



Operating in tandem? assessing the linkages between anti-Americanism and Antisemitism in France

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Abstract

This article explores the argument that antisemitism and anti-Americanism in France are linked to each other in a causal manner. Specifically, it addresses the oft-encountered suggestion that the two prejudices move in tandem with each other, and in such a way that the anterior one (antisemitism) effectively “causes” the latter one (anti-Americanism) to emerge—a suggestion made inter alios by Markovits (*J Israeli History* 25 85 105 2006). We argue that while there certainly appears to be a correlation between antisemitism and anti-Americanism in France, there is no evidence of contemporary antisemitism being a constitutive feature of the former. While antisemitism may arguably have been part of what propelled anti-Americanism during certain periods of the twentieth century, recently it appears as if “causal” vectors have been reversed, with anti-Americanism contributing to the rise of a “new antinarse8x63.12 Tw

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as they opposed America's. This proclivity stemmed, she argued, from an innate French tendency to be oppositional. These are a people given to glorifying the heroics of Astérix, the fictional warrior celebrated for fighting the good fight against the Roman bully during the Gallic Wars of Julius Caesar, and thus the embodiment of a national exultation of defiance. The French have “a rebellious, grumpy character, and a high propensity for opposition.... [They] are very distrustful in general – of each other, of their government, of politicians, of America, and so on. The French just like to be ‘anti,’ especially when the disruption of French society created by the phenomenon in question is strong” (Meunier



to be potentially beneficial for France's well-advertised quest to construct a more "autonomous" European defense capability (Belin 2018) (Fig. 1; CNCDH 2023).

No one would accuse that country's current leader, Emmanuel Macron, of being anti-American, notwithstanding his championing of the autonomy goal, and despite a well-publicized comment on the status of NATO in late 2019, when he famously diagnosed the alliance's "brain death" in an interview published in the *Economist* (Economist 2019; Haglund 2022). Quite the contrary, he is considered one of the



probably because they correlate with emotion-laden wars (global or otherwise) and the peace settlements ending those wars.

As a result, there have been four periods when anti-Americanism has been at its most ebullient in France: (1) the interwar years; (2) the immediate post-Second World War years; (3) the Vietnam War decade (1959–69) when Charles de Gaulle was president; and (4) the era of “unipolarity” of the post-cold war years (from the early 1990s until the mid-2000s), when an America-inflected “globalization” appeared unstoppable (Guéhenno 1999).

Interspersed throughout these same years were periods of relative calm, occasionally even something approaching bonhomie in the bilateral relationship, leading commentators to pronounce the death of anti-Americanism in France. One such period was the early 1980s, when it looked as if a hardening French position toward the Soviet Union was about to usher in a lasting era of Franco-American entente. This was symbolized by the remarkable intervention made by François Mitterrand into the German debate whether to accept the controversial deployment of NATO intermediate-range nuclear (INF) systems—American Pershing 2 and ground-launched cruise missiles—on German soil (Weisenfeld 1986). Many saw this intervention as sounding the knell for whatever remained of elite-level anti-Americanism in France (Pinto 1985; Lacorne and Rupnik 1990).

The entente of the 1980s proved to be short-lived, but that it existed at all should remind us that the discussion about anti-Americanism in France is a complicated one. And since we are going to investigate Markovits’s suggestion that antisemitism might constitute an ideational pillar of anti-Americanism, it behooves us here to stipulate what we consider the “pillars” of this attitudinal disposition. To recall, Markovits was primarily discussing *Western European* anti-Americanism. To determine whether there is a specific French variant at all, it would be useful to begin with a list of generic qualities so often associated with anti-Americanism in Europe.

For starters, it is worth pondering Kenneth Minogue’s wise caution against the analytical temptation to conceive of anti-Americanism as representing a single thing rather than multifaceted, and thus bound to be elusive (Minogue 1986, p. 43). Still, at certain times the concept has attained the status of what two scholars call the “master narrative of our time,” by which they mean “an international rhetoric of rejection that binds politics, economics, and ethics into a common story about how the world works and why it doesn’t,” with the principal target being the United States (Judt and Lacorne 2005, p. 13).

Let us consider anti-Americanism in its generic sense as applying not merely to France but to a cross section of European lands. In those lands, anti-Americanism has been said to manifest a set of attitudinal characteristics whose wellsprings have been an eagerness as well as a psychological need to construct negative images of the transatlantic Other. As such, these characteristics do not necessarily constitute a critique of American foreign or domestic policy behavior on more or less reasoned



American students of this sort of heterostereotyping provide four hallmarks of such anti-Americanism, namely (1) systematic antagonism toward an America held to incarnate evil; (2) deliberate exaggeration of the country's shortcomings coupled with a denial that it might possess any merits; (3) sustained misrepresentation of America for the purposes of advancing a political agenda; and (4) constant misperception and ridiculing of American society (Rubin and Rubin 2004; Katzenstein and Keohane 2007).

Some of these generic characteristics might not betray any particular French provenance, while others do have a French inflection. One of these is the civilizational



be an American one. “[N]o one can be in any doubt,” he prophesied, “that America’s civilization is well along the road to vanquishing the Old Continent” (Duhamel 1930, pp. 18–19).⁴



the dastardly manner in which postwar France was being treated by the country's erstwhile "old ally."⁶ Some of this critique was reasonable, having been inspired by



backdrop of a discussion of past and current tendencies in French antisemitism. The place to start the analysis is with a brief summary of the current state of debate over France's experience with antisemitism.

In assessing this debate, we have relied on elite interviews as a proxy for opinions on antisemitism and possible connections with anti-Americanism. Interviews were conducted with twenty-two founders and directors of Jewish-community and Israel-advocacy organizations, directors of human-rights and anti-racism organizations, and professors, academics, and journalists specializing in Jewish life and politics in France or popular perceptions of the United States in France. Our interviewees included leaders of ELNET-France, a lobbying group which aims to strengthen relations between government ministers, journalists, and security specialists in Israel and France and which advocates for European Union parliamentarians in Brussels to take positions toward this aim; a leader of the American Jewish Committee's European office in Paris; a director of *Alliance israélite universelle*, a longstanding educational and secular Jewish institution, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth



Although leaders of Jewish-community and human-rights organizations represent a small portion of the community, these institutions do constitute the most important claims-making actors and architects of the political debates pertinent to this community and other minorities in France. Thus, they function as a bridge between the French state and minority communities, in particular France's Jews.

Elite interviewing is a sound methodological approach when seeking to gather generalizable information about what a group of people think or how they interpret an event or series of events—such as, for our purposes, antisemitism and anti-American attitudes in France (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Goldstein 2002). Directors and other leaders of the organizations mentioned above, and scholars, have spent much time examining the core concern of French Jews. They know a great deal about the characteristics and attitudes of the general Jewish population and thus have an advantage in discussing antisemitism and anti-Americanism over the mass public and Jewish-community members. Speaking with these interviewees thus allowed us to gauge subtle aspects of elite views of the world, as well as to grasp the contours of more generalized opinion. We are aware of methodological concerns with elite interviewing. Broockman and Skovron (2018) demonstrated how relying solely on elite accounts of public opinion risks obtaining skewed or incomplete understandings of societal issues. In their study of almost four thousand surveys between 2012 and 2014 of state legislators in the United States and candidates to state legislatures, they found that politicians from both major parties consistently overestimated their constituents' preference for conservative policies. Distorted views can arise from elites and politicians being in echo chambers among their peers and colleagues, a reliance on anecdotal evidence, or overexposure to the positions of lobbying and interest groups.

While there is much survey evidence since 2000 on the topic of antisemitism, there is no public opinion survey we are aware of which asks about aspects of anti-Americanism as well as antisemitism, and conducting one was beyond our means. Thus, we studied the opinions of leaders of Jewish-community and advocacy organizations, and experts on Jewish life and politics in France and French attitudes toward Americans while aware of the potential risks of elite opinions.

France has the largest Jewish population in Europe. At an estimated 446,000 in 2021, its size trails only Israel and the United States, in both absolute and proportional numbers; Jews make up close to 0.7 percent of the total French population (DellaPergola and Staetsky 2021, p. 21). Slightly more than half reside in the greater Paris region (Fourquet and Manternach 2016). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a fear of being insulted, threatened, and assaulted has become a feature of everyday life for many French Jews, particularly those who wear or carry visible signifiers of being Jewish (Fondapol and AJC-Paris 2022; UEJF and IFOP 2023; Fourquet and Manternach 2016; Knobel 2013, 2016). For the past quarter-century, in the wake of increasing attacks against French Jews and Jewish institutions, there has developed a widespread sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future of Jewish life in France. The murders of Ilan Halimi in 2006, Sarah Halimi in 2017, Mireille Knoll in 2018, the killing of seven people at a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012, and the attack on the Hyper Casher grocery store in 2015 remain collective traumas for France's Jews. They were a few



among the several hundreds of incidents of threats and violence against Jews in France every year.

According to the *Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme* (CNCDH), a program of the French government which compiles reports of incidents of threats and violence reported to the police each year and deemed by the latter to be racist, antisemitic, or xenophobic, after a steady decrease in antisemitic incidents throughout the 1990s, hovering between 80 and 100 a year, there was a dramatic uptick beginning in October 2000, with 75 occurrences in the first two weeks of that month alone (CNCDH 2001, p. 35; CNCDH 2018). By the end of 2000, 744 incidents of threats of violence reported to the police were deemed to be antisemitic. The number of violent and threatening antisemitic incidents has generally remained within the 500 to 700 range in the years since then, with particularly bad years witnessing between 800 and 950 such cases (EUAFR 2014, p. 28; EUAFR 2019a, p. 38, 42; CNCDH 2024). There were more than a thousand such incidents in October and November 2023 alone—immediately after Hamas's 7 October attack on Israel and in the early period of Israel's retaliatory invasion of Gaza. The total number of incidents in 2023 was 1,676, or a fourfold increase over 2022 (CNCDH 2024: p. 13).

For certain years, threats and violence directed at Jews represented up to 70 to 80 percent of *all* racist incidents, according to the police, and for most other years they accounted for about half of all racist attacks (EUAFR 2014, p. 28; Reynié 2014, p. 7; Druetz and Mayer 2018, p. 8). Surveys conducted between 2015 and 2022 by the *Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique* (known as Fondapol), the American Jewish Committee in Paris (AJC-Paris), and the *Fondation Jean-Jaurès* indicated that almost all French Jews had been harassed at least once in their life for being Jewish (Fondapol and AJC-Paris 2019, 2022; Fourquet and Manternach 2016). A 2022 survey by Fondapol and the AJC-Paris found that 74 percent of respondents had experienced at least one antisemitic act in their lifetime, and 20 percent had been physically attacked—similar to the 2019 version of the survey. In addition, 68 percent of respondents had previously been mocked or insulted for being Jewish—an increase of 5 percent from 2019—and “repeatedly” so for 50 percent of the total figure (Fondapol and AJC-Paris 2022, p. 7, 10). These incidents reflect the tenor of a “new antisemitism” in France, so-called because of a widespread perception that, broadly, incidents of anti-Jewish threats and violence follow flare-ups of violence in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, and are most likely perpetrated by French people of Muslim and Arab background, inspired by anger and hatred toward Israel (to be discussed below).

Evidently, an intense concern for the future of communal and public Jewish life preoccupies French Jews today. Among our interviewees, the issues of top concern in their social networks tended to be riveted upon antisemitism, a sense of physical insecurity as Jews in France, the future of Jews and Jewish life in that country, Israel, and moving to Israel. Interviewees included scholars and political commentators specializing in anti-Americanism and in other manifestations of ethno-heterostereotyping, scholars of contemporary Jewish politics and life in France, and founders and directors of governmental, non-profit, and advocacy organizations focused on human rights in France, Jewish life in France, and Israel–France relations. Survey data compiled over the past decade by the



EUAFR, Fondapol, the AJC-Paris, and the *Institut français d'opinion publique* (IFOP), corroborate what the interviewees told us. Among respondents to the 2022 Fondapol and AJC-Paris survey, 85 percent believe antisemitism to be “widespread” in France, and almost three-quarters think it is increasing (Fondapol and AJC-Paris 2022, p. 12). Ten years earlier, a EUAFR survey of Jews in twelve EU countries found that French Jews expressed *by far* the highest level of fear: 85 percent thought antisemitism in France was a “major problem” (vs two-thirds in the general sample) and almost 90 percent believed it had gotten worse in the previous five years (vs three-quarters in the general sample) (EUAFR 2013).

In terms of fears of specific actions, EUAFR’s 2019a, b survey found that the majority (60 percent) of French Jews worried about being insulted and harassed, and nearly as many (58 percent) worried about being physically harmed.



both antisemitism and anti-Zionism to be encapsulated within a “wide-ranging demonization of America” (Taguie 2004, p. 5).

Are they correct? We structured some of the questions put to the two dozen interviewees specifically to ascertain whether the experts to whom we spoke perceived a link between the two attitudinal predispositions. What we found supported claims



But if there seems to exist a basal consensus regarding the general claim of linkage between the two “isms,” what does this tell us about Markovits’s stronger suggestion that antisemitism is a constitutive feature— that is to say, a necessary condition—of anti-Americanism? To the extent we can identify one clear, general connecting element between our pair of “isms,” it is expressed in the perception that there are objectionable qualities shared by the United States and Jews, and that these qualities are suspected of degrading France’s political culture and its republican values. Let us take a closer look at what are included in this index of offensive qualities, with a view to relating them to what we argued above were those two traits distinct to French anti-Americanism.

As we intimated earlier in this article, one of the two traits has been and remains the specification of Anglo-Saxon values as constituting a threat to both France’s culture and its republican virtues. At first blush, it might seem odd in the extreme to suggest any obvious affinity between Anglo-Saxonism (whatever it is supposed to mean) and antisemitism. After all, during the peak of Anglo-Saxon racist theorizing in the transatlantic world, from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1920s, it would have been unusual to discover enthusiasts of this brand of theorizing who were inclined to include Jews within their own ethno-racial “community” (Horsman 1976, 1981; Painter 2010; Grant 1919). Just the opposite, which is one of the reasons that Horace Kallen, among others, could insist during the 1920s on the basic incompatibility of Anglo-Saxonism with multiculturalism (or as he called it, “cultural pluralism”) (Kallen 1970). Yet, when one unpacks the contemporary understanding of Anglo-Saxonism in France, today’s concept refers not so much to ethno-linguistic attributes as it does to political values associated with *liberalism*; in short, the former



The implicit deal the French state offered to Jews in 1791 was that in exchange for citizenship, Jews' religious and cultural particularities were to play no part in their participation in civic matters. Over the ensuing century, France became a major haven for Jews leaving Eastern Europe and Russia. Accompanying this migratory influx, however, was a growing antisemitic movement portraying Jews as a threat to the republic, culminating in the Dreyfus affair at the end of the nineteenth century (Brown 2011; Kedward 1965; Begley 2009). The case crystallized anti-Jewish rage among a following from the republican left to the anti-republican clerical right, and in 1898, demonstrations, speeches, and newspaper pieces even in provincial cities with small Jewish populations denounced Jews as bent on the destruction of France (Begley 2009).

The public appetite for antisemitism and xenophobia abated by the start of the new century, only to resurge during the 1930s, when France received more Jewish refugees in proportion to its population than any other country. In the context of France's economic contraction, near-constant parliamentary deadlock, erosion of its military supremacy in Europe, and a weakened overall sense of its culture, it was not difficult for many French to blame foreigners, especially Jewish foreigners, for all that was going wrong (Marrus and Paxton 2009, p. 24).

Then came the Second World War with its short-term disastrous consequences for France, during the four years separating its defeat by and subsequent liberation from Nazi Germany. But if the wartime experience would have the consequence of ratifying in the minds of many antisemites the imagined connection between the Anglo-Saxons and the Jews, it also brought into high relief the France-inflected traits of anti-Americanism. To recall, there is a *structural* bias of France's anti-Americanism that sets it apart from other Western European critiques of America—a bias holding that America's power menaces France's interests. The corollary is that “balancing” this power will effect a return to a “multipolarity” that is, paradoxically, assumed to be beneficial for France—notwithstanding the empirical record of previous “multipolar” eras having been so terrible for French interests (Haglund 2003).

Here, the linkage between anti-Americanism and antisemitism turns on twinned condemnations of American “imperialism” and of Israel. This is significant for our argument, because while we accept that there is a correspondence between these two “antis” that seem so often to move in tandem, our basic thrust is to query the



be regarded increasingly in France as an American satellite, which aided and abetted the same American power that troubled so many in French elite circles.

Thus, whereas earlier in the twentieth century French Jews could be arraigned as running dogs of Anglo-Saxons (and by extension of liberal anti-republican values), starting in the late 1960s they could be criticized for aiding and advancing American imperialism in their support for Israel. Criticizing Jews for supporting Israel was all the more attractive due to French Jewry having become significantly more public and vociferous in their support for Israel since the late 1950s (Ghiles-Meilhac 2014). This development, conspicuous given the French societal context, was due firstly to the recent large influx of Jews from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco who, broadly speaking, were uninhibited, vocal, and enthusiastic in their support for Israel, unlike France's Ashkenazic Jews; and secondly to the surge of support for Israel in advance of the Six-Day War among French Jews more widely (Ghiles-Meilhac 2009).

De Gaulle transformed French policy toward Israel in the early 1960s. While he always opposed and sought to counterbalance the accretion of American power, following the establishment of the State of Israel and into the late 1950s, French leaders of the Fourth Republic, along with French public opinion, had supported



power, and not enough with France. Thus, American power, Israeli foreign policy, and France's Jews were lumped together to suggest tight correspondence between anti-Americanism and antisemitism— notwithstanding that the shaper of French foreign policy, de Gaulle, was generally not regarded as antisemitic (Jackson 2019). De Gaulle's insistence that "structural" reform of the international system was necessary for France's reclamation of its rightful place in the balance-of-power (its *rang*) informed his government's *politique arabe*, an approach that would continue into the 1990s and beyond (Müller 2013).

The sentiment of American-backed Israeli imperialism and aggression still mostly resided at the elite level, though the French public would soon catch up. That public had largely continued to support Israel as a young country in need of backing from its friends, including in advance of the 1967 Six Day War (Goldstein and Shumacher 2010). However, the widespread student and workers' protests of 1968 —against de Gaulle!—contributed to a new tendency to regard Israel as a proxy of US global power, and thus part of the problem of imperialism that protesters were denouncing. It became increasingly popular to view Israel, Zionism, and Jews as colonialists and imperialists, and therefore minions of American imperialism (Taguie 2004, p. 4).

As noted earlier, over the past twenty years, scholars of antisemitism have referred to the post-2000 increase in threats and violence against Jews in France as a "new antisemitism" (Peace 2009; Taguie 2002; Wieviorka 2005; Ghiles-Meilhac 2015, p. 221; Mayer 2004, 2005; D ruez and Mayer 2018; Caldwell 2009; Draï 2002; Attal 2004; Giniewski 2005; Finkielkraut 2003). Broadly, two distinguishing

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Public opinion surveys lend support to the claim that French people of Muslim



is not causation, and this, in turn, inspired our second major claim, which is that contrary to some analysts, we have not detected any sign of antisemitism's being a "constitutive" feature (i.e., a "necessary condition") of anti-Americanism in France. We find it hard to believe that had there never been any Jews in France, there would never have been any anti-Americanism in the country.

Indeed, if there *are* any causal arrows (and there may be none), they rather point



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