Hostility to Israel and Antisemitism: Toward a Sociological Approach

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Sociology is not immune from the ambivalence toward antisemitism that has haunted anti-hegemonic intellectual and political traditions. Yet in this paper, I argue that the resources of sociology can be mobilized to examine the ways in which antisemitism is sometimes manifested in discourses and movements against Israel and Zionism, even those which think of themselves as antiracist.

Key Words: Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, Israel, Jews, Sociology

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The Research Materials

The research materials for this paper have been gathered between 2005 and 2011, mainly in the UK, on the basis that they may be relevant to the relationship between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. These materials are produced by individuals, groups, and institutions, including political and social movements, trade unions, and churches. They appear in a diversity of textual form: books, pamphlets, newspaper articles, journal articles, websites, web pages, blogs, speeches, video, and music. There is a focus on material that is self-defined as being antiracist and therefore also anti-antisemitic because this material has the greatest potential to resonate in democratic spaces.

There is a tendency in researching this area for the distinction between primary and secondary research material to become blurred. An academic text can also constitute, be seen as, be made into, a political intervention. It may itself be understood as an example of discursive antisemitism or an example of a spurious charge of antisemitism made to delegitimize criticism of Israel.

Materials produced within official institutional frameworks also constitute part of the terrain on which political struggles are conducted by, among others, academics. For example, the *Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism* (2006) was not simply a neutral set of findings but also an attempt, in which academic scholars were participants, to institutionalize as official a particular approach to the understanding of antisemitism. The legitimacy of this official framework was rejected by

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scholars holding opposing views. The European Union Monitoring Commission (now the Fundamental Rights Agency [FRA]) Working Definition of Antisemitism is similarly contested by some scholars, while others were actively involved in the work of drafting the definition (Hirsh 2012). The boundaries of primary materials are porous and include scholarly, political, institutional, and more popular texts.

The material is qualitative, not quantitative. It never "speaks for itself," but always requires analysis and judgment; thus, it is open to different interpretations. Much of the material is gleaned from participant observation and action research. It is not the fruit of dispassionate and neutral observation but of public and contested debate and struggle.

Hostility to Israel comes from different sources and takes different forms. Tropes, elements of rhetoric, and commonsense notions migrate between antiracist and democratic spaces, nationalist and Islamist spaces, fringe and mainstream spaces, different kinds of media, and the right, the left, and the political center. It is within such a complex and dynamic reality that this paper finds its material and moves toward specific analytical claims.

ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTISEMITISM

The peace process between Israel and Palestine broke down decisively in 2000 with the start of the Second Intifada. The coalition of pro-peace forces in Israel and Palestine largely collapsed into opposing national consensuses, each of which portraying the other as being responsible anew for the conflict.

In September 2001 there was a UN conference in Durban, South Africa, to discuss global strategies for dealing with racism. At that gathering, there was a formidable campaign to portray Zionism as the key source of racism in the world. A number of factors came together that week—on the city streets and the beachfront, in the NGO conference, a huge event in a cricket ground bringing together tens of thousands of activists, and in the intergovernmental forum. The conference was overwhelmed by an organized and hostile anti-Israel fervor. Some of it was expressed in openly antisemitic forms, some was legitimate criticism of Israel expressed in democratic antiracist forms, and some was antisemitism expressed in ostensibly democratic and antiracist language. A number of antiracists who were there experienced Durban as a swirling mass of toxic antisemitic hate. Some of them were unable to get home in the following days because air traffic was disrupted after the attacks on the United States on September 11.

The collapse of the peace process, Durban, and 911, as well as the reverberating symbolic representations of them, can be understood as her-

alding what some have called "the new antisemitism" (Chesler 2003; Foxman 2004; Harrison 2006; Herf 2007; Iganski and Kosmin 2003; Julius 2010; Matas 2005; Rosenfeld 2011; Shepherd 2009; Stern 2006; Taguieff 2004; Wistrich 2010). There are a number of theorists who have responded with skepticism to the idea of a new antisemitism, arguing that this framework is a Jewish nationalist overreaction to mainly justified criticism of Israel (Beller 2007; Bunzl 2007; Finkelstein 2005; Klug 2004).

This paper does not present an overview of these debates, but instead focuses on evidence and analysis relevant to three key theoretical aspects of them:

- Antisemitism should be understood as a social phenomenon that is not reducible to the intent or the self-consciousness of the social actors involved. Antisemitism is a social fact that is produced through shared meanings and exclusions; it is not an individual moral failing.
- Difficulties of understanding are raised by the shift from explicit and self-conscious racism and antisemitism to discursive and institutional forms of racism and antisemitism. This paper discusses methodological questions concerning how to recognize racism and antisemitism when it is not straightforwardly observable in an unmediated way.
- Anti-Zionism tends to understand Israeli nationalism in a spirit that diverges from standard sociological approaches to nationalism. In this regard, this paper points toward a critique of conceptualism and a defense of a more materialist cosmopolitanism. Sociological approaches to the study of nationalism can help signpost us back toward understanding Israel as being a worldly material phenomenon rather than an ethereal and unique signifier. Sociological approaches can steer us away from ways of thinking about the world that give extraordinary explanatory power to Jews.

RACISM AS AN UNCONSCIOUS, INSTITUTIONAL, OR DISCURSIVE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL FORM

Openly racist thought and sentiment are increasingly recognized as falling outside of the boundaries of legitimate public discourse. Racist exclusions and sentiment are squeezed by legislation, legal precedent, and institutional policy but they nevertheless stubbornly persist. Whatever persists tends not to be conscious hatred, openly expressed, but rather unconscious institutional or discursive appearances of racism. Racist discourse has generally shifted away from zoologically based hostilities and toward prejudicial ways of thinking that are more likely to be articulated in the language of culture (Barker 1981). There is also increased awareness of the complexities of racisms and more unease with a simple black/white binary

framework. In Britain, for example, there is a rise of bigotry and xenophobia, similar to racism in its structure, against people from Eastern Europe who would be designated as "white" by standard critical race theory or multiculturalist assumptions (Dawney 2008).

In the 1970s, it was common for black professional footballers in England to be subjected to open, sustained, and unchallenged racist abuse by crowds and opponents. The 2011 disciplinary case against Luis Suarez, who was found to have racially abused a black opponent, illustrates that racism is taken more seriously today by the football authorities, and is also interesting in two specific further respects. The English Premier League is more globalized, both in terms of those who play in it and those who consume it, and Suarez defended himself by saying that in Uruguay, where he comes from, the use of the term "Negro," for example, to address an opponent, is not considered racist. So one interesting aspect of the story is his own employment of an "anti-racist" or multiculturalist defense. Some of his defenders have implied that the accusation of racism against a non-white migrant from South America may itself have had a racist component and that a white English player would have been less likely to find himself in this kind of trouble. The other illuminating aspect is that the tribunal that punished Suarez was careful to make a distinction between the charge that he "was a racist" on the one hand and that he had "done a racist thing" on the other. It decoupled the racist *act* from an association with the quality of "racist" that may be applied to the *person* (*Reasons of the Regulatory Commission* 2011).

The public inquiry into the Metropolitan Police's mishandling of the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence made use of the concept of "institutional racism" in order to make a similar distinction. This was a landmark event in the official recognition of racism in British public life. The concept of "institutional racism" focuses on norms and practices of an institution that may lead to racist outcomes, while not accusing any individual person of racist attitudes or sentiment of "being a racist" (Macpherson 1999).

A clear, practical benefit flows from making distinctions between racist acts and racist outcomes on the one hand and the designation of individuals as racist on the other. It is easier in terms of natural justice for the football authorities to prohibit racist speech than it is to move against individuals who "are" racist; it is easier for the Metropolitan Police to address its own norms and practices that lead to racist outcomes than to rid itself of racist officers. The focus on the act rather than the essence of the person makes sense in terms of policy enforcement. Rules can prohibit certain kinds of acts but not certain kinds of persons.

But in both these cases there remains a claim of injustice on the part of those who are found guilty of racist acts or practices. Suarez says he is sorry for what he did but he still feels that he has unjustly been branded as a racist. The Police Federation representing officers felt that an injustice had been done, one that characterized ordinary police officers as racists.

Aside from the practical issues, the question remains regarding how scholars should analyze the relationships between the racist act, the racist institution, the racist discourse, and the social actors who construct, and who are constructed by, these social phenomena.

The driving of racism underground represents a victory over open racism, in a struggle that won over large majorities of people to antiracist points of view. What has been driven underground, however, is not necessarily eradicated—and it may have the potentiality to re-erupt, perhaps in new and virulent forms.

Antisemitism as an Unconscious, Institutional, or Discursive Cultural and Political Form

Does antisemitism fit into the pattern? Following the Holocaust and the rise of the postwar antiracist movements, there was diminishing space left in public discourse for open antisemitism. Indeed, one of the very foundation blocks of postwar Europe was the narrative of the defeat of Nazism, the coming to terms with the fact of the Holocaust, and the creation of a new, peaceful, human rights-based settlement. Europe was shocked out of its antisemitic ways of thinking by the Holocaust. Just as with other racisms, overt hatred of Jews has come to violate the norms of respectable public discourse. But then the "new antisemitism" theorists argue that antisemitism continues to manifest itself in more subtle ways, specifically in both the quality and the quantity of hostility to Israel.

Their opponents, on the other hand, tend toward the view that, apart from some manifestations of right-wing or Christian antisemitism, particularly in Eastern Europe, antisemitism is to a large extent a thing of the past. Some argue that Jews successfully constructed themselves as "white" or as part of a Judeo-Christian elite, a process that, in Karen Brodkin's (1998) narrative, was also occurring in the United States. After the Holocaust, according to Matti Bunzl's (2007) version, Jews succeeded in putting themselves outside of the firing line, but only at the expense of other groups now constructed by racist discourse as threatening to Europe—in particular, Muslims.

If contemporary antisemitism is difficult to recognize because it is intertwined with a huge complexity of discourses, ideas, criticisms, activisms, commonsense notions, and unexamined assumptions, it is far from

unusual among contemporary bigotries. Contemporary bigotry is typically found among more complex ideational systems (Faludi 2006). Bigoted ways of thinking have more purchase if they can be held by people who believe they oppose bigotry. This phenomenon is not as simple as people dishonestly hiding their bigotry within an ostensibly universalistic rhetoric; instead, people are unconscious of the racist memes, assumptions, and outcomes that are manifested in their own thought, speech, and action. It is neither pretense nor camouflage.

Emile Durkheim (1952 [1897]) writes the following on the notion of intent, in his landmark sociological work, *Suicide:*

> Intent is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another. It even escapes self-observation. How often we mistake the true reasons for our acts! We constantly explain acts due to petty feelings or blind routine by generous passions or lofty considerations.
>
> Besides, in general, an act cannot be defined by the end sought by the actor, for an identical system of behaviour may be adjustable to too many different ends without altering its nature.

How is unconscious racism to be recognized, given that understanding even our own intentions, as well as those of others, is so clearly established as a sociologically problematic enterprise? Antisemitism, of which we may be unaware, might be recognized by the inconsistent outcomes it tends to produce. For example, it may lead to support for an exclusion of Israelis, and only Israelis, from British universities.[1] Unconscious antisemitism may be recognized by the replication of racist tropes and stereotypes in ostensibly non-racist discourse. For example, opponents of Israeli human rights abuses may find themselves embracing ideas reminiscent of classic antisemitic blood libels[2] or conspiracy theory.[3] Unconscious racism may manifest itself through slips or mistakes that are otherwise difficult to

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1. One leading pro-boycott activist drew attention to a case where the Commission for Racial Equality ruled that redundancies in one department in her university were racist in outcome (although not in intent) because five of the seven members made redundant in that department were from ethnic minorities. She did not follow the same logic with her proposed boycott, which would fall disproportionately on Jews and so would be antisemitic in effect even if not in intent (Pike 2007).

2. From the *Daily Mirror:* "We looked away as Israel bombed the crap out of Gaza. When the 1,314 dead Palestinians temporarily sated Tel Aviv's bloodlust . . ." (Reade 2009).

3. John Mearsheimer: "The Israel lobby was one of the principal driving forces behind the Iraq War, and in its absence we probably would not have had a war" (Stoll 2006).

account for. For example, one activist explained in a petition that the Holocaust was an event in which "thousands of LGBT people, trade unionists and disabled people were slaughtered," neglecting to mention Jews (Hirsh 2008). A union official thoughtlessly made a connection between anti-boycott lawyers in Britain and ". . . bank balances from Lehman Brothers that can't be tracked down" (Kovler 2009).

It is clear that there is anger in Britain with Israel—with its inability to make peace with its neighbors, with its continuing occupation of Palestinian territory, and with its record of human rights abuses. Given the long histories of antisemitism in Europe, it would be unexpected indeed if none of this anger with Israel was ever manifested in the language, tropes, or themes of antisemitism. Given the long history of antisemitism within left and radical politics, it would be equally surprising if antisemitic discourse did not sometimes infect left-wing and radical criticism of Israel.

Not all criticism of Israel is antisemitic; neither is all criticism of Israel free from antisemitism. The question of antisemitism, therefore, must necessarily be one of judgment and interpretation rather than of proof or refutation. It is always open to the skeptic either to deny that a particular action or text is antisemitic or to deny the political significance of antisemitism that is observed and identified as such. It is open to others to come to the judgment that hostility to Israel can be so disproportionate that all external criticism of Israel is likely to be tainted by antisemitism in one way or another (Matas 2005). One of the key claims of this paper is that the relationship between hostility to Israel and antisemitism is complex and difficult to pin down. It requires sociological and political judgment to recognize significant antisemitism. It is no accident that one of the nodes of particular controversy is around the issue of definitions of antisemitism, and there is nothing close to an agreed definition among scholars and activists. The proposed definitions, already controversial, are in fact guidelines that are intended to set the parameters for making difficult judgments (Hirsh 2012).

Seumas Milne (2008c) is a respected and antiracist columnist in the mainstream *Guardian* newspaper in London. In March 2008, in response to a claim that the antisemitism of Hamas is a significant factor in understanding its behavior, he first attempted (Milne 2008a) to deny that Hamas was antisemitic: ". . . Hamas leaders have in recent years repeatedly disavowed [the formulations of the charter] and commissioned the draft of a new charter." Later, Milne developed a position accepting that Hamas was antisemitic, but judged that this was of little political significance: "[I]t's clear to me . . . that 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 (Milne 2008b)."

Indeed, it is unsurprising if some Palestinians respond to the everyday realities of the Israeli occupation in the language of antisemitism. Milne himself wants 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 a party, Hamas, which treats the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as an authentic document, opposes peace with Israel, and wants an Islamic state. What they really mean, according to Milne's translation, is that they want an inclusive, non-racist, and democratic state.[4]

John Molyneux (2008), a theorist of the influential Socialist Workers Party in the UK, relies on a similar view of the world. What actual Palestinians or Israelis say is translated to fit with his own metropolitan worldview: ". . . from the standpoint of Marxism and international socialism an illiterate, conservative, superstitious Muslim Palestinian peasant who supports Hamas is more progressive than an educated liberal atheist Israeli who supports Zionism (even critically)."

What these subjects say and think is no measure of how "progressive" they are. What matters is their objective position in the balance of forces.

Often, individuals involved in antisemitic discourse and institutions are unaware of the antisemitism within which they are implicated. The Milne and the Molyneux examples show how it is also possible for antiracists, even when they see antisemitism, when they are aware of its presence, to judge it to be politically insignificant.

METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS FOR SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO CONTEMPORARY ANTISEMITISM

Sociology begins as an empirical enterprise, starting with an analysis of *what is.* Our ideas about the world as it *could be* are constrained but also inspired by their relationship to the world as it is. Sociology's foundation in the social world is its materialism. Its cosmopolitanism lies in its assumption that all human beings are in some profound sense of equal worth, irrespective of those factors that divide them, such as ethnicity, gender, class, and nation. Sociology's materialism keeps its cosmopolitanism from the temptation to raise universal principles to an abstract absolute. Its cosmopolitanism keeps its materialism from the temptation to limit itself to

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4. The debate is available online at http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=1726

descriptive empirical observation of what exists to move to an unambitious empiricism (Hirsh 2007).

When we turn to the sociological study of antisemitism and its relation to rhetoric about Israel, the objects of study are movements critical of Israel, including Palestine solidarity movements and anti-Zionist movements.

Criticism of Israeli policies and hostility to Israel come from a number of starkly distinct and different political traditions: liberal, democratic, post-colonial, Stalinist, socialist, nationalist, conservative, fascist, Islamist. They also come from different parts of the world, and different cultural and language traditions: Europe, America, the Middle East, Arabic, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. These traditions are variegated and distinct, but they are also intertwined. Elements of rhetoric and commonsense notions circulate among these living spaces, evolving and moving easily from one to another, not least through the new media.

An understanding of contemporary antisemitism requires a methodological toolbox that draws upon a number of resources available to sociologists. For example, we need to root our understanding of Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms within the frameworks developed for the analysis of nationalism in general (e.g., Anderson 1995; Hobsbawm 1995). This is a critical tradition, one that has come to understand the mechanisms by which nationalist movements reproduce themselves through narratives aspiring to achieve a status that is analogous to a sacred one. Through these processes, events are represented in music and movies and objects, texts that make us feel ourselves to be part of the narratives or ones that make us feel excluded. The sociological understanding of nationalism provides a framework that probes the claims of nationalists but that also understands that nationalism is fundamentally dialectical. It has the potential to construct both community and exclusion, responses to oppression but also oppressive structures. Sociological work on nationalism tends to be comparative and resistant to the representation of any particular nationalism as if it were unique, in isolation from all others. It understands nationalism as being produced and reproduced through interactions between economic, political, and cultural processes. It regards nationalisms critically but looks at what is, before it moves on to consider what might be.

Sociology is full of contested terms like Zionism and anti-Zionism, apartheid, human rights, the state, democracy, law, totalitarianism, imperialism, whiteness, genocide, ethnic cleansing. Such concepts, and the frameworks built around them, are sometimes indispensable for analysis but are also central to what is being analyzed. They can add to our understanding but are also capable of being mobilized as weapons. Sociology understands concepts in relation to their actualization in the material world. Thus,

discourse analysis addresses ways in which contested meanings are inter-
preted and played out, and how they solidify into distinct or opposed discur-
sive formations. Widely different forms of hostility to Israel, embedded in
distinct social movements, may host common elements of rhetoric and
shared understanding, and give rise to unexpected political alliances.

Sometimes thinking on Israel and Palestine fails to go beyond a con-
ceptual discussion of logical principles. Some people are content to demon-
strate triumphantly that there is a contradiction between the requirements
for Israel to be a democratic state for all its citizens and for Israel also to be
a Jewish state. They find that contradiction to be sufficient to pronounce
that Zionism is essentially a form of racism and that they understand all
racism in Israel to be a manifestation of the racist essence of Zionism. Other
people equally and triumphantly demonstrate that because anti-Zionism
finds Israel as a Jewish nation to be the only illegitimate nation in the
world, then anti-Zionism is by definition antisemitic. These are conceptual
frameworks that give huge explanatory weight to ideas, partially and sim-
plistically presented.

Sociology should be able to offer a more sophisticated framework of
understanding than that which is content simply to show that the require-
ments of Israel to be both Jewish and democratic are in some senses contra-
dictory. Sociology can also provide ways of analyzing the dynamics of
contradictions and how they interact with other contradictions. Sociology
offers ways of exploring how contradiction arose, how they have managed
to find material existences in a complex world, how successfully institu-
tions and discourses fulfilled contradictory requirements, and in which
ways things might develop.

Similarly, sociology should not be content to "prove" that anti-Zion-
ism is antisemitic; instead, it can help us study distinct forms of anti-Zion-
ism, their particular traditions and assumptions, to look at ways in which
they actualize themselves in concrete political exclusions, and to explore
the contradictions between the meanings social actors wish to communicate
and the meanings with which their communications are heard, read, and
interpreted in distinct contexts.

Take, for example, the proposal for an academic boycott of Israel.
There are good reasons to argue that this proposal is antisemitic, not neces-
sarily in intent but in effect (Garrard 2008). It may be argued that the boy-
cott singles out Israel for punishment while Israel is far from being the most
serious abuser of human rights in the world; or that it has a disproportionate
effect on Jews, including those who have no responsibility for Israeli
human rights abuses; or that it treats Israeli scholars as though they were
responsible for the policies of their government but does not relate to any
other scholars in the same way.

A *sociological* analysis of the relationship between the proposal for an academic boycott and antisemitism has the potential to offer more depth than these definitional and ideational claims. It can look at the ways in which the concept of an academic boycott is actually realized in a campaign. It can look at the ways in which the campaign actualizes itself, say, in an academic trade union or a university. Jewish communal leaders in the UK accused the university and College Union, which represents university and college workers, including academics, of being institutionally antisemitic (letter to Sally Hunt 2011). A sociological approach to investigating this claim would be able to examine the relationship between the empirical and the conceptual. It would be able to observe union congresses and meetings employing methodological rigor from the traditions of ethnomethodology and discourse analysis. It would be able to analyze the culture, norms, and practices of the union closely. It would be able to study the ways in which opponents of the campaign to boycott Israel have been isolated within the union and to look at the ways that the union leadership and structures had responded. An empirical approach would have to find ways to think about the cumulative effects that may arise from criticism of "Zionist" scholars as pro-apartheid, liars for Israel, pro-Nazi racists, as people who are indifferent to Palestinian suffering, and so on.[5] It is necessary to see how concepts circulate in social situations and how concrete exclusions emerge, whether intentional or not.

ANTISEMITISM AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON AND NOT JUST A SUBJECTIVE FEELING

Sociology understands antisemitism as an objective social phenomenon that cannot be defined simply by reference to the subjective feelings of individuals concerned. Sociology attends to discursive and institutional forms of antisemitism and antisemitic ways of thinking, not only to conscious hostility to Jews. Let me offer three examples.

Judith Butler

The academic and philosopher Judith Butler responded to the claim made by the president of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, that:

> Profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities. Serious and thoughtful people are advocat-

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5. For links to the testimony of a large number of UCU members who experienced the boycott "debates" as antisemitic, see Hirsh (2010).

ing and taking actions that are antisemitic in their effect if not their intent (quoted in Butler 2003).

 Butler's response:

> When the president of Harvard University declared that to criticise Israel . . . and to call on universities to divest from Israel are 'actions that are antisemitic in their effect, if not their intent', he introduced a distinction between effective and intentional antisemitism that is controversial at best. The counter-charge has been that in making his statement, Summers has struck a blow against academic freedom, in effect, if not in intent. Although he insisted that he meant nothing censorious by his remarks, and that he is in favour of Israeli policy being 'debated freely and civilly', his words have had a chilling effect on political discourse. Among those actions which he called "effectively antisemitic" were European boycotts of Israel . . . (Butler 2003).

Butler takes up this same *in effect but not intent* position in relation to freedom of speech. Although Summers insisted that he is for freedom of speech, and makes a distinction between speech and boycott (he thinks boycott is antisemitic), she says that his analysis is *objectively* anti-freedom in spite of his lack of intent and in spite of the explicit denial that he means to be understood in this way.

Butler is known for her pioneering work on the complex ways in which social and linguistic structures set up gendered and homophobic exclusions and how conceptual and discursive factors coalesce into systems of discrimination. According to her own theory, we are all caught up in the complexity of power relations in which our own self-consciousness is only a part of the story. But when the issue is one of antisemitism, she puts down her sophisticated social and discursive tools and argues instead that a person can only be implicated in antisemitism if they are self-conscious Jew-haters. She resists the idea that the boycott campaign could have antisemitic effects even if nobody intends them. Yet when responding to Summers, she reverts to her more familiar way of thinking, emphasizing that Summers is reinforcing a power structure that chills academic freedom in spite of his declarations that he wants to find the boundary between free speech and racist discourse.

Caryl Churchill

Let me turn to my second illustration of the complex interplay between antisemitism conceived as a self-consciousness on the one hand or as a social structure on the other. Caryl Churchill wrote a short play, *Seven Jew-*

ish Children—A Play for Gaza, which offers an account from her imagination of the psychological dynamics within an archetypal Jewish family that have led to the situation where today's Jews are able to contemplate the suffering of the Palestinians without pity or remorse (Churchill 2009b). British author and journalist Howard Jacobson (2009) argued that Churchill's play was antisemitic, not least because it made use, in his interpretation, of themes of blood libel, but also, he argued, because it accused Jews of being pathologically predisposed to genocide.

Churchill (2009a) responded: "Howard Jacobson writes as if there's something new about describing critics of Israel as antisemitic. But it's the usual tactic."

Here, Churchill has conflated those aspects of the play Jacobson judged antisemitic with "criticism of Israel" and insisted he was accusing her of acting with antisemitic intent. She denied being antisemitic and accused Jacobson of raising the issue of antisemitism with the intention of delegitimizing "criticism of Israel." Her letter goes on: "When people attack English Jews in the street saying, 'This is for Gaza', they are making a terrible mistake, confusing the people who bombed Gaza with Jews in general. When Howard Jacobson confuses those who criticize Israel with antisemites, he is making the same mistake."

Churchill's position is that the element of intentionality is analogous between the violent street thug and Jacobson. Jacobson's critique focuses on the distinction between criticism of Israel and antisemitism, but she accuses him simply of conflating one with the other until she arrives at the punchline of her letter: Jacobson is making the same mistake as the street thug, "unless he's doing it on purpose," she adds. She thus ascribes malicious intent not to the violent antisemite but to the person who opposes and names antisemitism.

It is now widely accepted among antiracist scholars and activists that acts, speech, ideas, practices, or institutions may be racist or may lead to racist outcomes, independently of whether or not the people involved are judged to be self-consciously racist. One benefit of making this distinction is that it enables individuals to examine their own ideas, actions, or speech to see whether, even though they are not racists, they might nevertheless have done or said something racist. It enables us to remain vigilant and educated about our own conduct. It enables antiracists to focus on particular kinds of speech, action, and social structure that may be problematic without getting bogged down in a fruitless discussion about a person's inner essence.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Macpherson 1999) needed the concept of *institutional racism* to understand why the investigation of Ste-

phen Lawrence's murder by racist street thugs in South East London had gone so wrong. Macpherson wrote:

> **6.13** Lord Scarman accepted the existence of what he termed '*unwitting*' or '*unconscious*' racism. To those adjectives can be added a third, namely '*unintentional*'. All three words are familiar in the context of any discussion in this field.

The problem was not to be found in the malicious or intentional racism of police officers but in the institutional culture of the Metropolitan Police.

Antiracists who are accused of antisemitism in connection with their statements about Israel find themselves in an unusual position. While it is difficult to look into the heart of a person in order to discover whether they are racist, it feels more comfortable when the person is yourself. Often antiracists accused of antisemitism forget the importance of understanding racism objectively as something that exists outside of the individual racist. They find it easier to look within themselves and to find they are not intentionally antisemitic—indeed, they are opponents of antisemitism. Intimate access to the object of inquiry yields an apparently clear result and seems to make it unnecessary for the antiracist to look any further at how contemporary antisemitism actually functions independently of the will of the particular social agent.

"The Israel Lobby"

My third example concerns "The Israel Lobby." It has been argued by some critics that John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (2007) is antisemitic. In the film *Defamation* (2010), Yoav Shamir, the film maker, asks Mearsheimer the following question:

> **Shamir:** Did you try to think about it like you know, between yourself and yourself . . . you know, . . . within yourself, did you take a moment to think maybe some of it was influenced by something which . . . could be interpreted as . . . antisemitism?
> **Mearsheimer:** No, because I'm not antisemitic and I never had any doubt that I wasn't antisemitic and I just didn't see any need to do this. . . . Now one can disagree with that but those arguments that we're making are not antisemitic and we're not antisemites. Of course it's almost impossible to prove that you're not an antisemite . . .

It is noteworthy that both the interviewer and the interviewee are working within the same paradigm. Shamir asks the question using a

strongly intentionalist notion of antisemitism. Mearsheimer's response indicates that he just knows he is not antisemitic and so it was never an issue. He also asserts his arguments are not antisemitic, although he does not rebut the claim that they are in substance. He prefers to look within himself than at the world outside for a definitive answer to the question of antisemitism.

HOSTILITY TO ISRAEL AND THE FORMS OF ANTISEMITISM

There is no single ahistorical antisemitism; instead, there are distinct antisemitisms of different kinds and in different times and places. Nevertheless, it is not surprising if sometimes Jews tend to experience every new hostility as just another manifestation of "the longest hatred" (Wistrich 1994). It is still less surprising given that each new antisemitism tends to draw upon mythology and imagery created by previous hostilities to Jews. For example, Nazi antisemitism was radically different from medieval Christian antisemitism but still made use of some of the same imagery and stereotypes. Each antisemitism creates something enduring, which remains in the cultural reservoir ready to be drawn upon and reinvigorated. Within this cultural reservoir two recurring motifs stand out: blood libel, which charges Jews with ethnically motivated crimes of cruelty, often against children, often involving the consumption or use of blood or body parts; and conspiracy theory, which constructs Jews, who are very small in number, as being hugely, selfishly, and secretly influential on a global scale (Julius 2010).

Criticism of Israel takes many forms. One might say that the occupation of Palestinian territory is oppressive and requires a regime of racist violence and humiliation to sustain it. One might say that Israel uses targeted assassinations against its enemies and practices imprisonment of Palestinians without trial, which are contrary to international human rights norms. One might say that it is an ethnically based state and not a state for all its citizens. Or it may be said that Israel was founded through a campaign of ethnic cleansing and only endures due to an ongoing campaign of ethnic exclusion. There are criticisms that have been made against Israeli policy or Israel's existence in an entirely rational way. Some of the criticisms, one may judge, are justified; others, one may judge, are not. On this level, dialogue, debate, criticism, and campaigning continue.

Naturally enough, campaigning against Israeli human rights abuses often seeks to engender feelings of compassion for and identification with Israel's Palestinian victims and concomitant feelings of anger toward Israel and Israelis (Fine 2011). Sometimes, antisemitic themes and images are put to work to help this process. Some anti-Zionist movements, for example Hamas or the Ahmadinejad regime in Iran, employ antisemitic tropes to

explain the bad behavior of Israel, to exaggerate it, and to bind people into an emotional commitment against it.

More surprisingly, however, images and tropes that resemble those of antisemitism also appear in the anti-Israel agitation of antiracists, of people who strongly oppose antisemitism. Here there can be no question of antisemitism being put to work in order to make the case against Israel. Instead, there must be an unconscious drawing upon the antisemitic motifs that reside in the collective cultural reservoir. What makes this latter hypothesis of unconscious antisemitism more puzzling still is the vehemence with which antiracists who employ antisemitic tropes sometimes deny that they are doing so even when it is pointed out to them, and with which they downplay the significance of openly antisemitic agitation on the part of others against Israel.

The rational type of criticism of Israel outlined above is joined in public discourse by a swirling mass of claims that are of a different kind—i.e., Israel has a policy of killing children; Israeli lobbying is hugely powerful; Israel is responsible for the Iraq War; Israel is responsible for President Mubarak; Israel is responsible for instability throughout the Middle East; Israel destroys the reputation of anybody in public life who criticizes it; Israel has huge influence over the media; Israel exaggerates the Holocaust and manipulates its memory for its own instrumental purposes; Israel steals the body parts of its enemies; Israel poisons Palestinian water supplies; Israel is genocidal; Israel is apartheid; Israel is essentially racist; Israel is colonialist; Israel is the testing ground and the prototype for "Western" techniques of power and surveillance.

The border between rational criticism and irrational claim is contested and difficult to define. Sometimes the same claim may be either a rational criticism or a blunt weapon, depending on how it is mobilized and in what combination; sometimes rational criticisms and irrational libels combine in toxic, angry swirls that are difficult to decouple and that have emergent properties not present before their release and combination.

Jenny Tonge, a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords in the UK, is an avowed opponent of antisemitism who employs both blood libel and conspiracy theory against Israel. "The pro-Israeli Lobby has got its grips on the Western world," she said in a speech, "its financial grips. I think they've probably got a certain grip on our party" (Hirsh 2006). The term "pro-Israel Lobby" was popularized by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2007). They argued that the lobby was so powerful that it had been instrumental in sending the United States to war in Iraq against the United States's own fundamental interests. Tonge used the term to refer to a hugely powerful and secret global force that has the Western world in its financial grip. The problem with the term is that it facilitates conceptual

slippage. There are certainly pro-Israel lobbying organizations and there are certainly Jewish communal organizations. But often the ways the terms "Israel Lobby" and "Jewish Lobby" are used transform the meaning of the terms into something more sinister. Tonge was not talking about actual organizations but about a hugely powerful and secret global financial force. Consciously or not, she was using Mearsheimer and Walt's terminology in ways that articulated traditional antisemitic conspiracy theory.

In the summer of 2009, an article appeared in a mainstream Swedish newspaper alleging that Israeli forces kill Palestinians in order to harvest their body parts (Berthelson and Barak 2009). In February 2010 Jenny Tonge called for an inquiry into allegations that Israelis who were in Haiti to help rescue people from the wreckage of the earthquake there were harvesting body organs to be sold for use in transplant operations.

Nick Clegg, now the deputy prime minster, fired Tonge from her job as a spokesperson on health issues, saying that her comments were "wholly unacceptable." What is interesting, however, is that Clegg denies that "Jenny Tonge is antisemitic or racist" (Bright 2010). Clegg relies on a personalized and intentionalist definition here, rather than an interpretation of what she said. When Clegg was challenged for this judgment by journalist Martin Bright, he said: "The very suggestion that I might explicitly or tacitly give cover to racism, I find politically abhorrent and personally deeply offensive" (Bright 2009). The question, Bright reports, made Clegg "beyond angry. Incandescent almost gets it, but that still doesn't capture the full fury of the man" (Bright 2009; Murray 2010).

Often, people can see that conspiracy theory such as that of Tonge is wrong or counterproductive or likely to upset Jews, but the idea that either the speech or the inividual are antisemitic meets huge emotional resistance. Raising the issue of antisemitism in relation to discourse that is ostensibly about Israel is often felt to be unsophisticated, unscholarly, impolite, and an indicator of vulgarity. It is often portrayed as a bad-faith and dishonest way that "Zionists" employ in order to try to delegitimize criticism of Israel (Hirsh 2010). This functions to relieve people of the duty to respond seriously to the issue, allowing them instead to respond *ad hominem*. It also makes it difficult to employ "antisemitism" as an analytic term in scholarly analysis.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING A SYMBOLIC WORLDVIEW OF JEWS

A common feature of diverse antisemitisms has been that they construct "the Jews" as centrally important to everything that is wrong with the world. As portrayed by antisemites, Jews are deemed to have a universal importance for mankind. Christian antisemitism said that the Jews had mur-

dered God, who suffered to save us all, and had refused His message; they became "a ubiquitous and constant concomitant of Christianity" (Bauman 1993, 37) whose overcoming is necessary for the accomplishment of the Christian mission. Leftist antisemitism, which the German Social Democrat August Bebel called "the socialism of fools," said that Jewish capitalists were responsible for the exploitation of the masses. Modernist antisemitism held Jews responsible for preventing modernity from coming to fruition by clinging on to their religious, social, and linguistic backwardness. Anti-modernist antisemitism said that Jews were responsible for the damage that modernity did to traditional forms and institutions. Nazi antisemitism said that Jews constituted a racial infection that prevented everybody else from living happily. Irrespective of their small numbers "the Jews" are afforded universal significance.

Israel or Zionism as constructed by anti-Zionists is deemed globally important as well: Israel is the keystone of the whole edifice of imperialism; Israel prevents peace and democracy across the Middle East; the Israel Lobby is responsible for war; Israel shows us all our future because "American power" may be undergoing a process of "Israelization"[6]; Zionism is deemed responsible for importing Islamophobia into the new Europe.

There is a tendency for the Israel/Palestine conflict to attain a place of great symbolic importance. Within this imaginary construct, the Palestinians come to occupy a symbolic position as victims of "the West," of "imperialism," or of "militarism." They stand for all of the victims. Of course it follows that if Palestinians are symbolic representatives of the oppressed everywhere, then Israelis tend to become symbolic representatives of oppressors everywhere. In this context, discussion about Israel and Palestine is sometimes less about the small if intractable conflict on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and more a symbolic narrative. The vocabulary and symbolism of the Israel/Palestine conflict are mobilized as a way of discussing the more universal issues facing humankind or more particularistic issues relating to our own histories and identities. The conflict becomes an empty vessel into which we can pour our own concerns: British concerns over the colonial legacy; European concerns about the Holocaust; American concerns about the frontier; Irish concerns about Unionism and Republicanism; South African concerns about overcoming apartheid. Apart from putting Jews back at the center of the world, this tendency is also wholly disrespectful to the suffering of the Palestinians. By constructing Palestinians as universally symbolic, their actual needs for solidarity and freedom go largely unconsidered. Rather than actual people finding a multiplicity of ways to live and to struggle in difficult circumstances, "the Palestinians"

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6. Martin Shaw, quoted in Johnson (2007).

are portrayed as one single heroic victim of the homogenous and evil
"Zionism." They become romantic and enraged carriers of our own anti-
Western fantasies (Fine 2009).

In this way of thinking, the usual sociological approach to nationalism
is reversed when looking at the Israel/Palestine conflict and antisemitism. In
sociology, nationalisms are viewed critically and comparatively, but Israeli
nationalism is often singled out as uniquely racist. Narratives of nationhood
are usually not examined only for their truth or falsity but understood also
as social phenomena with particular trajectories and functions, but Israeli
nationalism is often denounced in simplistic binary terms as an artificial
construct as though all the others were in some sense authentic. Contradic-
tions are usually examined and their consequences traced, but regarding
Israel they are often employed to construct essentialist patterns of think-
ing—often to denounce the idea and reality of a Jewish state. To be sure,
sociology itself is not immune to forms of antisemitism that claim to speak
for the oppressed and to confront the powerful (Postone 2006). Antisemit-
ism, after all, can be attractive to radical people who view the world and
find a lot wrong with it. Sociology, however, also holds an important key to
understanding antisemitism and the world that produces it.

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