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# On “antisemitism”

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**One specious argument that those of us active in Palestine solidarity hear time after time is the hoary line that "Jews are not really Semites, so why say that they are the victims of antisemitism", or its many variants, such as "Palestinians are Semites too".**

The argument is specious because it is generally used not in a spirit of genuine inquiry, but in order to obscure and even justify incidents of anti-Jewish bigotry. But it is also specious because it uses pseudo-scientific arguments and half-understood etymological claims to make a reactionary political case.

In the first place, there is no such thing as a "Semite". Race is a social construct, not a biological essence, and this is particularly true of the so-called "Semitic race". Until the nineteenth century, the term "Semitic" referred solely to a linguistic group, including Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Amharic and related languages. Significantly, neither Yiddish - the language of East European Ashkenazi Jews - nor Ladino - the language of Sefardi Jews in the Ottoman empire - is a Semitic language.

## "Race science"

With the development of European "race science" in the nineteenth century, the term was expanded to suggest that all speakers of Semitic languages were also racially related. Despite Jews not speaking a Semitic language except in prayer, they were arbitrarily included in this spurious category.

And later, when Jew-hater Wilhelm Marr sought to give a pseudo-scientific gloss to the bigotry he had expressed in his notorious book *The Victory of the Jewish Spirit over the Germanic Spirit*, he named his new anti-Jewish organisation the Antisemiten-Liga.

This was an explicitly anti-Jewish organisation; there is no evidence of Marr ever attacking any Arabs or Ethiopians. And since then, the term antisemitism, however misleading, has been used to mean anti-Jewish racism.

For some reason, when Marr's campaign was reported in England and his works translated, the term "Antisemitismus" acquired a hyphen and a capital, and became "anti-Semitism". This form of the term compounds the difficulties in using the term, since it implies an essential "Semitism" which the antisemites are combatting.

Indeed, this was precisely Marr's intention in coining the word. It is clear what anti-racists or anti-capitalists are opposing, but what exactly are "anti-Semites" combatting?

The problem with the term is that it implies that anti-Jewish racism is something separate from other expressions of racism. It is not hatred of Jews, but opposition to the mythical "Semitism" which we embody.

Taken to its extreme, the term even implies that the reason for anti-Jewish racism is to be found within Jews ourselves, rather than in the racist society in which we all live - an argument that is explicitly advanced by the antisemitic charlatan Gilad Atzmon. [\[1\]](#)

## On “antisemitism”

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By now, unfortunately, we are stuck with the term "antisemitism", with all of its shortcomings. We need to be clear that any arguments about whether Jews really are "Semites", or whether speakers of Semitic languages really can be antisemitic, are diversionary tactics.

The term was coined to mean anti-Jewish racism, and this is the way in which we should understand and when appropriate use it.

But we should not contribute to the racist myth of an essential "Semitism", characteristic to Jews, and demonstrated explicitly in the hyphenated form of the term.

Increasingly, scholars and activists, of different political perspectives, have argued against hyphenating the term, making very similar arguments. I recognise that most people who use the hyphenated form are not aware of this socio-linguistic debate, and are certainly not trying to perpetuate the myth of "the eternal Jew".

But I urge everyone to think of this when writing about anti-Jewish racism, and to consider exactly what message you want to convey. We won't change the world by changing our language, least of all by dropping a hyphen. But as part of a broader struggle, even symbolic changes matter.

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[1] Note, for instance, his comments "65 years after the liberation of Auschwitz we should reclaim our history and ask why? Why were the Jews hated? Why did European people stand up against their next door neighbours? Why are the Jews hated in the Middle East, surely they had a chance to open a new page in their troubled history?", "Jewish-ness isn't at all a racial category, but a mindset that some of us possess and very few of us try to oppose. The Nazi hatred toward anything even remotely Jewish could also be explained as a form of hostility towards the Jew within", and "It is time for Jews to look in the mirror and try to identify what it is in Jews and their culture that evokes so much fury. It may even be possible that some Jews would take this opportunity to apologise to the Gentiles around them for evoking all this anger."