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Opinion

Psychoanalysis and anti-Semitism

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Summary

How can psychoanalysis help explain anti-Semitism? German psychoanalyst Ilka Quindeau has made a new attempt to explore this highly topical phenomenon. In doing so, she follows in the tradition of the Frankfurt School and critically examines its research on the trait of the authoritarian personality. She also draws on the ideas of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche to gain insight into the psychological conflicts underlying anti-Semitism.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Anti-Semitism; Adorno; Authoritarian personality; Frankfurt school; LaPlanche

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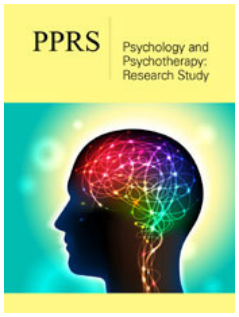

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Opinion

What contribution can psychoanalysis make to explaining anti-Semitism? In her recently published book entitled Psychoanalyse und Antisemitisms (Psychoanalysis and Anti-Semitism) [1], psychoanalyst Ilka Quindeau, who teaches at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, argues that multiple disciplinary perspectives are needed to understand anti-Semitism. Because it is an irrational phenomenon, it is not enough to view it solely from a sociological perspective; rather, a psychoanalytical perspective is also essential. Only with its help is it possible to understand anti-Semitism due to its irrational character.

In the past, attempts have been made to explain anti-Semitism from the two disciplinary perspectives of sociology and psychoanalysis. Authors of the Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, assumed in their research focused on National Socialism that anti-Semitism should be seen as a facet of a certain personality type, as part of an authoritarian character. They based their arguments on the ideas of Erich Fromm, who had linked sociology and psychoanalysis in such a way that he explained that within the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family, a certain personality type developed, namely the authoritarian character. This character type is one that inclines people to conform to the power relations of bourgeois society. This is because the Oedipus Complex is not deemed to be resolved in the way Sigmund Freud described. Instead, on the one hand, the hatred that the son feels for his father is directed against others, against the weak and defenceless. On the other hand, the love initially felt for the mother is transformed into the son's sympathy for the powerful. The son begins to admire authorities, who for him constitute a "personified superego" (27).

On the one hand, Quindeau follows in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, sharing its conviction that a combination of sociology and psychoanalysis is needed to understand anti-Semitism. On the other hand, however, she clearly distances herself from the construction of a personality type, namely that of the authoritarian character. She considers this construct problematic because she believes it could serve as an excuse: anyone who uses it always refers to others and not to themselves. However, in order to combat anti-Semitism, it is, in her view, important that everyone starts with themselves, reflecting on themselves, their own biography (and their family history).

In her endeavour to continue the tradition of the Frankfurt School and explain anti-Semitism from a combination of sociological and psychoanalytical perspectives, while at the same time renewing this tradition and giving it new impetus, Quindeau focuses on the

psychoanalytical angle, specifically on the question of what, using this approach, could replace the construct of an authoritarian character. To this end, she proposes drawing on an interpretation of psychoanalysis that-following the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche [2,3]-assumes a "primacy of the other": when a person is born, other people, sociality, are always already there. The individual develops within a given social context. This also applies to the individual's unconscious: it is essentially shaped by the individual's interaction with others, and that means, first and foremost, by encounters with adults, who themselves possess an unconscious. This encounter always has a sexual dimension, something that already plays a role in the initial interaction between the infant and an adult, namely in the context of personal hygiene. Laplanche goes so far as to claim that this is where an early form of seduction has already taken place.

From Laplanche's perspective, the desire with which humans are born is always conflictual. It aims at satisfaction, but the various modes of satisfaction-oral, anal, phallic, genital-are structured in a polarized manner. Due to this polarity, psychological conflicts are inevitable. Of central importance is the Oedipus complex, which, due to constitutional bisexuality, fundamentally takes two forms: one positive and one negative. While Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex is still characterized by heteronormativity, Laplanche, on the other hand, assumes that the Oedipus complex involves "the simultaneity of a homosexual and a heterosexual object choice, love for both the father and the mother" (83). Quindeau writes:

"In the course of the Oedipus complex, the generational difference and the gender difference establish themselves with belonging to one of the two genders, while the opposite-sex parts are repressed into the unconscious." (85)

In addition, triangulation occurs in connection with the Oedipus complex: whereas previously all object relations were dyadic, in the Oedipus complex it becomes relevant for the first time that the objects are not only related to the ego, but also to each other. The Oedipus complex is therefore associated with a radical decentring.

Against the backdrop of the rough outline provided above of the alterity-theoretical interpretation of psychoanalysis, Quindeau now proposes the following explanation of anti-Semitism: Anti-Semitism is seen to be based on psychological conflicts that are expressed in different ways depending on respective social conditions. To this end, society provides the individual with certain semantics. More precisely, society dictates which desires are frowned upon and which are not, and it offers possibilities for substitute means of satisfaction as well as "semantics that can be used to ward off the frowned-upon." (114)

However, it is possible to become aware of one's own psychological conflicts and, within the framework of psychoanalytic treatment, to gain insight into the contradictions of one's own desires, especially those contradictions that have emerged in the context of the Oedipus complex.

"These are the unconscious, diverse gender and sexual aspects, the ambiguity of gender and desire, which cannot be resolved with dichotomous identities, but (...) require constant psychological work. Only the self-reflective perception of ambiguities and recognition of the primacy of the other, that it is so and not otherwise, prevents >pathic projections< (Adorno) and enables a constructive, socially acceptable approach." (105)

Psychoanalysis can help the individual to develop a tolerance for ambiguity that prevents "the (frowned-upon) other in oneself" (105) from being projected onto other people, onto strangers (e.g., by attributing aggressiveness, power-seeking, scheming, or the like to them).

Quindeau's approach to explaining anti-Semitism psychoanalytically not only opens up new avenues for psychoanalysis as a practice in dealing with it, but can also be used for educational purposes. Last but not least, he emphasizes the responsibility of each individual by highlighting the importance of self-reflection.

However, the question arises as to why Quindeau does not distance himself more strongly from the tradition of the Frankfurt School with regard to the two other dimensions that it considers relevant for explaining anti-Semitism, in addition to psychological conflicts: semantics and the respective social context. On the one hand, this raises the question of whether the semantics provided for the individual by society can also be explained by means of psychoanalysis. Freud already attempted to reconstruct how anti-Jewish semantics developed out of Christianity and was transformed into anti-Semitic semantics in the 19th century on the basis of racial-biological thinking. These considerations can be taken up again-and, for example, the question can be explored as to whether the semantics of Islamic anti-Semitism, which is currently gaining in importance, can also be explained psychoanalytically [4].

As far as the social context is concerned, the question arises as to whether it makes sense to continue viewing it-as the authors of the Frankfurt School did-from a sociological perspective that follows in the tradition of Western Marxism. From this perspective, anti-Semitism appears primarily as an "event that stabilizes power" (104). Would it not be possible to leave this tradition behind and combine psychoanalysis with a different sociological perspective[1], such as that of structuralist sociology? Then anti-Semitism could

[1]Robert S. White recently attempted to do just that. His aim is also to combine a psychoanalytical and sociological perspective. In terms of the sociological perspective, he focuses on groups and their identities. How psychological conflicts are resolved depends not on society in general, but on the particular group to which an individual belongs. Groups can stabilize an individual psychologically by offering them security. However, they can also create a contrast to others, between "us" and "them," with latter being the "strangers" who either belong to their own group or are outside it. Strangers may then be excluded and devalued, with negative feelings directed towards them [5].

be viewed not only in terms of its function of stabilizing power, but more generally as a crisis phenomenon that could be understood in its concrete manifestation as a case (which could then be used to form types and draft a typology of manifestations of anti-Semitism).

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