



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Feldman, David and Gidley, Ben and Mcgeever, Brendan (2020) The Labour Party and antisemitism: a crisis misunderstood. The Political Quarterly Blog

,

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/46423/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

Antisemitism and the Labour party has rarely been out of the UK's political headlines in the UK since 2016. Yet as we argue in our [new article in *the Political Quarterly*](#), the controversy is ill-conceived.

Drawing on existing survey data, we show that antisemitism is broadly spread across supporters of all political parties. The key question for analysis, therefore, is not whether Labour has a problem with antisemitism, but why it is that Labour's antisemitism has risen to the surface in recent times whereas in other parties it has done so to a far lesser extent.

The answer, we propose, lies in the ways Jews intersect, or are perceived to intersect, with some of the issues that animate some party members and supporters: the injustices suffered by Palestinians and the operation of power within capitalist society.

Building on this insight we argue that disciplinary measures remain a necessary but far from sufficient tool for addressing antisemitism in political life. We need a reckoning with what we call the *reservoir* of antisemitism: a deep reservoir of narratives, representations and stereotypes from which various political actors draw at different moments. Finally, we explore the reasons why Labour and the left have at times struggled to recognise antisemitism, which we locate within the bifurcation of the anti-racist movement.

There have been a range of responses to our article from both academics and activists. Most of our interlocutors have been complimentary while a minority have been more critical. A portion of the latter have dealt in *ad hominem* attacks which we leave to one side. In this piece, we address some of the significant analytical issues which have emerged and highlight areas which stand in need of more research and analysis.

Antisemitism and the left

Our article aims to advance a contentious debate by providing an explanation of Labour's antisemitism problem. Our analysis operates chiefly through an account of the political ideas and unspoken assumptions at work in sections of the party. We do not say much about the micro-politics of the controversy, and this is one area where we will do more work in the future. Nevertheless, an explanation of antisemitism on the left is not the same as providing an excuse for it. Far from minimizing the extent of antisemitism, we criticize those who have tried to do so and we reject what we call 'denialism' on the left.

One concept which continues to cause disagreement among scholars is "anti-Zionist antisemitism". So far as our article is concerned, the controversy does not concern whether antisemitism can surface within anti-Zionist politics – clearly, it can and does – but how this phenomenon should be conceived and measured.

In our article we present this form of antisemitism as an expression of the 'reservoir' concept, rather than as a free-standing category. In this way it emerges as one variant of antisemitism: just as, for example, anti-capitalist antisemitism or white nationalist antisemitism. A minority of scholars and campaigning organizations, by contrast, single out "anti-Zionist antisemitism" as a primary category for measurement in its own right. This disagreement about conceptualization and method was too large to resolve in our original article, still less can we do it justice in a short blog, but it is something to which we shall return.

Antisemitism and anti-capitalism

We claim that certain forms of anti-capitalist discourse can be driven in an antisemitic direction. Our argument is not that anti-capitalism itself is somehow intrinsically antisemitic or even uniquely vulnerable to antisemitism.

Instead, we propose that when capitalist exploitation is personified as the work of self-interested financiers, or as a group of conspiring elites, rather than a set of structures, the capacity for the reservoir of antisemitism to be drawn on is enlarged. In reaching for a language to make sense of the injustices of the capitalist present, 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.

It is currently impossible to quantify the extent of the hold of these ideas in the Labour movement, but we can glean some insight from survey data on Labour voters. [YouGov polling](#) shortly before the 2019 general election found that 16 per cent of Labour voters agreed Jews have too much power in the media, while eight per cent believed Jews can't be trusted in business.

Within the Labour party itself, a number of candidates and office-holders have circulated material which draws on antisemitic tropes about finance, many citing the perceived influence of the Rothschilds. These include: a Labour councillor in Lancashire who justified sharing a meme about the Rothschilds controlling Trump, [stating](#) “we must remember that Rothschilds are a powerful financial family (like the Medicis) and represent capitalism and big business”; a Constituency Labour Party chair in Merseyside who [said](#) the “Rothschild family are behind a lot of the neo-liberal influence in the UK and the US”; a Momentum organiser in Portsmouth who claimed that Blair was ‘protected’ by the Rothschilds, who “control all the money in the world”; and a trade union official who [accused](#) a Remain campaigner of having “pockets full of Soros money”. These are just snapshots, and more work is required, but taken together they point to the ways some Labour members and supporters turn to the reservoir of antisemitism to make sense of the world.

Moving forward

Figures on all sides of this bitter dispute have unexpectedly tended to reach for the same understandings of antisemitism. Jeremy Corbyn and the Chief Rabbi agree it is a “poison”; for Boris Johnson and Len McCluskey, it is a “virus”. We argue that the reservoir idea provides a better way to understand the problem. At the same time, however, we recognise that this formulation has no built-in model for explaining how antisemitism spreads.

Our article is a call for a more conjunctural analysis, which focuses on why, at particular moments, political actors, both those who are committed antisemites and the majority who are not, go to the reservoir and draw from a depository of tropes and narratives. Understanding this better is central to our research agenda as we take this work forward.

Based on [an article](#) in the Political Quarterly journal.