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Labour and Antisemitism: a Crisis Misunderstood

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that Labour's antisemitism crisis has been misunderstood. We suggest that a more accurate and sophisticated understanding of antisemitism offers a way forward. There are three elements to this claim. First, by drawing on existing data on attitudes towards Jews, we criticise the widespread focus on individual 'antisemites', rather than on the broader problem of antisemitism. In turn, we conceive of antisemitism not as a virus or poison, as in so many formulations, but rather, as a reservoir of readily available images and ideas that subsist in our political culture. Second, following on from this understanding, we offer five ways forward. Finally, we set this analysis in the context of a historical parting of the ways between anti-racism and opposition to antisemitism. An anti-racism defined solely by conceptions of whiteness and power, we argue, has proven unable to fully acknowledge and account for anti-Jewish racism.

Keywords: Labour, antisemitism, anti-racism, metaphor, Jewish community, the left

SINCE APRIL 2016, a long-running controversy about antisemitism in the Labour Party and on the left more broadly has become a critical and, at times, central feature of political debate in Britain. This debate is not restricted to conventional political actors, but extends to academics, journalists, and bloggers. For some, an antisemitic way of thinking about Jews, Zionism and Israel, once located on the margins of the Labour Party, won positions of power and influence following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015.¹ For others, by contrast, the charges of antisemitism levelled against Labour should be viewed as a 'moral panic' or as a smear, designed to discredit support for socialism at home and for Palestinians in the Middle East.²

There is one significant, but unnoticed, point of consensus in this otherwise bitter dispute. Figures on all sides conceive antisemitism as an exogenous force which contaminates and spoils the political body it inhabits. Both Jeremy Corbyn and the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis characterise antisemitism as 'a poison'. For the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and for Michael Gove, it is a 'virus', a term also used by Mirvis's

predecessor, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well by a wide range of Labour figures from Lord Mandelson to Len McCluskey. Words matter and, as we shall see, these metaphors lead those who employ them to misconceive both the problem Labour faces and the sort of action the party needs to take.

The idea that Labour's antisemitism crisis is, essentially, a malign confection, broadcast by the opponents and enemies of Corbynism, was just about the majority opinion in the party in the autumn of the 2019 election. A September YouGov survey of members found that 66 per cent did not think the party had a serious problem of antisemitism within its membership and that 54 per cent blamed the accusations on political opponents who wanted to undermine Jeremy Corbyn or on the 'mainstream media'.³ These abbreviated views expressed by Labour members chime well with the more developed argument provided by the party's leaders and advocates. This argument, delivered in different registers, ranging from belligerent to regretful, has three main elements. First, it acknowledges that, disappointingly, there is some antisemitism in

Labour but that it is a tiny problem. In July 2019, for example, Jennie Formby, the party's General Secretary, pointed out that since September 2015 antisemitism related cases that had gone through all stages of the Labour Party's disciplinary procedures amounted to 0.06 per cent of the party's average membership over that period. This figure, or a similar one, is frequently held up as an indication of how insignificant the party's problem is.⁴ Second, the argument highlights the Labour left's record of opposing racism and fascism: this exemplary past means accusations of antisemitism in Labour can only be falsehoods disseminated to discredit the party by Tories, Blairites and Zionists, factions which fear its radicalism in general and its support for the Palestinians in particular. Finally, according to this script, insofar as there is a problem in Labour, it is conceived as one that reflects society at large and does not reflect aspects of the history and culture of the left.

Each of these elements should provoke scepticism. First, the assumption that the number of complaints dealt with by Labour's disciplinary apparatus reflects the real level of antisemitic incidents in the party is not credible. The one thing we know about reported hate crime figures in general is that they represent the tip of an iceberg. It is special pleading to think that Labour's data are in some way different. Second, the complaint that antisemitism is being used as a stick with which to beat the Labour Party is unworldly. From the ancient world to the contemporary scene, political adversaries have drawn attention to their opponents' ethical weaknesses. In the case of the Corbyn-led Labour Party, it was politics as usual when its rivals, both outside the party and within, drew attention to what they perceived to be a grave and persistent failure of principle. When the tables are turned—as they are over Islamophobia in the Conservative Party—this is just what the left does. Without doubt, there have been attempts to use Labour's antisemitism for political advantage, and this has had significant consequences. However, acknowledging this dimension of the controversy does not require us to assert *a priori* that allegations of antisemitism are made in bad faith or that there has not been an underlying problem.

Third, the idea that antisemitism is an alien growth, without any sources in the ecology and history of the left, forgets the antisemitism that recurs through the history of British radicalism from the Chartists, to the Boer War, to the present day, and which represents Jews as disloyal, and finance capital as Jewish. The proposition that antisemitic ideas remain alive within left political culture is reinforced by new research. In 2019, the anti-racist advocacy group Hope not Hate identified 27,000 UK based left-wing Twitter accounts that either directly spread antisemitic ideas or deny and trivialise them.⁵ When assessing this evidence, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between Labour Party members, supporters and the wider penumbra of left opinion, but what is clear is the existence within the left of political beliefs which draw on antisemitic ideas.

All of this suggests there is good reason for us to review evidence of the extent of antisemitism in Labour and to place it in the context of what we know about the extent of antisemitism in the country more broadly. First, if an antisemite is someone who displays a thoroughgoing and ideologically inflected negativity towards Jews, then the number of antisemites in Britain is strikingly low and significantly lower than those with corresponding views towards Muslims. In 2017 the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) estimated that the number who express multiple negative ideas about Jews with varying degrees of confidence and ideological certainty extends to roughly 5 per cent of British adults. The Pew Global Attitudes survey in spring 2019 similarly found 6 per cent of adults in the UK expressing an unfavourable view of Jews—similar to levels reported in western and northern Europe and significantly lower than the levels of antisemitism reported in countries of eastern and southern Europe.⁶

We can confidently label as antisemites the 5 per cent segment identified by JPR. But the number of antisemites is not the same thing as the spread of antisemitic ideas. This is something the JPR survey also tried to capture when it presented respondents with a series of negative statements about Jews. Here, 13 per cent agreed with the view that 'Jews think they are better than other people', 12 per cent agreed that the interests of

Jews are very different from the interests of others, and the same percentage agreed that Jews get rich at the expense of others, while 8 per cent agreed that Jews have too much power in Britain. Overall, 15 per cent of British adults hold two or more of these antisemitic attitudes and a further 15 per cent hold at least one. In contrast to the small number of antisemites in the country, the diffusion of antisemitic attitudes, at different levels of intensity, reaches 30 per cent of the adult population. The probability of self-censorship among some respondents means that this figure should be taken as an absolute minimum.

If we ask where these negative attitudes are most likely to be found, we can turn to polls conducted by YouGov in 2017 and 2019. These surveys found that men are more likely than women to approve of an antisemitic statement, and that people at both ends of the adult age range (18–24 and 65+) are more likely to do so than other age groups. At the same time, the surveys suggest that Labour Party supporters are no more likely than Conservative Party supporters to assent to an antisemitic proposition.⁷ In fact, in the case of the 2017 survey, Conservative Party voters were more likely to agree with antisemitic opinions. In 2019 the picture was more mixed, in part because the roster of questions was extended. Nevertheless, in that year 15 per cent of Conservative voters surveyed agreed that having a connection to Israel makes Jewish people less loyal to Britain than other British people, whereas among Labour voters the figure was lower at 11 per cent. Conversely, 16 percent of Labour voters agreed that 'compared to other groups Jewish people have too much power in the media', whereas among Conservative voters the figure was 14 per cent. The broad picture is clear, however. A significant minority of supporters of both main political parties assent to antisemitic stereotypes and prejudices.

This picture also presents a puzzle. Why is antisemitism a problem for Labour when, as we have seen, Conservative supporters too are vulnerable to the same prejudice? The idea that the controversy is the upshot of a baseless smear campaign is one tendentious response to this puzzle, but it is not persuasive in the face of evidence from attitudinal

surveys, the qualitative work of Hope not Hate and others, and the testimony of many Labour Party members. In this context, the question we need to ask is not whether there is a problem of antisemitism in the Labour Party, but why the antisemitism that exists within Labour rises to the surface.

We can approach this question by returning to the distinction between antisemites—thorough-going and often ideologically committed racists—and the more diffuse antisemitism that subsists in political culture. For while antisemitic attitudes are broadly distributed, in recent times it is among Labour Party members and supporters that Jews are more likely to be interpellated as subjects and as a problem within political debate. This does not happen because Labour members are committed antisemites, but because Jews intersect, or are perceived to intersect, with some of the key issues they care about: Israel and Palestine, and the operation of power within capitalist society.

In the former case, the 2019 YouGov survey demonstrates how some Labour supporters draw on the fund of antisemitic ideas when faced with the individual and collective injustice suffered by Palestinians. It found that fully one quarter of Labour voters agreed that 'Israel can get away with anything because its supporters control the media'. In other words, when Israel became the topic of conversation these respondents drew on the store of antisemitic stereotypes—in this case on the hoary idea, at least 150 years old, that Jews control the media.

In the case of anti-capitalism, intentionally or not, the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership has fed from a longstanding tendency on the left to understand capitalism as a corrupt system shaped by the machinations of a self-serving elite, rather than as a set of economic structures and relations. The key slogan, 'For the many not the few', has at times been appropriated by actors drawn to conspiratorial thinking. At this point Jews become vulnerable. Some Labour members and supporters have drawn on a pre-existing store of antisemitic attitudes in which Jews appear as the personification of finance capital and as the hidden hand pulling the levers of power. When political debate turns to Israel and to finance capitalism, the diffuse antisemitic attitudes that exist latently as

one resource among others within British culture can be mobilised; Jews are then racialised and abused in political discourse.

It has become a cliché to think of antisemitism as a virus. This trope predates the public health crisis that surrounds us at the time of writing. Antisemitism has long been understood as a strange disease which erupts in different times and places, creating antisemites. But in Britain the problem is not one of limited pockets of committed, ideological antipathy. Rather, the problem is more widespread: negative and stereotypical ideas about Jews which have accumulated over centuries and are embedded deeply within our culture. Instead of people who have been poisoned or who have caught a contagion which now possesses them, we see people reaching for antisemitic ideas at a particular moment to provide a simple and, apparently, persuasive account of a problem they care about. If we should use a metaphor to comprehend antisemitism, it is not virus but reservoir: a deep reservoir of stereotypes and narratives, one which is replenished over time and from which people can draw with ease. Indeed, the image of a reservoir may help us to understand not only antisemitism but also other racisms, both within and beyond Labour.

Responding to antisemitism

What are the political implications of the argument made above? What follows if we conceive antisemitism, not as a virus or poison, but as a reservoir of narratives and myths that can be taken as a resource in specific historical and social contexts? In the recent Labour Party controversy, as we noted at the start of this piece, both defenders and opponents of the party leadership shared a commitment to the virus metaphor. Two forms of politics followed from this. One was denial. Because the problem was understood as a problem of antisemites and not of antisemitism, defenders of the leadership were quick to emphasise the small number of 'real' antisemites in the party. Those accused of broadcasting antisemitic tropes were often defended on the basis of not being antisemites.

Corbyn 'does not have an anti-Semitic bone in his body', a party spokesman told the

Jewish press in 2015, a phrase repeated word for word in 2019 by Momentum founder Jon Lansman and by Gordon Nardell, the lawyer the party brought in to oversee disciplinary cases.⁸ In this rhetoric, because antisemitism is understood as only carried by antisemites, insisting someone is not antisemitic appears to erase the problem. The reservoir approach to antisemitism shows that such responses are misplaced. The reservoir of antisemitic tropes can be drawn on wittingly or unwittingly by those who lack a commitment to an antisemitic worldview; antisemitism can be present in the absence of recognisable 'antisemites'.

On the other side of the debate, the problem was seen as not one of a few bad apples, but of a host body afflicted with the sickness; Labour was framed as a party riddled with antisemites, requiring radical surgical attention in the form of large-scale expulsions. Mainstream Jewish organisations made increasingly sweeping demands to punish the offenders. Party leaders responded with assurances of a 'zero tolerance' approach, but struggled to implement it.

The two responses—denial on the one hand and zero tolerance on the other—created a dynamic in which relations between the party and the Jewish community could only deteriorate. The demand for zero tolerance is almost certainly impossible to meet: while antisemites might be rooted out, antisemitism, flowing through our political culture at large, cannot be. Meanwhile, denial blocked the possibility of developing an understanding of how antisemitism works as a reservoir of ideas and images. At the same time, it prevented any serious coming to terms with the hurt these ideas and images cause, regardless of the intent of those who use them.

In the aftermath of the Corbyn leadership, there is an opportunity to escape this dynamic. However, in the 2020 Labour leadership election—to the anger of many in the party grassroots who maintain the denialist position—almost all candidates followed earlier patterns, asserting they would take a 'zero tolerance' approach to antisemitism and finally 'root out' the problem.⁹ Again, the reservoir idea points to the insufficiency of the purely disciplinary route. You can

expel antisemites, but you cannot expel antisemitism.

Instead, we propose an approach with five key elements. First, activism against antisemitism should focus on antisemitism and not just antisemites: making people aware of the tropes and the harm done by them, rather than alleging that those who draw on these tropes are somehow irredeemably antisemitic. Second, there should be a deeper understanding of the reservoir of antisemitic ideas and images circulating within political culture, and how that reservoir has been replenished through time. In short: we need education. Third, political actors in the eye of the storm need to practise self-scrutiny rather than responding defensively or in the form of denial. This approach has the potential to rebuild trust between political parties and British Jews, and in fact, builds on a significant precedent. In April 2016 Labour MP Naz Shah was accused of sharing antisemitic content on social media. Instead of claiming she had not an antisemitic bone in her body, Shah articulated a desire to understand and repair the hurt she had been told she had caused. By refusing the debate on antisemitic intent—the question of whether she was ‘an antisemite’—Shah instead shifted our attention to language and imagery, that is, to the reservoir of antisemitic tropes on which she unwittingly drew. Her response was widely praised by mainstream Jewish organisations.¹⁰

Fourth, an awareness of antisemitism as a reservoir, with some tropes persisting over time and others emerging anew, should also caution us to be aware of the range of sources of antisemitism. While the Israel/Palestine conflict was the context in which some left-wing activists turned to antisemitic discourse, the antisemitism in the Labour Party also drew on long histories of anti-capitalist antisemitism, which in turn drew on Christian antisemitic themes, as well as on conspiratorial narratives. Anti-capitalist and conspiratorial forms of antisemitism have new resonance in the current conjuncture, as the increasingly opaque workings of global capitalism and the manifest injustices they produce push some actors to seek simplistic explanations. A single-minded focus on anti-Zionist antisemitism—both from some mainstream Jewish voices and from denialists in

Labour who saw all allegations of antisemitism as attempts to block criticism of Israel—meant that the public debate often missed the significance of anti-capitalism and conspiratorialism.

Similarly, an exclusive focus on antisemitism on the left leaves us unprepared to address the antisemitism that comes from elsewhere. In particular, from the political right, where it is surging globally, and could do so in Britain given the right circumstances. Our fifth and final way forward follows directly from this. Political parties and movements need to develop the political language to speak to the crises to which antisemitism responds without creating openings for antisemitism. For example, some responses to the crisis of global capitalism present a breach through which the reservoir of antisemitism can flow. A narrative of a “rigged economy” is not in itself antisemitic, but it can be vulnerable to an antisemitic articulation when the spotlight falls on elites as those who are doing the “rigging”. Other anti-capitalist narratives, which give greater emphasis to structures and impersonal forces, are more resistant to antisemitism.¹¹

Anti-racism and the Labour antisemitism crisis

One striking element of Naz Shah’s response to antisemitism in the spring of 2016 was her recognition that antisemitism is a form of racism. I ‘didn’t get antisemitism as racism’, she said; now, though, she realised that ‘Antisemitism is racism, full stop’. Her response drew on her own experiences and opened with an identification as ‘someone who knows the scourge of oppression and racism all too well’.¹² This points towards the intellectual and political potential of a multi-directional understanding of antisemitism; one that is always in relation to other racisms, from which a politics of solidarity might emerge.

And yet for Labour and the wider left, such an anti-racist politics has been difficult to sustain. In this final section, we argue that part of the reason Labour has not responded more adequately to antisemitism is a continued difficulty in recognising antisemitism as a form of racism. This reflects the changing

place of ‘antiantisemitism’ within the politics of anti-racism in Labour and the left more broadly. Half a century ago, opposition to antisemitism and opposition to other racisms were closely aligned, both intellectually and politically. This alignment is traceable in early academic work (such as that of Michael Banton) on race relations in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, which, though not always addressing antisemitism consistently, nevertheless proceeded from a shared premise that Nazi antisemitism and colonial racisms drew upon similar sources: ‘irrational prejudice’ and the scientifically untenable idea of ‘race’. These connections influenced the White Paper that led to the Labour government’s Race Relations Act 1976, drafted by Anthony Lester, who described his path to anti-racism as one paved by the experience of ‘English antisemitism’. Further afield, these threads were pulled together most dramatically in the scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois and the searing anti-colonial critique of Aimé Césaire.¹³ Today, however, these connections are slender, and for many there has been a parting of the ways. In Labour and contemporary British politics more generally, definitions of antisemitism, racism and Islamophobia abound, yet rarely are they joined up.

This is a bifurcation long in the making. Just over twenty-five years ago, the Runnymede Trust, Britain’s leading race equality think tank, issued its report into antisemitism, *A Very Light Sleeper: the Persistence and Dangers of Antisemitism*.¹⁴ Significantly, the report conceptualised antisemitism within a wider account of racism, and warned that these crucial connections had become ‘obscured’ in recent political debate. The document also drew attention to the relationship between antisemitism and what it labelled ‘Islamophobia’. This integrated conception of racism soon bore fruit: building on the report, Runnymede’s Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1997 published its pathbreaking work, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, widely recognised as the first such study on the subject.¹⁵ In the 1990s, then, the creative work of thinking about antisemitism and other racisms together was still underway in the UK, but it was a project working under increasing strain.

In the wider anti-racist movement, divisions were growing between campaigns against antisemitism and those organised around opposition to other forms of racism, especially when articulated with the politics of Zionism and anti-Zionism. The split, for example, between the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (CARF) and *Searchlight* magazine in the early 1990s over the question of Israel and Palestine, signalled the direction of travel to come. Two decades on, these divisions have grown further still. For Labour, the parting of the ways was most sharply brought into view in the summer of 2018, at a peak in the party’s antisemitism crisis, when over 100 Black, Asian and minority ethnic organisations signed an open letter expressing dismay at Labour’s decision to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition. The definition, said the signatories, would suppress any reckoning with colonial racisms, past and present.¹⁶

Within Labour, the parting of the ways often animates debate on Israel and Palestine. Labour’s association with Zionism is long-standing. At the time of the Six Day War in 1967, two-thirds of the parliamentary Labour Party were enrolled in Labour Friends of Israel. And though support for a Palestinian state has grown in Labour since the early 1980s, especially since the 1982 Lebanon War, the party retained its commitment to Israel constituted as a Jewish state. However, the election of Corbyn as leader in 2015 placed a question mark over that legacy. The party was now led by a long-standing advocate of the Palestinian national cause. This signalled a change, not in policy as such—the party remained ostensibly committed to a two-state solution under Corbyn’s leadership—but a change in the tone and substance of political debate, particularly within the wider membership, where instances of antisemitism had risen to the surface. This unsettling of Labour’s relation to Zionism has exposed and accentuated the parting of the ways.

The obstacles that stand in the way of a more integrated understanding of antisemitism are as conceptual as they are political, and these difficulties are not Labour’s own; they reflect important features in the way racism is understood today. In the UK, the

dominant paradigms for making sense of race, which emerged in the postwar decades and have subsequently been influenced by anti-racist struggles in the US, have had two key dimensions. First, they have been colour-coded, synchronised with ideas about whiteness, and, second, they emerged through the politics of decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century.

These paradigms have tended to leave to one side the history and ongoing significance of antisemitism, and have implicitly positioned Jews as unambiguously ‘white’—a problem already identified in Runnymede’s report on antisemitism twenty-five years ago. In more recent times, the popularisation of analyses of racism centred on ‘white privilege’ derived from the specific context of the US but extended to Europe, has added an accelerant to these developments such that, within prevailing accounts of racism, Jews are not always perceived to be among its victims. For Labour, where these anti-racist paradigms have found a home, they have enabled a corresponding inattentiveness to the specificity of antisemitism, and, at times, a striking inability to recognise it as a form of racism.

These tensions within anti-racist politics have played out in Labour’s antisemitism crisis. For instance, in 2011, when he was a backbench Labour MP, Jeremy Corbyn provided an introductory essay for a new edition of John Atkinson Hobson’s classic radical 1902 text *Imperialism*. Corbyn ticked off Hobson for his racialised representations of black Africans, but passed over without comment the antisemitic fulcrum of Hobson’s argument, wherein finance capital, Hobson’s essential vector of imperialism, is identified as Jewish.¹⁷ Corbyn’s silence on Hobson’s antisemitism represents another illustration of the parting of the ways, of a political culture in which some on the left fail to recognise antisemitism, even when it is in front of their eyes.

One of the most striking examples of this was the notorious mural in Tower Hamlets, the cause of so much controversy in the spring and summer of 2018. Here we have a powerful illustration of antisemitism apparently aligned with the cause of social justice, in which Jews are coded as white and placed front and centre within the financial elite.

Entitled *Freedom For Humanity*, the mural depicted six men at a table dictating the ‘New World Order’. When asked by the local council to clarify his message, the mural’s artist, Mear One, claimed the artwork depicted ‘class and privilege’, nothing more.¹⁸ In fact, it offered a vision of class stained through with modern antisemitism: a critique of capitalism in which the forces of global power are rendered ‘Jewish’; a racialised projection of ‘the Jew’ as an archetype which stands above and in conflict with the oppressed. Yet, for all the attention the mural received, one thing seemed to elude most commentators: the mural depicted not only Jews and Jewishness, but placed them in opposition to the pain and suffering of black and brown lives. At the same time, the figuring of Jews as ‘white’ was made more explicit by the artist himself, when he wrote: ‘some of the older white Jewish folk in the local community had an issue with me portraying their beloved #Rothschild or #Warburg etc as the demons they are’.¹⁹ The episode seemed to capture the anomalous position Jews sometimes occupy within an anti-racist imaginary focussed on whiteness and empire.

Labour’s antisemitism controversy, then, reflects a deepening divide among the forces that oppose racism. The moralising insistence on zero tolerance against antisemites and on stamping out the virus will not address this divide. But a more rigorous understanding of antisemitism—as one specific form of racism and as a reservoir of myths and images that circulate in our broader political culture—as well as the steps we have set out in this essay, may yet help us along the way. This is a matter of political will and vision. We will soon know whether the party can seize the opportunity.

Notes

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