

I want to start off by looking at a commonsense understanding of antisemitism. This view interprets different manifestations of judeophobia as being forms of appearance of an ever present underlying antisemitism.

I will discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of this intuitive explanation.

But I would like to suggest a different approach. Rather than thinking about contemporary anti-Zionist antisemitism as a new form of a timeless problem, I would like to explore this phenomenon in its own right.

I will argue that to understand it we need to move away from explanations that focus on the alleged antisemitic motivation of anti-Zionists and towards an analysis of its possible outcomes.

Hostility to the idea and practice of Israel comes from various sources – for example liberal nationalism, Marxist anti-imperialism, democratic cosmopolitanism – and it is not the same as hostility to Jews.

Yet we have seen that it can throw up a politics and a set of practices that creates a commonsense notion of Israel as a unique evil in the world and that thereby sets itself up for a fight with the Jews that defend Israel against this charge.

We have to analyse the discourse of anti-Zionism but we also have to look at how that discourse is actualised in the living anti-Zionist movement.

And one likely outcome, I would argue, of the anti-zionist worldview, is the creation of an antisemitic movement.

Anti-Zionism does not start as antisemitism. But it does normalise hostility to Israel and to Jews. Jew-hatred is

becoming respectable for the first time since the Holocaust – on the left but not only on the left.

Some people see antisemitism as a many headed sea monster.

It lurks under the surface and it puts up different heads in different places and at different times.

Antisemitism in this view is an ever-present fact of human history. The same underlying phenomenon seems to appear in different forms.

Medieval Christian antisemitism that saw Jews as Christ-killers;

Early left antisemitism saw Jews as evil capitalists or as money lenders.

Some on the right saw Jews embodying the Bolshevik threat.

Racist antisemitism that understood Jews as a biological infection.

Now we have a ‘new antisemitism’ which is often understood as a new form of appearance of the same monster.

One strength of this view is that it is intuitive. It has often felt to Jews that each new attack was nothing but a new form of appearance of ‘the old cancer’.

Another strength of **this view** is that it can account for the fact that many of the themes and images of demonization are common to the different forms of antisemitism.

The two **central** themes are Conspiracy theories and blood libels.

These in fact go together, since every version of the blood libels assumes a Jewish conspiracy to hide the crimes.

Anthony Julius has put together a history of the blood libels – and to hear him go through it is a gruellingly relentless experience.

He details the versions of the same story that have re-appeared in every century for the last two thousand years.

In each version Jews thirst for the blood of non-Jewish children, kill the innocents, consume their blood and conspire to cover their crimes.

There have been a number of **anti-Zionist** variants:

- 1 An image produced to promote the boycott of Israel – a Jaffa orange cut in half dripping with blood “Don’t squeeze a Jaffa crush the occupation” is the slogan.

The combination of Jews, food and non-Jewish blood creates a graphic, emotive and powerful image. If you eat Jaffa oranges that the Zionists are trying to sell you, you will actually be drinking the blood of their victims.

The question is, how does such an image get produced?

There are three possible explanations.

The first possibility is that the similarity with the old themes is purely coincidental. This, however, is unlikely because these ‘coincidences’ happen too often.

Sharon is caricatured eating a baby in the Independent newspaper.

The New Statesman, a mainstream left magazine puts a graphic on its front cover that shows a British flag pierced by a gaudy golden star of David under the caption “A Kosher Conspiracy?”

Sue Blackwell tells us that Bar-Ilan and Haifa have blood on their hands.

She claims that she won the debate in the AUT but was defeated by a well-funded, global, illegitimate and covert Zionist campaign.

Tariq Ali presents evidence that Israel has an organised policy of shooting Palestinian children.

Ilan Pappé tells us that he has witnessed Israeli soldiers playing football with the head of a Palestinian child.

So the recycling of old myths happens too often for it to be purely coincidental.

The second possible explanation is that the designer of the poster is an antisemite who is consciously drawing on his tradition is unlikely –

The cartoonist in the Independent, the editor of the New Statesman, Sue Blackwell, Tariq Ali, Ilan Pappé – all come out of an antiracist tradition. All say quite clearly that they are not antisemites. I don't think any of them are conscious Jew-haters, and I don't think that any of them are knowingly drawing on the old themes.

So the third possible explanation must point the way to the answer – that there is some sense in which antisemitic themes

are deeply embedded in the culture and elements present themselves unconsciously to people looking for emotive images that can drive us to act against Israel.

The mechanism of this cultural unconscious – how and why it works, how and why it is repeated is one element of this debate that requires further research and rigorous thinking-through.

One thing is clear – that many anti-Zionists are not prepared to think it through. They angrily reject the allegation that some of their imagery mirrors old antisemitic themes.

People involving themselves in the Israel/Palestine conflict have a duty to educate themselves and those that they draw into their movement, in the history of antisemitism. But they often openly refuse to do so.

So anti-Zionism as the current form of appearance of the old cancer?

One problem with this explanation is that while each form of anti-Judaism does seem to draw on older forms, they are also hugely different phenomena. Different times, different places, different manifestations, different social forces, different narratives.

The second problem for an ahistorical essentialist view of antisemitism is that there have been many times and places where life has been pretty good for Jews – where Jews have been able to function perfectly as part of the wider community, where they have not been excluded from public life, education, the professions; where they have had freedom to worship as they wished; where **other** racisms have been more dangerous, immediate and threatening.

Contemporary Europe is in many ways one of those good times and places for Jews. Although the frequency of antisemitic attacks has been rising sharply in the last decade, you are still much more likely to be beaten up on the street, excluded from society, excluded from the economy, excluded from education, demonised in the media, if you are black or Muslim than if you are Jewish.

Evidently, **I think** that antisemitism is a significant threat in contemporary Europe.

But we need to keep a sense of proportion and a sense of reality.

The many headed sea-monster theory could lead us to react to current threats as though they were identical to previous threats.

Some Jews mistakenly thought they could appease Nazism, deal with it, come to an accommodation with it – as they had, to an extent, been able to do with previous threats. But the Nazi threat was different.

Now, some campaigners feel that they are facing an immanent genocidal onslaught of the kind that was faced in the 1940s – but perhaps the current threat is not just a new manifestation of the previous one – but is in fact a different phenomenon in a different society at a different time for different reasons.

Another problem with an essentialist and ahistorical theory of antisemitism is that antisemitism understood in this way is likely to be thought of as undefeatable.

In our small way, we have shown that this is not necessarily the case.

The boycott policy was advocated by people who argue that

Israel is the only "illegitimate" state in the world;

that Israeli nationalism is essentially different from other nationalisms;

that Zionism is a form of racism, apartheid or Nazism;

that Israel plays a pivotal role in global imperialism;

that the Zionist lobby has huge, covert and illegitimate influence;

that Israel is guilty of genocide.

Some academics, who rightly wanted to do something to help Palestinians, naively went along with the hard-core activists who were organising this campaign.

The boycott campaign discriminated against Jews (at least Israeli Jews, at least Jews who did not define themselves as anti-Zionist) and it relied on hate-filled generalizations about Israel and 'Zionism'.

The boycott campaign amounted to a singling out of Israeli academics, without any politically or morally relevant reason, for special punishment and particular abhorrence.

We forced a full, informed and democratic debate in our union, and the AUT membership overturned the boycott. Not a single union branch where there was a genuine debate decided to **support** the boycott. The boycott was reversed after a six hour discussion of the most representative Council our union has ever seen.

This points to two preliminary conclusions:

- 1 people **are** susceptible to argument. We made the case against the boycott. Most of our colleagues thought that we were right.
- 2 Most academics – in general a liberal or left-leaning constituency – rejected the politics of the demonization of Israel.

This was not a discussion between an antisemitic left and a democratic right.

It was actually a fight between two left traditions.

There have always been antisemitic currents on the left. There have always been pro-totalitarian currents on the left.

But these currents have never **constituted** the left.

They have always been opposed by those that take the values of anti-racism, of human rights and of democratic norms seriously.

One left tradition holds that liberty and democracy are important parts of a superstructure of domination and oppression. This tradition holds these central concepts of freedom to be worse than valueless – they are tricks that bind the ‘oppressed’ to their oppressors.

The other left tradition argues that liberty and democracy need to be defended and **extended** – not critiqued and de-valued.

This tradition values, for example academic freedom. And it seeks to extend it. It opened up academia to Jews and then to women and ethnic minorities and to those who could not afford to pay for it. It seeks to **actualise** academic freedom and to make it real; it is not content with a merely formal or partial notion of academic freedom.

Anti-Zionism is not a phenomenon confined to the political left.

There is a growing British conservative current that combines a romantic 'Lawrence of Arabia' orientalism with a traditional snobbish and under-stated antisemitism.

Some on the right have begun to ask why the Zionists are allowed to pull other states into wars that are not in their own interests.

Skinheads in Berlin are affecting a concern for Palestinian rights.

David Irving's website is full of links to mainstream left, centre and right anti-Zionist writing.

On the **right** also, there have always been authoritarian and antisemitic currents and these have always been opposed by right wingers that took liberty seriously and that opposed antisemitism.

And of course, Polical Islamist currents, that are difficult to place on a left-right spectrum, have been growing in influence for the last three decades. Many of these currents have openly antisemitic anti-Zionist narratives at the very heart of their rhetoric.

Anti-Zionism **as** a form of appearance of a timeless antisemitism tends to focus attention on motivation.

But in the end, we cannot know what goes on inside Stephen Rose's head; or Tariq Ali's head; or Norman Finkelstein's head; or George Galloway's head. There is a level on which all we can do is relate seriously to what they say, not what we think they might mean.

I would prefer a research project that aimed to understand rather than to denounce or to psychologise.

We went up to Haifa University on Monday to meet with faculty there, to discuss ways in which they could oppose the boycott and to tell the story of the boycott debate.

In the car, we tried to focus on this meeting – what did we want to say at Haifa?

Oh yes, of course, we remembered. The boycott had focused on Haifa. That we had forgotten this for a moment is interesting.

This boycott was not about Haifa University. Haifa had been a strategic target for those that wanted to boycott Israel as a whole

But there is a sense in which the boycott had not even **really** been about Israel either.

For us the boycott had been much closer to home.

It had been about the danger of antisemitism in our home – on our campuses, in our own academic disciplines, in our newspapers, in our trade union.

And in a sense, it wasn't even centrally about Israel or antisemitism. In a world where Palestinians have become symbolic victims and Israelis have become symbolic oppressors – **globally** - this debate is entirely removed from actual Palestinians and Israelis.

We don't ask for thanks from Bar-Ilan or from Haifa or from Israel because this was our fight as well as yours.

And our task is to understand how the left and sections of academia has been infected by ideas and politics and theories that understand liberal values to be the values of 'the oppressors'.

Engage has not called anybody “antisemitic”.

What we have said is that when you play with demonization, when you single out the Jewish state, when you denounce “Zionists” as Nazis, then you are playing with fire.

And the danger is that you will license and bring into being an antisemitic movement.

At the moment the fight is not on the streets. The fight is on the level of discourse and politics. It is a fight about which notions become commonsense. I hope it can be won on the level of discourse.

Personally, I’m better at discourse than I am at street fighting.

The **‘Zionism’** that anti-Zionist discourses depict and denounce is more like a totalising and timeless essence of evil **than a** historical set of changing and variegated beliefs and practices. It is **presented** as an unthinkable object that requires either unconditional rejection **or** belief, **rather** than as a social and political phenomenon. The term ‘Zionism’ is used in such a way as to bring it closer to the language of evil than to the province of social scientific or historical understanding. ‘Zionist’ often hits out like an insult and carries such pejorative connotations that the

reality behind it has ended up disappearing under layers of stigmatisation.

There is an enthusiasm present in anti-Zionism that is not found in the critique of other states or other nationalisms. The demonisation of 'Zionism' takes some of its **force** from the justified critique of the Israeli occupation and systematic maltreatment of Palestinians. But it points in another direction: toward a totalitarian way of thinking whose language is that of conspiracy conducted by dark forces. A solution is often conceived not in terms of peace and reconciliation but rather in terms of destroying the evil, wherever it is to be found.

Anti-Zionism is a discourse, but it is a discourse that comes alive within a social movement. And the anti-racist anti-Zionist movement lives alongside other, openly antisemitic anti-Zionist movements. And it is currently forging new political alliances across these porous and fuzzy boundaries.

I am interested in the emergent properties of these ideas, discourses and narratives when they are actualised in these living movements – when the elements of rhetoric that are carefully crafted so that they are not **formally** antisemitic gain a life of their own; when they escape the control and supervision of the “sophisticated antiracists” that formulate them.

Anti-Zionism, as well as some of those that oppose anti-Zionism, tend to construct the debate in such a way as to force one to choose between one nationalism and the other. I think that we need to resist the simple choices that we are offered.

We need to fight against the demonization of Israel and Jews but we must also reject alternatives and explanations that demonize Muslims and Arabs.