

Antisemitism and discourses of denial

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Colloquium III: Patterns of Excuses for Antisemitism and Forms of Denial

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I wish to speak about the proclivity of many on the left to downplay or deny the importance of antisemitism. Sometimes we hear people speak 'as Jews' and offer the authority of being Jewish to confirm that one or other political action is not antisemitic. This refrain comes to the fore in the repeated and confident refrain that criticism of Israel is not antisemitic either in its motives or in its effects.

My own impression is that denial of antisemitism is common when it comes to the Israel / Palestine question. Consider the following statements as exemplars of what I am referring to:

"Antisemitism charges are just part of the deal for anyone who speaks out for Palestine. The important point in all this is that we keep speaking out for Palestine... no one is fooled by this demonizing of all opposition to Israel..." (University and College Union – UCU - activist).

"Criticism of Israel cannot be construed as antisemitic." (UCU motion 2007)

"Criticism of Israel or Israeli policy is not, as such, antisemitic" (UCU motion 2008)

"The charge of antisemitism is used to translate what one is actually hearing, say a protest against the killing of children and civilians by the Israeli army, into hatred of Jews." (Judith Butler)

"By shouting antisemitism every time someone attacks Israel or defends the Palestinians, defenders of Israel rob the word of its universal resonance. If you criticise Israel too forcefully, they warn, you will awaken the demons of antisemitism. Indeed,

they suggest, robust criticism of Israel doesn't just arouse antisemitism. It is antisemitism." (Tony Judt)

"For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government, as I have been." (Ken Livingstone, former Mayor of London)

"I am sick of being accused of anti-Semitism when what I am doing is criticising Israel and the state of Israel". (Jenny Tongue, House of Lords)

What we find in these cases is a stated reluctance or refusal to take seriously the charge of antisemitism, in relation to criticism of Israel. It is this I wish to explore.

Various official European reports (including the EU Monitoring Commission and the Agency for Fundamental Rights) have warned that, though criticism of Israel is not as such antisemitic, it can and sometimes does overlap with or turn into antisemitism. This can occur, they say, if Israel is selected as uniquely evil or violent among nations; or if all Jews or all Israeli Jews are held collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel; or if the military occupation of Palestine is compared with the Nazi extermination of Jews; or if Israel is represented through long established antisemitic myths of world conspiracy, control of the media and murder of non-Jewish children. They maintain that in such cases substitution of the word 'Zionist' for 'Jewish' may make little substantial difference to the hostility in question.

These reports raise the question of where legitimate political criticism of Israel stops and antisemitism kicks in. To the extent that there have been responses on the left, they have tended to downplay or deny the validity of these concerns. Respondents from organisations such as *Jews for Justice for Palestinians* and *Independent Jewish Voices* have argued that the commissions that produced these reports are influenced by the Israel lobby, exaggerate the threat posed by antisemitism in Europe, give excessive weight to the claims of Jews to suffer from antisemitism, and most important give credence to the notion that criticism of Israel is a form of antisemitism. What this amounts to in their view is an attempt to impose restrictions on the right of political criticism.

In its liberal form the discourse of denial is sometimes banal in the following sense. It offers a narrative of progress that pays tribute to the success of the new Europe in transcending its so-called 'longest

hatred'. It acknowledges that antisemitism was a monstrous feature of Europe's past but insists that the conditions that gave rise to antisemitism have now come to an end with the defeat of Nazism, the rise of the European Union and the reunification of Europe. It associates antisemitism with a period of European history in which nationalism prevailed and it sees antisemitism as having terminated with the triumph of universal civic values in the new Europe. This reassuring narrative confirms its optimism through the perception that Jews are successfully integrated at most levels of European life. It's become almost bad form to mention that within postnational Europe the subterranean stream of ultra-nationalistic politics might be rising once again to the surface or that the past may continue to weigh on the present.

In its more radical form the discourse of denial is critical of this dream of liberal progress. It shares the conviction that antisemitism has run its course in Europe, or at least in Western Europe, but insists that antisemitism has been replaced by Islamophobia as the 'real racism' of the moment. From this point of view, the end of antisemitism does not represent the end of racism in general but rather the emergence of new forms of racism. The focus is on the rise of Islamophobia and the cycles of racism that recur in Europe today. The racism of the moment, we are told, is no longer whether Jews can be good Germans or good Brits but whether Muslims can be good Europeans.

The further twist in the radical argument is on the charge of antisemitism itself. Those who express alarm about anti-Jewish racism may find themselves accused of 'playing the antisemitism card', as we might put it. They are said to ignore the real racisms that exist in European societies or even to incite anti-Moslem racism. Most commonly, concern over antisemitism is seen as a camouflage designed to invalidate criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and of the human rights abuses that follow from it. Paradoxically, it seems that it is no longer antisemitism that is troubling Europe but talk of antisemitism.

What concerns me most here is that the taboo against antisemitism is being whittled away through an emphatic insistence on the left that antizionism is not antisemitism. In either case it seems to me politically disabling to declare the end of antisemitism; it deadens the nerve of outrage and resistance.

One manifestation of this state of denial is the desire to rewrite the post-history of the Holocaust. It is said that commemoration of the Holocaust is exclusive, that it is all about Jewish suffering, that it ignores the millions of non-Jewish civilians who were also murdered under Nazi rule. It is said that that

no *universal* meaning is now drawn from collective memory of the Holocaust and that the emphasis on only *Jewish* suffering undermines the universalistic ethos of the new Europe. It is said that we suffer from a surfeit of Holocaust museums, films and histories as if this were the only injustice we need to remember. The question is put as to why it is illegal in some countries to deny the Holocaust but not other genocides; why, for instance, the Armenian genocide does not receive the same attention.

To be sure, the formal sensibility behind this post-history is correct. Memory of the Holocaust ought not to be used to privilege the suffering of Jews at the expense of other sufferings. The cry of 'Never Again' ought not to be converted into the injunction that this crime should never again be done *to Jews*. The memory of the Holocaust ought not to protect Israel from criticism. Concern over antisemitism ought not to blind us to other racisms or be used to invalidate criticism of Israel.

But who says otherwise? We are told: 'they' are sensitive only to the mass murder of *Jews*, 'they' turn the Holocaust into an excuse to ignore other crimes, 'they' shout antisemitism every time someone attacks Israel or defends the Palestinians. Who are 'they'? It may be true of certain Jewish ultra-nationalists that they think only of Jews, just as it may be true of other nationalists that they oppose racism in their own nationalistic ways. This is a common phenomenon. It is not wrong to criticise the excesses of Jewish nationalism as it is not wrong to criticise the excesses of any nationalism; but it is wrong to take this excess as the norm of whoever raises the antisemitism question.

We must not buy into the notion that collective memory of the Holocaust consumes our capacity for compassion and makes us blind to the suffering of others. Compassion is not a fixed quantity of capital. Memory of the Holocaust equally serves as a 'fire alarm' alerting us to other atrocities and the destructive capacities of the human species. We cannot accept that the particularity of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust subverts the formation of a universal ethics any more than the particularity of any other suffering. We cannot agree that the charge of antisemitism is only put forward in bad faith as attempt to censor criticism of Israel. What antisemitism-denial does here is translate one concern, fear of antisemitism, into another, a seemingly amoral determination to defend Israel at all costs. It is one thing to question the sacralisation of the Holocaust and the taboo on antisemitism that followed; quite another to turn violation of the taboo against antisemitism into a new norm. The empirical claim that antisemitism is no longer a problem in Europe simply serves to exclude it from the list of racisms Europeans now have to confront if the new Europe is to be built.

In this rewriting of history the classification of modern capitalism into national and postnational 'periods' leaves out multiple ways in which the past weighs upon the present. A formulaic schema is substituted for historical inquiry. On the one hand, we should not over-burden the association of antisemitism with nationalism. There is truth to it but let us also remember that the antisemitic parties that surfaced in the 1870s presented themselves as a transnational alternative to national governments, and that the National Socialist movement, in spite of its name, stood against the existing order of nation-states and the values and institutions embodied in it. Nazism had genuine contempt for parochialism of nation-states and its leaders were insistent that the movement was international in scope, organisation and aspiration. On the other hand, we should not put too much weight on the claim that antisemitism has run its course with the rise of the new Europe. The elevation of 'postnationalism' into a European ideal can give rise to its own exclusions. The conceptual dichotomy between postnationalism and nationalism puts all that is good on the side of postnationalism (i.e. the new Europe) and all that is bad on the side of nationalism (i.e. the Other). The good is split from the bad without confronting the equivocations of either side. Insofar as a moral division of the world is recreated between us and them, postnationalists and nationalists, it can serve to stigmatise the other as much as to idealise ourselves. It is not inevitable that Europe must be exclusionary in this way, but the urge is internal to it.

The representation of Israel or Zionism as the incarnation of negative properties Europe has succeeded in overcoming – its own colonial past, its own ethnic divisions, its own institutionalised racism, its own violence – is the key case in point. In this projection 'Israel' and 'Zionism' serve as vessels into which Europeans can project all that is bad in European history and preserve the good for ourselves. In European thought there has long existed a conviction that if we can only rid ourselves of some alien element – be it the bourgeoisie, parasites, terrorists or Jews – then all will be well with the world. Representation of Israel as a pariah state or people can perform a similar mythic function for a European consciousness anxious to divest itself of the legacy of its own past. It is through a projective logic of this kind that antisemitism can wheedle its way into the new Europe.

Hannah Arendt once wrote: the power of critical thinking is to purge us of 'fixed habits of thought' and 'conventional... codes of expression'. It is liberating not because it produces any final code of conduct or definition of good and evil but because it questions everything and treats nothing as final. The danger in critical thinking, however, is the obverse of its strength. If it undermines established notions of piety, it

can also produce a reversal of old values and declare these inversions to be new values. This is critical theory's own demon and it lurks on the edges of the antisemitism debate.

The antisemitism question in Europe is of course much wider than this debate over Israel / Palestine. The rise of antisemitism among ultra-nationalist parties in Europe is as much a concern for so-called 'critics of Israel' as for so called 'defenders of Israel'. We might think of the British Conservative Party's new friend in Europe: Michal Kaminski, the Polish politician who leads the new Conservatives and Reformists grouping in which the Tories sit, began his political journey in a neo-Nazi organisation, and continues to explain that Poles should apologise for the 1941 pogrom at Jedwabne only once the Jews have apologised for all they inflicted on the Poles. Or we might think of the Latvian affiliate to this grouping, the *For Fatherland and Freedom* party who are prime movers behind annual parades which celebrate the Latvian legion of the Waffen-SS – a band of brothers that included men who roamed the country gunning down Jewish men, women and children in their tens of thousands. Kaminski and the *For Fatherland and Freedom* mob are the tip of a large and ugly iceberg of a growing ultra-nationalism among people allied in their loathing of those deemed "other". They have also sought to reshape the internationally accepted narrative of the Holocaust in order to prioritise the crimes of Stalinism over those of Nazism.

A danger we face today in Europe is that hatred of Israel and / or Zionism will serve, like hatred of Jews in the past, as the basis for the formation of new political alliances among people and parties whose grievances are otherwise quite disparate. This is why I have stressed, a matter of urgency for our own political culture, the need we have in Europe to confront the antisemitism question. The discourse of denial I have sought to identify lies in the way of this confrontation. I would also stress that as far as justice for Palestinians is concerned, our failure to face up to the antisemitism question does them no favours .