

Conceptual Vandalism, Historical Distortion: The Labour Antisemitism Crisis and the Limits of Class Instrumentalism

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Abstract

This article analyses the British left's response to allegations of antisemitism within the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. It uses as its foil a collection of essays on the topic written over the course of the Corbyn era for leading online outlets of the contemporary Anglo-American left, and given away as a free e-book by Verso, the world's biggest leftist publisher, during the 2019 British election campaign. On the basis of this collection, the article suggests that the Labour antisemitism crisis was the culmination of a long process of political and theoretical degeneration within the left. It argues that the tendency to reduce of the question of antisemitism to that of class "interests," with antisemitism understood primarily as an "instrument" used by the powerful to divide the "oppressed," leaves many leftists unable to comprehend the possibility of exterminatory antisemitism as an end-in-itself. The appeal of this approach lies in the apparent alibi against antisemitism it provides for those on the left, like Corbyn, whose interests supposedly coincide with those of "the oppressed," and means that *accusations* of antisemitism within the left can be similarly denounced as cover for the underlying 'interests' of those making the accusation. The article argues that the insistence that the State of Israel is "a racist endeavour," a claim which lay at the heart of the Labour antisemitism dispute, rests upon an arbitrary and ahistorical rejection of the notion of Jewish peoplehood. This critique itself draws upon a long history of right-nationalist and liberal-republican antisemitism in which Jews were viewed as an illegitimate "anti-nation," and in its partiality is radically distinct from a critique of the nation-state as such. The article suggests that this same partiality and ahistoricity reappears in the inability of a class instrumentalist perspective to apprehend the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, relationship between Israel and antisemitism, and the genocidal antisemitism of the Holocaust in particular.

Keywords Jeremy Corbyn, antisemitism, Israel, antizionism, class, UK Labour Party, genocide, Holocaust, IHRA

INTRODUCTION

In November 2019, as the UK General Election campaign approached its climatic—and, for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, catastrophic—end, British publisher Verso released an "urgent" open access report entitled *Antisemitism and the Labour Party*.¹ Edited by Oxford PhD candidate Jamie Stern-Weiner, who has built a substantial online following through his trenchant

commentary on the topic, the report brings together key articles and essays on antisemitism within Labour published by leading websites, magazines and blogs of the contemporary Anglo-American left throughout the Corbyn era. These include the US quarterly magazine and website *Jacobin*, the British site *Open Democracy*, and the blog hosted by Verso itself.

The report is split into six sections: an “overview” featuring two wide-ranging essays from *Jacobin* features editor Daniel Finn; a section of “evidence” with contributions from Stern-Weiner and his regular collaborator Norman Finkelstein, and a guide to “challenging false accusations of antisemitism” by Jewish Voice for Labour, the anti-Zionist campaign group set up precisely for that purpose; a “reporting” section focusing on the media; three “case studies,” featuring two essays critiquing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) “working definition” of antisemitism; a “politics” section, including an essay by cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert setting out what shall be termed here an “instrumentalist” theory of antisemitism; and “processes and principles,” looking at the disciplinary structures of the Labour Party. The final section consists of twenty-one personal testimonies from “Labour members of Jewish heritage,” each affirming the central argument running through the report as a whole: that claims of “significant antisemitism” within the party “are ridiculous and owe more to the government of Israel’s concerns that a Labour government might support Palestine, to right-wing MPs seeing an opportunity to get rid of Corbyn, and to mainstream media fears of a left-wing Labour government.”²

To date, there has not been a more comprehensive account of the arguments put forward by leftist writers and activists to refute accusations of antisemitism during Corbyn’s leadership.³ Despite the dust now settling on the Corbyn era, appraising the report in depth remains a useful exercise. This is not just for what it tells us about the past few years in British politics, but because it confirms that the crisis over antisemitism in Labour was not merely the result of one particular individual’s failings, or those of a “few bad apples,” but rather represented the culmination of a long process of political, ideological and theoretical corrosion when it comes to antisemitism that has disfigured parts of the left for decades. In this article I suggest that the effects of such corrosion are first felt at the level

of *conceptualisation*—the way that Jews, antisemitism, Zionism, Israel, the Holocaust are categorised *prior* to any consideration of a particular incident of alleged antisemitism—and how these concepts are integrated into a worldview that for much of the left is taken as axiomatic.

A close study of the Stern-Weiner report reveals how this outlook often derives from a reductive form of quasi-Marxist “materialism,” which seeks to reduce the multiplicity of modern capitalist society to a Manichean morality play in which every historical phenomenon can be understood by posing the same simple question of *cui bono*—who benefits?⁴ When applied to antisemitism, this leads to a crude functionalism, whereby antisemitism is understood solely as an instrument consciously constructed by the powerful to protect their “real” political and economic interests and divide the oppressed. The validity of *claims* of antisemitism are in turn determined entirely by the supposed underlying “interests” of those making the claim, and those accused. In this way the concept of antisemitism is emptied of any determinate content of its own, dissolved into a generic notion of “oppression,” while leftists—those whose interests are assumed to necessarily coincide with those of the “oppressed”—are happily exonerated from any possibility of antisemitism from the start.

The imperious confidence provided by such a perspective goes some way to accounting for the lack of serious engagement with opposing arguments within these pages.⁵ One searches in vain for any reference to more than a century’s worth of theoretical and historical literature on the anti-capitalist left’s relationship to Judaism, antisemitism, Zionism and Israel.⁶ Instead each article is built upon a tight feedback loop of cross-references, with contributors rarely citing anyone except each other. The same self-certainty explains why so few authors feel the need to defend or even discuss the well-documented litany of Corbyn’s own actions during his career-long preoccupation with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Inviting a blood libeller for tea at the House of Commons? Donating money to a

charity run by a Holocaust denier?⁷ Attending a talk by the architect of multiple Hamas suicide bombings, which he subsequently described as “fascinating and electrifying”?⁸ None of this appears in the report. Why should it? Once Corbyn’s identity as—in Finkelstein’s words—a “saintly figure” whose “interests” are identical with those of the oppressed is taken as given, each question is answered before it is posed.⁹

Dissolving antisemitism into a prior question of supposed “interests” means the report can immediately shift its attention onto what, for its authors, is the far more pressing task of identifying those responsible for tricking people into believing that there is a problem at all. That this was the intended political function of the report is implied by the “urgency” of its free dissemination mid-election campaign, and is immediately affirmed by Stern-Weiner in his apoplectic introduction. The furore around antisemitism in Labour, he writes, “has no basis in fact, is *prima facie* absurd,” and is driven by “transparent[ly] . . . partisan motivations.”¹⁰ In its “cynical calculation, bottomless irrationality, and self-perpetuating moral hysteria,” it can only be compared with the “Salem Witch Trials or the McCarthyite purges.”¹¹ Later on, he adds the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the Nazi fantasy of a “Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy” to the list of similarly “fantastic antecedents.”¹² In response, the report seeks to provide a “sober examin[ation]” of “the strange events that have warped British politics since 2015,” with the immediate aim of helping Labour canvassers “challenge false accusations of antisemitism” on the doorstep.¹³ But there are longer-term political imperatives too. For Stern-Weiner, “the ‘Labour antisemitism’ campaign set a template that is sure to be deployed against other popular movements of the left.” As such, “establish[ing] . . . the truth” about antisemitism under Corbyn is of critical importance, “not just for posterity, but to help kindred movements avoid repetition of Labour’s mistakes.”¹⁴ In a post-election *Jacobin* article, Stern-Weiner emphasizes the foremost of these errors—attempting to “appease the

unappeasable” by acknowledging the existence of an “antisemitism crisis” in the first place.¹⁵

While the evasion of uncomfortable evidence, opposing arguments, and critical reflection on display throughout the report certainly makes the task of the authors easier—allowing Stern-Weiner to casually dismiss the controversy as little more than “a small number of questionable Facebook posts”—it leaves the central issues underlying the dispute untouched.¹⁶ Without recognition, let alone resolution, these issues will retain their potency, even if the demise of Corbynism quells their immediate “urgency” in UK politics—and means that their return to the centre of political debate is indeed almost inevitable. To this extent, Stern-Weiner’s complaint that, “like a creature from a horror film, the ‘Labour antisemitism’ controversy just won’t die” has some merit, for all its graphic hyperbole.¹⁷ In his view, this incessant return is evidence of the “collective madness” that engulfed British politics as part of a concerted attempt to prevent a left-wing leader coming to power.¹⁸ But what this report reveals is that, in truth, such compulsive repetition is rather a symptom of the contemporary left’s refusal to engage in the painful process of “working through” the uncomfortable history of its relationship with Judaism, antisemitism, Zionism, the Holocaust, and Israel, or to reckon with the distorted worldview which has both produced and continues to reproduce that history.

Throughout the remainder of this article, each of the key conceptual understandings underlying the arguments put forward in the Stern-Weiner report is analysed in turn. The first part examines the definition of antisemitism itself. The second part examines the conceptual basis underlying the depiction of the state of Israel and Zionism as a “racist endeavour,” which was central to the explosive debate over Labour’s initial rejection of the IHRA definition. The final section explores how this depiction of Israel is related to the inadequate way instrumentalist theories of antisemitism grasp the Holocaust and genocide itself.

CONCEPTUALISING ANTISEMITISM

At the root of the “crisis” lies the concept of antisemitism itself, and as such the question of its definition is a constant reference point here. In 2016, Jeremy Corbyn provided his own definition while giving evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee. Confidently asserting it “was very obvious what antisemitism is,” he described it as “where you use epithets to criticise people for being Jewish; where you attack Jewish people for what they are.”¹⁹ There are numerous echoes of Corbyn’s definition throughout the report. For Finn, antisemitism is “prejudice against Jewish people.”²⁰ Finkelstein gives Brian Klug’s definition—“a form of hostility to Jews as Jews, where Jews are perceived as something other than what they are”—his qualified approval.²¹ Stern-Weiner and Alan Maddison truncate IHRA’s “working definition”—with knowing irony, given that its initial rejection by Labour in 2018 led to the most explosive flashpoint of the Corbyn era—so as to reduce the crucially ambivalent phrase “a certain perception of Jews, which *may* be expressed as hatred toward Jews” to the unequivocal “hatred of Jews.”²²

Building on this definition, the report contends that there is no evidence of a rise in the number of Labour members or supporters showing “hostility,” “hatred,” or “prejudice” towards “Jews as Jews” under Corbyn’s leadership. The case for a Labour “antisemitism crisis” therefore collapses before it has even begun. To demonstrate this, multiple articles refer to Daniel Staetsky’s 2017 survey for the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, which sought to empirically measure the level of antisemitism within the United Kingdom.²³ Participants were asked their views on a set of negative stereotypes about Jews, ranging from “Jews think they are better than other people” and “get rich at the expense of others,” to “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes” and full-on Holocaust denial. Staetsky found that while only around 5% of British people display “open dislike” or hold “developed negative ideas about

Jews,” 28% agreed with at least one anti-Jewish statement. It concluded that while there are few “hardcore” *antisemites* in the United Kingdom, there is a far greater “diffusion” of *antisemitic ideas*.²⁴ These results were then broken down along political lines. Staetsky found that around 30% of people who identify as “very” or “fairly left-wing” agreed with at least one antisemitic idea, a figure “indistinguishable from the general population and from the political centre.”²⁵ In comparison, the “very right-wing” were 20% more likely than the general population to agree with at least one anti-Jewish statement. Staetsky therefore suggested that, when it comes to attitudes towards “Jews as Jews,” “the very left-wing are . . . no more antisemitic than the general population, but neither are they less antisemitic.”²⁶

This conclusion is the cornerstone of the Stern-Weiner report: yes, regrettably there may be some antisemitism in the Labour party, but it is merely a proportionate reflection of the level of antisemitism in British society in general. As Stern-Weiner puts it: “It has never been in dispute that anti-Jewish attitudes exist within the Labour Party. Such attitudes—along with ten thousand other varieties of bigotry and prejudice—exist in every political party, as they do in the society from which mass memberships are drawn.”²⁷ But Staetsky’s findings are said to confirm that the true home of antisemitism is the “very right-wing,” and therefore, to the extent that it seeps into Labour, this is assumed to be due to an unfortunate but unavoidable process of social osmosis affecting all large organisations. This leads to members making occasional mistakes, such as Corbyn’s notorious failure to recognise the “antisemitic undertones” of a mural depicting hook-nosed bankers—one of the few incidents involving Corbyn to get any serious attention.²⁸ But given there is no evidence of a *particular* problem within Labour, “the picture of a [Corbyn] movement infested with antisemitic attitudes simply cannot be sustained,” as Finn puts it.²⁹ The idea of a “crisis” beyond a few individual errors is for

Stern-Weiner thus a “baseless allegation,” which should be “dismiss[ed].”³⁰

In the report’s final essay, Stern-Weiner and Maddison roll back from even this minimal “social osmosis” theory of antisemitism. Now rejecting Staetsky’s distinction between “antisemites” and “antisemitism,” they suggest merely expressing the belief that Jews control the media, or the banking sector, exploit the Holocaust, or enjoy disproportionate political influence should not be classed as antisemitic, unless explicitly accompanied by “hatred” of “Jews as Jews.”³¹ Reducing antisemitism to explicit hatred provides the conceptual basis for Stern-Weiner’s *modus operandi*—splitting each incident of reported antisemitism into its component words or phrases, insisting that none, taken by themselves, “betray or necessarily reflect animus towards Jews,” and thus dismissing it as cooked-up. In so doing, the concept of antisemitism loses any objectivity, and is reduced to a search for irrefutable proof of subjective intent—something that even Norman Finkelstein recognizes is impossible to find.³² The bar for antisemitism is thereby raised to such a height that all but the most brazen Neo-Nazis pass under it. The inevitable conclusion which follows such premises is that “the proportion of Labour Party members who harbour hatred toward Jews”—and thus the level of antisemitism in the party—“rapidly approaches zero.”³³

As Sarah Brown has noted, this absolute separation between “hatred” and “negative stereotypes” is not routinely employed with regard to any other form of discrimination: “It doesn’t indicate *hatred*, precisely, to believe that blacks are inherently intellectually inferior to whites, or that women are only fitted to be mothers and homemakers. But most would have no difficulty acknowledging such views as racist and sexist.”³⁴ Nevertheless, this distinction is indeed the logical conclusion of a definition of antisemitism that limits itself to “hatred,” “hostility,” or “prejudice” towards “Jews as Jews.” Why, then, is such a distinction upheld when it comes to antisemitism? Perhaps the answer lies in an argu-

ment made by Finkelstein a few pages earlier, in which he suggests that the stereotypes measured in Staetsky’s survey are neither antisemitic, nor stereotypes—but rather statements of fact. For Finkelstein, Jewish people do indeed think they are better than others; they do exploit Holocaust victimhood; and they do hold “outsized . . . political power”—power that is in great part responsible for “British society . . . interminably chasing after [the] hobgoblin” that is the Labour antisemitism crisis. As such, holding such views is not antisemitic but “plain common sense.”³⁵

It was no doubt an acknowledgement of the extremity of Finkelstein’s position—which would not be out of place on a far-right website—that led Stern-Weiner to sheepishly add a disclaimer assuring readers that “contributors should not be assumed to agree . . . with each other.”³⁶ The majority are, indeed, content to stick with the initial theory of generic “social osmosis,” and make at least a gesture of regret that antisemitism is not lower amongst members of an avowedly “anti-racist” party than the general public. For Jeremy Gilbert, “there is no more antisemitism in the Labour Party than in the rest of society but there should be much less.”³⁷ This is not so much because of the harm antisemitism does to Jews, but rather the role “antisemitic discourse” plays in “protect[ing] the interests of the powerful.”³⁸ In his view, “the fundamental purpose of antisemitism is always to cover up the truth of power relations, driving wedges between Jewish and non-Jewish communities who should be united in the assertion of their common collective interests.”³⁹ Those in power use Jews as scapegoats to deflect attention from their own misdeeds, and leftists who are fooled by such tales have fallen for the oldest trick in the capitalist playbook. The “best cure for antisemitism” is therefore “the positive raising of class consciousness,” for “the more [people] are enabled to realise the extent to which they share material interests with millions of others around the world—irrespective of ethnicity or religion—the less susceptible they will be to antisemitism.”⁴⁰

This idea—that antisemitism is simply a cover for class oppression and will therefore vanish once a socialist society has been built—has been the dominant approach to antisemitism on the left for generations.⁴¹ A functionalist theory of this kind provides antisemitism with a kernel of rationality by making it a disposable means for a higher end, an instrument to be wielded by the powerful when it is required and discarded when not, rather than an end in itself. While it is a truism that all forms of ideology can be utilised by different social groups, this says nothing about why a particular ideology is *available* for use in the first place—a question which requires a more concrete, determined explanation.⁴² But by rendering antisemitism interchangeable with any other form of ideology aimed at “covering up the truth of power relations,” instrumentalist theory strips it of its particularity and instead subsumes it within an abstract concept of oppression-as-such.

Such an approach stands in contrast to the critical theories of antisemitism produced by a Frankfurt School-influenced left over the last century.⁴³ Theorists such as Max Horkheimer had, like the majority of leftist thinkers in the run-up to the Second World War, initially adopted instrumentalist theory to explain Nazi antisemitism. But they would later reject it once the limitations of depicting antisemitism as merely a means to another end, rather than an end-in-itself, became horribly apparent in the light of the Holocaust. As we shall explore further in the final section, the mass annihilation of European Jewry *for no other end than itself* cannot be grasped within a worldview that sees antisemitism as a secondary function of class oppression. If antisemitism is merely a consciously constructed yet ultimately superficial ‘narrative’ utilised by the powerful to pursue their “true” ends, the idea the powerful might seek to *totally eliminate* such convenient ideological cover is implausible. It was the belated recognition of this point which led Horkheimer and his colleague Theodor Adorno to abandon class instrumentalism. Instead they

began to theorise antisemitism as a complex, multivalent form of “unreason” with its own historic weight, dynamic and peculiar “anti-hegemonic” appeal, the “elements” of which are imbricated within modern or capitalist society *as a totality*—a totality that necessarily includes the standpoint and “interests” of that society’s critics.⁴⁴ The severity of this critique demands serious consideration of how even the most seemingly “radical” stance is entwined within the society against which it regards itself as opposed.

CONCEPTUALISING ISRAEL

But for those, like Gilbert, who continue to adhere to instrumentalist theory, it provides an infallible alibi against any possibility of their own antisemitism. If antisemitism is merely a strategy of class division propagated by the powerful, then as anti-capitalist leftists they cannot be antisemitic in any true sense, the occasional lapse aside, so long as they retain the requisite “class consciousness.” It is the confidence derived from this perspective which allows the Verso authors to completely disregard the second half of Staetsky’s report, despite relying heavily upon the findings of the first: an argumentative manoeuvre also employed by Philo et al.⁴⁵ The latter section focuses on level of “anti-Israel” sentiment in the United Kingdom, and possible connections between attitudes to Israel and anti-Jewish ideas in general. Participants were asked their views on nine negative statements about Israel, ranging from “Israel has too much control over global affairs” to “Israel is an apartheid state” and “exploits Holocaust victimhood for its own purposes.”⁴⁶ Previous research had shown most Jewish people considered these views as at least potentially antisemitic, in contrast to other criticisms of Israel that were not, and found a correlation between such attitudes and more traditional antisemitic attitudes. For these and other reasons, Daniel Allington and David Hirsh have argued that the two groups of attitudes should be recognised simply as differently

inflected forms of antisemitism: one, antizionist, and the other, Judeophobic.⁴⁷

Staetsky found that “negativity towards Israel is significantly more common than negativity towards Jews” within the United Kingdom, with just over 30% holding “very” or “somewhat” unfavourable views.⁴⁸ When split by political affiliation, the “very left-wing”—those most likely to be Corbyn supporters—were 20% *more likely* to hold anti-Israel views than the general population, with “elevated levels” in the “fairly” and “slightly” left-wing groups, too. Moreover, 23% of the “very left-wing” agreed with six to nine negative statements about Israel, “in contrast to 9% in the general population.”⁴⁹ The JPR also found that ‘the stronger a person’s anti-Israel views, the more likely they are to hold antisemitic attitudes’ about “Jews as Jews.”⁵⁰ The most commonly held antisemitic attitude for those strongly anti-Israel was “Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes,” alongside “Jews think they are better than other people,” and “Jews have too much power in Britain.”⁵¹ These attitudes, of course, are precisely those commended as “common sense” by Finkelstein.

Nowhere in the Stern-Weiner report is this aspect of Staetsky’s findings discussed. The reason is obvious: the authors do not accept there is any relationship between antisemitism and the disproportionately negative attitudes towards Israel amongst the left. The *possibility* of an “antizionist antisemitism” is regarded as a category error. Indeed, Daniel Finn argues that the entire Labour “crisis” derives from the “malicious” attempt to fabricate such a relationship through an illegitimate “redefin[ition of] the concept of antisemitism” so that it is no longer reserved for “prejudice against Jewish people” but encompasses “the view of Israel generally held in left-wing circles.”⁵² The motivation for this conceptual vandalism is much the same as that which, according to instrumentalist theory, underlies antisemitism itself—to protect the interests of the powerful. Thus, in a post-election article Jeremy Gilbert describes *accusations*

of antisemitism in almost identical fashion to his earlier depiction of antisemitism—as a form of “discourse” intended “to alienate cosmopolitan and socially liberal voters” from the left, and weaken those struggling against power.⁵³

The report’s authors are in general agreement about who has “weaponised” the charge of antisemitism in this way.⁵⁴ For Stern-Weiner, “Conservative, pro-Israel, and Labour rightist networks” are to blame.⁵⁵ For Finn, it is the defenders of “Atlanticist orthodoxy” in foreign policy, working alongside “several strands of pro-Israeli opinion whose combined weight is formidable.”⁵⁶ Gilbert presents it as the result of a historic compromise between the Blairite and Old Right wings of Labour, one ultimately dictated by the twin demands of “finance capital” and a “pro-Israel, pro-Atlanticist policy agenda,” and “calculated to attract the sympathy of the pro-Israel lobby, and the funding it has traditionally bestowed on politicians it likes.”⁵⁷ None of these groups truly believe in their accusations of antisemitism: in a separate essay not included here Gilbert writes that “Corbyn could convert to Judaism” or “apply for Israeli citizenship,” and still the “attacks on him would not relent for one second unless he agreed to give up control of the party; or at least to commit to a policy agenda approved by Merrill Lynch.”⁵⁸ David Edwards, the co-editor of the Chomskyite website Media Lens, argues that the absence of press articles associating Corbyn with antisemitism during his “first 32 years as an MP,” compared with the sudden avalanche of coverage following his elevation to the Labour leadership, proves the idea of a Labour antisemitism crisis is “a scam of the utmost cynicism and brutality” led by those desperate to prevent a challenge to “corporate power . . . by all necessary means.”⁵⁹

Differences arise between contributors only in the relative weight attributed to each part of this reactionary coalition—whether pro-Israel or pro-capitalist forces are in the driving seat. In the latter part of the Corbyn era, this distinction became the first line of defence for many high-profile supporters. By drawing a line

between the so-called “cranks”—those focused primarily on Israel, epitomised by the figure of then-MP Chris Williamson—and Corbyn and the rest of the party, it was hoped antisemitism could be presented as a “virus” imported into the “true” left from outside.⁶⁰ This strategy drew increasing fury from grassroot supporters, who not only recognised, rightly, that Corbyn’s own obsession with the “hand of Israel” must place him among the “cranks,” but that most “cranks” merely expressed the view of Israel “generally held in left-wing circles” in an unabashed, if perhaps vulgar, manner.⁶¹ To scapegoat “cranks” as antisemitic, while pledging full support to Corbyn, was seen as a hypocritical sacrifice of political principle in a futile attempt to “appease the unappeasable.” That the Verso authors share this analysis is indicated by Finn’s rejection of the label “crank,” both his and Edwards’s unfashionable defence of Williamson, and the inclusion of an article on the importance of “empirical sociology” co-written by Professor David Miller, a Syria chemical weapons-“truther,” who ran the campaign to reinstate Williamson after he was suspended from Labour for suggesting the party had “over-apologised” over antisemitism.⁶² Miller has argued that transatlantic “Zionist” networks are not only to blame for false claims of antisemitism but also responsible for the global spread of Islamophobia.⁶³ The report’s generosity to those rejected as “cranks” by other parts of the movement is confirmed by the prominence of Norman Finkelstein, who, dispensing with “Zionist” niceties, pins the blame for the Labour antisemitism “scam” on “Jewish elites . . . a gang of moral blackmailers and extortionists” (45) who are “terrorising Corbyn to accept a purported definition of antisemitism that . . . has nearly nothing to do with antisemitism and nearly everything to do with shielding Israel from deserved condemnation” (128).

It is certainly true that some of the criticism aimed at Corbyn was disingenuous—particularly from those on the right of British politics otherwise happy to lend their support to Victor Orban’s wantonly antisemitic regime.⁶⁴ But

the idea that no-one had raised the question of antisemitism within Corbyn’s wing of the left before he won the leadership is belied by the Stern-Weiner report’s own inclusion of Richard Kuper’s 2011 critique of the IHRA “working definition”—precisely that “purported definition” castigated by Finkelstein above—written four years before Corbyn’s victory.⁶⁵ Kuper’s article was a response to a campaign by activists within the University and College Union (UCU) against efforts throughout the 2000s to enforce what they saw as an antisemitic boycott of Israeli universities and academics, a struggle in many ways prefiguring that which would take place within Corbyn’s Labour.⁶⁶ These same activists—many with impeccable leftist credentials—had for nearly two decades raised similar concerns about the demonisation of Israel and the unqualified support for Hamas and Hezbollah within the Stop the War Coalition, of which Corbyn and his close associates were founder members.⁶⁷ The reason why such concerns moved into mainstream political discourse at the point Corbyn became Labour leader was precisely because that faction of the left long accused of antisemitism had won control of the United Kingdom’s main left-wing party for the first time in its history. Thus far from antisemitism appearing in the party through an unavoidable random process of social osmosis, it was rather that specific *political* victory—preceded by a flood of new members from that particular wing of the left—which transformed what had hitherto been a relatively minor intra-left debate into one of national significance. That parts of the right were able to capitalise on the issue, cynically or not, was possible only because of the longstanding refusal of large parts of the left to even recognise the problem, let alone deal with it—a refusal which the Stern-Weiner report merely reproduces.

CONCEPTUALISING THE NATION

As Kuper and Finkelstein’s comments above indicate, the question of the IHRA “working definition” of antisemitism is pivotal to this

debate. Throughout the report, the IHRA is presented as nothing less than the spearhead of a “concerted effort to stigmatise all robust, hard-hitting criticism of Israel as . . . tainted by anti-Jewish prejudice,” including as it does multiple examples related to the left’s “generally held” view of Israel.⁶⁸ The “most contentious” example is said to be “claiming . . . the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.”⁶⁹ It was indeed Labour’s initial rejection of this example when formulating an alternative code of conduct on antisemitism, which kickstarted the bitter dispute that followed. Posters declaring “Israel is a racist endeavour” were flyposted across London, while Labour activists (including David Miller) sought to make themselves martyrs of the IHRA by repeating the claim.⁷⁰ Corbyn himself was so committed to the description of the state of Israel—and, by extension, Zionism, the belief in a Jewish national identity manifest in a Jewish nation-state—as a “racist endeavour” that moments before the definition was finally to be adopted, he submitted a last-ditch amendment reiterating it is not “antisemitic to describe Israel, its policies or the circumstances around its foundation as racist because of their discriminatory impact, or to support another settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict.”⁷¹ The evident centrality of this particular argument means it merits sustained attention.

The claim that a “state of Israel is a racist endeavour” takes two distinct forms, conceptual and historical, although in practice they are often conflated. Both should be separated from the contention that any particular policy pursued by a particular Israeli government at any particular time is racist. What is at stake here is not the contingent activity of a temporary government, but the state’s inherent nature. Taken on its own, a *conceptual* argument that says a nationalist movement such as Zionism, and a nation-state which defines its citizenry in exclusive nationalistic terms such as Israel, is inherently racist is indeed not anti-Semitic—as long as that critique is applied equally to all forms of nationalism and national identity. The contradiction between

the abstract universality of “the state” and the concrete particularity of “the nation” (whether defined in territorial, racial, cultural, or ethnic terms) is by no means unique to Israel, but is inscribed in the very concept of the modern “nation-state.”⁷² To be consistent those who wish to describe the Israeli nation-state as racist on a conceptual level must abandon the idea of a specific “anti-Zionism” and instead fold it into a general “anti-nationalism.” For on what grounds, aside from the fact that Zionism was in part a *response* to nationalistic racism, can a distinction between “Zionism” and “nationalism” be upheld—unless, for some unexplained reason, the *concept* of Jewish nationality is exceptionally malign?

This was, of course, how political antisemites responded to Zionism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Jews did not constitute a proper national “people,” they had no organic connection to any land, and thus the claim to Jewish nationality was a contemptible parody, intended to fatally undermine the very concept of the nation. But the rejection of Jewish “peoplehood” also appears in the liberal republican mantra that Jews must be granted everything as individuals yet refused everything as a nation, while parts of the socialist left similarly regarded a particularistic insistence on Jewish identity as an obstacle to proletarian “unity.” From this perspective, anything that distracts from the struggle against the capitalist class—including a focus on Jewish, rather than class, interests—merely sustains capitalist power. This immediately places Zionism on the side of the oppressors, and explains, at least in part, why antipathy to a Jewish state existed within parts of the left long before Israel came into being.⁷³ The issue here is why such antipathy was, and is, not extended to all national movements. Applied consistently, a conceptual critique of a state of Israel would preclude support for Palestinian nationalism, as attempts to establish a “State of Palestine” must now be condemned as a “racist endeavour” undermining class solidarity.⁷⁴ Even those claiming to support a “bi-national”

Jewish-Arab federation in place of Israel would need to spend as much time calling for the abolition of every other extant nation-state as they do Israel.⁷⁵

A *historical* critique of Israel as a “racist endeavour,” by contrast, acknowledges the theoretical possibility of a non-racist Israeli nation-state. However, if the historical reality of the state’s founding is understood as entailing what Finkelstein describes as the “ethnic cleansing” and “transfer” of “the indigenous population,” then the “realisation of the Jewish people’s right to self-determination must have been a racist endeavour.”⁷⁶ This argument is closely tied to that portraying Israel as an inherently “imperialist” state, representing the last gasp of a colonial era thankfully overthrown elsewhere. But again, to be consistent, those who view the formation of Israel as racist in practice if not in theory must spend as much time condemning, for example, India and Pakistan—both formed through partition, ethnic violence, and population transfer a year before Israel. Indeed, they would need to condemn with equal force the “Arab” or “Muslim” states surrounding Israel, from which 850,000 Jews were expelled during the tumultuous years of Israel’s formation.⁷⁷ There has been scant evidence of such even-handedness during the debate over the IHRA definition within Labour and the wider left. Indeed, much of that debate has been distinguished by an astonishing ignorance of the actual history of Israel’s formation—that it was founded in part through war *against* the imperial power, Britain; that Britain refused to vote for the creation of Israel in 1948; that from the moment of its birth Israel was attacked by neighbouring Arab states who rejected the UN-sanctioned partition, which would have created a Palestinian-Arab state; that thousands of both Arabs and Jews were forced from their homes in the following turmoil. But it is only through such ignorance, wilful or not, that it is possible to depict those fleeing Russian pogroms, Arab expulsion, and Nazi annihilation as imperialist conquerors.⁷⁸

Perhaps the ongoing occupation and oppression of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza qualifies Israel as a “racist endeavour”? When it comes to expansion of settlements in the West Bank, the descriptor “colonialism” might carry more weight. Nevertheless, to expand this claim so as to incorporate the state as a whole is to assume once again that occupation and oppression are inextricably woven into Israel in a way unlike any other state—a notion disproved by the longstanding existence of anti-occupation movements within Israel, however cowed today. Moreover, the conflict between Israel and Palestine is but one of any number involving other states today, many with far greater death tolls.⁷⁹ Acknowledging this entails justification why this particular conflict, out of all of those in the world, holds such a pivotal position within the left’s imaginary. This centrality is underlined by Daniel Finn, who argues that far from being “a marginal issue that can be ditched or downplayed,” the question of Israel represents a “Rubicon” for the left, which, if crossed, puts at risk its entire project.⁸⁰ Writing in 2018, he suggests that “Corbynism is at a fork in the road,” and while it might be tempting to “choose the path of capitulation over Palestinian rights . . . if we can’t hold the line in defence of Corbyn’s eminently moderate stance on Palestine we certainly won’t be in any condition to resist the pressure that is still to come.”⁸¹ Leaving aside the suggestion that a “moderate stance” on “Palestinian rights” necessitates not only denouncing a Jewish state as a “racist endeavour” but acclaiming the reactionary fundamentalists Hamas as a force for “peace and social justice,” Finn’s depiction of the question of Israel as the lodestar at the centre of the left’s universe testifies to the extraordinary symbolic weight loaded onto the conflict, far beyond what it can bear.⁸²

Turning the question of Zionism into what Edward Said once called “the touchstone of contemporary political judgement”—the flipside of which is the inflation of “the idea of Palestine” into a signifier for universal emancipation-in-itself—has been standard practice within leftist

movements over the past forty years.⁸³ Its main effect has been to distort the actual history of the region until it becomes almost unrecognizable, while making attitudes towards Israel a litmus test permitting entry into the left.⁸⁴ Much as republican assimilationists demanded Jews sever ties with their Jewish identity in order to enter the abstract realm of the citizen, so too are Jews today asked to renounce any affiliation with Israel, however critical, in order to gain access to parts of the left.⁸⁵ As a result, the overwhelming majority of Jewish people in the United Kingdom find themselves denied entry—for, as Staetsky notes, “most British Jews consider Israel to be a central part of their Jewish identity,” even if they oppose the government, occupation and settlements.⁸⁶ This is at least part of the meaning of descriptions of Corbyn’s party as a “cold house for Jews,” which Finn flippantly dismisses as “hysterical.”⁸⁷ The full symbolic force of the left’s disfigured image of Israel is pressed onto Jewish shoulders, and those who refuse to bear its weight must either leave the left voluntarily or find themselves cast out.

But the authors here reject the idea that singling Israel out as a “racist endeavour,” or forcing Jews to choose between the left and support for Israel’s existence, is antisemitic. Organisations such as Jewish Voice for Labour, and the testimonies gathered at the back of the Stern-Weiner report, demonstrate that some Jewish people do, in fact, pass the litmus test that Israel represents for the left. From this perspective, it is not the excess opprobrium directed at Israel that is antisemitic, but rather the assumption that Jewish people do not agree it is warranted. Making this assumption is to hold “Jewish people collectively responsible for what Israel does”—which is, indeed, one of the IHRA’s examples of antisemitism.⁸⁸ But the responsibility for such projection ultimately lies with those who, as Richard Kuper puts it, portray Israel as “*the* Jewish state, acting on behalf of *all* Jews” and therefore “conflate Jews collectively with Israel.”⁸⁹ Norman Finkelstein likewise argues that “by representing itself as the

Nation-State of the Jewish people, Israel itself collectively implicates Jews in its actions.”⁹⁰ In this view, if only Israel would abandon its “racist endeavour” of claiming a Jewish national identity, there would no longer be any risk of “spill-over” from righteous condemnation of Israel to Jewish people in general.

The same confusion of conceptual, historical, and contingent critiques of Israel that plagues the debate over the IHRA definition appears again here. The concept of Israel as a Jewish nation-state, representing a general idea of Jewish “peoplehood,” is distinct from the behaviour of any particular government or holder of that state’s offices. The claims of that state to represent Jews as a “people” in *institutional* perpetuity should not then be conflated with the claims of a particular government to have the *political* support of that “people” for its actions. The formal separation of the state as an institution, the government as office holders, and wider civil society is inherent in the concept of a democratic polity. It is undoubtedly true that the relationship between the state of Israel and the Jewish diaspora—or between a specifically *Israeli* national identity and a broader Jewish peoplehood—is uniquely complex, and that a minority of Jews do not consider that state *as a state* to have any connection with their Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Jews in the United Kingdom and around the world do, to a greater or less extent—while often severely disapproving of the actions of the government.⁹¹ It is not then, *contra* Kuper and Finkelstein, antisemitic to recognize the claims of the Israeli state to *formally* represent a general (if not totalizing) notion of Jewish “peoplehood,” even if that notion—like all forms of nationalism—is neither uncontested nor incorporates all of what it means to be Jewish. Rather, antisemitism arises in the refusal to acknowledge the formal distinction (and often outright contradiction) between state, government and society when it comes to Israel, and Israel alone—to treat the actions of any particular Israeli government as expressing the inherent, essential character of a

Jewish state and society as such. This conflation of state, government and society underpins the conceptual critique of a Jewish national polity as uniquely malign—with the result that only the total rejection of the *concept* of Jewish nationality permits Jews entry into the left, a demand made of no other “people.”

CONCEPTUALISING GENOCIDE

The only connection between antisemitism and Israel acknowledged within the report is thereby one which originates in the behaviour of the Israeli state and travels *from* Israel *to* Jewish people in general. Depicting antisemitism as an understandable if regrettable response to either Israel’s existence, its actions or the claims its leaders make to Jewish representation is to once again to provide antisemitism with an underlying rationale. Moreover, such a perspective can only grasp the relationship between Israel and antisemitism as an *extrinsic* and *possible* one, in which antisemitism appears as a contingent result of Israel’s prior activity. It is blind not only to the possibility, outlined above, that the left’s conceptualisation of a Jewish state and its activities might carry antisemitic resonances from the outset. It is also unable to apprehend that aspect of Israel’s existence which has an *intrinsic* and *necessary* relationship to antisemitism, namely, its status as a “life-raft” state formed in the wake of the near-total annihilation of European Jewry. This radical separation of Israel from the antisemitism which preceded its founding enables the relationship between Israel and antisemitism to be inverted, so that the formation of a Jewish nation-state is now *responsible* for antisemitism rather than a *response* to it.

Recognising that there is an essential, rather than accidental, connection between Israel’s existence as a Jewish nation-state and the long history of antisemitism that culminated in—but was not ended by—the Holocaust does not mean that that the *actions* of that state are somehow *justified* by that history alone. As Werner Bonefeld puts it, this would be to

“[accept] the barbarism of extermination as a legitimizing force of state action. There can be no such legitimization.”⁹² It merely means that it is not enough to view antisemitism through the prism of Israel—rather the existence of Israel must first be viewed through the prism of antisemitism, and thus the Holocaust, itself. But this in turn entails recognizing the Nazi genocide for what it was: an attempt to root out and destroy every Jew in existence, not just within the German Reich but from every corner of the globe, with no exceptions, and for no “higher” purpose— not for territorial gain, nor for increased exploitation of labour, nor the pillage of natural resources—but rather as an end-in-itself. And yet, as noted above, it is precisely this form of recognition that is prevented by the instrumental theories of antisemitism which continue to prevail within leftist circles.

That Corbyn himself subscribes to such a theory, and shares its blindspots, is indicated by his co-sponsorship—alongside his former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell—of a 2011 Early Day Motion (EDM) calling for the word “Holocaust” to be removed from the name of Holocaust Memorial Day. The EDM noted that

disabled people were the first victims of Nazi mass murder, that working class activists and trade unionists, many of whom were Jewish, were the first to be sent to concentration camps, and that Nazism targeted not only Jewish but also Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, lesbian, gay and bisexual people and others they deemed undesirables; and therefore supports the call for international awareness of all communities and countries who have suffered and resisted mass extermination by renaming Holocaust Memorial Day as “Genocide Memorial Day—Never Again For Anyone.”⁹³

Taken by itself, this reads as a bald statement of fact, but the ideological basis of the motion is revealed by the interchange of the terms “mass murder” and “mass extermination.” While in terms of the impact on the victims there is

little to distinguish these categories, the Nazis' "mass murder" of non-Jews, however intense and unprecedented the persecution, was not, conceptually, motivated by the same desire for global annihilation that defined the "extermination" of world Jewry.⁹⁴ That the motion elides this crucial distinction—as well as the distinction separating the "concentration camp" from the "extermination camp"—is demonstrated by the single mention of Jews being as a mere predicate to the subject of "working class activist and trade unionist," implying that had these Jews only ceased working class activism they might have been spared—a point which utterly fails to comprehend the reality of antisemitism as an end-in-itself. But it was precisely this reality that necessitated the forging of the new concept of genocide following the Holocaust, alongside a legal framework capable of making similar crimes universally recognizable for the first time. The particularity of the Holocaust and the universality of the concept of genocide are thus inextricably tied together—the one illuminates the other, even if the Holocaust remains, as yet, unmatched in its extremity and global ambition.

By stripping exterminatory antisemitism of its privileged position within Nazi ideology in order to create a general category of "victims" in which Jews have no distinctive place, the class instrumentalism of Corbyn's EDM drains both the concept of genocide and the Holocaust itself of their determinate content, reducing them to the status of empty signifiers, abstract condemnations of violence-in-general. Demanding the word Holocaust be replaced by genocide on these grounds is thus little more than an expression of the mutilation of both terms. Moreover, while for Stern-Weiner and Maddison anything other than explicit hatred of "Jews as Jews" should be discounted as antisemitism, now it is precisely that hatred, in its most extreme genocidal form, which is erased by its dissolution into a generic concept of oppression. The concept of antisemitism thus stands on the verge of total disintegration.

But the gains from this conceptual sacrifice are threefold: the status of the Nazis as the universal symbol of oppression-in-general is secured against the special pleading of Jews; an otherwise problematic Holocaust is integrated into an instrumentalist theory of antisemitism through its reduction to "mass murder"; and, perhaps most importantly, the intrinsic connection between the "racist endeavour" that is the state of Israel and the Holocaust is severed. It follows that continued insistence on the Jewish particularity of the Holocaust blocks contemporary attempts to challenge the latest iterations of the generic "oppression" it now epitomizes: the most pertinent of which for the contemporary left is, of course, that embodied by the "racist endeavour" of the Israeli state. This is the main contention of Finkelstein's book *The Holocaust Industry*, published by Verso in 2000 and recapitulated in the Stern-Weiner report. The book transforms what would otherwise be an uncontroversial and unoriginal warning about crude usage of Holocaust memory into an extravagant conspiracy theory in which any insistence on the particularity of the Holocaust is now portrayed as little more than a cynical ploy to "justify criminal policies of the Israeli state," one ultimately driven by a "nauseating [Jewish] ethnic chauvinism."⁹⁵ The idea of the "unique suffering" of the Jews in the Holocaust "confers unique entitlement" upon Jews in general, acting as "Israel's prize alibi" to treat the Palestinians in whatever way they wish, and facilitating a lucrative "shake down" of credulous Gentiles.⁹⁶

The widespread acceptance of this argument, predicated once again on reducing the reality of exterminatory antisemitism to a "narrative" constructed to cover up underlying "interests," is signalled by the strong connection Staetsky found between holding anti-Israel views and believing that both Israel and Jews in general "exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes."⁹⁷ The task for those who do not subscribe to this doctrine of "Jewish uniqueness" is to prevent Jewish attempts to monopolise the concept of genocide as a means to distract

from Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. It was such an imperative that led Corbyn to host a Parliamentary meeting on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2010 entitled "Never Again for Anyone—Auschwitz to Gaza." The event was advertised with juxtaposed images of the Warsaw Ghetto and a Palestinian funeral, and featuring talks by Hajo Meyer, a survivor of Auschwitz—who would later blame Israel for 9/11—and Haidar Eid, a Gazan academic, who reportedly told the meeting that "Nazism has won because it has finally managed to Nazify the consciousness of its own victims."⁹⁸

That same year, and following a similar logic, the Momentum activist Ewa Jasiewicz, together with Israeli BDS activist Yonatan Shapira, graffitied the slogans "Free Palestine and Gaza" and "Liberate all ghettos" on a wall within the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto. This story was revived in the wake of the IHRA debate when the *Sunday Times* reported Jasiewicz had been invited to speak at a Momentum event at the Labour Party conference.⁹⁹ In the light of the above analysis, it is worth examining this particular event in more detail, and, in particular, Jasiewicz's "apology" after she had been accused of antisemitism. Jaciewicz assumed that the main point of contention was whether her condemnation of Israel's treatment of Gaza extended to the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, or to Jews in general. This was, indeed, the critique from sympathetic left sources, such as the anarchist collective Jewdas, who warned her action "risks being interpreted as a suggestion that Jews, rather than Israel, are to blame for what's happening in Gaza."¹⁰⁰ This argument derives from the same idea of an *extrinsic* relation between Israel and antisemitism set out by Kuper and Finkelstein above. In response Jaciewicz categorically denied she was "holding all Jewish people or those who were murdered in and through the ghetto as responsible for the actions of the Israeli state." The connection her "creative expression" sought to make between the Warsaw Ghetto and Gaza did not arise from the *Jewish* aspect of the Ghetto and that of Israeli state—which, to her mind, absolves her of antisemitism. Rather, it

derives from the common experience of "ghettoisation and oppression" shared by the inhabitants of the Ghetto and Gaza, "which is why [she] chose to write Liberate All Ghettos."¹⁰¹

As we have seen, the idea that the situation in Gaza, however grim, is in any way comparable to the Warsaw Ghetto or Auschwitz, such that they can all be fitted alongside one another in a single concept of "ghettoisation and oppression," does not stand up to a moment's scrutiny.¹⁰² The only way this can be done is, once again, by erasing the determinate role of exterminatory antisemitism in the Holocaust. The result is that the connection that *does* exist between the Warsaw Ghetto and Israel—consisting not of abstract "oppression" in general, but antisemitism in particular—is eradicated. Moreover, those who seek to reinstate that connection—not in defense of Israeli actions in Gaza but rather in defense of the concept of genocide itself—are now accused of merely "exploiting Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes." The justification of Jaciewicz's graffiti by prominent Corbyn-supporting commentator Ash Sarkar—that it was an act of "anti-racism" deserving "full solidarity" from the left, fallaciously depicted as antisemitic "as part of the informal silencing effects of [Labour's] IHRA adoption"—neatly demonstrates the connection between the conceptual critique of Israel as a racist endeavour, the erasure of genocidal antisemitism that reduces the Holocaust to an empty signifier, and the belief that Jewish particularity is merely a weapon cynically wielded in pursuit of selfish ends.¹⁰³

For Stern-Weiner, of course, despite acknowledging comparisons between Israel and the Nazis are strategically "unhelpful" because they "[make] life easier for Israel's apologists," none of this can be considered antisemitic, unless explicitly accompanied by "animus" towards "Jews as Jews"—despite the fact that such comparisons are predicated precisely on the erasure of that "animus."¹⁰⁴ Thus he argues that neither "analogising Israel to Nazi Germany," nor asserting that "the Nazi regime and the Zionist movement possessed an element of ideological and practical common ground,"

nor calling for “free speech” for Holocaust deniers while denying “Zionists” a platform should be classed as antisemitic, as none express, in and of themselves, explicit hatred of Jews.¹⁰⁵ And he has no qualms in recycling Finkelstein’s suggestion that Corbyn’s critics are driven by a “‘Holocaust uniqueness’ agenda’ . . . mobilised for flatly political purposes: if Jews are ‘unique’ victims, then Israel cannot be held to normal standards.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, the Stern-Weiner report reduces issues as complex as the interplay of the universal and particular in Holocaust memorialisation, and the politics of historical consciousness, state power, and collective identity, to the same glib assertions of “interests” that underlie instrumentalist theory as a whole. Once again a whole literature of nuanced scholarship on these issues is ignored in favour of a cartoonish “materialism” that does little except give left activists permission to indulge in the kind of Jew-baiting long thought the preserve of the far-right.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this collection of essays, first showcased in the leading websites and magazines of the contemporary left, and then lent the authoritative imprimatur of the world’s premier leftist publisher, the majority of British Jews—those unwilling to completely disavow either the concept or troubled reality of a Jewish state—stand accused of maliciously distorting concepts, “weaponising” that and manipulating history for their own purposes, stubbornly insisting on

a particularity which is presented as an obstacle to universal human emancipation. Yet, in truth, the evidence from the report suggest that the charges should be reversed. The desperation to defend Corbyn, and the movement behind him, from the charge of antisemitism has revealed the extent to which parts of the left, rather than Jews, are willing to abandon any commitment to historical truth, analytical consistency or intellectual integrity for the sake of political expediency. In the process the concepts and histories of antisemitism, of the Jewish nation-state, and the Holocaust itself have been wrenched out of shape, transformed into a crude artillery of anti-Jewish belligerence.

But such distortions are not merely a defensive response to immediate perceived attacks, but rather the legacy of a long history of political and intellectual struggle within the left itself—and for those leftists concerned with the rise of antisemitism, a history of defeat. Such a defeat was a precondition for a figure like Corbyn to not only win the leadership of the Labour Party in the first place, but be extolled as being on “the right side of history” throughout. It remains to be seen whether Corbyn’s own defeat at the hands of the electorate will lead to a reckoning with the long process of degeneration through which, in the words of Moishe Postone, “large parts of the left have lost their theoretical acumen, political analysis, and their moral compass.”¹⁰⁷ From what can be gleaned from the pages here at least, such a reckoning seems further away than ever.

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- 1 Jamie Stern-Weiner, ed., *Antisemitism and the Labour Party* (London: Verso, 2019), <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4508-antisemitism-and-the-labour-party>. This article has greatly benefited from comments by Daniel Allington, Ben Gidley, Susie Jacobs, Frederick Harry Pitts, David Seymour, Marcel Stoetzler, and Jack Watkins.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 201, 242. This article will primarily focus on the work of Stern-Weiner, Finn, Finkelstein, and Gilbert, as they provide the main theoretical thrust of the report. It will occasionally reference other contemporaneous works by these writers not featured here, including relevant essays written in the post-election period.
- 3 While the report does overlap at points with Greg Philo et al., *Bad News for Labour* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), particularly in the section on media coverage, there is a much broader range of arguments contesting claims of

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 - 9 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 44.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, xi.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, xi.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 38.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, xii, 55.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, xii.
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- 51 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 52 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 17–18.
- 53 In characteristic fashion, Gilbert provides no evidence for this claim. Given the JPR found "elevated levels" of anti-Israel sentiment amongst the "fairly" left-wing, it is likely that "socially liberal voters" were *more*, not less, likely to agree claims of antisemitism against Corbyn based on his views on Israel were "smears" propagated by the powerful.
- 54 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 150.

- 55 Ibid., 98.
- 56 Ibid., 9.
- 57 Ibid., 161, 165.
- 58 Jeremy Gilbert, "An Inevitable Division: The Politics and Consequences of the Labour Split," *Open Democracy*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/inevitable-division-politics-and-consequences-of-labour-split/>.
- 59 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 82–83.
- 60 Jade Azim, 'The real battle for Labour's soul? Lansmanites vs cranks,' *LabourList*, 8 August 2018 [Available at: <https://labourlist.org/2018/08/the-real-battle-for-labours-soul-lansmanites-vs-cranks/>]
- 61 Justin Cohen, "Corbyn 'Suspected Hand of Israel' in Egypt Bombing during Press TV Interview," *Jewish News*, July 29, 2018, <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/corbyn-suspected-hand-of-israel-in-egypt-bombing-during-press-tv-interview/>.
- 62 Eleni Courea, "Assad Defender Backs MP Chris Williamson over Antisemitism Dispute," *The Times*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/assad-defender-backs-mp-chris-williamson-over-antisemitism-dispute-pwv2h9lnp>.
- 63 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 12, 19–20, 84, 173–176. Mark Gardner, "Bristol University Says It Is 'Academic Freedom' to Wrongly Accuse Us of Spreading Islamophobia," *Jewish Chronicle*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/cst-oped-david-miller-bristol-university-1.488505>. During the writing of this article, Miller resigned from the Labour Party after an party investigation was launched into his conduct, blaming the "influence" of "the Zionist movement . . . on the British left and British politics more widely" (Lee Harpin, "Ahead of a Probe into his Conduct, Bristol Professor Resigns from Labour Blaming 'the Zionist Movement,'" *Jewish Chronicle*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/bristol-professor-resigns-from-labour-ahead-of-probe-into-his-conduct-blaming-the-zionist-movement-1.500687>).
- 64 Jessica Elgot, "Gove Criticised for Refusing to Condemn Hungary's Viktor Orbán," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/16/michael-gove-criticised-hungary-viktor-orban-tories>.
- 65 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 115–120.
- 66 For an account of the battle over the Israeli boycott within the UCU, see David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 4.
- 67 For the history of antisemitism within the Stop the War Coalition, see Rich, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism*, ch. 5. For a remarkably prescient 2011 warning of how the "story of extremism and the British left will, someday soon, become a big one for our media," see Rob Marchant, "Our Tolerance of Extremism will Do for Us," *LabourList*, July 4, 2011, <https://labourlist.org/2011/07/our-tolerance-of-extremism-will-do-for-us/>.
- 68 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 17, 57–59, 115–120, 121–130.
- 69 Ibid., 58.
- 70 Tom Powell, 'Posters Claiming 'Israel is a Racist Endeavour' Appear at London Bus Stops and are being Investigated by Police,' *Evening Standard*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/outrage-as-posters-claiming-israel-is-a-racist-endeavour-spring-up-at-london-bus-stops-a3928681.html>; Daniel Sugarman, "Academic Tells University Event Jewish Students' Campus Fears are 'Propaganda,'" *Jewish Chronicle*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/shocking-comments-of-uk-academic-on-israel-and-antisemitism-at-a-palestinian-event-hosted-by-ucl-stu-1.472789>.
- 71 Dan Sabbagh, "Labour Adopts IHRA Antisemitism Definition in Full," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/04/labour-adopts-ihra-antisemitism-definition-in-full>.
- 72 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "The European Nation State. Its Achievements and Its Limitations. On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," *Ratio Juris*, February 9, 1996, 125–137.
- 73 Cf. Colin Shindler, *Israel and the European Left: Between Solidarity and Delegitimization* (London: Continuum, 2012).
- 74 It should be noted that the argument works the other way round, too—there are no grounds for denying Palestinian "people" or "nationhood" if Jewish peoplehood is accepted. Like all nationalisms, both are historically constituted forms, rather than eternal essences, and as such there are no grounds for legitimating one against the other.
- 75 Moreover, as Fred Halliday noted nearly forty years ago, the fantasy of a bi-national socialist state has never had more than minimal support in either Israel or the Palestinian territories, and in that sense constitutes a far more

- 'imperialist' and anti-democratic project than a two-state solution (see his "Revolutionary Realism and the Struggle for Palestine," *MERIP Reports* 96 [May 1981]: 3–12).
- 76 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 128.
- 77 See Lyn Julius, *Uprooted: How 3000 Years of Jewish Civilization in the Arab World Vanished Overnight* (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018).
- 78 For a superb recent attempt to undo decades of distorted history of Israel and Zionism within the left, see Susie Linfield, *The Lions' Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 79 According to figures compiled by the Jewish Virtual Library, over 116,000 people have died in the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1920 ("Vital Statistics: Total Casualties, Arab-Israeli Conflict," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/total-casualties-arab-israeli-conflict>). By comparison, since 2011 it is estimated that anywhere between 380,000 and 585,000 people have died during the war in Syria (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Nearly 585,000 People have been Killed since the Beginning of the Syrian Revolution," January 4, 2020, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=152189>).
- 80 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 14.
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 Corbyn's description of Hamas as "an organisation that is dedicated . . . to bringing about peace and social justice and political justice for the whole region" is discussed in Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism*, 43–44.
- 83 Edward Said, "On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Salman Rushdie," *New Left Review* 160 (November/December 1986): 63–80. For a recent rendition of this argument, see Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews and Us* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2017), in which Zionism is explicitly presented as the dividing line between the forces of oppression-in-general and "revolutionary love." For an excellent critical review of Bouteldja from the left, focusing particularly on antisemitism, see Ivan Segre, "A Native with a Pale Face," *LA Review of Books*, November 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-native-with-a-pale-face/>.
- 84 David Hirsh has described this phenomenon as the forcible "exile" of Jews from the "community of the good" (*Contemporary Left Antisemitism*, 3 and *passim*).
- 85 See, for example, the interrogation about Israel and Zionism Labour staffer Joshua Simons allegedly found himself subject to when Seumas Milne, Corbyn's chief strategist, discovered he was Jewish (James Lyons, "Corbyn Insider Fuels Anti-Semitism Row," *The Sunday Times*, August 7, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/corbyn-insider-fuels-anti-semitism-row-ks89d6j65>).
- 86 Staetsky, *Antisemitism in Contemporary Great Britain*, 14.
- 87 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 4.
- 88 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 91 Stephen Miller, Margaret Harris, Colin Shindler, *The Attitudes of British Jews Towards Israel* (London: Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University, 2015).
- 92 Werner Bonefeld, "Nationalism and Anti-Semitism in an Anti-Globalization Perspective," in *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 153.
- 93 UK Parliament, Early Day Motions, EDM no. 1360: "Never Again for Anyone Initiative," <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/42381>.
- 94 The Nazi genocide of the Roma and Sinti may constitute an exception to this distinction. There remains a dispute within the literature as to whether the Nazis intended to wipe out the Roma and Sinti in their *entirety* in precisely the same way as the Jews. Nevertheless it is clear that the Nazis' treatment of the Nomadic Roma and Sinti at least was closer to that of the Jews than any other group. Indeed, the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Memorial Centre in Israel describes those groups' fates as "tantamount" to that of the Jews, negating the supposed point of Corbyn's EDM from the outset ("Non-Jewish Victims of Persecution in Germany," Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/nazi-germany-1933-39/non-jewish-victims.html>). My thanks to Susie Jacobs for raising this point.
- 95 Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (London: Verso, 2000), 13; Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 125.
- 96 Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, 46–47.

- 97 Staetsky, *Antisemitism in Contemporary Great Britain*, 36.
- 98 Sarah Marsh, "Corbyn Apologises over Event where Israel was Compared to Nazis," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/01/jeremy-corbyn-issues-apology-in-labour-antisemitism-row>; "Hajo Meyer: CIA en Mossad hebben 9/11 Twin Towers opgeblazen," *YouTube*, September 10, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t14A9__Vd4w; James Vaughan, "Here's Why It Matters that Labour's Governing Body has Moved Away from the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism," *The Conversation*, August 3, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/heres-why-it-matters-that-labours-governing-body-has-moved-away-from-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism-100976>.
- 99 Andrew Gilligan and Anna Gizowska, "Warsaw Ghetto Vandal to Speak at Momentum's Corbyn Festival," *The Sunday Times*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/warsaw-ghetto-vandal-to-speak-at-momentums-corbyn-festival-0rr8m7wqb>. *The Sunday Times* described Jasiewicz's graffiti as having "desecrated" the Ghetto. It should be noted that the wall she graffitied is not the remaining fragment of the original historic Ghetto wall, but rather a modern wall, regularly used by graffiti artists, within the area that had been the Ghetto. To that extent the act of graffiti itself, as opposed to the *content* of the graffiti, should not be characterised as a "desecration." My thanks to Ben Gidley for clarifying this point.
- 100 Jewdas, "Some More In Depth Thoughts on the Warsaw Ghetto Graffiti Broygus or 'Rabbi Geoffry's Rosh Hashanah Drash,'" *Facebook*, September 10, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=876208109235312&id=260895170766612.
- 101 Ewa Jasiewicz, "Ewa Jasiewicz Replies," *Labour Briefing*, September 15, 2018, <https://labourbriefing.org/blog/2018/9/15/axnkvsppg67mjs4li6iwomx4zn2lo0>.
- 102 For a short summary of the radical disparity between the Warsaw Ghetto and Gaza, see Bob From Brockley, "Gaza/ Warsaw Ghetto," *BobfromBrockley*, July 24, 2014, <http://brockley.blogspot.com/2014/07/gazawarsaw-ghetto.html>.
- 103 "Solidarity with Ewa Jasiewicz. . . Free Gaza and Palestine. Liberate all ghettos. These words aren't antisemitic. They're anti-racist. I suspect that stories like this will be pushed hard in the coming months, as part of the informal silencing effects of IHRA adoption." Ash Sarkar (@ayocaeser), Tweet, September 9, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ayocaeser/status/1038741208976244736>.
- 104 Stern-Weiner, *Antisemitism*, 103, 265.
- 105 *Ibid.*, 103, 107, 102–104.
- 106 "I find that ranking of suffering morally abhorrent. . . In fact, the 'Holocaust uniqueness' agenda has been mobilised for flatly political purposes: if Jews are 'unique' victims, then Israel cannot be held to normal standards." Jamie Stern-Weiner (@jsternweiner), Tweet, August 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/jsternweiner/status/1031158429870641152>. By focusing on the subjective question of "suffering" rather than the objective distinctions between *projects* of genocidal violence and other forms of oppression, Stern-Weiner again deprives the concept of genocide of its determinate content.
- 107 Postone was critiquing that part of the left—epitomized by Corbynism—which fixates on Israel while ignoring the democratic revolution in Syria, if not outright supporting the Assadist counter-revolution in the name of "anti-imperialism." "Moishe Postone on the Left and Syria: 'You'd think that after the beginnings of a democratic uprising put down w/ incredible brutality by Assad, that that would ring a bell. Large parts of the Left have lost their theoretical acumen, political analysis, and their moral compass.'" Joey Ayoub (@joeyayoub), Tweet, March 22, 2018, <https://twitter.com/joeyayoub/status/976891551346552832>. For more on the "Western left's" failure on Syria, see Yassin Al Haj Saleh, "Syria and the Left," *New Politics*, Winter 2015, https://newpol.org/issue_post/syria-and-left/. On Corbynism and Syria in particular, see Bolton and Pitts, *Corbynism*, 109–114.