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UK: Reading “That’s Funny...” now: and why it’s different from then

Thursday 19 November 2020, by [BURMAN Erica](#) (Date first published: 11 November 2020).

JVL Introduction

Steve Cohen’s pamphlet, [*That’s Funny, You don’t look Antisemitic*](#), first appeared in the early 80s. It was republished by Engage twenty years later as part of a campaign against the call for an academic boycott of Israel - a campaign which suggested that antisemitism underpinned the call for boycott.

Since then it has become the bible used to “expose” alleged antisemitism on the left.

In an extended essay for JVL, one of its editors and co-publisher, Erica Burman, explains the circumstances in which it first appeared.

It was actually Jewish feminists who demanded its publication when feminist magazine Spare Rib would only give a voice of Jewish writers who adopted an anti-Zionist position

Today, in contrast, it seems that anti-Zionist Jews are especially in the firing (or expulsion) line, and deemed especially culpable precisely *as Jews*.

In both cases, Burman points out, there is the “demand that Jews uphold a specific, deemed ‘correct’, position *because* they are Jews, or in order to legitimately call themselves Jewish.”

And that demand *is* antisemitic.

Eric Burman writes:

That’s Funny... and Steve Cohen are, for better or worse, part of my political biography, as indicated by the fact that I was both its publisher and co-editor. The book responded to a very particular set of debates occurring at that time - the early 1980s - in the left as well as the Jewish left. In recent times it has been cited and mobilised to support quite different claims and to support contrary political projects, as I explain below. This is an ahistorical reading of the text that - wilfully or not - suppresses or forgets the particular circumstances of its writing, publication and circulation. Attending to those conditions, and reading Steve’s text with renewed attention in the light of this, may facilitate better understanding of what is going on now.

At any rate, it is completely wrongheaded to equate our context now with 1984, when we finally published *That’s Funny...* (although as I detail below, the text was circulating in various forms earlier). Now, in 2020 - in part precisely because of what has happened in the intervening period - the debates about antisemitism and zionism, and how the left engages with, or indeed exhibits either or even both of these, are quite different. Whether this positions *That’s Funny...* as an interesting relic from a past time, or a diagnostic text disclosing how our current debates came about, is

another question.

A first key point on the original context. It was Jewish feminists who called for, fundraised and paid for, Steve's 'pamphlet' to be published. It was indeed a pamphlet, closely typed on foolscap, (imperfectly) photocopied and circulated by British Jewish feminists embroiled in a deeply upsetting controversy over being silenced and excluded by the then only British feminist publication, *Spare Rib*. Libby Lawson and I (who became *That's Funny's* co-editors and publishers) were among those dozens of Jewish feminists whose letters of protest were refused publication. We were silenced because *Spare Rib* demanded that Jewish feminists declare their position on Israel and espouse anti-Zionist credentials to be allowed a voice in the magazine. That is, a speaking position as Jewish feminists within the only British feminist publication in existence at the time was being predicated on declarations of antizionism. Whatever our positions on Israel/Palestine, in its presumption and disrespect of our own histories and (largely better than their) understanding of these issues, this was an absolute outrage. There was no negotiation or right of reply (other than sometime later allowing Nira Yuval-Davis to publish a piece – recently [reposted on this website](#)). It was a time of feeling very betrayed by mainstream British feminist movements, particularly as this was also the moment at which black women, lesbians and other groups of women marginalised by mainstream feminist discourse were beginning to speak out and formulate their demands to be heard and listened to.

It's worth pausing to reflect on this point. Jewish feminists demanded the publication of *That's Funny...* because it helped unravel how the then dominant political narrative – including feminist and left narratives – conflated Jews and Israel: on that basis making presumptions, even demands, about our politics and legitimacy. At that time Jewish feminists – then as now – espoused a range of opinions on Israel/Palestine. Being told we could not be recognised as Jewish feminists *unless* we declared ourselves anti-Zionists clearly performed the very political problem that we were being accused of, and then (to add insult to injury) positioned this as our problem! So, just to be clear, our 'crime' at that point was that – as Jews – we were presumed to be Zionist (however understood). Our response, aided by Steve's *That's Funny...*, was to show how that presumption was itself grounded in antisemitic assumptions about Jews as well as Israel that had informed British politics, of the left as well as the right.

Moreover those assumptions themselves betrayed a forgetting of history, of both: working class collusion in the history of immigration controls; and British imperialist history's key role in setting up the state of Israel – at a time when mainstream diaspora Jewish communities were less than lukewarm about the proposed Jewish homeland.

The context now is exactly the opposite. Then, our political voice was rendered conditional on adopting an anti-Zionist position, an enforced and conditional predication that, we argued, was antisemitic in its presumptions (that is, presuming to tell us what we should think and say; discounting the specific Jewish history and relationship with Zionism, the State of Israel, as well as its actions towards Palestinians). Now, in contrast, it seems that anti-Zionist Jews are especially in the firing (or expulsion) line, and deemed especially culpable precisely *as Jews*.

What is common to both cases, and is equally objectionable, is the demand that Jews uphold a specific, deemed 'correct', position *because* they are Jews, or in order to legitimately call themselves Jewish. This demand is antisemitic. What is also common to both contexts is that we were (in the eyes of various parties) the 'wrong' kind of Jews! All this is consistent with Steve's analysis in *That's Funny...* that traces the double binds and contradictions of antisemitism such that Jews get blamed for the very antisemitism that is directed at them! As he put it: 'It [left antisemitism] is a combination of conspiracy theory with collective guilt' (p.17, original edition).

The publication of *That's Funny...* also speaks to particular personal connections and conditions of mobilisation that are very different from the professionalised and digitised world of politics now. Steve was an immigration lawyer, immersed in fighting deportation and mental health tribunal cases, fighting for black and minoritized people's rights, including rights to stay in the UK. As well as being active in Jewish socialist politics he had significant personal and political connections with feminist movements, not least through his ex-wife lesbian feminist Sheila Saunders, who not only headed Leeds Jewish Social Services for some years but also founded Jewish Women's Aid and co-founded the short-lived but important British Jewish feminist magazine, *Shifra*. Far from being marginal, Sheila both served and led various aspects of Jewish community life. (Not long before she died, in 2012 she was also Lady Mayoress of Manchester, when Steve's old friend Mark Hackett was Lord Mayor). Both Steve and Sheila were both inspiring, funny, clever revolutionaries who were generous practically and emotionally, hugely involved as activists, open-minded and very, very proud to be Jewish.

If *That's Funny...* was published to address a debate that principally arose in the British feminist movement, Steve was always clear – and we (Libby and I, Steve's co-editors) agreed – that the antisemitism in the women's movement came from the left. And the antisemitism in the left in turn came from mainstream culture, including British imperial and colonial history, including in the Middle East, and including the longstanding and widespread European Christian antisemitism from the Crusades to the Inquisition to the Blood Libel and from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the Holocaust. So the book was written, and published, at a key moment of antiracist and anti-imperialist mobilisation, as an antiracist intervention and appeal to the left to attend to and root out the ways in which popular and cultural antisemitism was entering its analyses and processes.

That's why we gave it the subtitle "an antiracist analysis of left antisemitism". Every kind of antisemitism needs to be challenged, especially where it arises in otherwise progressive contexts. As Steve put it: "There is no balance sheet with any form of racism" (p.16). That is, it was addressed to a debate occurring within British left and feminist movements. It was not written as a tool for the Right to beat the Left. Poor Steve (who died in 2009) might well have been horrified at its current use. Or more likely he would have felt vindicated in his anticipation of it being used as "perverse ammunition to reactionaries of all kinds, who want to denounce revolutionary change" (p.7). But then he was flattered into allowing Engage to republish (as his 2005 Preface to that edition suggests and as he affirmed to me). He convinced himself that the text would speak for itself however it was framed by right wing Zionist reactionaries or left-leaning philosemitic apologists. Perhaps it would, if people actually read the text and his robust Preface properly, instead of just citing it for their own purposes. But I also think that Steve, in his grandiosity, underestimated how meaning is generated by the reader at least as much as the author. The context for reading this book is dramatically different from 36 years ago, even as the debates then have also shaped the ones we are embroiled in now.

So let's go to the second point about the context of its original publication. By 1984 Israel had invaded Lebanon and the Israeli military's support (through failing to intervene) for the Phalangists' massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatilla camp had been exposed. Jews (of whatever political persuasion) and non-Jews were appalled. By 1983 the massacre had already been named a genocide and Israel, as the occupying force, as responsible. For me, personally, the invasion of Lebanon marked a key point in prompting the move from a non-Zionist to anti-Zionist position. As I recall, the non-Zionist position was the official line of the Jewish Socialists' Group (that Steve, Libby and I were members of at the time), in challenging the presumed centrality of the state of Israel in Jewish diaspora life. Like others, my critical position on Zionism would become consolidated by 1988 and (what we now know to be) the first Intifada.

The title "*That's Funny...*" clearly reverses the antisemitic trope "That's funny, you don't look

Jewish". In that sense it reverses the racist gaze that traumatically limits and irrevocably damages the psyche, as Frantz Fanon evoked in *Black Skin White Masks*. Such a move anticipates claims to look back, that is, to hail (or "colour in") whiteness as opposed to the "marking" of blackness/minoritisation. Just as antiracist analyses now highlight how racism is not (only) black people's problem but very much a white problem, so Steve argues that antisemitism is a non-Jewish problem, that is, a problem for non-Jews to address. The casual racism of "That's funny, you don't look Jewish" that the title of Steve Cohen's book alludes to of course implies we would, or rather should, receive this as a compliment; that is, that we would not want to "look Jewish" (whatever that means...). "Not looking Jewish" presumes the assimilationist desire to fit into a (presumed white) Christian world, that we could pass as gentile. The disclaimer "That's funny" prefacing this statement indicates both that the speaker is aware that what follows could be heard as uncomfortable or controversial and sheds their responsibility for this.

But the *That's Funny...* title is also about how Steve loved to be funny, and enjoyed humour enormously, even as he also used humour to further his politics. Who else would have published a pamphlet of song lyrics about Jews and sexuality, called "The Jews and the Genitals"? Steve was also committed to campaigning against injustice – even (or especially) championing unpopular causes and positions. This orientation informed his antiracist commitment as an immigration barrister fighting asylum cases and running campaigns against immigration controls. He clearly enjoyed being provocative, and his provocations often did give pause for thought – who else could have called themselves – as he did in the 2005 Preface – an "antizionist Zionist"? And, just to clarify this point, my reading of this designation, "antizionist Zionist", is not that Steve had a late change of heart and became some kind of Zionist in his last days. Rather, from my recollection and knowledge of him, the claim of being "antizionist Zionist" was wilfully provocative, designed to provoke critical reflection on the part of those who would presume to be, or to know what was, Zionist or anti-Zionist. It is a formulation that demands a discussion, that poses questions, rather than stakes out grandstanding lines. As I read it, it is an invitation for us to revisit our assumptions and do the basic work of asking people what they mean by the identity positions they take up, rather than presuming we know what they mean for them. Yes, we could do with quite a lot more of that now!

Ironically, and – given the way the text is being used now – it is a huge irony (to me, at least), *That's Funny...* aimed to offer a disentangling of dominant narratives of Zionist and Jewish identities such that it was possible to assert a non-Zionist or anti-Zionist (as well as Zionist) identification without being (accused of being) antisemitic. It addressed a particular struggle that speaks to, and of, its time. Perhaps it helped that Steve enjoyed challenging orthodoxies, including but not only the pieties and hypocrisies of the bourgeois Jewish communities and its self-appointed leaders – the macherites, as he put it. He had a great way of rooting out, and worrying away at, implicit normalisations and canonical oppressive assumptions.

That's Funny... was a bold intervention in a highly charged and toxic political climate where what was at stake was the attempt to control who was allowed to say what a Jewish identity should be. While in some ways such a move is unthinkable now, in others it is the same. We still can't define for ourselves what our identities are because others are telling us what they should be. Only this time Jews have to be Zionist if they are not to be deemed antisemitic... (and what all these terms mean is also no longer open to discussion).

As ever within Jewish socialist politics, *That's Funny* was directed both to Jews (outside and inside mainstream Jewish communities) and to the non-Jewish Left. Its subtitle "an antiracist analysis of left-antisemitism" explicitly and intentionally positioned its analysis in alliance with and, crucially, as part of antiracist politics. It was an intervention in the left, for the left, from the left. (We did go on to publish another book by Gill Seidel, *Holocaust Denial*, about far right antisemitism). [1] It was part and parcel of Steve's work as a socialist, building solidarity across oppressed groups, that gave

rise to the No One Is Illegal campaign which – even as his health was failing – he helped to found. And that intervention also meant calling out the Trade Union movements' complicities in immigration controls. Steve's original research [2] not only identified how the first British immigration controls (which culminated in the 1905 Alien Act) were formulated principally against Jews, and how anti-Semitism fuelled these, but also highlighted how early trade-union and labour movements were agitating in favour of the controls and mobilising similar antisemitic tropes.

That central question, about the significance of antisemitism shaping the first formal immigration controls in this country for our understandings of the role of antisemitism in subsequent and current racist practices, including antisemitic practices, remains as urgent as ever. Except now, perhaps in response to that very question, we see a widespread defensive response that displaces attention from the material practice of everyday racisms (including antisemitism) to internecine disputes about *the legitimacy of claims about antisemitism*, and the relation of these to "Zionism" and "anti-Zionism".

Steve was drawn to analyse that history (supported by his close friend, the historian Bill Williams), in part to make sense of the current emergence of what he (in my view correctly) identified as antisemitism masquerading as antizionism in some left group discussions and publications. Why he focused on the particular groups he did probably says much about his own preferred audiences and political affiliations. He wrote from within the Jewish socialist movements, as a member of the Jewish Socialists' Group, but he had long political histories in other far left groups. And let's be clear, he wasn't in the Labour Party...

I opened this piece characterising my involvement as "for better or worse" because I have been perplexed and embarrassed by the ways Steve's little book has been turned against itself and the arguments it was formulated to clarify. I have been thankful that Engage's re-published version mis-scanned the book's title page such that Erica Bunnan took my place as co-editor. However, notwithstanding a certain amount of grating as I read it now, I can't distance myself from the original text. How could I when Libby Lawson and I worked so hard to turn Steve's cryptic and turgid lawyerese into – slightly – more readable prose? How could we, when our Jewish feminist sisters were clamouring for the book to support their/our struggles?

It's always risky making claims about history. After all, all histories are situated and perspectival, and so clearly contested, as well as typically mobilised to Justify current conditions as "histories of the present". My account here may be partial (in the sense of being both incomplete and inevitably motivated), yet I would claim it as a significant one, given my specific positions. Again I want to emphasise that this little book was prompted by the need to make a particular intervention at a particular time. While various of the political debates (not to mention the organisations) have moved on, some of Steve's analysis (pp. 40-41) of "the issues" is as pertinent now as then. Even if the examples of antisemitism Steve analysed were atypical (and, for Steve, any was unacceptable), and even if his efforts to support the left and feminist movements in their projects of political education fell on deaf ears, and even if now the text is used by the right to slur the left as antisemitic (as if this antisemitism originated from the left, rather than the right), I know that Steve was too committed to rooting out and challenging antisemitism in all its forms to allow it to continue anywhere. The book remains as a reminder of a particular past context. But while that context has – in perhaps some perverse ways – shaped our current predicaments, then and now are not the same.

A text is not, as Steve mistakenly thought, timeless in its meaning – a meaning controlled by the intentions of the authors. The fact is that, as Derrida says, meaning is conditioned by lines of force, and those lines of force are different now from what they were 36 years ago. Steve's analysis was exactly the opposite of current cynical assertions of the priority, and thereby weaponisation, of antisemitism. Steve saw combatting antisemitism as part of, and vital to, all antiracist struggles, and

he would have been appalled at the ways the selective attention to antisemitism currently functions to distract from wider mobilisations against racism and imperialism. And to those who want to criticise his selective use of sources, I would respond: remember, Steve was a barrister, a purveyor of arguments and persuasion, not an academic, and his research – while original and ahead of its time – made few claims to be comprehensive but rather was focused on making some key points in order to win the argument. What Steve offered was a historically grounded analysis of the ways anti-Jewish racism has shaped European racist institutional and material practices in ways that affect all those subject to racisms of all kinds. As he put it: ‘Anti-semitism, far from being an example of, or peripheral to, anti-alienism, was the force which ensured anti-alienism would be given statutory authority for the first time’ (p.32). In my view the consequences of that analysis have yet to be addressed, and – far from contributing to claims of Jewish exceptionalism – they are vital to antiracist struggle.

Erica Burman

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P.S.

Jewish Voice for Labour

<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/reading-thats-funny-now-and-why-its-different-from-t hen/>

Footnotes

[1] Perhaps significantly, I have far more copies of this book in my attic than Steve’s.

[2] Some of which was given airings in his other publications *It’s the same old story :Immigration controls against Jewish, Black and Asian people, with special reference to Manchester* (1987, Manchester City Council Public Relations Office), *From the Jews to the Tamils: Britain’s mistreatment of refugees* (1988, Manchester Law Centre), *A Hard Act to follow: the Immigration Act 1988* (Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign/South Manchester Law Centre), *Imagine there’s no countries: 1992 and international immigration controls against migrants, immigrants and refugees* (1992, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit)