

The Guardian

Richard Sharp is a public figure and fair game for satire. The use of antisemitic tropes is not

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The Guardian was right to remove and delete the cartoon published on Saturday, but with all that is known about anti-Jewish symbols and images, this should not be happening



📷 'Richard Sharp is a public figure of national interest. But he is also Jewish, and antisemitism remains a live and at times lethal problem.' Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Other than his closest friends, it is unlikely that anybody would complain if a Guardian cartoonist drew Boris Johnson as a gorilla.

All's fair in political satire, cartoonists are expected to be scurrilous, and the former prime minister is fair game. But if that same cartoonist drew a black politician in simian form, it would be obviously racist.

This is the principle to hold in mind when decoding Martin Rowson's cartoon of outgoing BBC chair [Richard Sharp](#), who is Jewish, in Saturday's Guardian. Centuries of anti-Jewish caricaturists (and to be clear, I do not accuse Rowson or the Guardian of falling into this category) have generated an extensive library of visual tropes to convey their hatred of, and disgust for, Jews. This is partly because antisemites face a challenge: how do you incite hatred against a group of people who are not always readily identifiable? Not every Jew wears religious clothing or "looks Jewish" to every beholder.

Rather than drawing a yellow star on each Jewish target, Nazi-style, artists down the ages have instead given their subjects stereotypically "Jewish" features. The outsized nose and lips, grotesque features and sinister grin have been part of antisemitic imagery for centuries, a way of portraying Jews as repulsive and sinister. You can find them in medieval woodcuts of the fictitious allegation that Jews crucified Christian children and drained their blood (the ritual murder or "blood libel" charge), in Victorian cartoons in Punch and in the Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer.

All of which makes it unfathomable that anyone would be so unfamiliar with this anti-Jewish visual lexicon that they would draw and publish a cartoon that depicted Sharp, or any other Jew in public life, in this way: but here we are. All the component parts were there: the large nose, the lips, the Fagin-like sneer, and, of course, what appears to be money. It's a racialised depiction of a Jew, and incidentally is another reminder, if Diane Abbott is still wondering, that antisemitism can indeed be a form of racism.

Sharp is a public figure of national interest and should not be exempt from scrutiny and satire. But he is also Jewish, and

antisemitism remains a live and at times lethal problem. There is a responsibility on newspapers and cartoonists to ensure that they do not feed this by deploying antisemitic motifs in their critiques of Jews in the public eye.

Rowson says that Sharp's Jewishness was not in his mind, but in a way that is beside the point. For centuries our world has taught us that this is how to imagine wealthy, powerful Jews, especially those accused of wrongdoing. The fact that his pen veered, however unthinkingly, towards these antisemitic motifs shows how easily, and unthinkingly, they can rise to the surface.

Then there are the contents of the box that Sharp is carrying. Rowson calls this "the standard accessory of the just sacked" (although that begs the question why it is a Goldman Sachs box and not a **BBC** one, when he has just lost his job at the latter). The most eye-catching thing in the box is a big pink squid, which seems puzzling until you remember that in 2009 Matt Taibbi, writing in Rolling Stone, famously described Goldman Sachs as "a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money".

This metaphor was, and remains, antisemitic. Goldman Sachs was founded by Jewish families and has a Jewish-sounding name. Antisemitic conspiracy peddlers regularly describe the fantastical Jewish power network they believe exists as a squid or octopus, its tentacles reaching into every part of society. In the antisemitic imagination, Jewish power is never about muscular strength or straightforward authority, but is more insidious and manipulative. This is why anti-Jewish zoomorphism tends towards snakes, spiders and, yes, squids, rather than, say, predators like sharks or lions. There is nothing honourable, in this way of thinking, about how Jews acquire and deploy money and power.

The specific invocation of a “vampire squid” connects with the blood libel allegation. Even Dracula himself, a mysterious figure of unexplained wealth who drinks blood and hates crosses, implicitly draws on this anti-Jewish tradition. Put all this together and Taibbi’s description of Goldman Sachs ticked numerous antisemitic boxes.

Nevertheless, it stuck and has been used by newspapers (including the Guardian) ever since. The fact it resonated so strongly tells us something about how easily antisemitic ideas exist, relatively unrecognised and unchallenged, in our world. The image of a huge, greedy, Jewish bank as a vampire squid works so well because it falls neatly into the groove of anti-Jewish thinking that has been present in our world for so long. It makes sense to people because it feels so familiar.

The swift withdrawal of the cartoon and [apology by both Rowson](#) and the Guardian are welcome, but really, this should not still be happening. The Labour party went through years of pain because too many people within its ranks, and in its leadership, either could not recognise antisemitic ideas or actively indulged them. One of the lowest points in that saga was Jeremy Corbyn’s apparent inability to recognise the antisemitism in a mural of bankers in which the Jewish figures were painted with – you guessed it – big noses.

The Labour party has worked hard to educate itself, but it seems that there are still those in broader progressive politics who have learning left to do.