

Left Antisemitism and Consistent Democracy

January 29, 2022



I am grateful to Daniel Fischer for his [review of my book *Confronting Antisemitism on the Left: Arguments for Socialists*](#). I am particularly flattered that, despite his obvious disagreements with core aspects of my argument, Fischer recommends the book as “probably the best available on the subject”, and honoured that he saw fit to buy it for friends as a Hannukah gift.

There is always a danger in responding to a review that one ends up precipitating an exchange that runs to book length in itself. Readers interested in themes raised in Fischer’s review will, I hope, go on to read my book, so they can assess his critique of it alongside the source material, in context and in full. Although it is not my intention to provoke a lengthy exchange of polemics, I feel a response to Fischer’s review could help clarify some elements of the wider debate. I also felt it important to correct one or two places where I feel Fischer has, I’m sure unintentionally, misrepresented my arguments.

Our most substantial disagreements centre on perspectives for Israel/Palestine and our approaches to Zionism and anti-Zionism. I’m not sure how Fischer is statistically measuring his claim that “antisemites are more likely to be Zionists”; as I’m sure he knows, there’s plenty of reactionary anti-Zionism in far-right and Islamist milieus. And I find his claim that “left antisemitism’s *most widespread manifestation* [my emphasis – DR]” is “left-leaning Zionists’ ubiquitous claim that anti-Zionism is antisemitic” slightly baffling. If I grasp his point at all, I’m not sure how it’s supportable in the light of Fischer’s own experiences on anti-Israel protests, described in the vignette at the beginning of his review. Surely those politics are a more “widespread” and significant “manifestation” of antisemitism on the left? But for what it’s worth, I’m explicit in my book that anti-Zionism is *not* necessarily antisemitic. But, I argue, *some forms* of anti-Zionism *are*, and that simply mechanically repeating the mantra that “anti-Zionism is not antisemitism”, *as if it can never be*, can have the effect of engendering a collective ignorance of those moments when it *is*.

I cannot share Fischer’s adulation of Lenni Brenner, whose work has provided a would-be “historical” basis for some of the worst conspiracist anti-Zionism on the far left. For readers interested in picking through the issues, I’d recommend this guest post on the blog of socialist

journalist Owen Jones (written by a self-identified “anti-Zionist Jew”), Brian Klug’s recent [letter to the New Statesman on the Haavara Agreement](#), this [1984 review of Brenner’s work from Socialist Organiser](#), and Barry Finger’s [comment on Brenner on the New Politics website](#).

Claims that the scattered instances of “collaboration” between some Zionists and Nazi authorities were not, in fact, the realpolitik choices of bourgeois-nationalist leaders made in conditions of utter desperation, but rather expressive of some comprehensive ideological affinity between Zionism and Nazism, do not, of course, originate with Brenner. They stem most centrally from Stalinism’s “anti-Zionist” campaigns of the 1950s onwards, conducted on an industrial scale. In the face of Stalinism’s industrial production of anti-Zionist propaganda, it is hardly possible to do as Fischer accuses me of doing and “overstate the centrality of anti-Zionism” to Stalinist antisemitism. There are literally thousands of books, articles, and speeches demonstrating its very clear centrality. Arguments similar to Brenner’s are threaded through many of them.

Fischer claims, wrongly, that I “support the mainstream two-state settlement which denies full equality to Palestinians within Israel’s borders.” Whether advocacy of *any* form of two-state settlement could be meaningfully described as “mainstream” any longer is highly debatable, given that bourgeois realpolitik has substantially lapsed into acceptance of the chauvinist one-state reality Israel has imposed on the ground. But in any case, the model of two-states I support is certainly not one which “denies full equality to Palestinians within Israel’s borders”. I support a two-state settlement because I believe the foundation of an independent Palestinian state, alongside and with the same rights as Israel, remains the obviously implied “next step” for levelling up the national rights of the two peoples. I also support struggles to win full equality for the Palestinian minority in Israel in the here-and-now. In my book, as well as opposing the occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the blockade and siege of Gaza, I explicitly oppose the “intense racism and discrimination” suffered by the Palestinian minority in Israel.

I quite deliberately refer to a two-state “settlement” rather than a two-state “solution”. I *don’t* see two states as an ultimate “solution” or end-point, but rather as a better foundation on which to build movements towards a democratic unitary state than the contemporary unequal one-state reality. I am sympathetic to efforts such as the “A Land for All: Two States, One Homeland” initiative, which try to move beyond two-state/one-state dichotomies and argue for a model based on two distinct national entities with close links, ultimately aspiring towards confederation.

It was their policy on the Palestinian refugee question which I promoted in the book, and which Fischer attacks in his review. This policy, developed jointly by Israeli Jewish and Palestinian activists, seems to me a perfectly reasonable starting point for democratic accommodation. I urge readers to read it in its entirety and judge it for themselves. What initiatives like this grasp, which so much of far-left thinking not only ignores but actively rejects, is that future confederation and unity can only emerge as the result of mutual recognition, accommodation, and joint struggle between the two peoples, rather than somehow being imposed.

Fischer says he wants to “smash Zionism, not Israel”. As an internationalist, I want to “smash”, if one insists on using that word in this context, all nationalisms, as I believe nationalism inimical to class politics. As a revolutionary anti-capitalist, I want to “smash” all states. Whether it is effective to pose that as a programmatic slogan and political point-of-departure is another matter. I’ve attended many protests in support of Uyghur human rights outside the Chinese Embassy in London; our campaign opposes the Han-Chinese chauvinism that provides ideological buttressing for China’s neo-colonial project in East Turkestan. But does Fischer think it would be good politics to put “smash Han nationalism”, or “smash Chinese nationalism”, on a banner?

Given the history of Zionism, which, as Gilbert Achcar put it, “emerged in reaction to an unbearable

form of racist oppression which [...] culminated in the Nazi genocide”, there is a particular case for sensitivity. What does Fischer imagine the majority of Jews, for whom “Zionism” may mean no more than support for Israeli Jewish self-determination and a loose affinity with Israel as an expression of Jewish nationhood, will hear in his “smash Zionism” slogan? I doubt he’ll get the opportunity to explain the small-print, or to convince them that what they see as “Zionism” isn’t *really* Zionism.

I should clarify that I am focused here on the discourse of the western left; I am in no position to “tone police” the Palestinian street, where words a good deal more bellicose than “smash” are undoubtedly and understandably deployed in response to the suffocating infrastructure of colonial oppression. But this is not merely a question of language deployed in casual conversation, but a matter of how political perspectives should be summarised. On that, I will say only that I admire the democratic humanism of those such as Edward Said, who argued: “In our situation as Arabs, it has been a stupid and wasteful policy for so many years to use phrases like ‘the Zionist entity’ and completely refuse to understand and analyse Israel and Israelis on the grounds that their existence must be denied because they caused the Palestinian *Nakba*. History is a dynamic thing [...] [We] have to go beyond such idiocies as saying that [...] Israelis are all, man, woman, and child, doomed to our eternal enmity and hostility.”

Fischer argues that the Israeli Jews’ “status as a nation does not give them a right to statehood”. Of course, it is possible to express national self-determination in forms other than a separate state. But believing that (at least) *some* national peoples do have the right to a state, which Fischer presumably does, but the Israeli Jews categorically don’t, seems a different order of argument.

I’m not uninterested in Fischer’s discourse about alternative forms of self-determination. But this discourse seems to belong to a semi-utopian imaginary of a post-national future. It is not a political answer to immediately-posed national questions. In terms of how nationhood is actually constituted in contemporary society, I don’t know what word other than “antisemitic” to use for the implications of a politics which tells the world’s only Jewish national group, whose existence as a distinct nation is inextricably bound up with experiences of anti-Jewish oppression, that, whilst other national peoples may have a right to statehood, they do not. Fischer accepts this as implicitly antisemitic, but says he’s sceptical as to whether any leftist really applies this kind of extreme exceptionalism. But if there are other instances of this “yes to national self-determination, up to and including the right to a state... but not for you” approach in major currents of far-left thought, I’m not aware of them.

None of this requires moderating criticism of the actually-existing Israeli state’s policies, its borders, its laws, or even its constitutional basis. And I share discomfort with the formulation that “Israel has a right to exist” when it is deployed, as it often is, by those who refuse to acknowledge Israel’s suppression of the Palestinians’ “right to exist” as an autonomous national people. But insisting, as a requirement of socialist principle, that Israel *does not* “have a right to exist”, suggests a programme requiring the abolition of actually-existing Israel as a condition of any progress at all. (Then, presumably, from the rubble, some more satisfactorily democratic settlement can be established, by someone, which will allow the Jews “self-determination”, but not a state.)

This is, at best, utopian, given that it essentially presupposes conditions of post-statist, post-national consciousness, which are hardly likely to drop out of the sky, and perhaps least of all in a situation of long-running national oppression. At worst, it licenses antisemitic chauvinism, given that the only force presently remotely capable of even attempting the abolition of the actually-existing Israeli state is the Iranian state and its paramilitary allies. A “decolonial” programme which confers “anti-imperialist” status on the wild fantasies of Israel’s regional-imperialist rival is not, I would argue, consistent with socialist principles, and certainly not with the anti-campist principles Fischer and I share.

The only truly democratic way to abolish the existing Israeli state is via a social revolution based on a majority of its inhabitants, necessarily including Jews. If, despite my assessment, it proves possible for such a revolutionary movement to emerge fully-formed in a single leap, with both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs developing a kind of post-national consciousness, I will be thrilled. But this seems unlikely enough for socialists – and, centrally and most immediately, socialists active in Israel/Palestine – to at least hedge our bets, and leave room for a transitional programme which includes the right to distinct statehood for both peoples.

It also seems notable that Fischer doesn't apply his advocacy of post-statist utopianism, as opposed to distinct national claims, equally on all sides. He sees the Palestinian national struggle as axiomatically "rooted in principles of liberty and equality", even though it has always been hegemonised by statist politics of some form. So, for Fischer, it seems, Israeli Jews must give up their national claims, which can only impel exclusivism and chauvinism, in the name of a post-statist conception of self-determination; but Palestinian nationalism, which will necessarily impel "liberty and equality", is only to be celebrated. Presumably any notion that democratic accommodation between the two claims might be necessary should be dismissed as compromise with "the oppressor". This seems more to convey an attempt to assign a transhistorical moral essence to different national groups, and determine their entitlement to rights on that basis, rather than a consistently democratic approach.

It might also be noted that Fischer's survey of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)'s history oddly fails to acknowledge its official support, since 1988, for a two-state settlement. Notwithstanding the many legitimate criticisms of the PLO, I welcome this position as an acknowledgement that both Israeli Jewish and Palestinian national claims are legitimate.

Fischer's review discusses my promotion of Steve Cohen's deliberately tongue-in-cheek self-description as an "anti-Zionist Zionist." I'm clear in the book that I use this label in Cohen's irreverent, mischievous spirit rather than as a serious proposal for how the left should describe its approach. It's not meant to offer "clarity", particularly, and certainly not intended to express a whole political programme. Rather, it's a provocative shorthand for some of what I believe a consistently democratic perspective must express: support for Palestinian self-determination, hostility to Israeli Jewish chauvinism, exclusivism, and supremacism, but also sensitivity to the historical experiences that impelled the emergence of Zionism and the desire for national-statehood, and support for the right to self-determination of Israeli Jews. On a personal level, it also speaks to the niche in which I aim to position myself: too "Zionist" for the left antisemites, too "anti-Zionist" for Jewish chauvinists.

Fischer calls for socialists to promote a "vision that convinces Israeli Jews they can live safely and freely in as a de-Zionized country." I'm unconvinced of the usefulness of the term "de-Zionised" here, but let's accept we share a desire to convince Israeli Jews that their rights and security don't require the denial of those same rights to Palestinians. In fact, such a denial will ultimately imperil those rights: in Marx's phrase, "a nation that oppresses another forges its own chains." The question, then, is how to mobilise Jews and Palestinians in common struggle to break ("smash", if Fischer insists) those chains, and forge instead a common future based on equal rights – which, if it does not include equal *national* rights, will not, in fact, be "equal".

Our efforts are best spent supporting movements on the ground, such as Omdim be'Yachad (Standing Together), which seek to organise both Jews and Arabs against racism and occupation, as well as around shared class interests on day-to-day economic and social struggles. The formal policy of Standing Together is that both peoples, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Arab, are entitled to statehood – i.e., for two states. But their movement also includes those who advocate unitary-binational and confederal models; if, in the course of their efforts to build joint struggles, significant social consent emerges for a genuinely egalitarian, democratic unitary model, that should be

welcomed and celebrated. Fewer borders are invariably preferable to more. Socialists in Britain and America will surely do more to contribute to the emergence of such a future by making practical solidarity with the forces seeking democratic unity and joint struggle than by insisting on a utopian-reactionary maximalism.

At the end of his review, Fischer includes a note calling attention to the fact that No Pasaran Media (NPM), the imprint which published my book, was founded by Jon Mendelsohn, a (Blairite) Labour peer, whose politics on Israel/Palestine Fischer describes as “centrist-Zionist”. I suspect Mendelsohn himself would prefer “liberal-Zionist”, but I won’t split hairs. Although Fischer laments that my publisher does not have “impeccable anti-Zionist credentials”, he concludes, in effect, “... but don’t let that put you off”. I’ll say a word or two on that here.

As I noted in the acknowledgements in my book, my condition for accepting NPM’s offer to publish a book of my writing on left antisemitism was that they exercise no political control over its content. They honoured this condition fully and at no point attempted to intervene in or politically shape my arguments – arguments which certainly don’t align with Mendelsohn’s politics. Fischer accepts that my politics are “not identical” to Mendelsohn’s. It would be more accurate to say they run significantly counter to them, as did the politics of Steve Cohen, a reprint of whose book Mendelsohn chose to make NPM’s first publication.

As for Ben Freeman, whose book *Jewish Pride* was published by NPM before mine, I think it is clear that our politics are worlds apart. I see Freeman’s politics as Jewish-chauvinist and anti-Palestinian. But, frankly, given that I don’t expect Freeman to account for my book in his circles, I don’t feel any obligation to account for his in mine, just as I don’t believe anyone published by Verso since 2015 is obliged to account for the fact they share a publisher with Max Blumenthal. I would also invite readers to consider the rather ugly implications of the argument, not made by Fischer but which I have seen suggested elsewhere, that Mendelsohn’s Zionism somehow flows through his money, rendering publications it funds an agent of that “Zionism”, regardless of the actually published content.

On some of mine and Fischer’s other disagreements – for example, around the question of antisemitism as an “oppression”, and whether it has a “structural” character – I will simply reflect, and would welcome further responses and critiques. And finally, whilst I welcome Fischer’s description of me as an “independent thinker”, which I certainly hope I am, my perspectives are inevitably shaped and informed by my political education. That has included work by writers and thinkers such as Steve Cohen, Moishe Postone, April Rosenblum, and others from outside my own, more narrowly-defined, political tradition. But it has also centrally included analysis and critique developed by comrades in Workers’ Liberty and our predecessor organisations, over more than four decades. Much of that work is directly referenced and drawn on in my book. I hope comrades interested in the arguments will go on to explore the wider body of political literature that informed them.