

# The Corbyn left: the politics of position and the politics of reason<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is about a preference within contemporary left-wing culture for defining opponents as not belonging rather than seeking to win them over. Opponents are constructed as being outside of the community of the good or the progressive. This licenses their treatment as 'other', impermeable to political argument, reason and evidence.

The Corbyn faction in the Labour Party employs an ethic of disdain for *ad hominem* politics but is keenly concerned with the construction and policing of the boundaries of progressive discourse. This faction's rise to leadership is symbolic of the prominence of this political culture.

As a sort of anti-imperialist 'campism' emerges as the pre-eminent principle of the progressive movement, hostility to Israel becomes a key marker of political belonging. This paper examines the *Livingstone Formulation*, a rhetorical device that seeks to construe the raising of the issue of antisemitism as more suspect and inherently problematic than the phenomenon of antisemitism itself. The construction of opponents of the Israel boycott campaign as external to the community of the University and College Union (UCU) provides case-study material.

The conclusion draws on the social critique of the Enlightenment notion of the autonomous rational subject. This critique downplays reason and human agency in social life. It is a development from the notion of false consciousness which facilitates a spiral into what Hannah Arendt (1975) analysed as a central feature of totalitarian politics: a culture in which disagreements are treated as 'originating in deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual and therefore beyond the power of reason'.

## PART 1: CORBYN AND THE COMMUNITY OF THE GOOD

From the beginning of his campaign for the leadership of the UK Labour Party, one of Jeremy Corbyn's most distinctive rhetorical stances has been: 'I don't do personal' ([Hattenstone 2015](#)).

During the campaign he responded in a speech to criticism from Tony Blair:

What this campaign is not about, and never will be about, is personal abuse, name calling, calling into question the character of other people, or other candidates. I believe many

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people, particularly young people, are totally turned off by the politics of celebrity, personality, personal abuse, name calling and all that kind of thing. Let's be adult about it. Let's have a serious debate, serious discussion, serious proposals put forward... ([Hartley 2015](#)).

In this article I argue that this statement by Jeremy Corbyn is not only misleading, it is a profound inversion of the actual culture of his political milieu.

The Corbyn faction's political practice is actually to *avoid* debate over ideas and policies. Instead it defines itself as the community of the good and it positions its opponents and its critics as being outside of that community. It is not doing this consciously and the suggestion that this is what is happening would be angrily rejected. But this 'politics of position', as I am calling it, is a significant phenomenon which is deeply embedded in contemporary left-wing political culture. Hannah Arendt (1975) argued that one of the defining features of totalitarian politics was the portrayal of political disagreements 'as invariably originating in deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual and therefore beyond the power of reason.' The Corbyn left's political *praxis* is not yet totalitarian but neither is it close to being confined to the democratic terrain of debate, argument and evidence.

The only Labour leader to have won General Elections in the era of colour television is Tony Blair. He won three. He is hated with a passion and a venom that goes beyond political disagreement.

The apocryphal insult thrown back at a Labour critic of Corbyn on a Facebook thread is: 'you're a Tory'. It could just as easily be 'you're a Zionist' or 'you're a Blairite'. Exiling a critic outside the community of the good and punishing them for their bad faith is preferred to offering reasons why they may be mistaken on a matter of principle, policy or fact.

Admittedly it is true that there is a tribalism present in all political organisation; a warm camaraderie for 'us' and some degree of disrespect for 'them'. Political narrative ties ideas and policies to communities of belonging emotionally as well as intellectually. But in the Corbyn phenomenon this process of staking out the boundaries separating the in-crowd from the out-crowd is key.

Perhaps this is because we are looking at a form of identity politics as much as a programme for government or radical change. If Labour cannot win even with Ed Miliband, and it has no interest in winning with a Tony Blair, then perhaps it is ready to lose courageously and honestly with a Jeremy Corbyn.

In a poll carried out during the leadership campaign, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper both scored higher than Corbyn with Labour members on the question: 'are they likely to win a General Election?' but Corbyn scored much higher on the question 'Should they be leader?' ([Dahlgreen 2015](#)). In another poll 'knows how to win elections' was thought to be 'among the most important leadership qualities' by only 27 per cent of voters in the leadership election ([Kirkup 2015](#)).

There is still the rich and exciting fantasy that Corbyn can sweep to power with his radicalism and his 'new politics'; that he can enthuse masses of new people, persuade them, make them believe; that he can repeat in the country the impossible victory that he achieved in the Party.

But perhaps more important is the inward looking 'not in my name' politics which has *given up* on winning and on the positive hope of changing the world. The politics of socialism, a positive constructive project, has been replaced by the politics of resistance and of critique, a negative symbolic enterprise concerned primarily with asserting innocence. It is also infantilising insofar as it contents itself with opposition, often moralistic, often ineffectual.

The intense personal payoff of this variant of identity politics is a feeling of inner cleanliness. The world may be utterly compromised and there may be nothing I can do about it, but it isn't going to be my fault, my own soul is clean. In this sense, while the Corbyn faction loves to say that it doesn't do personal, it doesn't do political either.

In the same speech quoted above, eight seconds after Corbyn has said he hates name calling and personal abuse, he indulges in name calling and abuse. 'The rich' and 'the powerful', he says, 'that benefit so much from our political system, don't care what kind of name calling goes on, providing their tax breaks go on...'. The rich and the powerful don't care about any kind of personal bullying because they only care about themselves. It is fine to 'do personal' when the target is outside of the community of the progressive and the good.

Corbyn goes on to say he feels that those who 'resort to personal abuse and name calling' are really 'probably a bit nervous about the power of democracy.' He finds another way to address the putative root cause rather than the point made.

When Corbyn is challenged on his beliefs and his record, he tends to respond by characterising a political challenge as a personal attack. He treats it as intrusive, rude and vulgar. In so doing, he accomplishes three things. He paints himself as the innocent victim of unjust aggression; he avoids responding to the detail of the challenge; and he bolsters the distinction between the good people inside his tent and the bad people outside of it. Howard Jacobson writes:

There was something 'How very dare you', about Jeremy Corbyn's recent temper tantrum in rebuttal of the charge that the company he kept reflected badly on him. 'The idea that I'm some kind of racist or anti-Semitic person is beyond appalling, disgusting and deeply offensive,' he said ([Jacobson 2015](#)).

'Alarm bells ring when a politician stands haughty upon his honour,' observes Jacobson. When Jeremy says he doesn't do personal what he means is that he will not deal with criticism in the normal way. He will not respond to it by means of reason or argument; he refuses to enter into serious engagement over worldviews, over ideas or over his record. He is less interested in trying to persuade than in making criticism appear as personal insult. 'Jeremy doesn't do personal' does not mean that he refrains from insulting others; it means that he refrains from *responding* to that which he is able to construct as insulting.

It is not accidental that the issue of antisemitism has become pivotal to this process of defining who is inside and who is not. In the post-war period, in democratic discourse at least, everybody recognised antisemitism as being bad and they recognised opposition to antisemitism as an entry requirement into progressive politics. Now, just the action of initiating a discussion about what is antisemitic and what is not rings alarm bells for people schooled in progressive culture. To ask if something said or done is antisemitic, if it relates to Israel or Palestinians, is to risk placing one's own membership of the community of the good under scrutiny.

It is difficult to engage in a reasoned and evidenced discussion about contemporary antisemitism but it is easy to mobilise the *issue* of antisemitism as an indicator of political cleanliness. In our time a person who raises the *issue* of antisemitism is more clearly recognisable as belonging to the wrong crowd than a person who stumbles into *actual* antisemitism. Raising the issue becomes a marker of Blairite, Tory or Zionist obfuscation. It marks a bad faith move designed to silence or to de-legitimise criticism of Israel, or even left politics in general. Antisemitism itself, on the other hand, when it can plausibly appear supportive of the Palestinians, does little to damage a person's reputation.

In his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2015, David Cameron criticised Jeremy Corbyn for having called the killing of Osama Bin Laden a tragedy. Cameron went on, in party conference rhetoric mode, 'My friends, we cannot let that man inflict his security-threatening, terrorist-sympathising, Britain-hating ideology on the country we love...' ([Wilkinson 2015](#)).

Now Corbyn is for unilateral nuclear disarmament and he has said that if he was prime minister he would never use nuclear weapons ([Sparrow 2015](#)). Over the years he has made clear his support for the 'Iraqi resistance', the IRA, Hamas and Hezbollah. Corbyn was the Chair of 'Stop the War' which has been explicit in its support for those fighting against British and American forces.

During an appearance on *Press TV*, the Iranian state English-language propaganda channel, on which Corbyn sometimes hosted a show, he had said that the killing of Bin Laden was a tragedy. The programme in question ([video 1](#)) was hosted by Yvonne Ridley, a leading member of George Galloway's *Respect* Party. Ridley thinks that 'Israel is a vile little state' and has reassured us that *Respect* is a 'Zionist-free party' while the mainstream parties are 'riddled with Zionists' ([Das 2012](#)).

In this programme Corbyn participates in a spinning swirl of conspiracy theory; perhaps Bin Laden was murdered years before; his killing is like the 'extra-judicial killing' of Adolf Eichmann by the 'Zionist state'; Charles II and Oliver Cromwell had their heads 'displayed', there is a 'medieval triumphalism' around the death of Bin Laden; Bin Laden's killing is a 'tragedy' like 9/11 and like the attack on Afghanistan; the fact that photographs of Bin Laden's body were not published demonstrates that President Obama may be lying about the death.

So how did Corbyn respond to Cameron's attack on his nuclear unilateralism, of his support for terrorism, of his response to the killing of Bin Laden and of his support for those engaging British forces? Corbyn has answers. His political tradition understands the key evils on the planet to be

American, British and Israeli imperialism. He thinks that forces which oppose imperialism, including the Iranian state and Yvonne Ridley, Iraqi Islamist militias, Bin Laden, the IRA, Hamas and Hezbollah, are fundamentally defensive. He supports them insofar as they are 'anti-imperialist'; insofar as they are anti-democratic, he regards them as *creations of imperialism*.

But Jeremy Corbyn did not engage with Cameron's criticism by defending his own record and his own beliefs. Instead, his spokesperson responded with this: 'The fact that David Cameron used his speech to make personal attacks on Jeremy Corbyn are a sure sign that he is rattled by the re-energisation of the Labour Party.'

Corbyn's official Facebook page characterised Cameron's speech as the 'most disgraceful name calling' and as 'personalised, playground attacks'. It went on:

You'll notice the similarity between the prime minister's words and those of the tabloid press, who have smeared Jeremy Corbyn throughout the summer and beyond.... The motivations are the same: to drown out debate and make our arguments taboo ([Dearden 2015](#)).

There seems to be a relationship between support for totalitarian ideas and movements on the one hand, and the adoption of totalitarian practices on the other. Hannah Arendt (1975) wrote that a defining characteristic of the totalitarian movements of the 20th-century was

... the introduction of entirely new methods into political propaganda, and indifference to the arguments of political opponents; these movements not only placed themselves outside and against the party system as a whole, they found a membership that had never been reached, never been 'spoiled' by the party system. Therefore they did not need to refute opposing arguments and consistently preferred methods which ended in death rather than persuasion, which spelled terror rather than conviction.

For sure, the Corbyn phenomenon is not currently a physically violent movement in spite of the vicarious thrill it enjoys by embracing violent movements in its global coalition. But my argument is that there is a discursive violence present in the way in which it pushes opponents out of the room. Arendt's description (1975) of the totalitarian approach to debate and to disagreement [resonates with the experiences](#) of those from the left and from within the labour movement who have dared to oppose the Jeremy Corbyn faction.

Struggles over the boundaries of political discourse are often important sites of political contestation. On the contemporary left, people and ideas are more and more being bundled over the boundaries of legitimate discourse by discursive force rather than rational debate and persuasion. This is not done for good reason, but in order to avoid having to give reasons. It is not the outcome of debate which positions some kinds of politics outside the community of the good; rather the act of positioning prejudices debate itself. In the absence of reasons and discussion, the process of defining people as not belonging takes more fixed and essentialist forms. That's why, although there are good reasons to worry about antisemitism on the contemporary left, those reasons are not heard. They are silenced by the shared assumption that anyone wanting to give such reasons is really speaking in bad faith in order to collude with the oppression of the

Palestinians. The totalitarians of old defined the enemies of the good in fixed categories. They were not people who *said* this or that; they were people who *were* this or that. It is the retreat from the politics of persuasion and discussion and its replacement with something more menacing that is the focus of this paper. (For more on struggles over the boundaries of political discourse and antisemitism, see [Hirsh 2010](#)).

## **PART 2: HOW ANTI-IMPERIALISM AND A TOLERANCE FOR ANTISEMITISM BECAME DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMUNITY OF THE GOOD**

The next section of this paper looks at how one element of the socialist and critical tradition, opposition to colonialism and imperialism, was raised to a new *'-ism'* itself, anti-imperialism. From being one element of the tradition, anti-imperialism became an absolute principle, predominating over other left wing and democratic principles such as self-liberation, equality, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, liberty, women's rights, lesbian and gay rights and national self-determination. This process is related to a resurgence of antisemitism on the left.

Corbyn's victory in the Labour Party is significant as an indicator of the progress of this anti-imperial-*ism* from the fringes to centre stage. Characteristics that were at one time confined to the dusty and obscure corners of the obsessive left now make a clear claim to be considered characteristics of the mainstream left. Nothing about Corbyn's record put off his supporters, not his history of support for antisemitic movements, for example, not his habit of defending antisemitic individuals nor his work for *Press TV*; not his support for the IRA, not his encouragement to those fighting against British forces, nor his support for Hamas and Hezbollah. None of this constituted an obstacle to supporting his leadership bid. Corbyn won a clear majority in every section of the party, amongst full members, trade union affiliated supporters and the new category of registered £3 supporters. There is no reason to believe that people voted for Corbyn in spite of these views rather than because of them.

The presence of antisemitism within radical and left wing thought is not new, but in democratic countries it had died down significantly after the Holocaust, even if it always remained strong in the Soviet Bloc as well as in Arab Nationalist and Islamist circles. In 2001 the confluence of three events heralded the return of antisemitism as a temptation for progressives. At Durban there was a huge UN conference at which Zionism was constructed as the most significant racism on the planet. The following Tuesday was 11 September, when the USA was attacked by *Al Qaeda*. In the same year the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians collapsed and the *Second Intifada* re-normalised the targeting of Jewish civilians as a means of resisting oppression.

With the post war resurgence of democratic Europe and the rise of American power, much of the left began to downplay those of its core values which did not provide a defining contrast against the newly dominant democratic ideology. Democratic values were more and more subordinated to the principle of opposition to imperialism. Struggles for equality within nations, and solidarity between the powerless across national boundaries, were sometimes sacrificed to struggles by *'oppressed' nations and peoples* against imperialist states. For *'imperialist'* read *'democratic'*. For *'oppressed nations'* read *'the men who rule over them and speak in their name'*.

This set of developments led to a splitting of the antiracist tradition. Any racism that was understood to be rooted in imperialism was vigorously opposed while any racism that blurred the black/white binary was downplayed.

The peoples who tended to suffer most acutely as a result of the struggle *against* imperialism were those who were held to be compromised by their 'collaboration' *with* imperialism: Tutsis, Tamils, Kurds, Baha'is, Yazidis, African Asians, Bosniaks, Armenians, Ukrainians and of course, Jews. Some on the left are not as exercised as they might be by the oppression of these groups because it is carried out by forces which they think of as broadly on the progressive side in the struggle against imperialism. The blood of those on the anti-imperialist left only really boils when it perceives white people, or people that it constructs as white, to be the villains. The left can be so tied to this emotional framework that it comes to feel as though all bad things in the world are the work of white people. Sometimes other people do bad things but, at root, it is white people who are found to be responsible. In this way, a part of the left finds itself stumbling into a worldview in which the only significant social agents are white people and all others are constructed as infantilised victims.

Jews seem to have the attribute, in the imagination of this current on the contemporary left, of being both white and not white; they are both 'us' and also not quite 'us'. They are sufficiently 'us' to give westerners the satisfaction of basking in the required guilt, but they are sufficiently not 'us' so that westerners can project their guilt onto them.

The Jews of the Holocaust still symbolise absolute powerlessness, the oppressed; but the Jews who survived the Holocaust, particularly those who found sanctuary in Israel or the US, fit better into another ready-made way of thinking about Jews: disproportionate power. In the tradition of *secondary* antisemitism, the Holocaust itself is thought to be one significant source of that power. In the tradition of *anti-capitalist* antisemitism, the sale of their souls to imperialism is the other source of Jewish power. This is the old ambivalence of the left: are the Jews glamorously powerless or are they menacingly all too powerful? Are they oppressed or oppressors?

The Corbynist worldview is one which sees some authoritarian states, some terrorist movements and some kinds of antisemitism as being objectively on our side against imperialism, as being part of the global progressive movement. Sometimes there is an admission that the violence and the antisemitism of these 'comrades' are not quite in keeping with our own values; they are admittedly not pretty, but who are 'we' to lecture to the oppressed about values?

[Alan Johnson \(2015\)](#) characterises this worldview which raises anti-imperialism to an absolute and which places great emphasis on position rather than agency, 'campism'.

It has caused parts of the left to abandon universal progressive values rooted in the Enlightenment and sign up instead as foot soldiers in what they see as the great contest between – these terms change over time, ... – 'Progressive' versus 'Reactionary' nations, 'Imperialism' versus 'Anti-Imperialism', 'Oppressed' versus 'Oppressor' peoples, 'The Empire' versus 'The Resistance', or simply 'Power' versus 'The Other'.

It has been steadily gaining ground on three fronts. In academia it has come to dominate disciplines such as post-colonial studies and Middle East Studies and it is considered unremarkable

and scholarly in a number of mainstream disciplines, including English, Sociology and Anthropology. Judith Butler, an influential and much admired philosopher and social theorist famously said that 'understanding Hamas, Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the left, that are part of a global left, is extremely important' ([Johnson 2012](#)).

She later clarified: 'They are "left" in the sense that they oppose colonialism and imperialism, but their tactics are not ones that I would ever condone.' ([Zimmer et al 2015](#)).

Butler's distinction between their positioning within the progressive movement on the one hand and what they actually do and say on the other, is significant. It is in particular this practice of positioning that is directly relevant to the argument here. Who is considered to be part of the progressive movement and who is considered to be outside of the progressive movement? How is it decided and what happens to those who are placed outside?

The second front on which the 'campist' worldview was marginal in Britain but has now made huge strides into the mainstream is the political left. The way in which positioning is taking precedence over debate in the Labour Party is indicative of its growing centrality.

The third front on which this worldview has been making significant inroads is in public opinion and attitudes. My hypothesis is that it is becoming standard within influential liberal and left-wing sections of the elite. In this milieu it is perfectly normal to believe, for example, that Tony Blair is a war criminal, that Israel should be boycotted, that America is responsible for most of what is wrong in the Middle East and that English teenagers who go to fight for *Daesh* are victims of British foreign policy and were radicalised by efforts to stop them. In my world, in my trade union, in my university, in my newspaper, in my Labour Party, on BBC Radio 4, the unexamined assumptions of this variant of anti-imperialism are to be found frequently repeated without serious critical assessment. They constitute the warm background community-defining set of things that good people are expected to believe. There are acknowledged and unwritten boundaries which divide 'us', the 'good people', from them, the uncultured, the Tories, the Americans, the Neo-Cons, the Blairites, the Islamophobes and in particular, the Zionists.

One of the spheres in which the boundaries of the community of the good are reinforced is comedy. Much contemporary comedy in the UK assumes these shared values and it coheres the community of the good around shared laughter at those who put themselves outside of it with their absurd and laughable opinions.

I now examine three specific case studies of this division into 'us' and 'them' and the resulting exclusions from the community of the 'good': The *Livingstone Formulation*, the University lecturers' trade union UCU, and the Corbyn campaign.

**Case Study 1.** *The Livingstone Formulation: how concern about antisemitism became more suspect than antisemitism itself*

One of the key things that progressive people in the UK understand is that making an accusation of antisemitism attracts more suspicion than having an accusation of antisemitism made against you.



While Nazi antisemitism and other historical Jew-hatreds are universally understood to have been evil, the standard progressive view is that these are phenomena of the past. The thesis outlined in academic form by Matti Bunzl (2007), that Islamophobia is the new antisemitism, fits in well with current common-sense thinking. The dominant sensibility on the left is that while Nazi antisemitism was real and awful, for too long the Jews have made too much of a fuss about it. It is all in the past and there are many other less recognised atrocities that deserve attention; there are the more recent genocides of which the victims are not white and privileged and do not have such easy access to the media and the levers of power. True, the notion of powerful and privileged victims of genocide should not survive a moment's reflection; but it does survive in part owing to the left's ambivalence on where to slot 'the Jews' into its schemas and narratives. There are whole literatures concerning ways in which Zionism is said to have benefitted from the Holocaust, is said to milk the Holocaust for legitimacy, to exaggerate the uniqueness of the Holocaust; and there are literatures in which Zionism is even said to have collaborated with or conceived the Holocaust. It is also commonly said to re-enact the Holocaust against the Palestinians ([Klaff 2014](#)).

The *Livingstone Formulation* is named after Ken Livingstone, the former Mayor of London. Livingstone got into an argument with a Jewish journalist, Oliver Feingold. Feingold asked him for a comment about a birthday party from which he had just emerged. Livingstone got angry and Feingold responded that he was 'only doing his job'. Livingstone latched onto this phrase, replying that Feingold was like a Nazi war criminal for using that defence. Feingold told him that he was Jewish and he objected to that. Livingstone told the journalist that his paper was 'was a load of scumbags and reactionary bigots' and that it had a record of supporting Fascism.

In this ostensibly embarrassing and inconsequential dialogue, Livingstone spotted a political opportunity. He wrote an article in *The Guardian* criticising the occupation of the West Bank in which he said: 'For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government, as I have been' (Livingstone 2006).

This *Livingstone Formulation* is a response to a charge of antisemitism. It is a rhetorical device which enables the user to refuse to engage with the charge made. It is a mirror which bounces back onto an accuser a counter-charge of dishonest Jewish (or 'Zionist') conspiracy.

Firstly, the *Livingstone Formulation* conflates anything allegedly antisemitic, in this case repeatedly insulting a Jewish reporter by comparing him to a Nazi, into the category of legitimate criticism of Israel. Secondly, it goes further than accusing people who raise the issue of antisemitism of being wrong; it accuses them of being *wrong on purpose*; of crying wolf, of playing the antisemitism card. It alleges an intent, often a collective intent and so a conspiracy, to mobilise Jewish victim-power for illegitimate purposes.

Livingstone refused to engage with the actual charge of antisemitism. Instead he preferred to accuse his accusers of Zionist bad faith.

There is a tendency for the Israel-Palestine conflict to attain a place of great symbolic importance. If Palestinians are symbolic representatives of the oppressed everywhere, then Israelis tend to become symbolic representatives of oppressors everywhere. In this context discussion is

sometimes less about the actual conflict on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and more a struggle over symbolic narrative. The thrusting of Israelis to the centre of a worldview mirrors antisemitic traditions insofar as they have always constructed Jews as being central to what is wrong with the world (see also Fine 2009).

Ken Livingstone was neither the first nor the only one to respond to a person, typically a Jew raising a concern about antisemitism, with an angry counter-accusation of 'Zionist!' 'Protector of Israel, oppressor of Palestinians!' The function of this response is to evade a reasoned discussion of the issue and instead to place the person who wants to discuss it outside of the community of the progressive.

The contemporary left wing 'campist' political practice of splitting the world into anti-imperialist and imperialist states dates back to Stalinist Russian Communism. After a brief flirtation in 1948 with the idea that Israel might become an ally in the Middle East, Soviet policy shifted to support for Arab Nationalist and Ba'athist regimes against Israel. Soviet antisemitism long pre-dated Israel, but the Stalinists were the first on the left to see the potential inherent in a strategy of demonizing Israel as pro-imperialist. The apartheid smear, that Israel is illegitimate in the same way that the apartheid regime in South Africa was illegitimate, was also a Soviet invention ([Crooke 2004](#)). This smear functions as a thought-free shortcut to the politics of boycott.

In 1952 Rudolph Slansky, who was himself the murderous dictator of Communist Czechoslovakia, was faced with an antisemitic purge by his 'comrades'. Slansky was removed from power and the following 'confession' was extracted under torture:

I deliberately shielded Zionism by publicly speaking out against the people who pointed to the hostile activities of Zionists and by describing these people as anti-Semites so that these people were in the end prosecuted and persecuted. I thus created an atmosphere in which people were afraid to oppose Zionism (Shindler 2011:145-6).

This is identical to Livingstone's formulation. The Jew confesses to (or is accused of) mobilising a bad-faith accusation of antisemitism in order to silence opposition to Zionism.

The *Livingstone Formulation* is employed frequently in contemporary political discourse. The Reverend Steven Sizer was a leading supporter in the Church of England of the campaign to boycott Israel. He wrote a letter to *The Independent* responding to an argument by the Chief Rabbi that the campaign was part of an emerging antisemitic culture in the UK. The Synod of the Church, wrote [Sizer \(2006\)](#), would not be 'intimidated by those who ... cry "antisemitism" whenever Israeli human rights abuses in the occupied territories are mentioned.' He went on: 'Why has the Archbishop faced a torrent of criticism over [a vote to divest from Caterpillar]? Simple: the people in the shadows know that Caterpillar is only the first [boycott].'

Sizer responded to an argument that BDS was antisemitic by alleging that the argument was made in bad faith 'by the people in the shadows', in order to unfairly de-legitimize criticism of Israel and the occupation.

One of the people who leapt to Sizer's defence against a charge of antisemitism was Jeremy Corbyn. Years before he ever imagined becoming Labour leader, Corbyn wrote a letter to the Church of England in support of Sizer, saying that he 'was under attack by a pro-Israeli smear campaign.' ([Simons 2015](#)). In other words, Corbyn used the *Livingstone Formulation*. Sizer was later banned by the Church from further participation in social media after he promoted an antisemitic article on his Facebook feed entitled: '9/11: Israel did it' ([Bingham 2015](#)).

Alain Badiou is a Maoist philosopher, but this does not prevent him from being considered legitimate in antiracist and scholarly circles, or from being celebrated and successful in France and around the world. He co-authored a book in 2013 called *Reflections on Antisemitism* (Badiou et al 2013) which, in the words of the publisher's web page, dissects 'how facile accusations of "anti-Semitism" are used to stifle dissent' ([Verso 2015](#)). Gérard Bensussan ([2014](#)) reviewed the book in *Libération*, arguing that in making antisemitism respectable, the extreme-left had achieved what the far-right could only dream of. He argues that Badiou participates in a contemporary restoration of French antisemitism.

Badiou's first response is that there 'could be no such thing as a far-left anti-Semitism – an absurd oxymoron...' ([Badiou 2014](#)). This is a clear illustration of the eclipse of the politics of reason by the politics of position. *By definition*, there can be no antisemitism *in this place*, within the community of the progressive. The suggestion that there may be such a thing as left antisemitism is not rebutted or denied, it is met with a threatening, aggressive and emotional volley of insults which effectively puts the person who made the suggestion outside the community.

Badiou proceeds to respond with the most condescending sarcasm, implying that Bensussan and his academic institution are well below his own intellectual level. He says that the accusation of antisemitism is a matter for the courts, meaning that it is a libel, but since he places no trust in the bourgeois courts, his remedy for the libel is as follows: 'I'll simply give Professor Bensussan a smack in the face if I ever come across him, which will be a richly deserved reward for his muck-spreading rhetoric.' (For more on the pleasures offered by contemporary antisemitism, see [Garrard 2013](#).)

Badiou is clear. An accusation of antisemitism, if it concerns a person on the left, if it concerns something which relates to hostility to Israel, need only be responded to by violence. Reasons, evidence or argument are appropriate for disagreements within the community of the progressive but are not appropriate for an accuser of antisemitism. (For more on the Livingstone Formulation see [Hirsh 2010](#).)

**Case Study 2:** *The boycott campaign and the UCU: how Israelis are to be excluded from the global community and people defined as their 'supporters' from the community of trades unionists*

The campaign to boycott Israel seeks to situate Israel outside of the community of the good and the progressive. The campaign situates those Israelis who are unwilling to disavow their country in the same way. They are to be isolated, ignored, silenced, excluded and punished; their narratives, their experiences and their motivations are to be treated as dishonest propaganda. When people within the community of the oppressed do bad things, these things are judged in the material

context of the bad things that have been done to them. When people are situated outside of the community of the oppressed, what they do is judged in a purely formal and abstract way.

The boycott campaign does not impact at first in Israel. The boycott campaign exists in the UK, in America, in South Africa, around the world. The exclusion it seeks to set up is 'here', where the campaign is, not 'there' in the Middle East. The universities from which Israeli scholars are to be excluded, the shops which are to be emptied of Israeli goods, the theatres in which Israeli actors are not to perform, the sports stadia in which Israeli footballers may not play, they are 'here' not 'there'. Sometimes people say Corbyn is bad on foreign policy but his domestic agenda against austerity is what is important. But the antisemitism of the boycott campaign is not foreign policy, it couldn't be closer to home. It impacts first within the Labour movement.

Prior to the boycott is the campaign for the boycott. The campaign exists 'here' in the unions, 'here' in the churches, 'here' in the political parties. The boycott campaign tends to operate by defining those who disagree with its strategy of boycott as supporters of Israel. It rejects the notion that there can be different ways of showing solidarity with Palestinians or different ways of supporting the peace movement.

The boycott campaign's treatment of the distinction between civil society and state in Israel as uniquely fictional facilitates the treatment of citizens as though they were responsible for state policy. The boycotters treat opponents of the boycott within the progressive movement as proxy Israelis and so by extension agents of the Israeli state. Opponents are called 'lobbyists' or 'agents' in order to signal their illegitimacy. In the narrative of the boycotters, lobbyists or agents of Israel should be no more recognised as authentic within the progressive movement than Israel itself is recognised as authentic in the Middle East.

Many of these opponents of the boycott campaign who are thus defined as being foreign to the progressive movement are Jews. The boycott campaign sets up a presumption or a suspicion around Jews; that they are in some sense collaborators with Zionism, conceived of in hateful terms. True, the boycotters offer Jews routes by which they can show that this presumption is unfair in their own special case. It offers them opportunities to disavow Israel or Zionism or their institutional connections. But it is the presumption and the suspicion that is important in itself. In any case, for most Jews the route of disavowal is too redolent of historic antisemitisms to be a tolerable option. These are the logical progressions by which discursive and institutional antisemitism follow in the wake of the boycott campaign. But in the end the relationship between hostility to Israel and antisemitism is an empirical one, not a logical one. Experience shows that they are related.

From 2003 the campaign to boycott Israel began to take shape within the forerunner unions of the UCU. By 2011, virtually nobody was left in the decision making structures who was willing and able to oppose the boycott campaign. UCU Congress that year resolved to campaign against the European Union Monitoring Commission (EUMC) Working Definition of Antisemitism because that definition provided a framework by which certain kinds of hostility to Israel, taking context into account, could be understood as antisemitic. The union, instead of ceasing to do things which were potentially antisemitic according to the working definition, resolved instead to fight against the

working definition. (For more on struggles over definitions of antisemitism, see [Hirsh 2012](#) and Marcus 2015).

The proponents of the boycott campaign do not think of themselves as Jew-haters but they do set themselves up in a fight with the overwhelming majority of the world's Jews. (For further analysis of antisemitism of which the carriers are not conscious, see [Hirsh 2013](#).) The boycotters seek to punish Israel for human rights abuses and to hold all Israelis collectively responsible for the actions of their government; they target no other state for boycott and they seek collective punishment for no other citizens. Those who oppose the boycott campaign are treated as though they are enemies of Palestine; they are identified as outsiders. Jews are more likely to have personal, family or work connections to Israel; they are more likely to feel compelled to speak up against a campaign that seeks to put Israelis outside of the community of the progressive, the rational, and the civilised.

Moreover, there is a wider context: a deep reservoir of antisemitic discourse, images, emotions and tropes within what we might call 'western' culture. It has been deposited by the distinct waves of antisemitism that have washed over Europe since the original rise of Christianity out of Judaism. It would be surprising indeed if a campaign to make people think of Israelis as being outside of the community of the civilised did not draw, even unconsciously, on these ready-made ways of thinking, linked to intense affective triggers. The campaign to treat Israelis and their 'supporters' as pariahs tends to bring with it echoes of previous campaigns against Jews. Images and tropes from old antisemitic themes are unconsciously recycled, and Jews who oppose the boycott are framed as conspiratorial, powerful, rich, bloodthirsty (particularly for children's blood), bourgeois, connected to dishonest bankers, warmongers etc.

After the last opponents of the boycott had resigned or been pushed out of the UCU, there was a final attempt to marshal the evidence of antisemitism within the union and to get a fair hearing for it. Ronnie Fraser, a union member, initiated a court action against the UCU alleging that it had, in the language of the Equality Act 2010, 'harassed' him by 'engaging in unwanted conduct' relating to his Jewish identity, the 'purpose and/or effect' of which has been, and continues to be, to 'violate his dignity' and/or create 'an intimidating, hostile, degrading humiliating' and/or 'offensive environment' for him. Fraser's lawyer, Anthony Julius, described a complex but interlinked course of action by the union, including absence of action, which he said amounted to institutional antisemitism.

The case was heard by the Employment Tribunal, in the autumn of 2012. It heard evidence on behalf of Fraser from 34 witnesses: union activists, scientists, sociologists, historians, lawyers, philosophers, Members of Parliament, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Atheists, academic experts on antisemitism, Jewish communal leaders. Witnesses gave written statements and were subjected to cross-examination. (Full disclosure: I was one of those witnesses).

The key mode of intimidation that Fraser and the other witnesses described was a constant and relentless stream of allegations of bad faith. People who said that they had experienced or understood something said or done in the union as antisemitic were told that they were really only trying to de-legitimise criticism of Israeli human rights abuses and the boycott campaign. Rather

than have the substance of what they were saying taken seriously, those who said they had experienced antisemitism were cast out of the union's community of good faith and were constructed as enemies who were engaged in a campaign of trying to harm the union.

However, what the Jews had suffered in the union, it turned out, they were now to suffer at the hands of the tribunal, which found against Fraser on everything: on technicalities, on legal argument, and on every significant issue of substance and of fact. The tribunal found everything the UCU said in its defence to be persuasive and it found nothing offered by Fraser or any of his witnesses to have merit. The culture, the practices and the norms inside the union were found to be not antisemitic, neither in intent nor in effect. Indeed, everything that Fraser and his witnesses experienced as antisemitic, the tribunal judged to have been entirely appropriate. The judgment had the form of reasoned judicial argument but it contained none of the grey, none of the complexity, none of the uncertainty which one would expect.

The tribunal found, simply, that 'at heart' the case represented 'an impermissible attempt to achieve a political end by litigious means...' (para 178). In other words, the tribunal produced what amounted to a judicial *Livingstone Formulation*.

The tribunal made clear that it believed that Fraser was trying to mobilise a bad-faith allegation of antisemitism in order to silence good-faith critics of Israel when it continued, 'We are also troubled by the implications of the claim. Underlying it we sense a worrying disregard for pluralism, tolerance and freedom of expression.'

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the tribunal in fact refused to delve into the detail of the evidence, 'a trial bundle of 23 volumes'. If it had done so it would have perhaps been concerned by some of it and perhaps remained unconvinced by other elements. What the tribunal seems to have done instead is to accept the union's overall narrative of the case. The union presented itself as a neutral and progressive institution, many of whose members were keen to show solidarity with the Palestinians. It presented those who supported Fraser as slick and dishonest but formidable and articulate nevertheless. It said that they were trying to pull the wool over the eyes of other union members and then the tribunal itself, in an attempt to mobilise the victim-power of the allegation of antisemitism.

In a few places in the judgement, the tribunal could be thought to have allowed its contempt to show through. It contrasted the 'down-to-earth style' of Ronnie Fraser to the 'the magnificent prose in which his written case was couched' by Anthony Julius. One might think it is unremarkable for a lawyer to be more eloquent than his client. But here there seems to be an allusion to Fraser's prestigious and expensive representation. The Tribunal goes on: 'what makes this litigation doubly regrettable is its gargantuan scale.' This may be read as alluding to the power of those who are assumed to be financing the case. From Fraser's point of view, however, it may equally be thought that the union was the powerful rich institution. In fact, the Fraser case was less than half-heartedly supported by the voluntary institutions of the Jewish community and it relied to a great extent on the commitment of one individual, the lawyer Anthony Julius.

Three of Fraser's witnesses were praised by the tribunal as being 'careful, thoughtful, courteous' in form and 'mindful of their obligations as witnesses'. The content of their evidence was, nevertheless, totally disregarded.

His other witnesses were accused of 'playing to the gallery', 'ventilating their opinions' and enjoying making speeches in the witness box. The union's witnesses, good honest simple union officials, were, said the tribunal, 'rather less colourful' than the claimant's, and were there 'for the mundane purpose of telling'. The simplistic distinction made between fact and opinion sits uncomfortably with the difficult realities of communicating experiences of antisemitism, and the understandings which those experiences helped to shape.

The tribunal chose not to hide its irritation. It did not regard the allegation of institutional antisemitism as being worthy of its time as compared to the deserving cases that the tribunal ought to be dealing with, allegations of discriminatory treatment which it considered genuine:

The Employment Tribunals are a hard-pressed public service and it is not right that their limited resources should be squandered as they have been in this case. Nor, if (contrary to our view) it was proper to face them with any claim at all, should the Respondents have been put to the trouble and expense of defending proceedings of this order or anything like it.

Later, when the union pursued Ronnie Fraser for its costs, amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds, the tribunal was forced to admit that it had over-reached its own powers in its enthusiasm to emphasise the inappropriateness of the case having been brought. It was forced to recuse itself from adjudicating the costs application on the basis that it had already pre-judged the issue in its original judgment. However, new judges were appointed and they closed ranks with the original tribunal, going out of their way to praise its substantive judgment.

There was an instructive exchange during the cross examination of the General Secretary of the UCU, Sally Hunt. Anthony Julius took her through a large number of examples of allegedly antisemitic things which had been said or written within union spaces; during Congress, at other meetings and on the UCU activists' email list. Hunt considered each example and she judged each one in turn to be not antisemitic. As though rather exasperated, Julius put a hypothetical to her: 'If somebody said, "If you want to understand the Jews, read Mein Kampf", would *that* be antisemitic?' Hunt answered that within the union context, because the union is an antiracist union, then no, it would not necessarily be antisemitic.

This answer is an explicit endorsement of the politics of position over the politics of reason. For Hunt, what was important in judging whether a statement was antisemitic was the space in which it was made and the people who made it, not the content of the statement itself. Like Badiou, who claimed that left-wing antisemitism was logically impossible because antisemitism is by definition not left wing, Hunt regards antisemitism within an antiracist union to be unthinkable. Instead of coming to terms with the normalisation of antisemitism in the union, Hunt *defined* the antisemitic behaviour and the antisemitic speech as being antiracist, not by virtue of its content but by virtue of its occurrence within a space which is *a priori* not antisemitic. Anybody who challenges this a



*priori* truth must be cast out; anybody who tries to engage with the truth by discussion, reason, evidence or argument risks their status as part of the community.

Having presided over the relentless cross examination of Sally Hunt, having seen her deny that each example was antisemitic, having seen her reject even the hypothetical, Judge Snelson scolded Anthony Julius in a rather condescending way and expressed the hope that Julius would soon come to discussing the evidence of the case.

**Case Study 3:** *How the Corbyn faction puts its political opponents outside the room rather than reply to their criticisms*

The final case study is an examination of a number of examples of how the dictum 'Jeremy doesn't do personal' has been inverted into personalised attacks against Corbyn's critics. The effect of this inversion has been to avoid addressing the criticism by throwing the critic out of the community of the good. Once the critic is excommunicated, their criticism is cauterised and a warning is served on other potential critics.

On 14 August 2015, as Jeremy Corbyn emerged as a front runner in the leadership election, the Jewish Chronicle (JC) took the unprecedented step of giving over its front page to seven questions regarding Corbyn's record on the issue of antisemitism ([JC Editorial 2015](#)).

It asked him about his relationship with campaign called 'Deir Yassin Remembered' which was run by Paul Eissen, a man who came out as an open Holocaust denier. Eissen said that Corbyn had donated money and had been supportive.

The JC asked Corbyn about his planned appearance the following week on a platform with Carlos Latuff, an antizionist and antisemitic cartoonist who had been awarded the second prize in President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust Denial cartoon contest in Tehran.

The JC asked Corbyn about his defence of Steven Sizer and his own accusation that Sizer's critics had been Zionists who were trying to smear him unfairly.

The paper asked Corbyn about his relationship with Hamas and Hezbollah, antisemitic organisations which he had referred to as 'friends' and which he had warmly supported, saying they were dedicated to peace and justice in the Middle East ([Video 2](#)).

Corbyn was asked why he had never condemned the antisemitic posters and banners that dominate the annual *Al-Quds Day* rally, sponsored by *Stop the War*, of which Corbyn was the National Chair.

Corbyn was asked why he defended Raed Salah as an 'honoured citizen', a man who had explicitly employed medieval style blood libel rhetoric in order to incite people against Jews.

Corbyn's answers were not convincing ([JC Reporter 2015](#)). He said he could not remember giving money to Eissen. He said that he had supported Eissen's campaign before it became clear that he was an antisemite, but so did a lot of other people. He said that he had decided not to appear with



Latuff but he did not say why. He said that he had defended Sizer as being the victim of a Zionist smear campaign before Sizer had become an antisemite, not after.

Corbyn's stock answer as to why he referred to Hamas and Hezbollah as 'friends' is that it was diplomatic language and that he was engaged in the peace process. He used the same 'diplomatic language' excuse in relation to his defence of Raed Salah, the blood libeller. In truth, Corbyn has embraced the politics of Hamas and Hezbollah, he has been hosted by Hamas in Gaza, he does not criticise their antisemitism, he is not worried by their links to the Iranian regime; in short, he thinks that they are freedom fighters.

Corbyn answered the question about antisemitic banners and posters by saying that he opposes antisemitism.

His answers to the Jewish Chronicle were evasive and partial. But the answer which has real kick, the one which the Corbyn faction really relies on, is that Corbyn supports the Palestinians, and the people who accuse him of antisemitism are doing so to smear him in order to silence his criticism of Israel.

James Bloodworth, the editor of the *Left Foot Forward* blog, appeared on the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme on 28 August 2015. He went out of his way to begin with the customary throat-clearing disclaimer that nobody is saying that Corbyn is antisemitic. Bloodworth then explained why there was a problem with Corbyn's tolerance for antisemitism and his participation in, and support for, antisemitic organisations and movements.

In response, Diane Abbott, a senior left wing Labour MP went on the attack. This attempt to portray Corbyn as antisemitic was a sign, she said, that the 'Westminster Elite' and the 'Political Class' were afraid of him and his anti-austerity agenda. Abbott marshalled all of her rhetorical power to make clear that such questions were impertinent and inappropriate; that they were 'personal' attacks and not political. She answered them by portraying Bloodworth as having overstepped the boundary of political honesty and decency; British politeness too.

The previous week, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown had written a piece in *The Independent* headed 'Fling mud if you must but don't call Jeremy Corbyn an Anti-semite'.

It is an accusation that is both absurd and menacing. The right, Blairites and hard Zionists have formed the most unholy of alliances to slay the reputation of the next likely leader of the Labour party. ... Most depressing of all is the collusion between the powerful right and Zionists. They seem determined to crush all alternatives to neoliberal economics and Western hegemony. ... As the forces of darkness turn on Corbyn, the leadership contest continues its descent into a passion play. (Alibhai-Brown 2015)

Alibhai-Brown mobilizes all of the fierce, outraged denunciation that she can muster against those who dare to raise the issue of antisemitism. Ironically she makes use of a number of antisemitic tropes in doing so. She employs righteous anger at the impertinence of it. There is also an appeal to the Jewish authority of antizionist Jews, those Jews whose place within the community of the progressive is assured. 'The right, Blairites and hard Zionists' are the ones employing this dirtiest

imaginable political manoeuvre, she says. The 'forces of darkness' are the 'powerful right' and 'Zionists'. Alibhai-Brown's piece is not even particularly supportive of Corbyn as a candidate for Labour leader, but what it does do is police the boundaries of the community of the progressive. Blairites and the right are outside, along with 'hard Zionists' and 'Zionists'.

In July, Corbyn had been interviewed on *Channel 4 News* ([Video 3](#)). Krishnan Guru-Murthy asks him why he referred to Hamas and Hezbollah as his 'friends'. Corbyn repeats his stock answer that he is in favour of a peace process and that should include Hamas. Gury-Murthy asks again why he called them 'friends'. Corbyn begins to get angry and accuses him of interrupting his answer. He carried on his speech about peace negotiations and Gury-Murthy asks for a third time why he called them 'friends'. Corbyn starts to raise his voice and to point, demanding to be allowed to finish. He accuses Guru-Murthy of being unprepared to discuss the wider issues of the Middle East. The issue is this, he says: 'Hamas and Hezbollah are part of a peace process...' When pushed again on whether Corbyn considers Hamas and Hezbollah to be friends, he accuses Gury-Murthy of 'trying to trivialise the whole discussion...'. Eventually Corbyn sits back in his chair and declares: 'thanks for the tabloid journalism'. When cornered, Corbyn preferred to try to cast Guru Murthy out of the community of the good ('tabloid!') rather than to respond to the question seriously.

### **PART 3: WHAT WE LOST WHEN WE LOST THE ASPIRATION TO BE AUTONOMOUS RATIONAL SUBJECTS**

The great philosophers of modernity articulated the revolt against the divine right of kings and against the clerics who, with the authority of God, told us what to think. Descartes democratized knowledge, insisting that what was important was method, reason and evidence, not the power of the knower. Rousseau, Hobbes and Kant put the rational individual, thinking about the world and deciding what to do, at the heart of the new democratic politics. The American Declaration of Independence raised the pursuit of happiness to an inherent and inalienable right.

Then along came the social theorists who said that ideal of the human being as an engaged, rational, autonomous subject was not exactly realised in the real world. It was a world where lots of power structures got in the way of allowing individual human beings to know and to pursue their own rational interests. We make history, but not under the circumstances of our own choosing. We construct our world but we are also constructed by it: we are given language, thoughts, habits, education, nation, religion, gender and race. They become part of us, part of how we relate to the world and part of how the world relates to us.

So the absolute centrality of the principle of the rational autonomous subject was eroded. Hegel founded human agency in the material world; Marx said our decisions were manifestations of social relations; sociologists said that the social world constructs us as much as we construct it; feminists said that women were excluded from the rational; Freud said that the subconscious is more telling than the conscious; Arendt said that rational critique could feed into a swirl of totalitarian rage; Said argued that colonialism clouds our thinking with racism; Foucault said that rational knowledge is still corrupted by power.

These social theorists were right to see the ways in which real human beings fell short of the ideal of the politically, ethically and legally rational and responsible subject. But many of their followers were not satisfied with that intuition. They went on to create accounts of the mass of humanity as being wholly determined by social forces. The idea of the human being as a subject with agency was ridiculed as a bourgeois and oppressive fiction. It was replaced with the division of the world into the oppressor as a rational subject, white, male, rich; and the oppressed as the irrational object, black, female, poor.

There was always, perhaps, a seed of this kind of worldview present in the social critique of bourgeois liberalism, but it has grown to dominate oppositional thinking.

In March 2008, John Molyneux, a leading intellectual of the *Socialist Workers Party*, at the time the most influential organisation of the Marxist left in the UK, wrote:

... an illiterate, conservative, superstitious Muslim Palestinian peasant who supports Hamas is more progressive than an educated liberal atheist Israeli who supports Zionism (even critically). ([Molyneux 2008](#))

Molyneux is clear. Who you are in the global binary of oppressor/oppressed is everything; what you think, what you say, what you do, is nothing at all.

The Enlightenment ideal was that to relate seriously to somebody was to relate seriously to the content of what they say. The 'new politics' is less interested in what you say and more interested in whether you are part of the global community of the oppressed or the global network of the oppressors. The more rational you seem, the more you're likely to be shoved into the oppressor camp. This shove is achieved by power and not by debate; not yet, in the Corbyn Labour Party, by physical violence, but by the kind of discursive violence that silences opponents and puts them out of the room.

It was the Marxists who embraced the notion of 'false consciousness'. They could see that workers were oppressed and that what they needed to do was to unite with all the other workers, the overwhelming majority of humanity, and to make a revolution. The problem was that the workers did not yet understand their own position and their own role in history. The Marxists believed that the working class would inevitably become conscious of its own role; a class not only 'in itself' but also 'for itself'.

Max Weber (1978) responded that:

The most classical expression of this pseudo-scientific use of concepts is the contention of a gifted writer that the individual may well mistake his own interests, but the 'class' is 'infallible' about its interests.

The contemporary version of 'false consciousness' is still more presumptuous than the Marxist one. Now, the metropolitan intellectuals award themselves the role of speaking for the oppressed. They have given up hope that the oppressed will become conscious and embrace the truth as elucidated by the metropolitan intellectuals. They think that because the oppressed are so excluded from the

power discourses of rationality, they are only able to *feel*; thinking is too much to ask for from the oppressed. Excluded from reason, they are left with only passion. The job of the intellectuals is to interpret the passion of the oppressed into the language of reason. For example, some Palestinians may embrace Jew-hatred; they may participate in suicide bombing; they may perpetrate random knife attacks on Jews. Their role, according to their western supporters, is not to be rational, to become conscious, and to develop universal socialist political forms; their role is to act through passion. The intellectuals co-opt the orientalist image of the passionate native and they interpret this passion into whatever language and ideas is convenient to them.

Democracy itself, along with freedom of expression, law, truth and human rights, now become suspect; they hide the reality of raw power behind a facade of legitimating discourse. Costas Douzinas tells that Spanish soldiers unfurled banners in response to the Napoleonic invasion that read 'Down With Freedom!' He suggests, and hopes, that the oppressed may soon be ready to raise the slogan 'Down With Human Rights!' (Douzinas 2000). The idea that human rights are western and imperialist is standard in contemporary progressive discourse and is routinely taught in universities. It leaves people who campaign for human rights within what is thought of as the 'community of the oppressed', entirely unsupported; not only unsupported but even constructed as opponents of the global coalition against imperialism. Campaigners for human rights, for women's rights, for lesbian and gay rights, against what are thought of as 'anti-imperialist regimes' are, themselves, in danger of being slung out of both the communities of the oppressed and of the progressive.

Any apparent concession won under existing conditions is considered insignificant. 'Manufactured consent' (Herman and Chomsky 1995), say the radical intellectuals, is not consent at all, but false consciousness. It is this ultra-radical and one-sided critique of everything valued in bourgeois society that both Hannah Arendt (1975), and George Orwell (2004), in their distinct ways, identify as characteristically totalitarian. It is above all the 'pursuit of happiness' and personal relationships that are prohibited under totalitarianism. Everything human must be subordinated to the ultimate collective goal.

## **CONCLUSION: HOW 'CAMPISM' PERSONIFIED BECAME THE LABOUR PARTY'S DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS**

Jeremy Corbyn has appointed Seumas Milne as his Chief of Communications. Milne's own political tradition is the Stalinist wing of the British Communist Party. Later he was close to George Galloway and the *Respect* party. From 2001 Milne was the comment editor at *The Guardian* and since 2007 he has been an associate editor of the whole paper. All the while he has been writing model opinion pieces and editorials demonstrating how to describe events in the world plausibly within the 'campist' and anti-imperialist paradigm.

Two days after 9/11 he wrote a piece headed: 'They can't see why they are hated' (Milne 2001), which assigned responsibility for the attack to US foreign policy. As though oblivious of the fall of the Soviet Union, Milne is still a cheerleader for Russian opposition to NATO, is still an apologist for its authoritarian leader and is still unconcerned about Ukraine's assertion of its right to self-determination (Milne 2015). There is video of Corbyn himself, two days after the tube and bus bombings in London on 7/7, with George Galloway at his shoulder, saying to an applauding crowd:

'We have to recognise that the security of this country is at risk. It's at risk because of the way we inflict an insecurity on so many other people around the world.' ([Video 4](#)).

Milne also embraces the notion that where people are situated in the spectrum of global oppression is more politically significant than what they do and what they say. In defence of a pro-Hamas [column \(2008\)](#) he wrote:

Hamas and the support it attracts is only the current expression of a spirit of Palestinian national resistance to oppression and dispossession going back decades. ([Hirsh 2008, in comments](#))

Indeed, it may be unsurprising if some Palestinians respond to the everyday realities of the Israeli occupation in the language of antisemitism. Milne himself sees it as his own job to translate antisemitic language back into the democratic language of a timeless 'spirit of Palestinian national resistance.' By doing so, he replaces what actually happens with what he wishes was happening. *He* tells us what Palestinians, conceived as being without significant internal diversity, *really* mean if they vote for Hamas. And what they really mean, according to Milne's translation, is that they want an inclusive, non-racist, and democratic state.

When Milne ([Hirsh 2008, in comments](#)) was challenged about Hamas and its antisemitic charter in 2008, he said that it was obsolete and that bringing it up in discussion was a sign of bad faith. In response to a claim that he was 'apologizing for, and denying, racism against Jews' in his support for Hamas, he responded with a venom which can only be explained by the desire to make clear that such criticism is beyond all that is appropriate within polite antiracist discourse. Milne characterised the claim as 'perverse and contemptible' on the basis that the Hamas charter of 1988 was admittedly a 'reactionary, anti-Jewish document', but it had been repeatedly disavowed by Hamas leaders, specifically in relation to the anti-Jewish tropes. It is noticeable that even about the charter, Milne could not bring himself to use the word 'antisemitic'. Of course, the disavowal was only a rumour put around for the use of liberal apologists in democratic countries. Seven years on, we are still waiting for such a disavowal from the Hamas leadership.

The politics of position not the politics of reason is coming to predominate in the UK Labour movement and in the universities. It has some chance, albeit not a big chance, of forming the next government. It has clear totalitarian potential because it is more concerned with the 'objective' position of a person or a group, in a fixed and essentialist schema, than with what that person or group says or does. The 20th-century totalitarians defined the core enemies of the good as capitalists, kulaks, Jews, or gays. What capitalists, kulaks, Jews or gays said and what they did was irrelevant. They were treated as though they blocked the road of the community of the good, on its journey to the good society.

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