

Comparing Concepts of the "Other as Enemy" Scientific Imperative – Political Irritant

On a much-discussed conference of the Center for Research on Antisemitism

On 8 December 2007, the Center held an open conference on the theme of "Perceived Enemy Muslim – Perceived Enemy Jew," which drew an extraordinary amount of attention. Islamist extremism, terrorism and global jihadism – as promoted by Iranian President Ahmadinejad and even earlier by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir – were emphatically condemned at the start of the conference, whose aim was to consider developments, tendencies and trends in German society. Essays in the most recent edition of the Yearbook of Research on Antisemitism had dealt with issues of isolation of Muslims through prejudices and enemy stereotypes, as well as through general suspicion cast on all members of the Islamic faith and culture in our society, as evidenced in many forums, including the Internet.

The conference was intended as a platform for discussion of findings presented in the yearbook, so as to launch a debate on these issues. Its success was underscored by the positive reactions of most participants. Malicious commentators, most of whom did not participate in the conference but rather relied on speculation and insinuation, are using this opportunity to carry on crude campaigns.

The positions that the Center for Research on Antisemitism has taken on these issues were clearly explicated at the opening of the conference:

The Institute has always applied the categories and findings emerging from research on antisemitism to the analysis of other prejudices. This is in keeping with the intentions of founding director Herbert A. Strauss. In the 1980s, he, too, applied the results of his research – as well as his personal experience as a survivor of persecution under National Socialism – to discussions regarding German policies toward refugees. It was not his intention, nor is it ours, to equate various contexts. Rather, the aim is to conduct an analytical transfer: Research on antisemitism and prejudice is a specialization in the study of the dynamics and functions of the concept of the "other as enemy" in various spheres.

The paradigmatic role of antisemitism, due to the historical persistence of anti-Judaism and given the results of research into the structures, mechanisms and effects of the concept of the other as enemy, can and must be applied to further areas of research. This method is not tantamount to equating antisemitism with resentments against other groups.

Modern antisemitism developed in the second half of the 19th century, when a segment of the population reacted to what they perceived as threatening socio-economic change. As research shows, the concept of the other as enemy also was an anti-modern reaction to the emancipation of the Jews – an emancipation that antisemites wanted to revoke. It is possible to see the generalized demonisation of Islam in Germany today as a reaction to the integration of Muslims, in the course of which this population becomes outwardly visible, such as through the construction of mosques. For many observers who are familiar with late 19th century antisemitism, today's battles over such projects repeat motifs that were common in German debates over synagogue construction. The Center for Research on Antisemitism is an appropriate academic forum for the discussion of such issues. The Center of course continues to focus on all forms of antisemitism, including those used to attack Israel. The scholarliness of the debate is demonstrated by the fact that all related questions may be asked freely – regardless of the differentiated answers. Snap judgments, campaigns and bans on discussion are not helpful. Nor are insults or hatred directed against those who may not share one's opinion. Academic work may not be influenced by political attacks.

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