# Antisemitism in Contemporary Hungary

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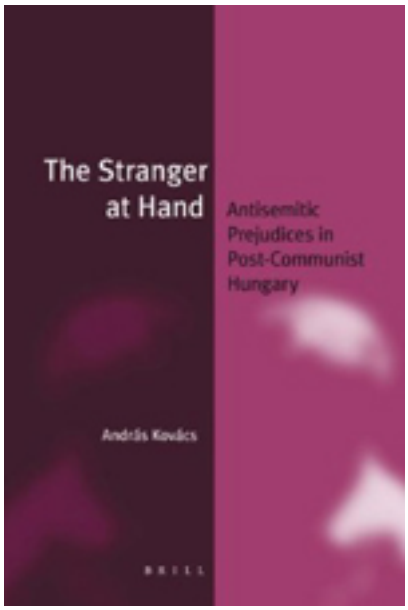
**András Kovács:The Stranger at Hand: Antisemitic Prejudices in Post-Communist Hungary. Jewish Identities in a Changing World Series.Leiden: Brill, 2011. 211 pp. $131.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-19194-5.**




The recent massive shift to the Right in Hungarian politics has substantially raised the level of attention devoted to the country. As concerned voices have largely dominated the discussion, questions related to how sufficiently Hungary has dealt with its co-responsibility for the Holocaust, the extent to which antisemitism continues to be socially acceptable, and whether anti-Jewish sentiment may even constitute a serious political threat again have been recurrently posed. The publication of András Kovács's The Stranger at Hand can therefore be considered a most timely scholarly contribution to the ongoing international debates.

On the pages of this highly informative book, Hungarian sociologist Kovács aims to "reveal the social background against which the newest political developments should be analyzed" (p. xi). One of his goals is to account for "the awkward developments of recent years" by drawing on the results of five representative samples that he took between 1994 and 2006 (p. x). Kovács complements his analysis of these survey data by an admittedly less broadly based qualitative study of antisemitic discourses in post-Communist Hungary. In addition, he also discusses the current significance of the Holocaust in Hungary, including the evolution of the relationship between its remembrance and current antisemitism.

At the beginning of The Stranger at Hand, Kovács rightly argues that since 1989 the significance and weight of antisemitism have been highly contested and strongly politicized questions in Hungary. As historical memories were reshaped and new symbolic identity constructions emerged largely on the basis of new-old historical interpretations, antisemitism and the interconnected "Jewish question" in modern Hungary became one of the recurrent subjects of public and even political debate. Kovács remarks that, ironically, anti-antisemitism in all likelihood contributed to the process of newly familiarizing people with the antisemitic code. He also emphasizes that in spite of

widespread surprise at the “reappearance” of antisemitism after 1989, the “Jewish question” was in fact reproduced during the Communist period when it served, above all, to express status conflicts between various groups of intellectuals.

The first chapter discusses what kind of antisemitic discourses were publicly formulated after 1989 and how central they have become. According to Kovács, Hungarian right-wing discourses tended to disassociate themselves from more radical ones and kept on referring to less radical ones. This meant that the discourses of the national conservatives did not adapt to, or borrow from, those of antisemitic radicals, but both of them were related, though in different ways, to the intermediary ethnopopulist (népi) discourse. In the 1990s, this ethnopopulist discourse tended to employ the dichotomizing identity strategy of (implicitly or explicitly) opposing the Hungarian nation to Jewish “others.” Kovács states that by picturing Jews as posing an external threat, ethnopopulists articulated “a structured antisemitic worldview” (p. 21). Such ethnopopulists tended to belong to the largest governing party until some of their leading representatives, notably István Csurka, founded their own moderately successful “Christian nationalist” party. Kovács maintains that there was no hidden antisemitic agenda behind mainstream national conservative views as articulated, most crucially, by József Antall who served as prime minister between 1990 and his death in office in 1993--in spite of their political cooperation with ethnopopulists.

Nevertheless, the national conservatives’ image of history included elements that “in a different context, may have formed part of an antisemitic discourse” (p. 29). Kovács argues that such ambiguities could make the spectrum from the conservative center to the antisemitic margins appear continuous, which in turn helped leftist and liberal forces delegitimize the national conservatives through recontextualizing their statements as antisemitic. While this is in many ways a laudably balanced assessment, it comes at the expense of highlighting, above all, the népi–urbánus divide that characterized Hungarian politics of the early 1990s but has lost much of its explanatory value in the meantime. In other words, Kovács devotes insufficient attention to the political discourses of more recent years when such intellectual oppositions seem to have lost much of their political relevance. In the meantime, the currently ruling Fidesz introduced a new activist conception of conservative politics and largely succeeded in changing the terms of debate through their anti-Communist nationalism.

As Kovács explains in chapter 2, early quantitative research into antisemitism showed that around 10 percent of the Hungarian population could be considered “consciously antisemitic” while around one-quarter could be described as prejudiced against Jews (pp. 39, 48). At the same time, only 7 percent of the latter group, i.e., 1-2 percent of the total population, consisted of what the author calls integrated members of society who could be susceptible to what he calls political forms of antisemitism (p. 79). While debates on the “Jewish question” and antisemitism recurrently preoccupied the Hungarian public already at this time, none of these results were exceptional by international standards. The data even shows comparatively high levels of sympathy toward Jews in Hungary (see pp. 32-33, 67).

According to the result of the 1995 survey, Kovács notes, attitudes were more important as explanatory factors of antisemitism than place of residence or social economic resources. While strong national sentiments had a serious effect on antisemitism and conservatives were considerably more antisemitic than the average, ideological factors accounted only moderately for antisemitism. At the same time, latent pressures turned out to be much greater among left-wingers: as their political camp was anti-antisemitic, leftists judged the freedom to be antisemitic to be much more restricted.

Kovács subsequently explains that the structure of the causal model accounting for antisemitism in Hungary was greatly simplified by 2002. While the results showed the continued presence of deprived and anomic antisemites, antisemitism increasingly stemmed from “political identity rather than deprived status and anomie” (p. 121). In other words, antisemitic prejudice started to be

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politicized. Parallel to this development, a new group appeared, which Kovács calls “frustrated nationalists.” Many of them were young urbanites characterized not so much by personal animosity toward Jews but by the experience of social defenselessness and loss of political trust. One of the central conclusions that Kovács thus draws from his 2002 survey is that the percentage of committed political antisemites increased fourfold from seven years earlier from 2 percent to 8 percent.

By 2006, the antisemitic segment of society thus consisted of two large groups: an alienated low-status group and a strongly nationalistic one that was neither socially deprived, nor strikingly anomic. Kovács argues that this created the chance for political entrepreneurs belonging to the latter group to build up their political base and gain the votes of the former--among others, precisely by employing antisemitism. Thus, as opposed to the 1990s, political antisemitic discourse transgressed “the boundaries of the elite groups” (p. 200). Later estimates show that the share of respondents accepting political antisemitic statements continued to grow. Particularly worrisome to Kovács is their widespread reception among the youngest adult cohorts.

However, what the scholarly literature calls new antisemitism (in short, vehement and disproportionate criticism of Israel often accompanied by an emphasis on “Jewish power” and sometimes even by the relativization and trivialization of the Holocaust) does not seem to have become particularly strong in Hungary. As the author explains, distinguishing between “old” and “new” forms has only limited relevance here. This is clearly at least partly due to the fact that left-wing antisemitism remains difficult to identify and that the Left continues to pursue an anti-antisemitic agenda. Somewhat curiously, attitudes to Israel and Jews, he notes, may even be detached: the results show the existence of pro-Israel antisemites as well as anti-Israel non-antisemites.

Last but not least, the book analyzes the views Hungarians share regarding the Holocaust as well as their sense of responsibility. In the early years of democracy, the symbolic significance of positions toward the Holocaust significantly differed from that observable in many Western countries. Kovács shows that, for instance, opinions on the Holocaust had no “<logical> polar distribution” and could hardly measure antisemitic prejudice (p. 153). Even in 2003, Holocaust denial was still relatively unknown: it was clearly less widespread in Hungary than in Western European countries and largely confined to the lowest layers of society. However, “the legitimacy of compensation and the institutional inclusion of the Holocaust in historical memory” would “also receive the disapproval of an educated, upper-middle-class group in Budapest” (p. 157). Kovács thus claims that Hungarians seemed much more interested in relativizing the Holocaust and rejecting Hungarian historical responsibility than in outright denials of what happened.

He shows that, in line with international and local efforts, the recognition of Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust grew by the early 2000s. While even the group of extreme antisemites seemed to accept it in much greater numbers, the intervening developments were nevertheless rather ambivalent. First, he argues that antisemites, even though they tended to declare that they accepted Hungarian responsibility, still wanted the issue to be laid to rest. Second, young people in particular were often opposed to responsibility as well as Holocaust remembrance. Even outright denial spread among the poorly educated youth and would soon reach Western European levels. Third, more people argued that Jews were taking advantage of their past persecution, pointing to an increase in what he labels secondary antisemitism.

As opinions on the Holocaust and antisemitic prejudice were now far more interrelated and the former also increasingly reflected the political-ideological divide between the Left and Right, Kovács concludes that the results revealed a much more coherent legitimacy discourse. According to even more recent survey results from 2009, right-wing voters clearly preferred to emphasize Hungarian suffering and tended to neglect Hungarian responsibility.

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In sum, Kovács finds that knowledge about the Holocaust in Hungary cannot be considered low by international standards. While awareness has grown further over time, in the absence of a properly functioning framework of education and enlightenment there appears to be no connection between knowledge levels and prejudice, he argues. Hungarians continue to be relatively prejudiced against Jews in spite of having reasonable levels of knowledge about the Holocaust. What is conspicuously missing here is an analysis of the complex relations between the way Hungary has dealt with its Communist past and remembrance of the Holocaust. This is all the more regrettable since right-wing successes arguably have to do not so much with attempts to directly question the reigning forms of Holocaust remembrance, though such attempts indubitably exist too, but with reinterpreting the twentieth century in a new anti-Communist overall frame through which the victim status of Jews can be subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) undermined.

In its conclusion, The Stranger at Hand argues that antisemitic prejudice in the Hungarian population as a whole has not risen dramatically and does not seem to be significantly higher than the international average, but “the system of antisemitic prejudice had actually become more coherent over time” and the “intensity of political antisemitism also became stronger” (p. 187). Kovács maintains that antisemitism has become a code of political identity and currently serves “primarily as a medium for establishing extreme right-wing identity” (p. 201). He simultaneously argues that it remains unclear whether antisemitic discourses provide an important common denominator for those who occasionally employ it. Moreover, he is hesitant to predict how the political entrepreneurs of the extreme Right shall employ it in the future. In spite of admitting to such uncertainties, Kovács considers “the elevation of political antisemitism into a central position unlikely” (p. 202). This sounds like a reasoned assessment that is all the more valuable as it is articulated in the midst of increasing hyperboles.

In sum, on the one hand, The Stranger at Hand provides the most detailed and nuanced exploration of the main causes, social embeddedness, internal variety, gradual transformation, and level of politicization of Hungarian antisemitism since 1989. On the other hand, a key methodological problem, namely, how much survey results on antisemitism are influenced by the fact that antisemitism is a well-known subject in its own right, remains underexplored. It might indeed make a world of difference whether respondents actually know what qualifies as antisemitic. If so, they can consciously choose their answers in order to appear the way they wish: it is then not so much their beliefs but merely their desired self-image that surveys can legitimately claim to explore. This is not to suggest that Kovács offers no sustained methodological explanations. He elaborately explains how latent antisemitism appears as a crucial problem for his kind of research. Still, the fact remains that the core analysis of the book does not deal with direct observations of social reality. A more diverse source base and more qualitative analyses might well have enabled the painting of an even more differentiated and accurate picture. Additional information on larger contextual issues, such as Hungarian political trends, particularly of the changing composition and profile of the Right, and relevant international developments, including the new, increasingly global forms of Holocaust canonization as well as its fierce contestation, might also have benefited the book. Even so, this volume is not only highly informative about the mainstream patterns of the evolution of antisemitism in post-Communist Hungary but also offers laudably measured overall judgments about it.

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