

Foreword to republication of “That’s funny, you don’t look anti-Semitic” by Steve Cohen

Friday 10 August 2018, by [ASHWORTH Jane](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2005).

Steve Cohen’s little pale-blue book on left-wing antisemitism caused a rumpus in the colleges when it first came out. Helped by the arresting title, which still raises a smile, *That’s Funny You Don’t Look Anti-Semitic* appeared in the coffee bars, Labour Clubs and Jewish Societies during the Miners Strike of 1984-85. Back then there were lots of Jewish lefties and the campus battles between Jewish students and the operational antisemites were starting to hot up again.

That’s Funny was a timely intervention. It helped prepare anti-racists for these battles. And it had an emotional impact on the reader. One socialist undergrad from Manchester vividly remembers sitting in a sunny park and reading it in one go, open mouthed. I remember sitting in the politico’s end, the smoke-filled, messy end of Manchester University Students Union’s coffee bar and looking around at the three tables of students all reading the same book. And these were not the type of students who did a lot of reading. *That’s Funny* was compelling.

Over at the politically-Jewish table sat the leaders of UJS (Union of Jewish Students) and the Union sabbaticals (full-timers) who had always felt there was something off about the left (in addition to their socialism) but hadn’t really mastered the subject. It took a while for them to read each page because they didn’t understand all the references to the left. I don’t suppose they liked Steve’s attacks on the Jewish Community’s leadership.

I sat at the SO table. SO (Socialist Organiser—the group that later became the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty) students were swiftly moving towards a “Two Nations, Two States” position and generally got on fine with Jewish students. We were chilled by that book. Although by 84 we had started to talk about left wing antisemites we were not yet on top of the arguments (Sunderland Poly Student Union had not yet banned its J Soc— it would be another couple of months before this massive learning experience convulsed the student movement and required us to become fluent opponents of antisemitism). We were slow readers too. It took us a while to read each page because we didn’t understand the Jewish stuff and because we broke off our reading to denounce Cohen as a cultural nationalist—while we giggled, tickled by the wonderfully crazy, eccentric fact of the existence of a *Bundist* in 1984.

And then there was the table of Jewish lefties. We’d been their mates for a while—gone to the same parties and on the same demos. We’d never been asked our position on Israel on a picket line: they had and their accusers were not looking for conversation. Instead they were making sure these Jews knew they were not part of the left. I guess these guys liked the book the most, even if they did agree with us about the Bund and even though they might have agreed with their other mates that Steve was too harsh on the communal leadership. These guys speed read the book. They understood the lefty bits and the Jewish bits.

The rest of the left, the SWP (Socialist Workers Party) and Workers Power were sitting at a fourth

table. They were not reading *That's Funny*. But it seemed to me they were starting to feel uncomfortable. Rowing about Zionism was a popular sport in that coffee bar, but to me it didn't look as though they fancied another ten rounds against the recharged, reinforced blue-red alliance just right then.

These battle lines and alliances were already drawn up by the time Sunderland Poly Student Union banned its J Soc. Then they hardened by the day. *That's Funny* didn't cause those battle lines and it didn't make any of us *Bundists*. But it did provide excellent references and it did provide a framework for understanding left-antisemitism. I think it played a role in legitimising the discussion: the very idea that there is left-wing antisemitism. As SO students we would have been far more isolated if that book hadn't been around. At least we could point to a real book to back up our claims.

That's Funny's 21st Century reprint has caused a lot of bother too.

I'd never met Steve Cohen before I popped up to Prestwich to see if he wanted to post the otherwise unavailable *That's Funny* on the Engage website. I offered him space to write a new introduction.

In the 20 years since writing *That's Funny*, Steve has been the lawyer for and leader of anti-deportation campaigns and he has occasionally written for the AWL's publications—both *Solidarity* and *Socialist Organiser*. Given this pedigree you can imagine the surprise when he turned out an Introduction with which I hardly agree on any point. For instance, Steve has an unusual position on the Israel/Palestine conflict. He thinks that all nationalism is racist and so he is "against" nation states on principle. In his head, his particular anti-Zionism does not single out Israel. He has equally unusual politics in relation to all nationalisms and states. But it's not good manners to trash a deal just because Steve's new Introduction is politically miles away from Engage. And it's not on to retrospectively trash *That's Funny* either. In fact, Pangloss insists that *That's Funny* stands in a better light when the politics of the author are understood: he has one foot in the camp of the anti-Zionists and yet he is still mortified by left-antisemitism. Steve Cohen's position is that Engage underestimates the power of left-wing antisemitism.

That's Funny You Don't Look Anti-Semitic

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There Must Be Some Way Out of Here

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article45620>

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