Struggles over the Boundaries of Legitimate Discourse: Antisemitism and Bad-Faith Allegations – David Hirsh

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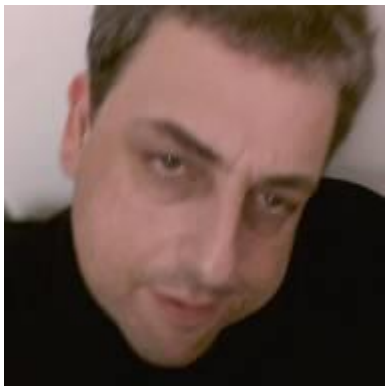

David Hirsh

A colleague told me that she had been invited onto a panel in the Netherlands to discuss Caryl Churchill's 'Seven Jewish Children: a play for Gaza'. I asked if she had judged that the play was antisemitic. She looked concerned and surprised and she told me that in the Netherlands one would not characterise such a play as antisemitic. After the Holocaust, the word 'antisemitic' was too strong for such a play, she explained.

The play is an account from Churchill's imagination of the psychological dynamics within an archetypal (or stereotyped) Jewish family which have led to the situation where today's Jews are able to contemplate the suffering of the Palestinians, including the Israeli killing of children, without pity or remorse (Churchill 2009). The writer Howard Jacobson (2009) did say, in Britain, that the play was antisemitic. He argued that the play was dishonest, one-sided, it made use of the themes of the blood libel and it accused Jews of being pathologically pre-disposed to genocide.

I am interested here in the thought process of my Dutch colleague. For her, characterising something a person has written as antisemitic felt similar to saying that the person is like a Nazi who is for the gassing of the Jews. For her the concept 'antisemitic' could not be used in a civilised rational or analytic discussion about Churchill's play because it was too big and too powerful. It could not be used as a scalpel, to dissect a piece of work; it was a nuclear bomb, which would not only destroy the object of inquiry but also the whole discursive space. There was a sense in which the concept of antisemitism itself was felt to be outside of the boundaries of legitimate discourse for ordinary everyday slanders against Jews.

If to raise the issue of antisemitism is to unleash a nuclear bomb, then the issue is unraisable, as nuclear weapons are unusable. The discussion of antisemitism is thought of as a weapon instead of an analytic or political endeavour. Who is sufficiently cynical and vulgar to wield this weapon when it ought to be reserved only to characterise pure evil? Caryl Churchill says:

> Howard Jacobson … writes as if there's something new about describing critics of Israel as anti-Semitic. But it's the usual tactic. (Churchill 2009a)

Who's usual tactic? What is the collective of which Jacobson is alleged to be part which usually uses a tactic of raising the issue of antisemitism to de-legitimise criticism of Israel? Churchill does not defend herself against Jacobson's accusation but instead bounces back a counter-accusation that critics of Israel are routinely accused of antisemitism in order to silence them.

Judith Butler was concerned about an argument made by Lawrence Summers, then the Preisdent of Harvard University, that the campaign to divest from or to boycott Israel was antisemitic in its effect if not in its intent (Butler 2003). Butler was critical of Summers' claim that something could still be antisemitic in its effect even if it was not motivated by any antisemitic intent.

Butler has made a career out of tracing 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 insists instead that a person can only be implicated in antisemitism if they are self conscious Jew-haters. In response to Summers, who is trying to use the concept of antisemitism in an analytic and a measured way to discuss a phenomenon about which he is concerned, Butler insists that the concept should remain a nuclear bomb. It should only be used, for her, to describe actions which are motivated by the hatred of Jews. She insists on defining antisemitism in such a way as to make it unusable in a discussion of contemporary discursive phenomena which are related to hostility to Israel.

The EUMC Working Definition of Antisemitism, produced by a body of the European Union, is a set of guidelines which was intended to help with the process of making a judgment about whether or not an incident is antisemitic. This definition was tentatively adopted following successful lobbying by Jewish NGOs which were concerned that some kinds of manifestations of hostility to Israel ought to be recognized as antisemitic (Whine 2006). The Working Definition focuses not on the intention of the person responsible for an incident but on the incident itself. It was originally produced to help officials across Europe to count and to report antisemitic incidents. It was an attempt to re-calibrate the concept of antisemitism to what was actually going on in Europe and so to undermine the association of the concept only with pure evil.

Antizionist discourse has been influential within the University and College Union (UCU) in the UK, the trade union which represents university and college workers. It has manifested itself in repeated attempts to win the union to a policy of supporting a boycott of Israeli universities in solidarity with the Palestinian people. In May 2011 senior figures in the UK Jewish community wrote a letter to the General Secretary. They wrote that the prevalence of antizionist discourse had created a situation where they judged that the union had become institutionally antisemitic. At UCU Congress, shortly afterwards, the antizionists proposed a motion which disavowed the EUMC Working Definition. They could not accept it as a valid definition because it seemed to characterize much of what they themselves were doing within the union as antisemitic. In the debate, the Working Definition was denounced as a bad faith attempt to say that criticism of Israel was antisemitic and thereby to situate such criticism

outside of the boundaries of antiracist, or even of legal, discourse. During the debate, Brian Klug's definition of antisemitism was proposed instead, which was summed up by a speaker in the debate as 'hostility towards Jews as Jews'[1]. This proposal would limit the concept of antisemitism to hostility which was consciously and openly felt and expressed against Jews for no other reason than their Jewishness.

My Dutch colleague did not want to use the concept 'antisemitism' because it seemed to impede the possibility of rational debate and critical thinking. Caryl Churchill did not want to engage with the concept of antisemitism because she thought of it as a dirty weapon, wielded in bad faith by people who want to protect Israel from criticism. Judith Butler did not want to accept the possibility of actions having antisemitic effect even in the absence of antisemitic malice. The UCU, when accused of antisemitism, responded by insisting on a definition by which nobody except a crazed Nazi could be said to be antisemitic.

Antiracists who are accused of antisemitism in connection with their statements about Israel find themselves in an unusual position. Often they forget the importance of understanding racism objectively as something which exists outside of the individual racist. They find it easier to look within themselvesand 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.

In February 2005, Ken Livingstone, then the mayor of London, became involved in an apparently trivial late night argument with a reporter after a party at City Hall. Oliver Finegold asked him how the party had been. Livingstone was angry because he felt Finegold was intruding. After a little banter to and fro, in which the reporter said that he was only trying to do his job, Livingstone retorted by asking him whether he had previously been a 'German war criminal'. Finegold replied that he hadn't, and that he was Jewish, and that he was offended by the suggestion. Livingstone went on to insist that Finegold was behaving just like a 'German war criminal', that his newspaper, *The Standard*, 'was a load of scumbags and reactionary bigots' and that it had a record of supporting Fascism.

Instead of apologizing for his comment in the sober light of day, Livingstone responded to charges of antisemitism which had been made in relation to the Finegold affair with the following words:

> '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 is a formulation which often appears in response to an accusation of antisemitism, which I have called *The Livingstone Formulation* (Hirsh 2007; 2010). It is a rhetorical device which enables the user to refuse to engage with the charge made. It is a mirror which bounces back an accusation of antisemitism against anybody who makes it. It contains a counter-charge of dishonest Jewish (or 'Zionist') conspiracy.

The *Livingstone Formulation* does two things. Firstly, it denies the distinction between criticism of Israel on the one hand, which is widely accepted as being legitimate, and discourse and action about which, by contrast, there is concern relating to its alleged connection to antisemitism, on the other. The *Livingstone Formulation* conflates everything,

both criticism of Israel but also other things which are allegedly not so legitimate, such as repeatedly insulting a Jewish reporter by comparing him to a Nazi, into the category of legitimate criticism of Israel.

Secondly, the *Livingstone Formulation* does not simply accuse anyone who raises the issue of contemporary antisemitism of being wrong, it also accuses them of bad faith: 'the accusation of antisemitism *has been used* against anyone who is critical…' [*my italics*]. Not an honest mistake, but a secret, common plan to try to de-legitimize criticism by means of an instrumental use of a charge of antisemitism. This is an allegation of malicious intent made against the (unspecified) people who raise concerns about antisemitism. It is not possible to 'use' 'the accusation of antisemitism' in order to delegitimize criticism of Israel, without dishonest intent.

The raising of the issue of antisemitism is often claimed to be an *ad hominem* attack, an accusation of antisemitic intent on the part of the 'critic of Israel'. Yet while there is fierce resistance to the possibility of unintended antisemitism, those who employ the *Livingstone Formulation* accuse those who raise the issue of antisemitism of doing so with malicious intent and of knowing that their concerns are not justified. Jon Pike (2008) argues that the 'Livingstone manouvre [also] represents a significant injustice. The function of the formulation is to establish and cement a credibility deficit on the part of those who have and express concern about anti-Semitism.'

Slavoj Žižek(2011) begins an article with what is universally accepted as being outside of the boundaries of legitimate discourse, that is the writings of Anders Breivik, the man who murdered 77 people in his attack on Oslo's government district and on the youth camp of the Norweigan Labour Party on 22 July 2011. Žižek's method is to associate other phenomena with Breivik in order to demonstrate how they too fall outside of the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Žižek says that Breivik is antisemitic but he also says that Breivik is 'pro-Israel'. Žižek's evidence is that 'he even wants to see the Jerusalem temple rebuilt', as though he shared this with most people who are 'pro-Israel' and he makes sense of Breivik's 'pro-Israel' stance by reference to his Islamophobia and his view that Israel is 'the first line of defence against the Muslim expansion'. Žižek asks how a 'Zionist Nazi' is possible. He says that 'Zionist-rightists' want to make a dirty deal with Europe whereby they are allowed to build 'apartheid' in Israel in exchange for Europeans being allowed to be intolerant of Muslim minorities at home. Since when did Europeans require Jewish agreement to be intolerant? But in Žižek's argument Israelis, or 'Rightist-Zionist' Jews, are a key element in the fatal undermining of European tolerant civilization. He is careful not to blame all Jews, he only blames those Jews who adhere to 'Zionist politics'. Without comment, he moves from Zionist Nazis, or 'Rightist-Zionists' to the left liberal philosopher Bernard Henry-Lévy. Žižek is concerned with Lévy's claim that antisemitism in the 21st Century would be 'progressive', in other words, would come significantly from the left rather than from the right. Žižek does not take the idea of antisemitism on the left seriously, and he swipes the idea away by ridiculing it as a claim that 'today's anti-capitalism is a disguised form of antisemitism'. Strange that he has never sniffed anti-capitalist antisemitism and does not find the idea worth any consideration. Strange also that it seems not to occur to him that Nazism itself could be understood as an anti-capitalist antisemitism. Instead, he reads the significance of Lévy's concern as being neglectful of still virulent'old' antisemitism in Europe. He says that Lévy's position is that concern for the 'old' antisemitism is incompatible with concern for the 'new', yet this actually turns out to be his own

position. He thinks that concern about 'new' (fake) antisemitism undermines the fight against 'old' (authentic) antisemitism.

Žižek offers a classic instance of the Livingstone Formulation:

> …Zionism itself has paradoxically come to adopt some antisemitic logic in its hatred of Jews who do not fully identify with the politics of the state of Israel. Their target, the figure of the Jew who doubts the Zionist project, is constructed in the same way as the European antisemites constructed the figures of the Jew…

Antisemitism has often made use of the trope of the exceptional Jew who is offered a way of absolving himself from the crimes of the Jews in general. Žižek splits Jewry into two. On the one hand we have Zionist Jews who embody everything that is bad about the contemporary world, which is evidenced by the fact that Breivik embraces their worldview. On the other hand, we have Jews who Žižek characterizes as those who 'do not fully identify with the politics of the state of Israel'. The first group of Jews, in Žižek's understanding, is analogous to the antisemites of old while the second group of Jews is analogous to the Jews of old. The first group has become Nazi while the second group is all that is left of authentically Jewish multiculturalist alterity. The Livingstone Formulation slippage is important here, it conflates the tiny minority of Jews who are militantly hostile to Israel with the evidently common and legitimate Jewish position of 'not fully [but in one sense or another] identifying with the politics of the state of Israel'.

Instead of examining the politics of Israel-hatred, or of particular manifestations of anti-capitalism to see if they connect in any way to antisemitism, Žižek haughtily discounts the possibility in advance. Eschewing rational discourse, he accuses a huge spectrum of Jewish opinion, from the most racist settlers on the far right, to Bernard Henry-Lévy, on the left, of being themselves like antisemites. Instead of engaging with what actually existing Jews say[2], he seeks rhetorically to push them over the boundary of legitimate discourse onto a terrain where their voices need not be listened to. It is not a surprise that the campaign to boycott Israeli academia is based on the same foundations as Žižek's politics. The damage done by refusing to think analytically and coolly about contemporary antisemitism, and de-legitimising those who do so, is that it inoculates antiracist activists against being able to recognize and to oppose antisemitism when they see it, or more worryingly, when they themselves stumble into it.

The inoculation is widespread. Latuff is an antizionist cartoonist who is celebrated on parts of the antiracist left but who was also awarded the second prize in President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust Denial cartoon exhibition in 2006. Latuff's work is full of antisemitic tropes: Israel as a child killing state, Israel as a blood sucking state, Israel as a globally powerful lobby, Israel as playing the antisemitism card in bad faith. The Guardian carried an uncritical piece about Latuff written by Jack Shenker (2011), who asked Latuff about claims that his work is antisemitic. Latuff offered an answer, 'wearily', writes Shenker. And that was enough for somebody writing in an antiracist newspaper. Latuff is weary because we are all inoculated to understand that these accusations of antisemitism are made in bad faith. With the world 'wearily' Shenker sides with the antisemite who doesn't need to engage rationally with his accusers. He only needs to sigh in mock tiredness at their bad faith and push them over the boundary of civilized discourse into a place where they do not need to be listened to and their criticism does not need to be engaged with.

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[1] http://engageonline.wordpress.com/2011/05/30/live-blogging-from-ucu-congress-the-eumc-working-definition/

[2] For some research on what actually existing Jews in Britain say, as well as a response to this Žižek piece, see Gardner (2011).

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