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In age of identity politics, some less equal than others

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As unending lockdowns fuel an increasingly widespread sense of war-weariness, a great deal of ugliness is coming to the surface. Few incidents are as troubling, however, as the reaction to an engagement party that was held at a private house in Melbourne on August 14.

The party, which clearly breached public health orders, was attended by 69 people. It was in that respect little different from the many other private gatherings, involving groups that range from 20 to nearly 100 people, that have contravened the Covid regulations.

There was, however, one respect in which this engagement party was different: the hosts and a majority of the guests were drawn from Melbourne's Orthodox Jewish community.

Let's be clear: there was nothing specifically religious about this party: it was not held in a religious venue, nor did it have any religious significance. Rather, it was an engagement party attended by people who happened to be Jewish. To call it a Jewish function would therefore make no more sense than calling similar gatherings Catholic, Anglican or agnostic.

However, that didn't stop Victoria's Covid-19 commander, Jeroen Weimar, from describing the participants not as Melburnians who had attended an illegal party but as "members of the Orthodox Jewish community" – the only instance, as best one can tell, in which those involved in a gathering that had no religious connotations have been labelled in religious

terms.

Even less restraint was shown by the Seven and Nine networks. Channel 7 displayed an infographic that, in purporting to identify the sources of the Covid cluster in southeast Melbourne, labelled them as an accountant, an architect, a sex worker, a worker in a pizza shop – and “Jewish community members”: again, the only case in which the broadcaster appears to have applied a religious descriptor to a purely secular event, while casting an entire community as being caught up in the spread of a dangerous disease that had caused Melburnians, yet again, to be locked into their homes.

Channel 9, which also took up Weimar’s description, went one better. Noting that the party’s host previously had helped finance a Jewish communal facility, its presentation combined images of the party with those of the facility, reinforcing the stigmatisation and conveying the impression that the party had a ritual connection it entirely lacked.

Sadly, but perhaps predictably, the event’s coverage unleashed a torrent of vitriolic anti-Semitic abuse, with many of those comments remaining on prominent websites for days after the reports first appeared. Faced with that response, Channel 7, instead of putting the event in perspective, reproduced one of the most odious comments, which called for Jews to be “put in a gas chamber”, but carefully pixelated the picture and name of the person who had posted it, thus preventing her from being identified – while not pixelating close-ups it also screened of the party’s participants, including several that highlighted symbols, such as skullcaps, of religious affiliation.

None of that is intended to imply that Weimar acted out of anti-Semitic intent. On the contrary, he apologised in writing for his choice of words, while Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, in a statement for which he deserves considerable credit, reinforced that apology by condemning the proliferation of online anti-Semitism in powerful terms.

As for channels 7 and 9, the likelihood is that they were, quite literally, being thoughtless: it just never crossed their minds to question the way they presented the event. But as so often happens, it is precisely what is taken for granted that is most revealing.

This is, after all, the age of identity politics, where the greatest sin, drilled in at the now ubiquitous courses on sensitivity training, is to give offence – a sin our ever-vigilant anti-discrimination commissions stand poised to detect and punish, even in its most trivial manifestations. But while all identities are equal, some are plainly less equal than others. And at several of our largest broadcasters, the caution that would normally be displayed in dealing with racial, ethnic or religious communities is, it seems, no longer required when the reference is to Jews.

Of course, it is not just the Jewish community that is at the losing end of identity politics' double standard, as a moment's consideration of the ABC's treatment of George Pell, and more recently of Scott Morrison's religious convictions, shows. But the context we're in gives the reaction to the engagement party a particularly disturbing edge.

It is, in effect, hardly new that epidemics, in tearing at the social fabric, generate a search for culprits; from Thucydides's account of the plague that struck Athens in the spring of 430BC through Defoe and Manzoni to Camus, literature's greatest descriptions of societies struggling with epidemics are permeated by conspiratorial fantasies of subterranean danger, of destructive agencies ready to rise from sewerage and cellar, spreading infection and perpetuating the death and despair.

Nor is it a coincidence that among the most enduring legacies of the 1919 flu pandemic was the seeping into political rhetoric of the language of contagion, which in turn fed the conviction that, like germs, only extermination could rid the body politic of those who were vilified as unclean.

As Swiss historian Philippe Burrin has shown, that transposition undoubtedly reached its extreme, and ultimately most lethal, form in Germany, where the biological analogy between Jews and plague-infected vermin was at the heart of Nazi propaganda. But Australia was hardly insulated from the global trend.

Thus, in the aftermath of the Spanish flu, it became commonplace on the right to describe Bolshevism as a deadly bacillus that had to be eradicated from Australian soil, with Eric Campbell, the leader of the New Guard, famously congratulating Hitler's regime for its

“cleansing of alleged subversives and degenerates”. And on the left, the 1920s saw the emergence of a virulent anti-Semitism, pervaded by notions of infection, corruption and filth, that was epitomised in the writings of Frank Anstey and in the columns of John Curtin’s *Westralian Worker*, helping to prompt some of the uglier outbursts of xenophobia in Australia’s history.

Tomorrow’s horrors, no doubt, will not be carbon copies of yesterday’s. But from Thucydides’s time to today, this much has always remained true: societies that shut in on themselves turn on themselves.

That, too, is part of the pandemic’s hidden toll – and it will continue to mount as the lockdowns transform simmering resentments into ill-directed fury. The longer they need to continue, the greater is the risk that we will march, hand-in-hand with the demons of fear on the one side and of rage on the other, into hatred’s all-consuming abyss.