

U.K.: How Labour's Dreadful Antisemitism Debate Has to Change

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The standard of debate around Labour's antisemitism saga has been dire from the start, and both Corbyn's critics and his supporters on the left have been to blame.

Things have reached a new low since the publication of the party's guidelines on identifying antisemitism last week. Amid fury from some in the British Jewish community and now determination from Labour MPs to junk the text, others have [already made the case](#) for the document [in detail](#). Too rarely, though, do we ask how we got here. Labour cut and pasted a definition of antisemitism produced by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and added a slew of robust and important additional examples like the insistence that "equating Jews with capitalists or the ruling class" is antisemitic, yet now it stands accused of being "[institutionally antisemitic](#)" for its efforts. Britain's three biggest Jewish newspapers unite to present Jeremy Corbyn as a modern Hitler by claiming he presents an "[existential threat](#)" to Jewish life in Britain. Casual dismissal of such incendiary rhetoric with a broad base as mere enemy propaganda demonstrates the left's failure to grapple seriously with thought it dislikes. Very many British Jews believe this stuff. They are wrong, but they are honestly concerned and a thoughtful, critical left should be keen to develop explanations for the panic that move beyond conspiratorial thinking. Most depressingly, 68 rabbis from every hue of Jewish religiosity [signed a letter labelling](#) the Labour leadership "insulting and arrogant" in failing to challenge "severe and widespread" antisemitism within the party. These are not only the voices of 'Blairites' or some 'Zionist lobby'; the broad swath of Jewish communal leadership, including some Haredim with little instinctive sympathy for Zionism, were willing to sign onto something so partisan and so despairing. Why?

There are, to be sure, old political stakes at play. Labour's Code of Conduct for Antisemitism removes the IHRA's insistence that Israel must be treated as a democracy – a highly contentious claim for a state that rules over millions of Palestinians openly deprived of democratic rights by a military occupation – and secondly the IHRA's contention that it is necessarily antisemitic to hold that Israel's existence as a state born out of ethnic cleansing amounts to racism. Palestinians are thus forbidden by the IHRA from questioning Israel's democratic or anti-racist character at just the moment when its parliament passes legislation stressing that the nation belongs to its Jewish citizens only. Some Palestinians might read that law as I would read it, as the extension of a racist state-building project founded by the expulsion of the natives. The IHRA would prohibit them and me from that reading. These are, one might reasonably suggest regardless of one's position on Israel, inappropriate intrusions of hotly contested political claims into a definition of antisemitism. Sure enough, in their opposition to Labour's divergences from the IHRA, [Labour 'insiders' now demand](#) that Seumas Milne must retract the firm criticisms of Israel he issued for years as a Guardian journalist. The de facto conflation of antisemitism with anti-Zionism (de facto, that is, since plenty of those pursuing the conflation in practice proclaim their disavowal of it in theory) seems at first sight more ferocious than ever. It is of course a highly dangerous conflation insofar as it risks

glamorising antisemitism and falsely affirming the antisemitic hypothesis that Netanyahu and world Jewry are one and the same. It risks mirroring the antisemitic treatment of Jews as one homogenous mass. Parliament's Home Affairs Committee [expressed its own reservations](#) about the IHRA for this reason, yet now that is forgotten amid the elevation of the IHRA document to sacred text status to aid the presumption that Labour's doubts about it should cast suspicion over the party.

All of this is important, but it won't do to end our discussion of antisemitism here. *Why* people find this presentation of Israel's critics on the left as antisemites compelling and how the left should respond remain questions to which we require much better answers. The dominant face of racism in Britain since 1945 has targeted groups other than Jews – South Asian, African and Caribbean immigrants and now Muslims – and so for decades the left has not concentrated on understanding antisemitism as a central and an urgent problem in the understanding of its enemies. That has been a regrettable absence, and one which we must now correct.

Antisemitism, anti-elitism and the radical left.

We should begin by noticing another pervasive conflation: the conflation between two breeds of the radical left. Camp Corbyn thinks it knows the radical left, thinks it has known them and worked with them for years. They are people who received their political education in trade unions or Communist parties or Trotskyist grouplets, who see a world defined by struggles of class rather than race, who see antisemitic anti-capitalism as a foolish misdiagnosis of the real causes of exploitation and alienation. Camp Corbyn hears attacks on Labour members and supporters and angrily, defensively they presume this is the group being accused of bigotry. When the Board of Deputies of British Jews wrote to Corbyn to complain of "[a far left worldview that is instinctively hostile to mainstream Jewish communities](#)", they too thought they knew the radical left. In part they likely had in mind the internet trolls and New World Order conspiracy theorists who join demonstrations against Israel and the IMF alike, who shriek of Rothschild cabals and Zionist conspiracies to start world wars and control the world's banks. The truth is that these are two quite distinct camps. Acknowledging the existence of both of them would mean stressing the existence of antisemitism on the left without reading antisemitism and anti-capitalism as synonymous.

Though Margaret Thatcher talked of unions as a powerful vested interest and Nigel Farage hailed Brexit as a victory for the "little people" against the migrant swarm, it is common now to hear assumptions that pretensions of anti-elitism are necessarily left-wing, such that the antisemite's claim to stand with the marginalised against a powerful Jewish lobby makes antisemitism a distinctly left-wing brand of prejudice.

The better alternative is to understand the search for a foreign conspiratorial hand behind every experience of suffering as a more ubiquitous intellectual condition. After the Holocaust, though, antisemitism in the West must deny itself in polite company. Under those conditions, the preponderance of anti-Zionism on the left sometimes gives antisemitism cover to scream on left-wing social media where on the right it must still hide better. As such, antisemitism is not *less* common than the anti-Corbyn crusaders imagine; it is likely to be *more* widespread than they realise, and across a much broader political spectrum. For its attempt to treat problems in our social structure as alien and extraneous and for its refusal of the frightening possibility that suffering is more deeply ingrained in Western societies than a tiny cabal of malicious outsiders, antisemitism is a conservative form of thinking probably attractive to millions beyond the most open bigots. Labour is just as likely to be institutionally antisemitic, then, as institutionally misogynistic and homophobic; anti-capitalists should be the first to read these malaises as produced by and embedded in hierarchical societies rather than as marginal cases of a few bad apples whose presence is overstated by zealots.

Part of the problem, often felt but rarely stated, is a sense that a lower bar is now used to identify antisemitism than most forms of racism. A narrow focus on the nasty intentions of individual bigots long permitted political moderates to burnish their anti-racist credentials without attacking racism's real foundations – Labour governments in the 1970s passed race relations legislation to ban those infamous 'no blacks, no dogs, no Irish' signs from hotels and guest houses while paying scant regard to police harassment of the Irish, and beefing up the nation's borders to keep out black migrants long before they reached British doorways. Given the post-Holocaust necessity for most antisemitism to deny itself, recent media discussion has tended to demonstrate an awareness that people can employ antisemitic tropes and so can demonstrate their antisemitic assumptions even where they insist that is not their conscious intent, and even where they aggressively and with honest intent parade their anti-racist credentials. That understanding is too rarely extended to other cases of discrimination. It is striking, for instance, that Alan Sugar can compare Corbyn to Hitler for his treatment of antisemitism in Labour and then profess an inability to understand why anyone would object to his sharing an image of the Senegalese football team as cheap sunglasses salesmen on a beach; or that Margaret Hodge can call Corbyn a racist for his handling of this antisemitism debate and avoid open-mouthed allegations of hypocrisy after she advocated an "indigenous-first" policy for allocating council housing that saw her lauded by the BNP.

These are not just examples of individuals inconsistent in their anti-racism. They also point to a more intellectually interesting double standard, which allows Ofsted to target Muslim girls in headscarves while the media talks of Muslim grooming gangs and Jack Straw is invited onto Newsnight as a respectable expert on the subject to defend his refusal to meet constituents wearing the niqab. This is the double standard which recognises that bigotry can be expressed with a modicum of subtlety, even that it can be disguised as something progressive, but which only recognises that point in the case of antisemitism. That risks provoking hostility from other minority communities who might feel that Jews are receiving much more sympathetic treatment in the political mainstream than they have come to expect for themselves. The response, however, should be to *generalise* this awareness of racism's complexities rather than to deny it in the case of antisemitism and so to accomplish a kind of levelling down where Jews and Muslims alike see bigotry against them denied until someone vandalises a place of worship or mows down a worshipper. When the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) highlighted islamophobia in the Conservative party, it was darkly comic to watch the Tories insist that nobody should listen to the MCB because they took supposedly objectionable positions on other political questions, all while wheeling out Sajid Javid to reject the charges, speaking "as a Muslim". That was a dreadful response to accusations of widespread prejudice, but it mirrored precisely the response of some on the left to accusations of antisemitism in Labour raised by the Board of Deputies. Unthinking double standards pervade, and the left remains stuck in a deplorably defensive mindset that tells it to hesitate before taking the fight to antisemitism.

Those who would associate antisemitism with the political left as twin anti-elitist forces tend to forget the dual nature of modern antisemitism. Antisemites long loathed Trotsky as much as Rothschild, using antisemitism as a crude social theory for opposing *both* the status quo *and* radical challenges to it. That dual nature might help in explaining the return of antisemitism to the headlines as a paranoia in the age of Corbyn. It is appealing as a mode of explanation for Corbynisism from those who for so long have known no politics beyond neoliberal technocracy – they can see in all anti-elitism the hidden force of antisemitism while simultaneously deploying the antisemitic frame to condemn committed Corbynites as a small band of nefarious conspirators against the national interest. It can be true both that antisemitism is a real problem in British society and that it is handled cynically by opponents of Corbyn. More pointedly, it is true both that antisemitism on the left and the right ought to be understood by left-wing anti-racists as a crisis and that the question why Britain's miserable, racist political mainstream reads antisemitism as a crisis at this moment deserves interrogation. There is a grand historical arc (anxieties about the passing of neoliberalism

and the return of antagonistic politics) which plays its part in generating panic about antisemitism. That is missed by the left's tendency to make this *all about Israel*, to think that Zionist cadres or the Israeli embassy must be behind every allegation of antisemitism in Labour. This view echoes antisemitism for its conspiratorial thinking and it risks romanticising Corbyn's position on Palestine, reading him as an exciting threat to Israeli interests [just when the left should be pushing the Labour leadership to adopt more unambiguously radical foreign policy positions](#).

Perhaps ironically, the left-wing focus on Israel has another set of erased victims: the Palestinian people. Mirroring the hierarchies of the colonial gaze, the Western left notices Israelis and shouts at them but it barely registers the existence of Palestinians except when they tend to the graves of their children. Ours is often a bitter, sad language of fury at Israeli crimes. The politics of solidarity should implore us to speak much more of a people with a gorgeous history of struggle and revolution that long inspired others from Algeria to South Africa to Vietnam, a history of courage and dedication in the fight to restore popular sovereignty and a lost body politic. That recentring of our political focus would immediately reveal so much. It would cast a light on the trail of racism that in 1944 saw the Labour party conference advocate ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and which now sees Labour MPs dismiss Palestinians' right to return to the homes from which they were chased. It would insist on the visibility, the existence of the Palestinian people and so would reveal the racism of those who now plead for the IHRA definition of antisemitism on the grounds that Jews should have the right to define what constitutes racism against them, apparently relaxed about the fact that the IHRA definition forbids Palestinians from exercising that same right by calling the state that kills them a racist state. It might unsettle all the lazy presumptions about Israel's 'right to exist', by paying overdue attention to the freedom struggle of those dispossessed by that 'right'. Most of all though, it would mean telling the left that we should battle antisemitism as a left-wing principle, not get tied up in debates about antisemitism as a misguided, indirect means of expressing opposition to Israel: the way to do that properly (nobly, rather than sordidly) is to refuse to permit the Palestinians to be extinguished from view.

A better way forward.

I was a teenager when a blogger told the world I was a kike. A few weeks earlier amid a winter of student protest, I had turned up at an anti-austerity conference where one of the conference organisers recognised me and invited me onto the stage to address the room. I talked excitably about my first experience of mass protest and about the new solidarities – with London Underground workers on strike, I think – that this brief movement had generated. “15-year-old communist Barnaby Raine is also a Jew” was the message one blogger took from that. A long series of comments then analysed the size of my nose and thanked the blogger for alerting the online community to another Rothschild-Soros shill cunningly feigning sympathy with the working class. I had not yet taken my GCSEs, but already I was part of something shadowy and global. Somehow someone discovered my home address and sent me envelopes empty but for the neatly cut-out swastikas inside. The sender really went to the trouble of cutting along every line. I remember thinking the flimsy white shapes looked almost cute, like bedroom decorations to hang from the ceiling above a baby's cot. It was my first confirmation that whatever I did and whatever I spoke about, to some people in modern Britain I would be above all a Jew and an object of sceptical scrutiny for it.

I barely thought of this for years, but I have been reminded of it in recent weeks. I thought then and think now that the radical left is capable of possessing the firmest answer to antisemitism, by our refusal to see people as ciphers for racial types and by turning our angry attention away from individuals and towards social structures of power and domination. I am much less confident now than I was then that the left will live up to that aspiration, that it will succeed in directing its indignation without qualification against every constricting force that frustrates the possibility of dignified living. Fulfilling that promise would mean a left at war with antisemitism and with Zionism.

We should be stronger on both of those battles, and we should stop thinking that we must choose between them. Of course, the two are not entirely unrelated. The old miseries of antisemitism aided in delivering present miseries to Palestine; the violent paranoias of Zionism are unimaginable except as the mirror of the violent paranoias of nineteenth-century antisemitism. To adapt some classic triangulation, we could do worse than the slogan “tough on Zionism, tough on the causes of Zionism.”

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