

Scholar: Europe's Right is embracing its Jews Old hatreds fading as nationalists turn anger on Muslims



Matti Bunzl, who presented *The New Philo-Semitism: Israel, Islamophobia, and the Right in Europe*, with Yael Zerubavel, director of Rutgers' Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.
Photo by Debra Rubin

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A wave of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric in Europe is being met by a surprising countertrend: right-wing political factions, including those rooted in Nazism, who have embraced Jews and Israel as “the quintessential guardians of European culture.”

So argues Matti Bunzl, director of the program in Jewish culture and society at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who contends that the European far Right is becoming “genuinely philo-Semitic.”

Such parties have thrown their support behind Jewish candidates, have had their leaders appear at pro-Israel rallies, and have written extensively about the virtues of Jews.

“It is not an aberration,” said Bunzl, an anthropologist who specializes in the history and culture of European Jewry.

Bunzl presented *The New Philo-Semitism: Israel, Islamophobia, and the Right in Europe* at a March 23 program at Trayes Hall on the Douglass campus in New Brunswick. The program was sponsored by Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life in conjunction with the Henry Schwartzman Endowed Faculty Seminar.

Bunzl cited numerous instances of this newfound fondness for Jews. Austria's Freedom Party, founded by former Nazis after the war, has run Jewish candidates, and its website "celebrates Jewish contributions to civilization."

Filip DeWinter, a Flemish nationalist in Belgium, whose party grew out of Flemish Nazism, has praised Jews as law-abiding citizens.

"Why would a Flemish nationalist need to say nice things about the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Antwerp?" asked Bunzl. "Is it a Belgian fluke? Too much chocolate perhaps?"

One explanation he offers is Islamophobia — antagonism toward Muslim immigrants or Muslims whose families have migrated to European countries in recent generations.

"Even strong support of Israel among the Right is driven by Islamophobia and perception of Israel as a bastion of European civilization," said Bunzl, author of *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe*. For European nationalists, "the Jewish state is trying to preserve its European values against the onslaught of Muslims. It is a European state trying to defend itself and its Western culture and democracy."

Bunzl finds little solace in this perception.

To him, *tikun olam*, the concept, he said, "that I think we all believe in, is the idea that Jews should repair the world and work for social justice. I cannot stomach that the far Right has come to love Jews because they now hate Muslims."

He also said he thinks right-wing philo-Semitism has picked up steam since the formation of the European Union in 1993, which downplayed nationalism in favor of European culture and identity.

Because Jews have lived in and integrated into societies from Poland to France for many hundreds of years, contributing their talents yet maintaining their own traditions, they in essence are now the paradigm for the "perfect European" in the eyes of the far Right, said Bunzl.

"But this is no cause for celebration," he cautioned.

Bunzl is a self-described rarity, having been born in 1971 into a Jewish family in Vienna. After growing up in the 1980s and hearing anti-Semitic rhetoric from the far Right, he said, makes the recent phenomena particularly fascinating to him.

"In the 1980s I was scared of the far Right," said Bunzl. "Austria was a scary place."

Now Jews in Europe have "become infatuated with the far Right" and the number casting votes for them is "growing fast," although Bunzl acknowledged that most Jews still vote for centrist or left-center candidates.

Still, he wondered, "how high a cost" will Jews pay for supporting nationalist candidates?

“We have to be careful who our friends are,” he said.