

Zionism and anti-Semitism

Escaping the 'bloody trap'

Frank Richards examines an issue that causes widespread confusion

Zionism is the subject of a long-running controversy on the left, and the cause of the most heated debates in student politics. The issue is clouded by emotion, making it hard to discern where passion ends and objective analysis begins. All sides of the debate are party to this confusion. Left-wing defenders of Israel are often influenced by guilt about the Holocaust; they apply a double standard, and treat the actions of the Zionist state more sympathetically than they would those of other regimes. Left-wing opponents of Israel, meanwhile, sometimes attack Zionism in a fashion that barely conceals an underlying anti-Semitism. Marxists must take a step back from such unworthy emotions. It is essential to approach this problem from a perspective which consistently opposes both Zionism and anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism has deep roots in capitalist society. Although the capitalist class claims to uphold the ideals of freedom and equality, in practice it has never been able to grant these rights to all. Since the nineteenth century, anti-Semitism has acquired a modern form in Europe. Although there is sometimes little public sign of anti-Semitism, it tends to come back into view during periods of social crisis.

Today, anti-Semitism is not a force

in British society. It is certainly unimportant compared to the virulent xenophobia that the British right directed at the Jewish people around the turn of the century, as evidenced in publications like Joseph Banister's *England Under the Jews*, written in 1901:

'No Jew is more of a hero among his fellow tribesmen than one who can boast of having accomplished the ruin of some friendless, unprotected Christian girl. Owing to this fact, the male members of what is probably the most lecherous breed in existence have in every country acquired such a vile reputation among working women, that English servant girls who desire to preserve their respectability can seldom be persuaded to take service in Jewish families.'

Banister's ravings about 'Yiddish gorillas' were happily accepted as good coin among the English upper classes in Edwardian times. Today such sentiments are confined to extreme right-wing publications with no influence; the better-known modern caricatures of Jews, like Maureen Lipman's character in the Telecom adverts, are mild by comparison.

Although anti-Semitism lacks the respectability it enjoyed in the past, it would be wrong to conclude that it

has disappeared. The unpopularity of former Tory home secretary Leon Brittan, for example, was considerably enhanced by innuendo about his Jewishness. Across the Channel in France, anti-Semitism represents a significant force. Jean Marie Le Pen's Front National has given a contemporary expression to old hatreds.

No way in

Many liberals express surprise that, after the horror of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism can still influence some people in the West. They are confused because they see anti-Semitism as an irrational prejudice which has no place in a modern capitalist society. In reality capitalism continually recreates the conditions for discrimination, and throws up barriers to the full assimilation of Jewish people into society.

The recognition that assimilation was not a viable option first prompted people like Theodor Herzl, Moses Hess and Max Nordau to assume leadership of the early Zionist movement in Europe. In the late nineteenth century they had seen their attempts at assimilation knocked back by Christian society. This rejection led them to conclude that Jews needed their own homeland if they were to survive as a people.

At the turn of the century Zionism was a relatively marginal movement within the European Jewish community. Most middle class Jews were committed to making their way in the world through assimilation. There was also a progressive current among working class Jews influenced by Marxism. Many socialist Jews understood that the solution was neither assimilation into capitalist society nor the separatist option of Zionism. They saw the key to the liberation of Jewish people as a working class revolution, to overthrow the system which perpetuated the conditions in which anti-Semitism could thrive.

So, in the early years of this century, there were three distinct strands within the Jewish community: a small minority of Zionists, middle class assimilationists, and a growing socialist movement within the working class. How was Zionism transformed from a minority viewpoint into a defining Jewish response?

Where to flee to?
Zionism grew with
Hitler's rise



The policy of assimilation was destroyed by the growing momentum of anti-Semitism. A wave of pogroms in eastern Europe at the turn of the century was followed by the far more insidious development of fascist and other far-right movements in central and western Europe. In the decade following the Russian Revolution of 1917, capitalism suffered a profound crisis which provoked a major right-wing backlash. Although the main targets were the organisations of the working class, attacking the Jews also provided a convenient focus for popularising reactionary ideas. In this atmosphere of heightening hostility to all things Jewish, the option of assimilation lost credibility.

Jewish progressives experienced a setback around the same time, with the defeats inflicted on the international working class in the twenties and thirties. After 1917 the outlook of internationalism, of workers' unity across national and racial lines, had inspired millions and countered anti-Semitism. But within a few short years internationalism was undermined by the hammering which the workers' movement took in the capitalist world, and by the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union.

By the late twenties there was an obvious lack of working class solidarity with Jews. In Stalin's Soviet Union, anti-Semitism was on the way to becoming respectable. Worse still, many of the Stalinised European Communist parties had begun adapting to the growing current of anti-Semitism. By 1930, the German Communist Party was keeping its Jewish leaders off public platforms, for fear that the Nazis might accuse it of being unpatriotic! It was hardly surprising, then, that many Jewish workers became disillusioned with socialism and that internationalism began to lose its appeal.

Zionism's rise

This was the background to the growth of Zionism as a dominant influence within European Jewry. As Hitler moved towards mastery over Europe, the alternatives to Zionism seemed exhausted. The growth of the Nazis, and the rise of anti-Semitism to the status of government policy, provoked a predictable yearning for safety and security, strengthened the sense of Jewishness, and seemed to vindicate the Zionist argument. Zionists had always insisted that anti-Semitism was endemic in Christian society and that Jews could only survive in their own homeland. The Nazis' every step served to strengthen the case for Zionism.

A handful of Marxists correctly pointed out that anti-Semitism had nothing to do with the homelessness of the Jewish people. They argued that the tensions inherent in the capitalist form of social organisation

perpetuated anti-Semitism, and that the salvation of the Jewish people depended on the overthrow of that system. With perspicacity, Leon Trotsky warned in July 1940 that the 'future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews'. Given the defeats suffered by the workers' movement and the terrible growth of the Nazi threat, Trotsky's words went unheeded. In the days when the genocide machine ground on at Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, who could believe that Zionism would lead to Israel bombing Beirut and putting down a Palestinian *intifada* in the occupied West Bank?

Biblical myths

For Marxists, the Zionist response was flawed from the start. First, it is an inappropriate way of fighting anti-Semitism. Second, once Zionism is put into practice it necessarily becomes oppressive, since it attempts to solve the Jewish problem at the expense of another people.

Zionists try to endow their perspective with legitimacy by appealing to the Bible and history. These claims are entirely spurious. The Jewish people of today owe their origins to the dispersal of their forebears among many different societies around the world (usually called the Diaspora), rather than to any connection with ancient Israel. As Abram Leon convincingly argues, in every respect, only a mythical appeal links modern Jewry to the biblical Palestine (A Leon, *The Jewish Question*, 1970). The Zionist claim to Palestine is as arbitrary as that of the Rastafarians to Ethiopia.

Jewish Zionism is a variant of the separatist and exclusivist reaction to oppression which is common among many persecuted minorities. For example, the contemporary black separatist movement interprets racism as an inherent feature of whiteness, in the same way that Jewish Zionists equate anti-Semitism with gentiles. It is an understandable response, but a dangerous one. In each case the exponents of these separatist views turn isolation into a virtue, as they try to sidestep discrimination rather than overcome it. The first important argument against Zionism, then, is that it rejects the perspective of fighting anti-Semitism in society.

New oppressors

Zionism rests on the conviction that Jews have no place in gentile society, so they should leave and set up their own homeland. As a result Zionists inadvertently lend weight to the classical anti-Semitic view, which also argues that Jews ought not live among Christians. The anti-Semitic and Zionist arguments converge around the theme that Jews are 'abnormal' people.

In abandoning the struggle against

anti-Semitism, Zionists perform a disservice to Jewish people. Unlike Zionists, communists are committed to fighting anti-Semitism and all forms of racism. We recognise that so long as one section of society remains oppressed, no section can aspire to true liberation.

The second argument against Zionism is that, if its perspective is implemented, it becomes a force for oppression itself. It is not possible to set up a Jewish homeland without violating the basic rights of another people. Zionist apologists have always argued that there was nothing oppressive about establishing the state of Israel. According to Zionist mythology, Palestine was more or less empty before they arrived. As Israel Zangwill conveniently put it, Palestine was a 'land without people, waiting for a people without land'.

In fact the creation of Israel had much in common with Western colonialism. The new Jewish homeland could not be built without forcibly expelling the indigenous Palestinian population. A persecuted minority from Europe thus turned into a new oppressor in Palestine. Nobody—not even the victims of the Holocaust—has the right to oppress another people.

The reactionary character of Zionism is underlined by the fact that Israel can only survive as an ally of Western, and especially American, imperialism. The oppression of the Palestinian people necessarily breeds resistance. This resistance has forced Israel to become a garrison state, which must continually wage war against Arab peoples. Israeli militarism suits the need of the imperialist powers for a policeman in the Middle East. This alliance places Zionism in the frontline of the imperialist struggle to dominate the Middle East.

Reasonable Israel?

Today many more people are critical of Israeli militarism, and even some Zionists find it hard to stomach Israeli atrocities in Lebanon or the West Bank. They object that these actions go against the noble principles of the state's founding fathers. These criticisms fail to appreciate that, for Israel, militarism is not a policy option which could be dispensed with. It is rooted in the very foundations of the Zionist project. Israel is an artificial, imposed state which can only stand on Palestinian soil by force of arms. It cannot act 'reasonably' and compromise with Palestinian demands. If Israel were to concede that a disputed area like Jerusalem or the West Bank is not Jewish by right, it would beg the question of why Haifa or Tel Aviv should be considered sacred, since Israel has equally little claim to these parts of Palestine.

With each passing decade, Israel has to become more militaristic to

'Events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews.'
(Leon Trotsky, 1940)



Bob Gannon

From oppressed to oppressor: the Zionist state survives by force of arms

survive. Within Israel, society becomes more reactionary and less secular. Since its existence is justified by mystical appeals to the past, any attempt to construct a more enlightened brand of Zionism is doomed. On the world stage, Zionism feels at home with the most reactionary regimes. South Africa, another artificial society, is Israel's natural ally.

Twofold trap

Marxism rejects any alternative which seeks to preserve Israel on a more rational foundation. Israel breeds oppression by its very existence. The destruction of the Zionist state is the precondition for any progressive solution. We oppose all forms of oppression; therefore, we resolutely support the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination. The denial of this right is the central issue in the Middle East. There can be no progress or peace until the Palestinians are able to decide their own future.

But we also oppose Zionism because of its destructive consequences for the *Jewish* people. Trotsky was right to say that Israel would turn into a 'bloody trap' for the Jews. The Zionist project exacts a high price in Jewish blood in Palestine, and around the world. By focusing all attention on Palestine, Zionism has undermined the capacity of Jews to fight the menace of anti-Semitism as it re-emerges elsewhere.

Zionism has not solved the Jewish question. It has simply created the Palestinian question. The struggle against the state of Israel and for the

self-determination of Palestine is the point of departure for solving these two problems.

During the past decade the British left has adopted a bizarre attitude towards the issues of Zionism and anti-Semitism. While the left has done little to organise positive action in defence of the Palestinians, it has spent an inordinate amount of time denouncing Zionism. This is particularly striking in the world of student politics. In recent years a main focus for left-wing students has been to label Zionists as racists and, as such, to argue for a 'No Platform' ban on Zionists organising or speaking at colleges. Let's examine the issues raised by this campaign.

In 1975 the general assembly of the United Nations voted to brand Zionism as 'a form of racism and racial discrimination'. This resolution has become the standard justification for describing Zionist and Jewish student societies as racist. How valid is this interpretation?

Is it racism?

Zionism cannot be crudely reduced to racism. As an idea or a political outlook, Zionism is in substance a nationalist ideology. Like all nationalist ideologies it is separatist and reactionary. But it is no more inherently racist than black separatism or Catalan nationalism.

Only when Zionism is put into practice does it acquire a racist component. Zionism as a form of settler colonialism, embodied in the state of Israel, is necessarily racist, because it is based on oppressing the Palestinian Arabs. The all-round

institutionalisation of racist policies directed at non-Jews in Israel, from the Law of Return to bans on Arab ownership of land in parts of the state, is well-documented.

In making a distinction between Zionism and its practical implementation, we do not imply that one is better than the other. After all, it is the nationalist separatism of the Zionist outlook which is implemented as a racist project. We draw the distinction only to reject the narrow view that Zionism is just another form of racism.

Suspect motives

In particular, we would suggest that the attempt to ban Zionist or Jewish societies on the grounds that they are racist is ill-conceived. It is worth asking why Jewish societies have been singled out for special attention. If left-wing student groups are so concerned about oppression in the Middle East, surely they would want to devote their time to organising action in defence of the Palestinian people's democratic rights? They would have mobilised campaigns to counter the chauvinist hysteria which the Western imperialists have whipped up by branding Arabs as 'terrorists'. They would have organised demonstrations to defend Libya when it faced the Anglo-American air-strikes in 1986. Strangely, whenever these opportunities to demonstrate concern about Middle Eastern matters have arisen, much of the student movement has been conspicuous by its absence.

The demand for 'No Platform' is a retreat from political struggle

Perhaps the student left is motivated less by concern for the plight of the Palestinians than by a burning desire to fight racism? If this is so, it is odd that Zionism should be picked out for such special attention. There is plenty for students concerned about racism to do here in Britain. If Jewish societies are indeed racist, they are hardly unique. Are the Young Conservatives any less racist? Is the student body as a whole so immune from racism that Jewish societies constitute the only, or even the biggest, problem? Those who genuinely want to combat racism would find their hands more than full once they tried to deal with the home-grown British variety. More to the point, the relative dearth of forceful action against racism in Britain calls into question the motives of those who concentrate their fire on accusing Jewish student societies of racism.

In these circumstances, the 'No Platform' campaigns against Zionist or Jewish societies are at best a diversion based on a double standard. So far as we know, there have been no similar campaigns against Tory and Labour student groups on the grounds that their parties support racist British institutions like immigration controls or paramilitary policing. At worst, these campaigns represent an adaptation to anti-Semitism. By applying a standard to Jewish student societies which they would

not use against others, the 'No Platform' campaigners invite accusations that they are picking on Jews. Whatever their true motives might be, their campaigns can fight neither racism nor the oppression of the Palestinian people.

In any case, the demand for 'No Platform' is a retreat from the political struggle. If Zionists are a problem they should be defeated with political arguments, not dealt with by bureaucratic manoeuvres like bans. Administrative measures do not provide political clarity. By its nature a ban restricts the debate and breeds confusion. The left's preoccupation with censorship, and its consequent failure to carry the arguments against Zionism within the wider student body, has added to the difficulty it now faces in getting progressive policies on the Palestinian question passed in student unions.

Encouraging official bans on political grounds also sets a dangerous precedent. Once it becomes legitimate for the authorities to ban student societies, the left will be the ones to suffer. In capitalist Britain, bans are inevitably more likely to be used against progressive movements than reactionary ones. If the left creates a climate in which calling for censorship is a central feature of political discourse, it will be ill-prepared to counter the Tory government's use of the same measures to stifle political dissent. The ban-happy left has already been

caught out by the Tories' attempt to 'No Platform' such critics as Irish republicans and lesbian and gay groups. The way to counter this offensive is through open campaigning for democratic rights, rather than naively demanding that the bans be turned against supporters of the status quo.

Taking sides

Those who want to contribute to the cause of progress in the Middle East need to adopt a perspective which is resolutely anti-imperialist. The practical way to do so is to fight against Britain's reactionary role in the region. The West's attempt to criminalise Arab freedom fighters as 'terrorists' demands an urgent response. It has helped to make anti-Arab prejudice rife in Britain today. We must expose this imperialist propaganda unequivocally if we are to give positive support to Palestine.

Finally, the left should recognise that it was the lack of proletarian solidarity with the victims of anti-Semitism which allowed Zionism to dominate Jewish communities. One step towards defeating Zionism is by fighting all manifestations of the anti-Semitism which perpetuates its appeal among Jews. Another step towards that goal is by showing consistent and active support for the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

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