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Lars Fischer

Excerpt

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Introduction

SPOT THE JEWISH CONNECTION!

Any assessment of past encounters between antisemitism and anti-antisemitism will obviously depend on a sound understanding of what people did and did not mean when they talked about antisemitism. What exactly were they taking issue with when they professed their opposition to it? What did people actually mean when they said that they encountered very little or a great deal of antisemitism, that they considered it a threat or a negligible nuisance? Is it likely, for that matter, always to be obvious to us when people were referring to antisemitism or ‘the Jews’? How Imperial German Social Democrats did and did not speak about antisemitism and ‘the Jewish Question’ will therefore be a central issue throughout this book. As will soon become evident, their habits and assumptions when speaking (or choosing to remain silent) about antisemitism differed in a number of fairly substantial ways from ours. To help drive this point home, I want to begin by presenting two short texts and asking my readers to try and spot their ‘Jewish connection’. Do these texts refer to either antisemitism and/or matters Jewish and, if so, how? All will be revealed – for the first text in the course of the introduction and for the second text in the final chapter.

[Our opponents] held their party congress in Kassel from 8 to 10 October. The deliberations began with a toast to the *Kaiser* and a Bismarck commemoration. In the debate that followed the report of the *Fraktion* [parliamentary party] on parliamentary activities, Werner reprimanded the stance of those members of the *Fraktion* that had voted *against the naval bill* while Bindewald defended this course. Subsequently, the main point of discussion was the *Mittelstandspolitik* [economic policy predicated on small and medium-sized independent enterprises]. Two motions were carried stipulating, firstly, that the party should oppose cooperative associations and junk markets [*Ramschbazzare*] as well as female competition in offices and shops and, secondly, that it should strive for the abolition of all cooperative associations for civil servants and officers and all private savings associations.

[This publication] epitomizes Lassalle’s merits and Lassalle’s faults. In this publication, to begin with the latter, Lassalle frequently indulges in the most ugly quibbling that tends towards a distortion of his opponent’s notions. His

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inclination, professed by himself in his diary, to take refuge in shouting down where arguments fail, shows itself here too: on several occasions the polemic no longer refutes, but merely shouts down. Lassalle is not content with the demonstration of his opponent's inadequacy in terms of his scholarly aptitude and the nature of his suggestions, ultimately he also questions his opponent's motives excessively, while passing over Schulze's factual objections to the idea of state-financed production co-operatives with a few unproven assertions.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SOCIALISM'S DEALINGS WITH
ANTISEMITISM AND 'THE JEWISH QUESTION'

The issue of Socialism's dealings with antisemitism and 'the Jewish Question' is by no means a new one. A relatively lively debate on the matter ensued especially from the mid-1940s to the early 1980s, and Jack Jacobs subsequently revisited the debate with a number of essays published together as a monograph fifteen years ago.¹ Initially, interest in the matter presumably stemmed from two sources. On the one hand, German Social Democracy had, to say the very least, obviously not succeeded in immunising the bulk of its constituency sufficiently against antisemitism for it to have presented a serious hurdle to the perpetration of the Shoah. On the other hand, Stalin's antisemitic campaigns and the antisemitic subplot of the East European show trials in the early 1950s clearly reinforced the need to question the more or less automatic assumption that the political Left was above suspicion when it came to antisemitism.

The relevant literature can be divided roughly into two strands. The more pessimistic line extends from Edmund Silberner² and George Lichtheim³ to Robert Wistrich.⁴ Shlomo Na'aman also tended increasingly in this direction towards the end of his life.⁵ This school of thought maintained that the Socialist movement does indeed have a substantial problem to address in connection with its (past) dealings with antisemitism and 'the Jewish Question'. Silberner went even further and occasionally suggested that Socialism had generated its very own antisemitic tradition. Needless to say, this more critical evaluation was also well in keeping with the conceptual endeavours of those, from Talmon to Sternhell, who argued that the Enlightenment project in its entirety was intrinsically totalitarian and that it was therefore

¹ Jack Jacobs, *On Socialists and "the Jewish Question" after Marx* (New York: New York University Press, 1992). Hereafter Jacobs, *Socialists*.

² Cf. Edmund Silberner, *Sozialisten zur Judenfrage* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1962). Hereafter Silberner, *Sozialisten*; idem, *Kommunisten zur Judenfrage* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1983).

³ Cf. George Lichtheim, 'Socialism and the Jews,' in *Dissent* (July–August 1968): 314–342.

⁴ Cf. Robert S. Wistrich, *Socialism and the Jews* (London, Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982). Hereafter Wistrich, *Socialism*.

⁵ Cf. Shlomo Na'aman, *Marxismus und Zionismus* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1997). Hereafter Na'aman, *Marxismus*.

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little wonder if the political Left and the political Right seemed virtually indistinguishable at certain junctures.

The other, more optimistic line of scholarship evaluating especially Imperial German Social Democracy's track record began with Paul Massing.⁶ It was propagated in one of Shulamit Volkov's earlier papers⁷ and culminated in Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel's monograph published in 1978.⁸ Here it was argued that all its relevant shortcomings notwithstanding, Social Democracy had ultimately stood firm against antisemitism. Nobody could reasonably have assumed that all the ambiguities and deficiencies that can indeed be demonstrated should have been representative of Social Democracy rather than marking the exceptions that prove the rule.

In fact, both schools of thought share an important underlying consensus. They agree that Social Democracy was the least antisemitic of the significant political camps in both Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic. Yet, while for some this is already the answer, for others this is only where the interesting questions begin. As Volkov pointed out in her review of Leuschen-Seppel's monograph, Leuschen-Seppel ultimately concluded that 'while the [Social Democratic] party was practically immune against antisemitism on the political level, it consistently succumbed to it on the cultural level'. Yet this failure surely 'must be seen as fatal indeed' when set in relation to the fact that it was precisely 'the persistence of a cultural system of norms, vocabulary, and associations',⁹ rather than a direct continuity of organised ideological antisemitism, that facilitated the transmission of antisemitism from Imperial Germany to the Weimar period. This was a process of transmission, then, in which Social Democracy, given its susceptibility to this 'cultural system', was clearly implicated, its party-political opposition to organised party-political antisemitism notwithstanding.

GERMAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE MARXIST PROJECT

Yet in order to examine the relevance and dynamics of this 'cultural system' by checking for its impact on Social Democracy as the sector of non-Jewish Imperial German society we would least expect to subscribe to it, we need to define our focus more precisely. It should be commonplace by now that neither 'the working class' nor 'the labour movement' can form our frame

⁶ Paul W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949). Hereafter Massing, *Rehearsal*. On the background here cf. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press [2nd edition], 1996): 170–171, 219–252. Hereafter Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*. Martin Jay's monograph on the Frankfurt School was first published in 1973.

⁷ Shulamit Volkov, 'The Immunization of Social Democracy Against Anti-semitism in Imperial Germany,' in *TAJb Beiheft 2* (1977): 63–81.

⁸ Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel, *Sozialdemokratie und Antisemitismus im Kaiserreich* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1978). Hereafter Leuschen-Seppel, *Sozialdemokratie*.

⁹ Volkov, 'Review,' 546.

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of reference here, nor even Social Democracy in its entirety. In Imperial Germany, ‘Social Democracy’ was, after all, the generic term used to refer to the entire spectrum of organisations under the sway of the Socialist labour movement. This resulted not least from the simply breath-taking degree of disenfranchisement – political, social and cultural – to which the German working class was initially subjected. As a result, Social Democracy replicated a wide-ranging net of institutions which in effect simulated the rights and integration refused their constituency within mainstream Imperial German society. As Peter Netti¹⁰ and others¹¹ have pointed out, the problem in this context is that a subculture like this can come to hinge all too exclusively on the profound sense of disenfranchisement that led to its creation in the first place. Those belonging to it are then highly likely to seize the first best opportunity to substitute the real thing, in other words integration into society, for the replicated sense of belonging offered by their subculture.

By 1914, the membership of the party exceeded one million and many more were associated with Social Democracy more generally. To want to make claims as to what ‘the members’ or ‘the supporters’ of Social Democracy thought and wanted is an extremely daring enterprise. That is not to say that it is impossible to reconstruct, within certain limits, the impact on the rank-and-file of the sorts of debates that will feature prominently throughout this book, and it goes without saying that this is an important task in its own right. Yet, in order to do so we first need to reconstruct and understand as precisely as possible the options and influences that are likely to have helped shape the perceptions and choices of the rank-and-file and it is to this first step that this book is dedicated.

One point often conveniently forgotten in this context is that the single most important formative influence (potential) Imperial German Socialists were subjected to was obviously not specifically Social Democratic at all. Just like everyone else, potential Social Democrats needed to confront the attempts of the state, the church and mainstream society to churn out and maintain loyal Imperial subjects. When it comes to such phenomena as authoritarianism, lack of initiative and the much-cited ‘revolutionary attentism’ within Social Democracy¹² the odds are, therefore, that these were not so much vices created by Social Democracy. Rather, they reflected attitudes and behavioural patterns that Imperial German society considered

¹⁰ J. P. Netti, ‘The German Social Democratic Party 1890–1914 as a Political Model,’ in *Past & Present* No. 30 (April 1965): 65–95.

¹¹ Especially Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹² Cf. Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus* (Frankfurt/Main, Vienna: Propyläen, 1973); idem, *Emanzipation und Integration* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1999); Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn–Bad Godesberg: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft [3rd corrected edition], 1972).

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virtuous and Social Democracy failed to tackle with sufficient determination or success.

The formative influence I would assume to have been best equipped to allow Social Democracy to combat the impact of standard Imperial German socialisation on its potential constituency is Marxism. Now, it is important to understand that Marxism, in the sense in which I propose we use this term, was not an organic, spontaneous outgrowth of the Socialist labour movement. In practical terms, it was a minority position that developed on the fringes of the emerging Socialist labour movement. Originally, it was quite literally a set of ideas, then a political project that was developed by Marx and Engels, their close associates and those who subsequently became convinced of the pertinence and usefulness of the Marxian mode of analysis and its strategic implications. This small group of men (and very few women) tried, in a more or less coordinated fashion, to penetrate relevant groups on the far Left of the emerging labour movements. To varying degrees, they were able to establish, over time, a Marxist strand within the Socialist labour movement. More often than not this resulted in a process of syncretism that transformed individual tenets of the Marxian approach quite considerably before they entered circulation as one ideological currency among others accepted as legal tender in the highly eclectic ideological dealings of Social Democracy.

As is well known, one of the central tenets of Marxism is historical materialism. Social and historical phenomena cannot simply be taken at face value, so the assumption goes. Although they often appear to result from natural 'facts of life' beyond human control, they are in fact in every instance the outcome of the historical process that generated them. Hence, they can be understood and accounted for as resulting from the interplay of the factors that contributed to that genetic process. These contributing factors can in turn be identified as representing the specific interests of various social groups. Consequently, social realities are man-made and therefore also alterable, provided we can identify the points at which the development that has led to the current state of affairs needs to be reversed or altered to bring about an alternative outcome.

One might be forgiven for assuming that people who subscribed to this approach should have been singularly well equipped to see through political myths prevalent at the time, including the two most rampant and crude ones among them: nationalism and antisemitism. That most Socialists were in fact by no means immune against these myths is now a commonplace that is usually enlisted to demonstrate the supposedly intrinsic deficiency of historical materialism. However critical one may be of historical materialism, though, there can be no doubt that self-avowed Marxists were susceptible to the myths of nationalism and antisemitism, or at least to some of the concepts and notions on which these myths drew, not because of their historical materialism but in spite of it. It is in this sense that Marxists can

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be counted among those whom one would least expect to subscribe to the prevalent perceptions of ‘the Jewish Question’. Hence, the fact that they nevertheless did subscribe to at least some of these perceptions provides a particularly good opportunity to gauge the impact of those perceptions on society as a whole.

In the course of this book the readers will meet a number of leading Socialists, all of whom considered themselves Marxists at least at some point in their career yet whose political orientations nevertheless cover the entire spectrum from the founding father of revisionism, Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), to two of the founding members of the German Communist Party (KPD), Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) and Franz Mehring (1846–1919). As we will see, each of these Socialists brought his or her own emphases, nuances and idiosyncrasies to the debates about antisemitism and ‘the Jews’. In this sense, Jack Jacobs is entirely right in criticising the ‘overgeneralization’¹³ characteristic of much of the earlier literature and, up to a point, his contention that ‘there was not a Marxist attitude towards the Jews, but a spectrum of Marxist (and socialist) attitudes towards the Jews’¹⁴ is indeed valid. Yet, as we will see, the closer we look at these Socialists’ varying emphases, nuances and idiosyncrasies, the clearer and in some respects even more remarkable certain fundamental commonalities between all of them (with the partial exception of Rosa Luxemburg) become.

ANTISEMITIC STEREOTYPING AND THE KERNEL-OF-TRUTH APPROACH
TO ANTISEMITISM

Innumerable attempts have been made to define precisely what constitutes antisemitism or qualifies an individual as an antisemite.¹⁵ Although the matter is destined by its very nature to remain controversial, the fundamental issues in this debate are well rehearsed. My argument throughout this book will be based on a categorical rejection of the kernel-of-truth approach to antisemitism.¹⁶ That is not to say that individual antisemitic perceptions can never coincide with individual aspects of Jewish reality. Of course a connection exists between the realities of Jewish existence and antisemitic perceptions. But the crucial question is whether that connection is of a coincidental or a causal nature. Put simply: does it make any difference to the antisemites, and is it of any significance to the way in which antisemitism functions, whether their claims and contentions about Jews are true (in the sense that they could be empirically verified) or not?

¹³ Jacobs, *Socialists*, 1. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ For probably the best survey, cf. Holz, *Nationaler Antisemitismus*, 26–115. Cf. also Wolfgang Benz, ‘Anti-Semitism Research,’ in Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, David Sorkin (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 943–955.

¹⁶ On this issue specifically, cf. Holz, *Nationaler Antisemitismus*, 62–77.

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The kernel-of-truth approach to antisemitism proceeds as follows. Firstly, it tries to identify the extent to which some of the antisemites' claims and contentions coincide with some aspects of some Jews' reality. Secondly, it tries to identify how the actual behaviour of some Jews makes 'the Jews' a foil for the projection of additional, entirely unfounded, anti-Jewish notions. The implication is this: those partial aspects of Jewish reality where a coincidence can be demonstrated are in fact the cause of the antisemitic claims and contentions that they coincide with. While the process subsequently snowballs out of control, allowing totally unfounded claims to be projected onto the Jews as well, what originally sets the ball in motion are partial aspects of Jewish reality that really do coincide with anti-Jewish contentions. The connection between these particular aspects of Jewish reality and antisemitism is therefore not coincidental, but actually causal.

This approach fails to address at least three fundamental issues. Although its proponents suggest that some of the antisemites' claims have a causal basis in reality, they do not deny, of course, that the way in which the antisemites portray these partial aspects of reality is distorted. How, then, and why does the ostensible kernel of truth gives rise to its own distortion and misrepresentation? Secondly, if some of the antisemites' contentions really do have a basis of sorts in reality, where do those come from that clearly have no basis in reality at all? And why, thirdly, does it make no difference to the antisemites either way whether their claims at least seem to have some basis in reality or quite clearly have none at all?

Shulamit Volkov rather succinctly spelt out the implications of this dilemma: 'Having provided the historical background for the anti-Jewish feelings endemic in the Christian world, having analysed the particular circumstances, [...] having disclosed the strains within [...] society at the time', the crucial 'task of explaining the *process*' by which antisemitic perceptions are actually formed and related to these circumstances, still remains to be tackled. 'There is only one way by which this task can be avoided', she added: 'Only if one assumes that the antisemites' claims were truthful [...] is one exempt from the effort to show how men [...] succumbed to the patently false worldview of antisemitism'.¹⁷

As is well known, modern political antisemitism tends to be particularly obsessed with the notion that emancipation would allow the Jews to integrate into society. Consequently, they would become indistinguishable as Jews, they would become invisible and it is precisely this that makes them so dangerous because it allows them go unnoticed as they proceed to subvert society from within. This line of argument not only does not claim to be based on empirically verifiable contentions, it overtly dismisses empirical

¹⁷ Shulamit Volkov, 'Antisemitism as a Cultural Code – Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany,' in *LBIYB* 23 (1978): 25–46, here 36.

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verifiability as a legitimate criterion. The danger lies precisely in that which, by definition, cannot be empirically verified.

Moreover, even where some coincidence between an antisemitic perception and an actual aspect of Jewish existence is not entirely out of the question, we still need to ask to what extent a phenomenon that may well be empirically verifiable *post facto* was actually in any meaningful sense of the word visible or palpable in everyday life at the time. After all, the fact, say, that the share of Jews in a particular profession is larger than their share of the population is not something one can simply see. One needs to compile statistical data to verify such an assumption, which begs the question why one should bother to do so in the first place. To do so makes sense only if one already suspects an iniquity. Needless to say, even then it is not the figures themselves that bear out that iniquity. For the data to take on the desired meaning, one first needs to pre-assume a fundamental distinction between Jews and non-Jews and must then posit that there is something iniquitous about the possibility that the share of Jews in any walk of life might be larger than their share of the population. The data do not, therefore, in any way demonstrate the existence of a 'Jewish Question', they presuppose it.

Antisemitic ideology has always proved more than capable of combining notions about 'the Jews' whose coincidental connection to reality one can just about discern with ones that are patently absurd. It has proved equally capable of integrating a variety of claims about Jewry that are in effect mutually exclusive. From the antisemites' point of view, the claims to which scholars have time and again attributed some kernel of truth are no more valid than those claims behind which one cannot by any stretch of the imagination discern such a kernel of truth. This surely demonstrates that for the antisemites the truth value of these contentions, in any meaningful sense of the word, is neither here nor there. From the antisemites' point of view, possible contradictions between their claims or difficulties in verifying them are easily enough explained: they demonstrate the extent to which 'the Jews' have already succeeded in turning the world on its head and making the non-Jews lose their bearings.

All that said, antisemitic projections are obviously 'by no means altogether irrational', but rely on a form of 'applied rather than spontaneous irrationality'.¹⁸ They are in fact the outgrowth of an active process of stereotyping. Antisemitism is often referred to as a form of prejudice. Now, prejudice is in many ways a strange concept. In common parlance, it is often used to imply that people pass premature and thus unjust judgement without full

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda.' This article, first published in 1946, has been reprinted in Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften* 8 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998): 397–407, here 401.

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knowledge of the facts. Were they in full command of all the facts, they would judge the matter in a more appropriate manner.

Yet in fact our judgements are never based on *full* knowledge of the facts though they do, one would hope, draw on *sufficient* knowledge of the facts. It is not full knowledge of the phenomenon that we are trying to judge that allows us to assess whether we are in sufficient command of the facts pertaining to that phenomenon to pass judgement on it. Instead, we rely on our critical faculties, on a generic set of criteria that will hopefully allow us to determine in any given instance whether our knowledge is sufficient to allow us to pass judgement, whatever the particular phenomenon at hand. More fundamentally, we are in fact inherently incapable of simply perceiving phenomena around us without at the same time applying our generic critical faculties in an attempt to make sense of them. In this sense there is no perception that does not automatically involve projection. No phenomenon can impress itself on our perceptions without us at the same time impressing on it our attempts to make sense of it.

As Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out in their ‘Elements of Antisemitism’,¹⁹ the crucial issue is therefore not that antisemitic notions regarding ‘the Jews’ are based on projection. In that respect they are no different from any other form of human perception.²⁰ What radically sets them apart is the fact that they are predicated on a radical exclusion of the reflective and critical faculties from the process of projection.²¹ Hence they amount to a false projection²² that blurs the distinction between the projecting subject and the object.²³ The object is reduced to a mere foil on which the projecting subject can see only what it has projected there in the first place. This is not a process, then, in which the subject’s interaction with the object is cut short and the subject therefore passes premature judgement on the basis of incomplete knowledge. Instead, the subject refuses all interaction with the object from the outset in order to render it a suitable foil for the projection of an established set of stereotypes.

The notion of prejudice suggests a process that transpires by default. The concept of stereotyping, by contrast, emphasises the active and aggressive nature of the process and its violation (not to say conceptual annihilation) of the object. It is therefore far better suited to characterise the antisemitic impulse. Subjectively, of course, most individuals will simply have grown into an already given consensus on the (negative) qualities of ‘the Jews’. They will not therefore encounter themselves as engaged in active stereotyping. Yet while it is true that they are not, for the most part, actively *inventing* the stereotypes, they certainly are actively *reproducing* them. It is not least for this reason that ‘the truth’ about the Jews provides no antidote to antisemitic stereotyping. As Adorno explained, ‘one cannot “correct”

¹⁹ Cf. idem, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998): 211–225.

²⁰ Ibid., 212. ²¹ Ibid., 214. ²² Ibid., 211. ²³ Ibid., 212.

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stereotyping by experience', the false projection cannot be remedied 'merely by taking a *real* look'. Instead, one 'has to reconstitute the capacity for having experiences'.²⁴ To do so, the critical faculties need to be admitted and reflective interaction between the subject and the object needs to be established.

To clarify this issue, let us consider the concept of the exception that proves the rule. What it in effect amounts to is the denial of something that is patently true on its own terms. This denial is obviously not predicated on any quality inherent in the object of our denial. Whether a particular phenomenon confirms or questions a more general assumption is not something that can be concluded from an analysis of the phenomenon itself. It can only be determined by putting the phenomenon into a larger context and applying generic critical and reflective techniques to make sense of the phenomenon in relation to that context. Hence, to return to our specific issue, the fact that we have only ever met wonderful Jews, in and of itself, can no more disprove antisemitism than the fact that we have only ever met horrid Jews, in and of itself, could prove it. 'Facts' about Jews only take on meaning once we begin to make sense of them. Consequently, antisemitism can only be remedied by altering the mechanism deployed by antisemites to 'make sense' of facts about Jews, not by trying to channel their attention from some facts onto others.

This means that what Jews do or do not do ultimately has no genuine influence on the antisemites' perceptions. Given that most of us like to think of Jewish history primarily as the account of Jewish agency in history, this is obviously an intensely frustrating state of affairs. The Shoah provides the most dramatic case in point. Few historical phenomena have had as fundamental an effect on Jewry. Yet at the same time it is hard to imagine a historical phenomenon on which Jewry itself was less capable of making an impact. Against this background the desire to put Jewish agency back into the history of antisemitism is an understandable one and often the willingness to concede a kernel of truth to antisemitic projections is presumably born of this very intention.

Indeed, the readers of this book may well find themselves feeling increasingly frustrated by the radical disjunction between Jewish realities and anti-Jewish stereotypes. The Social Democrats whose deliberations on antisemitism we will encounter were all convinced that they were not only addressing antisemitism in a sophisticated manner but also providing a sound response to 'the Jewish Question' itself. Yet, the concrete realities of actual Jews' lives and experiences play no genuine role in this entire discussion. They fail to feature in this book not for lack of interest or

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Prejudice in the Interview Material.' This text, first published in 1950, has been reprinted in Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften* 9 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998): 265–331, here 303.