



The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism

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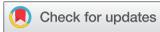


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The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism
by Dave Rich

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Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the British Labour Party in September 2015 came as a great surprise to many people, not least himself. After more than thirty years on the backbenches, arguing for left and far-left causes and never seeking any leadership role, Corbyn put himself forward to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of the previous leader, Ed Miliband, following Labour's defeat in the general election earlier that year.

Corbyn, however, could not muster the required thirty-five Labour members of Parliament (15 percent of the total) to support his nomination. At the last moment, some senior colleagues, who neither intended to vote for him nor wanted him to win, agreed to support his nomination to demonstrate that a range of opinions was represented. The leadership election rules had changed a year earlier, to a one member, one vote system. While parliamentarians had the right of nomination, they only had one vote each, like every other party member.

Miliband had created a new category of registered supporters who could also vote in the leadership election upon payment of a £3 fee. Some who belonged to far-left organizations now became members. Many others simply registered as supporters. There was no check on who was joining or registering, and the numbers swelled, most supporting Corbyn. Many long-time party members, having experienced two general election defeats, were also ready to listen to Corbyn's message of uncompromising socialist leadership, and he swept to a majority on the first ballot.

The British Jewish community had long memories of Corbyn's pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist views. In the 1980s, he supported the Labour Movement Campaign for Palestine and its policy of replacing Israel with a democratic secular state, and during the next thirty years he regularly and consistently criticized Israeli actions. For example, in 2002 he spoke at a rally condemning Israel for its response in the West Bank to the Netanya Park Hotel Seder night bombing that claimed the lives of thirty Israeli Passover celebrants. That rally was organized by the British arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

More notoriously, in 2009, Corbyn chaired a meeting in Parliament that included members of Hamas and Hizbullah, whom he called “friends.” When challenged, Corbyn responded that this was a formal greeting rather than any sign of affection. A few weeks after his election, Corbyn spoke at the traditional Labour Friends of Israel reception at the party conference. Not only did he not refer to anyone at the reception as “friends.” He even managed to complete his speech without mentioning the word “Israel.”

Over the next year, as Labour’s national popularity plummeted under Corbyn’s faltering leadership, stories of anti-Zionist and antisemitic language and behavior within the party began to appear. At Oxford University, there were complaints of antisemitism in the student Labour club, while some members of Parliament and local council members were suspended for alleged antisemitic language. Corbyn set up an inquiry, but its independence was compromised when its leader subsequently joined the Labour Party and was nominated by Corbyn to be a member of the House of Lords. Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London and one of Corbyn’s oldest political allies, was suspended until 2018 for the latest in a series of anti-Zionist and antisemitic statements. Many senior figures in the party argued that he should have been expelled.

Since Corbyn’s election, Jewish support for the Labour Party has collapsed. But with it has come an agonizing question: Where has all this come from? What happened to the Labour Party that was a proud, if critical, supporter of Israel? And how did Jews, the majority of whom voted Labour throughout the twentieth century and who were active members of progressive movements for political and social change, come to be identified as the enemy by those who now claimed to be in the progressive vanguard?

Dave Rich’s thoroughly researched and penetrative analysis provides many of the answers to these questions. Fortuitously, or presciently, in 2011 he began studying at the University of London for a PhD on the growth of left-wing anti-Zionism in Britain, completing his work just as Corbyn was elected Labour Party leader. His sources range from original documents of left-wing organizations, through academic and serious journalistic analysis, to original interviews with the key actors. Rich also has years of experience as a senior official of the British Jewish community’s internal security organization, the Community Security Trust (CST), all of which informed his own judgement of trends. This combination of academic research and practical involvement has enabled Rich to produce a detailed, informed, and incisive account of changes in left-wing thinking in the past sixty years, but particularly of the recent convulsions in the British Labour Party.

Rich’s account begins with the development of the New Left in the 1950s. The Old Left of the first half of the century was focused on class struggle, the importance of

trade unionism, and advancing the cause of the working class. The New Left was more fluid, and over time focused more on race, gender, peace, and environmental issues. Its membership was rooted in the intellectual and cultural professions, and was more activist, militant, and confrontational than the Old Left.

Anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism was an early focus of the New Left, with Israel identified as an agent of Western imperialism. Rich demonstrates that the anti-Zionism of the New Left predated the Six-Day War, as Israel was considered an occupying force by the New Left well before 1967.

Anti-racism went together with anti-colonialism, and the two coalesced in the Anti-Apartheid movement. Rich explores in some detail the origins and impact of the movement, and demonstrates how its leaders also became involved in anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian campaigns. Ultimately this resulted, internationally, in the infamous "Zionism is Racism" resolution at the UN in 1975. Rich focuses on the impact of this policy in Britain, which was most deeply experienced by Jewish students. The National Union of Students had previously adopted a "No Platform for Racists" policy, which, for anti-Zionists, coupled with the UN resolution, obviously implied that Zionist activity on campus should be banned. Jewish student societies supported Zionism and regularly organized Israel-focused activity. Thus, it followed, in New Left thinking, that Jewish student societies should be banned, and several resolutions to that effect were promoted. In this way, anti-Zionism became antisemitism. However, Jewish students fought back valiantly, often with strong support from non-Jewish students. The number of bans were small and they were soon rescinded.

Rich points out that the Anti-Apartheid campaign had a longstanding impact beyond the 1970s and '80s, because it became an ideal model for anti-Israel activity. The fight against South African apartheid generated worldwide support. It emerged at the fringes of society at the beginning of the '70s, and by the '80s had engaged mainstream world politics. That struggle eventually attracted mass support and ultimately achieved its objectives. Israel is wise to fight the application of the word "apartheid" to any of its activities. Not only is the word universally associated with an indefensible policy and regime, but the campaign to defeat it was successful.

In the 1990s, successive British governments provided a safe haven in Britain for some Islamic radicals who were threatened with imprisonment by their own governments. The misguided thinking was that in gratitude for the safety provided by Britain, the radicals would remain quiet. However, they continued as before, and soon jihadism was being preached both inside mosques and in public street meetings. Eventually, the law caught up with the more offensive preachers, particularly after 9/11, but could not prevent Britain's own terrorist outrage in July 2005.

By this time, an alliance had been formed between various New Left groups and Islamic organizations, brought together by protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Rich explains how this unholy alliance, between leftists who supposedly strongly oppose racism and sexism and Islamic organizations that explicitly practice both, continues to flourish. In leftist ideology, anti-imperialism is the supreme value, and the left supports groups that fight that battle, turning a blind eye to their behavior in other areas.

The New Left has a model of a world divided between “the oppressors” and “the oppressed,” and sees itself on the side of the oppressed. In this simplistic model, Israel is obviously the oppressor and the Palestinians are the oppressed. The idea of Zionism as the Jewish liberation movement does not fit.

Rich goes on to demonstrate how anti-Zionism soon merges into antisemitism, and one is used as a cloak for the other. He also explains how members of the New Left are in denial about their antisemitism. Their ideological framework identifies it as solely a right-wing phenomenon, while they, who are on the left, are anti-racist and so by definition cannot be antisemitic. This is ideological blindness, a form of intellectual glaucoma.

Rich’s book is an important one that should be read by all those seeking to understand the New Left’s obsession with anti-Zionism and its inability to recognize, let alone deal with, its own antisemitism. If there is a quibble, it is with the title’s reference to “The Left.” Rich focuses quite rightly on what he calls the New Left, and what others might call the Far Left, which until recently had been a marginal, if noisy, force in British politics. There is a large British moderate left, which has been in the mainstream of the Labour Party throughout its existence. Corbyn’s election has given the New Left more influence and has exposed its antisemitic strain. But it does not yet control the party, let alone its MPs. A battle is currently underway in which its antisemitism has become center stage. The outcome, and with it the future of the Labour Party, remains uncertain.