Elements of Controversy: Responses to Anti-Semitism in Nascent German Social Science

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Abstract Employing Marcelo Dascal's theory and typology of controversies, this chapter attempts to pull together certain elements of the writing of Georg Simmel (1858–1918), the founder of formal sociology; Franz Boas (1858–1942), the founder of cultural anthropology; and Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943), the founder of Jewish sociology and demography, and interpret them with regard to the then contemporary social, political, or scientific anti-Semitism. Through a comparison of their writing, the chapter argues that Ruppin was engaged in a discussion with anti-Semitic writers, as the object of disagreement, anti-Semitic reaction to Jewish difference, was treated as being well circumscribed. Simmel was engaged in a dispute, the source of disagreement rooted in differences of attitude, feelings, or preferences, transcending Jews as a specified object. Boas approached a controversy, revolving around specific objects and problems but spreading to broader methodological issues. The chapter points to the fact that none of these discourses meet Dascal's minimal definition of a controversy, because of the absence of a structured sequence of polemic exchanges (POPO). The chapter attempts to answer why this is so.

Keywords History of antisemitism • History of sociology • History of anthropology • Jewish history • European history

1 Introduction

The starting point for the following deliberations is this curious fact: in the intense social scientific writing that directly or indirectly touched on "the Jewish problem," "Jewish difference," or "the Jews" in the final decades of the nineteenth century

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and the first decades of the twentieth, virtually none conforms with Marcelo Dascal's sequence of proponent–opponent–proponent (POPO), a sequence that serves as a condition for defining polemic exchanges as a controversy, a debate, or a discussion (Dascal 2000).[1] The development of the social sciences occurred simultaneously with the rise of the anti-Semitic movement, a movement that was at first political in nature but which was also advocated in various ways in academic publications. It is easy, in this context, to point to a plethora of attitudes toward the above signifiers based on different methodological, epistemic, ontological, and ideological outlooks. It is also not hard to document clashes in the academic sphere between various views on these signifiers. There is no question, then, that in the various fields that were undergoing codification as the "social sciences" in the final decades of the nineteenth century, "Jews" and "the Jewish question" were subject of heated disagreement. One need only recall the exchange between German historian Heinrich von Treitschke and Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz or that between Treitschke and Roman historian Theodore Mommsen.[2] Unlike these famous controversies, that in different ways touched on Jews and anti-Semitism, those of the academic founders of modern German social science, while displaying various modes that approach a controversy, fall short of the POPO criteria: the production of competing "facts," different interpretations of the same facts or facts drawn from the same repertoire, and the appropriation of empirical facts by opposing writers and their reinterpretation (see Hart 2006).

There is virtually no record of a sequence in which writers would directly address and challenge each others' presuppositions, arguments, modes of argumentation, and inferences. In this chapter I will show, in a very brief form, elements from three responses to anti-Semitism that approach the three modes of controversy.[3] But underlying the following discussion is the question, to which I return in my concluding comments, as to how we explain the fact that we find in this sphere only elements of controversy rather than a true controversy, and that this is so on both fronts, so to speak: that of the typology of controversies, and that of early formulations of social science with regard to Jews, Jewish difference, and anti-Semitism.

In the following I attempt to briefly demonstrate responses to social, political, and scientific anti-Semitism that approach the three types of polemical exchange by drawing on the work of Georg Simmel, one of the founders of academic sociology; Franz Boas, the founder of American cultural anthropology; and Arthur Ruppin, the founder of German Jewish sociology and demography. The three were involved in different ways and to different degrees in exchanges that could be interpreted

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[1]For an application in a different field, see Dascal and Cremaschi (1999).

[2]For historical particulars of the exchange between Treitschke and Graetz, see Lindemann (1997). There is immense literature on the *Antisemitismus Streit* which to a great extent was fired by the exchange between Treitschke and Mommsen. For a recent account, see Krieger (2003).

[3]For a wider historical background, see my "Circumventions and confrontations: Responses to antisemitism in Georg Simmel, Franz Boas, and Arthur Ruppin." For a more detailed analysis of these responses in rhetorical terms, see "Argumentative patterns and epistemic considerations: Responses to antisemitism in the conceptual history of social science."

as polemical: dispute, debate, and controversy. In each case I pull out just one typical thread from their respective extensive writing and interpret it according to the pragmatics of the typology of controversies. Treating the writings of Simmel, Boas, and Ruppin as a site of intense controversy and distinguishing between strategic moves (tied to overall aims) and tactical ones (contingent on demands), it is possible to show that with regard to anti-Semitism, the three were engaged in three kinds of discourse: Ruppin accepted many of anti-Semitism's assumptions about Jews while repudiating their judgment – Ruppin was engaged in a "discussion" with anti-Semitic writers, that is, a polemical exchange whose object is a well-circumscribed topic or problem. Simmel denied the racial foundation of anti-Semitism, based on radical individualism – Simmel was engaged in a "dispute," which may appear to revolve around a well-defined object, but its source of disagreement is rooted in differences of attitude, feelings, or preferences. Rejecting biological determinism in the name of cultural relativism, Boas subsumed anti-Semitism into racism – he was involved in a "controversy" with anti-Semitic writers; a controversy may begin with a specific problem but spreads to other problems and disagreements, such as methodology.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was born in Berlin to parents who had converted to Protestant and Catholic Christianity before his birth. While he was aware that the family was ethnically of Jewish descent, he was brought up a Protestant. Franz Boas (1858–1942) was born in the same year as Simmel, in Minden (Westphalia), to a Jewish family highly acculturated to German culture. The family was not religious or observant but celebrated the major Jewish festivals. Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943) was born 18 years after Simmel and Boas, in Rawitsch/Rawicz, Posen, then Prussia and today Poland, and was brought up in a mildly observant family.

2   Georg Simmel: Circumvention as Strategy

Simmel never referred to anti-Semitism as a circumscribed social phenomenon or even employed the word "anti-Semitism" in his publications. This does not reflect lack of interest on Simmel's behalf, or his failure to notice the existence of anti-Semitism in German society, but rather it is a sign that he viewed it as a particularly sensitive matter that necessitated great caution (Köhnke 1996: 145). Simmel supported Jewish integration into German society and culture and, as Köhnke has observed, viewed any public allusion to anti-Semitism by individuals of Jewish descent as a potential obstacle to that integration. Substantiation for this interpretation can be found in the fact that in his private correspondences, Simmel refers more than once to anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria (Köhnke 1996: 147).

His response to anti-Semitism is evident in several interconnected layers, ranging from general epistemic considerations to more specific allusions to race or Jews. Simmel does not deny the reality of markers of Jewish difference, but, based on a specific set of sociological principles, attempts to undermine the anti-Semitic claim

that these markers are biologically innate or racially determined. His sociological theory conditions references to Jews, racial difference, or anti-Semitic sentiments to the status of secondary social constructions. Rhetorically, his strategy is to circumvent the definition of anti-Semitism as a separate object or set of social interactions with distinctive characteristics.[4]

I demonstrate Simmel's pitching of his response to the theoretical register by analyzing the way his notion of "social type" impinges on the interpretation of Jewish difference. Specifically, this notion transforms differences commonly conceived as racial into socially constituted ones. Simmel developed the notions of social form and social type in terms of individual "interaction," as individual interaction sustains society and is the ultimate basis of sociology (see Frisby 1992: 5–19).

His insistence that social forms and social types were the result of individual interaction undermined common conceptions of society and culture as deriving from natural strata, as well as biological conceptions of "*Volk*" or "race." Thus, his concept opposed the terms of discourse that supported the representation of Jews as foreign to the "body" of the nation, race, or the state.

Simmel develops the notion of "social type" in his programmatic essay "How is society possible?" and employs it for the analysis of numerous such types (1971: 6–22). It is developed through the discussion of three "sociological a-priorities." The first principle is that the picture of another person is distorted in principle (1971: 9). This is because every person has a core of individuality which cannot be subjectively reproduced by another. As a result, we think of the individual with his or her singularity under universal categories. In order to recognize that individual, we subsume him or her under a general type.

This sociological apriority is closely connected to an additional consideration, namely, that the other person is never "entirely himself" but only a fragment of himself. Yet, humans cannot grasp fragments, only wholes (1971: 10). As a result, the other person is typed according to the idealization of his personality from given fragments. Simmel's second sociological a priori consideration is that "each element of a group is not a societary part, but beyond that something else" (1971: 10). This "constitutes the positive condition for the fact that he is such a group member in other aspects of his being" (1971: 10). Simmel's third principle is that "society is a structure of unequal elements," but the possibility of belonging to a society rests on the assumption that each individual "is automatically referred to a determined position within his social milieu, that this position ideally belonging to him is also actually present in the social whole" (1971: 18). This precondition is at the basis of the claim that for every given personality, a position and a function exist within the

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[4]His strategy of dealing with anti-Semitism, therefore, reflects his style of conducting controversy: indirect allusions characterize also his controversies with Emile Durkheim and with Wilhelm Dilthey. On his controversy with Durkheim, see my "The Controversy over the Foundation of Sociology and its Object: Simmel's Form versus Durkheim's Collectivity."

society to which the personality is "called," and there is an imperative to search until it is found. Particular social types are conceived as cast by the specifiable reactions and expectations of others.

These a-priorities are at the root of Simmel's entire sociological work. They can also be seen as a response to anti-Semitism in the following way. Simmel maintains that the creation of social types rests on an intimate dialectics between individuals and others. Types, therefore, are to a great extent "negative," that is, imposed by way of interaction. The relations are with others who assign an individual a particular position and expect him to behave in specific ways. Furthermore, this is not entirely an individual matter in the sense that his characteristics are seen as attributes of the social structure. The gist of this interpretation is that an individual assigned to a certain type, be it that of the poor, the whore, the stranger, or any other, has his individual features completed (*ergänzt*) into more general categories of types. In other words, types are socially mediated categories rather than naturally classified differences. Both "social form" and "social type" establish the sociological method on methodological individualism and view social relations and social identities in individual terms. While Simmel's motivations cannot be reduced to countering anti-Semitism, these principles clearly contest biological, racial, and historical collectivistic accounts of Jews, Jewish difference, and anti-Semitic sentiments or social forms. This theory frames Jews as individual humans who are classified as "Jews" following the sociological a priori principles elucidated above; similarly, it classifies anti-Semitism as a social form, a condensation of individual interactions, rather than a racial instinct.

Simmel's sociological theory determines anti-Semitic sentiments as, ultimately, secondary results of individual interactions. His radical epistemological individualism rules out the possibility of a social form being racially determined. This interpretation of anti-Semitism is opposed widespread late nineteenth century views that anti-Semitism was primarily a natural or biological phenomenon, constituting the instinctive aversion of non-Jews toward Jews.

3 Franz Boas: Dispute over Method

Boas was a student when anti-Semitism became a recognized, institutionalized student movement (Cole 1999: 58–59). It is possible to argue that Boas's writings address anti-Semitism in three different anthropological arenas: first, contributions to the field of physical anthropology; second, articles that addressed anti-Semitism and racism directly; and third, works that undermined racist scientific methodologies. Here I will demonstrate the latter group.

The most important aspect of Boas's response to anti-Semitism, however, is found in his methodological criticism of racist anthropology.[5] The essay "On Alternating Sounds" (1889) illustrates how Boas employs methodological grounds

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[5]Stocking (1968).

in order to counter racist anthropology. The article was a response to a paper presented a year earlier by anthropologist and linguist Daniel Garrison Brinton. Brinton observed that in the spoken languages of many Native Americans, certain sounds regularly alternated. Based on evolutionary theory, Brinton interpreted this as a sign of linguistic inferiority, claiming that Native Americans were at a lower stage of evolution. In his response, Boas argued that "alternating sounds" was not a feature of Native American languages but rather a reflection of the culturally determined nature of human perception. What Brinton conceived as alternating sounds did not reflect how the Inuit might pronounce a word, but rather how one phonetic system (the English one) was unable to accommodate another one (the Inuit). Employing a form of neo-Kantian critique, Boas made a unique contribution to the methods of descriptive linguistics. Yet, his ultimate goal was that the perceptual categories of Western researchers risk systematically misperceiving a meaningful element in another culture. What appeared to be evidence of cultural inferiority was, in fact, the consequence of unscientific methods, and reflected Western beliefs as their perceived superiority. This essay did not touch on anti-Semitism directly, but bore on Jews, who in Europe were marked as primitive remnants of an inferior life-form that inexplicably had survived into modern society (Steinberg 1995: 59–114).

Boas's major contribution was his "normalizing" of anti-Semitism. Aligning Jews with other minorities, he transformed anti-Semitism into a sub-case of "racism" and "prejudice," and subordinated anti-Semitism to racism.

4   Arthur Ruppin: A Debate with Anti-Semites

"Antisemitism cannot be overcome by opposing its arguments alone," Ruppin claimed in *The Sociology of the Jews.*[6] This statement captures an aspect of Ruppin's attitude, more pragmatic than Simmel's theoretical and Boas's methodological register of response.

The study of anti-Semitism became a cornerstone of his academic project, inherent to his model for the sociological and demographic study of contemporary Jewry from his *Die Juden der Gegenwart* (1904), through *The Jews of Today* (1913), *Soziologie der Juden* (1930), *The Jews in the Modern World* (1935), to *The Jewish Fate and Future* (1940) which was published after Germany had invaded Poland, with its huge Jewish population, and the outbreak of WWII.

Ruppin's perspective on anti-Semitism is intertwined with his Zionist convictions. His response to anti-Semitic representations is based on certain ontological assumptions concerning social reality. While according to Ruppin anti-Semitism was a multilayered phenomenon, at its most primitive, fundamental level, anti-Semitism flows from a "group instinct," an anthropological, permanent feature of

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[6]Ruppin (1930: 41 [Hebrew, translation mine], 1940: 207).

human nature[7]: "Any person who is not born within the group but enters its territory as a migrant, or as a member of a subjugated group, is regarded an alien" (1940: 207). The elements of controversy directed against anti-Semitic accounts found in Ruppin's writing, therefore, are not attempts to provide an alternative theory that would explain anti-Semitism or to dispute the methodology of anti-Semitic writers, but rather expressions of his disagreements with the particulars of anti-Semitic representations of Jews and Jewish difference. This stance is at the basis of the "statistical wars" in which Ruppin was engaged.

It is precisely in this that one finds the element of debate in Ruppin's (1930) response: even when he counters anti-Semitic accusations, Ruppin's categories do not fundamentally differ from those of his anti-Semitic opponents. For instance, when Ruppin criticizes racial anti-Semitism, he attempts to refute its allegations based on what he asserts to be the superior standard for the measurement of interracial hatred: the rate of intermarriage. That is, his refutation is based not on the register of the particular statistics, but on shared acceptance, at least implicitly, of the veracity of such a category of interracial hatred. Rather than moving from a specific social phenomenon to a general category, his direction is the opposite, from universal categories of analysis to the specific features of anti-Semitism as a phenomenon. Indeed, from descriptions of the anti-Semitic accusations, Ruppin moves directly to a detailed discussion of statistical rates of Jewish criminality, in order to repudiate anti-Semitic allegations; likewise, he dealt with other features of Jewish life that were statistically measured such as alcoholism, mental disorders, rates of suicide, and medical pathologies. On all these Ruppin disputed the statistical representations of his anti-Jewish opponents not by calling into question the categories, or the validity of the statistical methods and techniques, but by providing alternative statistical representations. Ruppin responds to anti-Semitic accusations from what he perceives as empirical reality, based on the same categories. In agreement with Dascal's typology, of the three, only Ruppin sought agreement with his opponents.

Ruppin refers to the "slender" foundations of the Aryan theory and his interpretation of that theory is primarily functional: the theory comes to reawaken the defeated German people, a means of restoring confidence. Ruppin's discussion of the theory is remarkably ironic, even sarcastic (1930: 233–234). In *Sociology of the Jews* (33–36), Ruppin attacks Aryan racial theory and denies that it is the objective source of anti-Semitism. He also emphasizes, quoting Nazi racial writer Fritz Lenz, the placing of races in a hierarchical structure. Ruppin (1940) returns to the social aspect of hatred, insisting that anti-Semitism (like anti-African racism) has an important social element to it, namely, the "unbearable fact" of the freed slave. Ruppin distinguishes Christian anti-Jewish sentiment from racial anti-Semitism and criticizes, in particular, the Aryan racial theory of the "spiritual Judaization" of culture. He opposes the view that anti-Semitism is a specifically modern phenomenon and, in practice, views its expressions as manifestations of

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[7]See also *Sociology of the Jews* [Hebrew], 30.

one and the same phenomenon. Ruppin's historical account differs, therefore, from Simmel's or Boas's, as Ruppin is not driven to separate between "objective" and "subjective" features of anti-Semitism, nor does he attempt to follow the role of the subjective in constituting the "objective." His rejection of a "general theory" of prejudice of which anti-Semitism is only a sub-case is at the core of his concepts and rhetorical strategy.

5 Concluding Comments

This chapter has pulled together certain elements of the writing of Simmel, Boas, and Ruppin and interpreted them with regard to social, political, or scientific anti-Semitism and in relation to their fit with Marcelo Dascal's three types of controversy. Ruppin was engaged in a discussion with anti-Semitic writers, as the object of disagreement, anti-Semitic reaction to Jewish difference, was treated as being well circumscribed. Simmel was engaged in a dispute, the source of disagreement rooted in differences of attitude, feelings, or preferences, transcending Jews as a specified object. Boas approached a controversy, revolving around specific objects and problems, but spreading to broader methodological issues.

As mentioned earlier, among the founders of the German social sciences, there is no record of a sequence of polemical exchanges that qualifies, according to Dascal's definitions, as a controversy. In my brief concluding comments, I would like to take a step back and suggest an explanation of this fact, attempting to draw from it several tentative conclusions regarding the historical subject at hand as well as about the definition of controversies in a wider sense.

This chapter focused on three writers. The two older of the three, Simmel and Boas (both born in 1858), were born to a generation that was deeply committed to German liberal cultural values and to the idea of the integration of German Jews into German society. While politically there is no question that they greatly opposed anti-Semitism as a political movement, as a set of beliefs, and as a social phenomenon, both intuitively believed it would be counterproductive to challenge the views of their opponents directly. Both also recognized, as we have learned above, that the true source of disagreement between them and anti-Semites was wider than the latter's prejudices concerning Jews, and pertained to much broader theoretical, methodological, and ontological matters that touched on questions of what society is and what a modern society is. Ruppin (who was born in 1876) belonged to a generation that was forced (and was able) to confront anti-Semitism more directly (Zionism, of course, in certain respects involved such a mode of response).

Simmel and Boas, arguably more than Ruppin, also belonged to a generation that developed over the course of their career the epistemological basis for their respective disciplines. Their style of argumentation, which is in many respects very different, shared the tendency to define the field of enquiry, its possible objects of enquiry, and its modes of study in a positive as well as a negative sense. What I

mean by "negative sense" is that their respective definitions decided what was not within the purview of their respective fields (and therefore would have to be studied elsewhere) as well as what could qualify as a social explanation. This cultural mode of writing does not encourage controversies and could be viewed, in certain senses, as a form of "autism." Nonetheless, in certain respects, as a strategy, it was in fact a very powerful way to deny the symbolic presence of that with which they disagreed. Avoiding controversies on subjects they did not want to acknowledge allowed them not only to define unilaterally their respective fields but also to avoid having to deal with the challenges of their opponents. They could choose to avoid entering controversies on anti-Semitism and the Jewish question, however, only because this fitted the larger academic discursive culture, in which to establish the epistemic, ontological, and methodological principles of a given field did not necessitate entering into controversies with competing or opposing views.

Of the three, Ruppin came closest to engagement in a controversy centered directly on Jews that was not centered primarily on or diverted to methodological or theoretical questions. This makes the work of the historian easier than in the other more ambiguous and sometimes camouflaged modes, where the historian must deduce disagreements interpretatively from contexts, co-texts, and subtexts. The "cases" of anti-Semitism and the Jewish question, then, can serve as powerful heuristic devices for probing modes of academic culture.

By way of conclusion I would like to shift the perspective from the subject of anti-Semitism to that of the powerful typology of controversies, and to certain questions to the answer of which this typology could be put by way of the cases discussed above. If, indeed, the POPO criteria defines a controversy, we would have to conclude that in the field of nascent German social science, no controversy took place with regard to anti-Semitism and the Jewish question. If, however, we believe anti-Semitism and the Jewish question were, in fact, a highly controversial subject, then we would be inclined to consider that on some occasions and in some circumstances, softer, more flexible definitions unearth polemic exchanges where the comprehensive classification is not met.

Another important observation by Marcelo Dascal is helpful at this point. Dascal adds that for the analysis of polemical exchanges, one must also consider in what kind of exchange actors perceive themselves to be participating; in other words, whether they conceive their own and their opponents' views as mutually exclusive and whether they view the exchange as a discussion or a dispute, a fact that determines their expectations and interpretations in the debate. Indeed, in this sense, Simmel and Boas – maybe even more than Ruppin – believed they were engaged in a discourse that was mutually exclusive. The specific variant of controversy studied here suggests that in certain historical and cultural contexts, the conventions of controversy differ and, in this case, the decision whether to confront a writer by name or to address a subject directly may itself have expressive dimensions, which should not be interpreted as lack of polemic intent but rather, on the contrary, as the presence of serious disagreement; it is, so to speak, "the continuation of controversy by other means."

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