PRIMARY REVIEW 2: R. Brym, *A Survey on Antisemitism in Ontario's K-12 Schools*, 2025

Overview

A report authored by Prof. Robert Brym on antisemitism in Ontario schools was widely circulated by the federal government and received significant press and social media coverage. The present critique challenges the study's methodologies including, notably, a failure to clearly define antisemitism, (thereby impeding our capacity to distinguish between antisemitic and non-antisemitic events). This critique also focuses on the study's interpretive missteps such as the report's failure to provide adequate political context for understanding the emotions and opinions of those surveyed.

Methodology

1. What stands out immediately in this research is the absence of any discussion whatsoever of how antisemitism is defined. As Brym states on page 15, "Antisemitic incidents are defined as those that parents and their children consider antisemitic." This calls into question how those reporting define antisemitism. Brym takes as a given that anything that gets reported as antisemitism is antisemitism. He never introduces the controversies surrounding definitions of antisemitism, many of which dispute that criticism of Israel equates with Jew hatred.[1] Nor does he seek the opinions of students, teachers, or other school officials accused of antisemitism to contextualize incidents reported by survey respondents.

2. On page 15 Brym claims, without evidence, that the survey sample is "roughly representative of the 2/3 of Ontario Jews most closely tied to the Jewish community by membership in synagogues and other Jewish institutions." [2] It can be disputed that 2/3 of Ontario Jews are "closely tied" to Jewish institutions. In the 2018 Jewish communal survey (of which Brym is a co- author) it was reported that 22% of Jews are "not very" or not at all connected to the community and 24% have no organizational affiliation. What results would Brym have gotten if he had been able to capture the views of the unaffiliated? Moreover, it is well-known that those with

[1] See, for example, Mark Mazower, On Antisemitism. Penguin Press, 2025 and Jonathan Judaken, Critical Theories of Antisemitism, Columbia University Press, 2024. See also Antony Lerman, Whatever Happened to Antisemitism: Redefinition and the Myth of the Collective Jew, Pluto Press, 2022.

[2] It should be noted for example that membership in a Jewish community centre, which might be acquired in order to access fitness classes, swimming pool, etc. would render the (Jewish)bbuyer among those Jews who are "closely tied" to the Jewish community.

strong opinions are more likely to respond to a survey. Therefore, even among the Jews that were put in contact with this survey, there is likely to be a self-selection bias.

3. On page 21, Brym criticizes the Toronto District School Board for not utilizing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism to identify incidents of antisemitism. This position shifts the manuscript's tone from an unbiased scientific inquiry into ideological advocacy, compromising its status as an objective study. Moreover, there is no acknowledgement of either the widespread recognition[3] of how the IHRA-WDA has been used to suppress[4] criticism of Israel nor of the pushback against the TDSB by progressive Jews and Palestinians.

4. On page 29, Brym relies on statistics published in the B'nai Brith Audit of Antisemitic Incidents even though in the past he has criticized the Audit's methodology as flawed[5]. Brym characterizes alleged antisemitic incidents occurring after October 7 as "another cycle of hate." Since B'nai Brith uses the IHRA-WDA definition to vet incidents, many strong statements and actions critical of Israel wind up conflating opposition to Israeli violence with antisemitism, even though he argues against this elsewhere[6]. This position conforms to that of Deborah Lyons, the pro-Israel former Special Envoy on Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism whose office funded and published Brym's research on K-12 schools.

Interpretation concerns

1. On page 29 Brym conjectures that children perpetrating antisemitism are simply modeling their antisemitic behaviour on that of their parents. The possibility for a racist interpretation of this is obvious in a context which views Muslims as inherently antisemitic.

2. Regarding the author's previously published claims about Muslims' opinions of Jews, on page 29 Brym repeats a specific statistic from his 2024 report that 52% of

[3] Ruth Gould, R. (2020), 'The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism: Defining Antisemitism by Erasing Palestinians." The Political Quarterly, 91: 825-831. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12883

[4] See data from the Foundation for Middle East Peace documenting opposition to the IHRA in the U.S. https://fmep.org/resource/statements-analyses-opposing-federal-ihra-legislation-2024/. For a deep critique of the IHRA WDA see Antony Lerman, What Ever Happened to Antisemitism?

[5] Robert Brym, "Antisemitic and Anti-Israel Actions and Attitudes in Canada and Internationally: A Research Agenda", Patterns of Prejudice 53.4, 2019.

[6] Robert Brym, "Yes, anti-Zionism is antisemitic" National Post, August 26,2026. Brym argues directly that anti-Zionism is antisemitic because it denies the Jewish people their right to self-determination

Canadian Muslims hold somewhat negative views of Jews[7]. Notably, Brym offers no political context for these numbers. What is missing here is data assessing Muslims' attitudes towards Jews before the Oct. 7 Hamas attack. He neglects, for example, to gauge the effect of Israel's genocide in Gaza on Canadian Muslim attitudes towards Jews and Israel.

3. Regarding the impact of parents' politics on students' behavior, on page 30 Brym relates the story of what one student heard from another, a story which amounted to a description of Jewish settler colonialism and its deadly impact on Palestinians in Israel. While the story is crude and almost metaphorical, it is not antisemitic. Moreover, Brym gives this as an example of "antisocial modeling" in the family. Again, context is completely missing. When the institutional Jewish community (which includes Brym) consistently represents Jews and Israel as indivisible, strong opposition to Israel's conduct in Gaza (and elsewhere) is interpreted as antisemitic. Not only is this obvious likelihood not discussed in a balanced way, Brym claims on page 34 that the story described above is an example of anti-Jewish hate that has nothing to do with Israel. On the face of it, this allegory is clearly about Israel's treatment of Palestinians and Brym's flatly stated counternarrative is not based on any investigation of the motivations or emotional investments of the storyteller.

4. Very disturbing is Brym's attack on Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies on page 32. Attacks on DEI institutional structures and rhetoric have been foundational to the right-wing playbook in North America. Brym uses one parent's interpretation of DEI – "[it] basically divides kids into oppressors and oppressed" – as a true reflection of school anti-discrimination policies. He then offers an example of DEI policy by citing a child being told by a classmate that Jews are "rich and stingy" which was accompanied by a Heil Hitler salute. The unsubstantiated implication is that the child is being taught this behaviour through the school's DEI initiatives. Also, on page 33 Brym interprets claims that Jews "are mainly white" as an expression of class and racial resentment. There is no acknowledgement of Jewish racial and economic privilege in Canada.[8] According to Brym, to even acknowledge this privilege is to engage in antisemitism.

   Also on page 33, Brym conjectures that the impact of widespread social isolation during COVID is responsible for attacks carried out by students who just want to connect with other students and who are not motivated by racial animus. Similar to

[7] Jews and Israel 2024: A Survey of Canadian Attitudes and Jewish Perceptions appeared in the journal Canadian Jewish Studies Vol. 37, Spring 2024 https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/40368

[8] On Jewish whiteness in Canada, see Sheryl Nestel "Zionist loyalty and Euro-Jewish Whiteness: Untangling the Threads of a Lethal Complicity" in Emily Regan Wills, et al, Eds, Advocating for Palestine in Canada, Fernwood Publishing, 2022

his unsupported interpretation about familial transmission of antisemitic ideas, Brym floats this idea about the impact of COVID isolation without providing any evidence.

5. Brym states that "Zionism is the belief that Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland," asserting that this belief is embraced by 94% of Canadian Jews. However, this definition is presented without qualification, overlooking a broad variety of contemporary interpretations.[9] He also states that "the existence of Israel is central to Jewish identity" when there is considerable evidence indicating that Jewish identification with Israel has dropped precipitously in the U.S. As to Canada, according to a survey published by the liberal Zionist Canadian group JSpace, Canadian Jews are "a community navigating tension and restraint: many respondents report holding back from expressing their views, particularly those on the left, reflecting internal divisions and a sense that Israel-related discourse has become fraught within Jewish communal spaces." By presenting these substantial claims without empirical substantiation, the report frequently lacks the necessary academic rigor.

6. On page 41 Brym describes as "antisemitic" incidents wherein a teacher invited speakers with a "radical Palestinian point of view" rather than invite those representing a "more nuanced interpretation of the complex history of the conflict." Brym fails, however, to define what constitutes a "radical Palestinian" or "nuanced" point of view. He also fails to provide the specific contextual details necessary for an independent evaluation of the incidents. By uncritically prioritizing a "nuanced" perspective over a "radical" one without establishing objective criteria or presenting evidence, the text introduces a distinct ideological bias that undermines its analytical objectivity.

[9] For a scholarly argument against this definition see Judith Butler, Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism, Columbia University Press, 2012.