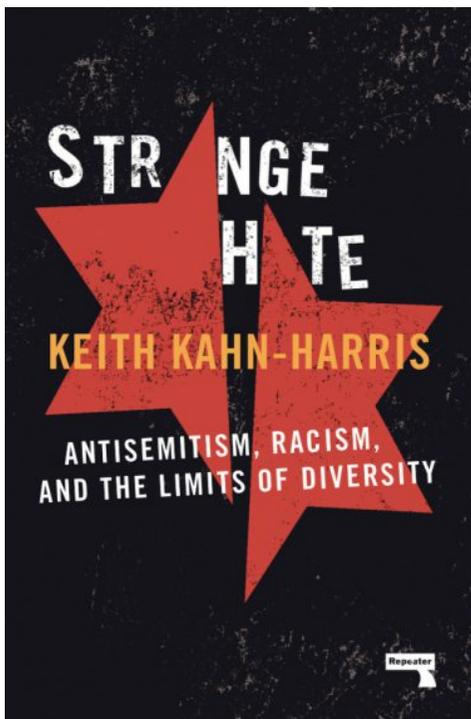


Strange Hate

Keith Kahn-Harris



Cultural hatreds have always been with us but in the modern world, racists and anti-racists alike are becoming more selective in which minorities they either embrace or reject. In *Strange Hate*, Keith Kahn-Harris argues that we are less enlightened than we imagine about what it means to live in a diverse society and offers an original take on what contemporary antisemitism can teach us about repairing the persistence of racism and civility in public life

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“Zionism, like other nationalisms, is a project that seeks to carve out a space in which a particular people can exercise agency, to determine their own future. However much that agency is constrained given our global interconnectedness, and however much Israeli governments and those who defend them often claim to ‘have no choice’ but to act in a particular way, Israel is a powerful national state with a wide range of possibilities for how it acts in the world. Jews in many countries, including the UK and US, have well-organised and well-resourced forms of communal organisation and representation. The Jewish people are not without agency.

Given this agency, how far do Jews have some level of control over how and whether antisemitism is manifested? Is antisemitism today a response to the actions Jews take and, concomitantly, could a change in Jewish behaviour result in a change in the level of antisemitism?

This is an immensely sensitive area. I was reminded of just how sensitive it is when, in 2018, I made an off-hand remark on a friend’s Facebook post about a survey showing that Armenia had higher levels of antisemitism than any other country in the Former Soviet Union. I commented ‘Well, I can’t imagine that Israeli collusion with Turkish denials of the Armenian genocide helped matters’. I regret my comment. While Israel’s past collusion with Turkish genocide denialism disgusts me, as a sociologist I should have known better than attribute a monocausal explanation to a phenomenon like antisemitism. In doing so I was indulging in a common tendency to see most antisemitism today as the inevitable blowback from Israeli actions. For example, an article in the *Morning Star* (subsequently deleted online), written in June 2018 in the wake of the killing of Gazan protestors in the ‘great march of return’, argued:

surely the Jewish organisations and individuals who lately were protesting about growing anti-semitism in Britain must see that, as advocates of Israel’s historical and still unremitting brutality against Palestinians, they will inevitably be regarded by some other British nationals as being indirectly complicit in that country’s actions ... no amount of protestations about the symptoms of rising anti-semitism or anti-Israel sentiment in Britain and elsewhere will end the problem until its root cause—Israel’s criminal behaviour—is dealt with.

Some have argued that this blowback is in a completely different category to antisemitism. Speaking of the assaults on Jews by French youth, often but not exclusively Muslim, from the deprived *banlieus*, Alain Badiou explains that ‘what these young people feel is not antisemitism, but rather a hostility, “political but not well politicized”, to what is perceived as the position of the Jews in France’. This is a hair’s-breadth away from not just justification, but even encouragement. The corollary is that, were Israel to be ‘dealt with’, the antisemitism it provokes (if indeed it could be called antisemitism) would simply melt away.

For those who argue that accusations of antisemitism on the left are confected or exaggerated, a similar mixture of acknowledgement and threat comes in the form of warnings that false accusations of antisemitism will end up producing real antisemitism. Sometimes this is expressed as a fear for the future. In July 2018, the British Jewish anti-Zionist Robert Cohen wrote:

what if Corbyn loses by a narrow margin? How will the millions who voted for him see the Jewish community and its three-year campaign to brand him toxic?

The ‘Jewish War Against Corbyn’ is not good Jewish communal politics. It’s playing with fire.

These kinds of explanations for antisemitism are unconvincing—to say the least—to Zionist Jews, and even some anti-Zionists may find them uncomfortable. Let us assume for a moment that antisemitism was purely a response to Jewish actions, either in Israel or elsewhere. Does that mean that, should Jews desist from those actions it would simply vanish? Hate has its own dynamic, and when cocooned in the framework of antisemitism, it becomes self-contained, independent of its initial causes. The state of Israel did not burst into a world unsullied by Jew-hatred. Whatever anger the foundation of Israel and its subsequent actions may have caused, pre-existing histories of antisemitism, including within Islam and within the left, often gave form and substance to the outrage.

Yet if we reject mechanistic explanations, what is left? Sometimes, antisemitism is treated as a kind of virus that exists independently of what Jews do or do not do. Antisemitism, in this view, is based on the projection

of fantasies onto Jews; fantasies that have no basis in reality. Israel is simply the latest excuse in a long line of them. The *telos* of this argument is that, given that antisemitism would exist regardless of the existence of Israel, better to have the state and face this enmity from a position of strength.

Between non-explanations that render the Jewish connection to antisemitism as entirely incidental, and explanations that see it as a consequence of Jewish behaviour, lies the ground on which antisemitism can be understood. Jews and non-Jews stand on this ground, intricately interconnected, as all of us are. Amidst this tangle lies the secret of whether a Jewish change of behaviour could eliminate antisemitism, and how far there is a limit to what they could possibly do.

To even raise the issue of responsibility in conjunction with victimhood—of antisemitism or of any kind—is to risk compounding the wounds that antisemitism causes. How could I even intimate to a Jew who has been attacked on the street or abused online that they might never have suffered had we as Jews behaved differently? Even if it were true, would it not feel like a kick in the teeth? And this isn’t just a Jewish matter. How, for example, is anyone who has been sexually abused supposed to react to discussions about responsibility?

The trouble is, to grant all self-identified victims a complete pass for all types of behaviour is also untenable. And if responsibility can ever only be with perpetrators, it risks the absurdity of seeing all victims as interchangeable: why do some people rape women and others bomb synagogues if women and Jews were not different classes of victims, attacked for different (albeit perhaps related) reasons?

The only way I can find round this impasse is to change the *stakes*. The reason this whole question is so hard is because so much rests on whether Jews or other classes of people can legitimately be understood as ‘worthy’ victims. What if things were different? What if the acceptance of agency and responsibility could coexist with the acknowledgment of pain and suffering? This would mean taking a principled stance that certain kinds of behaviours—antisemitism, rape, abuse and so on—are wrong regardless of the behaviour of the victim. In and of itself, that isn’t a novel argument. But its implications are rarely worked through to the point that I hope to do—to a place that is very uncomfortable.

Let’s say that Jews really are over-sensitive cynics who act in bad faith to avoid being accountable for the justifiable hatred their behaviour provokes. Let’s say that Israel is a state so piteously cruel and oppressive that its actions directly provoke hostility towards its Jewish supporters from people who would otherwise have never thought ill of them. Let’s say that every single Jew is so callously privileged, so blind to the suffering they cause, that no accommodation can be made with them ... *It should not matter!*

(And do I need to say that that is not what I believe about Jews? I hope not.)

Antisemitism and racism, even in its selective variants, is a form of acting and speaking that is more than ‘just’ criticism. It treats others not just as people with whom one disagrees on certain matters, but also as people who are somehow beyond consideration, beyond coexistence, beyond relationship. Everyone comes into contact with people whom one finds hateful from time to time. For the most part, the way we respond to them is to grit our teeth, maintain a façade of superficial politeness and minimise non-essential interaction. But if you have a co-worker you can’t stand, you don’t—or at least you shouldn’t—subject them to violence, conduct campaigns against them, claim they cannot be part of democratic processes, create conspiracy theories about them and refuse to protect them against the abuse of others.

Again, let’s assume that Jews, or a sub-set of Jews, are as hateful as they are painted. If you are to be a true anti-racist, you still have to treat them with some consideration, as you would an unpleasant co-worker. More than that: you have to protect them from others who would not treat them with the same consideration.

To be a true anti-racist you have to ask the question: How can we build a society in which privileged, oppressive, over-sensitive cynics can still enjoy the same level of protection as the good guys? And if you find that thought repellent or horrific, then good—because you should.

This is the ultimate answer to the antisemitism controversy: Not the embrace of some form of soggy liberal ... *continued in the book*