

Let's get to Work – Against Anti-Semitism! #1

Similar, but different: On the interdependence of anti-Semitism and racism

In spring 2025, a series of online events took place as part of the “Connect – Diversity through Participation” project at the DGB-Bildungswerk Thüringen e.V. The lectures in the series were transcribed and published in several languages. This text summarizes the lecture by [Bijan Razavi \(Anne Frank Educational Center\)](#).

Both racism and anti-Semitism are forms of group-focused enmity. They are based on socially widespread prejudices, portray certain groups as enemies, and have led to social exclusion, hatred, and deadly violence for centuries. But what are the differences between these two ideologies? Or are we dealing with the same phenomenon, with only the affected groups differing? The following text provides answers.

Brief overview: Racism

Today's racism developed during the era of European colonialism – and not by chance. Racism served to legitimize the exploitation of colonized peoples by portraying them as less civilized, unbelieving, and “defective” in comparison to Christian Europeans. From these racist attributions, the colonial powers derived an educational mandate for themselves: according to Christian European

values, the subjugated peoples were to become “perfect human beings” through work. Accordingly, racism created a moral justification for the European powers to force subjugated peoples to work and ruthlessly exploit their labor. In the 18th century, in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the ideals of equal civil rights and universal human dignity spread throughout Europe – values that contradicted the ongoing colonial exploitation. This contradiction was resolved and morally legitimized by the racist worldview of more and less civilized peoples, and backed up by (pseudo-)scientific findings.

After the experience of deeply racist Nazi Germany and the scientific refutation of the construct of human “races,” racism became increasingly ostracized in public life after 1945. Nevertheless, racist patterns of thought did not disappear from society and continued to manifest themselves in old and new forms. What is new is the replacement of the term ‘race’ with that of “culture.” Apart from the term used, however, nothing has changed in the argumentation of racism: groups of people continue to be attributed seemingly unchangeable characteristics that are determined by their (supposed) origin. Where people's ways of thinking and behaving used to be justified by their “race,” today their “culture” is used as an explanation. A fitting

example is the often racist debate about whether “Islamic” and “German culture” are compatible: in the racist narrative, Muslims and non-Muslim Germans are assumed to share the same unchangeable characteristics amongst their respective groups and are therefore unable to live together harmoniously.

Summary: Racism

Racism can be understood as a doctrine that establishes a hierarchical distinction between people and assumes **biological characteristics** to be an essential prerequisite. The central reason for creating such a hierarchy is to justify and **control the unequal distribution of various resources and to enforce it at all levels of social life.**

Based on: Maisha-Maureen Auma (2018): *Rassismus. Eine Definition für die Alltagspraxis.* (Racism: A definition for everyday practice.)

Brief overview: Anti-Semitism

In its modern form, anti-Semitism evolved primarily from the Christian hostility toward Jews in the Middle Ages. Jews were imagined as invisible enemies within the community who seek to destroy it. This image is derived from the Christian narrative that “the Jews” were responsible for the

When the text refers to “the Jew” / “the Jews” in quotation marks, it does not refer to real Jewish people, but rather to the anti-Semitic perception of them.

crucifixion of Jesus and have since been secretly perpetrating violence against Christians in order to symbolically repeat the “murder of God.”

Accordingly, anti-Semitic images

such as the legend of ritual murders of children or stories of Jewish well poisonings have existed for centuries. The idea of an

internal enemy who has allegedly always hated the Christian community has also been used repeatedly to explain incomprehensible phenomena such as the plague and to make Jews scapegoats for it.

In modern times, the idea that Jews are the cause of evil and therefore represent the “antithesis of all that is good” continues to persist. Nazi propaganda portrayed the “German way” as hard-working, settled, and attached to their homeland, in contrast to the ever-restless „Jew“: the latter were purportedly incapable of honest work and wandered from one “host nation” to the next in order to exploit it like parasites. The motif of conspiracy and world domination is also a central feature of anti-Semitism. Jews are accused of being secretly responsible for global power structures such as capitalism or imperialism. They allegedly make all important decisions behind the scenes and influence politicians, the media, and science. According to the narrative of anti-Semitism, they use these instruments of power as a means to subvert supposedly natural orders.

These forms of anti-Semitism can be applied to Israel. When Israeli politicians are portrayed as monsters who drink children's blood, or when the abolition of the State of Israel is promised as the end of global capitalism, this is a continuation of old anti-Semitic narratives. What they have in common is the idea that the world would be freed from all evil if “the Jews” no longer existed. The idea of Jewish power as the cause of evil is present in all forms of anti-Semitism.

Summary: Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is a **model for explaining the world.** Anti-Semitic thinking allows for projection: everything negative in society and the world is outsourced and attributed to one guilty party – “the Jews.” Ultimately, salvation from evil can only be achieved by eliminating it.

Therefore, anti-Semitism always involves a **logic of destruction**. This culminated in the Nazi extermination camps, whose ideology equated the destruction of the Jewish people with the "salvation of the world." After the Holocaust, overt anti-Semitism, like racism, became increasingly condemned in public. Since then, old antisemitic narratives have increasingly been expressed in **secret codes and indirect communication**, in which the word "Jew" is replaced – for example, by "the Rothschilds," "the East Coast elites," or even „Israel“ as "the collective Jew."

Comparison

So, what are the similarities and differences between antisemitism and racism – and why is it important to know them? At this point, we do not attempt to provide complete answers to these questions. However, it is helpful to consider the following three levels:

Standardization:

Both racist and antisemitic thinking construct an out-group and an in-group. The latter is considered "normal", while "the strangers" form an alleged deviation – regardless of whether Jewish people or groups with racist attributes like "foreigners" are meant. However, there is a difference in the view of the foreign groups, namely that Jewish people in antisemitic imagination are fundamentally different from all other humans. This makes them "the other Others".

Hierarchization:

Racism sees the in-group as superior and the out-group as inferior. Racist attributions are not positive qualities: they describe racialized people as uncivilized, violent, close to nature, and backward, thereby demarcating the in-group as reasonable, rational, diligent, civilized, etc. (Even seemingly "positive" attributions like "rhythm in their blood" are

based on "racially" conditioned characteristics. They stereotype and deny acquired skills.) In antisemitism, the relationship is more complex because Jewish people are attributed with something powerful. "The Jews" are made into an out-group that is simultaneously superior and inferior: they are allegedly superior due to the conspiratorial Jewish world domination, which oppresses "the good ones" (the in-group considered normal). This idea is contrary to the racist relationship of dominance. At the same time, antisemitism attributes moral inferiority to Jewish people, characterizing them as evil, lazy, exploitative, ruthless, and dishonest.

Function:

Both ideologies can fulfill certain functions, such as when they are used to justify violence. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental functional difference: racism is intended to legitimize dominance, i.e., morally secure the global and societal unequal distribution of access and resources. Antisemitism is used as an explanation of the world by personalizing abstract structures and thus "explaining" them. Despite this difference, it is essential that there is no ranking between antisemitism and racism! In both cases, we are dealing with potentially murderous structures that must be understood and combated together and often ideologically intersect.

This can be seen in how they deal with their objects – i.e., the people made into an out-group. For example, the right-wing extremist conspiracy narrative of the "Great Replacement" claims that secret elites plan a population exchange in Western countries by controlling the immigration of migrants described with racist characteristics from countries of the Global South. The threat posed by a secret, powerful group is an antisemitic code. It is combined with a racist attribution through the portrayal of refugees as a homogeneous mass without their own motivation. This creates a hidden internal and external enemy image, ideologically combined and united in a common narrative. This is typical for right-wing extremist worldviews that are both racist and antisemitic.

Repercussions

The mentioned differences between the ideologies also involve different consequences for the treatment of their objects. In right-wing extremist thinking, racially described objects can be controlled, re-educated, and their labor exploited. Violence and destruction are **means** to achieve these goals. However, this does not work with Jewish people, as antisemites portray them as both incapable of working and overly powerful at the same time. Antisemitic violence and destruction serve the **purpose** of "liberating" the earth from all things Jewish in right-wing extremism.

Further multilingual texts on the topic of antisemitism

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www.dgb-bwt.de/wissen-fuer-alle

All texts are available in the **following languages**: Arabic, Dari, German, English, French, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese.

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