Canadian ideals of diversity and tolerance to hide or cover up any racial hatred that may abide among citizens. The essay by R. Roy McMurtry argues forcefully (echoing Durkheim) that law is an expression of moral values and the collective commitment of Canadians to tolerance and a rejection of racism. Hence, use of the legal system to combat antisemitism reflects a moral commitment among Canadians to fight this problem and other forms of bigotry. This collective commitment does not absolve individuals of their personal responsibility to combat such injustices if they arise.

The value of this book escalates significantly when we ponder how it will be received by a new generation of students whose awareness of antisemitism is fairly recent. This young group that will shape future public policy will find some of their preconceived notions about the subject dashed by evidence the book presents; yet, this leads to further study and ultimately to a conclusion that when it comes to antisemitism, “nothing fits” or aligns itself exactly, nor is it supposed to. This beast is global, ever changing, ever learning, and unfortunately, ever adapting to current conditions. To fail to grasp this complexity could be detrimental, even fatal to Jews wherever they may reside.

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