

# Antisemitism, anti-racism and the Labour Party

Richard Kuper, Brendan McGeever, Lynne Segal  
and Nira Yuval-Davis, in discussion with Jamie  
Hakim and Ben Little

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*The discussion below seeks to separate out some of the different strands that have been bundled together in recent debates, and to better understand the underlying issues in the row about antisemitism, Labour and the left. Since this discussion took place, there have been a number of further developments but the basic problematics have not changed.*

**Jamie** How would each of you describe your relationship to the issues of antisemitism, the Labour Party and anti-racist politics?

**Lynne** I am a Labour Party member in Jeremy Corbyn's constituency of North Islington - and I was very active in getting him selected and then elected in 1983. I have been hearing Jeremy speak in Labour Party meetings once a month for years, and I have seen the relationship he has had with local Jewish communities over the last thirty years, which is really extensive. But I am also someone who in 2001 was hailed by Irene Bruegel when she sent out a message to her Jewish feminist friends after she had visited Israel and been told by Palestinians that it was very important to them in their struggle for justice that Jews got involved. So, I was one of the founders of Jews for Justice for Palestinians.<sup>1</sup> And I also belong to Independent Jewish Voices and Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace and so have been really engaged in working for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine for nearly two decades. In terms of my

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identities and belonging, I have always described myself first and foremost as a socialist feminist - though I have always been aware, I could say proud, of my Jewish heritage, I only became actively involved in Jewish politics from 2001. It's been a very interesting journey - and a sad one.

**Brendan** I am a socialist and an academic with a specialist interest in the study of antisemitism, racism and anti-racism, and their relationship to the left, historically and up to the present day. Some people approach the question of antisemitism and the left from the standpoint of Israel/Palestine, while others approach it from the position of Corbyn, Corbynism and the Labour Party. I approach it from the perspective of an academic on the left with a specialist interest in these issues.

**Nira** It doesn't relate to your personal biography?

**Brendan** Well, there is a Jewish dimension in the family, as well as a history of anti-racism and political activism. All of this plays a role in shaping my interest in the subject, but it's hard to say how, exactly.

**Nira** I have lived in London for more than half my life but I was born in pre-state Israel - I can't say Israel/Palestine because I was born at the heart of the Zionist enterprise. My parents came from Lithuania and all their families were murdered by the Nazis during WW2. This put antisemitism as a very central emotional and ideological theme in our home lives. To my father's chagrin, however (my mother was dead by then), this emotional involvement, after the mid-1960s, did not push me into the Zionist 'never again' for the Jews but instead mobilised me into 'never again for anyone' - and to become involved in the struggle against the military government and confiscation of land from Palestinian citizens of Israel, and, after 1967, the Occupation. I went through a long and painful process of becoming first non-Zionist and then anti-Zionist - which I only fully became after I left Israel in 1970 because even when you are in opposition there you are usually in opposition within the assumptions of what you are opposing. So I am a part of a very small group of anti-Zionist Israeli Jews and I have been active on this issue here as part of the Middle Eastern scene and more generally in a number of socialist feminist and anti-fundamentalist organisations. Over the years many of my feminist friends of

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Jewish origin have been very frightened, emotionally, about dealing with these issues and I was very happy when Irene and Richard and others picked up on these issues and set up Jews for Justice for Palestine, although I have mainly been involved in recent years on the academic side. I have never been a member of the Labour Party but of course I voted for Corbyn in the general election, and I am pleased that the party is being led by him. My major intervention on this specific issue was an essay I wrote in *Spare Rib* in 1984, 'Zionism, antisemitism and the struggle against racism'.<sup>2</sup> I wrote it in 1983 but there was long battle before it was published - they wanted the part which criticised Zionism but not the one which recognised the existence of antisemitism!

**Brendan** I still give this article to my students today.

**Richard** I grew up in South Africa in an atheist family that was part of a very Jewish community. My grandfather was president of the Federation of Synagogues. South Africa produced one of the most Zionist Jewish communities in the world. As I was growing up, like many others I turned to Zionism as a solution to the problems I saw around me. I couldn't solve the problems of South Africa, but may be by running away and joining the Israeli army I could do something! I was listening to short-wave radio and cheering on the troops as they approached Suez in 1956. I spent a number of years living this kind of Zionist identity, which lasted, really, until I went to Israel for two and half months at the age of eighteen. I enjoyed it enormously, but I found it very different from my expectations. In some ways the day-to-day prejudice against Arabs I encountered among my Israeli friends there reminded me very much of the atmosphere of the world I had come from in South Africa. I then went on to England and never returned to South Africa, and just drifted away from the Zionism that had been so important to me when I became caught up in the revolutionary politics of Britain in the 1960s. I joined the Labour Party in 1964, and have been a member all along - apart from a short interlude between 1966 and 2015! In the intervening time I was involved in other sorts of politics, first with the International Socialists and then later with the Socialist Society.<sup>3</sup> In the Socialist Society we worked with the Labour left, including Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, who were involved in the big Chesterfield conferences we jointly organised with the Campaign Group in the late 1980s.

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I reconnected with my Zionist youth, as it were, from 2001, when I was involved with Irene in setting up Jews for Justice for Palestinians. That meant I had to rethink questions which, to be honest, I had just put out of my mind for many years, in part because, like many Jews, I found it very painful - the kinds of issues one has to deal with, the divisions and the deep, emotional, painful rifts which occur with family and friends as different interpretations emerge about what is happening in Israel/Palestine. I remained very active on the Israel/Palestine issue until 2015, by which time I felt burnt out on the issue - I felt I had done all I could, and I could see that there was an opportunity with Jeremy standing as Labour leader for an alternative, broader, ecosocialist politics to be fought for. And, blow me, six months later I found myself at the centre an antisemitism row, and I have done very little since then apart from being preoccupied with these issues. I am now very involved with Jewish Voice for Labour, where we try, in our own way, to provide a focus for debate for disaffected Jews who want to take antisemitism seriously but also recognise the political context in which current battles are raging - that they are in fact about a much wider politics, and not just about antisemitism.

**Ben** I am a member of the Labour Party, and I voted for Jeremy Corbyn as leader twice and would do so again. I am Jewish, but until recently I hadn't thought about it much - not since I was about fourteen, around which time a number of things happened, including the death of my grandfather, from whom I inherited my Jewish identity. Israel had not been part of my grandfather's Jewish identity, so it did not become part of mine either. But I did decide to have a Bar Mitzvah, as this was something that was really important to him. This meant that I encountered British Jewish cultural life from within a synagogue, but I quickly found myself quite alienated from the emphasis placed on Israel in the Jewish education we received in the synagogue. So not long after this I quit my bit of the Jewish Youth movement, over what I saw as a dismissal of the plight of the Palestinians. When I explained my reasons for leaving, an older member of the community called me a fascist. At around the same time I left my secondary school because I was experiencing sustained antisemitic abuse from some of the students - and, in the end, one of the teachers. So I left, as did four or five other Jewish boys at the school. So these were definitely questions that I avoided because of the complexity around them. In recently thinking again about these issues in the light of what is happening now, I continue to feel quite uncomfortable.

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**Jamie** I was brought up in the North London Jewish community, which was Zionist - what I called in my PhD popular Zionism. By this I mean people who are not necessarily involved in organised Zionist politics but who share a common-sense understanding of the Zionist version of the conflict, in which a naturalised support of Israel manifests itself in a very emotionally charged, and complex, way. In my PhD I looked at the period around the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war - before then it was quite normal for mainstream Jewish organisations and institutions to be critical of or indifferent to Zionism, but all that began to change after the war. I was looking at the reasons why, and the intensity of that emotional relationship. But now I have put that work aside and started exploring different things - partly because it is emotionally difficult - for reasons that anyone who is critical of Israel but has Zionist family would recognise. I have family in Israel but my position is anti-Zionist. I think Israel should be a democratic secular state for all the people who live in that country. I am also involved in anti-racist politics so I am interested in what Brendan has to say about that.

## Antisemitism in the current political conjuncture

The next question is about what people think about the 'crisis' of antisemitism in the Labour Party - what is happening, who are the major players?

**Brendan** One useful way of looking at this question is to start with Gramsci and the concept of conjuncture.<sup>4</sup> What I think has happened conjuncturally, at the level of the political, since 2015, when the antisemitism row began, is that, very quickly, two interpretations emerged and consolidated themselves. One interpretation saw antisemitism absolutely everywhere, head-to-toe, the left dripping with antisemitism. The other saw antisemitism as only a smear, simply an attempt to interrupt the Corbyn surge. People who were confused by the complexities of the issue - the relationships between Zionism and anti-Zionism, racism and anti-racism, Israel/Palestine and colonialism - were quickly faced with making a choice between these two interpretations. This is a false choice but it is the way the debate has been framed over the last three years. It is a false choice because, although it is clear that antisemitism is real, and has a long history and contemporary presence on the left, as elsewhere, it is equally clear that this has been taken up by some with an axe to grind

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- people who we wouldn't usually put in the anti-racist camp. We need to recognise both these things - in short, to be able to walk in a straight line *and* chew gum.

**Lynne** I would want to disaggregate the issue of concern about the increasing antisemitism of recent years from the question of the powerful current of organised criticism of Corbyn, from many sources, and the strategic mobilisation of the issue of antisemitism against Corbyn.

In these discussions the issue has not been placed in the wider context of the rise of racism more generally. We know in the US, for example, that it is exactly in the states that voted for Trump - Pennsylvania, the rust-bucket states - where there has been an increase in the desecration of Jewish cemeteries. And the issue must also be seen alongside the rise of anti-Islam racism, not to mention the bloody attacks on black people in general, and escalating racism overall. What we need in these neoliberal times is a discussion of the structures of racism, alongside the age-old power of antisemitism.

And all this is made more complex by the contemporary culture of complaint - also associated with neoliberalism - a culture of expression of individual affect. This has empowered people to use the idea of antisemitism in particular ways, and to express it in terms of their own personal hurt - there is a certain force in the joke: antisemitism used to be about people who hated Jews, today it is about people whom Jews hate! Antisemitism has been mobilised in attacks on Jeremy Corbyn which I think are by and large strategic. This isn't to say there is no antisemitism on the left, or the Labour Party. Of course there is and always has been. But all the data and research shows that the left is much less antisemitic than the right. Yet the whole discussion has been focused on antisemitism on the left and not on the broader context of antisemitism in society - or in the Tory Party. So we have to think about this within the context of the rise of the right and of racism, and also in the context of what Joan Scott has characterised as 'cultures of civility' - whereby certain viewpoints have to be defended from 'uncivil' and hurtful criticism, which has the effect of closing down discussion. That way of approaching issues side-lines concerns about the underlying structures of racism, including antisemitism.

**Nira** We need also to consider the impact of the 'new' definition of antisemitism that has come from the US and is now embodied in the IHRA definition of 2016.<sup>5</sup>

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This expresses the position that has been Israeli policy since the 1970s, a very instrumentalist approach that says that every critique of Israel is antisemitic. I have always argued that this is a dangerous thing to do, because if you argue that every criticism of Israel is antisemitism - even if it concerns issues such as the occupation of Palestinian land and the settlement movement - then maybe it could become common sense that antisemitism is not so bad. And when this kind of position comes up against a dichotomous form of anti-imperialist identity politics - either you are with us or against us - the Palestinians become lined up alongside black people, the global South, anti-colonialism, while Israel - and by extension, on some interpretations of the Israeli definition, Jews - is placed on the side of imperialism and racism. So this general blurring of meaning can be dangerous. Moreover, the Arabic word for Jew, Yahud, refers to both Jews and Israelis, there is not a linguistic distinction. In the Arab world Jewishness is often associated with Jewish communalism - as in the Ottoman empire.

Another problematic thing is that antisemites have often been supporters of Israel, because it is seen as the only way to get Jews out of the country. And evangelical Christians support the return of the Jews to the Holy Land because only after that happens will Jesus return in the second coming. This is why they give huge amounts of money for settlers. But such Christians believe that Jews who do not convert to Christianity before the second coming will have to be exterminated. Israel and the settlers don't care about this part, they just benefit from it. But this kind of support does not stem from a benign view of Judaism. So a lot of the meaning of what is happening is being blurred.

Then, as Lynne mentioned, we need to think about antisemitism in terms of the rise of the right, including the populist right, which should be understood as a response to the ravages of global neoliberalism. I understand this in terms of the development of a politics of autochthonic belonging, where groups seek a defensive security within a territory to which they make an exclusive claim of belonging.<sup>6</sup> In Eastern Europe this has taken the form of an extreme-right antisemitism, whereas in Britain extreme-right racism is primarily focused on black people and Muslims, and the far right have tried to dissociate themselves from the Nazis. In Eastern Europe they don't have to take this into consideration. So the forms which racism takes are always overdetermined in many different ways. And now all these currents have been combined and used as a weapon against Corbyn and the struggle for socialist

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renewal. Because of support for Israel on the right, including the support of many anti-semites, the spotlight has been on the Labour Party.

Again, this is not to say that antisemitism is not an issue in the wider society and in the Labour Party. In fact one of the things I found when I was teaching the sociology of racism was that while students were in the main aware about not talking about black people in particular ways, they were not aware of how to talk about Jews. This relates to the occasion when Corbyn defended from attack a mural by Kalen Ockerman, which - apparently unnoticed by Corbyn - drew on antisemitic stereotypes (which he has since acknowledged he should not have done). Ockerman argued that he was targeting capitalists, not Jews, but, consciously or unconsciously, he was drawing on antisemitic imagery of the Jew as the ultimate capitalist to make his point. Many of my students have replicated this idea that Jews are rich, money-grubbing and cliquish, and have been very uncomfortable when I have told them I am Jewish. So it is all very complicated.

**Richard** I agree we have to talk about the conjuncture but for me the conjuncture should be seen as the election of Corbyn as Labour Party leader. It is as simple as that. That's what transformed the debate and made antisemitism an issue. Because we are talking here, as Stephen Marks pointed out at the launch of Jewish Voices for Labour, about a party whose leader before Corbyn took on the role was Ed Miliband, who is Jewish (as was the runner up in the leadership election he won ...). When Ed was leader of the Labour Party there was no talk about antisemitism - apart from all the coverage about his inability to eat a bacon sandwich, and that was definitely not coming from the left. What changed was that we had a leader of the Labour Party who was committed to the Palestinian cause - although Ed had already paved the way through his support for recognition of the Palestinian state - which was deeply unpopular among right-wing groups in the Labour Party, and amongst Zionist groups, for obvious reasons. Suddenly you had a leader of a mainstream European party who was prepared to be openly critical of Israel, probably for the first time ever. That is the context in which all this has happened. This is not to dismiss any of the things that have emerged about antisemitism, but it is to point out that all these things were happening before, when Ed was leader, but they did not become issues then. They became issues when they were mobilised as one of the strands in the attacks on Corbyn. I agree that we need both to identify the sources of the attack

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and to recognise and deal with antisemitism. But the way in which the problem has been constructed, as Brendan has described, is based on a choice between two equally indefensible positions. And as for the idea of zero tolerance - I am not sure what they mean by this. If you are talking about zero tolerance of racism, 90 per cent of the membership of all British political parties would be thrown out tomorrow: somewhere, sometime, almost all of them will have said or written something that contains racist tropes.

The way to deal with antisemitism, and other kinds of racism, is to create a political culture of discussion, education and exchange of ideas, and to patiently explain why talking in certain ways about certain groups is unacceptable. And, as Nira has said, this includes pointing out the problem when people attempt to personify capitalists and end up personifying them as Jews - though, again, in my experience this is not a common occurrence on the left. Nevertheless, where it does exist we have to work out how to deal with it. And my firm view is that the way in which antisemitism has arisen as an issue over the last three years means that it is now very difficult to talk about it in public. People are not sure what they are allowed to say and so they don't say anything. The result of what has happened in recent years has been that the framework for discussion has been closed down. There are now many universities where it is difficult to talk, not about Jews but about Israel. There are many cases where the attempt to impose the IHRA definition has so blurred the edges of what people understand as antisemitism that people prefer not to talk about it at all. This bodes ill for the future of combatting antisemitism. If we do not have an atmosphere in which people can tease out what is going on and people can express their view - even if they are wrong - we are not going to get clarity.

**Nira** The problems are compounded by the way identity politics sometimes operates. Any critique of someone who is Jewish - and this is similar to what has also happened in relation to black politics and gender politics - is interpreted to mean that you are antisemitic. People find it hard to identify the difference between personal and ideology critique.

**Ben** In terms of the conjuncture, there is a really important convergence happening at the moment between those on the Labour right who are trying to destabilise

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Corbyn in the hope he will not be leader at the next election, and the whole of the Conservative Party. This alignment between these two parts of British politics on this issue can also be seen in other configurations or alliances - for example between Remainers on the Tory left and the Labour right. Antisemitism is used as a shared voice in opposition to Corbyn.

But there is also a group of people for whom this is not an instrumental issue, people who may not be primarily political but who are now very vocal on this issue - the substantial part of British Jewry who see a fundamental connection between Israel and being Jewish. It is important to remember that this constituency exists, and that there is genuine concern, and to address this group of people about what is happening in Labour, and not to just dismiss their concerns.

### The left and antisemitism

**Jamie** I am wondering if there really is a form of antisemitism that is particular to the left - whether that is even a useful way of thinking about it all. Can we really say that there is particular way in which this issue is articulated on the left?

**Brendan** I think we need to talk about the historical relationship between the left and antisemitism, as well as the present. Antisemitism has long been a feature of left and radical politics in Britain and across Europe. In Britain we find it in the 1890s, in the pages of Britain's first socialist newspaper, *Justice* - the paper of the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's first Marxist party - where articles regularly refer to Jews as financiers and international capitalists. We also see it in Keir Hardie's newspaper *Labour Leader*, which referred to hook-nosed Rothschilds. Of course we are not living in the 1890s, but the point is that antisemitism is not something that is external to the socialist movement. Antisemitism has not latched on to the left from the outside - as has been suggested in some recent debates. To varying degrees it has always had an organic presence within it. It is disappointing to see some disavow this aspect of the movement's past. Antisemitism and other forms of racism have always been present in the left since its inception. And there is nothing extraordinary or surprising about this given that European socialism emerged in the nineteenth century in a context of colonialism, racism, empire and a hugely exploitative capitalist society. The socialist movement absorbed elements of that mainstream

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culture then - and it continues to do so today.

What specifically can we identify about the relationship between the left and antisemitism? In the visions conjured up by some socialists, Jews have often been positioned in opposition to the working class, as bearers of exploitation, or as occupying an exploitative class position. The late Moishe Postone argued that what makes antisemitism dangerous for the left is that it can have the appearance of being anti-hegemonic. It can take the form of a kind of fetishised oppositionalism that defines itself as being against intangible forms of global domination - something which finds expression in all kinds of political formations, not just in the left.

**Jamie** I still feel that the traits you are describing are not specific to the left - for example they could be found among Nazis, and neo-Nazis. What is the purpose of talking about antisemitism specifically in relation to the left, and not across other political formations?

**Brendan** I was trying to look at the particular forms which antisemitism takes on the left, but I am not arguing that these forms are only present on the left. I was trying to show how antisemitism can assume the form of an anti-establishment force, of being anti-capitalist. And that has a particular appeal to sections of the left.

**Richard** I feel you are talking as if the traits of the left which you describe as going back to the nineteenth century have continued uninterrupted, but I do not recognise the validity of this description in relation to the fifty years and more during which I have been involved on the left. And your account does not explain why the question of antisemitism has emerged as major issue now. Why do you think it has surfaced in this way now?

**Brendan** Some of the Marxist literature I have been referencing is about forty years old, so this is not a new subject. There have been conversations about antisemitism on the left for a long time. But of course the reason these arguments have come to prominence now is precisely as several of us have already described - the new conjuncture of Corbynism. But I want to insist on a point I opened with: antisemitism on the left is real, even if the issue has been instrumentalised in

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reaction to the election of Corbyn and the rise of the Labour left.

I would also argue that the Labour Party is a different political formation now. It is an organisation with more than half a million members - a mass organisation. And a mass party in the age of social media presents new challenges, particularly when racism - in all its forms - is emboldened, as it is now. My colleague David Feldman makes an important observation: if we accept that 5 per cent of the population are antisemitic (as suggested in research carried out by the Institute for Jewish Policy<sup>7</sup>), then let us then assume that the Labour Party is better than average, and that only 2.5 per cent of its half a million members are antisemitic. That's ten thousand antisemites in Labour - quite a large number, and some of them are on social media. This has to be part of the answer to the question 'why now?' - we are talking about mass politics. But there is a further point: in addition to actual antisemites, we also have to contend with the fact that individual negative stereotypes about Jews are widely diffused within about a third of the British population.

**Lynne** I don't disagree with the way you have been describing the existence of antisemitism within the left - particularly in relation to those tropes about Jews as financial capitalists. But I want to also point out that the left has always - until recently - been a major political home for Jews in politics. Jews who wanted to be political were by and large on the left. People like Sam Aaronovitch, Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel and Harold Rosen were in the Communist Party precisely because of antisemitism in the world, so that they could fight racism in general. Raphael Samuel wrote about this in his memoir, *The Lost World of British Communism* - the CP is where Jews went, where they found a home and a voice. And this was true of other parts of the left - it was seen as a better place to be. So that also has to be factored into this conversation.

**Brendan** I agree, but there has been a parting of ways in recent decades. And even in the classical period, when relations between Jews and the left were healthier, there were difficulties. One tiny anecdote - when I was carrying out research in the Bolshevik Party archives in Moscow, I came across documents written by Jews in Russia in 1919 saying 'they are murdering us, the Red Army is carrying out pogroms!'. But in the same breath they also said: 'we must join the Red Army to fight for the revolution!'. I think this needs to be added to the account offered by Lynne.

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The left could be a home for Jews but at times a hostile one too. Both things were often true at one and the same time.

**Nira** Of course what you are saying is true - August Bebel called antisemitism the socialism of fools - people who identified the enemy as Jews rather than capitalism in general. But we also need to pay attention to other forms of racism in the Labour Party - to focus only on antisemitism is very distorting.

But to return to the question of conjuncture, and why this is happening now, in terms of the issue of Israel - the idea of equating antisemitism and anti-Zionism has also been around for a long time, but one thing that is different now is that Israel is much more successful in its propaganda these days. As long ago as the student movement of the 1960s, respected social-democratic academics, as well as Israeli students studying abroad, were recruited by Israel to elaborate on the supposed antisemitism of the left - this idea has always been an important tactical weapon in the hands of Israel, and for many years they have been organising delegations to Israel which are supposedly 'neutral' from different academic disciplines from all over the western world. We thought they were going to be defeated in these efforts when the facts about Palestinian suffering and the occupation became known internationally, but they now seem to be more successful than ever. And because this idea is more mainstream now it has fed into the conjuncture with Corbyn.

I can't understand why it has been successful but I also can't understand why Corbyn and others have been so hesitant, so ambivalent, in their rejection of this accusation. But I think that this is also to do with a particular version of identity politics. When Ruth Smeeth walked out of that meeting in tears, saying she had been personally insulted, everybody got very alarmed - this relates to what Lynne was saying about cultures of civility.

**Ben** I agree that the left has always been attractive to Jews, but they have also always had to negotiate with antisemitism on the left. We started this conversation with Gramsci, and I consider myself a Gramscian, but Gramsci refers throughout the Prison Notebooks to 'Jewish-style financiers'. I would argue that one thing that has enabled people to deal with such negotiations has been through opting for a marriage of socialism and Zionism. I don't think we should skate over that. A lot of the socialist Jewish youth movements here - groups like Habonim - are also Zionist.

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They are acutely involved in and concerned about justice for Palestinians but they are also explicitly Zionist. So it is important to note that the attraction to the left and socialism does not exclude Zionism.

### The weaponisation of antisemitism

**Jamie** How do people see the issue of Israel and Zionism playing out in the present conjuncture? Could you directly address this context?

**Lynne** There are so many things coming together that it is hard to separate out any one aspect. But, within this, the link to antisemitism has been such a powerful force to use - bringing in people's emotional histories in a way which is so silencing. Also, I think that though most people don't understand antisemitism, they do think it is wrong - they do all know about the Holocaust. Antisemitism almost stands in for all forms of racism - so this makes the accusation of antisemitism all the more silencing. As Richard says, the linking of antisemitism and criticism of Israel has made it hard for people to talk about Israel. As soon as the subject of Israel is raised, all you need to do is to argue that something has been said that is antisemitic and the discussion comes to a halt. On many American campuses you will get in terrible trouble if you raise critical issues about Israel, on the grounds that you are creating an unsafe space for Jews. One part of Israeli government policy has been to get militant Zionist students to declare themselves as feeling unsafe whenever criticism of Israel is raised. This exists in tandem with a culture of risk management, as I mentioned before, that certain things are simply not safe to talk about. So, as soon as I got involved in peace politics in Israel I was accused of being a self-hating Jew. That's a very painful thing to be accused of and it puts you into defensive mode. Excuse me, but I come from a Jewish family which has been making this same argument since the days of the British Mandate in Palestine. My maternal grandfather, Alfred Harris, ran the *Hebrew Standard* in Sydney in those days, and he expressed his concern then about what would happen if a Jewish homeland was established in a country which at that time was 93 per cent Palestinian. He foresaw that there would be terrible problems for the majority of the population that was not Jewish. And he was proved right, as we saw with the Nakba in 1948, when, during the fighting which preceded the establishment of the Israeli state, with its actual and threatened violence against

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Palestinians, 700,000 of them either fled or were forcibly expelled from their land.

**Jamie** Why is it so difficult simply to give this kind of historical account?

**Lynne** It is because, whatever the potential complexities and diverse practices of Zionism, Israel has come to be dominated by a militant Zionist practice that is a form of expansionary settler colonialism. It is still the case that Palestinians are being driven from their land. So, even now, we only remember and mourn the Holocaust, not the Nakba. This means there can be no true recognition of mutual suffering between Palestinians and Israelis, because the Nakba is an ongoing project.

**Nira** I am also critical of the way Holocaust Memorial Day was established in Britain. This not because remembering the Holocaust is not important to me - most of my family were murdered by the Nazis. And I know that it is important educationally - my British students in the later years of my course on the sociology of racism were better informed and less antisemitic than those from the earlier years of the course because of improved secondary school teaching about the Holocaust. But the way Holocaust Memorial Day has been set up suggests that it is inherently worse than any other genocide or case of human suffering. And for the British this is very convenient, because they were not involved in the Holocaust themselves. Every head of state who visits Israel is invited to Yad Vashem, and people's emotions are manipulated as a way to win support for Israeli government policies. It is very silencing. But when I argued this position on a discussion panel for the BBC TV series *The Big Questions*, the Rabbi on the panel, and the Holocaust survivor, both started to cry. It was as if I had belittled or insulted the Holocaust itself.

**Ben** There is an argument put forward by many British Jews that the amount of attention and criticism focused on Israel is excessive. They argue that Israel is no worse than many other countries - for example there are many other countries where there is entitlement to residence on the basis of ethno-national identity. And there are still wrongs being enacted by white-majority settlers in countries such as the US, Australia and Canada, but these receive very little attention.

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**Richard** I think you have to look at this in a global context: Israel has received around a third of all US foreign aid since 1967, and it is regarded as being of enormous strategic global importance to the West. Jerusalem is also the centre of three world religions - so it matters to billions of people what happens there. It's not for no reason that Israel is the centre of so much attention. And I think it is also because we are told to judge Israel like any other democratic country, but there are very few democratic countries currently occupying and taking the land of another people, despite international and UN condemnation. There are very few democratic countries surrounding an enclave such as Gaza and imprisoning one and a half million people inside it - a place where, from time to time, in the words of one of Sharon's advisors, it is thought necessary every few years to 'mow the lawn' to keep the situation under control. It really upsets people, including me, when the Israeli government justifies its actions by saying it is operating to defend western democratic values.

People like me judge Israel by what it has become today. Others - and that would have been me when I was growing up in the Zionist movement - may see Zionism in rather different terms, as a liberatory philosophy, an opportunity for a people who have endured generations - centuries, millennia - of oppression to find their own place in the sun. And to try to reconcile these two ways of looking at Zionism is very complicated, and in the end I was unable to hold these two positions together for any period of time. I was forced to give one of them up by the reality of what I saw in the conflict, and I abandoned any idea that today Zionism could be a happy movement of liberation. But historically it has been, for many people.

As Ben pointed out, many people in the community he comes from now feel they are being unfairly picked on. This is a political debate but it has deep emotional roots. But it doesn't help political debate when people try to bury the other side with emotional accusations - that they are self-hating Jews, Holocaust deniers or whatever. We have to find a framework in which we can have these debates, and a language that can cross those divides. And I don't think we on the left have always been as good at that as we might have been.

**Lynne** I want to make another point about antisemitism, which is that, while it has always been at the heart of Christendom, it has always been about a people who are the enemy *within*. Jesus was a Jew. Jews and Christians have always been absolutely

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inter-related. Some of the greatest thinkers in western culture - Freud, Marx, Einstein - were Jewish, and let's not forget the American literary greats like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. We live in a culture whose sense of itself is deeply entangled with Jewish culture and history - even if we decide to hate them. And this history of close connection to Israel is one of the reasons that we feel the need to criticise its actions.

**Brendan** Something that has preoccupied me recently is that antisemitism seems to have become a difficult issue for anti-racists. What is that about? Part of it is to do with current articulations of anti-racist politics. They come out of a particular history that has not been very attentive to the kinds of issues we have been discussing. For example, there is a propensity to understand racism in relation to colonialism and European expansionism. But this overlooks internal racialisation within Europe, one of whose subjects is, of course Jews (the Irish being another). So there can be a difficulty in recognising antisemitism. Another is the tendency which several people have mentioned of folding Zionism into European imperialism and settler colonialism. This brings into sharp view the racism endured by Palestinians, but it also overlooks the fact that Zionism was also a response to murderous, genocidal racism in Europe. And this is where Brian Klug's formulation is useful - that Zionism is Janus-faced, at any one time it is facing in two different directions. In one direction is the history of internal exclusion and racialisation in Europe, and in the other is British imperial expansion in the Middle East, and Palestine specifically. This is one reason why anti-racists find it so difficult to make sense of what is going on, because Palestinians were turned into refugees not by colonisers in the classical sense but by people who were exiles escaping persecution. Hannah Arendt captured this tragic dynamic quite powerfully when she said: 'the solution to the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people'. And the numbers have only increased since then. So Jewish statehood has a complicated history for twenty-first century anti-racists, and, as Richard said, we need a language to navigate that, and we don't have it.

**Nira** The Bund movement, which was founded at the end of the nineteenth century, was socialist but, unlike socialist or other kinds of Zionists, they didn't think a solution would be settler colonialism, and putting all the Jews outside Europe. They

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envisaged that Jews would be part of a socialist federation of East Europe, and here they were drawing on the ideas of Otto Bauer and his conception of the separation of nationalism and the state in the post-imperial societies of Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary, in which ethnic and national minorities had no distinct territories of their own though they were very much collectivities. And on this question of settler colonialism - I first understood Israel in this way when I visited Australia, and then I met Davia Staiulis, who was Canadian and had analysed Canada as a settler society, and we worked together on an intersectional analysis of settler colonial states. It is not true that Israel is the only country founded by those who were persecuted - Australia was first populated by convicts, and is the home today of many minority groups - Jews, Irish, Vietnamese. America was founded by people escaping religious persecution, and the same is true of the Boers in South Africa. The idea that it is only Israel that was formed in this way is another example of Israeli narratives of exceptionalism. It is important to be aware of nuances but it is also important not to fall into the traps set by this kind of narrative - or to get caught up in the dichotomies of identity politics. Because of the wounded nature of Jewish subjectivities, when you say to people that there are other people like you, it hurts. We have to be sensitive to this but that does not mean we should legitimise it or condone it.

**Jamie** Why do you think tackling antisemitism has become separated from other anti-racist campaigning in Britain?

**Ben** I do think it is more difficult for people to understand antisemitism. I was having a conversation recently with some anti-racist campaigners about how to talk about Mark Zuckerberg and the other guys who work at Facebook, Google and other similar companies. Some people call them white supremacists, but I really struggle with this idea. I know that many of these companies are part of a structure which is profoundly racialised, including through the way the Google algorithm works, but to call this group of largely Jewish men white supremacists does not seem a useful way of describing them. And I also find it difficult when people involved in anti-racism say that Israel is a white supremacist country.

**Richard** I agree that it is sometimes difficult to recognise antisemitism but I also think that we sometimes recognise antisemitism where it doesn't exist.

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For example, what is quite interesting about some of the recent Labour Party disciplinary cases is that people started off being accused of antisemitism but tended to end up with charges of bringing the Labour Party into disrepute. And I think that is because people do not know what antisemitism is about. When Marc Wadsworth, an anti-racist activist, said that Ruth Smeeth was working hand in hand with the press he was immediately accused of making an antisemitic remark. He was subsequently expelled from the party for breaching party rules and bringing the party into disrepute, but it is now common sense in the media that he was done for antisemitism. He was never charged with antisemitism. The same is true for Ken Livingstone. I don't necessarily want to defend Ken's interventions but I do not think that antisemitism is a reasonable description of what happened in that case. So we need more clarity about what constitutes antisemitism and should resist the way in which the IHRA definition of antisemitism has clouded our understanding of antisemitism. My definition of it would be that it is a form of racism, pure and simple - hatred, hostility, prejudice and discrimination against Jews because they are Jews, and the stereotyping of Jews - the imputing to them of characteristics that are generally regarded as unacceptable. Of course that can manifest itself in all kinds of ways, but when it comes to Israel, you have to ask yourself whether what's being said is projecting onto Israel characteristics associated with antisemitism. This can be the case, but my overwhelming experience on the left is that it is not. And we have got to shift the debate onto that ground. But in order to do that you have to first have an understanding of what antisemitism is. You don't define antisemitism as the IHRA does as 'a certain perception of Jews which may be expressed as hatred of Jews', which is such a fuzzy description that the only way that you can make sense of it is to give examples as guidance - and most of the examples it gives, as we know, are about Israel and not about Jews. That is where the confusion comes from. And our intervention has to be aimed at separating out these threads.

Yes, let's talk about antisemitism in the labour movement but let us be clear about what it is that we are talking about. In my experience most people do not know how to talk about it. They don't want to go there because it is too dangerous. And this is not contradicted by the ways in which people express themselves on social media, where all sorts of hatreds are unleashed. And, by the way, we have no evidence that all the hostility on social media that is routinely attributed to Labour Party members actually does come from that source. It's just an assumption. When

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Ruth Smeeth said she got 25,000 tweets in 24 hours - where is the evidence that these were all from Labour Party members, that it is all part of the conspiracy by Corbynites to demonise his enemies? There has been no systematic analysis of the sources of these tweets, and I think there needs to be such an analysis so that we can see where this filth comes from and try to deal with it and stop it. I do not accept for a moment that it is leftist analysis of capitalism that facilitates this kind of stuff. There is no evidence for that at all.

**Lynne** I feel horrified and distressed that it might affect the next election results that people have been able to discredit Jeremy Corbyn with an accusation that I know to be false. For some reason, of all the many attempts to smear Corbyn, this is the one that has really caught on. And I do think that it is a smear. It doesn't matter that he acknowledges that mistakes have been made - it just goes on and on. Livingstone leaves the party and Corbyn says it was the right thing to do and the media jump in and say 'he hasn't said that Livingstone can never ever be allowed to join the party again'. Whatever he says or does, he is always going to be accused of antisemitism.

**Ben** If you think about the issue electorally rather than conjuncturally, there are a number of parliamentary seats - at least two or three - that will be massively affected by this smear (and I agree that it is a smear, even though I think Corbyn has done some stupid things). And two or three seats could make the difference between winning or losing the next election if the polls remain as they are now. It may be a smear but it is hugely effective - one which may stop us getting a socialist government. I think that is what's at stake, and that is why I keep bringing the conversation back to the concerns of the people I grew up with. I grew up in Finchley, and Finchley and Golders Green is one of those seats.

**Nira** What do you think we should do to address this?

**Ben** I don't know - but it is important to keep having conversations like this one, where those viewpoints are taken into account and we try to convince them that there is a wider political context to all this. That their history does matter, and we do need to tackle antisemitism inside and outside the Labour Party, but that, at the same time, the way it has all come out at this precise point in time has been entirely

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orchestrated. There has been a strategic convergence of all the forces we have been discussing to keep Corbyn out.

**Brendan** I think a focus on the question of whether or not Corbyn, or the Labour front bench, is antisemitic is not a particularly fruitful way to think about the issues at stake. For me the problem is not identifying individuals as antisemitic but trying to get to grips with our inability to recognise it. So I want to raise a couple of questions. The first is that of Christine Shawcroft - not because I think she is antisemitic but because her case tells us something about this difficulty. Shawcroft, at that time a director of Momentum, member of the NEC and chair of the party's disputes subcommittee, raised an objection to the suspension of a Labour councillor candidate who was on record as calling the Holocaust a hoax. Secondly, when there was a demonstration by a number of Jewish organisations, MPs and others in Parliament Square, registering their concerns about antisemitism in the Labour Party, the response from some sections of the left, including a number of my dearest friends and closest comrades, was to call them 'snakes', Blairites and so on. And afterwards in some CLPs, for example in Bristol West, there were calls to deselect MPs who had attended the protest. None of this is about hardened antisemites in the Labour Party. It's about a cultural inability to recognise antisemitism and to navigate the politics of anti-antisemitism. That is what we need to deal with - an inattentiveness to the question of antisemitism and its marginalisation within the anti-racist movement - not the question of whether or not Corbyn is antisemitic.

**Lynne** But that is the question - it is in my view a stupid one, but it has been having an effect.

**Richard** I am still puzzled by Brendan's argument - which I also read in the article you wrote with David Feldman in *Haaretz* - about this idea of an inability to recognise antisemitism.<sup>8</sup> Was our Jewish Voices for Labour counter-demonstration to the protest in Parliament Square an instance of antisemitism or was it a political response to what we saw as a political instrumentalisation of antisemitism? It is not that we don't recognise antisemitism but that we see that the issue is being mobilised in a very weaponised way. And every response the party has made to this accusation has been batted away. I believe that at the heart of all this is not an issue

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about antisemitism but an issue about the politics of people who are trying to stop Corbyn. It reminds me of what happened when Michael Foot was leader in 1983. Antisemitism wasn't an issue then, but there was the same mobilisation against him by people on the right of the party who preferred to lose an election than to have a programme they didn't approve of.

**Brendan** I don't doubt that, but there are some who, out of loyalty to the left, have failed to come to terms with antisemitism in order to support Corbyn. And from an anti-racist perspective that is lamentable.

**Nira** There are three separate issues here. The first is a short-term one - finding strategies that can help Labour win in the next election. The second is the need to separate the issue of criticism of Israel from the issue of antisemitism. The third is the need to integrate antisemitism into ideas about racism, from which it has been separated. Instead of antisemitism being associated with criticism of Israel it needs to be understood as an aspect of racism. But none of these tasks are easy.

*This is an edited transcript of a discussion recorded in May 2018.*

**Jamie Hakim** is a lecturer in media studies at the University of East Anglia. His PhD explored the rise of 'Popular Zionism' in the British Jewish community after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. He now works on questions of gender and digital media and will have a book published on this topic in 2019.

**Ben Little** is a lecturer in media and cultural politics at the University of East Anglia. He is a member of the Soundings editorial collective. His co-authored book *Russell Brand: comedy, celebrity, politics* was published in 2016.

**Richard Kuper** was a founder member of Jews for Justice for Palestinians in 2002 and of Jewish Voice for Labour in 2017.

**Brendan McGeever** is Lecturer in the Sociology of Racialization and Antisemitism in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. He is the

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author of *The Bolsheviks and Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution*, forthcoming.

**Lynne Segal** teaches in Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Her books include *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*; *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*; *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology & Politics*; and *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*. She wrote in detail about dissident Jewish identities, the left and Israel in her political memoir *Making Trouble: Life & Politics*.

**Nira Yuval-Davis** is Honorary Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London. She is the author of many books including *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, 2011; *Women Against Fundamentalism*, 2014; and *Bordering*, forthcoming. She is winner of the 2018 International Sociological Association Distinguished Award for Excellence in Research and Practice.

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## Notes

1. Irene Bruegel co-founded Jews for Justice for Palestinians with her partner Richard Kuper and others in February 2002. She died in 2008. See: [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/oct/15/women-highereducation](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/oct/15/women-highereducation). On JfJP see: <https://jfjp.com/who-we-are/>.

2. Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Struggle Against Racism: Some reflections on a painful debate among feminists', *Spare Rib* 148, September 1984.

3. The Socialist Society was an independent left group founded in 1981. Among other things, it sought to influence Labour Party thinking. It organised some major conferences in the later 1980s and there were a number of local Socialist Societies.

4. A good introduction to these ideas is to be found in the introduction to Stuart Hall's Selected Political Writings: [https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-chapter/StuartHallSPW\\_Introduction\\_FreeChapter.pdf](https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-chapter/StuartHallSPW_Introduction_FreeChapter.pdf).

5. See: [www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism](http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism).

6. Nira Yuval-Davis, 'The double crisis of governability and governmentality', *Soundings* 52, winter 2012.

7. [www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=9993](http://www.jpr.org.uk/publication?id=9993).

8. [www.haaretz.com/opinion/labour-s-festering-anti-semitism-problem-didn-t-start-with-corbyn-1.5980426](http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/labour-s-festering-anti-semitism-problem-didn-t-start-with-corbyn-1.5980426),