

Antisemitism and the Left: Confronting an Invisible Racism

Sina Arnold & Blair Taylor¹

The resurgence of antisemitism – from the deadly Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, the alt-right’s chant of “Jews will not replace us,” up to recent controversies within the Women’s March and UK Labour Party – caught many observers off guard. Although antisemitism is on the rise in the U.S., it has – until recently – remained conspicuously absent from progressive/left discourse and activism. These recent incidents have restored the term to the lexicon of the left, however there remains a tendency to focus exclusively on the more deadly antisemitism of the right while remaining silent about less deadly manifestations on the left. This article seeks to fill this political and analytical void by highlighting this “invisible” form of racism, challenging some common assumptions found on the left, and offering analytical and political tools rooted in an emancipatory perspective. We show that the left has a long and complicated historical relationship with antisemitism. By focusing on how antisemitism can manifest in left critiques of capitalism or global politics, we illustrate how it both overlaps with and diverges from the antisemitism of the right. We use recent examples to describe common rhetorical strategies employed to deny or downplay the existence of antisemitism within left movements, or derail conversations about it from taking place. As antisemitism continues to shape the contemporary political landscape, we argue that emancipatory movements must become familiar with its specific contours and actively address it in their political work. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2019 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

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¹ **Blair Taylor**, Ph.D., in Politics from the New School for Social Research) is Program Director of the Institute for Social Ecology. He has published on the history of the left, anarchism, right-wing ecology, and post-colonial theory.

Sina Arnold, Ph.D., in Social/Cultural Anthropology) is a lecturer and researcher at the Center for Research on Antisemitism at Technische Universität Berlin. Her work focuses on migration, contemporary antisemitism and racism. Both have been activists and educators involved in left social movements for over 25 years.

INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of antisemitism – from the deadly Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, the alt-right’s chant of “Jews will not replace us,” up to recent controversies within the Women’s March and UK Labour Party – caught many observers off guard. Although antisemitism is on the rise in the U.S. and globally, it has – until recently – remained conspicuously absent from progressive/left discourse and political activism. This silence has been compounded by the fact that attempts to address antisemitism have frequently been met by a set of responses rather unusual within a left culture typically sensitive to claims of racism.

Firstly, opposition to antisemitism is often presumed to be an automatic and inherent feature of belonging to the left: since leftists oppose all forms of racism and oppression, this, by definition, includes antisemitism. Second, many progressives assume that antisemitism is no longer a serious or systemic social problem, and therefore requires no specific attention – especially in comparison to anti-black and anti-Arab racism (Rosenblum 2007, Arnold 2015, Sunshine 2017). Lastly, some leftists often claim that addressing antisemitism is only a cynical smokescreen for defending Israel; “hasbara” – a euphemism for Israeli propaganda – that disguises anti-Arab, Zionist, and other right-wing positions in antiracist veneer. As a result of these dynamics, many on the left respond to allegations of antisemitism with uncharacteristic suspicion if not derision, in some quarters abandoning it as an issue owned by the political right.

This article seeks to fill this political and analytical void by shining a light on an “invisible” form of racism, challenging some common assumptions found on the left, and offering analytical and political tools rooted in an emancipatory perspective. We will show that the left has a long and complicated historical relationship with antisemitism, one including instances where it not only went unchallenged, but was actively reproduced. This endeavor requires clarifying how antisemitism is different from other forms of racism, outlining its core tropes and delineating it as a uniquely racialized worldview. We use recent examples to describe common rhetorical strategies employed to deny or downplay the existence of antisemitism within left movements, or derail conversations about it from taking place.

We will also highlight key historical and intellectual shifts that have shaped how left movements do or do not discuss antisemitism, a legacy that continues to mold movement discourse today. Although the recent resurgence of virulent antisemitism has put the term back into the lexicon of the left, there remains a strong tendency to focus exclusively on the

more deadly antisemitism of the right while remaining silent on less violent manifestations on the left. By focusing on how antisemitism can manifest in left critiques of capitalism, modernity, or global politics, we illustrate how it both overlaps with and diverges from the antisemitism of the right. Lastly, we will explore antisemitism in relation to the centrality of Israel and Palestine in contemporary left discourse, and the reluctance to grapple with complicated issues of framing, salience, and unwanted political bedfellows.

This text focuses primarily on the left in the United States. American leftists often tend to see antisemitism as primarily a European phenomenon, one mostly restricted to the distant past. Certainly, there have been a few attempts to address contemporary antisemitism on the left, such as April Rosenblum's pamphlet *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere* (2007), the Marxist Humanist Initiative essay "Beware of Left Anti-Semitism" (2011), the collective open letter "Not Quite 'Ordinary Human Beings'—Anti-imperialism and the Anti-Humanist Rhetoric of Gilad Atzmon" (2012), Spencer Sunshine's "The Left Must Root Out Antisemitism in Its Ranks" (2017), and "Understanding Antisemitism: An Offering to Our Movement" from Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ 2017). However, these resources remain largely unknown and invisible. Most non-Jewish Americans are unaware of the long history of antisemitism in the United States, which if acknowledged at all, is understood as a problem of the past and not the present. By contrast, we will demonstrate that antisemitism continues to be a threat globally, including in the United States.

For this reason, confronting antisemitism in theory and practice is a necessary component of any emancipatory, antiracist politics or theory. This requires becoming aware of the history of antisemitism on the left and acknowledging that left movements have – until very recently and with few exceptions – mostly overlooked this form of oppression. While the left has no problem identifying and denouncing the more overt and deadly manifestations of antisemitism of the right, it has difficulty seeing and addressing more subtle forms on the left. As we detail below, left activists often react defensively to allegations of antisemitism. If it is not dismissed as a smear, one frequently hears that right antisemitism is worse. In our view, these patterns are not the result of conscious antisemitic intent, but rather ignorance of what constitutes antisemitism and unexamined political assumptions. But in the face of growing threats and violence to Jewish people across the globe, such responses are insufficient. We therefore hope this article can make a small contribution to the articulation of an emancipatory analysis of antisemitism.

WHAT IS ANTISEMITISM?

Perhaps the most common reason why leftists overlook antisemitism is that they assume it functions the same as other forms of racism, thus missing those features which make it specific and distinct. It certainly can and does take the form of simple racial prejudice or discrimination against Jews – and on the far-right overt or biological race hatred is still common. However, antisemitism is unique in that historically it evolved as part of a broader anti-modern ideology closely linked to the rise of bourgeois society, i.e. capitalism, cosmopolitanism, and the modern nation-state (Benz 2005, Volkov 1978). Of course, antisemitism has many elements in common with other forms of racism: Jews as a group are essentialized; they are assigned negative attributes and discriminated against in various areas of life – features shared by all racisms. There are, however, also important differences between antisemitism and other forms of racism – just as there are differences in the specific forms of racism towards Blacks, Asians, Arabs and other groups. In general terms, what might be called “colonial” forms of racism directed at colonized people, indigenous groups, or African slaves construct “the other” as inferior, uncivilized, and sub-human. This “other” symbolizes nature and uncontrollable sexuality, and is associated with the body and emotion in contrast to mind and reason. This in turn leads to characterizations as less intelligent, criminal, and lazy. Presented as inferior, it is therefore assumed that this “other” must be suppressed, exploited, and excluded (Arnold 2018).

By contrast, “the Jew” is generally less associated with nature but with modernity and society. Jews are “over-civilized,” suspiciously intelligent and physically weak, rootless cosmopolitans lacking loyalty to community or country. They are depicted as overly individualistic (yet at the same time cliquishly tribal), money-grubbing materialists who have grown powerful and wealthy through dishonesty and trickery. In short, they are the personification of all the negative aspects of modern society. As “the Jews” are perceived as either openly running the world or secretly conspiring to do so, antisemitism ultimately does not seek to merely keep “the other” down, but rather to destroy their perceived hegemonic power – Nazi eliminationism would take this to its logical conclusion. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) treats antisemitism as a pathological expression of capitalism’s tendency to abolish the possibility of a radically different world. It describes how the experience of the domination inherent to a capitalist society based on the unending drive for profit rather than human need can become hatred towards Jews: “No matter what the makeup of the Jews

may be in reality, their image, that of the defeated, has characteristics which must make totalitarian rule their mortal enemy: happiness without power, reward without work, a homeland without frontiers, religion without myth. These features are outlawed by the ruling powers because they are secretly covered by the ruled.” (2002: 164-65). It is precisely this posture – as a critique of power and capitalism – that has made the left more susceptible to antisemitism than other forms of racism; it is no accident the German socialist leader August Bebel was quoted as calling it “socialism of fools” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, Postone 2006, Battini 2016).

Thus, although antisemitism includes prejudice and discrimination based on racialized group categories, on a more fundamental level it is an expansive anti-modern worldview offered as a supposed critique of bourgeois society. Antisemitism targets central features of modern society – abstractness, universality, mobility, cosmopolitanism, and capitalism – all of which become identified with and personified as “the Jew” (Battini 2016). Understanding the distinctive nature of antisemitism is crucial to recognizing it. As antisemitism is a worldview, one’s subject position or identity provides no immunity against it: Leftists are rightly unconvinced when the right legitimizes racism by holding up Clarence Thomas or Thomas Sowell, or dismiss sexism via Laura Southern or Phyllis Schlafly. Likewise Jews, people of color, and professed antiracists are not immune from reproducing antisemitic stereotypes.

In contemporary left discussions of racism, privilege-checking, call-out culture, and soul-searching have become the norm, while questioning such allegations is generally perceived as defending racism. Viewed in this context, the left’s double standard regarding accusations of antisemitism is all the more glaring.

ANTISEMITISM AND THE AMERICAN LEFT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A variety of historical examples make it clear that US leftists have not been immune to antisemitic thinking. The Populists of the late 19th century at times engaged in antisemitic imagery that associated Jews with banks and economic exploitation, making “the Jew a symbol of capitalism and urbanism, concepts in themselves too abstract to be satisfactory objects of animosity” (Moore 1981: 103). The Old Left, and especially the Communist Party, was ambivalent regarding antisemitism, but generally aligned with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s (CPSU) positions, including ignoring or endorsing antisemitic show trials which

portrayed Jewish party members as disloyal traitors in the Soviet Union under Stalin, in Czechoslovakia, and East Germany (Norwood 2013).

The political legacy of the New Left is of particular relevance. During the 1960s, anti-imperialism and antizionism became increasingly central to New Left politics. Occasionally, the latter was expressed in antisemitic ways. Generally, this took the form of equating Jews with Israel and holding them collectively responsible for Israeli actions. Abundant examples can be found in the New Left radical press, as when the Socialist Workers Party paper claimed: “Jews contributed men, money and influence to make Israel a reality and to perpetuate the crimes committed against Palestinians. The people of the Book...changed roles from oppressed to oppressor” (Forster and Epstein 1974: 130). A communiqué from The New World Liberation Front, an urban guerrilla group active in the 1970s, is more extreme:

These Zionist ruling class pigs will not butcher poor people fighting for a just life without suffering drastic repercussions. The Jewish-American ruling class cannot protect themselves well enough for a sufficient amount of time. They should consider this carefully! We will show the Jewish-American ruling class how extremely vulnerable they are, here in the belly of the beast. Their lives will be in grave jeopardy if mad-dog Rabin imposes this massacre on the Palestinian people... We call on all comrades to move directly against all Jewish-American ruling class bloodsuckers if Rabin moves to massacre freedom fighters! These ruling class dogs are influential both here and in Israel and are extremely vulnerable (1976).

Here, American Jews are directly threatened with violence for the crimes of Israel and global capitalism, combined and embodied in the conspiratorial figure of the “Jewish-American ruling class,” depicted as parasitic “bloodsuckers” and “dogs” which must be put down. The article was accompanied by a racist cartoon featuring stereotypical images of plotting, hooked-nosed Jews. During Jesse Jackson’s 1984 presidential bid, this representative of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party referred to New York City as “Hymietown,” “hymie” being a racist slur for Jews (Joyce 1984). Many leftists defended Jackson or tried to rationalize his comments (Lester 1985, “For Jesse Jackson” 1986). These examples of tolerance and apologetics for open antisemitism illuminate a persistent double standard in left discourse when compared to other forms of racism.

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LEFT

If there was any doubt, the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in 2018 forcefully demonstrated that antisemitism persists as a deadly threat. According to a 2014 poll, 26 percent of all respondents in 101 countries agreed to at least 6 out of 11 anti-Jewish statements (Anti-Defamation League 2014). The United States was no exception; while antisemitic attitudes were less pronounced there, 19 percent still judged the statement “Jews have too much influence/control on Wall Street” as “true” or “probably true,” while 14 percent agreed to the statement “Jews today have too much influence in the US.” Antisemitic incidents (including physical assaults, vandalism, and attacks on Jewish institutions) spiked by nearly 60 percent in 2017, the largest single-year increase recorded (Anti-Defamation League 2018). Moreover, awareness towards historical antisemitism is not high: A recent national survey of Holocaust awareness and knowledge among US adults revealed that there are not only significant gaps in historical knowledge about the Holocaust but also that 70 percent of Americans say fewer people seem to care about the Holocaust than they used to (Claims Conference 2018). These developments have effects on Jewish Americans: In a 2019 Survey of American Jews, 84 percent of the respondents had the perception that antisemitism had increased over the past five years, and 42 percent felt less secure than a year ago (American Jewish Committee 2019).

In the last twenty years there have been four antisemitic mass shootings in the United States. In 2006 Naveed Afzal Haq began a shooting spree at the Seattle Jewish Federation by screaming, “I’m a Muslim American; I’m angry at Israel!” In a subsequent 9-11 call, he declared his actions were politically motivated by George W. Bush, Islamophobia, Israel, and the Iraq War – standard left issues of the 2000s. In 2009, a white supremacist killed a security guard at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., and in 2014, long-time white supremacist Frazier Glenn Miller went on a murderous rampage targeting a Jewish institution in Kansas City, killing three. The Tree of Life shooter claimed 11 lives in 2018, shortly after posting online about “the filthy *evil* jews Bringing the Filthy *evil* Muslims into the Country!!” (Gessen 2018). Yet in contrast to other outbursts of racist violence, with few exceptions left-wing media outlets had little, if anything, to say about these incidents. Unlike cases of Islamophobic violence, they did not lead to calls for greater national reflection or the need to confront antisemitism (Shire 2018, Tabarovsky 2019, Mudede 2015, Hsieh and Sanders 2017).

Let us now turn to how the contemporary U.S. left addresses

antisemitism. There are relatively few examples of *open antisemitism* in left circles. The Bush-era anti-war movement at times featured antisemitic imagery (Arnold 2015). Images of hooked-nosed Jews clutching the world in their hands are not uncommon on posters and banners at protests against Israel (Wistrich 2012: 472). Antisemitism could also be found in the margins of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). A man repeatedly appeared at the Zuccotti Park encampment in NYC holding signs saying “Google: Jewish Bankers.” He was confronted by a handful of others holding counter-signs stating his views did not represent theirs or those of the movement generally (Goldberg 2011). However, a visibly Jewish man was later attacked at the same location after being confronted on the street. Antisemitic conspiracy theories appeared with some frequency in Occupy online forums. A Facebook page titled “Occupy Wall Street” that had no connection to the actual movement prominently featured antisemitic images.

Yet this “fake” page ultimately attracted far more likes than the official Occupy Facebook page (Arnold 2015). Although unsolicited, the Occupy movement attracted a variety of right-wing sympathizers with different agendas. In a video entitled “Occupy Zionist Wall Street,” noted white supremacist David Duke praised those who attack the international banks supposedly holding America hostage. The American Nazi Party also voiced support for OWS, lauding its potential for making “the Natives” aware of the influence of Jewish “Wall Street bankers” and stating that “this issue is TAYLOR MADE [sic] for National Socialists.” Several Nazi groups attempted to infiltrate Occupy encampments but were mostly turned away (Lyons 2011). At the same time, less explicitly right-wing actors like the conspiracy theorist David Icke were welcomed within some Occupy camps (Sunshine 2014). This interest from the right shows the potential for antisemitism posed by vague populist and personalistic critiques of capitalist society.

More recently, a variety of avowedly intersectionalist movements have been marred by allegations of antisemitism. The Women’s March has faced a cascade of accusations including anti-Jewish statements made at their first meeting, noticeably omitting Jewish oppression from public statements, and associating with the antisemitic, anti-feminist and homophobic Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan, leader of the black Muslim organization Nation of Islam, has a long history of making antisemitic comments (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). The group’s reaction to critics was defensive and dismissive, eventually issuing general statements condemning antisemitism and transphobia but refusing to hold Farrakhan and his organization accountable. Women’s March Co-Chair Carmen

Perez publicly called the issue a “distraction” (Harnish 2018), Co-President Tamika Mallory called for “empathy” and the need for “nuance and complexities”.² Equivocations like these are unfortunately part of a common pattern wherein accusations of antisemitism are dismissed as politically-motivated attempts to divide and discredit movements for social justice, or as distractions from more important matters. The result is that antisemitism cannot be addressed on its own terms, but only indirectly through reference to other issues.

In 2017, three Jewish lesbians participating in the Chicago Dyke March were asked to leave because they were holding a rainbow flag with a star of David on it, which event organizers claimed was a “Zionist” symbol. In 2015, a Black Lives Matter rally in Seattle stopped outside a new marijuana dispensary to decry gentrification, but one speaker used the occasion to accuse the Jewish owner of being from Israel and serving in the Israeli Defense Force (Mudede 2015). In reality, his family had lived in the community for several generations and he had never been to Israel. At a subsequent protest at the same shop, another prominent local activist was caught on camera telling the owner to “go back to Germany” and “let them Nazis get on you again,” implying the long-time local resident didn’t belong and should return to face antisemitic violence in Europe (Brownstone 2017).

These incidents demonstrate both the persistence of the antisemitic trope that Jews are malevolent outsiders who are fundamentally alien to and preying upon the “real” community, and the notion that Israel stands at the center of global evil. The first theme was prominent in Nazi propaganda, given paradigmatic expression in an infamous cartoon from *Der Stürmer* depicting a “Jewish worm” eating its way through an apple labeled the “German economy” with a caption reading: “when something is rotten, the Jew is behind it.” The second is illustrated by how frequently otherwise fractious left movements find common ground in anti-Israel activism, highly visible even in movements with little connection to Middle East politics. Jewish Voice for Peace’s “Deadly Exchange” campaign provides a contemporary example, which attempts to project blame for racist police violence in the U.S. onto Israel (and Jewish groups like the ADL) by highlighting law enforcement exchange programs between the two nations that allegedly share “worst practices,” resting on a chain of highly tenuous linkages (Elman 2019). The centrality of anti-Israel discourse on the left has made it a point of resonance with far-right actors encompassing white supremacists like David Duke and Islamic

² Cp. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TamikaDMallory/status/970490221598072834>

fundamentalists from Louis Farrakhan to Hamas (Laquer 2006).

Ilhan Omar, the first Somali and one of the first two Muslims elected to U.S. Congress in 2018, sparked a fierce antisemitism controversy. First, a tweet from 2012 was discovered which stated that “Israel has hypnotized the world, may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel,” recycling tropes of occult Jewish manipulation of the world (Bresnahan 2019). This was soon followed by another tweet which suggested Republican support for Israel was “all about the Benjamins” and naming the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as the paymaster. Critics charged that these statements mobilized the classic antisemitic trope of a shadowy group of powerful Jews secretly controlling government, reminiscent of the “Zionist Occupied Government” or “ZOG” theory of the far-right, while others responded it was an accurate description of how the pro-Israel lobby works. As Michelle Goldberg, a New York Times columnist who is herself highly critical of Israel, noted:

[A]t a moment when activists have finally pried open space in American politics to question our relationship with Israel, it’s particularly incumbent on Israel’s legitimate critics to avoid anything that smacks of anti-Jewish bigotry. And the idea of Jews as global puppet masters, using their financial savvy to make the gentiles do their bidding, clearly does (2019).

Although Omar herself apologized and graciously thanked her Jewish colleagues for educating her, a variety of left media outlets condemned her apology and doubled down on her statements. The prominent left magazine *Jacobin* unleashed a deluge of headlines proclaiming: “Ilhan Omar Was Right,” “Ilhan Omar is not Antisemitic,” and “Democrats are Failing Ilhan Omar” (Ackerman 2019, Kulwin 2019, Savage 2019). While some commentators criticized a few of Omar’s statements, most defenses focused on the Islamophobia and bad faith of her Republican critics; none mentioned the many Jews who expressed hurt at her words.

As previously noted, the contemporary left’s definitional identity of standing for equality and opposing racial hatred and discrimination means that “primary antisemitism” – overt prejudice and discrimination against Jews – is rarely seen on an individual level and is indeed often vocally opposed. Yet, as we know from other forms of racism, the absence of explicit statements of racial animosity does not mean that the bigotry doesn’t exist. The above examples demonstrate the left’s willingness to overlook or excuse both conscious and unintentional antisemitism, especially if it happens in the context of criticizing Israel or defending

fellow leftists. Instead of open expressions of antisemitism, what we see on the left are various patterns, reactions, and discourses that make it impossible to discuss. In the following sections we identify three common responses to attempts to discuss antisemitism on the left: *denying*, *downplaying*, and *derailing*. We will examine each of these dynamics in turn.

SHUTTING DOWN DISCUSSIONS OF ANTISEMITISM ON THE LEFT: THREE COMMON DYNAMICS

Denial and Downplaying

Understanding themselves as members of a structurally racist and (hetero)sexist society, left activists often show a high degree of sensitivity and self-criticism regarding oppression and domination. Yet on a standard list of “isms” targeted by the left – capitalism, racism, sexism, and so on – antisemitism usually doesn’t make the cut. Occupy Wall Street, for example, engaged in lively debates about white privilege and racism within the movement, and also debated how to address the sexual assaults and male dominance that occurred in some encampments. But despite several instances of open antisemitism and the widespread participation of right-wing activists, antisemitism was not a similar topic of discussion. Although there were no reported instances of overt anti-black racism, this didn’t stop it from becoming a key theme for the movement. By contrast, the Women’s March had to be forced to include antisemitism in their statements of intersectional solidarity. Organization spokeswoman Linda Sarsour suggested that while antisemitism exists, it is not a systemic form of racism – erasing the highly systemic nature of the Holocaust and the central role antisemitism plays in the worldview of the far-right (Pidly 2018, Ward 2017). This creates a tacit hierarchy of oppression on the left, wherein by virtue of being seen as white (also invisibilizing Jews of color), Jews cannot also be understood as victims of racial oppression – overlooking the fact that according to the far-right, they are not.

A textbook example of downplaying is the book *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* (Cockburn and St. Clair 2002). Widely available in left bookstores, where it is often the only book on the subject, it clearly announces its intention from the first page: “I think we should almost never take antisemitism seriously,” and adding, “. . . maybe we should have some fun with it” (p. 1). On the rare occasion antisemitism is acknowledged to exist, it is trivialized: “Undoubtedly there is genuine antisemitism in the Arab world: the distribution of the *Protocols of the*

Elders of Zion, the myths about stealing the blood of gentile babies. This is utterly inexcusable. So was your failure to answer Aunt Bee’s last letter” (Cockburn and St. Clair 2002: 7). Ten out of the eighteen chapters address not antisemitism, but its “misuse” by groups who accuse pro-Palestinian activists of it. Not one contribution deals with the historical background of antisemitism in general, or the left in particular. Instead it assumes antisemitism is an irrelevant issue, especially in contrast to Islamophobia. This is perhaps unsurprising given the book is co-published by *Counterpunch*, an ostensibly left magazine that has given space to white nationalists and antisemites including Alison Weir, Israel Shamir, Paul Craig Roberts, Eric Walburg, and Gilad Atzmon (Levick 2002, Wolfe 2016). What is more surprising is that left authors and publishers would produce a book whose primary function is to downplay and deny the existence of antisemitism.

Another recent example can be found in the U.S. left reaction to the attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo by Islamists in Paris. Its central concern was not the 12 left-wing journalists murdered by right-wing extremists, but rather the magazine’s alleged disproportionate and overgeneralizing focus on Islam (an allegation challenged by an empirical study by *Le Monde Diplomatique*).³ While some portrayals of Muslim and Islam in Charlie Hebdo are indeed questionable, many activists completely refused solidarity with what was perceived as a racist publication, often without knowledge of the French political context or language.⁴ In the rush to confront the symbolic racism of cartoons and the potential for anti-Muslim backlash, the left completely ignored the deadly racism that had already occurred – the murder of four Jews in a nearby kosher supermarket carried out by an associate of the attackers. This incident reveals a highly selective antiracism, wherein one form of violent racism – restricted neither to the page nor possible future scenarios – is excluded from left discourse entirely.

Antisemitism is therefore not typically recognized as a problem worth discussing on the left. Attempts to bring it up are routinely greeted with denial, defensiveness, and hostility. Indeed, antisemitism is unique in that

³ For an analysis of the context and content of Hebdo cartoons, including documentation of the proportion of covers devoted to Islam – out of 538, 483 focused on politics, economics, and sport, while of the 38 focusing on religious themes, 21 targeted Christianity and 7 Islam. <http://www.understandingcharliehebdo.com/>

⁴ Richard Seymour’s *Jacobin* article “On Charlie Hebdo” provides the best, but not a unique example. We could find no mention of the antisemitic murders in any left publications, only Jewish ones.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/charlie-hebdo-islamophobia/>

the left has a specific term used to dismiss it – “hasbara,” a synonym for Israeli propaganda. Already in the 1980s, Jewish feminist Irena Klepfisz has called this refusal to engage with the topic “antisemitism by omission” (1989, p. 52).

Derailing

The dynamic of derailing has become a familiar one in left and liberal discourse. It describes a situation where a discussion about a particular issue is redirected to a different topic, changing the subject but also typically reframing it in a manner which justifies or rationalizes the issue being discussed. To give a recent example, conservative opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement tried to derail conversations about racist policing by pivoting to generalized assertions that “all lives matter.” Although left activists are generally sensitive to this dynamic, it happens with great regularity regarding antisemitism. Instead of discussing antisemitism, activists often immediately redirect to its cynical use to justify Israeli policy and silence its critics. In research interviews with left activists, conversations were repeatedly redirected from discussing antisemitism to *accusations* of antisemitism, and its alleged abuse (Arnold 2015). Again, this double standard stands out as the contemporary left is not typically prone to doubting accusations of racism. If conversations about Islamophobia were repeatedly redirected to talk only about the problem of Islamist terrorism, this would be rightly denounced as derailing a discussion of racism. Generally, such derailments redirect to Israel; indeed, this dynamic has been described by antisemitism scholar David Hirsh as “The Livingstone Formulation” (2016). As a result, antisemitism can never be addressed by the left as a social phenomenon on its own, but only in relation to Israel.

Once again, the double standard is clear; the left would never tolerate discussing Islamophobia only after first addressing Islamic terrorism or Iranian state policy. In these cases, it would be obvious that these are distinct subjects not to be conflated, and that racism is by definition an irrational ideology that doesn’t require reasons. Antisemitism has the dubious honor of being one of the only forms of racism where the left is often quick to suggest such reasons. This, of course, is the very definition of rationalization.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Attempts to discuss antisemitism on the left almost always turn into

discussions of Israel. We have already provided several reasons why mixing these two distinct issues is problematic: While it is obviously necessary to talk about the Middle East conflict, antisemitism must also be taken seriously and addressed on its own terms. Yet this very conflation, along with the great prominence the Middle East conflict is given within contemporary left discourse, requires careful attention to the specific patterns and forms criticism of Israel takes. *To state the obvious, criticism of Israel in itself is not antisemitic.* Yet, as with any form of racism, antisemitism is not only, or even primarily, expressed as explicit racial hatred; it frequently takes the form of coded language, heightened attention to actual events, or the application of double standards.

For this reason, distinguishing between antisemitism, antizionism, and critiques of Israel and its policies is not nearly as simple as the left presumes. Increasingly, the standard left response to any accusation of antisemitism in the context of Israel/Palestine is to insist on a fundamental distinction between antizionism, which is legitimate, and antisemitism, which is racist. Unfortunately, a simple change in terminology does not guarantee that a particular discourse or action is non-racist (Kaplan and Small 2006, Hirsh 2018). According to the normal standards of antiracist practice, this is an uncontroversial fact. Many leftists readily accept that as open racism has become less socially acceptable, it assumes coded forms: “welfare queens,” “thugs,” hyper-predators,” “bad hombres,” etc... The same holds true for antisemitism, the historical background being what sociologists Bergmann and Erb (1986) have termed “communication latency,” i.e. describing how the Holocaust created a public taboo in Western countries on openly antisemitic statements. Antizionism thus was one form of “detour communication,” a socially acceptable way of denouncing Jews via the Jewish state (Bergmann and Erb 1986, Beyer and Krumpal 2013).

In fact, one easily finds numerous instances where antizionism is indeed motivated by antisemitism, or is indistinguishable from it. Today, the most explicit antisemites – neo-Nazis, white nationalists, and fundamentalist Islamists – also speak of “Zionists” rather than or in addition to the more straightforward term “Jews.” David Duke frequently speaks of Zionist control over the U.S. government, and was an enthusiastic defender of representative Ilhan Omar. After years of defense, prominent activists like Gilad Atzmon and Alison Weir were eventually asked to leave the Palestine solidarity movement for repeatedly crossing the line into blatant antisemitism. Left antizionists protesting against the annual Israel Day parade in New York City jostle uncomfortably among Islamists carrying antisemitic banners that equate Jews with cockroaches or proclaim that the

“Final Solution to the Middle East = Nuke Tel Aviv.” Thus, while it is logically true that antizionism isn’t inherently antisemitic, these and many other examples just as conclusively demonstrate that it nonetheless can be, and historically often has been in left-wing spaces (Norwood 2013, Haury 2002). Moreover, empirical studies have shown a correlation between anti-Jewish statements and criticisms of Israel (Beyer and Liebe 2016, Imhoff 2012, Kaplan and Small 2006). In light of these facts and unwanted political bedfellows, the common left mantra that “antizionism is not antisemitism” is inadequate if the left is to take antisemitism seriously. There is no magic safe word that can be used to dismiss accusations of antisemitism, or any other form of racism. Antiracists can’t afford to simply take words at face value, but must rather closely scrutinize the context, content, and patterns of political statements.

For this reason, it is necessary to articulate a consistent set of criteria for distinguishing legitimate criticism of Israel from antisemitic forms. Antisemitism scholar Alan Johnson offers a useful general criterion:

Antisemitic antizionism bends the meaning of Israel and Zionism out of shape until both become fit receptacles for the tropes, images and ideas of classical antisemitism. In short, that which the demonological Jew once was, demonological Israel now is: uniquely malevolent, full of blood lust, all-controlling, the hidden hand, tricky, always acting in bad faith, the obstacle to a better, purer, more spiritual world, uniquely deserving of punishment, and so on (2015).

Another useful tool is the 3D test of antisemitism, standing for delegitimization, demonization, and double standards (Sharansky 2004). Note that none on their own is a clear indication of antisemitism; depending on the context, each can simply reflect political priority and emphasis. However, they provide a useful diagnostic framework by which to assess antisemitism, especially when several of these dynamics appear at once. All three are common within the contemporary U.S. left.

Delegitimization. Although Israel was established in accordance with international law and the United Nations, its right to exist as a nation-state has been challenged – both militarily and politically – since its inception. These arguments may be based on anarchist or antinational claims that *all* states are illegitimate, on liberal antizionist positions that Israel cannot grant special status and priority to Jews and at the same time guarantee equal rights to all of its citizens, or on orthodox religious positions from Jewish groups like Neturei Karta who believe founding a Jewish state before the return of the Messiah is wrong. However, in most cases the

delegitimization of Israel makes it almost unique among contemporary nation-states. It is this often-unstated political goal that has led even fervent Palestinian activists like Norman Finkelstein (2012) and Noam Chomsky (2014) to criticize the Boycott Divest Sanctions (BDS) movement, which in their estimation views the very existence of Israel as illegitimate, whereas they seek to change its policies, however radically.

Demonization. While the purpose of political propaganda is to incite, criticism of Israel often takes especially virulent forms that veer into total demonization. Left critics frequently go beyond targeting specific government policies to question Israel's basic right to exist. Israel is routinely characterized as a uniquely bloodthirsty, evil, and powerful state – all of which mirror the historical tropes of antisemitism, right down to the harvesting of organs, the killing of small children or the poisoning of wells. It is commonly depicted as a brutally racist dictatorship engaged in “genocide,” including historically inaccurate comparisons to South African Apartheid and highly insensitive analogies to the Nazi regime.⁵

Although there is unfortunately no shortage of nation-states that violate human rights or that are engaged in bloody land disputes, the left concentrates disproportionate attention on Israel compared to other governments. Next door to Israel, the Syrian government and the Islamic State have both been documented using chemical weapons against civilians, but only Israelis are labeled “People Who Kill Children” in left media, as the title of one *Jacobin* article bluntly declared, recalling the blood libel trope (Shupak 2014). While many counter by saying this heightened scrutiny is warranted due to the close relationship between the United States and Israel, this defense does not address the left's lack of attention to similar relationships with allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or India. There is no correlate BDS movement targeting these regimes, nor do these conflicts routinely emerge in unrelated movements.

Often this demonization does not stop with the Israeli government, but extends to all Israelis, anywhere and anytime. A large section of the BDS movement holds all Israelis everywhere accountable for the crimes of their government. As a result, any event anywhere in the world today that

⁵ The “Apartheid” designation overlooks some inconvenient facts; to take but one example, the Israeli Knesset currently has proportionally more Arab-Israeli members (13 percent) than the U.S. Congress has African American representatives (8 percent). Arab and Palestinian citizens of Israel can vote and have political parties. The Nazism analogy similarly ignores that Israel has not engaged in the calculated extermination of Palestinians -- something well within the capacity of Israel's far more powerful military. Indeed, it must overlook their unilateral withdrawal from both Gaza and Sinai, a strange course of action if “genocide” is the goal. None of this diminishes ongoing violence in the Occupied Territories, but accurate terminology matters.

features Israelis, regardless of political commitments or sponsorship, is likely to be targeted for protest and boycott. Even more troubling, this demonization has expanded to also include non-Israeli Jews, as in case of Jewish-American musician Matisyahu being barred from playing a Spanish music festival in 2015 without first stating his position on the Israel/Palestine conflict.

No other left movement holds an entire nation, its individual citizens, or members of an entire religious faith directly accountable for the crimes of their (or not their) government. In fact, attempts to do so regarding other groups – targeting Muslims for professions of national loyalty after 9/11 for example – have been rightly deemed racist. Such demonization is often accompanied by ideological generalizations which assume particular political groups or tendencies within Israel – such as the far-right Israeli political party Likud – speak for the entire population. This stands in sharp contrast to assumptions regarding the other side, as when leftists claim Hamas doesn't speak for all Palestinians, despite garnering 45 percent of the vote in the 2006 Gaza election (Anderson 2015, Hasan 2019). Demonization is so pervasive and all-encompassing that even progressive aspects of Israeli society, such as gay rights or ecological movements, are dismissed as mere cover for brutal policies towards Palestinians. As a result, even liberal activists inside Israel must confront not only opposition at home, but internationally organized campaigns against their alleged “pinkwashing” and “homo-nationalism.” When everything and everyone associated with only one nation is deemed evil, demonization is clearly at work.

Double Standards. As these examples show, a variety of double standards are applied to Israel and no other nation (Hirsh 2018, Rosenfeld 2019). We identify five of the most common forms, pertaining to: *salience*, *state foundation*, *state formation*, *self-understanding*, *self-determination* (Arnold 2015).

The double standard of *salience* translates into a political context where the left assigns vastly more attention and importance to the issue of Israel/Palestine than any other conflict in the world today. Israel is one of the few issues that unites a typically fractious left. This one conflict is so central to the U.S. left's self-understanding that that it is often a highly visible element even in demonstrations for completely unrelated topics like climate change, police brutality, or gay rights. This ideological omnipresence suggests that the left views Israel as both a unifying factor as well as a political lynchpin upon which various other forms of oppression rest. Yet at the same time, various other occupations, civil wars, and violent conflicts receive little or no attention from the left—there

are no sustained left campaigns targeting other contemporary examples such as India's annexation of Kashmir, Turkey's brutal suppression of the Kurds, Russia's occupation of the Crimea or Iran publicly executing gays. This double standard is even more glaring for North American leftists who target settler colonialism in Israel while directly benefiting from its legacy at home.

The double standard of *state foundation* marks the foundation of Israel alone as artificial and violent, in contrast to the presumably peaceful and "organic" process of establishing other states. Because it calls for an end not only to the occupation but the very existence of Israel, antizionism has come to represent the obvious "radical" position on the left. Yet this radicalism rests on deeply liberal and ahistorical presumptions about the nature of nation-states. It assumes Israel is a uniquely violent exception rather than the more mundane rule. Antizionism selectively ignores that every state in existence today is equally "artificial," birthed and maintained by violence, dispossession, and exclusion.

While the violence that accompanied the foundation of Israel is not unique, the late historical moment (as well as political context) of its establishment is. This brings us to the related double standard of *state formation*, which sees Israel as anachronistic, a colonial and imperial regime engaged in an outmoded form of colonial expansionism. Yet once again, this feature is not unique to Israel. Borders have been continuously redrawn throughout history to create new states. Thirty-four have been founded since 1990 alone, many of which were the result of civil war or land grabs lacking any legal legitimacy, as evident in the ongoing cases of South Sudan and the Western Sahara. Various existing states are also currently engaged in violent territorial expansion and the suppression of local populations – Turkey, India, Russia, Ethiopia, and Morocco, to name a few. State foundation and expansion are frequently accompanied by forced population transfers, yet the demand for the right of return for Palestinians is almost exclusively directed at Israel. Although this has been a persistent sticking point holding up negotiations for Palestinian statehood, it is rarely a condition for other partitioned states, for example India and Pakistan. Left discourse also seldom discusses the treatment of Palestinian refugees by other states like Syria and Egypt, or mentions the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees exiled from neighboring Arab countries in the wake of 1948. None of these examples serve as justification for Israeli crimes or any other occupation; rather the lack of attention and activism around them illustrates a profound double standard operating within left political discourse, one that happens to resonate with historical patterns of antisemitic exceptionalism.

The double standard of *self-understanding* results in criticizing Israel as a specifically ethno-religious state. Yet this position ignores that this fact holds true for several other states today, and for most in history. One would be hard-pressed to find leftists who criticize the specifically Muslim nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Almost every nation in history was at one point linked to a state religion, and as of yet every nation enforces restrictive ethno-racial immigration policies. But it is only the Jewish state that is routinely criticized by the left for its specifically religious character and demographic manipulation. While leftists are right to reject both ethno-religious nationalism and restrictive immigration/demographic policies, they are far from consistent, criticizing some forms -- U.S. and Israel, Christian and Jewish chauvinism -- while ignoring or even rationalizing others -- Islamic nations, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist ethno-religious nationalisms.

Lastly, the double standard of *self-determination* results in acknowledging this right only for Palestinians. A wide variety of movements of Palestinian self-determination are championed by the left – regardless of political content – while Zionism is denounced as synonymous with racism and violence, equally oblivious to specificities of historical form or political content. This holds true more generally for the U.S. left’s view of the Israel-Palestine conflict as a whole; although this history is long and complicated, the double standard of self-determination results in an extremely one-sided and simplistic account. Palestinian dispossession and repression is very real, and as the stronger force Israel has the greater power and responsibility to resolve this conflict. At the same time, the left selectively ignores various important historical facts on the other side: that Jews also have historical ties to the region and their own history of displacement; the long subsequent history of persecution, exclusion, oppression, and expulsion, culminating in the Holocaust; that as a result of these historical oppressions Zionism as a national liberation movement and state-building project started late in the game and under historical conditions not of its choosing; the armed attacks on Israel – including civilians – from its inception until the present (Linfield 2019, Memmi 1973).

Despite this complicated history, most leftists primarily perceive Palestinian suffering, fear, and rage as legitimate. At times this translates into support for reactionary groups like Hamas or Hezbollah, despite their fundamentalist politics. By contrast, the feelings of fear, insecurity, and historical persecution among Jewish Israelis are hardly seen as legitimate. The left often portrays the rise of right-wing Palestinian political actors like Hamas as a regrettable but understandable reaction to violence, while

the rise of Likud and Israel's shift to the right are never interpreted as a bad reaction to anti-Semitism and violence against Jews. Although both groups are irredentist and predicated on their opposition to the peace process, the dominant left position is to only acknowledge this regarding Israel, refusing to admit there are those on the other side who will never accept peaceful coexistence with “the Zionist entity.” In a conflict where there has been trauma and loss of life on both sides, one does not have to equate the suffering of parties to recognize that resolution is impossible if it only considers the claims of one side.

To review, while antizionism and antisemitism are not necessarily the same thing, they also can be. Simply insisting on the language of antizionism is no guarantee that they do not overlap, as demonstrated by a brief glance at the discourse used by the aforementioned antisemitic “antizionist” neo-Nazis. We have offered the “three D” test as one possible criterion to help distinguish legitimate critiques of Israel from antisemitism, by asking if they rely upon delegitimization, demonization, and double standards. As there are many legitimate grounds to criticize Israeli policy, identifying double standards is an especially useful analytical tool. To this end we have identified five common double standards: *salience*, *state foundation*, *state formation*, *self-understanding*, *self-determination*. The fact that other human rights abusing states – Russia, Iran, China, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia – or settler-colonial societies – the United States, Canada, and Australia – are not held to the same standard of critique denote clear double standards.

Today, antizionism is more than a political position taken towards the Middle East conflict, the rejection of Israel has become a distinctive marker of belonging to the radical left (Hirsh 2016). According to Shulamit Volkov (2006), it has become a form of subcultural badge that declares one is on the right side of history, symbolizing a rejection of colonialism, imperialism, racism, and nationalism, collectively represented by Zionism and embodied in the state of Israel. It has been argued that this shift reflects a deeper crisis of the left that started during the 1960s and continues to the present: a search for revolutionary subjects abroad in the face of increasing powerlessness at home (Gitlin 1993, Postone 2006). Unfortunately, this fixation on the Jewish state as the primary (or secondary after the United States) locus of power and evil in the world reproduces a central trope of antisemitism.

MAKING SENSE OF THE PRESENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LEFT THEORY

Fully explaining the reasons for these positions towards antisemitism within the United States left is beyond the scope of this article, so we can only briefly touch upon them here. However, it is important to stress that, in our analysis, these political patterns *do not stem from conscious and open antisemitism*. We are *not* saying these dynamics are motivated by antisemitic hatred, but are rather the result of unexamined assumptions, myopic political analysis, and, importantly, a genuine but inconsistent concern for the suffering of others. Nevertheless, the result is that the left has set an inordinately high bar for what constitutes antisemitism, in effect defining it out of existence – at least on the left.

The first factor is the, until quite recently, relatively low level of open antisemitism in the United States. This has dramatically changed since 2016, as the Trump presidency has legitimated more brazen forms of racism in general and antisemitism in particular, and as the alt-right and resurgent neo-Nazi movement have begun to visibly target Jews once again (Hawley 2017, Neiwart 2017). Yet until this recent upsurge it was largely understandable that left activists prioritized the far more visible and common forms of anti-black and anti-Arab racism. But as a result, while leftists are generally well aware of how these forms of racism have structured U.S. history, they often remain ignorant of the equally long history of antisemitism in America. This has included residential segregation, employment discrimination, and even lynching (Kerl 2017, Stember 1966). In 1654 Peter Stuyvesant, general director of the Dutch New Amsterdam colony which later became New York City, urged that “the deceitful race” of Jews should not “be allowed to further infect and trouble this new colony” with their “customary usury and deceitful trading with Christians” (Stuyvesant 1654). Almost 200 years later, president Franklin Delano Roosevelt could still state matter-of-factly, “this is a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews are here under sufferance” (Pike 1995: 67). Although less visible today, antisemitism has shaped American history (Dinnerstein 1994, Gerber 1986).

The second important factor is the relationship of direct financial and military support that exists between the U.S. and Israel, a bond which is bipartisan but associated especially with the political right. This governmental alliance also aligns with relatively positive attitudes towards Israel within the general population (Gallup 2019). This generally positive governmental orientation towards Israel results in an oppositional position by the left that seeks to challenge these political norms and make the

Palestinian plight more visible, intervening in a conflict supported by their tax dollars. However, this specific relationship can also blind the left to the broader context. It easily misses that strong anti-Israel sentiment in many other places in the world, such as Germany and many Middle Eastern countries, is often fueled by antisemitism. It also often translates into a distorted view of U.S. support which ignores the roles played by other international players and their geopolitical interests. Moreover, it can lead to an inflated sense of the power of “the Israel lobby,” reproducing the notion that an unseen cabal of Jews control the most powerful nation on earth (Walt and Mearsheimer 2006; Chomsky 2006).

The third factor concerns the political actors who address antisemitism in the United States. Generally, the main groups that focus attention on antisemitism are conservative and right-wing organizations or activists, scholars etc. And it is true that these organizations and individuals often enough do respond to any criticism of Israel with accusations of antisemitism (Foxman 2003: 18; Gordon 2013). Yet this perception creates a situation where even groups like the Anti-Defamation League, a human rights organization which “fights anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry” and monitors hate groups, is considered right-wing solely on account of their support for Israel. This political context has created a “boy who cried wolf” situation, where many left activists instinctively distrust allegations of antisemitism or see them only as politically motivated smears. For many on the left, antisemitism has become an almost inherently right-wing issue used to weaken the left.

The prominence and visibility of Holocaust commemoration in the United States, long institutionalized in monuments, text books, and popular culture, is yet another factor. As Shoah commemoration, with its depiction of Americans as the heroic liberators of WWII (Novick 1999), enjoys broad mainstream support, leftists frequently treat it as a political concern that is irrelevant or even counterproductive. This can lead to a “victimhood competition” which falsely imagines that one form of historical commemoration necessarily diminishes the remembrance of forms of other historical oppression, especially the extermination of Native Americans or African slavery. As a result, the painful history of Jewish oppression can be trivialized, or reduced to cynical political manipulation. This is in fact the basic argument of Norman Finkelstein’s book *The Holocaust Industry* (2000), which was also read in some left circles.

The final factor that can blind the American left to antisemitism is the existence of a thriving Jewish community. Jews in the United States can take for granted a relatively safe and stable political environment that does

not exist in many other places. Debates within the Jewish community around the meaning of Jewish identity, social justice, and Israel look and sound very different when transposed into political contexts that do not share the same basic assumptions or face the same threats. The intensity, closeness, and emotional connection to questions of antisemitism and Israel often have very different meanings within Jewish communities that are obscured or overshadowed when these debates take place in other contexts or locations.

These historical and geo-political factors are exacerbated by trends in contemporary left theory. One is the rise of Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness as the predominant theoretical concepts for addressing racism (Delgado/Stefancic 2017, Crenshaw et al. 1995). Despite the important contributions of these ideas, their framework of “white privilege” provides no political vocabulary to talk about the oppression of Jews, who can only be understood as privileged white people (Arnold 2015, Taylor 2017). This effectively erases their specific history of domination, and the process of contingent “whiteification” (Brodin 1998, Kivel 1998). But it also overlooks the fact that not all Jews are white or of European origin; Mizrahi and Jews of color face antisemitism as well as anti-black and/or anti-Arab racism.

Another political factor is the prominence, especially since 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, of an anti-imperialist political frame within many parts of the left. This perspective focuses primarily on the power and crimes of the United States and Israel – understood as the heart of global imperialism. Ascendant during the late Sixties New Left, this ideology was often predicated on the supposed impossibility of social change within the United States, viewing both the working and ruling class as bought off by the spoils of racism at home and empire abroad. Much of the left started to pin their hopes on a global struggle of the rest against the West, embodied in third world liberation struggles like those in North Vietnam, Cuba, and Angola. Transforming the role of domestic radicals to fighting imperialism from within the belly of the beast on behalf of movements in other places in turn encouraged an uncritical orientation to even reactionary anti-western movements and discourses (Postone 2006, Hensman 2018, Stoetzler 2018). Thus, many forms of anti-imperialism are frequently oblivious to, or supportive of, the growing power and crimes of new imperialist powers like Russia, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. This binary worldview is also a disguised variety of Orientalism, as it only sees “the rest” in relationship to “the west,” denying all other political actors any real agency and casting them only in the role of eternal victim. This dramatically simplified understanding of power overlooks or demotes

various domestic forms of domination and class exploitation by subordinating them to the primary evil of imperialism.

This variety of crude anti-imperialist politics has become more popular since the attacks of 9/11, and is especially apparent in U.S. left discourse around the Middle East. Political action by Israel is almost always depicted by the left as coldly-calculated, motivated by racist and murderous intent, whereas Palestinian action is presented as an automatic or natural reaction rather than conscious political choice, whether it takes the form of suicide bombing civilians or Hamas' explicit antisemitism. While the left claims that anti-Arab racism constitutes the essence of Zionism, it refuses to acknowledge that antisemitic ideology is one of many factors that influences politics in the Middle East, or is willing to overlook it.

Indeed, anti-imperialism's logic of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" has created strange political bedfellows: right-wing isolationists and Marxist Leninists; Islamic fundamentalists and queer activists; anarchists and reactionary nationalists (Taylor 2017). As a result, leftists have often tolerated antisemitic positions, or even openly support right-wing political groups. The feminist queer theorist Judith Butler provided one example in 2006 when she claimed that "understanding Hamas and Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, on the left, part of a global left, is extremely important" (Butler 2006). For many, these group's "anti-imperialist" opposition to Israel overrides their stated ideological of hostility towards Jews, queers, and women.

Certain modes of criticizing capitalism can offer another theoretical opening to antisemitism (Battini 2019, Fine and Spencer 2017). Populist and conspiratorial critiques of capitalism attack only one aspect of capitalism – finance, interest, greed – as if these were possible without the allegedly "good" side of capitalism. This ignores core characteristics like exploitation, competition, and private property. Such critiques personalize capitalism by targeting bankers or individual firms, treating the problems of capitalism as moral rather than systemic while ignoring the structural forces which compel ruthless competition among capitalists. By focusing on corruption, greed, and other personal failings, this narrative suggests that the solution is simply eliminating the few "bad apples" which spoil the bunch. Historically, these bad apples have frequently been identified as Jews. Occupy Wall Street's vague populist frames of the 99% versus the 1% and "Main Street" versus "Wall Street" allowed for mass identification with the movement, but it also left it open to right-wing and antisemitic interpretations, both of which had small presences on the fringes of the movement.

While the various historical, political, and theoretical factors described

above attempt to contextualize and explain the particularities of left discourse on antisemitism in the United States, they neither excuse nor rationalize them. The patterns, dynamics, subtle double standards, and not-so-subtle violent outbursts of antisemitism are all too real, as is the left's continued reluctance to address it as a problem. This makes it a challenge left social movements and thinkers must seriously confront.

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF IGNORING – AND CHALLENGING – ANTISEMITISM ON THE LEFT

Before concluding, let us first avoid persistent confusions by reiterating what we are *not* saying: that antisemitism is the worst or most pressing form of oppression today; that the left is a hotbed of rabid antisemites; that any and all criticism of Israel is antisemitic. Instead, we are suggesting antisemitism remains an “invisible prejudice” for much of the contemporary left. We suggest this is due to two main reasons; first, when it does occasionally surface, its articulation is not generally explicit, but rather takes coded and fragmented forms. Second, it is a form of racism that cannot be addressed – the left lacks the conceptual tools and political will to do so. As previously noted, we do *not* believe this is the result of antisemitic intent but rather unexamined assumptions, faulty political analysis, and social pressure to conform to left conventional wisdom. Nonetheless, the various political blind spots, peculiar bedfellows, and double standards we have addressed stand out by the uncommon prominence, tolerance, and emotional weight the left assigns them.

These dynamics have real political consequences. In many cases, it becomes impossible for Jews and allies to talk about antisemitism, especially without being accused of apologism for Zionism. Many Jews state that they feel they are allowed into the left only if they publicly espouse a commitment to antizionism, and are ethnically singled out for a political loyalty test. The Revolutionary Communist Party magazine is explicit: “Jewish people who resent being resented for Israel's crimes... need to loudly and unequivocally speak out against Israel's crimes” (Goodman 2010). This formulation holds Jewish Americans responsible for Israeli state policy, while also blaming the victim by implying that Jews deserve racism unless they take action against Israel. Similar suggestions that Arabs and Muslims be singled out for symbolic statements of loyalty would never be condoned on the left; when the right makes this demand, it is rightly condemned as racist. Yet this is a common complaint from Jewish leftists. At times this leads to actual expulsion, as it did at the Chicago Dyke March, but more frequently it takes subtler forms of day-

to-day pressure and threat within left spaces. Since according to opinion polls 70 percent of American Jews believe that “caring about Israel is an important part of my being a Jew,” in practice this means disqualifying the vast majority of American Jews from participating in the left (American Jewish Committee 2018).

We also suggest that these attitudes reflect the relative weakness of the left today. Moishe Postone (2006) argues that the contemporary radical left – delegitimized, powerless, and lacking a viable revolutionary agent akin to the working class – has abandoned its utopian aspirations and been reduced to passively cheering for or against other states or movements. With the possibility of progressive social change seemingly off the table, many leftists have proven willing to embrace any form of “resistance” to capitalism, the U.S., or Israel, regardless of their politics. This “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic often projects its own values onto actors that do not share them or simply endorses reactionary political aims.⁶

This makes confronting antisemitism an important task for rebuilding an emancipatory left. What, concretely, does this task require? First, deeper forms of analysis – of capitalism, racism, global politics, and the Middle East – which accurately understand the complexities of the contemporary social world, and which can offer a liberatory political vision that distinguishes its critiques from those of conspiracists, nationalists, theocrats, and antisemites. It entails being aware of our immediate political context and its historical specificities, but also keeping in mind the different context and histories found elsewhere – including current political developments like rising antisemitism in Europe and the Arab world. We must revise and update our analysis of racism, and acknowledging that many of our inherited concepts have little to say about antisemitism. Although there is a rich literature on the subject, most of the left are unfamiliar with left theorists and historians of antisemitism such as Michele Battini, Werner Bonefeld, Ellen Willis, Robert Fine, Moishe Postone, or the work of the Frankfurt School. This requires ongoing educational work including workshops, forums, panel discussion, and publications. It calls for increased awareness of contemporary antisemitic violence and discourse, demonstrating solidarity with its victims, and launching new political campaigns which proactively address

⁶ One example of this naïve type of coalition-building: in 2010 Iran President Ahmadinejad met in NYC with over 100 activists from the peace movement – including Code Pink, religious groups, independent media organizations, and Palestinian groups in New York under the banner of creating peace between the people of the U.S. and Iran. None of these left groups in attendance bothered to criticize Iran's human rights violations or his open antisemitism, baffling and enraging many Iranian left groups.

antisemitism.

Most crucially, it requires making antisemitism a topic the left takes seriously. The recent wave of antisemitic violence and speech has sparked some long-overdue discussion on the left. In 2017 Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) produced “Understanding Antisemitism,” a primer on antisemitism from a left movement perspective (JFREJ 2017). Other groups and outlets have started to discuss the topic and at times pointed out the left’s silence (Ward 2017, Bovy 2017). Yet much of the renewed attention still focuses exclusively on the right, or replicates the same problems described here. This includes the Jewish Voice for Peace anthology *On Antisemitism* (2017), featuring essays by antizionist activists not scholars of antisemitism. It focuses on the Christian and racial antisemitism of the political right, and gives ample space to Islamophobia, but says little about forms found on the left. And while it devotes a third of the book to “fighting false charges of antisemitism,” it refuses to consider that criticism of Israel can ever be antisemitic. This approach ensures the left will be vigilant towards the antisemitism of its enemies, but not of its friends.

As with past struggles to confront racism, both within the left and in society at large, it will be a difficult process that involves challenging basic assumptions and disrupting received political categories. But ultimately this process is a rewarding and necessary one. Any left worth the name must demonstrate its commitment to uprooting all forms of racism and domination; confronting the current invisibility of antisemitism can only make it stronger.

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