

The Fight Against Antisemitism is the Fight for Total Liberation

September 28, 2021



Sometimes we have walked so far off course on a struggle that we have to reset to the basics. Over the past two decades, conservative organizations have routinely lobbed accusations of antisemitism at left-wing organizers, usually related to problematic discourses on Israel or conspiracy theories, and those claims have done little to force the left to seriously analyze the issue. In most cases, the liberal left fails to see issues of oppression as they are: police violence is reduced to bad apples, border imperialism is answered with calls for “inclusion,” patriarchy is countered with “CEO feminism.” The radical left comes at the issues with a more “by the roots” mentality, where, at least in theory, they try to get to the heart of the problem and refuse to let easy answers rule the direction of organizing.

But when it comes to antisemitism, the radical left is increasingly daft at seeing the issue with any deep-set clarity. Instead, the increasing violence faced by Jewish communities is muted by the disingenuous accusations of Israel’s defenders, and the radical left continues to be ill equipped to actually take on this challenge with sincerity and efficacy.

This is why a new canon is developing as writers, organizers, and scholars are attacking the issue full throated, and doing it as insiders in the left. Nearly forty years ago, during the Israel-Lebanon War of 1982, British socialist activist Steve Cohen wrote a well researched polemic against what he saw as antisemitic strains in his own left. This became the classic work on the subject *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Antisemitic*, which has been reprinted in more recent years and takes us through well over a century of the left’s bumbling attempts to reckon with Jews.

After the Labour antisemitism crisis, which played a role in costing Corbyn and Labour's left flank the election in 2019, there has been a variety of postmortems to diagnose the failure. A huge portion of the left decided to double down, penning screed after screed asserting "Labour did nothing wrong" and refusing to entertain the thousands of Jewish voices that said something could have been rotten. It is in this climate that Daniel Randall has written a sort of spiritual sequel to *That's Funny* called *Confronting Antisemitism on the Left: Arguments for Socialists*, a book that takes on his own socialist community and challenges them to confront antisemitism with the same vigor they have taken on other struggles against oppression.

I spoke with Randall about his book, the legacy of "left-wing antisemitism," how right-wing campaigns have created doubt, and what the left can do to take this fight seriously again.

Shane Burley: What was the impetus for putting together this book?

Daniel Randall: The immediate background is that this issue, antisemitism on the left of politics, has been brought to much greater prominence in political discussion in Britain over the past few years, with controversies around Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party from 2015-2019.

The concept of left antisemitism and disputes over its meaning, and indeed existence, were dragged from a relatively obscure and marginalized corner of the far left into much more public discourse. Lots of people started writing about it much more regularly and prolifically. Within Labour, the debate was often unhelpfully bifurcated into, on the one hand, those arguing that all claims of antisemitism were smears and fabrications concocted by supporters of Israel, or, on the other, people arguing that the problem was with the entire radical left, or even that antisemitism inevitably grew out of radical left-wing ideas.

My book came about because No Pasaran Media, an imprint set up in 2019 in order to republish Steven Cohen's classic book *That's Funny, You Don't Look Antisemitic*, approached me with an offer to publish a book of my own writing on the issue. The book does not try to re-litigate those Labour Party controversies. I talk about them, but I try to take a longer range historical view.

In terms of my own engagement with the subject, it's an issue I've been personally engaged with for as long as I've been politically active, primarily for two reasons. One, unavoidably, is my own Jewish identity. I try not to foreground that too much; I want to avoid an identitarian approach, which I think invariably obscures more than it clarifies and generates more heat than light. But inevitably, that's part of my interest in and engagement with the issue.

Secondly, because I'm a member of an organization — Workers' Liberty, a socialist group here in the UK — which has had a critical analysis of left antisemitism for a long time. From the 1980s, we were one of the only organized tendencies on the British left that acknowledged left antisemitism as real, and tried to confront it critically. There have been other collectives, and individuals like Steve Cohen, whose work I draw on a lot, who were attempting to do some of that work. But in terms of the organized far left in Britain, Workers' Liberty was a bit of an outlier in that respect. I have substantially got my political education and formation in the context of an organization that had a critical analysis of this phenomenon, so that's why it was a part of my intellectual landscape.

SB: Do you think that "left antisemitism" is functionally different from right-wing antisemitism, and does it come from within the left or does it result from reactionary influences that affect the left externally?

DR: I think it is functionally different, and I think identifying those differences is important. Analytical frames that blur out the specificities are prone to running aground. One of the things I'm

attempting to do in the book, which is a difficult aspect of the issue, is to draw out some of the differences between racialized antisemitism and what I term “ideological” antisemitism. I don’t think it’s necessarily useful to define left antisemitism as “racist”.

As for whether antisemitism is organic on the left, or an incursion from outside, I think both things happen. The scholar Marcel Stoetzler has a helpful approach, which I reference in the book, that says left antisemitism as an overall category can be broken down into antisemitism *on* the left, which is manifestations on the left of the themes of antisemitism in general, and then antisemitism *of* the left, which is perhaps more organic and distinct. In my book I talk about both, though I group them together under a common heading.

I identify two principal historical sources of left antisemitism. One is primitive and underdeveloped critiques of capitalism, which reduce it to finance, speculation, and banking, and which dovetail very clearly with the traditional themes of antisemitism. That may be more antisemitism *on* the left. The second source, which is perhaps more an example of antisemitism *of* the left, is Stalinism, and particularly Stalinism’s “anti-Zionist” campaigns of the 1950s onward. These fed, and were fed by, Stalinism’s campist anti-imperialism, which designates Israel and Zionism as the quintessential expression of colonialism and racism, and elevates Zionism to an almost mystical position in history and world affairs.

SB: There is this notion that antisemitic caricatures of Jews as communists is the predominant historical image, but actually the accusation of the Jews as capitalists or innovators of capitalism is much more extensive. And the idea that traditional lifestyles and societies are the correct alternative to the decadence of emerging international capitalism is carried over in a lot of left-wing literature historically as well.

DR: There is an element of that. And you can also see it in left-wing, or would-be left-wing, valorizations of national capital against international capital. A heavily biodegraded version of this that one finds a lot in the British labour movement — and I’m not suggesting that the people who recycle these narratives are consciously antisemitic — is a valorization of “British manufacturing”, as if there is something noble about the materially-rooted production of physical goods on the national soil, which has been undone by the phantasmic, incorporeal specter of international finance and speculation. Of course, international finance is a force in capitalism and has a class agenda, but it’s this valorization of a national capital against international capital that is a theme of antisemitism, and something you find across both the right and the left.

SB: This seems to be a part of the right’s claim to being opposed to the establishment.

DR: Yes, it’s an appeal to a plebian, populist sentiment.

SB: We talk about that populist dynamic reproducing the conditions for antisemitism, but I would also find it difficult to discuss these issues of power and economic inequality without some type of left populism as a communication device. David Renton discusses this in his new book *Labour’s Antisemitism Crisis* where he says there were essentially two Corbyns: the populist Corbyn, and the class war Corbyn. But I’m not sure that those two are actually that different from one another. In at least the United States, populism was often the language the working class used for socialism, particularly in rural areas.

So how do you go about avoiding these populist rhetorics that have been historically tied to antisemitism while still discussing things like financialization and the advancement of capital into people’s lives?

DR: It's about continually ensuring what you're saying is rooted in an analysis of what capitalism actually is. The left needs a holistic analysis that sees finance, or the other elements of capitalism that are often characterized as worse, as parts of the capitalist whole. National manufacturing is just as much a part of capitalism as banking and finance. We have no interest in promoting national capital over international capitalism.

The second element is about agency. For me, what really differentiates a class-struggle frame from a populist frame is where they each locate the source of transformative power. I hope I'm not what some might call a "class reductionist", but I do think that the nucleus of capitalism is expressed in the wage relation. That's where transformative power is fundamentally situated. Affirming that, and reasserting the need for organization on that terrain, is vital. That's not to say class struggle is more important than struggles against oppressions that might intersect with, but aren't wholly based on, class, but it is to say that we can't get rid of capitalism without organization that seeks to confront it at the nucleus.

I think that does cut against the populist narrative, which is much looser. It is about the "people" and the "elites." Those concepts are extremely underdeveloped, and in fact open to being developed in a very reactionary direction. Often, the implied source of transformative power is simply in revealing who the nefarious "elites" are. That dovetails very easily with conspiracy-theorist and antisemitic thinking.

SB: There are times when you look at liberal left politics and you see how ineffective and inaccurate the analysis there could be, but there are occasions when people on the radical left seem confused by certain issues when a lot of more center-left voices often get it. Antisemitism is sometimes one of these, where some radical left spaces will do mental backflips to avoid saying something is, in fact, antisemitic, or that antisemitism is an important issue to confront. Why do you think this is?

DR: I think it's a combination of factors. One of them is that much of the left has a quite simplistic understanding of bigotry or reactionary ideas being tied to oppression, which in turn is tied to economic disadvantage. There is a certain standard for what an oppressed or minoritized group looks like and how it should behave. Jewish people, certainly in Britain and America, have experienced a significant degree of social mobility. For white Jews, there has been a substantial integration into whiteness. And that can make it seem like antisemitism is a historical relic from an era when Jews were more visibly oppressed.

I should say, as a caveat, that in the book I question whether or not it is helpful to understand contemporary antisemitism, especially in a country like Britain, as an "oppression". I don't think Jews in Britain are oppressed in the way that, say, Black people are. But just because Jews might not be oppressed in that sense, this doesn't mean that antisemitism does not present an ideological danger. Because of antisemitism's function as an ideological narrative that has what Moishe Postone called an "anti-hegemonic" and "pseudo-emancipatory" character — that is, it purports to be an ideology of resistance to power, that can offer a path to liberation — it is particularly dangerous for the left.

Another factor is the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is an unavoidable part of the question you're asking. Much of the far left dismisses antisemitism as only being something people are falsely accused of in order to censor criticism of Israel. That's often the only form in which it features on their intellectual horizon; there's a complete dismissal of the idea that antisemitism might present specific dangers for left-wing ideas that we have to guard against.

Lastly, I think in general the intellectual and political culture of the far left is on the floor. We don't

live in a period where there is a lot of nuanced thinking or deep engagement. In some senses, you're right, it is quite simple, but there are also complexities to it. We have to disentangle various historical elements, and confront questions like "if Jews are not an oppressed minority, why is antisemitism still a threat?" Properly confronting this issue requires a degree of nuance and willingness to engage with complexity that I think is rare on the contemporary far left.

SB: It is hard to have a nuanced conversation about Zionism and anti-Zionism at a moment where there is a brutal bombing of Gaza and far-right Israeli Jewish groups storming through Palestinian neighborhoods (and Palestinian groups in Jewish neighborhoods). But people are often unwilling to discuss problematic forms of anti-Zionism in the middle of very real Israeli violence. What do you think is a productive way to talk about the conflict?

DR: The way I've tried to approach this issue in the book is through the critique of campism. If you dismantle the campist frame - which says everyone over here is an instrument of reaction, so everyone in the opposing camp is an instrument of progress by default - then you can have a more nuanced conversation. Yes, Palestinians are colonially subjugated by Israel. There's a real question of national oppression and a real national liberation struggle. But that doesn't, for example, automatically mean that Israeli Jews, who are on the "other side" of that, so to speak, have no right to self-determination, or make it inadmissible to criticize Hamas.

Rejecting campism doesn't require throwing out fundamental principles like opposition to national oppression and colonialism, or opposition to the racism that exists in Israeli society. In fact, it starts from those principles, but it applies them equally and consistently rather than making them relative, depending on which "camp" in the campist schema you're talking about.

SB: You mention this in the book as being a sort of marginal position, but my general position is to have a universal opposition to nationalism, which leads me to a one state solution (as well as just what feels right given the Nakba and the experiences of ethnic cleansing faced by Palestinians). This is often said to be the unrealistic and utopian perspective, but with the growth of the settlements and the swiss cheese made of Palestine, the one state solution seems maybe the only practical one. And I wonder if the framework of "right to self-determination" always helps us, versus looking at the behavior of states and peoples and the experiences that they have had and building an anti-oppression and revolutionary politic based on those particularities rather than trying to adapt those experiences into a post-nationalist framework. This conversation often gets relegated to questions of the abstract right of self-determination rather than just the realities of the occupation.

DR: I'm instinctively sympathetic to your impulse; I think reaffirming the necessarily anti-nationalist character of revolutionary socialist politics is important. But I'm skeptical of the immediate viability of your approach. Of all the national conflicts in the world, the one that is perhaps least easy to move to a post-nationalist framework would be Israel-Palestine. This is a scenario where you have two national peoples for whom a huge part of their material existence as distinct national peoples is a product of historic oppression. The Palestinian national identity was forged - not entirely, but in substantial part - in the crucible of Israeli oppression. Posing, as the immediate solution to the conflict, a model that requires the dissolution of that distinct national identity into a unitary, post-national state seems utopian to me.

SB: The Israeli Right's claim that Palestinians aren't a nation is demonstrably countered by the experience of Israeli colonialism, which reaffirmed the national identity.

DR: Whether or not they were before is immaterial; they are indisputably a national group now, in

significant part because of what Israel has done to them. There is a similar question on the other "side": was there a Jewish "nation", anywhere in the world, prior to the genocide and forced migrations of the 20th century? That's up for historical debate. But by 1948 there *was* a Jewish national community in Palestine, because the compulsion of historical experience on Jews had created one, and certainly by the 1940s because Jewish refugees often had nowhere else to go. That's not to justify the displacement of pre-existing Arab populations that took place in that process of national formation, but the link between the creation of a Jewish national community in Palestine and historic anti-Jewish oppression is undeniable.

So of all the national conflicts in the world, the one where both the peoples involved have deeply rooted conceptions of their nationhood which are seen as related to their historic, and in one case their ongoing, oppression, seems to me unlikely to leap over the national framework and into a post-national framework. But I would be delighted to be proved wrong about that.

SB: This seems to be part of the problem that happens in discussions of Jewish nationhood. And this goes back to the Stalinist claim that Jews are not a nation, a claim that still gets reproduced on the left at times. In a world where we already see concepts like ethnicity and nationhood as social constructs, ones which are barriers to human collaboration and universal liberation, they get reified so as to define Jews out. (Obviously they are not the only people to whom this takes place; the Israeli right does this with Palestinians, only it is different because they don't actually believe ethnicity and nationhood are social constructs.)

DR: Some of the inconsistencies and exceptionalisms that take place on the far left are at the root of what is implicitly antisemitic. You hear people say things like, "the right is always asking us if we support the right of Israel to exist, but no state has a 'right to exist'!" That's fine if you apply it consistently to every national question in the world. I might critique that as a utopian position, but I would respect the principle impelling it. But if you're only invoking the critique of nationhood, statehood, and the framework of national self-determination in order to, as you say, exclude Israeli Jews from it, then there's something problematic about that.

SB: There are a lot of conservative scholars who say that there is an inherent suspicion of Jewish distinctiveness on the left. Do you think that's true, and how does that play out politically?

DR: I think that is an element in the mix here. This is something Steve Cohen wrote about in his book, the left not being able to deal with Jewish claims for autonomy. With Israel-Palestine, there are a lot of difficult dualities. In one sense, it is a quite simple and straightforward iteration of processes and dynamics that we see in national and state formation all over the world, all throughout history. For example, India-Pakistan. There are innumerable examples of instances of national oppression, the mass displacement of populations, the denial of the rights to return, colonial occupations.

But there are also some specificities, in terms of the historical provenance of Israeli Jewish nationhood and its relationship to the Holocaust. While I don't want to wander off into a discussion about whether or not the Holocaust is a historically unique event, it is certainly historically weighty. I think the left struggles with all of that and, particularly given that various forms of campism are hegemonic across left thinking, it's a lot easier to drop a campist frame on top of it and make all the complexity go away. I think the left struggles with all of that and, particularly given that various forms of campism are hegemonic across left thinking, it's a lot easier to drop a campist frame on top of it and make all the complexity go away. If you can deploy simplistic slogans that say, in effect, "Israel, and implicitly Israelis, bad; Palestine good"... that's much easier. And there's a very appealing simplicity to that.. if you can say, in effect, "Israel, and implicitly Israelis, bad; Palestine

good"... that's much easier. And there's a very appealing simplicity to that.

And again, it's not to say that the oppression of the Palestinians isn't real and that international solidarity with them isn't vital. I saw a viral tweet recently that said something like, "Palestinians don't need a PhD in Holocaust Studies to want to be free." Of course that's true, but if we - the left - want to develop a politics that can overcome nationalism and chauvinism rather than reproducing them, and unite workers across national boundaries - even when one nation is oppressing another - then we *do* need to confront history in all its complexity.

SB: The left doesn't really have trouble accommodating distinctiveness in other cases, and they don't have a problem understanding Jewish distinctiveness when it's a certain type of distinctiveness, such as when Haredim attend demonstrations.

DR: I talk about this a bit in the book. There is a particular phenomenon now in contemporary left antisemitism that I call "selective philosemitism", which goes beyond non-Jewish leftists just picking their favorite type of Jew and then tokenizing them because they reaffirm their existing beliefs.

There is a "selective philosemitism" on the right too, but there is a particular thing going on with the promotion of Neturei Karta and other Haredi anti-Zionists by some on the left. In doing that, they are promoting some of the most reactionary elements in Jewish life, and amplifying their claims to be the "true Jews", simply because they say Israel shouldn't exist. But ultimately, what separates Neturei Karta from the ultra-Orthodox settlers chanting "death to Arabs" in the streets of Israel is a matter of theology, not any consistent anti-racist or internationalist principle. Much of their worldview, and certainly on questions of gender and sexuality, is shared by these two groups of ultra Orthodox.

But because they have payot and dress in a religiously sanctioned way, they conform more to the expectation of what minority outsider-ness looks like. And if *these* Jews, the "true Jews", are saying Israel shouldn't exist and that Zionism is an affront to Jewish theology, then that's the debate settled, and you can point to them to dismiss out of hand any claims that some critiques of Israel and Zionism might be antisemitic.

SB: There seems to be an element of this in the more recent celebration of the diaspora, which is portrayed both sort of as the "correct" type of Jewishness and a very wonderful history. And this seems to allow people to celebrate Jewishness without dealing with Israel-Palestine. And that is tough because of the way many formal Jewish organizations talk about this, in a way that doesn't celebrate diasporism. And that's not to say that I don't share that affinity with diasporism, that is where I feel really at home in Jewishness and radical Jewish history.

DR: I am drawn, I think like any Jew on the revolutionary left, to the spirit of non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish leftisms of the pre-WWII period. I don't identify personally with the Bund, but I think it's an important history. In particular I think people like Esther Frumkin, who died in a Stalinist gulag, and others on the left of the Bund are especially heroic figures. There's a lot of richness in that that we should celebrate, reaffirm, and reconnect with.

But I think you're right that often, that's done on the basis of a historical-fantasy role playing, which wants to use an invocation of historic anti-Zionist diaspora radicalism to avoid a serious confrontation with the effect the experiences of 20th century history had on Jewish consciousness. I would like Jews to be non-Zionist, I would like Jews to oppose nationalism and not have a particularist consciousness. I would like Israel to be a state for all its citizens, Jewish and Palestinian, not the alleged state of all Jews everywhere, and I would like it not to loom so large in

Jewish identity. Those are all aspirations I believe the left should have. But we will not achieve any of that without an understanding of the effects historical experience, and particularly the experience of the 20th century, had on Jewish consciousness.

Reconnecting with diaspora radicalism can be part of that, but it can't be done in a crude way. The implication from many on the left, including some anti-Zionist Jewish leftists, is something like: "Why would any Jewish person want anything to do with Israel when they have these great, alternative traditions of Bundism or other anti-Zionist Jewish leftism to identify with? And if they choose Zionism over this radical diaspora politics, then they've made a conscious choice to side with oppression and they are therefore our enemy." The reality is, most Jews have "chosen" Zionism, for historical reasons which can't be overcome at will. And because of the campist schema, these Jews are then implicitly seen by some of the left as having placed themselves in the enemy camp.

I think that is where a lot of contemporary left antisemitism resides, in this implicit designation of Jews as on the "other side" because of their views on Israel. One rejoinder to this I've encountered says that we shouldn't pander to reactionary beliefs about gender or sexuality even when they're expressed by historically oppressed people, so why should we pander to Jewish nationalism? So to clarify, I am not suggesting that it should be "pandered" to, or that the left shouldn't have a critique of it. But I am suggesting that, to confront an ideological phenomenon, you have to consider its roots, and see how it's constructed and why it has a hold over people. In the case of Jewish nationalism, the left has substantially given up the attempt.

SB: How do you think we can constructively start to deal with antisemitism in left social movements and in larger society?

DR: My book focuses on the British context, though I think American readers will find echoes and resonances. There was a particular debate in the Labour Party about the *form* of how we deal with antisemitism. There were many people who treated it very much as a procedural issue — focusing on getting better processes for reporting allegations of antisemitism, and streamlining disciplinary processes with the aim of making it easier to expel people from the party. I'm extremely critical of that approach, which I think is both ineffective and counterproductive. It completely misunderstands the specific nature of this problem, and the question of how ideas shift and change in political spaces.

What is required is a political-educational campaign that starts with people talking about the issue and thrashing it out. Some of those debates will be uncomfortable, and in fact it's quite rare to directly debate contentious issues on the left. The idea that you change ideas through polemic, critique, and debate seems to have been confiscated by liberalism, and it's unfashionable to assert that on the far left. But there is no other way through this except through debate, because there is a confluence of ideological material that has built up over the years that has to be directly confronted.

Many people, good comrades coming at this with the best of intentions, take the view that it is best to separate the question of antisemitism from political debates about Zionism and the Israel-Palestinian question. I am sympathetic to that on a sentimental level, but they simply can't be separated in practice. The questions have been substantially fused. There's a quote in the book from Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet, who said in an interview: "We have the misfortune of having Israel as an enemy because it enjoys unlimited support. And we have the good fortune of having Israel as our enemy because the Jews are the centre of world attention. You've brought us defeat and renown." Basically he's saying that history has linked the Jewish question and the Palestinian question. The history of European antisemitism has flowed so directly into the formation of the state of Israel that we couldn't decouple them even if we wanted to. So they have to be

considered, not as a singular question, but definitely in parallel.

Fundamentally, what's necessary to uproot and overcome this is twofold. Firstly, it's a reaffirmation of a materialist, class-struggle analysis of capitalism, pushing past populist limitations and re-anchoring left analysis in a class-struggle theory of change and agency. That's the antidote to the ongoing influence of primitive-anti-capitalist antisemitism on the left.

And secondly, affirming consistently democratic internationalism as an alternative to campism. What the left should champion on the international terrain is democracy and equal rights, rather than the relativism of campism with its conceptions of good and bad peoples.

We also need to reaffirm the progressive potential of struggles *within* every society, and look for dissident, transformative, democratic, working-class, and progressive struggles to stand in solidarity with, rather than camps of good states against bad states, and labeling one as the quintessential expression of evil. If we can apply that to Israel-Palestine, we can overcome left antisemitism as derived from Stalinist campism.