

Old Prejudices, New Debates: J.A. Hobson and Anti-Semitism

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“It is, of course, disconcerting, perhaps even surprising, for those who expect anti-Semites to fit a certain character type, and to emerge from a certain place on the extreme right-wing of the ideological spectrum, to find what appears to be a strain of anti-Semitism in the writings of this otherwise humane, left-leaning social theorist.”^[1]

The quote above is from an analysis of the works of the late 19th and early 20th social theorist and ‘economic heretic’ John Atkinson Hobson which evaluated whether it is fair to label him an anti-Semite, and the nature and the extent of his anti-Semitic statements.
^[2]

Similar questions recently resurfaced, sparked by a column in *The Times* that focused on how in 2011 Jeremy Corbyn provided a foreword for a reprint of Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study (1902)*. Hobson’s analysis of the underlying dynamics of imperialism garnered widespread attention upon its release, and over the following decades it became a key work in the anti-imperialist canon. Indeed, its influence stretched from liberals to Bolsheviks.^[3] It thus seems unsurprising that Corbyn – a self-identified anti-imperialist – would lend his support to the book.

However, the focus of *The Times* piece was a specific passage in *Imperialism* – and other lengthier sections in Hobson’s wider corpus – that suggest an anti-Semitic mindset.^[4] This material was brought to attention to support the long-running claim that Jeremy Corbyn and sections of the Labour Party are either anti-Semitic or at least ignorant or uncaring about the manner in which anti-Semitic tropes are reproduced by some on the left, often as part of critiques such as of the societally detrimental impacts of the financial sector or the Israel and Palestine conflict. The case of Hobson provides some useful parallels.

Fittingly, much of the current debate between historians unfolded in the pages of the *Guardian*, a newspaper Hobson had been closely linked to.^[5] He became a close confidante of the newspaper’s longstanding editor C.P. Scott, acted as the *Guardian*’s correspondent during the Boer War, and continued to contribute articles over the following decades, as well as regularly being sought for advice by members of the editorial team.

Hobson, C.P. and L.T. Hobhouse – the liberal sociologist – were also key figures in the emergence of the New Liberalism at the end of the 19th century. This was an attempt to go beyond the classical liberalism of the Victorian period, redefining the state as a means of enabling greater freedom and individual agency by mitigating the destructive effects of poverty and unequal opportunity.^[6] Their efforts played a key role in helping lay the foundations for the socially progressive policies of David Lloyd George and forged ties between many New Liberals and the social democrats and socialists of the Labour Party,

which eventually resulted in the post-Second World War welfare state. Aside from his influential analysis of imperialism, Hobson also provided key contributions such as the concept of a 'living wage' and his theory of underconsumption.

An op ed in the Guardian criticised Corbyn for providing the foreword to *Imperialism* without denouncing its anti-Semitic passages and Hobson's similar statements in other works, while Miles Taylor argued that "antisemitism is inseparable from [Hobson's] attack on imperialism". Robert Saunders argued that Hobson was "viciously anti-Semitic", and that although we should not ignore this aspect of Hobson's thought "it may be possible to detach his more valuable insights from the anti-Semitic poison coursing through them".

Donald Sassoon and Tristram Hunt stated that it was reductive to frame Hobson's work through the lens of anti-Semitism, arguing that such passages only constituted a tiny segment of his written output and were marginal to his wider arguments. Moreover, it was pointed out that many at the time shared such views – spanning both the right and the left.[7] Abigail Green argued that the anti-Semitic passages deserve to be foregrounded precisely because of this wider cultural context.

Although anti-Semitism was deeply embedded in right-wing politics, it was also entrenched in sections of the left and the Labour movement. It was also present among fellow 'economic heretics' that are hard to categorise such as Major Douglas and those that supported his 'Social Credit' programme, and prominent critic of the gold standard Arthur Kitson.[8] Many of these groups and individuals reproduced and fixated on anti-Semitic ideas more often as time passed.[9]

As the two most in-depth assessments of Hobson's possible anti-Semitism have shown, Hobson did not conform to the typical model of the anti-Semite,[10] and, contrary to many others at the time, his prejudice appears to have lessened and eventually disappeared from his later work. Allett suggests the pivotal moment was the Boer War and the understanding of intolerance Hobson gained from his analysis of jingoism.[11]

However, Hobson's turn away from anti-Semitism did not result in him publicly denouncing it.[12] Moreover, although Hobson became an ardent opponent of Nazism, his championing of economic explanations for its emergence only served to help obscure the anti-Semitism that lay at the heart of the ideology.[13]

The example of Hobson shows that it is possible to expunge problematic and harmful tropes from otherwise vital analyses. But it also demonstrates that this is not enough. Prejudice and harmful scapegoating need to be resisted, and personal failings on such matters should be acknowledged.

Geoffrey Alderman has convincingly argued that Corbyn is not an anti-Semite, pointing to his long history of supporting Jewish communal initiatives. Rather, Corbyn's anti-Zionism and his antipathy towards imperialism and the financial sector likely explain his lack of effort to tackle anti-Semitism.

Important critiques are undermined when they are infiltrated by anti-Semitic tropes, prejudice and conspiracism, as the cases of Hobson, Kitson, Douglas and many others demonstrate. Allowing such ideas to propagate is unacceptable, and combating them is especially vital during periods of rising intolerance such as the early 20th century and, indeed, today. Hobson should not be defined by the anti-Semitic content in his earlier works. But the insights to be gained from exploring his relationship to the wider patterns of prejudice of his time should not be neglected either.

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[1] J. Allett, 'New Liberalism, Old Prejudices: J.A. Hobson and the "Jewish Question"', *Jewish Social Studies*, 49.2 (1987), p. 99.

[2] The designation 'economic heretic' is taken from Hobson's autobiography, and signifies the radical nature of many of ideas. Although he had aspirations to become an economist, Hobson was shunned by the academic economics community because of his criticisms of orthodox approaches.

[3] It was especially influential among liberals that took a pro-Boer stance during the Boer War. Lenin and Trotsky were both impressed by Hobson's analysis. T. Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey* (2nd edn, London, 1990), ch. 4.

[4] The offending passages are indeed damning. The key section in *Imperialism* is only a few lines long, but reproduced the long-standing idea of a Jewish financial conspiracy with its talk of "men of a single and peculiar race, who have behind them many centuries of financial experience". Hobson's analysis had been influenced by his time spent in South Africa, and his book on the Boer War from two years prior contained more extensive denunciations of Jewish financiers and businessmen and even more prejudicial language, such as referring to Jewish financiers as "parasites". J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902), p. 64; J.A. Hobson, *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Effects* (London, 1900), p. 69. As will be discussed, Hobson's earlier work is where nearly all of the anti-Semitic tropes he reproduced are to be found, with such ideas largely disappearing from this later writings.

[5] Although this had been when it was still called the *Manchester Guardian*.

[6] Such an approach is now often labelled Social Liberalism, to differentiate it from Socialism.

[7] It is worth mentioning that eugenics also had supporters across the political spectrum at this time – including many on the left – and there was often a direct link between eugenicist and anti-Semitic beliefs stemming from pseudoscientific racial science.

[8] R.D. Boyce, *British Capitalism and the Crossroads* (Cambridge, 1987), 64; J. Stingel, *Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism, Social Credit, and the Jewish Response* (Montreal, 2000).

[9] See, for example, how the anti-Semitism and the idea of a Jewish financial conspiracy went from being only appearing in passing to being a central concern in the work of Arthur Kitson. A. Kitson, *The Money Problem* (London, 1903); A. Kitson, *A Fraudulent Standard: An Exposure of the Fraudulent Character of Our Monetary Standard with Suggestions for the Establishment of an Invariable Unit of Value* (London, 1917).

[10] Colin Holmes perceptively analysed how central anti-Semitism was to Hobson's thought, and concluded that although much of his earlier work did essentialise Jewish people and reproduced conspiracy theories about 'Jew power' in a manner similar to widespread discourses at the time, overall "it would be dangerous to regard Hobson as prejudiced against Jews in the classical sense; the indications are that he did not possess a hostility towards them which was central to the economy of his psyche". C. Holmes, 'J.A. Hobson and the Jews', in C. Holmes (ed.), *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society* (London, 1978), p. 144; Allett, 'New Liberalism, Old Prejudices'.

[11] As he states: "Hobson's rethinking of the "Jewish Question" most likely came about as a result of his scrutinizing of the operation of prejudice in others. By trying to penetrate the mind of the Jingoist, Hobson appears to have gained fresh insight into his own prejudicial ways of thinking, as well as a new appreciation of the predicament of his victim, having suffered rude handling at several public meetings when trying to present his minority "pro-Boer" case." Allett, 'New Liberalism, Old Prejudices', p. 110. However, it has also been pointed out that Hobson did slip back into using the same anti-Semitic tropes on at least one occasion when discussing financiers, in his 1931 book *God and Mammon*. W. Brustein, L. Roberts, *The Socialism of Fools?: Leftist Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 185.

[12] Nor did he revise the offending passages in his earlier works in subsequent print editions.

[13] Allett, 'New Liberalism, Old Prejudices', p. 112.