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QUARTERLY

Anti-Semitism: The Oldest Hate Renewed



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“The Culture of Contempt”: Anti-Semitism in the UK

by **DAVID HIRSH**

Anti-Semitism is not inherent either on the left or the right but anti-democratic politics and anti-Semitism have a long history of passionate mutual attraction. What we have in Britain, and not only in Britain, is a mushrooming of anti-democratic politics and ways of thinking into the mainstream. We might call it “populism.” Populism is a flirtation with some of the thrills and temptations of twentieth century totalitarianism. There is not enough fear of losing the democracy and the liberty we have; there is too much contempt for this ordinary everyday life.

There has always been genuinely left-wing anti-Semitism because there have always been anti-democratic currents on the left. There is a genuinely authentic left anti-Semitism but people on the left prefer to think of anti-Semitism, when they even recognise it around them, as a personal failing imported from somewhere else, into their movement. More and more the left insists that anti-Semitism is something “over there” on the right, and the right insists that anti-Semitism is something “over there” amongst Muslims and the left. In so insisting, each gives cover and protection to the anti-Semitism within its own political family.

Left-wing anti-Semitism has fuelled imaginings of Jews as enablers of privilege and oppression. This has largely shifted from the alleged Jewish role in capitalism to the alleged Jewish role in imperialism and racism. It is a perennial source of embarrassment to those anti-Zionists who consider themselves to be opponents of anti-Semitism that

their own “clean” campaigns are always attractive to older and more vulgar anti-Semitic tropes relating to Jewish money, Jewish domination of culture and news, and an “Old Testament” lust for blood.

■ *From the Fringes to the Center*

My book, *Contemporary Left Anti-Semitism* is the story of the twenty-first century mainstreaming of an anti-Semitic current from the fringes of the British left to the center. As students in the 1980s, we opposed attempts to prohibit student Jewish societies, which were decreed Zionist - and so racist and so in violation of the principles of the student movement.

At the end of 2000, hopes for a peace between Israel and the Palestinians faded

Israeli universities coalesced within the academic trade unions in Britain. It incited British academics to pick out and punish their Israeli colleagues by excluding them from the global community of science and scholarship. This campaign created a toxic culture in the University and College Union. It was somewhat successful in constructing support for the boycott as a key signifier of membership of the “community of the good.” Opposition to the boycott became something which merited exclusion from that community.

In this way, a politics of position replaced a politics of reason. To be positioned outside of the community of the good meant exclusion from the community of debate, argument, and evidence.

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with the break down of the peace process. In September of the following year, at the World Conference against Racism in Durban in the new South Africa, political anti-Semitism poisoned attempts to galvanise the global struggle against racism. Zionism, it was said, must be recognised as the key symbolic racism on the planet. A week later the jihadi Islamist movement destroyed the World Trade Center, hit the Pentagon and missed the White House.

From 2003, the campaign to boycott

The boundaries of the community were policed by a kind of discursive violence instead. And of course, many of the people excluded in this way were Jews, or people accused of supporting Zionism; in fact, archetypically they were people who could see, and were willing to oppose, anti-Semitism.

Just as race is constructed by racism, “Zionism” was constructed by anti-Zionism to mean racism, apartheid, imperialism and even Nazism. Jews

who did not accept anti-Zionism had this identity of “Zionist” thrust upon them, no matter how they understood their own political or ethnic identity. No understanding of Zionism as the self-liberation of Jews or as the renewal of Jewish life after the Holocaust and after anti-Semitism in Russia and the Middle East, was countenanced.

■ *The Culture of Contempt*

The culture of contempt for Israel as a key symbolic evil brought anti-Semitism with it into the union. It created an assumption that Jews were enemies; it treated Israeli human rights abuses, both real and imagined, as uniquely significant; it was open to conspiracy fantasy and blood libel; it treated people who spoke up against anti-Semitism as enemies while treating people who said explicitly anti-Semitic things as friends who had fallen into error.

Anybody who stood up against anti-Semitism would be accused of being part of a conspiracy to silence criticism of Israel. I called this standard response of angry denial and counter-accusation “The Livingstone Formulation,” after the then-Mayor of London.

The Livingstone Formulation is a mode of bullying Jews and their allies. It does not say that they are mistaken, that they have weighed up the evidence wrongly. Instead it teaches people to treat them as though they are part of an organised conspiracy to lie, as though they are alien to the movement, as though they are only pretending to care, and as though they are really devoted to undermining the genuine aims of the left; and as though they are paid agents of Israel or of the “Israel lobby.”

Some of us opposed anti-Semitism in the academic unions not only because we cared about our unions but also because we thought that the anti-Semitism might spread. Anti-Semitism was not common in Britain and it did not feature in popular culture or the mass media; other forms of racism and bigotry had a better hold there. But anti-Semitism,

albeit in a form which was angrily denied, was carried by some of the most educated, left-wing and anti-racist people in the country; and it was influential among opinion-formers, journalists and educators. We were worried that it would spread throughout the trade union and the Labour movement, and become normal within a whole layer of left and liberal people.

We were not wrong.

■ *How it Happened*

Jeremy Corbyn was neither an innovator nor a great leader of change, but a follower of prevailing left-wing orthodoxies. He was imbued in a worldview with roots in Stalinist Communism, but also in the post-1968 “new left,” which held “capitalism,” “modernity,” and “imperialism” responsible for poverty,

But there is a further step. How is it possible for Corbyn to have declared that the anti-Semitic, Jew-killing movements Hamas and Hezbollah were dedicated to peace and justice across the Middle East? Yes, they are movements against capitalism-modernity-imperialism. But in Corbyn’s political tradition, and quite deliberately manufactured by the Soviet Union, Zionism gets tacked onto the end of that way of describing the structures of global power and domination which keep poor people poor and sick and subjugated: it becomes capitalism-modernity-imperialism-Zionism.

How did Corbyn become leader of the Labour Party and find himself one General Election away from 10 Downing Street? This situation was not the product of a crisis of the British left alone, it was the product of a crisis of British politics

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war, and oppression globally. There were other bad things, but those were produced by the world system of cruelty and power, the iron cage of rationality, capitalism-modernity-imperialism. Insofar as any political movement was against capitalism-modernity-imperialism, it was good; and insofar as it was not good, it was because it had been driven bad by capitalism-modernity-imperialism.

In this template, democratic states are the root of all evil and their democracy is fundamentally fake, an ideological trick designed to fool people into giving consent for their own oppression. That is why undemocratic movements against the democratic states are treated as being on the side of the global revolt against capitalism-modernity-imperialism.

as a whole. The rise of Corbyn was related to the rise, mainly on the British right, of a movement against the European Union, convinced that migration and international co-operation were key threats to British happiness and freedom.

■ *Populism*

Populist movements cultivate contempt for the institutions and cultures of democratic society. They say that democracy is a façade constructed by a liberal elite to hide the underlying reality, which is that an establishment rules in its own interest while pretending to care about the common good.

According to populism, freedom of speech is “fake news”; politics is dominated by an insider “political class”



Trucks carrying advertisements against the Labour party driving around central London, (Photo: Matthew Chattle/Alamy)

which serves only the elite; knowledge is power and science is self-serving; international trade and co-operation benefit only the “globalist” cosmopolitans at the expense of regular folk.

The liberal democratic state mediates the interests, tastes, desires, and needs of a huge diversity of flesh and blood human beings: people of different classes, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, origins, tastes, inclinations and abilities. In the sphere of liberty, staked out and protected by the state, people inherit and construct their own communities, families, friendships, religions, trade unions and cultures; and they invent, produce, work, buy and sell in the market. And in the sphere of politics they come together, thinking in the universal interest, to guarantee the sphere of liberty, to set its limits and rules.

Every aspect of existing society is open to critique. Populism pounces on the rational kernel of every criticism and it melds each one into a single emotional narrative of furious contempt.

Twentieth century totalitarianism took critiques of state, law, rights, and democracy and built out of them movements which in the end were so powerful that they were able to smash states, and to rule without law, rights, or democracy.

Populism and totalitarianism dispense with the contradictions and diversity of actual human beings and they invite us into a simple imagined community called “the people.” Democracy mediates a multiplicity of voices but populism must have a single heroic voice. Since “the people” is abstract but singular, it can only speak through the personality of the strongman leader.

Populism and totalitarianism can never succeed. They find nothing of any value in existing society and they promise to tear it all down and to build again from nothing. But it is easier to destroy than it is to create and they can never deliver the utopia they weaved in the imagination of their followers. Their failure has to be explained by reference to the “enemies of the people.”

■ **Corbyn and “Blairism”**

Corbyn presented himself as the voice of the people, as the antidote to (neo)liberalism and to “Blairism.” Although Tony Blair is the only person to have won a General Election for Labour since 1974 (he won three), for the Corbynites, he embodies the populist notion of the “fake liberal establishment,” which talks justice and egalitarianism while secretly plotting power and riches only

for itself. The populists have only contempt for “Blairite” or “centrist” or “liberal” democratic politics, human rights, rule of law, scientific knowledge and for international co-operation. And this contempt was echoed and underlined by the Brexit right, howling against the “establishment” European Union and its unpatriotic enablers at home, plotting with the globalist, cosmopolitan, foreign elites against the British people.

The two populist movements constructed each other as their opposition while each reinforced much of their mutual central message.

In Britain, Corbyn’s Labour Party was unable to extricate itself from the culture in which accusations of anti-Semitism were understood as confirmation of his goodness and of the hostility of the powerful right-wing establishment. More and more the image of Britain’s Jews, and global Zionists, resonated as ways of picturing the enemy which stood between “us” and socialism.

The populist right focused on migrants, on the financial centre of the City of London, on the “political class,” on the educated and metropolitan elite, on the old enemies of France and Germany, and on Muslims. The anti-Semitic potential within some of these ways of designating the enemy of the people has so far gone largely untapped.

In the end, significant parts of the electorate, including sections of the working class which had been loyal to Labour for a century, sniffed that Corbyn was a dangerous crank. Many people thought the anti-Semitic odor which hung around him, even if they didn’t quite know or understand the details, was symbolic of that, and they didn’t want him in Downing Street. It was a two-horse race, so they voted for the other guy.

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