

Review of “Antisemitism Explained” by Steven Baum

Baum, Steven K. (2012). *Antisemitism Explained*. Lanham MD/Plymouth UK: University Press of America. 253 pages. \$30.

Building upon his earlier important texts *The Psychology of Genocide: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers* (Cambridge, 2008) and *When Fairy Tales Kill: The*

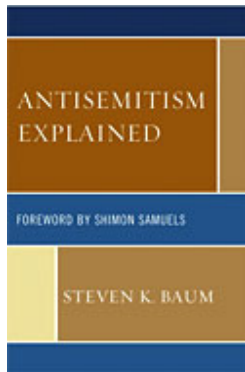


Origins and Transmission of Antisemitic Beliefs (iUniverse, 2008), and his numerous authored and so-authored articles and conducted surveys (see his extensive Bibliography in this volume, 226-242), psychologist Steven Baum has attempted the near impossible: to proffer an explanation of the world's longest hatred-antisemitism. As he himself notes in his own Introduction, the book's title is something of a misnomer, and, perhaps, should have been instead: *Antisemitism: An Attempt at An Explanation*. (Such are, indeed, the wonders of

marketing: so-called "catchy" titles sell more than accurate ones!) Be that as it may, early on he presents to the reader his psychologically-oriented theoretical understanding; the book itself then becomes a working out of his thesis:

I will offer a new model of antisemitism based on social beliefs and their transmission. The model begins with a sender who creates an antisemitic message within the larger social group. If the content of the message meets rumor criteria-provocative, concise, and consistent with what is previously known-it spreads through the culture like wildfire. People in the social circle distribute the hot message to hubs (people who are well-connected), from which it is dispersed even more widely. The repetition of the message [i.e. that Jews are the enemy, a la Nazi Joseph Goebbels, 1897-1945, and others], along with its dispersion through multiple channels, affords the message greater reliability and validity. It becomes a social truth. The message is reinforced in both cultures-explicit and implicit-in a closed feedback loop. A national and perhaps international narrative is formed and, if repeated enough, affords the impression of reality. In the court of public opinion or social beliefs, everyone knows of the Jews' culpability, so it is just a question of time before you round up the usual suspects. It does not matter if it is real. Paybacks are what they deserve.

(6)



While this reviewer would suggest that Baum's model of the social transmission of antisemitic beliefs and their working out in real physical manifestations is not necessarily new (See, for example the work of Gavin Langmuir, California, 1990, a and b, and others), what is new and, therefore, invaluable, is Baum's updating of this understanding in light of the emboldened antisemitism that now presents itself in the disguised form of anti-Zionism (i.e. strident disagreements with the sovereign State of Israel as solely responsibility for the ongoing Middle East crises and the result of its governmental, political, and military policies and actions).

What is new, however, and most genuinely appreciated, is Baum's theory of the spreading of antisemitism based on a social communications theory (i.e. "based on social fantasy" [114]) in Chapter 3 and the turning of such perverse fantasies in the case of antisemitism becoming realities even though based upon little more than rumor-mongering and having little to no bases whatsoever in fact. Coupled with questionably-successful "advertising" and not shortchanging the powerful influence of the various media, Baum's arguments regarding the longevity and durable staying-power of antisemitism make that much more sense. Furthermore, by appealing to baser instincts, antisemitic mythmaking and mongering relies on all-too-easy catchy sloganeering (e.g. the infamous Nazi slogan which regularly appeared in Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*, "Die Juden sind unser Unglück!"/"The Jews are our misfortune!"), and thus fuels an already pre-disposed population to engage in the very lethality of actions which have for far too long accompanied antisemitic chants and boasts, as Baum makes transparently clear in Chapter 4.

As he lays out his text:

Chapter One describes the psychology of the social mind-the formation of social beliefs as a narrative and the ease with which the social mind distorts...Chapter Two offers the reader an overview of how an ongoing narrative is formed...Chapter Three offers a communications model of antisemitic belief transmission with a focus on why it is the case that, as journalist Charles Krauthammer quipped, "the Jews are news."...Chapter Four introduces the theoretical notion of a cultural cauldron of superstitions, racist ideas, magical thinking, and folk tales [Here is where *When Fairy Tales Kill* is particularly valuable to the reader as a corollary text.]...Chapter Five addresses this master narrative, a social trend that labels Israel with traits of a collective Jew [Thus anti-Zionism=antisemitism.]...The final chapter explains why the pathology of antisemitic beliefs is here to stay in all its forms, and examines some alternatives for stemming the communication flow. (7-8)

While occasionally lapsing into the jargon of own professional discourse, particularly in the narrative explanations of the various surveys and data, Baum

does an excellent job of laying out for the non-psychologist/non-psychotherapist reader his various theses chapter by chapter.

Sharing his conclusion echoed numerous times throughout his text that "antisemitism will always exist because *people are prone to believe social fantasies about the Jews more than realities*" (xvi, emphasis in original), and even go far as to say "I am scared enough because I know enough about the psychology of genocide to believe that a Second Holocaust of Israel is imminent" (xiv), this reviewer would rephrase these tragically sad comments even more pointedly, "as long as there is Judaism, there will be anti-Judaism (antisemitism); as long as there are Jews, there will be Jew-haters (antisemites); and as long as there is Israel and Israelis, there will be anti-Zionists (antisemites, despite their protestations to the contrary!)." The ultimate question, then, becomes not the "how" of antisemitism (i.e. how it manifests itself over the generations) because we already have a cache of far too many examples, but the why of antisemitism (what is there in the human personality that all too easily predisposes itself to prejudice, hatred, stereotyping, and worse.) Given Baum's professional experiences as a practicing psychotherapist, and references to having addressed patients one manifestation of whose illness is hatred of the other, his concluding chapter is particularly significant and important. Before doing so, however, one is well-advised to heed Baum's cautionary note regarding "the futility of trying to fight bad information with good information" with "the disturbing reality that once an idea has been implanted in people's minds, it can be difficult to dislodge" (137). Hence the challenge-despite the additional awareness that "politics and power will always trump mental health" (208).

Finally, while Baum does make the rather astute negative observation. Can sufficient interventions be made to stem the flow of antisemitic beliefs? Probably not. Perhaps some changes are possible, but the need to stay tribal through our social identity remains, and in that sense the die is cast in the world's morality play" (209)

He does hold out two inviting possibilities: education (217-219) and defiance of collective social (im)morality (219-221). From his unique vantage point and perspective, therefore, one would have wished for an additional final chapter exploring in far greater depth these two possibilities with concrete suggestions for their implementations. One can only hope that book is in the offing.

Overall, Steven Baum has written an important text on the difficult topic of understanding antisemitism. In doing so, he has enlarged our common conversation by bring to bear the insights of a discipline of which far too many of us know far too little. For that, too, he is to be commended.

References

Baum, Steven K. (2008). *The Psychology of Genocide: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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