

There Must Be Some Way Out of Here (republishing of "That's Funny, You Don't Look Antisemitic")

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In 1984 I wrote a booklet against anti-Semitism. For this I was denounced as a Zionist. Engage, in its important struggle against Left-wing anti-Semitism, is now reproducing this booklet. In 2005 I wrote a pastiche poem criticising Zionism. For this I was denounced as an anti-Semite by some people on the Engage website. What is happening here?

It seems to me that one of the things that is happening is that whatever the fundamental political distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism (a distinction I see as absolute) yet on an emotional and existential level the two have become hopelessly intertwined—and this itself is political. Something else which is happening is the confirmation as far as I'm concerned of a political analysis of anti-Semitism which in my naivety, strikes me as obvious but which I've never seen articulated anywhere else. This is that the Jewish Chronicle and Socialist Worker are both correct. And incorrect. Zionism is anti-racist. And Zionism is racist. I cannot see how Zionism in its triumphant form (the Israeli state) is anything except essentially racist. It was founded on the dispossession of the Palestinians. And it continues on the super-exploitation and humiliation of the Palestinians as the "other". To deny this strikes me as fundamentally immoral. I also happen to think that two states, one of which by definition has to be exclusively Jewish is similarly immoral. I think majoritarianism (the legitimisation of an entity through numbers) is immoral wherever it presents itself—it leads at the very least to forced population movement and at its most extreme to ethnic cleansing and all that implies. I'll leave open to discussion and personal judgement the point on this continuum that Israel may already be guilty and at which a divided state would become guilty.

On the other hand it seems to me equally undeniable that Zionism in its inception was anti-racist. It was a reaction against, a way of dealing with, European anti-Semitism. Maybe as a revolutionary socialist writing in Prestwich in 2005 it would not be my way. However as a Jew of whatever political persuasion in Europe after the coming to power of Hitler in 1933 or the defeat of the revolution in Spain in 1939 I may well have had a different position. And if fascism ever took over here and Jews were barred entry elsewhere then I guess I might take a different position. I empathise with the "bolt hole" theory of Zionism. I appreciate the significance of the remarks by Isaac Deutscher, the Polish Marxist ex-rabbi, who wrote in later life "In this controversy (between socialism and Zionism) Zionism has scored a horrible victory, one of which it could neither wish nor expect; six million Jews had to perish in Hitler's gas chambers in order that Israel should come to life ... If instead of arguing against Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s I had urged European Jewry to go to Palestine, I might have saved some of the lives that were later extinguished in Hitler's gas chambers" (*Israel's Spiritual Climate*). I take it as axiomatic that any revolutionary of that pre-war period would have fought for the absolute right of Jews to enter Palestine. To have argued otherwise, to have argued for immigration controls, would have meant support for the British Mandate whose army tried to prevent entry. However the tenets of revolutionary socialism (tenets to which I still hold even in these days of Blair, Bush, Sharon and ... Bin Laden) would demand that entry into the then Palestine

would/should have lead to an attempt to forge an alliance between Jewish workers and Palestinian workers and peasants against the Zionist leadership, the absentee Palestinian landlords and the British soldiery. Of course the task would have been enormous. But the failure of that historic task has lead to what we have today—Israel the perpetual blood bath.

It is because Zionism is both racist and anti-racist that I call myself an anti- Zionist Zionist. It is also because Zionism is racist and anti racist that there is an even more urgent need to rigorously distinguish anti-Zionism from anti- Semitism. This itself requires a rigorous definition of both—otherwise how is it rationally possible to ever distinguish the two? I do not think there is ever the question of anti-Zionism discourse "becoming" or "sliding into" anti-Semitism. If a position is anti-semitic then it is anti-semitic in its origins—it does not become so. It is nothing whatsoever to do with Zionism. So, fascistic critiques of Israel are not about Zionism. They are about Jews. And this is the point. Anti-Zionism is about solidarity with the Palestinians. Anti-Semitism is about the Jewish conspiracy. Not all critiques of Israel are based on Jewish conspiracy theories. And anti-Semitism is not going to help progress the Palestinian cause. Just as August Bebel famously described the equation of capital with Jew as the socialism of fools then the equation of Zionism with world domination with Jew is the anti-zionism of fools.

It often feels like the wisdom of Solomon is required to know how to deal politically with this grotesque foolishness. One issue is the actual (the "cleansing" of Jews from Jerusalem in 1948, the suicide bombings of today) or threatened ("drive them into the sea") repression of Israeli Jews which fuels a fortress mentality and to which sections of the left retain an ambivalent or agnostic attitude. Another issue that should be a matter of concern is that anti-semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism drives away those who would otherwise want to give solidarity to the Palestinian cause. For myself, this is what I found unfortunate in the debate over the boycott of some or all Israeli universities. Whatever the motive of those proposing the boycott (and like Engage I'm opposed to exceptionalising Israel) there is still an imperative need to offer real, material, political support to the Palestinians. I think for myself the best way of dealing with any particular proposed boycott is to come to a decision on whether the boycott would help the Palestinians irrespective of its proposers—and organise independently against anti-Semitism. Which perhaps meaning building a movement that simultaneously is dedicated to Palestinian solidarity and opposition to anti-Semitism.

It is apparent from what I've said that I also disagree with what I take to be the dominant position within Engage—namely that in our contemporary world anti- Zionism must inevitably equate with anti-Semitism. Paradoxically I also disagree with Engage's position that in the modern world the form that anti-Semitism takes is through (foolish) anti-Zionism. *I think it is worse than that.* Obviously this is one form that is taken by the theory of the world Jewish conspiracy. However it seems to me that this is merely concealing more classic forms—Jew as all- powerful (the "Zionist lobby" running the USA), Jew as financial manipulator (the world being supposedly run by trans-national corporations and not imperialist states), Jew as murderer (take your pick—the blitzing of Iraq comes in there somewhere through its constant equation with the repression of the Palestinians). Jew as the subject of the blood libel (ditto but add the surreal accusation that Jews are responsible for September 11th), Jew as the killer of the first born (double ditto), Jew as poisoner of the wells (the anti-urbanisation of much Green politics—with Jews being the urban people par excellence). These images, these world-views, are powerful enough to split off from any anti-zionist base. And they have begun to split off within sections of the anti-globalisation, anti-capitalist movement. It is here that the anti-Zionism of fools emerges with a vengeance but is still subservient to the classic socialism of fools and also to the pre-capitalist feudalism of fools—the real McCoy of jew hatred. This is because anti-capitalism is shared by socialists who aspire to post-capitalist formations and right-wing organisations who hark back to an earlier pre-capitalist age— which is one of many reasons why genuine socialists have to be vigilant against any equation of capital with

Jew.

Anti-Semitism on the left has for too long been a taboo subject—probably since the inception of the socialist project itself. I know because in 1984 I was that taboo! I became for a short period a political pariah in sections of the socialist/communist movement (my movement) for daring to raise the subject. Actually when I began writing my book I had no intention of writing anything

on anti-Semitism, left or right. I wanted to write and condemn the (latest) Israeli onslaught on Lebanon. I used the left press as source material—and became horrified by what I was reading. And what I was reading was gross stereotyping of the Jew via the stereotyping of Israel as the most powerful force in the universe. All this was redolent of all the old-time European, Christian imagery—just stopping short it seemed of accusations of desecrating the wafer. So I did some research and quickly realised that this left anti-Semitism did not spring from nowhere but unfortunately had a long and dishonourable tradition—going back at least to the successful agitation for immigration controls against Jewish refugees and the 1905 Aliens Act. As it so happened, I was at that time thinking of writing another book just on this agitation—but Pluto Press told me that "Jews don't sell". To which I replied that I thought this was what we've always been accused of doing too much of. To show Pluto they were not being true Marxists I quoted Marx's own piece of self-hatred from his *On The Jewish Question*: "What is the secular cult of the Jew? Haggling". And then bizarrely I started to come across references and allusions (illusions) in parts of the left press to the wealth and power of Jews, of Jewry, all in the service of Israel—or maybe Israel was in the service of Jews and Jewry. Who knows? It was all rubbish anyway—but extremely dangerous rubbish.

And without managing (with the support of some comrades in the Jewish Socialist Group—the JSG) to keep fixed in my head the absolute distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, I guess I could have gone schizophrenic. There were two great successive nights when I was evicted from a mosque then a shul. I'm always sorry I never made the hat-trick of our common enemy—a church. The mosque incident involved picketing (along with some Asian youth) some local anti-Jewish ayatollah. The shul incident was wonderful. It was in Liverpool. I went with other members of the JSG to picket a meeting that was being held in support of the invasion (a shul supporting a military invasion? This really was Old Testament stuff). What we didn't know was that the guest speaker was some Israeli General—we should have recognised him by his ripped jeans and tee shirt. As we were being lifted horizontally, face downwards, out of the shul by the stewards I looked down on a face looking up at me. The face looking up said "Weren't we at Oxford together?". To which I replied "I think so—were you at Trinity?" That to me is a classic example of tribalism. *Mea culpa*. I always regret not screaming out "Let my people go!".

That's Funny You Don't Look Anti-Semitic did create ripples. It managed to split the JSG whose then dominant leadership thought it might offend the Socialist Workers Party. It resulted in some pretty dreadful correspondence over many weeks in journals like *Searchlight* and *Peace News*. A pamphlet was written denouncing me as a "criminal". There was a particular review—in *Searchlight*—one sentence of which I will never forget. Every Jew on the left will know that terrible syndrome whereby, whatever the context and wherever one is, we will be tested by being given the question "what is your position on Zionism?" Wanna support the miners—what's your position on Zionism? Against the bomb— what's your position on Zionism? And want to join our march against the eradication of Baghdad, in particular the eradication of Baghdad—what's your position on Zionism? And we all know what answer is expected in order to pass the test. It is a very strong form of anti-Semitism based on assumptions of collective responsibility. Denounce Zionism, crawl in the gutter, wear a yellow star and we'll let you in the club. Which is one reason why I call myself an Anti-Zionist Zionist—at least that should confuse the bastards. Anyhow this particular review, noting that my book actually did attack Zionism, said "It is not enough to trot out platitudes, as he does, about being against Zionism and in support of the Palestinian struggle". So I'm not allowed into the club even

though I fulfil the entry requirements. I'm not allowed in because I recognise and oppose the existence of anti-Semitism on the Left—and this therefore renders all support for Palestinians a "platitude". Well it ain't me who's here confusing anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.

An accusation greeting the publication of *That's Funny* was that even if anti-Semitism existed, it was trivial compared to other forms of oppression—not least that being inflicted on the Palestinians. I find this argument abhorrent. The struggle for communism is not about establishing some equitable scale of oppression and exploitation. It is about smashing all such oppression and exploitation. Switch to Germany 1925—"Comrades why are you harping on about anti-Semitism? It's trivial. If it ever became significant we will deal with it. Honest".

But there were positives back in 1984. There were allies out there—for instance the then Manchester and Liverpool branches of the JSG. I discovered that a similar political battle was going on within the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and a kind of informal alliance was formed here. I remember that a large debate was organised in the Peace Studies department at Bradford University—where I shared some dope with a member of the PLO. It was Lebanese! And then the three of us who had published the book (we called ourselves *The Beyond The Pale Collective*) organised a biggish conference in Manchester. And Pluto Press was wrong—we sold a lot of books. We sold enough books to publish another one—on *Holocaust Denial* by Gill Seidel. This had been accepted by Pluto but then pulped after it had been typeset! I guess this was part of their reality denial.

As far as I'm concerned I'm still prepared to stand behind most of what I wrote those two decades ago. However there is one issue where my position has somewhat changed. And there is a second where I think I missed the plot entirely. First I think the book was, in its critique of assimilation, far too uncritical of the concept of "Jewish culture". In fact I think it was implicitly far too generous towards Bundism in this respect (though I still support the Bundist championing of political self-organisation). I no longer see Jewish (or any) culture as monolithic. It is fractured and determined by issues of class. I have been in too many situations where the need to fight racism (racist attacks, immigration controls, fascist mobilisations) has been counter-posed by some suggestion about having an "ethnic" evening with "ethnic" clothes and "ethnic" food. It's got to the stage where, to paraphrase Goebbels, whenever I hear the word multicultural I want to reach for my gun. In particular I am now ruthlessly opposed to denominational schools—be they Jewish, Muslim, Catholic or Church of England. Some of this has been informed by the racist admission practices of the Jewish School in Manchester (no Jewish mother no entry). However the substantive point is that as a militant atheist I am opposed to the state subsidising the garbage of religion—any religion. And anyhow, I'm for the unity of people of all ages not their division. At the same time I'm equally opposed to the (political) drive towards assimilation—I don't see incorporation into the norms of imperialism as a step forward for humanity. The latest example of this drive towards incorporation is the suggestion by the Home Office Minister, Hazel Blears, following the London underground bombings that 'minorities should be described as, for example "Asian-British" rather than simply as "Asian"'. (Times 8 August 2005). The idea of the labelling and re-labelling of human beings as a method of protecting the citizenry of London is as ludicrous as all other justifications used for restricting the free movement of the same human beings. In the past slaves were branded—literally and with fire. Under the modern market economy it is people. This commoditisation of the alien reduces her or him to a piece of capital, to a new form of enslavement - the enslavement of a forced identity within a hostile society ever ready to deport and expel.

Second I come to missing the plot. This is not about what I wrote. It is about what I did not write. In fact it was what I explicitly refrained from writing. So I said "The book says nothing about socialist or liberation movements in the third world, deliberately so, because countries in the third world have not historically been within the grip of Christianity, and thus have no tradition of conspiracy

theories. For example within Islam both Jew and Christian were seen as infidels—and certainly there was no constant mythology of universal Jewish domination. If notions about Jewish power entered the third world, then that is a product of imperialistic and Christian penetration”.

Looking back on this from today's realities it clearly is inadequate. For instance I cannot see any basis for conspiracy theories (i.e. classic anti-Semitism) within Islam historically, however badly Jews (usually alongside Christians) were sometimes mistreated. I guess for this we have to be thankful we never bumped off Mohammed as well as Jesus. However it would be a matter of interesting political investigation to see precisely how conspiracy theories have subsequently entered the Muslim world—to see how they have become the Islam of fools. Moreover whatever the significance today of Left anti-Semitism, its influence and social weight is insignificant compared to that within Muslim communities (an anti-Semitism which is possibly matched by racism within the Jewish community). So the *Elders of the Protocols of Zion* is a best seller in Arabic speaking countries. So I've read how Islamicists blame "world Jewry" for both the New York and London underground bombings. And this junk needs to be challenged. And it needs to be challenged by the Left—and it isn't. In fact it is encouraged—if only obliquely.

It is encouraged by Israeli exceptionalism—by the constant depiction and caricaturing of Israel as somehow being the pre-eminent world imperialist power. Inasmuch as I might be for some boycott of Israeli universities then I'm equally in support of a boycott of British universities because of their collusion in the institutionalised apartheid of immigration controls—that is either collusion by their silence or by their active co-operation with the Home Office in developing controls (which appears to be the case with University College London). It is encouraged by the emergence on demonstrations against the American invasion of Iraq, of the denunciation of Israel's occupation of the West Bank—as though there was some intrinsic connection between the two which is not shared with other imperialist interventions. It is encouraged by the sycophantic, uncritical relationship that the SWP/Respect has towards the Muslim leadership as organised, for instance, around the mosques—these Muslim *machers* are as right-wing and often as anti-Semitic as their Jewish *macher* counterparts organised around the shuls are anti-Islam. In the beginning was the Board of Deputies? Today there is the Muslim Association of Britain. *Macherism*, the political reliance on a self-appointed leadership (the *macherites*) is a political disease which needs to be challenged and destroyed—instead sections of the Left are cultivating it at its most dangerous points.

Is there any way out of this mess? Particularly is there any way out of this mess for socialists in this country trapped politically between the existential linkage of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism? Is there a wisdom of Solomon? In all humility I think so. Of course we can all have our own politics on the way forward as regards Israel/Palestine. My own vision is of a federated secular and socialist middle east. This maybe is utopic but so is socialism. So is the revolution. So is all meaningful change. However there is going to be no way forward without a recognition of the fundamental block towards any change whatsoever—namely the world wide antagonism between Jews and Muslims. The international nature of this cleavage is central. Only joint and grassroots solidarity between the players in the game can possibly open up any dialogue. In Israel/Palestine this means between the Jewish and Palestinian masses. For instance let there be a march of a hundred thousand Israeli peaceniks into the occupied territories—and let them stay until the Israeli army and the settlers march out (or co-operate with the Palestinians in the sharing of resources—including the opening up of the new townships to Palestinians). Let Engage encourage this with its co-thinkers in Israel!

In this country it means joint activity between Jews and Muslims (and socialists) with the Jewish and Muslim communities. And what this boils down to is joint activity against fascism and racism. I suggested above the necessity to start to develop a movement simultaneously based on struggle for Palestinian rights and against anti-Semitism. This is presently an abstraction. However another real movement does exist against racism which can draw the two communities together in struggle. This

is the disparate movement against immigration controls—for whom the Jews were the first and Muslims the latest victims. Of course controls need to be challenged in their own right—not just as a device for unity. However the challenge can also forge a unity which presently seems a million miles away. What is more the history of the last thirty years of struggle by migrants, immigrants and refugees against controls shows something that SWP/Respect have utterly missed. This is that real, meaningful, progressive political activity within the Muslim community (and all third world communities) comes from the grassroots either by by-passing or defeating the community *machers*. Let Engage become involved in these struggles both because of their intrinsic political importance and as part of its commitment to challenging left anti-Semitism by building meaningful alliances!

It could begin by supporting the campaign of Samina Altaf and her two children to fight deportation. Samina's is just one of countless stories—though I guess more immediately poignant. Having fled Pakistan to avoid repeated domestic abuse she was refused asylum here. Like all asylum seekers she is outside of the welfare state and has been forcibly dispersed into Salford by the so-called National Asylum Support Service (NASS—a wing of the Home Office). And now as a failed asylum seeker who is refusing to return "voluntarily" to the country from she fled she is being threatened by NASS with eviction onto the streets. And I forgot to mention this—Samina is disabled with rickets. And her children are crippled with rickets. Get involved with the campaign! Write a letter of support to her constituency MP—Hazel Blears that well known re-labeller of third world identity and warrior against international terrorism (address House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1). Blears happens to be a Home Office MP—so terrorise her with letters of support. And invite a speaker from the campaign to one of your meetings—whilst sending money to the campaign (address Samina Altaf Defence Campaign, c/o Bury Law Centre, 8 Banks St, Bury BL9 0DL).

Finally I think that not one iota of the above can ever be resolved through communalism, through tribalism, through uncritically supporting Jews as Jews or Muslims as Muslims. My religion right or wrong! And all due to an accident of birth. I guess I recoil when I read on the Engage website the reflection on being Jewish—"frankly I can't get enough of it". Jewish identity as an addiction is not much of an advert for clarity of political thought. I was shocked by a news report I read a few years ago. It is a story that deserves creative fictionalisation. It concerned a guy who was raised in a highly Zionist family (I guess High Zionism is the Jewish version of High Church). He was raised as a conscious racist towards the Palestinians. Dirty Arabs! Until he discovered he was one of them—He was an adopted son. His biological parents were, I think, Libyan. Overnight (or maybe it took a little longer) he became a vehement anti-Zionist— and Jew hater. Dirty Jews! I was struck by two very powerful televisual images during the recent eviction of the Gaza settlers by the (Orwellian entitled) Israeli Defence Force. One was that of Israeli soldiers crying. The Israeli army in tears? One of the most powerful militaries in the world! Why no tears when the Palestinians were evicted? The second image was just bizarre in its tribalism. This was that of the settlers being evicted and the soldiers evicting them temporarily desisting from their civil war and *praying* together on shabbos—with the evictions resuming as soon as shabbos ended. Compared to this crazy chauvinism the legendary football xmas day football match in the trenches of World War One between German and British soldiers was a genuine act of internationalism. However there can be no genuine internationalism, no genuine international solidarity, no meaningful working together of ordinary people wherever tribalism or communalism dominates. And at the moment it is precisely these reactionary formations that dominate both Muslim and Jewish communities—and the tragedy is they are hardening. It would be good if Engage put its energy into helping soften them.

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

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Foreword to the new edition

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article45619>

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