

Book Review: Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser, Eds., *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN-13: 978-3030516574 (paperback). 336 Pages. \$29.99.

Reviewed by Shane Burley¹

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Despite the flurry of academic books being published on the subject of antisemitism across a number of academic institutes, the discussions have remained reasonably narrow. Alleged left-wing antisemitism, particularly claims around the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement have gotten extensive attention at places like the Indiana State University Press, as have retreads of classical fascist, Islamist, and period-specific antisemitic movements. While some of this scholarship has been essential, there are glaring holes in the research that has been done, and especially in how different and conflicting theories and disciplines approach different elements of our discourse on antisemitism. This is why *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*, edited by Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser, stands out as such a profound contribution: it sees inquiry as the key to unpacking antisemitism rather than narrow interpretations of potential solutions.

The book is a series of almost definitional chapters into different important sub-topics that help to form a higher level view on antisemitism, with a goal of creating multiple points of intervention: history, sociology, political science, religious studies, Jewish studies, and more. The chapters we end up with break down the historical phenomenon of antisemitism into specific pieces, such as the role of anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism in forming anti-Jewish beliefs, how Ghettos and Zionism relate to historical antisemitism, and how theories like Orientalism help to explain, or problematize, our theories of antisemitism.

Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism does not revert simply to being simplistic encyclopedia entries, though a common style binds the

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chapters together. Each chapter provides the reader with a survey of the existing scholarship on the subject, such as our understandings of key issues like the “Blood Libel” or the role of the Catholic Church. The reader will then easily orient themselves to the specific intervention named, get a feel for where the agreements and conflicts in the existing research are and an understanding of where to go next in the field. While having some degree of uniformity, there is still enough creative ingenuity to each chapter that they feel authentic to the scholars involved, some of whom are well known in the field. Magda Teter’s chapter on Catholicism helps to center the complex church politics of the time that helped to form early antisemitic libels as a way of building regional canonization for Saints, a theme she recently explicated in her groundbreaking history of the Blood Libel.²

What makes *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* stand out most is the lack of political orientations that are so common in Antisemitism Studies scholarship, and the “New Antisemitism” in particular. The chapters on “Orientalism,” “Gender,” and “Postcolonialism” take on many of the critical anti-oppression models that are associated with the political left, and where criticisms of Israel tend to flourish, and they are treated as a neutrally important constituent element of the field itself. This feels like a return to an earlier world of antisemitism scholarship, where progressive and antiracist approaches seemed to have a more central role into theorizing the origins and future of anti-Jewish bias. The nuance of the book is seen in chapters that could be particularly challenging, such as “Jewish Self-Hatred” by Sol Goldberg, which holds open the question of whether Jewish self-hatred is even a dependable concept, or “Sinat Yisrael (Hatred of Jews)” that looks to the “Esau Hates Jacob” claims of perennial antisemitism sometimes seen in religious circles. Since these issues have been at play in many contemporary discussions about Jewish anti-Zionism or more conservative, nationalist solutions to antisemitism, those sorts of ideas often exist as self-evident and unchallenged rather than themselves being the object of inquiry. Does Jewish self-hatred even exist as an identifiable feature? What role does anti-Zionism have in this? Much of the existing scholarship has behaved as though these questions have already been resolved, and in ways that demean Jews who do not fit into a narrow Zionist politic, and the fact that this book re-opens these debates from a contemporary standpoint allows us to finally get a sweeping look

² Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020).

at the top of antisemitism in a way that moves us forward rather than relying on established convention.

Left-wing antisemitism is parsed out in a variety of ways, including through chapters like “Conspiracy Theories” and “Secularism,” who try to get at exactly what sorts of claims and ideas about Jews permeate in supposedly left-wing political spaces. This is done rather than suggesting there is an ontologically consistent “left-wing antisemitism,” something notable scholars in the field, such as the late Robert Wistrich, have built their careers on and are often based on spurious allegations. The same approach is provided to the political right, where antisemitism is not understood as a singularly permanently coherent perspective, but as a confederation of often conflicting and/or self-reinforcing ideas about Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism. This repositioning allows the scholars contributing to the anthology to dive into their own disciplines, trace the history of scholarship that exists around that sub-topic, and present a broad view on their own chosen angle of the issue, such as how the historical phenomenon of the Pogrom can be understood or how Nazism relates to other antisemitisms.

One thing that this approach allows for is for Jews to actually make their way back into the discussion, not simply as targets for anti-Jewish violence, but to have their existence considered relative to antisemitism. As recent studies like David Nirenberg’s *Anti-Judaism* and popular books like Dara Horn’s *People Love Dead Jews* have outlined, actual Jews are often missing from discussions ostensibly about them.³ Either through antisemitic motifs or through morality plays, the real lives of Jews outside of their relationship with oppression is often unconsidered.⁴ But by allowing such a range of approaches, we see the different ways that antisemitism has affected historical Jewish communities, how Jews struggle to understand it themselves, and about the lack of uniformity inside of Jewish communities themselves.

Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism is better poised for experts and scholars in the field looking for a field guide to help in study, and that style may run at odds with the layperson looking to get a quick orientation. What you will find here is a trust in the process of inquiry, where the editors give over the issue of antisemitism to an interdisciplinary dynamic whereby authors may conflict, where a lot of conclusions are paired in

³ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

⁴ I discussed this issue in Shane Burley, “Jew-Hating is Never About Jews,” *Tikkun*, June 28th, 2021, <https://www.tikkun.org/jew-hating-is-never-about-jews/>.

contradiction to one another, and where asking even more questions is preferred to instructive solutions and policy proposals. In the era of rampant legislation to limit activism critical of Israel or the expansive use of the Institute for Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism⁵, this commitment to disagreement and research is a rare treat.⁶

⁵ <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>

⁶ "Palestinian rights and the IHRA definition of antisemitism," *The Guardian*, November 29th, 2020, [theguardian.com/news/2020/nov/29/palestinian-rights-and-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/nov/29/palestinian-rights-and-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism).