

THE HATE HUNTER

"This does not mean that the left as a whole, or even most people who profess left wing politics, is antisemitic or has a 'Jewish problem'. But it does mean that the left is not immune to the insidious appeal of antisemitism, and it is complacent to assume otherwise."

Telos: Is there really a 'Jewish problem' among left-wingers?

Dave Rich: The short answer to this is 'yes – but only for some'. In recent years the United Kingdom saw a surge of antisemitism in the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, which came to an end in early 2020. This was confirmed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the UK's anti-discrimination watchdog and regulator of equality legislation, which ruled that the Labour Party had unlawfully discriminated against its Jewish members. Given that the Labour Party is a party of the left and had, historically, been the most vigorous of all parties in opposing racism and antisemitism, this was a striking turn of events.

This happened because the party shifted markedly to the left under Corbyn, and drew in a new membership attracted by a radical political programme and a populist analysis that blamed "a rigged system set up by the wealth extractors, for the wealth extractors" for all the inequality and suffering in the world. It is no great jump to connect this analysis to some very old and sinister stereotypes about rich, powerful and manipulative Jews and all of a sudden, your left-wing anti-capitalism has become synonymous with antisemitism conspiracism.

One of the central characteristics of antisemitism is that it is able to insinuate itself within the framework of different ideologies, religions and belief systems. It is not limited to the far right, for example, but can be found on the left, in New Age movements, in Christian and Islamic traditions, and in systems of secular thought. When we address antisemitism, we are not dealing with an ordinary prejudice, but rather a conspiracy theory that claims huge explanatory power. Antisemitism seeks to tell you what is wrong in the world, and why, and who to blame. As such it has implicit resonance for some on the left who also seek to answer those same questions in their laudable quest to reduce suffering and inequality.

This does not mean that the left as a whole, or even most people who profess left wing politics, is antisemitic or has a 'Jewish problem'. But it does mean that the left is not immune to the insidious appeal of antisemitism, and it is complacent to assume otherwise.

Where does it come from?

Antisemitism is very old indeed: its core tropes can be traced back to the crucifixion or even earlier, and its central figure of the demonic, bloodthirsty, conniving Jew was firmly embedded in the European consciousness during the Middle Ages. But for the left specifically, the seminal period came in the nineteenth century, when Europe's rational philosophers and liberal politicians struggled against its old aristocratic and religious elites. Socialist thinkers, Marx pre-eminent amongst them, sought to develop a new set of ideas for how to think about economic relations and organise society in a fairer way, and in the midst of all of this, money, trading and exchange came to be associated with the medieval figure of the moneylending Jew. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Rothschilds had come to embody the 'Jewish' character of soulless, global finance. Meanwhile, conspiracy theories about shadowy Jewish puppeteers pulling everyone's strings were in the process of being codified into the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', which became a bestseller in the first half of the twentieth century.

The role and status of Jews in this new Europe came to be known as the 'Jewish Question', and it was addressed by all the leading socialist and anarchist thinkers. Some did so in more explicitly antisemitic terms than others; all accepted the logic that the emancipation of the Jews was a question that needed to be addressed. Again, the left was not the main driver of European antisemitism, in the nineteenth century or the twentieth. That lay with right wing, reactionary elements, including some of the most powerful individuals and forces on the continent. But it is necessary to accept that antisemitism has been present in left wing thinking since its origins, and remains so today.

This has been exacerbated in the modern period by the political trajectory of the State of Israel. When it was founded in 1948, Israel enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union and much of the socialist movement in the West. In the decades since then, Israel has moved firmly into the orbit of the United States and become the dominant military and economic power in its region. The occupation of the West Bank has endured for over half a century and the Palestinians have become, for many on the left, emblematic of the oppressed victims of Western colonialism. This provides sufficient fuel for those on the left who are attracted by antisemitic ways of thinking about Jews to keep their hateful fires burning.

What is the difference, if any, between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism?

In theory, anti-Zionism and antisemitism ought to be entirely different things. One is a prejudice and a conspiracy theory that identifies Jews as the cause of all ills in society, an alien presence that brings only harmful consequences. The other is a political position that, prior to 1948, opposed the creation of a Jewish state in the land of Israel, and today argues for a political

arrangement on that territory that does not include Jewish sovereignty. It is possible to construct anti-Zionist positions that are not antisemitic, meaning that they are not designed or intended to be damaging to Jewish interests. However, the practical reality is very different. Most anti-Zionist politics today is expressed in terms that incorporate tropes about Jewish power, Jewish racism, Jewish bloodthirstiness, and conspiratorial language and thinking about Jews in general: in other words, antisemitic ways of thinking about Jews translated for a world in which the most visible expression of Jewishness is the State of Israel. The political forces in the Middle East that work most vigorously against Zionism and for the elimination of Israel are, on the whole, undeniably antisemitic. You only have to read the Twitter feed of Ayatollah Khamenei, with his talk of 'Zionist capitalists' being a 'plague', to see what this antisemitic anti-Zionism looks like.

Then there is the simple fact that before 1948, anti-Zionism involved arguing against the theoretical creation of a State that did not yet exist. After that date, Israel was a sovereign state, founded with the imprimatur of a United Nations vote and able to defend itself militarily. In these circumstances, anti-Zionism becomes an ideology of aggression, dedicated to the elimination of a state of nine million people that has no wish to disappear. Since Israel now holds the world's largest single Jewish community and is the motor at the heart of global Jewish life, it is hard to see how a campaign to get rid of it can be distinguished in practical terms from an anti-Jewish campaign.

“Sometimes a goblin is just a goblin.” Can you tell us the story behind this tweet of yours?

This relates to the allegation that the goblin bankers in the Harry Potter films are intended to be anti-Jewish caricatures. I can see why some people would think that: they are mean-spirited bankers with grotesque facial features, all big noses and ears, and that does fit the stereotype. But any allegation of antisemitism needs to be assessed in context – this is a demand of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, and it is also common sense – and context must include an assessment of the person being accused and their track record. In this case, the allegations were directed at JK Rowling as the creator of Harry Potter, and Rowling has a long and consistent record of speaking out against antisemitism and supporting the Jewish community. She is certainly not an antisemite, whatever the goblins in her films look like. So sometimes, a goblin really is just a goblin.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Choosing to talk about conspiracy theories, hate and racism in December, the month when “*we’re all better people*” is a bit of a gamble, or at the very least, off-topic. Instead, we here at PRIMOPIANOSCALA have a different take, which is exactly why we have asked Dave Rich, a historian and one of the foremost experts on antisemitism –and on conspiracy theories and racial hate in general– to unpack these ever-timely phenomena for us.

Rich explains the roots of left-wing antisemitism, far less known than that of the right but widespread, especially in Great Britain. He wrote his graduate dissertation then a bestseller, *The Left's Jewish Problem*, specifically on this topic and analyses it in the hope of finding some answers.

“*There’s no use denying it -Rich states- the left has historically had a Jewish problem.*” One such example is the tweet, which was later removed, by Rebecca Long-Bailey, MP of the British Labour shadow government, falsely accusing Israel of training US police to asphyxiate with their knees, a practice which cost African-American man George Floyd his life.

“*That tweet is a symptom of an old prejudice that drives some progressives, all over the world, to see the Jews and the Jewish State as the source of all evil*”, Rich says. Then he explains that left-wing antisemitism is different from the more familiar right-wing, racist antisemitism. It stems from a way of thinking that divides the world into oppressed and oppressors, assigning the latter label to the Jews, portrayed as rich, powerful and manipulative.

When we add hostility towards Zionism and Israel to the mix, what we have is a sentiment that goes far beyond merely legitimately disagreeing with Israeli policy to incorporate longstanding anti-Semitic stereotypes and traditional conspiracy theories.

Especially compelling is Rich’s *historical* reconstruction of this phenomenon, which culminates with a statement that is coupled with anti-Zionism, and the historical link that the European left shared with the Soviet Union during the Cold War: “*When it was founded in 1948, Israel enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union and much of the socialist movement in the West.*” Rich explains, adding that, “*The occupation of the West Bank has endured for over half a century and the Palestinians have become, for many on the left, emblematic of the oppressed victims of Western colonialism.*” Clearly, the dividing line between antisemitism and anti-Zionism is not very clear.

A recent incident from the Italian *news* confirms this. Popular TV host **Chef Rubio**, attacked life senator and Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre, accusing her of never having expressed her stance on the crimes committed by the Israeli army against the Palestinians. As if, because she is Jewish, taking a stance against Israeli policy was the only thing that would entitle her to speak publically about the Holocaust.

Not only does Rich clearly define the difference between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, he concludes by saying that, in theory, this distinction is possible; however, the findings in a UK study on people’s perceptions/positions on the Jews has led to some rather disconcerting conclusions. People who are anti-Israel, *i.e.*, who think Israel should not even exist, tend also to be anti-Semitic and detest the Jews as such.

Our interview concludes on a lighter note, talking about Harry Potter and the like. But we’ll leave it to you readers to discover that.

This last 2022 cover of PRIMOPIANOSCALA has the same pop, oneiric look as in previous months, portraying our guest with some of the distinguishing symbols of his role, life and so on with a collage of simple, juxtaposed images around his head like a hat. For Rich we have chosen the symbols of London, from the skyline to Westminster and double decker buses. We also added some of the signs of his academic life and social activism in his work with Community Security Trust, where he serves as policy director. And we haven’t forgotten the only exception to Rich’s notorious reserve: his passion for football and his team Manchester United. Finally, just to add a bit of holiday cheer, we’ve thrown in Harry Potter and a goblin, because “*Sometimes a goblin is just a goblin*”, as he says with a touch of irony, pointing out however the widespread, subliminal

presence of anti-Semite tropes.

With this December issue, all of us here at Telos A&S would like to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a serene 2023. May it be better than 2021 and 2022 and that the verse, prayer and hymn “Peace on earth and good will toward men” become reality!

Mariella Palazzolo



Dave Rich is an associate researcher at the **Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Antisemitism** at the University of London.

In 2015 Rich earned a PhD from this university with the dissertation “*Zionists and Anti-Zionists: Political protest and student activism in Great Britain, 1968-1986*”. From his dissertation, came his book *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Antisemitism* (Biteback, 2016, 2018).

Rich's research focusses on antisemitism and how it intersects with and, in other ways, diverges from anti-Zionism and other forms of racism. He has observed the phenomenon of antisemitism within the Labour Party in the UK and how different subjects, both inside and outside the Party, have addressed this issue.

He also studies conspiracy theories, their spread and how they are employed by movements and extremist ideologies. He has written essays on this topic, as well as on boycotts of Israel and antisemitic hate crimes.

He recently **announced** that he will be publishing his second book in February 2023 entitled: *Everyday Hate: How antisemitism is built into our world & how you can change it*.

Since July 2019 he has been the Director of Policy at the Community Security Trust (**CST**), a charity recognised by the UK government in 1994 to protect the Jewish community from antisemitism and its threats.

He is a huge football fan and his team is Manchester United. He lives in London.

Marco Sonsini