

Antisemitism, the Left and 1967

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Television was still “black and white” when I entered a high school oratory contest to talk about the U.S. war in Vietnam. A young Trotskyist subsequently recruited me to join the New Democratic Youth. I immersed myself in socialist political thought.

The U.S was a colonial empire and therefore, oppressive; however, as I understood Marx, capitalism was a necessary stage before socialism and eventual communism. The newly formed state of Israel was allied with United States and was, therefore, an oppressor. I noted that the majority of socialist thinkers I had been reading – Rosa Luxembour, Leon Trotsky, Edward Bernstein, and even Marx himself were Jews. The Jewish Left must have switched sides out of self-interest – the worst sort of traitor. The Balfour Declaration was proof that Israel was a colonial Zionist plot from the beginning of the British mandate in Palestine in 1920. Zionism was said to be a form of religious fundamentalism based on a divine mandate for Jews to occupy this particular area of the globe thus offending my newly developing humanist sensibilities.

We weren’t told that most of European Jewry had rejected Zionism. From 1919 to 1932 only 120,000 immigrated to Palestine joining the 60,000 to 80,000 Jews already present. In comparison, 280,000 to 380,000 European Jews migrated elsewhere, mainly to the Americas. After 1932, as conditions for Jews in Europe became progressively worse, western governments limited Jewish immigration to their countries. We also weren’t told that Britain had never allowed Jewish immigration to the 60% of Palestine east of the Jordan River or that in 1939 they stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine entirely. This trapped potentially hundreds of thousands

who could have been saved from the holocaust. The Left has had more sympathy for non-Jewish refugees.

In an act of ethnic cleansing, 850,000 Jews were expelled from Arab lands following World War II. While the United States and France took 250,000 of them, most had no choice but to resettle in Palestine. In 1947, the United Nations offered a “two state” solution for that part of Palestine that was not already part of the new state of Jordan. The Jews accepted the plan and named their portion “Israel.” The Arabs refused the two-state solution, invaded and lost. The majority of Arabs and all of the Jews were expelled from that part of Palestine designated for the other group. Why are the descendants of the Arabs still designated as refugees but not the descendants of Jews who also lost their homes?

I learned that most Zionists were not religious fundamentalists. Zionism was a movement for the re-establishment of a Jewish nation in Palestine. I still opposed Zionism for the same humanistic reason I would oppose nationalism generally – it is restrictive of minority populations who may not fit into the ethnic and linguistic definition of “the nation.” I have since learned that the leaders who established the state of Israel were from the Jewish Enlightenment tradition and they implemented a constitution guaranteeing liberal values, secularism and democracy. Three quarters of Israel’s population are Jews and a quarter of these are [atheists](#). More than 20% of Israel’s population are Arab Muslims with full rights of citizenship. Women, gays transsexuals and religious minorities have constitutional equality. In a nod to socialism, the two hundred and seventy kibbutzim that dot the landscape are rural communes. Why would the Left abandon the only people in the Middle East that have established a democracy with at least some semblance of socialism?

In 1967 Canada got colour television and Egypt, Jordan and Syria once again invaded Israel. They lost. Israel took the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. This was also the year the Arabs from these regions began referring to themselves as “Palestinians,” as distinct from other Arabs. In defence of the Left, Nasser of Egypt, Arafat of Palestine and the Baath parties of Syria and Iraq sounded like socialists but, like Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union, they needed totalitarian methods to compensate for their lack of popular support. All were eventually replaced by Islamists bent on restoring a Medieval view of mankind with a strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Humanists are opposed to the imposition of religious doctrine on subject peoples. Why did the Left support these reactionaries?

The Arab Palestinians were offered their own state with East Jerusalem as its capital in 2000 and again in 2008, but their leaders again rejected this “two-state” solution. Likud led by Benjamin Netanyahu was elected in 2009 on a platform opposed to such territorial concessions while favouring settlement expansion. The Israeli Labor Party has not had a role in government since. Why does the Left malign the Israeli Left?

With the return of the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt agreed to recognize Israel as a state. In 2005 Israel ended its occupation of Gaza “trading land for peace” by forcibly removing nine thousand Jews in 21 communities from the territory. The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) won elections for the Palestinian Authority in 2006 and subsequently formed the government of Gaza violently repressing opposition. Since its founding charter promised the elimination of Israel, the Israelis have maintained a blockade to prevent Hamas from acquiring heavy weapons. The Left has equated this blockade with occupation thus broadening the meaning of the term which had meant “control and administration.”

On October 7, 2023 Hamas led Gazans invaded Israel and murdered 1,200 mostly civilians, including 378 who were attending a music festival. They did not spare infants or elderly. They took 251 hostages in preparation for the inevitable counter-attack. The Left accused Israel of “genocide.”

“Genocide” is a term that was coined to describe attempts to remove a people from the gene pool. Six million Jews were placed into concentration camps and systematically murdered during World War II. The population of European Jews decreased accordingly. There has been no corresponding decrease in Muslim Arab populations, for example, the population of Gaza was 356,000 in 1967 growing to 2.1 million on 2023. In a reverse of this growth, the number of [Syrian Christians](#) dropped from 2.1 million in 2011 to 300,000 by 2022. Where is the outcry? At one time there were 14,000 [Lebanese Jews](#) but fewer than 20 remain alive today, yet no one has accused the Muslims of genocide. Hamas has reported that 300 Gazans have died of hunger since October 7, 2023 but during the same time period 100,000 to 150,000 people have died from hunger in [Yemen](#) and 50,000 to 100,000 have died in [South Sudan](#). Where are the demonstrations on Western university campuses opposing Yemeni and Sudanese “genocide?” Israeli forces have been targeting Hamas operatives who dress in civilian clothes and operate in civilian areas. In Ukraine the Russian forces actually do engage in indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas. Why has the Left not organized mass demonstrations against Russian “genocide?”

We need to consider that Israel stands accused of genocide for defending itself from an enemy that refused to release its hostages unconditionally and who refuses to surrender. The term “genocide” was created to represent the intentional extermination of a racial, ethnic or religious group from the gene pool. To expand the definition of genocide to mean “war crimes” or even the effects of war on civilian populations, we negate the meaning and purpose of the original

concept. Expanding the definition in this way equates the holocaust with other phenomenon – thus erasing the significance of the concept – a clever form of holocaust denial.

The Left claims to be anti-Zionist, not antisemitic, but they appear to have a special set of rules for the only majority Jewish state in the world; and, their “Pro-Palestinian” campaign has resulted in attacks on synagogues and Jewish run businesses. Students have expressed fear of identifying as Jews in Canadian universities. Jews only represent 1% of the Canadian population, but in 2023 there were 900 police reported [attacks on Jews](#) representing 70% of all religiously motivated hate crimes in the country. In the modern context “anti-Zionism” has become an engine of Jew hatred. At least some of the Left can trace their antisemitism to a misreading of Marx who said: "What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money. [...] In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism" (Marx, 1844/2008).

These words were used by Stalin and his successors in the Soviet Union to justify widespread purges that killed or imprisoned thousands of Jews while equating Zionism with imperialism and fascism. The American Communist Party justified Arab pogroms against Jews in Palestine and North Africa while conflating Jewish financiers with plutocratic exploitation. Soviet bloc propaganda, allied with authoritarian Arab states, funded vicious campaigns demonizing Israel as a colonial outpost, and influencing the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s to adopt tropes of Jewish power and victim-blaming. Marx would not have been pleased. In the context of his writing, he was telling Jewish capitalists to give up on capitalism. His words were part of a movement that saw Jews embrace socialist and union activity in an attempt to integrate with workers the world over. But Marx’s more literal followers turned class politics into identity politics.

It began with Marcuse and the New Left in the 1960s (Coughlin & Higgins, 2019). In an act of revisionism, it declared students and academics, as opposed to workers, to be the revolutionary class. By the 1980s it had replaced workers in another way – designated identity groups were now seen as the primary victims of oppression. In the 1980s and 1990s this not-so new Left adopted postmodern relativism with at least one important difference – while postmodernism held that all knowledge is socially constructed by people with power, the new Left held that its own ideology could not be critically examined. Pinker noted this new belief system had the trappings of a quasi-religion (Pinker, 2003). This new religious movement that has become increasingly strident and intolerant is commonly referred to as “Wokism” (Robertson, 2021; Robertson & Tasca, 2022; Samuels, 2022).

Any religion or ideology based on identity groups and politics will inevitably favor some groups over others thus promoting racism. The tropes used to demonize Jews from the left frequently channel those used by 20th Century fascists. Since Enlightenment science and reason are seen as “Eurocentric” with Jews defined as ultra-white, the resultant demonization is often impervious to logic. Humanists need to consider how ideological belief that is religiously held can damage free speech, reason and, ultimately, compassion.

The media often see the Wokists as “the Left,” but there is a branch of the traditional Left who believed Enlightenment tools of science and reason could be used to address social problems and build a better society. Guided by humanist compassion, Democratic Socialists like Bernstein sought to curb the excesses of capitalism while preserving individual liberty and human rights. They rejected the authoritarianism of both the far-left and the far-right championing free speech and open discussion to overcome the bias and programming that would otherwise determine our worldview. Over the years, my views have evolved accordingly. I still

do not pretend I have it exactly right and I remain open to refining my understanding through continued reflection and dialogue.

Cold hearted orb that rules the night

Distorts the colours from our sight

Red is grey and yellow white

But we decide which is right

And which is illusion.

-The Moody Blues, 1967

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