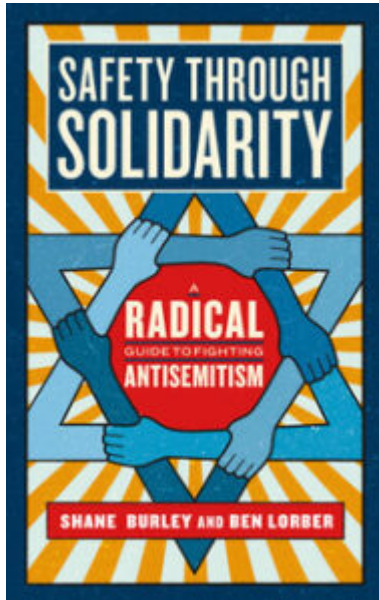


Fighting Antisemitism Today—An Interview with Shane Burley and Ben Lorber

written by Kevin Van Meter, Shane Burley, Ben Lorber | August 13, 2024



For the past several years Shane Burley and Kevin Van Meter have engaged in a series of conversations on [“Autonomous Anti-Fascism”](#) and [“Antifascism, Historically and in the Present.”](#) Today they are joined by Ben Lorber for a conversation regarding the fight against antisemitism. Fighting antisemitism “through solidarity” doesn’t just create “safety” for “Jews and all people”; it allows us to directly confront the conspiratory core of contemporary fascist and rightwing arguments while building resilient antifascist and left movements. Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism by Shane Burley and Ben Lorber was released in June 2024 from Melville House and the authors are currently touring the United States.

Kevin Van Meter (KVM): During our prior conversations, in Spring 2021 and Winter 2022 respectively, Shane and I began by addressing the “interregnum” period of the first Trump administration, then moved to the specter of an “apocalypse” following the January 6th fascist insurrection. How would you characterize our contemporary period?

Shane Burley (SB): I think it has been primarily defined by recuperation and redefinition of the far-right, sort of a rearticulation of how they interpret their primary ideological mandates. With the death of the alt-right and the final transition of the old GOP to its new national populist form, we actually see a party more flexible to the needs of a more radical base. So now we are seeing two distinct wings that, in earlier years, would likely have been part and parcel of the same component of the party: the more conspiratorial “MAGA movement” defined by its support for Trump, and National Conservatives, a more openly nationalist contingent that still retains strong connections to the professional infrastructure of the Beltway. This means that as they develop a plan for a 2024 Trump victory, and intend to operationalize it with direction like the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, they have created a better working relationship between the radicals and the party. In that world, the groypers and their leader Nick Fuentes have become the most viable component of the earlier alt-right to survive, and the emerging “Dissident right” (which is ideologically similar to the earlier alt-right coalition) seems more prepared to speak to the rhetoric the base needs to hear.

All of this is to say that we have a frightening American far-right ahead of us with more opportunity to operationalize politics within the state system rather than to only exist as radicals outside of it, though we are also seeing a growth of neo-Nazi groups as well in the form of the Goyim Defense League, Blood Tribe, the Active Clubs, and Patriot Front.

KVM: Previously Shane argued, “We are living in a period like all periods when fascist movements try to redefine themselves.” What does organized fascism look like at this moment in the summer of 2024?

SB: I think it largely looks like it did in 2016 with some very particular cultural, rhetorical, and electoral changes simply to conform to the realities of this Trump candidacy. A more openly Christian nationalist rhetoric, a mandate to talk about Israel, a focus on the issues that have become central for the GOP in the last four years, such as youth gender medicine, “wokeness,” Critical Race Theory, public education, and public LGBTQ events. All of this leads me to be just as concerned, if not more so, than in the years past. Their great hope is that the organizing infrastructure that the great shock of Trump’s victory launched in 2016 is still intact enough to be used for even larger mobilizations in 2025.

Ben Lorber (BL): I would also say that many of the central tenets that characterized the Trump-era alt-right have moved openly into the mainstream. MAGA politicians and pundits now talk openly about the ‘great replacement’ of ‘legacy Americans’ by immigrants, and profess that the US should be a ‘Christian nation.’ Over the last few years, even as most of the organizations that led the older alt-right have faded, their ideas have won, and moved into the mainstream. ‘Organized’ fascism can sometimes appear more diffuse—for example, most Capitol insurrectionists, or street mobs confronting BLM protesters in 2020 or Gaza encampments in 2024 do not formally belong to far-right membership-based organizations. Rather, they’re much more likely to be organized via more ‘informal’ methods such as Whatsapp and Facebook groups, or by Instagram pages they follow. This more ‘decentralized’ fascist mobilization apparatus is no less dangerous—and of course, membership-based organizations like Patriot Front still exist as well.

KVM: To follow up, what role does antisemitism play in contemporary organized fascism and rightwing politics?

SB: Antisemitism has always been a major piece of most modern fascist movements because, as their ideology developed, they depended on using the specter of the Jew to mobilize resentment and anger. On the one hand, they have a closed vision of who the “us” is in their identitarian matrix, which often defines Jews outside of the white, Christian nation, and excluding Jews was always a major piece of the romantic European ethnic nationalisms from which fascist movements ultimately developed. Second, their revolutionary character depends on creating a type of populist wave that pretends to challenge capital while refusing to undermine the actual class position created by our economic system. They do this with conspiracism, and antisemitic conspiracies about cabals and bankers is the most fully realized version of this model of faux-class struggle. Additionally, as people like Eric Ward have written, they need a central conspirator to explain why if racial minorities are so incapable, as racists suggest, they have also organized effectively through social movements. The answer provided by the far-right is that the Jews are responsible, using non-white communities as a weapon against Aryan interests. And since fascist movements are mostly in continuity with one another, inheriting ideas, prejudices, and practical politics as the generations pass, antisemitism has become a common ideological scaffolding that they can transmute to new conditions, constituencies, and passions.

BL: So, on today’s fascist right, you have white nationalist movements trading in explicit conspiracy theories that the Jews are behind everything they oppose—BLM, non-white immigration, ‘Cultural

Marxism,' LGBTQ liberation movements, foreign wars, the political establishment, etc. These conspiracy theories have motivated deadly attacks on Jews and on Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ communities across the country in recent years. And whenever they appear, they are so to speak 'intersectional'—the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter thought Jews were behind immigration; the Buffalo shooter attacked a Black community and claimed in his manifesto that Jews were his ultimate enemy, etc. At the same time, these conspiracy theories animate the broader MAGA right, even if not always in explicit form. For example, Fox News pundits and GOP politicians claim George Soros, 'Cultural Marxists,' or globalists are pulling the strings behind immigration, BLM, legal prosecution of Trump, and basically everything else. These conspiracy theories serve as a meta-narrative for the right, uniting everything they oppose under the aegis of a common enemy—and in this way they serve as a major mobilizing tool. It's also getting more explicit—even in the last nine months, MAGA pundits have been dropping the dog-whistles and more openly railing against liberal Jews.

KVM: False narratives about “Jews” are at the center of conspiracy theories on the right and prevent the left, as they “creep in,” from understanding *actually existing* power relations. Since we have addressed antisemitism on the right, how does it manifest on the left?

SB: There are a couple of ways that antisemitic ideas manifest on the left, and, in a sense, they aren't different than on the right. They often take the form of a type of populist anti-capitalism, one that uses conspiracism as a replacement for a class analysis. So instead of concerning ourselves with the hyper consolidation of capital amongst a ruling class, a conspiracy theory may be hatched about these particular capitalists and their control over markets, workplaces, housing, governments, etc., such as George Soros or the Rothschild family. These then bring antisemitic ideas into a social movement space, both injecting bigotry into a movement that is supposed to be aiming for collective liberation and/or redirecting strategies from a viable pathway to change and in the direction of a mirage. The difference between the right and left on this question is that antisemitic conspiracy theories and beliefs are usually an aberration for the left, while on the right they are often structural, implicit, and inseparable from the right's vision of economic populism. There are other ways this plays out as well, and it's not dissimilar to the way any type of bigoted idea makes its way into the left, such as transphobia in the feminist movement or anti-immigrant xenophobia in environmentalism. People inside social movements are not immune from the same messages all of us receive, and they can bring those bad ideas into their organizing spaces as well, reproducing them at the same time as they are hoping to challenge the sources of power.

BL: Particularly relevant these days, is that these conspiracy theories can sometimes 'creep in' to anti-Zionist discourse on the left. For example, the mistaken analysis you see sometimes that the United States supports Israel because of 'Zionist control' of the government. In reality, this gets it backwards—support for Israel serves U.S. imperial interests of domination over the Middle East, bolsters shared settler-colonial mythologies, and plays into the End Times fantasies of tens of millions of U.S. Christian Zionists, who vastly outnumber American Jews. Conflating Zionism and Judaism—for example, targeting Jews or Jewish institutions as a result of generalized opposition to Israel, imposing political 'litmus tests' on Jews, or casting Jewish theology or culture as the 'root cause' of Israel's oppression—is also antisemitic and can appear occasionally in left spaces, and needs to be condemned unreservedly. Of course, it needs to be said here that anti-Zionism is not inherently antisemitic and most left anti-Zionism does not make these mistakes today. Opposing Israel's genocide and settler-colonial apartheid is more necessary than ever. And all of these tendencies, in fact, are much stronger and deeply rooted on the radical right, as we would expect.

KVM: While uncovering and confronting antisemitism is a major undercurrent in Shane's prior work—*Why We Fight*, *Fascism Today*, and the edited anthology *¡No pasarán!* — what prompted you to write a full length “guide to fighting antisemitism”?

SB: This was actually Ben's idea in the beginning, but once he suggested it, it made perfect sense. A lot of my work has been to try to build an alternative to the mainline discourse on an issue or cultural scene. So, whether it is neofolk or black metal or building an alternative union infrastructure, what I want to do is try to offer something novel where the mainline discourse has dropped the ball. And that has happened nowhere more than in the fight against antisemitism, which has been taken up mostly by the pro-Israel right. In that way, we now have an entire world of anti-antisemitism organizations that primarily wield accusations of antisemitism against Palestine solidarity organizations, which both undermines justice movements and makes us less able to fight antisemitism at a time when actual antisemitism, particularly coming from the far-right, is measurably growing.

BL: We also wanted to fill a gap in left analysis. Much of the left doesn't have a rigorous understanding of how antisemitism works, how it intersects with other forms of oppression and helps uphold structural injustice in our world. This essentially cedes the terrain to the right, allowing our enemies to present themselves as the valiant defenders of the Jews. It also means, on a very basic level, the left can't succeed in our project of collective liberation if we don't have a full picture of the forces and systems of oppression we're up against, if we miss the particular role antisemitism plays in upholding racial capitalism, nationalism, and reaction in all its forms.

KVM: Part of confronting antisemitic narratives is amplifying the “diversity of Jewish experience.” Why is this so vital to *Safety Through Solidarity*?

SB: As it stands, most organizations claiming authority on the subject of antisemitism are overwhelmingly white and Ashkenazi-centric. There are a lot of problems with this: it enables racist allegations about the alleged disproportionate rate of antisemitism in non-white communities, it erases the experiences of Jews of color around the world, and it provides an inaccurate picture for how antisemitism is being experienced by the majority of the world's Jews. It also separates antisemitism from other forms of oppression by denying the intersectional reality of many Jewish experiences, and most Jews do not experience antisemitism in isolation but paired with other forms of bigotry and oppression. By maintaining a white, Ashkenormative position, many of these anti-antisemitism organizations maintain the status quo of political centrism, Israeli nationalism, and law enforcement partnerships that they seem to think are the cornerstones of Jewish safety, but which actually make a lot of Jews less safe. So, if we want to consider how antisemitism is related to structures of power, we need to hear from a diversity of Jewish communities so we can both get an accurate picture of how it works and we can build bridges of solidarity to do something about it.

BL: Too often, conversations around antisemitism present an over-simplified portrait of Jewish history derived from a caricature of the experiences of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe. Jewish history as a whole is imagined as essentially a never-ending repetition of *Fiddler On the Roof*-style pogroms, isolation, expulsions, and the like. This portrait, which scholar Salo Baron called the 'lachrymose' theory of Jewish history, is derived from the historical experience of Jews in Christian Europe, where antisemitism for many centuries was systemic, pointed, and often very intense, including of course the Nazi Holocaust. (Even there, however, it distorts European Jewish history, smoothing over nuances and complexities of experience.) But it completely erases the experiences of Jews outside of Europe. For millennia, Jews often found much greater acceptance, pluralism, co-existence, and thriving across the Middle East and North Africa, and in Muslim-majority civilizations. It wasn't always rosy—Jews and Christians faced second-class status, and antisemitism still existed—but by and large, the experience was profoundly different. When we are able to de-center this European lens and broaden the scope, we can tell a different story about antisemitism, about the relations between Jews and non-Jews, and about the Jewish future. Because in fact, the 'lachrymose' story of Jewish history has a political purpose, as scholars like Ella Shohat have documented so well—it benefits Zionism by framing Israel as the supposed *telos* of Jewish history.

KVM: There is an entire “tradition of looking at antisemitism from the left.” What is this tradition?

SB: While the right has captured much of the contemporary conversation on antisemitism, this has not been the historical reality of the fight against antisemitism. There is a long tradition of left-wing critiques of antisemitism, heading back into the earliest debates amongst Marxist and anarchists. Since then, there have been significant pockets of the left that see fighting antisemitism as central to their work, such as antifascism, the Jewish New Left, Jewish feminism, Frankfurt School Marxists, and others. Within this model we understand antisemitism not as a unique pathology of Gentiles, or as an “eternal hatred,” but as a system of oppression like any other, tied to white Christian supremacy and the structural inequalities of capitalism. By looking at this in a non-exceptionalist way, we actually pick up on the larger strategic orientations of the left by looking at how to build cross-community solidarity to fight back against our shared sources of oppression. In this way, the leftist tradition is one that rejects technocratic non-profits, police partnerships, and Israeli nationalism as the solution to Jewish safety, and instead focuses on an alliance with other people facing marginalization.

BL: Yes, for over a century there has existed a strong, if sometimes subterranean, left analysis of antisemitism as the “socialism of fools,” as the phrase coined in the late-19th century European left puts it. Leftists have often been quick to understand that conspiracy theories are a central tool of nationalism and reaction, used to divert and subvert popular anger and discontent away from the root causes of oppression and onto a false mirage. At the same time, much of this analysis has been forgotten by major currents of the left over the last half-century. So, we understand our book as a memory project—bringing submerged analysis back into the open, to enrich our movements.

KVM: Moreover, one of the strengths of the book is delineating between “two traditions of fighting antisemitism.” What are these different traditions?

SB: In our final chapter we look at two distinct traditions of fighting antisemitism, though there are also others that may overlap. The first is the Jewish left, which aims to bring Jewish identity, experiences, and traditions into radical politics, ensuring that this perspective always remains a feature of the coalitions we build. Jewish radicals are disproportionately present in leftist movements, and they are also the people who often had to advocate to have antisemitism taken seriously within the left. Over the past thirty years the left has dealt with antisemitism more and more infrequently, and the recent revival of the Jewish left is a positive development that can help to build up our movements’ capacity to take on this fight.

The next one we discuss is community self-defense and antifascism. This is part of the alternative we see to investing in police and prisons. Instead of outsourcing our safety to a state that doesn’t have our best interests at heart, we want to invest in each other: building models of safety by getting other communities to act in a multidirectional commitment of solidarity. What would it look like to create a community alliance of mosques, Jewish groups, and historically Black churches, all of which are targeted by hateful attacks? What would it mean to share our resources and interventions to ensure that synagogues remain safe places, without resorting to off-duty police or partnerships with the FBI? Part of this question is how to take seriously the concerns over safety while not reinvesting in the same structures of power that themselves further marginalize communities, particularly Jews of diverse backgrounds.

BL: So, in our last chapter we counterpose these powerful and promising left strategies of fighting antisemitism, to the tired and broken mainstream approach. We discuss how for decades, groups like the ADL have sought to ‘fight antisemitism’ by building vertical alliances with the State, policing, militarized surveillance, and nationalism. This strategy really accelerated after the 1967 Six Day War, when the global left lent solidarity to the cause of Palestinian liberation. After that, the ADL and others

claimed that the 'new antisemitism' took the form of criticism of Israel, and they sought to work with the state and the right to repress Israel-critical speech and radical left social movements, in many different ways. Since October 7 of course, these efforts have intensified in the United States and around the world. In our view this makes it more important than ever for the left to change the narrative and build a new approach to fighting antisemitism alongside Palestinian liberation.

KVM: You book offers that “claiming the space to gather as Jews on the left to take on antisemitism, is itself liberatory and healing.” Can you expand upon this notion? And how can those outside of the Jewish experience aid in protecting this “space” and contribute to “tracing the connections between different forms of oppression we face”?

SB: This comes from the healing nature that identity politics can take if it is an opportunity to build connections, address where feelings are coming from, and help to transfer experiences into ideas for change. But it can't stop there, as so much of contemporary Jewish responses to antisemitism do. Because a sense of inherent distrust has formed of the non-Jewish world, both from real and understandable experiences of trauma and because of the rhetoric of some major anti-antisemitism organizations seem to suggest the Gentile world is hopelessly antisemitic, we often lose that second piece, where we build alliances with non-Jews. But since we see our society's basic institutions, capitalism, statehood, disenfranchisement, as the underlying cause of both ongoing antisemitism and other forms of oppression, it's only logical to reach out beyond the Jewish quarter to build relationships that can evolve into a mass movement. Jews are not impacted by Western imperialism in some isolated way, these are the forces that have inculcated white Christian supremacy and colonialism globally, so we all have a vested interest in building the widest possible movement to take this on. We can't expect half measures to ultimately result in the change we want to see, and because of that we quite literally must depend on non-Jewish comrades who share the same desire to uproot systemic injustice.

KVM: With ceasefire, peace, and Gaza solidarity demonstrations around the country being led by young Jews and Muslims, with the important role of second-generation Palestinian students, how do we envision “a future beyond nationalism” and antisemitism?

SB: The first is to stop assuming Zionism is necessarily a mechanism of Jewish safety. To prop up Israel as a colonial enterprise, it depends on the Israeli state moving further and further to the right, and to partner with both Christian evangelicals on the one hand, and far-right national populists on the other, so they can see a large enough global constituency of support for their project. But these are the two primary demographics that are making the Jewish diaspora (and, likely, Israelis as well) unsafe, and so we have to start rethinking the very foundations of a narrative that assumes unencumbered Israeli nationalism will ever be an answer to antisemitism. If it was, antisemitism would be a thing of the past.

So when we think about building movements, we have to avoid the fatalism of much of the rhetoric around antisemitism, and to refuse to assume that the Israeli stop-gap is the best we can hope for. We dream of something much bigger, the kind of world that can brush away systemic inequality and bigotry, and that requires partnering with other marginalized people, especially those who are being systematically dispossessed of their land by Western colonialism and imperialism. That is part of why we are seeing mass support for a ceasefire in Gaza from young Jews, because they know that enacting a genocide in Palestine does little for Jewish safety, and instead further entrenches the systems of Western colonialism that are also at the heart of perpetuating antisemitic conspiracy theories and Christian hegemony.

KVM: Now that we have discussed visions for the future, let us talk briefly about tactics and strategy. We agree that antifascist movements of the past decade have been right to

follow the charge given to us by Anti-Racist Action when they declared [“We Go Where They Go”](#). How does this apply to the fight against antisemitism today?

SB: Well, antifascism has always had a program for this, and in a way we need to trust a bit of that vision for how to prioritize the fight. While antisemitism may not be often discussed in large sections of the left, that's not true in antifascist circles where it has always been of primary importance because antisemitism is a centerpiece of white nationalism. So, if we are thinking of tactics, actually expanding the presence of organized and trained antifascist groups is a good start. But also letting that consciousness bleed into the rest of the left is important, which means having trainings on this, holding some space for Jews to talk about experiences, and addressing antisemitism when it comes up.

But there is the more important question of offensive strategies, how we fight the institutions themselves. This is largely similar to the questions social movements always ask themselves: what institutions and people are responsible for a problem, and what strategies can a large mass of people employ to confront those sources? This may mean taking on demagogic leaders from the far-right, exposing them and undermining their efforts, or confronting people in business, housing, and other sectors who perpetuate the same kind of hateful ideas. It likely means taking on the underlying systems that create the alienation necessary for conspiracism to breed, such as by building labor unions and mutual aid networks, and it definitely means creating strong communities with coalitions that can rise up to fight the right together. Because we understand antisemitism as systemic, we know that it is a relevant question in every area of struggle, so we need to spread the ideas on it, add a nuanced understanding of how antisemitism works to all social movements, and think of how we can expand our work to address this particular uniqueness.

KVM: It's hard not to be pessimistic as we engage in this dialogue during late-Summer 2024: there is the looming election, fascist rhetoric spewing from the stage at the Republican National Convention as part of the further mainstreaming of fascist positions and figures, continued timidity and collaboration of the Democratic establishment coupled with a lackluster extra-parliamentary left movement in the United States. What do you see on the horizon and how do we prepare our autonomous forces and the U.S. working-class to fight fascism?

BL: I think that in addition to grassroots strategies of mutual aid, communal self-defense, anti-fascist street confrontation and the like, a popular front strategy is necessary now and for the foreseeable future. The institutions of multiracial democracy won't themselves free us, but we also can't cede these spaces to the right. We also need to build movements that are broad and welcoming, where many different people can see their needs, their families, their interests reflected. It actually is in everyone's self-interest to overthrow capitalism and build a radically different world, but too often our movements feel more like siloed subcultures, where we really aren't embodying this. The far-right has been able to build a mass movement because their coalitions are broad, expansive and flexible. They welcome in, while we shut out. If we have any hope of defeating fascism in the long-term we have to become the majority.

SB: I think we can expect a more competent right in elected office the next time around, which means more attention paid to the actual state. That is important and we have coalitions for such things, but we shouldn't forget the ground-level defensive work as well. Those two things come hand in hand, and at the same time as the state will try to engage in attacks on abortion rights, trans healthcare, immigrant rights, etc., it will also encourage vigilante violence against activists, which is where antifascism can act as the protective measure necessary to defend all movements.