The left and antisemitism: an overview

This article is an updated and adapted version of a speech by Daniel Randall, a Workers’ Liberty member and trade union activist, first given in 2016. We include it here as a broad introduction and overview to the issues. A recording of the speech as originally delivered is available online at bit.ly/left-and-as.

Antisemitism: a pseudo-emancipatory bigotry

Antisemitism is an ancient prejudice, with deep roots in the origins of Christian culture, bound up both with the developing ideology of incipient Christianity as it broke from the Jewish establishment, and with the particular position in which Jews stood in relation to the development of capitalist modernity.

As Hal Draper put it in his 1977 essay “Marx and the Economic-Jew Stereotype”: “Jews were forced into a lopsided economic structure by Christendom’s prohibition on their entrance into agriculture, guild occupations, and professions.”

Antisemitism is generally understood as racist, or basically-racist, hostility to Jewish people. The Jewish population of the UK is small, between 250,000 and 300,000, so empirically, antisemitism is not the cutting edge of racism in this country, and it has been a long time since antisemitism was the key structuring aspect of right-wing chauvinist and nationalist ideologies in Britain, which now foreground a generic anti-immigrant and often anti-Muslim politics. Nevertheless, antisemitism is a real racism that is materially experienced by real people, and merits a response on those terms. When, for example, neo-Nazis announce their intention to hold rallies in heavily Jewish areas of London, as they did in 2016, we should respond accordingly, in at least the spirit of Cable Street.

Antisemitic incidents are increasing, with 1,382 recorded nationwide by the Community Security Trust, a Jewish-community organisation which monitors antisemitic incidents. This was the highest tally recorded since it began gathering data in 1984. A resurgent far right, which in June 2018 mobilised greater numbers for demonstrations than any far-right force since the 1930s, poses a real and renewed threat.

However, a simple understanding of antisemitism as anti-Jewish racism does not give us a complete picture. Hitlerite antisemitism, based on pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies and advocating extermination, is just one strain of historical antisemitism. "Racism" itself can be a difficult concept to define, but various forms of historical Christian-religious antisemitism, for example, aren't straightforwardly "racist"; in the schema of that kind of antisemitism, Jews could covert and baptise their way out of persecution.

Also particular to historical antisemitism, compared to other forms of racism, bigotry, and chauvinism, is the almost ubiquitous trope of Jewish power and control. Most forms of racism are based on the opposite: anti-black racism, for example, is normally based on the idea that black people are lazy, stupid, and fitted only to perform menial tasks in the service of whites. Antisemitism, by contrast, invariably contends that the target group, Jews, are all-powerful and all-controlling.

The Marxist theorist Moishe Postone summarised it like this: “The way in which antisemitism is distinguished, and should be distinguished, from racism, has to do with the sort of imaginary of power, attributed to the Jews, Zionism, and Israel, which is at the heart of antisemitism. The Jews are seen as constituting an immensely powerful, abstract, intangible global form of power that dominates the world.

“There is nothing similar to this idea at the heart of other forms of racism. Racism rarely, to the best of my knowledge, constitutes a whole system that seeks to explain the world. Antisemitism is a primitive critique of the world, of capitalist modernity. The reason I regard it as being particularly dangerous for the left is precisely because antisemitism has a pseudo-emancipatory dimension that other forms of racism rarely have.”

To talk of a specific "left antisemitism", then, is not to suggest a variety of antisemitism which is left-wing, but rather a specific strain of antisemitism which manifests on the left, within left-wing discourse, and which is distinct from straightforward racist hostility to Jews. The propagators of this left antisemitism can’t be understood as “racists”, and their ideas are not, usually, based on personal animosity towards individual Jews.

It is an interesting historical curio that the term "antisemitism" was first popularised not by a right-winger but by Wilhelm Marr, a German revolutionary of the 1848 generation and proto-anarchist of sorts. There is an antisemitic element to the writing of mid-19th-century leftists like Eugen Dühring, Max Stirner, and Bruno Bauer. Some early leftists, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for example, were more or less straightforward anti-Jewish racists. There’s elements of racial hierarchicalism in some of what Mikhail Bakunin, the theoretical forefather of anarchist-communism, wrote as well.

All of these people thought of themselves as, and in many cases genuinely were, radicals and progressives, but they saw antisemitism as a perfectly compatible part of their left-wing worldview. Antisemitism for them was what Postone called “anti-hegemonic”, a perspective of dissent against the powers...
that be, because of the conflation of Jews with commerce, finance, and capital. In the 1890s, August Bebel, a leader of Germany’s revolutionary workers’ party, the SDP, was already denouncing that conflation as “the socialism of fools”. If nothing else, this shows us that there is a substantial historical precedent for the integration of antisemitic discourse and ideology into a worldview that sees itself as left-wing.

Tropes about “Jewish financiers” and so on, have never really gone away, and have resurfaced somewhat since the economic crisis of 2007/2008. Quasi-movements like Zeitgeist, which aren’t really part of the left but which permeate left-wing spaces and some left-wing culture, are perhaps best understood as the most explicit modern carriers of Bebel’s “socialism of fools”. Memes about “Rothschild bankers” are common in many loosely-left-wing spaces online. Political arguments which blame “bankers”, “financiers”, or “elites” for “rigging the economy” are also common.

These may be made with the best of intentions, by people simply aiming to attack injustice and inequality. They are not necessarily implicitly-antisemitic, but they are misleading. Capitalism is not a conspiracy of nefarious forces “rigging” things behind the scenes, and such arguments can send people off down rabbit holes looking for the hidden hand. Capitalism is a system predicated on exploitation and inequality; it is not “rigged”, it’s supposed to work like this! Our aim as socialists is to organise our class, the working class, against the boss class, and overthrow capitalism. That aim is quite different than the one implied by arguments which blame “financial elites”, as if merely “exposing” these elites will fix our problems.

**Far-left “common sense” on Israel/Palestine**

Contemporary left antisemitism has an additional, and perhaps more significant, set of historical roots which are key to understanding its development and character. Much contemporary left antisemitism doesn’t talk about “Jews”, but about “Zionists”, and its ideas are expressed in discourse about Israel/Palestine.

Contemporary left antisemitism consists primarily in a politically-constructed implied hostility to most Jews, based on a particular analysis of the Israel/Palestine conflict – in fact, a mis-analysis. That mis-analysis has at least four key elements:

The first is the view that the Jewish presence in historic Palestine is entirely illegitimate, a product only of a colonial land-grab, and only resolvable either by the Hebrew-speaking Jewish population agreeing to be a subsumed as a religious minority in a wider state, or by their forcible conquest. These ideas are often only implicitly expressed, but are the logical endpoint of the argument that the Jewish presence in historic Palestine is illegitimate.

Secondly, and connected to this, the argument that Israel is a uniquely reactionary state, and that Jewish nationalism (Zionism), is a uniquely reactionary nationalism. Again, these ideas are usually only implicitly expressed; one rarely finds a leftist prepared to write, openly, “Israel is the most reactionary state in the world, and Zionism is the most essentially reactionary expression of nationalism”. These ideas are, however, implied. Israeli Jews are the only national group for which the far-left’s default programme is that their state must be dismantled, rather than changed in some way, however radical. There is no substantial “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions” movement, consciously aimed at isolating a particular state, directed towards any other country. There has been no tradition of writing about “the Kemalist entity” when describing Turkey’s historic oppression of the Kurds, or referring to modern Sri Lankan state as “the Sinhalese entity” when describing its brutal oppression of the Tamils, as there is of describing Israel as “the Zionist entity”.

A third element is the argument that a Jewish, or “Zionist”, lobby exerts an essentially controlling influence on American foreign policy or world affairs in general, or the media, or some aspect of the media.

Finally, the argument, or the implied demand, that Jewish people, uniquely amongst ethno-cultural groups, make a total break from certain aspects of their historically-developed identity and experience or risk being considered basically akin to racists. Perhaps the best example of this is the campaign of some on the far left in the 1980s to have Student Unions ban campus Jewish Societies which did not take an explicitly anti-Zionist stance.

**The “Jewish question”**

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the revolutionary socialist movement built up an immense body of literature on what was called “the Jewish question”.

That “question”, as it was understood by Marxists prior to the Second World War, was about how to understand and relate to a mass of people – not, in fact, all Jews globally, but the Yiddish-speaking Jews living in central and eastern Europe. Were they a nation, a religious group, an ethno-cultural community, or some combination of these? Should the socialist movement advocate national separatism, or assimilation into multinational societies?

Those questions were largely settled by the Holocaust, which annihilated and dispersed that population. The “Jewish question”, as it was understood by the Marxist movement of the 19th century, no longer exists. European Jews’ experiences of oppression, state-sanctioned pogroms under Tsarism and then the industrialised extermination of the Holocaust, turned nationalism from a minority current into a mass movement. Many Jews became convinced that the only way to guarantee security would be to found their own state.

The revolutionary socialist tradition with which Workers’ Liberty identifies opposed Zionism prior to the Second World War. But it was an opposition conditioned by an understanding of the material roots of nationalist impulse, which acknowledged that Zionism, like all nationalisms, encompassed a spectrum of perspectives and programmes.

There was, for example, a detachment of the Red Army organised by the left-Zionist party Paole Zion which fought for the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. Leon Trotsky, by the end of his life, had significantly tempered his historical opposition to Jewish statehood. In the 1948 war around the foundation of Israel, no current on the anti-Stalinist socialist left argued that the victory of the Arab armies, led by British imperial officers, would be the progressive outcome. As recently as 1967, there was a faction in the International Socialists, the SWP’s predecessor organisation, which argued (wrongly, but notably), for supporting Israel in the ‘67 war.

But today the far left propagates an anti-Zionism based on an historical erasure or minimising of Jewish refugee experience, particularly after the Holocaust. It is an anti-Zionism which sees only the frequently ethno-chauvinist pronouncements of senior Israeli politicians, and not the more complicated socio-political impulses that drove masses of working-class Jews to adopt Zionism’s central tenet: the idea that the Jewish nation should constitute itself at the level of an independent state, and later, that that state should exist in Palestine. This form of anti-Zionism sees Jewish emigration to Palestine as being only, ever,
colonial, erasing the experiences of Jewish refugees from genocide who had literally nowhere else to go. This contemporary “absolute” anti-Zionism also frequently blows Zionism out of all proportion, amplifying it from what it is – the historic nationalist movement of a historically oppressed people, which has, constituted as a nation-state, itself become an oppressive force – into the essential expression of national oppression and colonialism, acting as an all-pervasive, all-powerful force in world politics. Just as, in the 19th century, invective against “Jewish capitalists” constituted a “socialism of fools”, much contemporary far-left discourse on Zionism represents an “anti-imperialism of fools”.

This one-sided, ahistorical analysis of Jewish nationalism has clear roots. Those roots are in Stalinism.

Stalinist antisemitism

Dale Street’s essay “The Stalinist roots of ‘left’ antisemitism” (which also appears in this pamphlet, on page 8), argues convincingly that the origins of these arguments lie in Stalinism’s antisemitic conspiracy theories of the early 1950s onwards.

Stalinist arguments on Zionism very closely parallel arguments made by some of those at the centre of the recent controversies in Labour.

For example: “The capitalists of England, the USA, France, Germany, and other countries, amongst them millionaires and multi-millionaires of Jewish origin, who had their eyes on the wealth of the Near East, helped the creation of the Zionist idea. From the very outset it was linked with the project of the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish state as a Jewish fortress, a barrier against Asia.”

This is from D. Soffer’s The Collapse of Zionist Theories, first published in English in 1980. According to the Soviet-born historian Seymour Reznik, between 1969 and 1985 about 230 books were published in the USSR which exposed “Zionist-Masonic” conspiracies against Russia, and the entire world. Also according to Reznik, between 1981 and 1986 alone, nearly 50,000 antisemitic articles appeared in the official Soviet press.

For Stalinism, this explicitly antisemitic anti-Zionism had a specific ideological function. Perhaps ironically, in material geopolitical terms, the role of the USSR was very different: indeed, it armed, through its Czech satellite, the fledgling Israeli state. The left-wing Zionist party Mapam supported the Soviet Union. Stalinist anti-Zionist and antisemitic conspiracy theories had less to do with the Stalinist powers’ actual geopolitical terms, the role of the USSR was very different: indeed, it armed, through its Czech satellite, the fledgling Israeli state. The left-wing Zionist party Mapam supported the Soviet Union. Stalinist anti-Zionist and antisemitic conspiracy theories had less to do with the Stalinist powers’ actual geopolitical relationship to Israel, and more to do with finding a scapegoat towards which Stalinist ruling classes could channel and direct potential internal dissent.

But this Stalinist amalgam of Zionism with “imperialism” and “racism”, as if the three things are unambiguously synonymous and interchangeable, continues to exert a profound ideological impact on the whole far left, even the Trotskyist left, much of which was uncritically swept along in the “anti-imperialist” fervour of the struggles of the late 60s onwards, and absorbed a great deal from the Stalinist ideologies which hegemonised much left-wing political space.

A large section of the left in effect absorbed into its political bloodstream a type of anti-Zionism which elbowed out the more rational anti-Zionism of a previous generation. If one reads, for example, the writing of Ernest Mandel – a somewhat idiosyncratic but significant theoretical figure in the sphere of broadly “orthodox” Trotskyism – on Zionism and Israel/Palestine, there is none of the venom or vitriol one encounters today.

Even the early writing of Tony Cliff, the founder of what is now the Socialist Workers Party, on the subject is markedly different from the arguments the SWP makes today. In the 1930s, Tony Cliff supported Jewish immigration to Palestine, and favoured the creation of a separate Jewish state.

These shifts are partially explained by the fact that the Israeli state has become more heavily militarised, its colonial project in Palestine more barbaric, and so on, as time has progressed. But there is no equivalent shift in far-left policy towards any other state engaged in colonial oppression. The left, in short, took what began as a Stalinist propaganda trick and elevated it into a key aspect of its worldview.

This worldview exceptionalises Israel, and Jewish nationalism, and treats them in terms the left does not treat other oppressive states or nationalist ideologies. To better understand this, one might usefully compare the way the left relates to Israel with the way it relates to Turkey, another militarist and nationalist state oppressing a national minority. Michael Ells, writing in the Workers’ Liberty newspaper Solidarity, puts it like this:

“Comparison with Turkey’s relationship with the Kurds indicates the absurdity and implicit racism of these positions. Rightly, left and workers’ movements around the world are united in outrage at the Turkish state’s treatment of the Kurds. There is widespread global support for Kurdish demands for autonomy or independence. But nobody argues the Turkish state should cease to exist. Or that those Turks who support the Kurds and oppose racism in Turkish society (of whom there are many) are racists unless they accept that Turkey should be dissolved. No-one in Oxford University Labour Club, to our knowledge, has started singing jaunty songs about bombs killing civilians in Ankara or Istanbul.

“Where UK media outlets or politicians give the Turkish state an easy ride, or overlook its racist war against the Kurds, this is generally not ascribed to shadowy ‘Turkish control’ of the UK media, or to combinations of ‘Turkish-nationalist millionaires’ forming powerful ‘Turkish lobbies’. A grounded and researched explanation usually suffices to explain UK collaboration with Turkey: self-interested co-operation between imperialist states. There is no global movement to boycott Turkish goods because they are Turkish; there is no global campaign to shut down performances by Turkish artists because they are Turkish; there is no move to disbar academic collaboration with Turkish academics because they are Turkish. Moreover, were such a campaign of blanket hostility to all things Turkish proposed to a left-wing audience, it is hard to imagine it being greeted with anything other than outrage.”
Zionism and Jewish identity

Jewish identity, like any national or ethnic identity, is complex and sometimes contradictory. Some level of identification and affinity with Israel, seen as, in Isaac Deutscher’s useful phrase, the “life-raft state” for post-Holocaust Jewish refugees, makes up an aspect of that identity for many.

Many Jews have friends or relatives in Israel. Jews who have had any contact with religious practise will have some recognition and familiarity with Hebrew, Israel’s majority language. Israel is the world’s only majority-Jewish state, whose foundation is profoundly connected to the history of the Holocaust and the oppression of Jews in 20th century Europe, experiences which continue to resonate in Jewish consciousness today.

This affinity is not limited to the predominantly-white, Ashkenazi Jewish populations of central and eastern European background. Non-white, Arab-background Jews also experienced significant persecution and expulsion from their home states in and around the time of the establishment of the state of Israel, many of them finding refuge in Israel itself. Some form of “Zionism”, more or less ideologically-developed, is also widespread amongst non-white Jewish communities.

Research by academics at City University in 2015, which interviewed over 1,000 British Jews, found that 93% of them feel that Israel forms some part of their identity. 90% support its continued existence as a Jewish state: they are, in other words “Zionists”. But 71% also support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel – that is to say, they are not expansionist national-chauvinists, hostile to the Palestinians’ own national rights – and 75% say that the West Bank settlements are a “major obstacle to peace”.

An analysis that begins and ends with the contentions that “Zionism is racism” and that Israel is nothing but a colonial-settler state, cannot begin to engage with the complexities of this identity and political views. It necessarily implies hostility to 93% of Jews in Britain, and probably a similar proportion of Jews around the world, and not merely to their political views, but to the very fabric of what, for them, comprises their Jewish identity.

None of this is to suggest that any species of “support for Israel” must simply be excused as an inevitable product of Jewish historical experience and a fixed aspect of Jewish identity. Socialists must oppose Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, which obviously implies politically confronting those who defend it, whatever their ethnic or religious background. But any rigorous Marxist analysis of the history of Zionism must understand its historical dynamics within the context of Jewish consciousness, even while opposing national oppression and supporting the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination.

The impulses frequently inculcated by experiences of oppression and persecution always pose a risk to universalist politics. But we cannot win hegemony for revolutionary-humanist, universalist politics by storming people from above.

It is perhaps also worth saying here, as aside, that, just as we have a duty as historical materialists to understand the complex history of Zionism, we also have a duty to understand the material basis of the hatred and anger, often violently expressed, towards Israel and Zionism on the part of many Palestinians – a dispossessed people who have been systematically brutalised by the colonial project of the Israeli state.

To dismiss their “anti-Zionism” merely as motivated by antisemitism would be as calamitous as a dismissal of the “Zionism” of most Jews as merely “racist”. Palestinian consciousness has undoubtedly been profoundly shaped by the experience of ongoing national oppression at the hands of the Israeli state. The point is to proceed from a serious analysis of history, “on all sides”, so to speak, and to aspire to a politics based on equality.

How to confront left antisemitism

The issue of antisemitism has undoubtedly been exploited by the right in the Labour Party, and in wider society, including within the Jewish community. But they are not fabricating issues: they are punching a bruise.

They are able to exploit the issue – yes, often cynically; yes, for their own ends; yes, sometimes by exaggeration – only because it exists in the first place.

Many of the solutions proposed within the Labour Party – tighter disciplinary measures, clearer codes of conduct, and so on – seek technical-bureaucratic fixes for political problems. A culture of knee-jerk expulsion for anyone who circulates a left antisemitic meme, or makes an antisemitic remark in a meeting, will make the problem worse, not better.

Although it may strike us as unseemly to insist that antisemitism be a matter for “debate”, it is only by confronting the ideas that underpin left antisemitism in open debate within the Labour Party and the wider movement that it can be uprooted. What is required is not more expulsions, but more debate and discussion, conducted in an atmosphere of free speech.

On the basis of the overview given in this article, and the analyses offered by the other articles in this pamphlet, Workers’ Liberty believes the ideas our organisation has developed can help confront left antisemitism. We have summarised it like this:

“Workers’ Liberty rejects a theory of world politics based on ‘good peoples’ and ‘bad peoples’. We reject conspiratorial explanations for world events. We believe that the answer to all colonial wars and national liberation struggles is to apply the democratic principle of self-determination for nations, to support oppressed nations in their struggle for self-determination and to apply the principle equally to all nations.

“Until the rest of the left takes up an approach to the Israel-Palestine based on democracy, and abandons the formulas which are the inheritance of Stalinism, left-wing antisemitism will continue to surface and re-surface, and no amount of hand-wringing or expulsions will change that.”

The only real solution to this problem is to replace the left’s existing common sense on Israel/Palestine, Zionism, and Jewish identity, which is in large part an inheritance from Stalinism, with a new common sense based on consistent democracy and equality, ideas that were at the very heart of the pre-Stalinist Marxist project, and which must be urgently reintegrated into its political core.

This pamphlet is a contribution to that aim.
How to wipe out left antisemitism

This article, by Sean Matgamna, was first published in Solidarity in May 2016, and traces the roots of contemporary left antisemitism in the development of far-left policy towards Israel/Palestine. The article also argues against knee-jerk expulsions from the Labour Party as the default response to left antisemitism. The article is available online at bit.ly/wipeout-leftas.

Jackie Walker, a woman of mixed African-Jewish background, and vice-chair of the Labour Party’s left-wing group, Momentum, has been suspended by the Labour Party on grounds of antisemitism. The charge of antisemitism is based on a fragment of a Facebook conversation from some months ago. Her antisemitism consisted in the statement that Africa too had experienced a Holocaust.

The Labour Party now has a regime of capricious and arbitrary instant exclusions. This paper and its predecessor Socialist Organiser have argued that antisemitism in the labour movement needs to be rooted out. But this Red-Queen-in-Alice-in-Wonderland, “off with their heads” regime is not the way to do it.

For decades, from Israel’s June 1967 Six Day War and with renewed energy after the 1973 Yom Kippur Israeli-Egyptian war, hostility to Israel has been a major, and seemingly ever-growing, force in the labour movement and in the Labour Party. Some of that is a just hostility to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. But there is more than that. There is often a blatant antisemitism.

In June 1967 Israel occupied that part of pre-1948 Palestine which the United Nations partition plan of 1947 had designated for an independent Palestinian state, to exist side by side with Israel. That Palestinian territory had been occupied and annexed in 1948-9 by Jordan and Egypt, and a small part of it by Israel. Now all of pre-war Palestine and Gaza was under Israeli control. Various Israeli offers to vacate the newly conquered territories in return for peace and recognition by the Arab states were rejected. Israel’s occupation of that Palestinian land has so far lasted half a century. It has turned Israel into a regional imperialist power (in the sense that Marxists had called the pre-World-War-2 Czechoslovakian, Polish, and Yugoslav states imperialist: they ruled over minority peoples repressed to various degrees by the Poles, Czechs, Serbs). Israel has been a grubby and brutal imperialist power in its treatment of the Palestinians. As with any other imperialist occupation, Marxists have demanded that the occupying power, Israel, get out of the Arab-majority territories and allow the Palestinians to have their own state there. That there were special problems was not to be denied. In 1967, no Arab state recognised Israel’s existence, or its right to continued existence. Only the PLO and a couple of states, Egypt and Jordan, do so, even today. The PLO before the June 1967 war had been controlled by Egypt and fronted by Ahmad Shukeiri, who proclaimed the PLO’s objective in the slogan: “drive the Jews into the sea”.

This was altogether too reminiscent of Hitler, then only twenty years dead. Any taint, approximation to, or suggestion of antisemitism was still held to be unclean politics, far outside what was acceptable to labour-movement people. But with an enormous exception: the Stalinist movements everywhere had spent the years from 1948-9 to 1953 in a scarcely-disguised antisemitic clamour against “the Zionists” and against Israel.

In Stalinist show trials in Russia’s satellite states in Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Slánský trial of 1952, recently-prominent Stalinists accused of all sorts of treasons were indicted above all as being Zionists. They were jailed, and some hanged. The Stalinist parties everywhere conducted large-scale propaganda against Zionism. It was then that the assertion that the Zionists were tools, and political and moral accomplices, of Hitler and the Nazis, appeared and went into circulation. In the USSR, a projected show trial of Jewish doctors who had attended the leading Stalinists was set in train. It was abandoned when Stalin died in March 1953. Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced Stalin in 1956, and his antisemitism suddenly became a matter of public record. Many Jews left the Communist Parties. Stalinist anti-Zionist antisemitism was banked down. But not everywhere. Open antisemitism became a force in Poland as late as 1967-8.

The orthodox Trotskyists, including the Palestinian Trotskyists, declared themselves against both sides in the Israeli war of independence in 1948. The Workers Party in the USA supported Israel’s right to exist and defend itself. Naturally, Trotskyists denounced the Stalinist antisemitic campaigns of 1948 to 1953. In 1956 and after, its antisemitism was part of their denunciation of Stalinism. How did those attitudes turn into fervent support for the Arab states against Israel? What were the political processes by way of which much of what had been official Stalinist doctrine in 1948-53, denounced as antisemitism by the orthodox Trotskyists, came to be fervently accepted and propagated by them?

The objective basis for it was the fact and the accompanying brutalities of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian-majority territories. Its subjective basis was the peculiar version of anti-imperialism which the Trotskyists adopted from the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950 onwards, an anti-imperialism coloured and sculpted by the belief that in the colonial and semi-colonial world the Stalinists were, by virtue of their militancy against the US and its allies, leading the first stage of an anti-capitalist and essentially working-class world revolution.

Thus the orthodox Trotskyists came to be impassioned
defenders and advocates of one of the great imperialist blocs contending for mastery in the world. They made criticisms of Stalinism, but never allowed them to affect the basic commitment to "defend" the USSR and its spawns and replicas. The same sort of anti-imperialism was brought to bear on the antagonisms between Israel and the Arab states. The anti-colonial movements in the Arab world were construed as part of an "Arab Revolution", which in turn was part of the "Colonial Revolution", which was part of the "World Revolution". The Grant tendency (later Militant, and today the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal) even discovered in 1965 that Ba'athist (non-Stalinist) Syria had, in this historical process, become a "deformed workers state".

Israel, which after 1967, though not before, became closely allied with the USA, was part of the imperialist bloc. The Palestinians and the Arab states, such as Nasserite Egypt, opposing Israel were part of the progressive anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist bloc. And of course the Palestinians facing the superior might of Israel naturally attracted the reflex sympathy and support of socialists.

The Trotskyists shift from their attitude in the 1948 war and after was first a shift to a new denial that Israel was a historically legitimate state. From the end of Arab-Israeli hostilities in 1949, the Trotskyists had taken the existence of Israel as a fact. When in 1956 Israel joined France and Britain in invading Egypt (the Suez crisis), the Trotskyists properly took sides with Egypt, but did not conclude that Israel, the ally of Britain and France, had no right to continue existing. In the grip of a belief that the "Arab Revolution" was, or would soon become, socialist, Gerry Healy, the leader of the main British orthodox Trotskyist group, published a small pamphlet on the Suez crisis in which, astonishingly, he threatened that if the Israelis did not change to the right side in the world revolution, the side that the Arabs and their colonial revolution were on, they would soon face a bloody holocaust that would make Hitler's massacres seem "like a tea party!" The organisation that could allow Healy to publish such a thing -- what could make the murder of six million Jews in Europe seem like a tea party? -- was politically sick; but the same organisation, at roughly the same time, could publish a valuable expose of Stalinist antisemitism.

The shift to radical opposition to the existence of Israel came by way of widespread acceptance of the post-1969 PLO proposal to replace Israel with a secular democratic state in all of pre-1948 Palestine, in which Jews and Arabs could live as equals. The PLO no longer shouted "Drive the Jews into the sea", but, with its seemingly benign proposal for Jewish-Arab equality in a common secular democratic state, it was thereby all the more effective in spreading the idea that Israel was not a legitimate state, that it should never have come into existence, and that it should be put out of existence as soon as possible. Any idea that this could ever be done by Israel agreeing to the removal of Jackie Walker is preposterous. It is indignant, or exaggerated, or hysterical denunciation of specific Israeli acts to be branded racist, incompatible with membership of the Labour Party?

The solution to Israel's colonial occupation of the Palestinian people is for both peoples, Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian, to have equal rights, including the right to their own state. 

any armed Arab (or, latterly, Islamic, i.e. Iranian) action against Israel.

Not just a proper socialist and democratic support for Palestinians attempting to drive out the Israelis from Palestinian majority territories, but support for suicide bombs against Israeli civilians and for the mountings and actions against Israel of such as Saddam Hussein. Labour MPs held to such views, and not only honest and well-meaning political fools like the late Ron Brown MP. When in 1994 the soft-left Labour MP George Galloway, on camera, addressed Saddam Hussein, praising the butcher's strength and in Arabic pledging support for the conquest of Jerusalem, the right-wing Labour establishment left it to the Tories and the press to protest. Galloway's continued membership of the Labour Party was at that point never questioned, other than that Socialist Organiser (forerunner of Solidarity) said that he should be removed as an MP.

And now, under a left-wing leadership, we have a regime in the Labour Party where Jackie Walker, a woman of mixed African-Jewish background, can be summarily suspended for daring to call the long historical martyrdom of Africa, notably the slave trade, a Holocaust equivalent to the Nazi massacre of six million Jews. Are such glosses on history now full-blown antisemitism? Not something maybe to disagree with, or question, or denounce, but something incompatible with membership of the Labour Party? The Labour Party that for so long had George Galloway as one of its ornaments?

I repeat: antisemitism on the left needs to be fought against and destroyed. This paper, and its predecessor Socialist Organiser, have been fighting it within the left and in the labour movement for over three decades. The main fight, however, has to take the form of debate, discussion, political education and re-education. The suspension from the Labour Party of a Ken Livingstone for pretty blatant antisemitism on the air is just and necessary. The removal of Jackie Walker is preposterous. It is the sort of response in mirror image that the hysterical left in student unions have sometimes employed against those Jews they deem not hostile enough to Israel and thus Zionist and racist.

The Palestinians are oppressed by Israel and therefore are entitled to the support of honest socialists and consistent democrats. Is heated support for the Palestinians from now on to be incompatible with Labour Party membership? Is it indignant, or exaggerated, or hysterical denunciation of specific Israeli acts to be branded racist, incompatible with membership in the new Labour Party?

We need to specify what left antisemitism consists of; in order to debate, educate, and clarify. These, I think, are its main
1. The belief that Israel has no right to exist. That is the core of left antisemitism, though it comes in more than one version and from more than one root, ranging from the skewed anti-imperialism of the orthodox Trotskyists through Arab nationalism to Islamic chauvinism.

2. The belief that Israeli Jewish nationalism, Zionism, is necessarily a form of racism. That this racism can only be expunged if Israel, Zionists, and Jews abandon Israeli nationalism and support of any kind for Israel. That Jews Jewish students, for example can only redeem themselves if they agree that the very existence of Israel is racist.

3. The view that Israel alone is responsible for the conflict with the Arab states (and, now, with Islamic states). The idea that Israel alone is responsible for creating Arab refugees, and is uniquely evil in doing so. In real history, about 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven out in 1948. In the following years the Jews who fled or were expelled from Arab territories numbered about 600,000. Israel integrated the 600,000; the Arab states mostly refused the Palestinians citizenship or even the right to work.

4. The claim that the Palestinian have a “right of return”, that is, the right to the organised settlement in Israel of six million people, only a tiny and dying-off number of whom were born in what is now Israel, is one of the many codes for in fact demanding the self-abolition of the Jewish state and justifications for war to conquer and abolish it because it will not accept the demand. It is not the equivalent of free immigration to the UK, or even of mass migration to the UK of millions from Syria, Libya, or elsewhere. Its equivalent for Britain would be the organised settlement in the country of sixty million people. Socialists should be in favour of agreements between Israel and the Palestinians for compensation and for letting individual Palestinians into Israel. Support for a collective right of return is only another form of the demand to conquer and destroy Israel, if it will not surrender.

5. The idea that the forced migration of 700,000 Arabs was a unique evil is also extravagantly wrong. In 1945, about 13 million Germans were driven out of Eastern Europe and German East Prussia. They were driven into a Germany reduced to ruins by wartime bombing, where economic life had seized up and millions were starving. At least half a million are reckoned to have lost their lives in that ethnic cleansing. Only obscure German nationalists now propose to reverse that forced population movement and to drive out the Poles and Czechs who live where Germans once lived.

6. There is a peculiar form of Holocaust semi-denial current on the left. I have never heard of anyone on the left who denies that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis (though, in the nature of things, someone will now jump out from behind a bush wearing a “Hitler was Framed” badge, and call me a liar). What many on the left deny is that this unique fact of history had repercussions that we should at least try to understand, with some sympathy for the surviving Jews and their descendents. On the left the Holocaust is not denied, but it is relegated almost to the status of a “virtual fact”. In truth, the Holocaust discredited all Jewish-assimilationist programmes, including ours, the socialist one. It created the will for a Jewish solution to the Jewish question and for the creation of Israel. There is not to be surprised or scandalised in that. The Holocaust should be appreciated as a real fact of history, with repercussions and reverberations, and not as something outside the history we are all part of, as a sort of side-show, as a two-dimensional hologram rather than the enormously weighty, reverbrating event it was and continues to be.

7. The idea that there are good peoples entitled to all rights, and bad peoples, entitled to none. That too is something I have never heard anyone voice explicitly. But it is there as an underlying implicit subtext in the idea that we are concerned with national rights only for the presently oppressed, i.e. in this case the Palestinians.

8. There is no “one-state solution”. Not through, as now, Israeli domination of the whole territory and Palestinians living indefinitely in a limbo of Israeli occupation, nor through a Palestinian state “from the river to the sea” incorporating Israel after its Jewish population have been killed or overpowered by Arab or Islamic states.

The only just solution that can serve both Jews and Arabs is two states: a sovereign Palestinian state in contiguous territory, side by side with Israel.

Further reading on Israel/Palestine and left antisemitism

Trotskyists and the creation of Israel

What did the Trotskyists, the anti-Stalinist revolutionaries, say about Israel and Zionism in the years leading up to and after Israel’s founding? Their perspectives were markedly different from the common sense which prevails on the left today. This pamphlet brings together key articles from the time, and is available at bit.ly/trots-on-israel.
Stalinist roots of left anti-semitism

In the 1970s the rulers of the USSR launched a sustained “anti-Zionist” campaign, in fact anti-semitic.

No surprise. But an examination of the publications from that campaign shows something much more shocking than the fact that the old Stalinist despots were ready to use any sort of reactionary prejudice for their own ends. It demonstrates that much of what many British and international leftists – even Trotskyists – say about Israel is an indirect and unwitting copy of the Stalinists’ efforts at constructing a Marxist-sounding gloss on old anti-semitic themes.

Zionism equals racism; Zionism equals imperialism; Zionism equals South African apartheid; Israel is the USA’s “watchdog” in the Middle East; Zionism is complicit with, or even promotes, anti-semitism – all these themes, now commonplace on the left, were pioneered by the Stalinists.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the Stalinists had had an “anti-Zionist” campaign which figured prominently in the show-trials of Rudolf Slánský and others in Eastern Europe in these years. Mordekhai Oren quotes the following interchange with the prosecutor at his own trial:

“Would you be ready to confess that in 1948, after Tito’s betrayal, you met Moshe Pijade as well as Dr. Bebler in Belgrade?”

“I didn’t meet Pijade in 1948, and even if I had, that would have been no crime. Nor was it a crime to meet Bebler.”

“He’s a Jew, and you too, and both of you are Zionists.”

By 1953, the stage had been set for the mass deportation of the surviving Jews of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; an anti-semitic show-trial was due to be staged, in which five Jewish doctors from the Kremlin’s own hospital were to face charges of poisoning and convicting. As with the Crimean Tatars after the war, such a mass deportation would have cost the lives of countless tens of thousands. Stalin died before the trial could be held and his successors dropped it.

In the late 1960s, a new official “anti-Zionist” campaign was launched in the Soviet Union, in the aftermath of Israel’s victory in the Six Days’ War over Arab states friendly to the Soviet Union. It increased in the 1970s, as Israel inflicted another defeat on Arab states in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and Jewish organisations internationally stepped up their campaign for Soviet Jews.

The amalgam

The core of the Stalinist argument was their old technique of the amalgam. Zionism, so the Stalinists claimed, was tied up with, allied to, linked with, or responsible for, every reactionary force that right-minded people might detest – capitalism, imperialism, even anti-semitism, and Nazism.

“Political Zionism emerged at the close of the nineteenth century as the ideology, and then the practice, of the reactionary Jewish bourgeoisie, fearful of the awakening of the heroic self-consciousness amongst the Jewish proletariat”. Jewish workers in European countries were participating ever more actively in the class struggle and revolutionary movements. Hence, “to tear them away from this struggle, to confine them to a new but this time spiritual ghetto – such as the social instruction given to Zionism by the bourgeoisie which created it”.

The creation of a national home for Jews was the means whereby Jewish-bourgeois hegemony over Jewish workers was to be maintained. “The powerful Jewish bourgeoisie, allied with imperialism, needed the creation of a ‘national home’... first and foremost in order to keep under its influence the mass of Jewish workers.”

Moreover: “In the West, Jewish capital became such a powerful force that it was able to participate independently in the colonial division of the world.”

In another version, Jewish capital was maybe not able to compete independently with the biggest capitalist powers. But it was nevertheless a central agent of theirs – indeed, miraculously, simultaneously a central agent of all the competing powers!

“The capitalists of England, the USA, France, Germany, and other countries, amongst them millionaires and multi-millionaires of Jewish origin, who had their eyes on the wealth of the Near East, helped the creation of the Zionist idea. From the very outset it was linked with the project of the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish state as a Jewish fortress, a barrier against Asia.”

“It is claimed” (so the Stalinists admitted), “that Zionism is nothing but a reaction against anti-semitism.” But only “Zionist ideologists” could suggest that. For the Stalinists, it was not the anti-semites but the Zionists who exploited the notorious Dreyfus affair of anti-semitic persecution in late 19th century France. “The Dreyfus affair was used by the Jewish bourgeoisie of Western Europe for the consolidation of nationalist political forces in the united World Zionist Organisation, set up in 1897 in Basle.”

According to the Stalinists: “Zionism and anti-semitism are the two sides of the same coin – racism. Zionists greeted the anti-semitic policies of Tsarism in its time and also the monstrous policies of genocide at the time of Hitler.” Indeed, so the Stalinists claimed: “Zionist ideologists have never concealed their positive attitude towards anti-semitism, in which the powerful Jewish bourgeoisie and Judaic clericalism saw a convenient way of maintaining their influence over the Jewish communities.”

Anti-semitism is “a form of national and religious intolerance which expresses itself in a hostile attitude towards Jews,” but at the same time, “this reactionary, antihuman phenomenon has been used (and still is used today) in a speculative manner by Zionists and rabbis as a bugaboo with the help of which it was intended to achieve a consolidation of the crumbling Jewish communities.”

Thus, the Jewish bourgeoisie and its ideologues have shown, and continue to show today, “great interest in the existence of anti-semitic attitudes, in the whipping up of anti-semitism at the level of state policies.” The idea that Zionism was a response to anti-semitism had gained ground merely because of the “efforts of the Jewish bourgeoisie and of the press which it has bought”. In Russia, the Zionists “covertly did their utmost in order to keep under its influence the mass of Jewish workers.”

Such was the relationship between Zionism and Tsarism that “[the Zionist leader] Herzl himself met with the Tsarist Minister of the Interior, von Plehve”. (That the meeting caused outrage, and nearly led to a split, in the Zionist movement in Russia, was not mentioned).

Then Zionist “anti-Soviet activities” began – in the very first days of the existence of Soviet power. In the civil war, “they acted as allies of the counter-revolution... They created Zionist military units which conducted an armed struggle against the
The Soviet republic. No mention of the Zionist units which fought in the Red Army alongside the Bolsheviks.

The Soviet “anti-Zionist” campaign moved on to accuse Zionists of not merely using or welcoming, but actively promoting, antisemitism, financing antisemitic organisations, and inciting antisemitic pogroms:

“In 1930, at the time of a crisis in the United States, there emerged more than a hundred organisations, the time and resources of which were spent on propaganda of hatred towards Jews. (It is important to note that many of them were covertly financed by secret Zionist funds).”

In the late 1940s and early 1950s: “Secret agents of Zionism whipped up feelings of fear amongst the Jews of Syria, Libya, Tunisia, the Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt, from where entire city communities departed [for Israel] ... In the course of several years Zionists stoked up and provoked in every way possible ‘useful antisemitic activities’ which helped promote the mass exit of hundreds of thousands of believers in Judaism from Arab countries.” Zionists did bomb a synagogue in the 1950s.

In Western Europe: “As early as 1950 hatred towards Jews was already very widespread in the West. The powerful Jewish bourgeoisie was far from being the least responsible for this. The many antisemitic organisations which it created, the state machines in a series of imperialist countries which bowed down before powerful [read: Jewish] capital, and, finally, the ruling Zionist camarilla of Israel used antisemitism in their class interests.”

And in the 1970s: “The propaganda of antisemitic views in many capitalist states has kept its importance as a tool of reaction ... The Jewish bourgeoisie itself and the many groups and parties which it has created in the service of powerful capital play their role in this ... antisemitic organisations have been set up with the resources dispensed from the secret funds of Zionism.”

These (unspecified) antisemitic organisations then became a further means whereby the Zionists could maintain their influence over Jewish communities: “These organisations committed provocative actions, the object of which were poor Jews and the Jewish middle strata. The highest stratum of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the finance and finance-industrial magnates, who constitute the core and the leadership of the entire system of international Zionism ... had the possibility of presenting themselves as the ‘sole defenders’ of the Jewish population ... and of demonstrating on more than one occasion ‘Jewish solidarity’ with the victims of antisemitism.”

**Zionism and Nazism**

The USSR’s “anti-Zionist” campaign took shreds of fact about some Zionists resigning themselves to accept European antisemitism as a reality they could not change, and blew them up into a conspiracy theory. It went on to blame “the Zionists” even for the Nazi Holocaust.

The Zionists welcomed the arrival in power of the fascists in Germany. "What saved the Zionists? Fascism! It sounds paradoxical, but it was exactly thus.” Herzl wanted Jews to leave Germany, and so too did the Nazis: “The plans of the fascist and Zionist leaders coincided: the fascists planned to drive the Jews out of German ‘living space’, and the Zionists wanted to realise their goal at the expense of those Jews driven out.”

“We know that Zionism always saw in antisemitism an ally in the achievement of its goals. It was no coincidence that a mutual understanding emerged between the Nazis, who horribly persecuted Jews, and the Zionists, who played the role of ‘saviours’ of the Jews.” Hence it came about that Zionists “co-operated with Hitlerites and helped them to destroy millions of Jewish lives, attempting to save only the capitalists. The Zionists always regarded antisemitism, and still do so, as an important means of forcing all Jews to leave their countries and escape to the ‘Promised Land’ in Israel”.

There was, moreover, an overlap between the theories of Zionism and fascism: “As regards the theory of ‘racial purity’, the treatises on ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ peoples, the concepts of the ‘Aryan’ and the ‘superman’, here there is really not a little in common between the Zionists and the fascists.” The theories of various “Zionist ideologues” did not differ “at all from the views on racial exclusiveness to be found in the ‘collected works’ of Hitler, Rosenberg, and other fascist theoreticians.” Zionism is akin to Nazism because “the ideologues of Zionism and apartheid are related to it” (Nazism), and are merely contemporary variations of the myth about the supposedly innate inequality of people and races.

Thus it was that Zionism and fascism ended up collaborating with one another: “The monstrous plans of the fascist animals, based on the inhuman and racist ideology of Hitlerism, met with the cooperation and support of other racists – Zionists.”

In the 1970s: “Secret agents of Zionism took part in the mass slaughter of Jews.” The Zionists helped uncover those of Jewish origin who were hiding from the Gestapo and the police, handed them over to the fascists, and took part in the mass slaughter of Jews.

"It has become known that Polish Zionists who have now fled to Israel worked side-by-side with the Gestapo and the Nazi military intelligence service during the war.” Writing as if “the Zionists” were not Jews themselves, many of them fated to be killed by the Nazis, the Stalinists stated that “the Zionists” were not concerned about the fate of Jews living (and dying) in Germany under Nazi rule: “The Zionists were completely unconcerned with the interests of the German Jews.” The fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany “did not at all alarm the Zionists during the years of the war against fascism. And this in a situation where the Jews were the victims of atrocious terror and persecution.” For the Zionists, creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine was more important than saving Jewish lives: “The Zionists reconciled themselves to the camps and the ghettos, to the extermination of millions of Jews. The Zionists needed the corpses of these Jews because across them lay the road out of the occupied countries and into Palestine. The Jews who were allowed to be victims of fascism were ‘proof’... of the necessity of the creation of a Jewish state.” The attitude of the Zionists was: “let millions (of Jews) drown in blood if there remains one road open for hundreds of thousands-to Palestine.”

The only Jews whom the Zionists were concerned to save from fascism were the wealthy – they cared nothing for German Jews “with the exception of German Jew capitalists, who, as soon as Hitler came to power, transferred their capital to Swiss and German banks.”

The Zionists were prepared to let the weak go to their deaths so that only the strong would be left to inhabit Israel: “With the assistance of the Nazis, the so-called ‘selection’ of the settlers was achieved, the citizens of the future Israel. ‘The dust of the old world’ was turned into ashes of the concentration camps.” Without the assistance of the Zionists, the Nazis could not have carried out their extermination programme: “Could the fascists have managed without their Zionist assistants? This question can be answered only by clarifying the role of the Zionist leaders in the extermination of the Jews of Europe. Their assistance gave the fascists the possibility of exterminating hundreds of thousands of Jews at the hands of dozens or a few hundred selected killers.”

“... the Judeenate [Jewish councils] sincerely and exactly carried out all the orders of the fascists, even orders about the physical mass elimination of the Jewish population... In the shape of the
Judenrate the activities of the Zionists were legalised and their leaders became loyal executors of fascist policies.45 The Zionists also attempted to prevent any opposition to the Nazi policies: “Wherever the inhabitants of the ghettos who were condemned to death succeeded in organising uprisings against the fascists, especially in Warsaw in 1943, the Zionists helped the Germans frustrate the uprisings, or crush them where they occurred.” 43 In fact the Warsaw uprising was led by a Zionist!

The central message of the Soviet “anti-Zionist” campaign in relation to the alleged Zionist-Nazi collaboration was clear: “The Zionist crimes in the ghettos and the death camps must be completely uncovered, so that it can be recognised at what price it was that the state of Israel was created ... That the state of Israel was created by hands warmed in Jewish blood is indisputable.”44 Thus, the rise of Zionism and of Israel had nothing to do with reflex responses to Nazi or more general antisemitic persecution. It was a gratuitous act of evil. Immediately upon the creation of the state of Israel, “Zionism, a dangerous, fascistic force reminiscent of the Black Hundreds, a doctrine which is reactionary and expansionist by its very nature, became the ideology of its ruling circles.”45 Such is the irony of history: the Zionist rulers of Israel carry out the very same policies of genocide in relation to the Arabs as those which were carried out by the Hitlerites in relation to the Jews.46

The factors which official USSR “anti-Zionism” had discovered behind the emergence of Zionism – the devilish cunning of the Jewish bourgeoisie in its efforts to maintain control over the Jewish working class, and the enormous secret and concentrated power of Jewish bourgeoisie, which enabled it to take part as an independent force in the scramble by European empires to divide up the world, or somehow to act as the vanguard of imperialism in general – likewise lay behind the creation of the state of Israel: “The monopoly Jewish bourgeoisie established control over Jewish workers in different countries of the world, strengthened its positions in the major capitalist countries, and achieved an extension of colonial expansion in Asia and Africa. The most important instrument in the realisation of these tasks of the Jewish monopoly bourgeoisie in contemporary conditions is the state of Israel, which is ruled by Zionists – an inseparable part of international Zionism.”47

“In a situation where the colonial system was collapsing, imperialism began feverishly to search after and work out new forms and methods for the achievement of expansionist policies. The state of Israel was created just at the time when the waves of the rising national liberation movement in Asia and Africa began to destroy the colonial empire”.48 The creation of Israel was thus “the creation of a strategic ‘buffer’ between Europe and Asia, an advance outpost of the struggle against communism and the national liberation movement.”49

In fact Israel got its weapons for the 1948 war in which it was established by smuggling and from USSR-controlled Czechoslovakia. The USSR, then keen to seize what seemed to be a chance to strike a blow at the British Empire, was the first state to recognise Israel. The left-Zionist group Mapam, very influential in the Zionist armed forces in 1948, ardently supported the Soviet Union. The CIA was extremely worried about what it saw as the leftist and pro-USSR tinge of Israeli influence among the waves of the rising national liberation movement in Asia and Africa began to destroy the colonial empire”.50 It has the job of “acting as a gendarme in armed conflict against the Arab peoples”. Where and how Israel had been of any practical assistance to the USA or any other big capitalist power in securing their oil or other interests in the Middle East, the Stalinists did not specify. They pressed on with their picture of “Zionism” as the spearhead of imperialism, especially US imperialism: “The financial-economic support of Israel on the part of internationalist Zionist circles transforms it into a parasite-state.”52 This economic backing also means that “the economy of Israel is in reality controlled by the internationalist Zionist corporation, by Zionist capital of the USA, England, France, and a series of other countries.”53 Thus, “the nationalistic ruling stratum of Israel is in fact part of the international Zionist concern, based in New York and controlled from the United States.”54

Israel = South Africa?

For the Stalinist writers, Israel was not only a sort of offshoot or outpost of the USA. It was, with fiendish cunning, simultaneously an offshoot or outpost of South Africa as it was before 1994, under the system of apartheid.

“Israel has a special relationship of the closest kind with South Africa. Israel and South Africa are linked to one another by economic, political, military, and ideological ties... Israel and South Africa are linked by a common racist ideology and practice, and by reactionary domestic and foreign policies... The union of the racists of Israel and South Africa is a massive threat to the African peoples and to the whole of humanity.”55

Facile analogies, now prevalent on the British left, featured constantly in the Soviet campaign. Zionism and apartheid possessed “common ideological roots”56. “In the South of Africa, in the Republic of South Africa, and in Palestine, close to the Suez Canal, there arose two platforms of world imperialism, summoned ... to put a check to the national-liberation movement of the peoples.”57

In both Israel and South Africa, “racial-biological doctrines have been raised to the level of an official ideology and of state policies, in accordance with which people are divided into the ‘elegant’ and the ‘barbarian’.”58 The Soviet “anti-Zionist” campaign did differ from the contemporary British leftists’ frequent equating of Israel and apartheid South Africa in that it was rather more imaginative in discovering supposed parallels. It was, after all, no coincidence that “the entire history of South Africa and Palestine reveals very many identical events and common traits,”59 the most notable ones being:

In 1880, in the Cape Colony, the first South African nationalist party had been founded; in the same year the first Zionist organisation was set up in Russia; the former advocated separate development for Blacks; the latter opposed assimilation.

The turn of the 19th/20th century was a period of conflict between the Boers and the British, resulting in the Boer War; at the same time inter-imperialist rivalries for colonies became more acute, “above all between British imperial capital and international Jewish capital.”60

“The opening years of the century both Zionism and South African nationalism used social demagogy to attract support: “all possible variants of petty-bourgeois socialism became common in Zionism, just as in South Africa there was national socialism and labourite reformist socialism.” Both the Zionists and the Afrikaner nationalists exploited the 1914-18 war, the former obtaining the Balfour Declaration (in which Britain promised to support a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine), and the latter being prepared to organised armed revolt against Britain in order to obtain concessions.

After the war, “both Afrikaner nationalism and Zionists ever
more overtly became the right flank of imperialism, together with fascism.” In the inter-war years “the Afrikaner bourgeoisie and international Jewish capital created a series of secret organisations, in their own way centralised Mafias.”

In the 1939-45 war both the Zionists and the South African nationalists were “close in spirit to Hitler’. While “English soldiers died on the battlefields, fighting against the Nazis who had set themselves the goal of exterminating the Jews, Zionist extremists did not stop even at the use of terror against the English authorities”; the South African nationalists “attempted in an analogous manner to use the war situation to pursue anti-English goals, in order to strengthen their position in the country.”

Immediately after the close of the war Zionism allied itself with American imperialism, and so too did the South African nationalists, in order to “break free of dependence on the British Empire. The Empire lost control over the Palestine problem, and its influence over South Africa fell sharply.”

The state of Israel was proclaimed on 14 May 1948; on 26 May 1948, the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa. In South Africa, however, the leading role belonged as ever to the Zionist conspiracy. “By 1945 ... Jewish immigrants (to South Africa), with the support of international Zionist capital, had rapidly occupied the key positions in the economy and trade, and had begun to extract profits from the system of racial inequality dominant in the country.”

Within a matter of years “the racists (of South Africa) in reality collapsed into economic dependence on the Zionists.”

One last piece of evidence adduced by the Soviet campaign as proof of the evils of Zionism was its alleged record of collaboration with Trotskyism. In the late 1920s, “the Zionists looked for support amongst the defeated anti-Leninist factional groupings amongst the Trotskyite oppositionists.” It was therefore “far from being a coincidence that the Zionist newspaper Tijdit addressed itself to Trotsky in 1927, calling him ‘our brother’, and inviting the Trotskyites to ‘unity of action’.”

In “the attempts to undermine socialism in Czechoslovakia” (i.e. the 1968 reform movement, eventually crushed by a Russian invasion) Zionists worked hand-in-glove with the Trotskyites: “... with the remnants of bourgeois parties which emerged from the underground, with right-wing social democracy, with ‘national-communists’, with Trotskyites.”

Contemporary Zionism continues to co-operate with “extremists and openly fascist forces, and to maintain at the same time contacts and close links with Trotskyites and revisionists of all shades.” Today, “Zionism closely co-operates with many other battalions of anti-communism – neo-fascists, Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists, Horthyite, Ustash, South African racists, Trotskyites, and Maoists.”

Even this kind of cant finds an echo on the British far left. It was, after all, the Workers’ Revolutionary Party, backed up by some sympathetic Labour Party members, which declared with editorial authority: “The Zionist connection between these so-called ‘lefts’ in the Labour Party [i.e. Socialist Organiser, a forerunner of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty and our paper Solidarity] right through to Thatcher and Reagan’s White House is there for all to see in its unprincipled nakedness.”

Zionism as US imperialism

Tsarism, British imperialism, Hitlerism, Afrikaner nationalism, Trotskyism... according to the Stalinists, “the Zionists” were also the shock-troops of US imperialism. Either Israel was an outpost of the USA, or “the Zionists” controlled the USA, or both.

The Kremlin argued: “The real masters of international Zionism who finance and inspire the aggression of Israel against Arab countries and the anti-communist, anti-Soviet activity of Zionist organisations, are the most powerful monopolies and banks of the USA and other countries, that is, the driving forces of contemporary imperialism.” But this begs the question of who exerts the major influence and control over “the most powerful monopolies and banks of the USA”.

“The existence in the United States of the most numerous grouping in the world of capitalists of Jewish origin ... is the most important factor determining the specific nature of American Zionism ... About 20% of American millionaires are Jews, although, as is well known, the proportion of Americans of Jewish origin does not exceed 3% of the entire population of the USA.”

American Zionism, therefore, constitutes “a mighty and powerful detachment of international Zionism, by virtue of both its numbers and also its financial-political possibilities.” In the American political arena it thus performs a dual function: “as spokesperson of the interests of one of the groupings of the bourgeoisie of the USA, playing no small role in circles which determine the policies of Washington, and as part of international Zionism, closely connected with its other groupings.”

“The powerful Jewish bourgeoisie is far from occupying the lowest position in the financial oligarchy of the USA.” The position of the middle-man in relation to the organisation of major long-term loans is in reality monopolised by seventeen of the most powerful Wall Street firms. The majority of them belong either partially or entirely to the powerful Jewish bourgeoisie.

“A series of monopolies which have contracts with the Pentagon are controlled by the Zionists. The Lazard brothers, for example, who are members of the American Jewish Committee, control the aviation company Lockheed, 90% of the work of which is for the Pentagon. Zionists have an entrenched position in the General Dynamics corporation as well ... It is necessary to say that these and other firms with contracts with the Pentagon are the main suppliers of weapons to Israel.”

“American Zionists dispose of massive financial resources and a far-reaching network of organisations. They possess a powerful propaganda apparatus and control a significant share of the means of mass communication in the country.”

Other spheres of influence of Zionism in America include the CIA (“The interests of the powerful Jewish bourgeoisie and other groupings of finance capital are interlaced in the secret service just as in other spheres of politics, economics and ideology”), primaries for the selection of Presidential candidates (“The participation of Zionist capital in the financing of the primary campaigns and in working out the platforms in the primaries of the candidates for President – this phenomenon is characteristic of political life in the USA”), and the Mafia (“The leadership of the Mafia was [at the time of Al Capone] closely linked with Zionists and international Zionism, and some Zionists... became its leaders”).

It is therefore far from clear who is the tail and who is the dog. Zionism is simultaneously an agency of American imperialism, and at the same time the driving force behind it: “Zionism has now become one of the most influential forces in the American political arena ... The union of the Zionists with different political forces in the USA, expressing the interests of the entire American ruling class, significantly strengthens the possibilities of Zionism exerting an influence on the policies of Washington.”

The Protocols updated

The Stalinist account sought to mobilise every sort of sentiment it could plausibly appeal to under “Marxist” colours – anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, anti-Nazism, and even opposition to antisemitism – against “the Zionists”, by way of portraying “the Zionists” as in cahoots with, or as pulling the strings of, those responsible for all the evils appealed against.

It was in fact tantamount to an updated and Marxist version
of the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a forgery concocted by the Tsarist secret police in order to portray Jews as secretly working for, and near achieving, world domination. The original version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion was published in Russia in 1903 by Pavel Krushchev. Supposedly the record of a meeting held in Basle in 1897 at the time of the first Zionist Congress in which the participants plotted to achieve world domination, this piece of fiction quickly became a warrant for antisemitic pogroms, often organised directly by the Tsarist secret police. The major themes of the forgery were: Jews controlled and manipulated the media in order to gain in power; Jews used cunning and guile to strengthen their position in society; international finance and banking were under Jewish control; Jews aspired to world domination, using these methods of control of the media, cunning and deceit, and control over international finance; this aim was to be achieved in partnership with the Freemasons.

According to the Stalinists, the Tsarist secret police were quite right to think that Jews were establishing a sinister grip on the media. “In many bourgeois countries, Zionist organisations have implanted their ‘cadres’ and ‘sympathisers’ into the central press agencies, the editorial offices of radio and television, the cinema, the sciences, arts, and literature. Using these powerful levers, the Zionists influence public opinion, overtly or covertly preaching their ideas, skirting round in silence or distorting anything which contradicts their ideology in the slightest.”

Zionism exerts “major, sometimes overwhelming, influence on means of mass communication, culture, and the state-administrative apparatus of the major capitalist states.” It focuses its attention “in particular on the cinema, television, radio and daily newspapers.” As a result of this control over “means of mass communication, the ‘intellectual industries’ and cultural institutions ... “Zionism is an indispensable part of the capitalist world, in which ‘mass culture’ fulfils precisely expressed functions of the ideological armoury of the bourgeoisie.” The earnest researcher should not be bamboozled by the superficial facts of Jews being a small minority in all major countries, politically divided among themselves, and often not keen to be stridently “Zionist”.

“Analysing the organisational labyrinth of international Zionism is very complicated. This is to be explained by several factors. Firstly, the secret of the organisational structure is carefully concealed from the uninitiated.” Another factor lies in the fact that “many Zionist organisations ... prefer to appear in the guise of ‘Jewish’, ‘religious’, ‘socialist’, ‘benevolent’, ‘cultural’, ‘educational’, ‘scientific’ leagues, funds, unions, groups, and parties.” That they do not call themselves ‘Zionist’ is merely a matter of “tactics, of the means whereby to realise the policies of the Jewish nationalist bourgeoisie.”

Synagogues are one example of institutions used as a cover for Zionist activities: “Where Zionist political organisations are unable to exist legally, such as in the countries of socialism, they (the Zionists) come running to the services of the synagogues in partnership with the Freemasons.”

Deception, diversions, espionage, terror, blackmail, bribery, intimidation, falsification, playing on family and national sentiments, unbridled chauvinism – this is a far from complete list of the methods of Zionist propaganda and practice.”

Also: “Over the years, Zionism changed into a powerful international concern. The international Zionist corporation ... its countless branches and subsidiaries ... is one of the most powerful units of finance capital.” The economic basis of Zionism is “the most powerful financial industrial-monopolies of the West... Economic conferences of Jewish millionaires are capital united on a world scale, used to exert pressure on states and governments in a series of capitalist countries in pursuit of political goals.” The Zionist organisations are controlled by the powerful Jewish bourgeoisie: “in the leadership of the Zionist organisations there has never been, nor is there now, a single worker or peasant; instead, at all levels of the Zionist hierarchy are rabbis, millionaires, bankers, stock-brokers, speculators representatives of monopolies, etc.”

The same principle also applies to Judaism, from which according to the “anti-Zionist” campaign, the racist Zionist concept of “the chosen people” is derived: “Wherever the rabbis rule together with the Zionists, everything is subordinate to the interests of Zionism, served by the interests of capital. Therefore, as a rule, the leading roles in religious communities not only in Israel but also in the USA and other capitalist countries are played by wealthy people: businessmen, directors of companies, financial bosses.”

Zionism, which was “called into life at the will of the Jewish bourgeoisie,” knows of “ways in and out of the corridors of power of which the uninitiated are ignorant.” Apart from its influential position in the politics and economies of the United States and Western Europe, and its subversive activities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, “the powerful Jewish bourgeoisie is firmly entrenched in Spain and Portugal, in the economies of a series of Latin American countries, in Australia and New Zealand. Its sphere of influence extends to the countries of Asia as well, including Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, and Malaysia. As a rule, this involves representatives of families which are involved in a series of countries and also in several continents.”

In Latin America, for example, where “the Jewish bourgeoisie is encouraged by foreign capital, which has transformed it into its base in line with not only its economic but also its political plan,” “banks and also securities in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Columbia, Venezuela, and also other countries as well belong to pro-Zionist capital... The powerful Zionist bourgeoisie of the USA plays the role in Latin America of the most aggressive detachment of North American imperialism.”

The organisational structure of international Zionism is based on “subsidies of Zionist bankers and other capitalists, (through which) was created an extensive extra-state and even supra-state system of organisations entangling, like a cobweb, many capitalist states which spread out their tentacles into the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. To this system belongs first and foremost the World Zionist Organisation and the World Jewish Congress.”

It is therefore “no exaggeration to say that the system of organisations of international Zionism (which extends throughout the entire world and, at the same time, is strongly centralised) united with a powerful financial-economic base in the shape of the monopoly bourgeoisie of Jewish origin ... is the main source of strength and activity of Zionist influence on the politics of a series of leading capitalist states. At present, international Zionism ... given the depth of its penetration into the most variegated spheres of political, economic, and social life of the capitalist countries, has no equal amongst the other bourgeois-nationalist and anticommunist currents and detachments of world reaction.”

International Zionism is not satisfied with merely having no equal in the imperialist world. It strives for world power, in the
traditions of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: “The representatives of international Zionist capital openly aspire to world domination, although they mask their ambitions of world conquest by way of vague phrases about ‘ethical socialism.’”

Going beyond the original version of the Protocols however, the 1970s USSR version suggested that that goal had already been achieved, at least outside the borders of the vigilantly “anti-Zionist” Stalinist states: “Too much bears witness to the fact that in the sum of various factors – economic, political, ideological, social, religious, societal, etc. – which determine the course of action of the ruling circles of the leading capitalist states, the cosmopolitan Jewish bourgeoisie and Zionist capital (closely linked with Judaic clericalism) emerge as significantly more organised, more ambitious, and more powerful than any other influential monopoly (family, banking, regional) groups and groupings of the financial oligarchy.”

None of this, of course was antisemitism. It was simply “anti-Zionism”.

FOOTNOTES
V. Bolshakov (1972): Zionism in the Service of Anti-Communism
M. Davydov et al. (1973): We Pass Judgement on Zionism
I. Mints et al. (1973): Zionism: Theory and Practice
V. Skurlatov (1975): Zionism and Apartheid
R. Brodsky / Y. Shulmeister (1976): Zionism – A Tool of Reaction
V. Kiselev et al. (1977): International Zionism: History and Politics
D. Soifer (1980): The Collapse of Zionist Theories
1. Prisonnier Politique à Prague, Mordekhai Oren
2. Soifer, p.5
3. Bolshakov, p.8
4. Bolshakov, p.8
5. Skurlatov, p.39
6. Soifer, p.5
7. Mitin, p.54
8. Mitin, p.58, footnote
9. Soifer, p.21
10. Mitin, p.58
11. Mitin, p.19
12. Mitin, p.59
13. Mitin, p.59
15. Davydov, p.13
16. Mitin, p.218
17. Davydov, p.4
18. Mitin, p.62
19. Mints, p.169
20. Mints, p.169
21. Mitin, p.62
22. Mitin, p.224
23. Soifer, p.42
24. Brodsky, p.75
25. Brodsky, p.82
26. Mitin, p.224
27. Soifer, p.38
28. Bolshakov, p.27
29. Brodsky, p.33
30. Davydov, p.7
31. Skurlatov, p.4
32. Soifer, p.43
33. Soifer, p.49
34. Bolshakov, p.39
35. Soifer, p.42
36. Bolshakov, p.25
37. Brodsky, p.78
38. Brodsky, p.84
39. Soifer, p.42
40. Bolshakov, p.43
41. Brodsky, p.89
42. Brodsky, p.90
43. Soifer, p.46
44. Brodsky, p.117
45. Mitin, p.83
46. Soifer, p.22
47. Kiselev, p.12
48. Mints, p.180
49. Soifer, p.34
50. Soifer, p.123
51. Mitin, p.83
52. Mints, p.95
53. Bolshakov, p.96
54. Kiselev, p.75
55. Soifer, p.127
56. Skurlatov, p.43
57. Skurlatov, p.47
58. Skurlatov, p.4
59. Skurlatov pp.21, 46, 51, 55, 58, 57, 59, 84
60. Skurlatov p.112
61. Mitin, p.218
62. Mitin, p.223
63. Mitin, p.115
64. Mitin, p.266
65. Soifer, p.50
66. Newsline, 9.4.1983
67. Bolshakov, p.58
68. Kiselev, p.113
69. Kiselev p.113
70. Kiselev p.114
71. Bolshakov p.48
72. Bolshakov p.51
73. Soifer, p.65
74. Kiselev, p.148
75. Bolshakov p.173
76. Bolshakov p.80
77. Bolshakov p.162
78. Kiselev, p.130
79. Mitin, p.98
80. Kiselev, p.15
81. Mitin, p.95
82. Bolshakov p.90
83. Bolshakov p.90
84. Kiselev, p.123
85. Mitin, p.128
86. Mitin, p.85
87. Mitin, p.93
88. Soifer, p.183
89. Bolshakov, p.5
90. Soifer, p.59
91. Mitin, p.245, footnote
92. See Mitin, chapter 3, “Judaism and Zionism”
93. Mitin, p.31
94. Bolshakov, p.5
95. Bolshakov, p.5
96. Bolshakov p.72
97. Kiselev, p.163
98. Kiselev, p.164
99. Mitin, p.188
100. Kiselev, p.15
101. Skurlatov p.118
102. Mitin, p.127
Antisemitism: a “pseudo-emancipatory” critique

Moishe Postone (1942-2018) was a Marxist writer and academic, based for many years at the University of Chicago. As well as writing extensively about value theory, Postone was one of the foremost theorists and analysts of left antisemitism, tracing its origins to the “pseudo-emancipatory” character that antisemitism had as a primitive critique of “capitalist modernity”. In this interview with Martin Thomas of Workers’ Liberty, Postone explains his analysis of left antisemitism. The interview is available online at bit.ly/postone-2010

Q. To many people on the left today, antisemitism seems to be just another form of racism, undesirable but for now fairly marginal, and prominent in discussion only because the Israeli government uses charges of antisemitism to deflect the criticisms it faces. You argue, however, that antisemitism is different from other forms of racism, and it is not marginal today. Why?

A. It is true that the Israeli government uses the charge of antisemitism to shield it from criticisms. But that doesn’t mean that antisemitism itself isn’t a serious problem.

The way in which antisemitism is distinguished, and should be distinguished, from racism, has to do with the sort of imaginary of power, attributed to the Jews, Zionism, and Israel, which is at the heart of antisemitism. The Jews are seen as constituting an immensely powerful, abstract, intangible global form of power that dominates the world. There is nothing similar to this idea at the heart of other forms of racism.

Racism rarely, to the best of my knowledge, constitutes a whole system that seeks to explain the world. Antisemitism is a primitive critique of the world, of capitalist modernity. The reason I regard it as being particularly dangerous for the left is precisely because antisemitism has a pseudo-emancipatory dimension that other forms of racism rarely have.

Q. How much do you think antisemitism today is tied up with attitudes to Israel? It seems to us that a strand in the attitudes of some left-wing forces towards Israel has antisemitic implications.

That is the strand which desires not just criticism and change of Israeli government policy towards the Palestinians, but the abolition of Israel as such, and a world where all other nation states would exist but not Israel. From that viewpoint, to be a Jew, to feel some common identity with other Jews and thus usually with the Jews of Israel, is to be a “Zionist”, and that is as abhorrent as being a racist.

A. A lot has to be disaggregated here. There is a kind of fatal convergence of a number of historical currents in the contemporary form of anti-Zionism.

One, the origins of which aren’t necessarily antisemitic, has its roots in struggles among members of the Jewish intelligentsia in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. A majority of Jewish intellectuals – including secularised intellectuals – felt that some form of collective identity was part and parcel of the Jewish experience.

This identity became increasingly defined as national given the breakdown of earlier, imperial forms of collectivity – that is, as the old empires, the Hapsburg, the Romanov, and the Prussian empires, unravelled. The Jews in Eastern Europe — as opposed to the Jews in Western Europe — largely viewed themselves as a collectivity, not simply as a religion.

There were various forms of this Jewish national self-expression. Zionism was one. There were others, like Jewish cultural autonomists, and the Bund, an autonomous socialist movement of Jewish workers, which was much larger than any of the other movements, and which split off from the Russian Social Democratic party in the first years of the 20th century.

On the other hand there were Jews, many of them members of Communist parties, who viewed any expression of Jewish identity as anathema to their own notions of what I would call abstract Enlightenment notions of humanity. For example, Trotsky, in an earlier phase, referred to the Bund as “sea-sick Zionists”. Note that the critique of Zionism here had nothing to do with Palestine or the situation of the Palestinians, since the Bund was focused entirely on autonomy within the Russian empire and rejected Zionism. Rather, Trotsky’s equation of the Bund and Zionism implied a rejection of any form of Jewish communal self-identification. Trotsky, I think, changed his mind later on, but that attitude was fairly typical. Communist organisations tended to be very strongly opposed to Jewish nationalism of any sort, whether cultural nationalism, political nationalism, or Zionism. This is one strand of anti-Zionism. It is not necessarily antisemitic, but rejects Jewish collective self-identification in the name of abstract universalism.

Yet, frequently, this form of anti-Zionism is inconsistent – it is willing to accord national self-determination to most peoples, but not to Jews. It is at this point that what presents itself as abstractly universal becomes ideological. Moreover, the meaning of such abstract universalism itself changes with historical context. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, this abstract universalism serves to veil the history of Jews in Europe.

This fulfils a very useful, historically “cleansing” dual function: the violence historically perpetrated by Europeans on Jews is erased; at the same time the horrors of European colonialism now become attributed to the Jews. In this case, the abstract universalism expressed by many anti-Zionists today becomes an ideology of legitimation that helps constitute a form of amnesia regarding the long history of European actions, policies and ideologies toward the Jews, while essentially continuing that history. The Jews have once again become the singular object of European indignation. The solidarity most Jews feel toward other Jews, including in Israel – however understandable following the Holocaust – is now decried. This form of anti-Zionism has become one of the bases for a
programme to eradicate actually existing Jewish self-determination. It converges with some forms of Arab nationalism — now coded as singularly progressive.

Another strand of anti-Zionism — this time deeply antisemitic — was introduced by the Soviet Union, particularly in the show trials in Eastern Europe after World War Two. This was particularly dramatic in the case of the Slánský trial, when most of the members of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were tried and then shot. All of the charges against them were classically antisemitic charges: they were rootless, they were cosmopolitan, and they were part of a general global conspiracy. Because the Soviet Union could not officially use the language of antisemitism, they began to use the word “Zionist” to mean exactly what anti-Semites mean when they speak of Jews.

These Czechoslovak CP leaders, who had nothing to do with Zionism — most of them were Spanish Civil War veterans — were shot as Zionists. This strand of antisemitic anti-Zionism was imported into the Middle East during the Cold War, in part by the intelligence services of countries like East Germany. A form of antisemitism was introduced into the Middle East that was “legitimate” for the Left, and was called anti-Zionism. It allowed nothing to do with a movement against Israeli settlement. Of course, the Arab population of Palestine reacted negatively to Jewish immigration and resisted it. That’s very understandable. That in itself is certainly not antisemitic. But these strands of anti-Zionism converged historically.

As for the third strand, there has been a change in the last ten years or so, starting with the Palestinian movement itself, with regard to the existence of Israel. For years most Palestinian organizations refused to accept the existence of Israel. In 1988, however, the PLO decided that it would accept the existence of Israel. The second intifada, which began in 2000, was politically very different from the first intifada, and entailed a reversal of that decision.

I regard that as having been a fundamental political mistake, and I think it is remarkable and unfortunate that the Left has gotten caught up in it and, increasingly, is calling for the abolition of Israel. However, today in the Middle East there are roughly as many Jews as there are Palestinians. Any strategy based on analogies to situations like Algeria or South Africa simply won’t work, on demographic as well as political and historical grounds.

Why is it that people don’t see what the situation is today, and try to see if there is any kind of resolution to what is essentially a national conflict that could free up progressive politics? To subsume the conflict under the rubric of colonialism misrecognizes the situation. Unlike those who have subsumed progressive politics under the national struggle, I think that so long as the struggle is focused on the existence of Israel and the existence of Palestine, progressive struggles are undermined. People who regard the struggle against the existence of Israel as progressive are taking something reactionary and regarding it as progressive.

In the past decade there has been a concerted campaign by some Palestinians, carried into the West by the left, to put the existence of Israel back on the table. Among other things, this has the effect of strengthening the right in Israel.

Between 1967 and 2000, the left in Israel had always argued that what the Palestinians wanted was self-determination, and that the right-wing notion that they wanted to eradicate Israel was a fantasy. Unfortunately that fantasy was shown in 2000 not to be a fantasy, which has strengthened the right immeasurably in its attempts to prevent the coming into being of a Palestinian state. The Israeli right and the Palestinian right are reinforcing each other, and the left in the West is supporting what I regard as the Palestinian right, the ultra-nationalists and the Islamists.

The idea that every nation other than the Jews should be allowed self-determination does come back to the Soviet Union. One has only to read Stalin on the nationalities question.

Q. The other odd thing about some current left-wing attitudes to Israel is the projection onto Israel of huge and mysterious power. For example, it is often taken as axiomatic that Israel is the dominant power in the Middle East, and it is often argued that Israel has huge power in the ruling circles of the USA and Britain.

A. Israel is far from being as powerful as charged. Yet you have people like my present and former colleagues at the University of Chicago, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, strongly supported by circles in the UK, who argue that the only thing driving American policy in the Middle East is Israel, as mediated by the Jewish lobby.

They make this sweeping charge in the absence of any serious attempt to analyze American policy in the Middle East since 1945, which certainly cannot adequately be understood as Israel-driven. So, for example, they completely ignore American policy toward Iran for the past 75 years. The real pillars of American policy in the Middle East after World War Two were Saudi Arabia and Iran. That has changed in recent decades, and the Americans aren’t sure how to deal with that and secure the Gulf for their purposes. Yet you had a book written by these two academics claiming that American policy in the Middle East was primarily driven by the Jewish lobby without bothering to seriously analyze Great Power policies in the Middle East in the 20th century.

I’ve argued elsewhere that this sort of argument is antisemitic. This has nothing to do with the personal attitudes of the people involved, but the sort of enormous global power it accords the Jews (as, in this case, the puppet-masters of the good-natured, slow-witted, giant, Uncle Sam) is typical for modern antisemitic thought.

More generally that ideology represents what I call a fetishised form of anti-capitalism. That is, the mysterious power of capital, which is intangible, global, and which churns up nations and areas and people’s lives, is attributed to the Jews. The abstract domination of capitalism is personified as the Jews. Antisemitism is a revolt against global capital, misrecognized as the Jews. This approach might also help explain the spread of antisemitism in the Middle East in the past two decades. I don’t think it is a sufficient explanation only to point to the suffering of the Palestinians. Economically, the Middle East has declined precipitously in the past three decades. Only sub-Saharan Africa has fared worse. And this has occurred at a time when other countries and regions, thought of as part of the Third World fifty years ago, are developing rapidly. I think that antisemitism in the Middle East today is an expression not only of the Israel-Palestine conflict, but also of a heightened general sense of helplessness in the light of these global developments.

On the German right a century ago, the global domination of capital used to be considered that of the Jews and Britain. Now the Left sees it as the domination of Israel and the United States. The thought pattern is the same.

We now have a form of antisemitism that seems to be progressive and “anti-imperialist,” which is a real danger for the left.

Racism is rarely a danger for the left. The left has to be careful not to be racist, but it isn’t an ongoing danger because racism doesn’t have the apparent emancipatory dimension of antisemitism.

Q. The identification of global capitalist power with the Jews and Britain goes back before the Nazis to sections of the British left at the time of the Boer war — when they condemned as a “Jewish war” — and to the Populist movement in the USA in the late 19th century.
A. Yes, and it’s coming back in the United States now. The so-called “tea parties”, the so-called right-wing grass-roots fury about the financial crisis, have definite antisemitic overtones.

Q. You have argued that the USSR and similar systems were not forms of emancipation from capitalism, but state-centred forms of capitalism. It follows that the general attitude on the left of siding with the USSR — sometimes very critically — against the USA was self-destructive.

You have indicated parallels between the sort of anti-imperialism today which sides with political Islam as the counter-power to the USA, and the old Cold War. What do you think are the common features of those two political polarisations? And the differences?

A. The differences are that the older form of anti-Americanism was tied to promoting Communist revolution in Vietnam, Cuba, etc.

Whatever one may have thought of it at the time, or however one may regard it retrospectively, its own self-understanding was that it promoted an emancipatory project. The United States was sharply criticised not only because it is the United States and a great power, but also because it was hindering the emergence of a more progressive social order. That was the self-understanding of many who were in solidarity with Vietnam or with Cuba.

Today, I doubt that even the people who proclaim “We are all Hezbollah” or “We are all Hamas” would say that those movements represent an emancipatory social order. At best what is involved is an Orientalist reification of the Arabs and/or Muslims as the Other, whereby the Other, this time, is affirmed.

It is yet another indication of historical helplessness on the part of the left, the inability to come up with any imaginary of what a post-capitalist future might look like. Not having any vision of a post-capitalist future, many have substituted a reified notion of “resistance” for any conception of transformation. Anything that “resists” the United States becomes regarded positively. I regard this as an extremely questionable form of thought.

Even in the previous period — when solidarity with Vietnam, Cuba, etc. predominated — I think the division of the globe into two camps had very negative consequences for the left. The left too often found itself in the position of being the mirror image of Western nationalists.

Many on the left became nationalists of the other side. Most of them — there were some significant exceptions — were extremely apologetic about what was going on in Communist countries. Their critical gaze was blunted. Instead of developing a form of internationalism that was critical of all existing relations, the left became supporters of one side in another version of the Great Game.

This had disastrous effects on the left’s critical faculties — and not only in the case of Communists. It’s absurd that Michel Foucault went to Iran and regarded the revolution of the mullahs as having some progressive dimensions.

One thing that made the two-camp vision seductive is that Communists in the West tended to be very progressive people — very brave people, often — who suffered for their attempts to, in their minds, create a more humane and progressive and perhaps even socialist society. Those people were completely instrumentalised; but, because of the double character of Communism, it was very difficult for some people to see that. The segments of the Social Democratic left who opposed those Communists and saw how they were being manipulated themselves became ideologues of Cold War liberalism.

I don’t think the left should have been on either side of that divide. But I also think the situation for the left is worse today.
Boycott Israel?

Many activists on the left, often motivated by a just desire to “do something”, anything, to support the Palestinians, now promote thoroughgoing boycotts of Israel as the best means of expressing solidarity. Workers’ Liberty has long argued against this approach. This article, from 2010, makes the case against boycotts. It is available online at bit.ly/anti-boycott.

“Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means which unite the working class, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts…”

Leon Trotsky, Their Morals and Ours

Since Israel’s brutal invasion of Gaza in January 2009, calls for international boycotts of various aspects of Israeli society – whether academic, cultural, sporting, economic or simply thoroughgoing, root-and-branch boycotts “of Israel” – have gained prominence.

Many trade unions have adopted some form of pro-boycott position, and the tactic is also being debated in the student movement. At present, unfortunately, the dominant voices opposing it are supporters of the Israeli government and those who believe that student unions should have nothing to do with big political issues.

Workers’ Liberty condemned and opposed Israel’s invasion of Gaza, and we condemn and oppose its occupation of the Palestinian territories. We believe solidarity with the Palestinians should be the left’s starting point on the question of Israel/Palestine. But we believe that the proposal to boycott Israel is reactionary, counter-productive and will hinder efforts to build an effective movement of solidarity with the Palestinians.

In this briefing, we set out our arguments against the boycott, and for a different kind of solidarity with the Palestinians and the Israeli left.

Why boycotts will not help the Palestinians

We oppose the oppression of the Palestinians by Israel both because we are against oppression in general, and because it undermines the development of the kind of politics we want to see in the Middle East – revolutionary politics, with workers of different national and religious groups uniting in the struggle against capitalism.

Unless they fight for the right of every people to freely determine their own future – a right the Palestinians are currently denied – workers in the region will never build a movement capable of overthrowing capitalism.

So the urge to “do something” for the Palestinians is a good one. But boycotts of Israel are not a good thing to do. They are likely to be ineffective; in so far as they are effective they will harm the Palestinian cause, and have other negative consequences too.

It’s unlikely your student union shop stocks many Israeli goods; it’s unlikely your university has many links with the Israeli government. The boycott is not so much about directly exerting pressure as about creating a general political climate. And the political environment it creates will not benefit the Palestinian struggle.

Many, perhaps most, Israelis support their own government’s policy. The Palestinians have every right to struggle for their freedom now, regardless of what support they have in Israel. But what they need most of all is Israeli allies.

The Palestinian struggle has been going on for decades, but has not succeeded. The Israeli government is too strong. It will most likely take big political (and social) upheavals within Israel to force it to change policy. In fact, it will probably require the replacement of this Israeli government by a very different one. So the attitude of most Israelis matters.

In Israel, there is an anti-occupation movement, involving both Arabs and Jews. There are demonstrations against Israel’s wars, sometimes larger and sometimes smaller. (The opposition to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon mobilised 250,000 people, the equivalent of 2.5 million in a country the size of the UK.) There are anti-settlement, anti-separation fence, anti-road block and anti-house demolition campaigns. There are anti-racist groups. Perhaps most impressive in courage if not in numbers are the Shministim, anti-war high school students who have gone to prison for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. One of these comrades toured the UK on a speaker tour Workers’ Liberty organised in March last year.

This left, broadly defined, is small and weak, like in Britain, but it exists. It needs support and solidarity.

There is also, of course, the Israeli working class, the great majority of which is ethnically ‘Jewish’. Parts of it are organised, and have fought big struggles. Most workers, and at least the leaders of their trade union organisations too, currently support the government. But as socialists, we think it is self-evident that what Israeli workers think should be of concern.

Boycotts will certainly weaken the left, internationalist, pro-Palestinian wing inside Israel, and strengthen the right, by making Israelis feel as if a hostile world is pressing down on them (of the course the history of the Holocaust and antisemitism play a role here too). The more effective they are – for instance, the more Israelis lose their jobs or livelihoods as a result – the stronger this negative impact will be. Boycotts will harm, not help, the Palestinians.
Do boycotts work? The Israel-South Africa comparison

One comparison frequently made by supporters of the boycott is between Israel and apartheid South Africa, against which there was a high-profile and widely-supported international boycott. In fact there is not a lot of evidence that the South African boycott worked.

It ran from the early 1960s to 1994, with little effect. What was decisive was the struggles of black workers and poor in the townships, who from the late 1970s became organised, for instance in the multi-racial trade unions. They brought the apartheid regime to its knees, forcing it to hand over to the ANC for fear of something “worse”, i.e. a workers’ revolution.

There were also problems with the boycott as it was constituted – the bourgeois leaders of the ANC, for instance, tried to use it to prevent direct links between the independent trade unions and workers’ organisations in other countries. But, overall, the left was right to support the boycott. Its aim was to make apartheid South Africa stink in the nostrils of world public opinion, and rightly so. Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians also stinks, but the differences are decisive. Israeli-Palestine is not South Africa.

For Marxists, “apartheid” was not simply a term of abuse, but had a definite class content. It was a peculiar social system in which a white caste, intertwined with the capitalist ruling class, denied the black majority elementary political rights in order to enforce their super-exploitation. The answer, short of socialist revolution, was a single state with equal rights for all. For democrats, let alone socialists, there could be absolutely no question of “national rights” for the whites, of collective rights for whites as a group (as distinct from living with individual equal rights after the overthrow of apartheid). The majority of the people in the single state of South Africa supported the boycott. It was therefore right to support it, with whatever criticisms and scepticism.

The Israelis are not a narrow caste, and Israeli is not an apartheid state, but a nation – one that denies rights to and oppresses the Palestinians, but a nation nonetheless. Iraq, Iran and Turkey are not “apartheid states” because they oppress the Kurds, and Russia is not an “apartheid state” because of its occupation of Chechnya.

Israel’s social structure is decisively different to that of apartheid South Africa. It is a national entity, not simply a narrow settler-caste. Within Israel, there are Israeli-Jewish-Hebrew speaking capitalists, workers, intermediate layers. The great majority of the working class is ethnically “Jewish”, and for the reasons explained above, their view matters. They do not have the right to support the denial of rights to the Palestinians, but they do have the right to want to keep their own national rights. That is why in Palestine, unlike in South Africa, the best immediate settlement from a working-class point of view is two states (with equal rights for everyone in both states, of course).

We can see why the Palestinian trade unions and others support a boycott. In the desperate situation they face, this is understandable. But we do not agree. The existence of two nations, with two working classes, makes things more complicated.

In terms of the Arab citizens of Israel, they face discrimination in many areas of life. We oppose and condemn this. But the situation more resembles the racism and discrimination historically faced by black and ethnic minority people in the UK or US than it does apartheid South Africa. Israeli Arabs have formally equal rights, they can vote, there are Arab members of the Knesset.

There are Arab members of the Israeli national sports teams which some want to boycott. None of this is to suggest that their situation is anything other than one of a very severely discriminated-against minority facing intense racism, but apartheid is simply not an accurate description.

Some of the military-administrative techniques of oppression adopted by Israel in its war against the Palestinians resemble those used by the South African regime. But the social and political realities of Israel-Palestine and South Africa are fundamentally dissimilar. Recognising that in no way lessens our hostility to the oppression of the Palestinians; in fact it grounds it in reality.

Is Israel “the” problem? Should we support any measure that hits Israel?

Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians is a big part of the problem; the major problem, in fact, and the one we should focus on. But it is not the only problem. A big part of what is wrong with the way some left-wingers talk about Israel-Palestine is their totally one-sided and un-nuanced condemnation of Israel.

What, for instance, about the fact that most of Israel’s neighbours do not and have never recognised its right to exist – and have tried to crush it in three wars (1947, 1967, 1973)? What about the fact that many Arab states have also mistreated the Palestinians (particularly Jordan, which has carried out terrible massacres)? Israel’s imperialism, its chauvinism, its nationalism (Zionism) have to be understood within a network of interlocking, antagonistic and mutually reinforcing imperialisms, chauvinisms and nationalisms.

Again, this is not to excuse Israel’s crimes, but to understand their context – and therefore understand how to fight them. To refuse to do this means distorting reality, and therefore, in effect, giving up on changing it.

We repeat: the urge to do something to stop oppression is good. That does not mean that doing anything, no matter how harmful and counterproductive, is a good idea.

What about academic boycotts?

If anything, academic boycotts are even worse. Many Israeli academics have been highly critical of the Israeli government’s policy towards the Palestinians; and it is quite clear that we need to build links between academics and students in Palestine, Israel and other countries to make solidarity with the Palestinians and fight for a democratic settlement.

The fruits of such boycotts can be seen by what happened in 2002, when Manchester academic Mona Baker sacked Israeli colleagues Gideon Toury and Miriam Shlesinger from journals she ran. Shlesinger is the former chair of the Israeli section of Amnesty International, who had been active in a Jewish-Arab group defying IDF blockades to deliver supplies to Palestinian towns in the West Bank!

Some argue that academic boycotts should apply to those academics who refuse to condemn and oppose their government, but clearly that’s not how Mona Baker understood the boycott. We might also add that since many boycott supporters oppose not just Israel’s policies but its existence, how far would Israeli academics have to go to escape the net? What if they oppose the war against the Palestinians, but support a two-state settlement and maybe even – shock, horror – call themselves “Zionists”?

In any case, why is Israel the only country in the world to which these standards should be applied? Should we boycott Chinese scientists, literature professors and mathematicians who refuse to condemn the Tiananmen Square massacre, or perhaps even support the Stalinist regime? What about boycotting Chinese universities as a whole, since after all they are much more directly state-controlled, with dissent much tightly limited than in their Israeli equivalents?
In fact, no one advocates such boycotts. Israel is singled out. This is a problem with the boycott movement in general. Supporters of boycott need to explain why they do not also advocate boycotting other states which commit human rights abuses, for instance Turkey for its treatment of the Kurds or Sri Lanka for its horrendous massacres of the Tamils – or indeed the US or Britain for their imperialist adventures across the world.

Should we be advocating that British students and academics boycott themselves?

**Be consistent!**

There are good reasons why, in general, the left is sceptical about boycotts as a form of struggle. They promote ideas of consumer rather than workers’ power, power residing on people’s shopping lists rather than in their workplaces. They are often counterproductive. But Israel seems to be a special case. Why?

Obviously, it’s sometimes necessary to focus on particular struggles at particular times (e.g., Israel-Palestine at the time of the invasion of Lebanon). But unless the left clearly evidence that best activists will have a limited amount of time and energy, and therefore have to pick and choose what they want to be active on.

In general you should try to take up as many different issues as possible, and be universalist in your opposition to exploitation and oppression. (One of the problems with the boycott Israel movement is that it often fails to acknowledge other similar or worse situations that exist in the world.)

There is nothing about taking a position on Israel-Palestine, or making practical solidarity, that suggests being inconsistent by failing to take up other struggles.

Boycotting an entire country, however, is different. If a student union is going to boycott Israel, shouldn’t it logically boycott all states which deny human rights? The only possible answer to this is try to make out that Israel is different, perhaps uniquely, usually by grotesquely exaggerating its (real) crimes and, in effect, downplaying those of other states.

**The dangers of antisemitism**

Workers’ Liberty has also written a lot about the potentially antisemitic implications of a widespread boycott campaign. What do we mean by this? Clearly, no one on the left is antisemitic in the sense of racist far-right-style raving. However, we do think there are two distinct issues that mean that boycott creates a danger of antisemitism.

Firstly, those who support a boycott, and justify this by exceptionalising Israel, are often remarkably soft when it comes to opposing antisemitism. There are numerous examples, so let us pick a few. i) The Socialist Workers Party, a key force behind the boycott campaign, regularly invites jazz musician Gilad Atzmon, an ex-Israeli citizen who, despite being from a Jewish background himself, is effectively an antisemitic conspiracy theorist, to play at its events. Even radical anti-Zionist Jews, some of whom support a boycott, have condemned this, but the SWP does not relent. ii) On demonstrations against Israel’s 2006 invasion of Lebanon, SWPers joined in chants of “we are all Hezbollah”, explicitly aligning themselves with a far-right, antisemitic Islamist force. In other words a culture is being created on the left where antisemitism is seen as more acceptable than other forms of chauvinism.

Secondly, we believe the logic of the boycott is itself antisemitic – not in the straightforwardly racist sense, but in the sense of being comprehensively hostile to most Jewish people alive. Clearly, the idea that all Jews, wherever they were born and wherever they live, should identify with and support Israel in order to be “properly Jewish” is offensive nonsense. Indeed, many Jews around the world oppose Israel’s government and its project in the occupied territories. But nearly 50% of the world’s Jews live in Israel itself, and it is clear that even the great majority of those who don’t support the existence of an Israeli-Jewish national entity in some form – the main exceptions being far-right religious “anti-Zionist” groups like Neturei Karta.

This means that, while they may set out simply to target supporters of the Israeli government, boycotts almost inevitably become focused on targeting the biggest site of support “for Israel” (that is, any support for the existence of an Israeli-Jewish national entity) – Jewish communities.

The corporations that boycott campaigners choose to target certainly raise some questions. Starbucks (which certainly deserves criticism for its appalling workers’ rights record, both in terms of how it treats the workers who supply its coffee and the workers who sell it on UK high-streets) has been targeted on the basis that it “funds Israel” and specifically “donates its profits to the Israeli military”. Its Jewish CEO, Howard Schultz, is a supporter of the state of Israel (as well, obviously, as being a ruthless capitalist exploiter) but claims about Starbucks directly “funding” Israel or its military are fabricated and stem largely from a hoax letter written on an anti-Zionist website. Even if one thinks it is legitimate to target Starbucks on the basis that one of its bosses is a supporter of the state of Israel, it is not a big leap from targeting a company because its Jewish owner supports the state of Israel to targeting a company because it is assumed that its Jewish owner (or its owner who is assumed to be Jewish) supports the state of Israel. Marks & Spencer, for example, was founded by Russian Jewish immigrants who became convinced Zionists.

But today its concrete “support” for Israel hardly extends beyond capitalist norms that apply to most big multinational retailers (i.e. it stocks Israeli goods and has links to commercial operations in Israel), and yet it is still a prominent target for boycott campaigners.

“Left-wing” boycotters should ask themselves: how will making a tiny, tiny dent in Marks & Spencer’s UK sales figures make life better for the Palestinians? How will it do anything apart from convince people that “consumer power” is something to be relied upon and, worse, create an atmosphere in which businesses known to be, or to have been, Jewish-owned are placed under direct suspicion of “Zionism” and all made potential targets?

Jewish community organisations have fallen foul of boycott-type campaigns, too. In the 1980s, some left-led student unions tried to ban student Jewish Societies on the basis that they were “racist” because they supported Israel. Student members of the organisation that became Workers’ Liberty took a lead in opposing the bans and they were fought off.

Of course, some Jewish Societies did and do support the Israeli government; they are politically wrong, and the left should oppose that. But if, for example, a Chinese students’ society came out in support of the Chinese government, would it be right to try and ban them? No – it would be a racist outrage.

This is not to say that everyone who supports a boycott, or most of its supporters, are antisemitic. It is not to deny that many boycotters are militant fighters against antisemitism in other respects. But it is to say that these issues should be considered and given supporters of the boycott serious pause for thought.

**Solidarity, not boycotts**

Given the politically problematic, limiting and potentially deeply counterproductive nature of boycotts, we do not believe they are a useful tool for building a movement that can make solidarity with the Palestinians on a rational, internationalist basis.

As socialists, we believe that the main people fundamentally
capable of effecting progressive change in Israel-Palestine are the Palestinian and Israeli working classes, and that working-class and student movement activists elsewhere in the world can be most effective by supporting initiatives that aid the development of united working-class struggle against the occupation on the ground.

Political programme matters here; we believe that a solidarity movement can only be meaningful if it is based on politics that recognise the existence of two distinct national groups in the region and aspires to the unity of their working-classes rather than an endless cycle of nationalistic and chauvinist hostility.

One of the tragedies of the boycott is that a number of trade unions have adopted it and then done nothing, literally nothing, to actually support the Palestinians. The union which has done most to support the Palestinians is the RMT, which during the year that it opposed boycotts sponsored a speaker tour with a refuser and campaigned in support of Arab rail workers sacked due to racist discrimination in Israel. (The leadership then got the policy changed and has done little since.) We need positive campaigning activity.

We believe that activists should put their time and energy into building material support and solidarity for initiatives like the Workers’ Advice Centre, which organises both Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian Arab workers, including many migrant and precarious workers shut out by the mainstream Israeli trade union movement. We should support organisations like the Democracy and Workers’ Rights Centre in Ramallah, which organises Palestinian workers to fight for independence as well as for workers’ rights within the currently occupied territories. We believe activists should support forces within Israeli society like the refusers’ movement, who are on the frontline of attempts to undermine the Israeli state’s expansionist, militarist project. Boycotts are not complementary to such activity – they cut against it.

Boycotts are at best a diversion and at worst a dangerous dead-end. Activists should fight for positive solidarity instead.

We believe that direct links and solidarity with socialists, internationalists, and other radical activists in Israel and Palestine is a better approach than boycotts. This picture shows activists from Israel’s “Standing Together” movement, which brings together Jews and Arabs to fight against occupation and racism, and for equal rights for both peoples, including equal national rights, protesting killings in Gaza in 2018. These movements represent the best hope for the future of the region. “Boycott Israel” politics cut against the need to offer them direct support and solidarity.

Workers’ Liberty has been active in building solidarity with organisations like the Workers’ Advice Centre (WAC-Maan), a radical trade union organisation in Israel/Palestine which organises both Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian-Arab workers. For more on their activities, visit their English-language website at: eng.wac-maan.org.il
Leon Trotsky on Stalinist antisemitism

Stalinist antisemitism did not begin with its “anti-Zionist” campaigns of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and later. The Stalinist regime used and encouraged antisemitism from its earliest days. This article by Leon Trotsky, entitled “Thermidor and Antisemitism” (1937), shows Trotsky analysing Stalinist antisemitism. It also gives some insight into his views on Jewish nationalism, which remained fluid throughout his life. The article is online at bit.ly/thermidor-as.

At the time of the last Moscow trial I remarked in one of my statements that Stalin, in the struggle with the Opposition, exploited the antisemitic tendencies in the country. On this subject I received a series of letters and questions which were, by and large – there is no reason to hide the truth – very naive.

“How can one accuse the Soviet Union of antisemitism?” “If the USSR is an antisemitic country, is there anything left at all?” That was the dominant note of these letters.

These people raise objections and are perplexed because they are accustomed to counterpose fascist antisemitism with the emancipation of the Jews accomplished by the October Revolution. To these people it now appears that I am wringing from their hands a magic charm. Such a method of reasoning is typical of those who are accustomed to vulgar, non-dialectical thinking. They live in a world of immutable abstractions. They recognise only that which suits them: the Germany of Hitler is the absolutist kingdom of antisemitism; the USSR, on the contrary, is the kingdom of national harmony. Vital contradictions, changes, transitions from one condition to another, in a word, the actual historical processes escape their lackadaisical attention.

It has not yet been forgotten, I trust, that antisemitism was quite widespread in Tsarist Russia among the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie of the city, the intelligentsia and the more backward strata of the working class. “Mother” Russia was renowned not only for her periodic Jewish pogroms, but also for the existence of a considerable number of antisemitic publications which, in that day, enjoyed a wide circulation. The October Revolution abolished the outlawed status of the Jews. That, however, does not at all mean that with one blow it swept out anti-Semitism. A long and persistent struggle against religion has failed to prevent suppliants even today from crowding thousands and thousands of churches, mosques and synagogues. The same situation prevails in the sphere of national prejudices. Legislation alone does not change people. Their thoughts, emotions, outlook depend upon tradition, material conditions of life, cultural level, etc. The Soviet regime is not yet twenty years old. The older half of the population was educated under Tsarism. The younger half has inherited a great deal from the older. These general historical conditions in themselves should make any thinking person realise that, despite the model legislation of the October Revolution, it is impossible that national and chauvinist prejudices, particularly antisemitism, should not have persisted strongly among the backward layers of the population.

But this is by no means all. The Soviet regime, in actuality, initiated a series of new phenomena which, because of the poverty and low cultural level of the population, were capable of generating anew, and did in fact generate, antisemitic moods. The Jews are a typical city population. They comprise a considerable percentage of the city population in the Ukraine, in White Russia and even in Great Russia. The Soviet, more than any other regime in the world, needs a very great number of civil servants. Civil servants are recruited from the more cultured city population. Naturally the Jews occupied a disproportionately large place among the bureaucracy and particularly so in the lower and middle levels.

Of course we can close our eyes to that fact and limit ourselves to vague generalities about the equality and brotherhood of all races. But an ostrich policy will not advance us a single step. The hatred of the peasants and the workers for the bureaucracy is a fundamental fact of Soviet life. The despotism of the regime, the persecution of every critic, the stifling of every living thought, finally the judicial frame-ups are merely a reflection of this basic fact. Even by a priori reasoning it is impossible not to conclude that the hatred for the bureaucracy would assume an antisemitic color, at least in those places where the Jewish functionaries compose a significant percentage of the population and are thrown into relief against a broad background of the peasant masses.

In 1923 I proposed to the party conference of the Bolsheviks of the Ukraine that the functionaries should be able to speak and write in the idiom of the surrounding population. How many ironical remarks were made about this proposal, in the main by the Jewish intelligentsia who spoke and read Russian and did not wish to learn the Ukrainian language! It must be admitted that in that respect the situation has changed considerably for the better. But the national composition of the bureaucracy changed little, and what is immeasurably more important, the antagonism between the population and the bureaucracy has grown monstrously during the past ten to twelve years. All serious and honest observers, especially those who have lived among the toiling masses for a long time, bear witness to the existence of antisemitism, not only of the old and hereditary, but also of the new, “Soviet” variety.

The Soviet bureaucrat feels himself morally in a beleaguered camp. He attempts with all his strength to break through from...
his isolation. The politics of Stalin, at least to the extent of 50 percent, is dictated by this urge. To wit: (1) the pseudo-socialist
demagogy (“Socialism is already accomplished,” “Stalin gave,
gives and will give the people a happy life,” etc.); (2) political
and economic measures designed to build around the
bureaucracy a broad layer of a new aristocracy (the
disproportionately high wages of the Stakhanovites, military
ranks, honorary orders, the new “nobility,” etc.); (3) catering to
the national feelings and prejudices of the backward layers of
the population.

The Ukrainian bureaucrat, if he himself is an indigenous
Ukrainian, will, at the critical moment, inevitably try to
emphasise that he is a brother to the peasant – not some sort of
foreigner and under no circumstances a Jew. Of course there is
not – alas! – a grain of “socialism” or even of elementary
democracy in such an attitude. But that’s precisely the nub of
the question. The privileged bureaucracy, fearful of its
privileges, and consequently completely demoralised,
represents at present the most anti-socialist and most anti-
democratic stratum of Soviet society. In the struggle for its
self-preservation it exploits the most ingrained prejudices and
the most benighted instincts. If in Moscow, Stalin stages trials
which accuse the Trotskyists of plotting to poison workers, then
it is not difficult to imagine to what foul depths the bureaucracy
can resort in some Ukrainian or central Asiatic navel!

He who attentively observes Soviet life, even if only through
official publications, will from time to time see bored in various
parts of the country hideous bureaucratic abscesses: bribery,
corruption, embezzlement, murder of persons whose existence
is embarrassing to the bureaucracy, violation of women and the
like.

Were we to slash vertically through, we should see that every
such abscess resulted from the bureaucratic stratum. Sometimes
Moscow is constrained to resort to demonstration trials. In all
such trials the Jews inevitably comprise a significant
percentage, in part because, as we already stated, they make up
a great part of the bureaucracy and are branded with its odium,
partially because, impelled by the instinct for self-preservation,
the leading cadre of the bureaucracy at the center and in the
provinces strives to divert the indignation of the working
masses from itself to the Jews. This fact was known to every
critical observer in the USSR as far back as ten years ago, when
Stalin regime had hardly as yet revealed its basic features.

The struggle against the Opposition was for the ruling clique
a question of life and death. The program, principles, ties with
the masses, everything was rooted out and cast aside because
of the anxiety of the new ruling clique for its self-preservation.
These people stop at nothing on order to guard their privileges
and power. Recently an announcement was released to the
whole world, to the effect that my youngest son, Sergei Sedov,
was under indictment for plotting mass poisoning of the
workers. Every normal person will conclude: people capable of
preferring such a charge have reached the last degree of moral
degradation. Is it possible in that case to doubt even for a
moment that these same accusers are capable of fostering the
antisemitic prejudices of the masses?

Precisely in the case of my son, both these depravities are
united. It is worthwhile to consider this case. From the day of
their birth, my sons bore the name of their mother (Sedov).
They never used any other name – neither at elementary school,
nor at the university, nor in their later life. As for me, during
the past thirty-four years I have borne the name of Trotsky.
During the Soviet period no one ever called me by the name of
my father (Bronstein), just as no one ever called Stalin
Dzhugashvili. In order not to oblige my sons to change their
name, I, for “citizenship” requirements, took on the name of
my wife (which, according to Soviet law, is fully permissible).
However, after my son, Sergei Sedov, was charged with the
utterly incredible accusation of plotting to poison workers, the
GPU announced in the Soviet and foreign press the “real” (!)
name of my son is not Sedov but Bronstein. If these falsifiers
wished to emphasize the connection of the accused with me,
they would have called him Trotsky since politically the name
Bronstein means nothing at all to anyone. But they were out for
another game; that is, they wished to emphasise my Jewish
origin and the semi-Jewish origin of my son. I paused at this
episode because it has a vital and yet not at all exceptional
character. The whole struggle against the Opposition was full
of such episodes.

Between 1923 and 1926, when Stalin, with Zinoviev and
Kamenev, was still a member of the “Troika,” the play on the
strings of antisemitism bore a very cautious and masked character.
Especially schooled orators (Stalin already then led an
underhanded struggle against his associates) said that the
followers of Trotsky are petty bourgeois from “small towns”
without defining their race. Actually that was untrue. The
percentage of Jewish intellectuals in the Opposition was in no
case any greater than that in the party and in the bureaucracy.

It is sufficient to name the leaders of the Opposition for the
years 1923-25: I.N. Smirnov, Serebryakov, Rakovsky, Piatkov,
Preobrazhensky, Krestinsky, Murdalov, Beloborodov,
Mrachkovsky, V. Yakovlev, Sapronov, V.M. Smirnov, Ishtchenko
– fully indigenous Russians. Radek at the time was only half-
sympathetic. But, as in the trials of the grafters and other
scoundrels, so at the time of the expulsions of the Opposition
from the party, the bureaucracy purposely emphasised the
names of Jewish members of casual and secondary importance.

This was quite openly discussed in the party, and, back in
1925, the Opposition saw in this situation the unmistakable
symptom of the decay of the ruling clique.

After Zinoviev and Kamenev joined the Opposition the
situation changed radically for the worse. At this point there
opened wide a perfect chance to say to the workers that at the
head of the Opposition stand three “dissatisfied Jewish
intellectuals.” Under the direction of Stalin, Uglanov in
Moscow and Kirov in Leningrad carried through this line
systematically and almost fully in the open. In order the more
sharply to demonstrate to the workers the differences between
the “old” course and the “new,” the Jews, even when
unreservedly devoted to the general line, were removed from
responsible party and Soviet posts. Not only in the country but
even in the Moscow factories the bating of the Opposition back
in 1926 often assumed a thoroughly obvious antisemitic
character.

Many agitators spoke brazenly: “The Jews are rioting.” I
received hundreds of letters deploiring the antisemitic methods
in the struggle with the Opposition. At one of the sessions of the
Politburo I wrote Bukharin a note: “You cannot help
knowing that even in Moscow in the struggle with the
Opposition, methods of Black Hundred demagogues
(antisemitism, etc.) are utilised.”

Bukharin answered me evasively on that same piece of paper:
“Individual instances, of course, are possible.” I again wrote: “I
have in mind not individual instances but a systematic agitation
among the party secretaries at large Moscow enterprises. Will
you agree to come with me to investigate an example of this at
the factory “Skorokhod” (I know a number of other such
episodes).” Bukharin answered, “All right, we can go.”

In vain I tried to make him carry out the promise. Stalin most
categorically forbade him to do so. In the months of
preparations for the expulsions of the Opposition from the
party, the arrests, the exiles (in the second half of 1927),
the antisemitic agitation assumed a thoroughly unbridled
character. The slogan, “Beat the Opposition,” often took on
the complexion of the old slogan “Beat the Jews and save Russia.”
The matter went so far that Stalin was constrained to come out
with a printed statement which declared: “We fight against
Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev not because they are Jews but
because they are Oppositionists,” etc. To every politically
thinking person it was completely clear that this consciously
equivocal declaration, directed against “excesses” of antisemitism, did at the same time with complete premeditation nourish it. “Do not forget that the leaders of the Opposition are Jews.”

That was the meaning of the statement of Stalin, published in all Soviet journals. When the Opposition, to meet the repressions, proceeded with a more decisive and open struggle, Stalin, in the form of a very significant “jest,” told Piatakov and Preobrazhensky: “You at the least are fighting against the C.E., openly brandishing your axes. That proves your ‘orthodox’ action. Trotsky works slyly and not with a hatchet.” Preobrazhensky and Piatakov related this conversation to me with strong revulsion. Dozens of times Stalin attempted to counterpose the “orthodox” core of the Opposition to me.

The well known German radical journalist, the former editor of Aktion, Franz Pfemfert, at present in exile, wrote me in August 1936: “Perhaps you remember that several years ago in Aktion I declared that many actions of Stalin can be explained by his antisemitic tendencies. The fact that in this monstrous trial he, through Tass, managed to ‘correct’ the names of Zinoviev and Kamenev represents, by itself, a gesture in typical Streicher style. In this manner Stalin gave the ‘Go’ sign to all antisemitic, unscrupulous elements.”

In fact the names, Zinoviev and Kamenev, it would seem, are more famous than the names of Radomislyski and Rozenfeld. What other motives could Stalin have had to make known the “real” names of his victims, except to play with antisemitic moods? Such an act, and without the slightest legal justification, was, as we have seen, likewise committed over the name of my son. But, undoubtedly, the most astonishing thing is the fact that all four “terrorists” allegedly sent by me from abroad turned out to be Jews and – at the same time – agents of the antisemitic Gestapo! Inasmuch as I have ever actually seen any of these unfortunates, it is clear that the GPU deliberately selected them because of their racial origin. And the GPU does not function by virtue of its own inspiration!

Again, if such methods are practiced at the very top where the personal responsibility of Stalin is absolutely unquestionable, then it is not hard to imagine what transpires at the factories, and especially at the kolkhozes. And how can it be otherwise? The physical extermination of the older generation of the Bolsheviks is, for every person who can think, an incontrovertible expression of the Thermidorian reaction, and in its most advanced stage at that. History has never yet seen an example when the reaction following the revolutionary upsurge was not accompanied by the most unbridled chauvinistic passions, antisemitism among them.

In the opinion of some “Friends of the USSR,” my reference to the exploitation of antisemitic tendencies by a considerable part of the present bureaucracy represents a malicious invention for the purpose of a struggle against Stalin. It is difficult to argue with professional “friends” of the bureaucracy. These people deny the existence of a Thermidorian reaction. They accept even the Moscow trials at face value. There are not “friends” who visit the USSR with special intention of seeing spots on the sun. Not a few of these receive special pay for their readiness to see only what is pointed out to them by the finger of the bureaucracy. But woe to those workers, revolutionists, socialists, democrats who, in the words of Pushkin, prefer “a delusion which exalts us” to the bitter truth. One must face life as it is. It is necessary to find in reality itself the force to overcome its reactionary and barbaric features. That is what Marxism teaches us.

Some would-be “pundits” have even accused me of “suddenly” raising the “Jewish question” and of intending to create some kind of ghetto for the Jews. I can only shrug my shoulders in pity. I have lived my whole life outside Jewish circles. I have always worked in the Russian workers’ movement. My native tongue is Russian. Unfortunately, I have not even learned to read Jewish [Yiddish].
Is left antisemitism a form of racism?

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty has historically drawn a distinction between left antisemitism, which we have described as “politically-constructed”, and racialised forms of antisemitism. However, this subject is a matter of debate, including in our own organisation. These articles, by Camila Bassi and Martin Thomas, discuss left antisemitism in the context of wider anti-racist politics. The exchange can be found online at bit.ly/left-as-exchange.

Demistifying left antisemitism

By Camila Bassi

Racism

Much of the British Left comprehends antisemitism as the exclusive property of the Right: either as a phenomenon of the far Right (fascists) against Jewish people, or as a false accusation by the Israeli Right and its allies against the Left to silence political criticism of Israel, or as an ironic bedfellow of the Israeli Right to justify its existence as an expansionist and racist nation-state.

The aim of this article is to demystify left-wing antisemitism and to explain how it is a form of anti-Jewish racism.

In the history of racism, a key transformation occurred with the epistemological shift from religion to science as the standard criterion to measure and evaluate the apparent nature of the social and material world. Miles (1989: 20) explains the early origins of European racism:

“By the fifteenth century, the centre of economic and political power in Europe had consolidated in the emergent nation states of the north and west of the continent […]. Trade, travel, and exploration were interdependent elements in an attempt by the feudal ruling classes to resolve a major economic crisis […] and together, they widened the European contact with populations elsewhere in the world.

“This resulted in a major change in the structural context within which representations of the Other were generated and reproduced. Up to this point, the non-Islamic Other was beyond and outside the European arena. Moreover, in the case of the discourse about the Islamic Other, it was for a long time a representation generated in the context of European subordination to a greater economic and military power.

“But once the emergent European city and nation states began to expand their material and political boundaries to incorporate other parts of the world within a system of international trade […], a system which was subsequently linked with colonial settlement, the populations they confronted in this exercise were within the arena of Europe in an economic and political sense, even though not spatially.

“And when colonisation became an objective, a class of Europeans began a new era of contact and interrelationship with indigenous populations, a contact that was increasingly structured by competition for land, the introduction of private property rights, the demand for labour force, and the perceived obligation of conversion to Christianity. Collectively, these were all embodied in the discourse of ‘civilisation’.”

From the late eighteenth century, with the secularisation of culture and the rising hegemony of science, a change in European representations of the Other took place, namely, “the emergence of the idea of ‘race’” – “an idea that was taken up by scientific enquiry and increasingly attributed with a narrow and precise meaning”:

“As a result, the sense of difference embodied in European representations of the Other became interpreted as a difference of ‘race’, that is, as a primarily biological and natural difference which was inherent and unalterable. Moreover, the supposed difference was presented as scientific (that is, objective) fact. This discourse of ‘race’, although the product of ‘scientific’ activity, came to be widely reproduced throughout Europe, North America and the European colonies in the nineteenth century, becoming, inter alia, a component part of common-sense discourse at all levels of the class structure and a basic component of imperialist ideologies […].” (Miles 1989: 30-31)

This scientific discourse of “race” did not simply replace earlier representations of the Other, rather earlier ideas of “savagery, barbarism, and civilisation both predetermined the space that the idea of ‘race’ occupied but were then themselves reconstituted by it” (Miles 1989: 33).

Vis-à-vis anti-Jewish racism, the historical shift from Christian antisemitism (which was religious-based) to racial antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries effectively fused religion with the idea of ‘race’ born from ‘racial’ science. Miles (1989: 36) observes that within Europe: “representations of the Other as an inferior ‘race’ focused, amongst others, on the Irish […] and Jews (Mosse 1978). This was sustained partly by claiming a biological superiority for the Nordic ‘race’.” Campaigns for immigration controls in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century focused on Jewish refugees from eastern Europe: “The notions of ‘immigrant’ and ‘alien’ became synonymous in everyday life with that of Jew […] Moreover, Jewishness was increasingly interpreted as a quality determined by blood, and therefore as hereditary and ineradicable. References to the existence of a Jewish ‘race’ became common. This ‘race’ was signified as an alien presence
that had the potential to destroy civilised society through the promotion of an international conspiracy; consequently, the Jews became the racialised ‘enemy within’ “ (Miles 1993: 135-136).

Within a wider economic and political crisis, it was in Nazi Germany “that the idea of the Jews as a degenerate, unproductive and criminal ‘race’, as simultaneously a ‘race’ of exploiters and revolutionaries […]”, evolved into a state policy and practice of genocide (Miles 1989: 59).

While the end of the Second World War marked an era in which the scientific establishment largely discredited the determining biological category of ‘race’, the idea of ‘race’ survives and continues to evolve as an everyday common-sense discourse, id est, as an ideological framework for making sense of the world and its social and material relations.

**Antisemitic anti-Zionism**

In the USSR the period between 1949 and 1953 was marked by an officially-endorsed anti-Zionism that was antisemitic. This period concluded in a series of show trials which demonised the alleged collaborators of Zionism as bourgeois, cosmopolitan, Trotskyist, and conspiratorial enemies of the state.

By the end of this period Zionism was popularly depicted as the stalking horse of US and Western imperialism. Post-1967, another official anti-Zionism campaign began in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Oschlies (1979: 161) illustrates its antisemitism by referencing a letter published in June 1968 in the Prague evening newspaper Vecerní Praha:

“During the last few years a tacit, but persistent, antisemitism has informed official attitudes, and it will take a long time before it can be eradicated … In this context the word Zionism is invariably used. Please take your notebook and interview people; I am sure they will tell you what they always tell me: that (a) Jews are out to destroy the socialist countries; (b) Jews aspire to world domination; (c) They want to revenge themselves for the victims of the gas chambers.”

With antisemitic anti-Zionism becoming common currency in Stalinist Communist Parties worldwide, the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s (pioneered by a number of ex-Communist Party members) inherited this tendency as part of a general leftist, anti-imperialist, third worldist, and ultimately dual campist outlook. After the formation of the nation-state of Israel in 1948, general public opinion in the West, including on the Left, regarded Israel as a civilised country amid backward, barbaric masses who desired its annihilation. As this opinion

![The Czech communist leader Rudolf Slánský was executed as part of an antisemitic show-trial in 1952, in which he was accused of “Zionism”.

The turning point was the outcome of the 1967 war: “the Israeli victory in the 1967 war and subsequent settlement of occupied Arab territories […] brought the younger generation of Western Marxists, the Trotskyst or Maoist ‘new left’, to an extreme anti-Israeli position. Israel, which from 1967 also developed close relations with the US, was condemned as racist, the oppressor of the Palestinians and the main progenitor of imperialism and colonialism in the Middle East […]” (Golan 2001: 129).

**Colonial model of racism**

Miles (1989: 67; 1993) is astutely critical of “much of the British and North American theorising about capitalism and racism since the 1960s”.

Although such theorising acknowledges the immorality of racism which culminated in the Holocaust, it nonetheless: “utilises a colonial model which has little scope to explain much of the European racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and certainly not that form of racism which others label antisemitism […] it does, however, have a relevance to the controversial debate about whether or not Zionism can be defined as an instance of racism […].

“Consequently, we are offered definitions and theories of racism which are so specific to the history of overseas colonisation (that is, specific to the domination of ‘white’ over ‘black’ as so many writers express it) that they are of little value in explaining any other (non-colonial) context.” (Miles 1989: 67-68).

Miles insists that a theorisation and analysis of racism grounded solely in colonial history and which subsequently elevates the somatic characteristic of skin colour – such that racism is exclusively understood as a “white ideology” created to dominate “black people” – has “a specific and limited explanatory power” (Miles 1993: 148). Vis-à-vis the history of anti-Jewish (and anti-gypsy) racism in Europe, he explains:

“These instances demonstrate that, contrary to those who argue that ‘being black’ makes ‘black’ people especially vulnerable to racism in a ‘white society’, it is because visibility is always the outcome of a process of signification in a historical context that one can conclude that those who cannot be seen by virtue of their really existing phenotypical features are equally vulnerable to being racialized: their ‘non-visibility’ can be constructed by the racist imagination as the proof of their ‘real’ and ‘essential’ (but ‘concealed’) difference, which is then signified by a socially imposed mark (as in the example of the Nazi requirement that Jews wear a yellow Star of David […]).” (Miles 1993: 13-14)

In sum, the colonial model of racism, as prevalent in US and British academia (and indeed on the wider political Left), is not able to explain the combination of events, circumstances, and social relations in which certain populations have been racialised and excluded without being colonised; furthermore, this model offers intellectual credibility to the ahistorical notion of ‘Zionist racism’: of rich, colonial, white Jews oppressing poor, anti-colonial, brown Arabs.

Contra the colonial model of racism, Miles (1993: 21) advances a theorisation and analysis of racism that focuses on: “the articulation between the capitalist mode of production and the nation state, rather than between capitalism and colonialism, because […] this maps the primary set of social relations within which racism had its origins and initial effects. Colonialism was an integral moment of this articulation, but racism was not an exclusive product of colonialism […]”.

Miles (1993: 61-62) recognises the concurrent development of racism and nationalism, and their potential overlap:

“The theorisation of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ took place at a time of
‘internal’ European political and economic reorganisation and ‘external’ colonial expansion, in the course of which the range of human cultural and physiological variation became more widely known to a larger number of people.

The extension of capitalist relations of production increased the circulation of commodities and of people, and this increasing mobility, migration and social interaction provided part of the foundation upon which the ideologies of racism and nationalism were constructed. The increasing profusion of physiological and cultural variation, as recognised in western Europe, became the object of intellectual curiosity and, thereby, of the theoretical practice of scientists and philosophers.

“But it also became the focus of political attention and action as populations within and beyond Europe were nationalised and racialised by the state [...]”

Contemporary left anti-Jewish racism

I contend that operating in and through a mainstream current of leftist understanding of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a particular ideological form of anti-Jewish racism which works to both “fix” and “make sense” of this conflict.

This anti-Jewish racism has roots in the Stalinist Left and New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the more general history of racism. What’s more, this anti-Jewish racism is compounded by the legacy of US and British academia’s colonial model of racism, which, one, provides limited to no recognition of racism beyond what “white people” do to “black/brown people” (and, within the recent discourse of Islamophobia, of what “white people” do to “black/brown Muslims”) and, two, intellectually endorses an ahistorical notion of Zionism as an instance of racism.

Leftists in this current argue that it is necessary for individual Jews to break from ‘them’ and assimilate to ‘us’ by becoming anti-Zionists who vocally denounce the existence of Israel. Indeed, the Left’s promotion of certain individual Jews who have done just this – for example, Ilan Pappe, Norman Finkelstein, Gilad Atzmon, and Tony Cliff (born Yigael Gluckstein) – is held up as proof of the Left’s tolerance and acceptance of Jews. And yet it is with critical qualification. Indeed, the evolving nature of racism has led to many instances in which its discourse accommodates the Other through a deemed necessary process of assimilation.

With racism in general, real and imagined somatic and/or cultural characteristics have historically been and continue to be signified as an innate mark of “race”. Indeed, there are historical instances in which representations of the Other have been based exclusively on cultural characteristics, notably, “European representations of the Islamic world”, which “extensively utilised images of barbarism and sexuality in the context of a Christian/heathen dichotomy” (Miles 1989: 40).

Similar to all other manifestations of racism, with contemporary left anti-Jewish racism it is not difference per se that matters but the identification of this difference as significant (Miles 1989). The difference that racism signifies is related to what we might understand as ethnicity: to common geography, familial heritage, and socio-cultural constitution, such as language, food, and clothing.

Contemporary left anti-Jewish racism involves a process of signification that defines the Other by real and imagined cultural features – *id est*, it marks out a group of people in relation to Israeli/Zionist Jewishness - and assigns this categorised group of bodies with negative characteristics and as giving rise to negative consequences. This Jewish Other is generalised with a singular and static understanding of Israel and Zionism: that this Jewish collective has uniquely world domineering and tyrannical power.

The leftist demand (often implicit) that the Israeli Jewish nation-state must be undone because it is uniquely despotic (comparable only to fascist Germany and/or apartheid South Africa) – a judgement and a demand not made of any other nation-state worldwide now or in history – is racist. It is racist because real and imagined cultural characteristics have been and are signified as an innate mark of the nature of Israel and Zionism (and of the cultural “race” of Jews associated with Israel and Zionism), which are deemed especially deplorable and negative in characteristics and consequences.

Furthermore, the logic underpinning the leftist demand to boycott Israeli academia is an unprecedented denial and writing-off of any progressive role for the Israeli-Jewish working class now or in the future. This is racist since this working class is singled out and solidified like none other and is generalised as a cultural “race” (of the collective Zionist Jews) that is especially wretched and negative in characteristics and consequences.

Miles (1993: 49) does well to remind us that:

“In so far as Marxism asserts that all social relationships are socially constructed and reproduced in specific historical circumstances, and that those relationships are therefore in principle alterable by human agency, then it should not have space for an ideological notion that implies, and often explicitly asserts, the opposite.”

References


Distinctions on left antisemitism

By Martin Thomas

Modern political antisemitism consists in damning the very existence of the Israeli state (however modified) as inescapably racist and imperialist, and thus damning all Jews who fail to renounce connection to or sympathy with Israel (however critical) as agents of racism and imperialism.

More traditional racial antisemitism consists in damning Jews, as a hereditary supposed “race”, as constitutionally malevolent and disruptive.

There is no Chinese wall between these forms of antisemitism, or indeed between either of them and other forms of antisemitism in history (Christian, reactionary anti-capitalist, etc.) However, there are distinctions, and it is important to understand these if we are to convince left-minded people influenced by strands of antisemitism rather than only cursing them.

I adduce five reasons for distinguishing between political antisemitism and racial antisemitism.

1. The term “racism” has acquired a diffuse width of meaning, and at the same time come to be cognate with crimes and immoralities rather than with erroneous (or hurtfully erroneous) ideologies. When we are arguing with people who have straddles or traits in their thinking of political antisemitism, but who (by their own lights) abhor racial antisemitism, to call
them “racist” cuts short the argument. It conveys to them that we do not wish to dispute political ideas with them, but instead to brand them as criminal.

2. Antisemitism is much older than racism. It is possible, of course, to stretch the term racism by back-defining it to cover many phenomena from centuries before the term existed. But to do that blurs rather than clarifies. In particular, it blurs the ways in which antisemitism operates quite differently from general racism (or, if you insist on putting it that way, from other racism).

3. It is indeed, as Camila points out, disorienting to identify racism exclusively or overwhelmingly as an offshoot of European colonialism. But it is equally disorienting to identify it as a characteristic offshoot of nationalism, presumably of irredentist and revanchist Arab nationalism. Political antisemitism has a dynamic different from both nationalism and racism.

4. Being Jewish does not license antisemitic views, any more than being a woman licenses hostility to feminist demands. But the high-profile Jewish political antisemites are clearly not “self-hating Jews”, either.

5. If we abandon the distinction between political antisemitism and racism, then that makes us no longer able to point out and denounce where people drift over the line.

Widening of the term “racism”

The word “racism” (and its synonym “racialism”, more common until the early 1970s) has an odd history.

Xenophobia in various forms is old. The systematic division of humankind into races, and desire to promote or defend one “race” (the vast majority of whose other members are utterly remote to you) against another, is relatively new.

With the development of capitalism, and the consequent decay of social classifications which consigned categories of people to helotry from birth, like serfdom, racist ideologies emerged as rationalisations for defining “alien” hereditary groups of people (such as dark-skinned people) as excluded from the full human rights now being claimed by others. The heyday of doctrines which sought to consolidate such rationalisations as “science” was from the late 18th century through to the late 19th century.

In the early 20th century, when the world was dominated by European colonial imperialism, “scientific” racism was already much discredited, but looser doctrines had great weight. Karl Kautsky, writing on the question, felt he had to take it as given that there were such things as “races”, so as then to show that “in the place of sharply distinct races, unchanged for long periods, we find a constant and increasingly rapid process of race disintegration... natural scientists are by no means agreed on the division of human races, but are obliged to admit that everything is in a state of flux... there is nothing more absurd than the theory of the ‘natural’ hostility between races”.

Yet the words “racist” or “racialist” were rarely used. The left conducted its battles against racism without using the word.

The word “racism” came into wider use from the 1930s, as more and more people (including many themselves tainted by “racial” prejudice) expressed horror at the “racial” doctrines of the Nazis.

Its use remained fairly steady until about 1960, and then, in the aftermath of the winning of independence of most of the European colonies, increased enormously.

It increased hugely yet again from the early 1980s, before levelling off around 2000. I take that second surge to reflect the ascent of neoliberalism, under which (as our comrade Danny Reilly showed in articles in the mid 1970s) governments combined drives against racial discrimination within their own countries (reckoned to cause friction and waste of resources) with restrictive immigration policies, racist by implication but not explicitly.

The anti-racist drive of neoliberalism has gone with the grain of many efforts from labour movements and the left, and has had successes. Overt racial discrimination, almost everywhere, is not a question of dispute, but a crime. Even far-rightists today insist that they are not racists.

The use of the term “racism” has widened. Today it has come to mean, not just discrimination, hostility, or subjugation on the pretext of explicit theories about biological “race”, but a wider range of disadvantaging. It can include “inadvertent” racism or “institutional” racism.

This widening is a good thing. It means that a wider range of discriminatory or divisive practices get examined and criticised.

It can, however, be abused, by branding critical discourse about ideas and cultures as “racial”. A section of the left has defended its complaisance towards political Islam by claiming that any other attitude is “racist”. Thus in 2013 we had people on Facebook branding us “racist” because of rough comments on political Islam. This year we had Socialist Worker denouncing the “Council of Ex-Muslims” (people “racially” similar to still-Muslims) as “racists” because they joined the Pride march with provocative anti-Islamic placards.

Elsewhere, speedily resort to the label “racist” often serves to close arguments and replace them by exchanges of abuse, rather than to sharpen and clarify them.

The two SWP-linked groups in Australia, Solidarity and Socialist Alternative, differ on the question of “457 visas”, visas for certain categories of migrant temporary contract workers. Socialist Alternative stresses opposition to 457 visas, in a way that sometimes must come across as suggesting the expulsion of 457-visa workers. Solidarity stresses trade-union organising of 457-visa workers.

A few years ago they held a more-or-less civil debate on the issue. However, the gist of it was each group trying to brand the other’s position as “racist”. There were more substantive arguments made, but the fundamentals of the debate were played out on the basis of one side being “racist”.

It is surely arguable that pushing for British exit from the EU, when it is known that the chief (and desired) result of exit is to block free migration from Eastern Europe, has racist implications against East-European peoples.

However, to denounce pro-Brexit positions flatly as “racism”, or pro-Brexit people as “racial”, is to widen the use of the terms in a counterproductive way. The pro-Brexit people will see the denouncers not as attempting to have a (maybe heated) argument with them, but rather as accusing them of a crime.

Those who think that free movement from Eastern Europe will bring “too many” people here, undercutting wages, overstretched housing and other social provision, are wrong. You can tease through implications from their argument which are “racist” in terms of ranking Poles or Romanians lower than British-born people. But often, in fact usually, they are really not “racist” in terms of considering Poles or Romanians to be “races” which are by heredity less deserving of rights than others.

Most left-wing people with political antisemitic views do not at all consider Jewish people to be a “race” which is by heredity less deserving of rights than others. They are sincerely shocked at what you call “Zionism” — a quality different from that of your political opposition to neoliberalism, or radical feminism.
or whatever — and that “something special” has implications which may make you want to reconsider...

**Antisemitism operates differently from racism**

Antisemitism is much older than racism. For most of its history, antisemitism — Muslim, and, much worse, Christian — stigmatised and disadvantaged Jews not as a “race” but as a religious grouping. Jews could and did escape the stigma and disadvantage by converting to Islam or Christianity.

19th century antisemitism built on Christian antisemitism, but gave it a twist, identifying Jews with hated aspects of capitalism. Modern political antisemitism, derived from the Stalinist campaign of the late 40s and early 50s, continues that reactionary anti-capitalist strand, combining it now with a reactionary anti-imperialist strand which identifies Israel as the world’s hyper-imperialism.

Thus antisemitism operates differently from racism — or from other racism, if you prefer. Moishe Postone explains: “The way in which antisemitism is distinguished, and should be distinguished, from racism, has to do with the sort of imaginary of power, attributed to the Jews, Zionism, and Israel, which is at the heart of antisemitism.

“The Jews are seen as constituting an immensely powerful, abstract, intangible global form of power that dominates the world. There is nothing similar to this idea at the heart of other forms of racism... antisemitism is a primitive critique of the world, of capitalist modernity. The reason I regard it as being particularly dangerous for the left is precisely because antisemitism has a pseudo-emancipatory dimension that other forms of racism rarely have”.

**Racism, nationalism and antisemitism**

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote about the Ivory Coast:

“If the national bourgeoisie goes into competition with the Europeans, the artisans and craftsmen start a fight against non-national Africans. In the Ivory Coast, the anti-Dahoman and the anti-Voltaic troubles are in fact racial riots. The Dahoman and Voltaic peoples, who control the greater part of the petty trade, are, once independence is declared, the object of hostile manifestations on the part of the people of Ivory Coast. From nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally racism”.

Camila is right: racism is not only an expression and legacy of imperialist exploitation, and not only white-against-black. As Fanon describes, racism is not only an expression and legacy of imperialist exploitation, and not only white-against-black.

Some comrades have argued that in recent years the sections in the Labour left (for example) influenced by left political antisemitism have drifted so that now many of their attitudes are much closer to “old-fashioned” antisemitism.