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That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic: Perspective on the American Left

During our years as activists in the civil rights and anti-war movements we were not especially interested in specific Jewish issues. The problems of the Jewish people often seemed narrow or parochial, and they certainly couldn't match the immediacy of the great issues confronting the American public. This was also, of course, the predominant view of most American leftists.

In the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war the American Left was nearly unanimous in its support for the Arabs. At first we accepted—sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly—the Left's distinction between anti-semitism and what they called “anti-Zionism.” Eventually, however, the frequency and fervor of attacks on Israel's existence, as well as on any notion of the importance of Jewish identity, led us to the realization that leftist anti-Zionism, in this country and elsewhere, has not been able to transcend the world's history of anti-semitism.

This is not to say that anti-Zionism and anti-semitism are identical, but rather that powerful strains of traditional anti-semitism run through the predominantly pro-Palestinian Left ideology. We cannot say whether this phenomenon is intentional or unwitting, but we do know that the Left* has made no systematic attempt to rid its politics of anti-semitic roots.

Any analysis of Left anti-semitism begins with the Left's own argument that it is not anti-semitic but merely anti-Zionist. And since Zionism is *both* racist and imperialist, it is the duty of the Left to oppose it at every turn. In fact, Zionism is the Jews' worst enemy since it impedes the world socialist revolution

*In this article we refer to a Left with an apparent majority which is hostile to the Jews. We must point out, however, that we ourselves are leftists; furthermore there are several non-Jewish Left organizations which support Jewish peoplehood and the continued existence of Israel. Some individual leftists have also expressed to us their disgust at the anti-semitic attitudes of many “progressive” organizations. Thus, we are not referring to our allies and potential allies when we excoriate “the Left” in this article: rather, we hope that our analysis will help others speak out more clearly against the anti-semites.

which will someday provide the solution for all oppressed people.

Now, we are not opposed to legitimate criticism of Israel: Chutzpah as a collective, and we as individuals, have always criticized those aspects of Israeli policy which we considered inimical to peace. Indeed, we believe it is the obligation of Jewish and Gentile socialists to make constructive criticisms of Israel in the same way they criticize other nations. We also feel, however, that in the case of criticism of Israel, Gentiles must look inward, to be certain that their criticism does not stem in part from unconscious anti-semitism. Just as it was (and is) an obligation for whites to investigate their possibly unconscious racism before criticizing aspects of black liberation, Gentiles must similarly take a hard look at their own history before indulging in what may appear to them to be “even handed” criticism of Israel. (We might also suggest that many leftist *Jewish* critics of Israel take the same sort of hard look; anti-semitism, like anti-black racism, sometimes flourishes within the oppressed group itself.)

We believe that the form and content of most Left criticism of Israel is inescapably anti-semitic. Having long passed the point where we find it necessary to be defensive about our Zionism, it is still important to explain how the basis of anti-Zionism is anti-semitic.

The central feature of Left anti-Zionism is that it denies to Jews the right of self-determination. The argument that Jews are not entitled to their own state is generally based, either implicitly or explicitly, on Stalin's analysis of the national question.** In this dry and rather unimaginative polemic, Stalin sought to prove that Jews are not a nation. This “proof,” which has been accepted by most leftists, boils down to the fact that in 1913 the Jews of eastern Europe occupied no common territory. This dialectical defect in our peoplehood is of course quite circular. We were not entitled to a national home because we had no national home. The circle has been subsequently squared: now that we have a national home

**Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Martin Lawrence Ltd., London. Pp. 35-45.

it's illegitimate. Why? Because we didn't have one in 1913. That is the Left's traditional solution to the Jews' wandering. Rather than allow us to settle in one locality, they have chosen instead to freeze us in time. We were consigned forever to our role and social position at the beginning of the century.

This analysis ignores all that is unique in Jewish history. The fact is that we maintained ourselves as a people for close to two thousand years without a homeland. We did this by developing common languages, religion, history and culture. Most of all, we maintained our peoplehood through the understanding of our shared destiny. As a people we have asserted our legitimate aspirations. At different times and places these aspirations have ranged from simply staying alive to self-determination. Today the two may have become identical; continued self-determination is all but tantamount to continued existence.

Any ideology or world view which seeks to thwart our people's legitimate aspirations is anti-semitic. Thus, the Left, in its anti-Zionism, is anti-semitic precisely because it would deny to Jews those rights which it promises to all other peoples. A cornerstone of twentieth-century socialism is the right of nations to self-determination, yet many twentieth-century socialists have ingeniously devised a series of rationalizations aimed at denying this right to one nation only: the Jews. A close look at these arguments reveals them to be manifestly anti-semitic. The simplest indicator of this is the regular application of a double standard which distinguishes between the Jews on one hand and the rest of the world on the other. The mere notion that some people are entitled to self-determination while others are not must be immediately suspect, no matter what justifications are offered for the distinction. Let us, nevertheless, have a look at these justifications. They are of two sorts; one is essentially racial and the other purports to be political.

The racial argument dates back to our old friend Stalin. In its modern form it is an attempt to redefine Jews as something less than a people. "Jews are only a religion."—"Jewishness is only cultural." Once we are stripped of our peoplehood, the obvious next step is to deny us self-determination—since that is a right which is reserved for peoples and nations. Why is this a racial argument? Because it assumes that Jews, of all the people on the earth, are intrinsically incapable of having *both* a religion and a nation, or of having *both* a culture and a nation. In the final analysis, this argument exists only for the purpose of

denying our aspirations. If three million Israeli Jews are to be denied independence, some method must be found to distinguish them from eight million Cubans or three million Palestinians. The simplest method is redefinition.

Just as the Left has redefined the Jews as less than a nation, the Right has traditionally redefined us as something more than a nation. Hitler's lasting contribution to anti-semitism was the popularization of the theory of Jewish racialism—the idea that Jews comprised a distinct, indelible, unassimilable and decidedly inferior race. So far, the redefinition of the Left has not proven as virulent as that of the Right, but there are several invidious features in common. Both seek to diminish Jewish rights by redefinition; the one minimizes our importance while the other exaggerates it. More ominously, each tries to resolve the "Jewish Question" by making us disappear, either physically or by ideological pronouncement.

The political argument is, at least on the surface, more honest than the racial one. Leftists claim that their opposition to Zionism is purely political and is in no way related to the fact that the Israelis are Jews. The issue, they say, is simply one of imperialism versus the Third World. Israel is supported by the United States and Britain while the Palestinians are fighting a struggle of national liberation so that they may join the socialist community of nations. Such a view, if sincerely held, might be wrong, but it would hardly be anti-semitic. After all, the Left opposes Gentile as well as Jewish imperialism.

We are certainly not going to argue that political criticism of Israel is illegitimate, yet it hardly seems fair that the Jews should be placed on the cutting edge of the struggle against imperialism and/or capitalism. It *isn't* fair, nor is it a coincidence that Left opposition to Israel has taken a form unique in the history of "national liberation." This occurs because the opponents of Israel have been unable to free themselves from the influence of centuries of anti-semitism. Consequently, modern political anti-Zionism inevitably contains the following elements of anti-semitism: First, anti-Zionists continue to apply a double standard to the behavior of Jews and Arabs. Israel is deemed illegitimate because it is a "creation of British Imperialism." The support that the British gave to national movements in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia is conveniently forgotten. So are the facts that British support for a Jewish national home disappeared by the 1930's, and that the Israeli War of Independence was fought, in part, *against* the British.

Also conveniently ignored is the PLO's search for support from everyone, including the United States.

One would think that in rejecting religion the Left might also abandon the concept of original sin. Yet with respect to a single people there persists the theory of immutable guilt by original association. It was permissible for Mao to ally himself with Chiang Kai-shek, it was laudable for Ho Chi Minh to receive arms from the Americans, it was a stroke of socialist genius for Stalin to make his pact with Hitler, but when the early Zionists procured a rather lukewarm declaration of support from His Majesty's Government they seem to have damned their people for all time.

"Not at all," replies the Left, "Israel *continues* to be supported by the United States as an outpost of American capitalism and imperialism. That is why it must be destroyed." This rejoinder highlights a second element of anti-semitism. There are numerous nations which are far more "capitalist" than Israel. Many of them, such as Chile, Argentina, South Korea and Uganda, are ruled by bloody neo-Fascists. The Left opposes all of these regimes and offers the cure of social revolution led by the indigenous working class. Nobody seriously suggests that Argentina should cease to exist as a nation or that the Ugandans have forfeited their right to independence because they allowed Amin to come to power; only in Israel is the appropriate remedy for "capitalism" nothing short of eradication. Now, perhaps Marx's notion of a world socialist revolution will ultimately come to pass. Maybe in the future, people will agree to abolish *all* nation-states—but there is no good reason that this final solution should find its *first* application *now* against the Jews.

Jewish history of the last century teaches us that Gentile socialists are so eager to bring about Utopia, that they will fight for it down to the last Jew. Non-Zionist Jewish socialists such as the Jewish Labor Bund in Eastern Europe and in the USSR were exterminated, politically and physically, by Stalin and other Gentile progressives. Today the Left's conclusion that of all nations Israel alone must vanish because of its "relationship" to monopoly capital is pure anti-semitism.

We have compared the Left's approach to Israel with its approach to Chile, Argentina, South Korea, and Uganda *only* for the purpose of demonstrating the anti-semitic double standard in operation. We must emphasize that the comparison stops there. Israel is economically similar to the Scandinavian

countries. It is a developing nation and a welfare state with a mix of private enterprise and state ownership of the means of production. We would like to see Israel move more towards socialism. But even if Israel were entirely capitalist, this would still not justify its eradication.

Some leftists argue that in fact what they are calling for *is* a workers' revolution of Jews and Arabs. This sounds innocent enough. When pressed about the goals of this revolution, however, they tell us that the primary goal is "the destruction of the Zionist state." Stripped of the rhetoric, this means that *Jewish* self-determination is intrinsically anti-worker. No such attack is ever made on Arab (or any other people's) self-determination. The double standard reveals itself once again.

"But," replies the Left, "Israel is a settler state, like South Africa and Rhodesia, and, like them, must disappear." Such a superficial analysis demonstrates another aspect of Left anti-semitism: exploitation of Jewish oppression when it suits, and ignorance when it doesn't. Leftists are a veritable fount of tears for Jewish suffering at the hands of the Fascists during the Holocaust, but the endless economic and physical persecution of Jews in European and Arab countries (including those calling themselves "socialist"), the *immediate causes of the return to Zion* are ignored, while Jewish settlers are characterized not as victims but as spearheads of racism, capitalism and imperialism.

There are numerous arguments put forth by Jews to justify their claim to a state in Israel. The arguments are quite distinct from those of whites in South Africa and Rhodesia. (We discuss these arguments in detail in the Middle East section of this book.) There are also numerous Arab arguments. An honest person, an honest socialist, would try to investigate and weigh these various claims. The anti-semitic Left rejects *all* Jewish arguments out of hand and accepts *all* Arab arguments unquestioningly.

Other examples of Left anti-semitism are not hard to find. The world Left, which is proudly sensitive to issues of racism, has been strangely silent about the oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union. From blind supporters of the USSR we would expect nothing else. But even anti-Soviet Left groups, Maoists, Trotskyists, and others, who attack every aspect of Soviet society, turn their backs on the suffering of Soviet Jews.

The Left has been particularly insensitive to blatant manifestations of anti-semitism emanating from the Arab world. Do leftists discount as "wartime propaganda"

the hook-nosed, money-grubbing caricatures of Jews that regularly appear in the Arab press? One would at least hope to see a disclaimer somewhere, even from supporters of the PLO, if such support were not in fact rooted in anti-semitism. A search for such a statement of disassociation would be in vain.

Unfortunately, Arab anti-semitism is hardly limited to newspaper stereotypes. The history of Jews in Arab lands is one of degradation and oppression. Today, Jews are at best second-class citizens in every Arab country except Jordan, and it's certain that Jews would also be second-class citizens there if they hadn't all been killed or expelled in 1948. The Left, however, is silent on the current oppression of Jews and goes so far as to insist that the historical oppression of Jews in Arab lands is non-existent. "Before the advent of Zionism, the Jews and Arabs lived in peace." Such a statement ignores fourteen centuries of pogroms. It is the moral equivalent of claiming that black slaves were always happy and carefree in the American South, or that the Nazi Holocaust was the "hoax of the twentieth century."

The Left gives its near unanimous support to the Palestine Liberation Organization despite the fact that their statement of unity, the Palestinian National Covenant, is explicitly anti-semitic. The Covenant states in no uncertain terms that while Palestinians are a people entitled to self-determination, Jews merely constitute a "religious minority" with no national rights or independent existence. Jews who arrived after 1917 are not to be accorded citizenship in the future "Palestinian" State. What *would* happen to them is ominously left to the imagination. The Covenant goes on to state that the Palestinian Arab people will exercise self-determination "solely according to its own will and choice." Thus, Left support for this so-called "Unitary State," like its support for resolutions equating Zionism with racism, is just another way of trying to define us out of existence. While Jewish self-determination is automatically defined as racism, explicitly racist aspects of Palestinian National Liberation are left to fester.

The essence of Jewish history has been resistance to assimilation. The essential feature of the Left's approach to the Jewish People has been forced assimilation into either countries or movements, denying all the while that the Jewish People have any collective rights other than the right to vanish.

Gentile leftists implicitly believe that they have freed themselves from the western tradition of anti-semitism. "Yes," they argue, "Christianity has been

anti-semitic, but we are only anti-Zionist." One way to test this claim is to see how often leftist attitudes towards Jews are the same as anti-semitic attitudes. Leftists always describe Jews as a moneyed class—(middle-class Jews," "rich Jews," "Jewish capitalists"). Leftists consign Jews to statelessness; i.e., to our traditional wandering status. Leftists accept any and all claims of Jewish atrocities against others. Leftists excuse atrocities against Jews. Leftists describe world Jewry as a monolithic conspiracy, and leftists demand of Jews total assimilation, and complete rejection of Jewish consciousness. Now, perhaps all of this can be explained as anti-Zionism—and perhaps something that looks like a fish, smells like a fish, and swims like a fish is something other than a fish—but the difference, whatever it is, seems insignificant.

"But aren't some Jewish groups anti-Zionist? Does that make them also anti-semitic?" The two anti-Zionist Jewish groups which come to mind are the American Council for Judaism and the Jewish Labor Bund. The Council, which opposes the existence of Israel and supports the Arabs' call for its destruction, is in fact anti-semitic: it redefines Jews as a religion only, and denies us what it would grant all Arabs: statehood and self-determination.

The Bund is another matter entirely. This group, since its inception in 1897, has supported Jewish peoplehood and called for national, albeit landless, status for the Jews. Denial of this status by Lenin, Stalin, and the Bolsheviks led to the Bund's disappearance in the USSR. Many Bundists were later jailed, driven into exile, or killed. Today, the Bund still exists, and still describes itself as anti-Zionist. But its "anti-Zionism" does *not* include a call for Israel's destruction (there is a Bund Chapter in Israel), does *not* redefine Jews as a religion, does *not* support the PLO program for a "Unitary (Arab) State." The Bund simply claims that Israel has not solved the problem of Jewish oppression, and that the solution must be sought only in international socialism.

We have no disagreement with their first claim. We find their second claim naive, especially since many Bundists are alive today only because they were able to escape to Israel, while others are dead because of betrayal to the Nazis by their socialist "comrades." So, we disagree with the Bund's analysis but we do *not* find them anti-semitic.

Leftist anti-Zionism, as we have shown, is a whole different phenomenon. By every available measure it is anti-semitic to the core.

Perhaps our former comrades will read and understand this, more likely they will not. Too often we have attempted to raise our fears and concerns about the future of our people, only to be ignored or even censured. The most common response is that nobody could be seriously anti-semitic after the Nazi Holocaust. We suppose they sincerely believe that the world has risen above its recent history and will never threaten us again, but we see things differently. During the Holocaust six million Jews were killed while

the world stood by: closed eyes, closed hearts, and, worst of all, closed doors. When the Left seeks to destroy the only country that is committed to our survival, we simply can't credit them with having learned any lessons at all from our bitter past. Their studied ignorance, their doctrinaire refusal to face up to our oppression and our need for our state, must be called by its correct name: anti-Jewish racism, anti-semitism.