

David Feldman

Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism in Britain

Proceedings / International conference

“Antisemitism in Europe Today: the Phenomena, the Conflicts”

8–9 November 2013

Organized by

the Jewish Museum Berlin,

the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”

and the Center for Research on Antisemitism Berlin



Jüdisches Museum Berlin

Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism in Britain

David Feldman¹

In Britain, as in many other countries, debate over the state of Israel, its existence and policies, commonly lead to charges of antisemitism directed at some of Israel's critics. In this short paper I shall take account not only of the accusations of antisemitism but also of the ways in which they have been denied. My focus will be on this dispute as it arises among academics and public intellectuals.

We can begin this brief survey with the booklet *From blood libel to boycott: changing faces of British antisemitism*, written by the prolific and renowned historian, Robert Wistrich. Wistrich, concludes as follows: 'During the last decade Britain, led by its liberal left elites has been sleepwalking into a morass of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish bigotry, while vehemently denying that anything is amiss.'² Elsewhere, Wistrich invokes a longer historical process. In 2010, in his colossal tome *A lethal obsession: Anti-semitism from antiquity to global jihad*, he writes, 'since 1967 anti-Semitism has re-entered leftist discourse [in Britain] not only through its obsessive focus on the sins of Israel but its ideologically driven singling out of Jews, Judaism and Zionism as dire impediments to revolutionary progress.' By 1980 'Britain's radical Left had become explicitly or implicitly anti-Semitic in its demonization of Jews, its equation of Zionism with racism or Nazism and its malevolent undermining of any moral basis for Israel existence' but 'whole swathes of educated opinion in the media, British politics and academia...have bought heavily into this demonization of Israel and America.'³ Anthony Julius, the prominent lawyer and distinguished author, broadly agrees on this point. In another massive volume, *Trials of the Diaspora: a history of anti-semitism in England from the middle ages to the twenty first century*, he states, 'Anti-semitic anti-Zionism first emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in consequence of the Six Day War, but became hegemonic in the 1990s and 2000s.'⁴

Yet despite the best efforts of Wistrich, Julius and other academics and journalists, intellectuals and polemicists, there is no agreement that hostility to Israel is closely bound with antisemitism. The relationship of anti-Zionism or fierce criticism of Israel to antisemitism remains a point of intense debate. Brian Klug, in an article published in 2003, acknowledged that at times Israel is attacked in explicitly antisemitic terms. However, he concludes 'the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the view that hostility towards Israel, at bottom, is not a new form of antisemitism, it is a function of a deep and bitter political conflict.'⁵ Similarly, reviewing the scene in Europe, Jonathan Judaken proposes 'the formula that "anti-Zionism is antisemitism" is too simplistic.' He claims that doctrine as well as, or instead of, scholarship is in play when these accusations are made. 'We need to

¹ Pears Institute for the study of Antisemitism Birkbeck, University of London

² Robert Wistrich, *From blood libel to boycott. Changing faces of British Antisemitism*, Jerusalem, 2011, p. 22

³ Robert Wistrich, *A lethal obsession: Anti-semitism from antiquity to global jihad*, New York, 2010, pp.383, 386;

⁴ Anthony Julius, *Trials of the diaspora*, Oxford, p.441.

⁵ Brian Klug, 'The collective Jew: Israel and the new antisemitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 37.2, 2003, pp.133-4.

examine the political agenda’, he suggests, ‘of those who believe an unholy alliance of reds, greens and jihadists is animating a new antisemitism.’⁶

Characteristically, interventions in these disputes are conceived as political interventions in the world as well as scholarly interventions in an intellectual endeavour. This contributes to the passion and, on occasion, ugly temper of debate. Wistrich denounces the ‘nihilistic folly’ of ‘progressive Jews- driven by self-congratulatory narcissism as much as self-loathing’. Accusations of ‘paranoia’ fly back in the other direction.⁷ But there is a price paid when robust exchanges give way to accusations of bad faith and diagnoses of mental illness. For one precondition of intellectual exchange is not fulfilled here; namely that the participants look upon each other as fellows, engaged in an honest pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Polemic has its place and time but we should understand that polemicists seek, rhetorically at least, to annihilate their opponents. On current evidence anyone who enters this fight and imagines that she or he will formulate the argument to end it, with one side victorious and the other politically and intellectually abject in defeat, is going to end up both disappointed and abused.

My main here is not to take up arms and become a direct participant in this battle but to reflect upon it. The questions are the following. Has the British left really become anti-Zionist? How is antisemitism defined and understood in these debates? What is at stake when people disagree over the role played by antisemitism in discourse on Israel? These questions lie at one remove from the dispute to which we have become accustomed.

Any assessment of the attitudes of the British left to Zionism should focus on the Labour Party. For more than a century the Labour Party has dominated left-wing politics in Britain. For the fifty years following the Balfour Declaration, Labour party support for Zionism did not stem from an appreciation of the necessity of Zionism for the Jews. Rather, Labour support for Zionism was based on the fact that Zionists were European colonists who, it was believed, brought a higher level of civilization to a part of the world that remained locked in medieval backwardness in its level of economic development, in its political organisation, its religious practices and in its social organisation. The fact that the Zionists appeared to combine technological progress with socialist organisation, both on the *kibbutzim* and in the trade unions, rendered them especially attractive allies in Britain’s global mission.⁸

The critique of Israel as an illegitimate, colonialist and inherently racist state was indeed an argument articulated in the Marxist, revolutionary and radical left from the 1960s onwards. Yet categorical anti-Zionist argument did not frame the criticism of Israel that came from the Labour Party, even from its left wing, in these years. The continuing belief of the Labour left in the legitimacy of Israel was made dramatically clear in an interview with Tony Benn published in Labour Movement

⁶ Jonathan Judaken, ‘So what’s new? Rethinking the “new antisemitism” in a global age’ *Patterns of Prejudice*, 42.4-5, p.533

⁷ Wistrich, *From blood libel*, p.22; Steven Beller, ‘In Zion’s Hall of Mirrors: a comment on *Neuer Antisemitismus*’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41.2, 2007, p.217.

⁸ This is discussed in my forthcoming paper ‘The Labour Party and Zionism’.

Campaign for Palestine, *Newsletter*, in 1984. Tony Benn was the leading figure in the Labour left in parliament in these years. He strived to ally the Labour party to the extra-parliamentary opposition to the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Inevitably this brought him into close contact with the revolutionary left. The interview with the Labour Movement campaign for Palestine was an example of one such contact. Benn's interviewers tried to persuade him that Israel and Zionism have 'always acted...as an ally of imperialism.' Yet Benn refused to disavow Israel. He maintained, 'I am in favour of a Jewish state and I believe the Jews are entitled to have security in Israel. I don't believe that a criticism of individual items of policy can be used to see Israel destroyed.' He went on to reject the idea of a bi-national state. He firmly believed, the Jews are entitled to a land of their own.⁹ Benn's position was that the Palestinians as well as Jews too required self-determination and a homeland. Indeed, it was this, rather than a principled and thorough-going anti-Zionism that has characterised the Labour party attitude since the 1980s. At party conference in 1988 and 1989 conference motions, brought forward in the context of the *intifada* called for recognition of the Palestinian *and* Israeli peoples' right to self-determination. It remains the case today that not one Labour Member of Parliament has expressed public support for a one state solution. They all support Israel's right to exist within defensible borders. This might be matter for celebration or for regret, according to one's political point of view, but it is certainly not anything that can be described as anti-Zionism in any meaningful sense of the term. Wistrich and Julius are unreliable guides in so far as they paint a picture in which British liberal and left elites embrace antisemitic anti-Zionism.

Nevertheless, the lack of support for principled anti-Zionism leaves open the possibility that much criticism of Israel is antisemitic in character: that, for example, Israel's mainstream critics subject the county to double standards and demonization, that antisemitic themes and images (images of Jews wielding hidden and sinister influence, for example) arise in discourse about Israel, that criticism of Israel often embraces Jews more generally, and that some forms of campaigning, notably the movement to boycott Israel, are by definition antisemitic.

Yet here we find an interesting absence of agreement. Let us take one significant example: the movement to boycott Israel. On the one side, there are those who regard the movement as the latest example in a long and ignoble line of antisemitic boycotts. We need only think of nationalist boycotts against Jews in eastern and central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses to understand that the historical precedents are real enough. But most supporters of the boycott movement do not recognise themselves when they are portrayed as antisemitic. On the contrary, characteristically, they present their cause as the latest iteration of a long and noble history of boycott campaigns in human rights causes. The campaign against apartheid is the obvious analogy but in the twentieth century the boycott tactic was also used in the

⁹ Labour Party Campaign for Palestine, *Newsletter*, 1984, 1, p.3.

civil rights movement in the United States, as a protest against Nazi persecution of the Jews, and as a form of anti-colonial protest and mobilisation.¹⁰

It is obvious, but no less true for that, that these divergent assessments of whether or not something is antisemitic are closely related to conflicting positions on the Zionist idea, on the policies and practices of the Israeli state, on the rights (and wrongs) of the Palestinians, and the rights and wrongs of the Israeli occupation and settlement policies since 1967. However, there is also another, less well-recognised but equally significant feature of these of these disputes. Namely, that they reflect widespread but largely unacknowledged disagreement over the nature and characteristics of antisemitism.

In the UK, for example, there are at least three different usages of the term antisemitism in circulation. The first, we might term the traditional conception of the term. It focusses on hostility to Jews as Jews.¹¹ In this view, an attack on Jews, as Jews, is by definition antisemitic. But there are problems with this definition. What if Jews, acting in ways that are understood to be Jewish, break a widely accepted norm of behaviour? Is the attack on them in this case necessarily antisemitic? For this reason, Brian Klug focusses not merely on hostility to Jews but hostility that stems from the prejudiced mindset of the perpetrators. Accordingly, he defines anitsematism as ‘a form of hostility towards Jews as Jews, in which Jews are perceived as something other than they are...Thinking that Jews are really ‘Jews’ is precisely the core of antisemitism’.¹²

A second usage of antisemitism which circulates in Britain, unlike the first, is an innovation that owes much to discussion over the last two decades among scholars and policy makers on racism and what is termed racial disadvantage. Here the emphasis is not on the mind of the perpetrator but on outcomes. This has yielded the term institutional racism. Thus the disproportionately large number of young black men in British gaols is termed institutionally racist, regardless of the perceptions or intentions of any one in the police force, judiciary and the prison service. We find this concept of institutional racism now used, for example, in the context of the campaign to Boycott Israel undertaken by some members of the Universities and Colleges Union in the UK. Thus in 2011 a number of leader British Jews, supported by Eric Pickles, a minister in the Conservative government attacked the UCU as institutionally racist. This was taken up by the sociologist and activist David Hirsh. Hirsh wrote: ‘Nobody in the union hates Jews; it isn’t that sort of antisemitism. Institutional antisemitism....create[s] an environment within the union which is hostile to Jews, even if nobody intends to create such an environment.’¹³

¹⁰ For a characterization of the movement to boycott Israel as, by definition, antisemitic see Julius, *Trials of the diaspora*, p.483. The broader history of boycotts was discussed at a conference on ‘Boycotts: Past and Present’ held at Birkbeck, University of London, 19-21 June, 2013.

¹¹ For a discussion see Tony Kushner, *The persistence of prejudice. Antisemitism in British society during the Second World War*, Manchester, 1989, pp.2-13.

¹² Klug, ‘The collective Jew’, pp.124-5

¹³ *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 June 2011; 30 June, 2011; ‘Tories target UCU’s weakspot’ <http://engageonline.wordpress.com/2011/07/01/>

Finally there is a third conception of antisemitism in circulation. This too takes its cue from the wider context of thinking on racism but in this case it emphasises the feelings of the victim of a racist or antisemitic attack that are held to be crucial. For example, in 2011, in the context of debate within the UCU, Trevor Phillips, the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission intervened. Taking his lead from the Macpherson report - a 1999 report into policing in the UK - Phillips said 'if the object of harassment or attack regards her treatment as being antisemitic...then the presumption is that the victims perception is what defines the incident.'¹⁴

We can see, then, that there are at least three quite different understandings of what antisemitism is and where it resides: does it lie in the perceptions of the perpetrator, in a set of outcomes that arise independently of perception and language or in the perceptions, not of the perpetrator, but of the victim? Because we are, for the most part, unaware of this plurality of meanings, discussion of antisemitism frequently falls into confusion.

The same term - antisemitism - now covers a wide variety of meanings which are by no means necessarily compatible. It is not surprising, therefore, that people disagree in good faith over whether or not something is antisemitic. The argument in Britain between the advocates and opponents of the campaign to boycott Israel is among other things, a conflict between competing definitions of antisemitism. The boycotters hold up what we can term a traditional definition of the term and its critics uphold more recent conceptions. When people disagree about antisemitism it is often the case that they are talking about different phenomena and processes which nevertheless bear the same name.

It is not only issues related to Israel that reveal this confusion. We can find analogous disputes over the presence or absence of antisemitism in debates on circumcision, on ritual slaughter and on the supporters of Tottenham Hotspur football club calling themselves the 'yid army'.¹⁵ We should also notice that the meaning of the term antisemitism is not only contested but has changed over time. I will simply mention that in Britain before 1914 the term antisemitism was not normally used in connection with pogroms. The term antisemitism was reserved by British Jews for the charge of double loyalty in modern societies: the idea that Jews could not be patriots in the states in which they had achieved formal civic and political equality.¹⁶

The meaning of the term antisemitism, therefore, does not stand outside of history or the politics of the present. This does raise the question of what academics and intellectuals should do when they address the subject. For myself, rather than engage in a fruitless and acrimonious debate over what the definitive meaning of the term antisemitism is, I believe that I will be better employed in seeking to understand who uses the term, with what meaning and to what purpose. For the

¹⁴ *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 May 2011

¹⁵ <http://www.leftfootforward.org/2013/09/spurs-yid-antisemitism/>

¹⁶ [http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&clist=HAntisemitism&month=1308&week&msg=3GM7p14gUH4IAiYU5rO9Fw)

[bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&clist=HAntisemitism&month=1308&week&msg=3GM7p14gUH4IAiYU5rO9Fw](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&clist=HAntisemitism&month=1308&week&msg=3GM7p14gUH4IAiYU5rO9Fw)

concept of antisemitism is as much a part of history as the phenomena it strives to comprehend. In the *German Ideology* Karl Marx famously wrote that philosophers had tried to interpret the world but the point was to change it. In the case of scholars of antisemitism the reverse might be the case. We have been trying to change the world but as scholars we might be better employed, in the first instance, trying to interpret it.

David Feldman, *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism in Britain*, 30.09.2014, www.jmberlin.de/antisemitism-today/Feldman.pdf



This work is licensed by the Jewish Museum Berlin and the author under a CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DE license.