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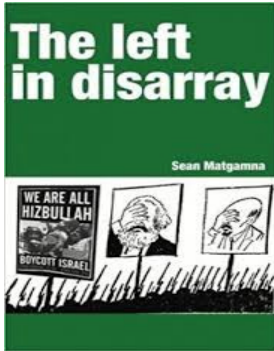
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WHAT IS LEFT ANTISEMITISM?

SEAN MATGAMNA

Contemporary left-wing antisemitism is first and foremost a denial of Israel's right to exist and, as a result, a comprehensive hostility to pro-Israel Jews, that is to most Jews alive, branding them as 'Zionists' and seeing that description as akin to 'racist' or 'imperialist,' writes Sean Matgamna. In this clear-sighted essay taken from his book, [The Left in Disarray](#) (Workers Liberty Press, 2017), he sets out what 'left-wing antisemitism' is, where is it manifested and what is to be done about it. We would like to thank Sean Matgamna for permission to reprint the essay.

I

What is 'left-wing antisemitism'? Where is it manifested? What is to be done about it? There are three difficulties, three confusions and obfuscations that stand in the way of rational discussion of what we mean by 'left-wing antisemitism'.

The first is that left-wing antisemitism knows itself by another and more self-righteous name, 'anti-Zionism'. Often, your left-wing antisemite sincerely believes that he or she is only an anti-Zionist, only a just if severe critic of Israel.

The second is that talk of left-wing antisemitism to a left-wing antisemite normally evokes indignant, sincere, and just denial of something else! 'No, I'm not a racist! How dare you call me a racist?'

No, indeed, apart from an atypical crackpot here and there, left-wing antisemites are not racist. But there was antisemitism before there was late-19th and 20th century anti-Jewish racism. And there is still antisemitism of different sorts, long after disgust with Hitler-style racism, and overt racism of any sort, became part of the mental and emotional furniture of all half-way decent people, and perhaps especially of left-wing people.

Left-wingers are people who by instinct and conviction side with the oppressed, the outcasts,

those deprived of human rights, with the working-class and the labour movement. We naturally side against the police, the military, and the powerful capitalist states, including our 'own'. We are socially tolerant; in contrast to 'hang 'em, flog 'em, build more jails' people; we look to changing social conditions rather than to punishment to deal with crime – we are people who want to be Marxists and socialists, and consistent democrats. Confused some such people may be, racists they are not. We are not saying that left-wing antisemites are racists.

The third source of confusion and obfuscation is the objection: 'You say I'm an antisemite because I denounce Israel. I'm not anti-Jewish when I denounce Israel, but anti-Zionist.' And sometimes, at this point, you get the addition: 'By the way, I am myself Jewish.'

The objector continues: Israel deserves criticism. Even the harshest criticism of Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza, and of Israel's long-term treatment of the Palestinians, is pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist, not antisemitic. To equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism is just crude and hysterical Zionist apologetics.

No, by 'left-wing antisemitism' we emphatically do not mean political, military, or social criticism of Israel and of the policy of Israeli governments. Certainly, not all left-wing critics of Israel or Zionism are antisemites, even though these days all antisemites, including the right-wing, old-fashioned, and racist antisemites, are paid-up 'anti-Zionists'.

Israel frequently deserves criticism. Israel's policy in the Occupied Territories and its general treatment of the Palestinians deserve outright condemnation. The oppressed Palestinians need to be politically defended against Israeli governments and the Israeli military. The only halfway equitable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, a viable, independent Palestinian state in contiguous territory, side by side with Israel, needs to be argued for and upheld against Israeli power.

Solidarity condemns Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. We defend the Palestinians and champion an independent Palestinian state side by side with Israel. The difference here between left-wing antisemites and honest critics of Israel – a category which includes a very large number of Israeli Jews as well as Israeli Arabs – is a straightforward one of politics, of policy.

The left-wing antisemites do not only criticise Israel. They condemn it outright and deny its right to exist. They use legitimate criticisms, and utilise our natural sympathy with the Palestinians, not to seek redress, not as arguments against an Israeli government, an Israeli policy, or anything specifically wrong in Israel, but as arguments against the right of Israel to exist at all. Any Israel. Any Jewish state in the area. Any Israel, with any policy, even one in which all the specific causes

for justly criticising present-day Israel and for supporting the Palestinians against it have been entirely eliminated.

The root problem, say the left-wing antisemites, is that Israel exists. The root 'crime of Zionism' is that it advocated and brought into existence 'the Zionist state of Israel'.

Bitterly, and often justly, criticising specific Israeli policies, actions, and governments, seemingly championing the Palestinians, your left-wing antisemites seek no specific redress in Israel or from Israel, demanding only that Israel should cease to exist or be put out of existence.

They often oppose measures to alleviate the condition of the Palestinians short of the destruction of Israel. Thus the petitions and chants on demonstrations: 'Two states solution, no solution!' They use slogans like 'Free Palestine' precisely because they can be understood in different ways, depending on your definition of 'Palestine'. Therefore they can accommodate those who, without having studied the complexities or the history of the Jewish-Arab conflict, instinctively side with the oppressed and outmatched Palestinians, and for whom 'Free Palestine' means simply that Israel should get out of the Occupied Territories. And it can also accommodate those, like the proponents of the slogan, the political Islamists of the Muslim Association of Britain/ Muslim Brotherhood and others, who define 'Palestine' as pre-Israel, pre-1948 Palestine, and by 'Free Palestine' mean the destruction and abolition of Israel, and the elimination in one way or another of the Jewish population of Israel, or most of them.

The political differences spelled out here are easily understood. But why is the drive and the commitment to destroy Israel antisemitism, and not just anti-Zionism?

Because the attitude to the Jewish nation in Israel is unique, different from the left's attitude to all other nations; and because of the ramifications for attitudes to Jews outside Israel. Apart from a few religious Jews who think the establishment of Israel was a revolt against God, and some Jews who share the views of the leftists whom we are discussing here, those Jews outside Israel instinctively identify with and support Israel, however critically. For the left-wing antisemite they are therefore 'Zionists,' and proper and natural targets of the drive to 'smash Zionism'.

The attitude of the 'anti-Zionist' Left to Israel brings with it a comprehensive hostility to most Jews everywhere – those who identify with Israel and who defend its right to exist. These are not just people with mistaken ideas. They are 'Zionists'.

In colleges, for example, where the anti-Zionist Left exists side by side with Jewish students, this attitude often means a special antagonism to the 'Zionist' Jews. They are identified with Israel.

They, especially, are pressured either to denounce Israel, to agree that it is 'racist' and 'imperialist' and that its existence is a crime against the Arabs – or else be held directly and personally responsible for everything Israel does, has done, or is said to have done.

In such places, where the Left 'interfaces' with Jews, the logic of the unique attitude to Israel takes on a nasty persecuting quality. In the past, in the mid 1980s for example, that has taken the form of attempting to ban Jewish student societies. Non-Jews who defend Israel's right to exist are not classified in the same category.

But is the attitude of the 'absolute anti-Zionists' to Israel really unique? There are seeming similarities with Left attitudes to one or two other states – Protestant Northern Ireland, apartheid South Africa, or pre-1980 white-ruled Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) – but the attitude to Israel is unique, because the reality of Israel cannot properly be identified with Northern Ireland, apartheid South Africa, or white Rhodesia.

In apartheid South Africa and white Rhodesia a minority lorded it over the big majority of the population, exploiting them. Israel is a predominantly Jewish state consisting of all classes. The Jewish nation does not subsist, and never has subsisted, on the exploitation of Arab labour, or depended in any essential way on such exploitation.

The general left hostility to the Northern Ireland Protestants – who are not exploiters of Catholic labour, and who are the compact majority, if not of the Six Counties, then of the north-east half of the Six Counties – is the closest to the attitude to Israel.

But it is not widely believed on the Left that the Northern Ireland Protestant-Unionists simply have no right to be there. The right of the Jews to 'be there' is denied in those sections of the Left that we are discussing. The organisation of Jewish migration to Palestine – that was the root 'crime' of Zionism, of which the 'crime' of establishing Israel was only a further development. The 'solution' is not only to undo and abolish Israel, but to reverse Jewish 'migration' – which now includes people born there, to parents born there – and to roll the film of Middle-Eastern history backwards.

The prerequisite for left-wing antisemitism is the catastrophic decline in the culture of the Left over the last decades, a decline which allows people who want to be socialists to chant 'Sharon is Hitler, Israel is Nazi' and similar nonsense without checking on the words, without pausing to listen to what they are saying, or to think about it. The specific framework within which what we have been describing exists, and without which it probably couldn't exist in these 'left-wing' forms, is the poisonous and systematic misrepresentation and falsification of the history of the

Jewish-Arab conflict and of the Jewish people in the 20th century. We can only touch on that here.

In real history, Jews fled to Palestine, where a small Zionist colony and a small pre-Zionist Jewish community already existed, from persecution in Europe in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. In the 1930s and 40s they fled for their lives from Nazism, which killed two out of every three Jews alive in Europe in 1939, in a world in which no non-persecuting state would let them, or enough of them, in. They fled to the existing Jewish national minority in Palestine (a long-established minority which, though small, was for example the majority in Jerusalem in 1900).

While Hitler was organising mass slaughter, Britain shut out Jews from Palestine, interning those who tried to enter. Overloaded, unseaworthy boats carrying illegal cargoes of Jews sank in the Mediterranean trying to get to Palestine (for example, the Struma, in which over 700 people died).

Israel was set up by those Jews on licence from the UN, which stipulated two states in Palestine, one Jewish and one Arab. When the State of Israel was declared in May 1948, the surrounding Arab states invaded. Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt were then British-dominated, and some of the armies were staffed by British officers. The Israelis defended themselves and won. In the war three quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs were driven out or fled; in the same period and afterwards, about 600,000 Jews were expelled from or fled Arab countries.

In the Arab invasion of 1948, the Arab-Palestinian state was eliminated. Most of its territory went to Jordan, and fell under Israeli control in the war of 1967. That was a tremendous tragedy that will only be redressed when an independent Palestinian state takes its place alongside Israel.

This complex and tragic history is presented by the 'absolute anti-Zionist' Left as a conspiracy of Zionism, conceived of as a demonic force outside general history and outside Jewish history. It is not rare to find 'Left anti-Zionists' arguing that this Jewish-Zionist conspiracy was so all-powerful that it was able even to manipulate Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust in which six million Jews died (see the play by the veteran Trotskyist Jim Allen, *Perdition*, of which Ken Loach planned a performance at a London theatre in 1987). The core idea, the root of modern left-wing antisemitism, is that Israel, in one way or another, is an illegitimate state; and that therefore, in one way or another, it should be done away with. If its citizens will not be the first in history to voluntarily dismantle their nation-state and make themselves a minority in a state run by those whom they have had to fight for national existence; if they will not agree to voluntarily dismantle Israel and create a 'secular democratic Arab state,' in which Israeli Jews can have religious but not national rights – then they must be overwhelmed and compelled to submit or flee by the Arab states,

now or when they are strong enough.

Beginning with the benign-seeming proposal to sink Israel into a broader Arab-majority entity in which ‘everyone could live in peace,’ the chain of logic rooted in the idea that Israel should not have come into existence, that it is an illegitimate state, leads directly – since Israel will not agree to abolish itself – to support for compulsion, conquest, and all that goes with it. Israel must be conquered.

Even the work of a writer like Hal Draper can feed into this poisoned stream. While Draper made valid and just criticisms of Israel, he accepted that it had a right to exist and a right to defend itself. He denounced those who wanted to destroy it. But he made his criticisms in the tone and manner of a prophet denouncing sin and iniquity. He too thought that Israel was an illegitimate state, that it should never have come into existence and should go out of existence as soon as possible.

By agreement, and only by agreement, he believed; but the subtleties get lost. There is nothing to stop someone swayed by Draper’s denunciations of Israel, and accepting his idea that Israel is an illegitimate state, then impatiently insisting: if not by agreement, then by conquest. And so an increasingly-disoriented SWP-UK could look to a Saddam Hussein to ‘free Palestine,’ that is, conquer Israel. The point here is that states and nations are the products of history. There is no such thing as an illegitimate nation or a ‘bad people’ which does not deserve the same rights as other peoples.

The antisemitic Left today, which depicts Israel as the hyper-imperialist power – either controlling US policy, or acting as its chief instrument, the story varies – is in the grip of an ‘anti-imperialism of the fools’. And that in practice leads to a comprehensive hostility to Jews not far from what Bebel called the socialism of fools. One of the great tragedies of contemporary politics is that many young people, whose initial instincts to oppose Bush and Blair in Iraq and to support the Palestinians are initially healthy, are being poisoned with ‘left-wing’ antisemitism.

‘Left-wing antisemitism’ is, in short, first a denial of Israel’s right to exist and rooted in that a comprehensive hostility to pro-Israel Jews, that is to most Jews alive, branding them as ‘Zionists’ and seeing that description as akin to ‘racist’ or ‘imperialist’. It excepts only those Jews who agree that Israel is racist imperialism in its most concentrated essence, and oppose its continued existence.

The general antidote to this anti-imperialism of fools is the propagation of rational democratic and socialist politics. Such politics focus on a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. They

measure and criticise Israel – and the Arab states – according to their stand in relation to that just solution – the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

There is an immediate ‘antidote’ to left-wing antisemitism too, and it is a very important task for Marxist socialists like those who publish *Solidarity*: relentless exposure and criticism of their politics and antics – without fear of isolation, ridicule, or the venomous hostility of the vocal and self-righteous left-wing antisemites.

II

We need to specify what ‘Left antisemitism’ consists of, in order to debate, educate, and clarify. These, I think, are its main features.

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. Advocacy of the destruction of Israel, which is what separates left-wing and Islamist antisemites from honest critics of Israeli policy, should not be tolerated in the labour movement and in the serious left.

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 Jewish students, for example, can only redeem themselves if they agree that the very existence of Israel or of an Israeli Jewish nation 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 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 abolish itself. It is not the equivalent of free immigration to the UK, or even of mass migration to the UK of millions from Syria, Libya, and Africa. Its equivalent for Britain would be the settlement in the country, organised by a hostile authority, of 60 million people. Socialists should of course 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, 12 to 14 million Germans were driven out of Eastern Europe. They were driven into a Germany reduced to ruins by wartime bombing, where economic life had seized up and millions were starving. Only fringe German nationalists now propose to reverse that forced population movement and to drive out the Poles, Czechs, Russians, etc. who live where Germans once lived.

6. There is a peculiar dialect 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 the anti-Zionist left habitually deny is that this unique fact of history had repercussions that we should at least recognise and try to understand, with some sympathy for the surviving Jews and their descendants. 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 and hardened the will for a Jewish solution to the Jewish question and for the creation of Israel. There is nothing to be surprised at or scandalised by 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, reverberating 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 plainly and explicitly. But it is there as an 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, as now, by Israeli domination of the whole territory and Palestinians living indefinitely in a purgatory 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. If, as may be possible, a Palestinian Arab state is made impossible by the spread of Israeli settlements, then the future will be grim indeed for both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews.

