

Zionism, anti-semitism and the left

Interview with Moishe Postone

Moishe Postone is a Marxist academic based at the University of Chicago. As well as writing extensively on Marx's political economy, he has also been central to the development of theories of "left anti-semitism", which look at ways in which positions taken by left groups, particularly on Israel/Palestine, can feed into, or be based on, hostility to Jews. Martin Thomas spoke to him.

Q. To many people on the left today, anti-semitism seems to be just another form of racism, undesirable but for now fairly marginal, and prominent in discussion only because the Israeli government uses charges of anti-semitism to deflect the criticisms it faces. You argue, however, that anti-semitism is different from other forms of racism, and it is not marginal today. Why?

A. It is true that the Israeli government uses the charge of anti-semitism to shield it from criticisms. But that doesn't mean that anti-semitism itself isn't a serious problem.

The way in which anti-semitism is distinguished, and should be distinguished, from racism, has to do with the sort of imaginary of power, attributed to the Jews, Zionism, and Israel, which is at the heart of anti-semitism. The Jews are seen as constituting an immensely powerful, abstract, intangible global form of power that dominates the world. There is nothing similar to this idea at the heart of other forms of racism. Racism rarely, to the best of my knowledge, constitutes a whole system that seeks to explain the world. anti-semitism is a primitive critique of the world, of capitalist modernity. The reason I regard it as being particularly dangerous for the left is precisely because anti-semitism has a pseudo-emancipatory dimension that other forms of racism rarely have.

Q. How much do you think anti-semitism today is tied up with attitudes to Israel? It seems to us that a strand in the attitudes of some left-wing forces towards Israel has anti-semitic implications. That is the strand which desires not just criticism and change of Israeli government policy towards the Palestinians, but the abolition of Israel as such, and a world where all other nation states would exist but not Israel. From that viewpoint, to be a Jew, to feel some common identity with other Jews and thus usually with the Jews of Israel, is to be a "Zionist", and that is as abhorrent as being a racist.

A. A lot has to be disaggregated here. There is a kind of fatal convergence of a number of historical currents in the contemporary form of anti-Zionism.

One, the origins of which aren't necessarily anti-semitic, has its roots in struggles among members of the Jewish intelligentsia in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. A majority of Jewish intellectuals - including secularised intellectuals - felt that some form of collective identity was part and parcel of the Jewish experience. This identity became increasingly defined as national given the breakdown of earlier, imperial forms of collectivity - that is, as the old empires, the Hapsburg, the Romanov, and the Prussian empires, unravelled. The Jews in Eastern Europe - as opposed to the Jews in Western Europe - largely viewed themselves as a collectivity, not simply as a religion.

There were various forms of this Jewish national self-expression. Zionism was one. There were others, like Jewish cultural autonomists, and the Bund, an autonomous socialist movement of Jewish workers, which was much larger than any of the other movements, and which split off from the Russian Social Democratic party in the first years of the 20th century.

On the other hand there were Jews, many of them members of Communist parties, who viewed any expression of Jewish identity as anathema to their own notions of what I would call abstract Enlightenment notions of humanity. For example, Trotsky, in an earlier phase, referred to the Bund as "sea-sick Zionists". Note that the critique of Zionism here had nothing to do with Palestine or the situation of the Palestinians, since the Bund was focused entirely on autonomy within the Russian empire and rejected Zionism. Rather, Trotsky's equation of the Bund and Zionism implied a rejection of any form of Jewish communal self-identification. Trotsky, I think,

changed his mind later on, but that attitude was fairly typical. Communist organisations tended to be very strongly opposed to Jewish nationalism of any sort, whether cultural nationalism, political nationalism, or Zionism. This is one strand of anti-Zionism. It is not necessarily anti-semitic, but rejects Jewish collective self-identification in the name of abstract universalism. Yet, frequently, this form of anti-Zionism is inconsistent – it is willing to accord national self-determination to most peoples, but not to Jews. It is at this point that what presents itself as abstractly universal becomes ideological. Moreover, the meaning of such abstract universalism itself changes with historical context. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, this abstract universalism serves to veil the history of Jews in Europe. This fulfils a very useful, historically “cleansing” dual function: the violence historically perpetrated by Europeans on Jews is erased; at the same time the horrors of European colonialism now become attributed to the Jews. In this case, the abstract universalism expressed by many anti-Zionists today becomes an ideology of legitimization that helps constitute a form of amnesia regarding the long history of European actions, policies and ideologies toward the Jews, while essentially continuing that history. The Jews have once again become the singular object of European indignation. The solidarity most Jews feel toward other Jews, including in Israel – however understandable following the Holocaust – is now decried. This form of anti-Zionism has become one of the bases for a programme to eradicate actually existing Jewish self-determination. It converges with some forms of Arab nationalism – now coded as singularly progressive.

Another strand of left anti-Zionism – this time deeply anti-semitic – was introduced by the Soviet Union, particularly in the show trials in Eastern Europe after World War Two. This was particularly dramatic in the case of the Slansky trial, when most of the members of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were tried and then shot. All of the charges against them were classically anti-semitic charges: they were rootless, they were cosmopolitan, and they were part of a general global conspiracy. Because the Soviet Union could not officially use the language of anti-semitism, they began to use the word “Zionist” to mean exactly what anti-Semites mean when they speak of Jews.

These Czechoslovak CP leaders, who had nothing to do with Zionism — most of them were Spanish Civil War veterans — were shot as Zionists.

This strand of anti-semitic anti-Zionism was imported into the Middle East during the Cold War, in part by the intelligence services of countries like East Germany. A form of anti-semitism was introduced into the Middle East that was “legitimate” for the Left, and was called anti-Zionism.

Its origins had nothing to do with a movement against Israeli settlement. Of course, the Arab population of Palestine reacted negatively to Jewish immigration and resisted it. That’s very understandable. That in itself is certainly not anti-semitic. But these strands of anti-Zionism converged historically.

As for the third strand, there has been a change in the last ten years or so, starting with the Palestinian movement itself, with regard to the existence of Israel. For years most Palestinian organizations refused to accept the existence of Israel. In 1988, however, the PLO decided that it would accept the existence of Israel. The second intifada, which begun in 2000, was politically very different from the first intifada, and entailed a reversal of that decision.

I regard that as having been a fundamental political mistake, and I think it is remarkable and unfortunate that the Left has gotten caught up in it and, increasingly, is calling for the abolition of Israel. However, today in the Middle East there are roughly as many Jews as there are Palestinians. Any strategy based on analogies to situations like Algeria or South Africa simply won’t work, on demographic as well as political and historical grounds.

Why is it that people don’t see what the situation is today, and try to see if there is a kind of resolution to what is essentially a national conflict that could free up progressive politics? To subsume the conflict under the rubric of colonialism misrecognizes the situation. Unlike those who have subsumed progressive politics under the national struggle, I think that so long as the struggle is focused on the existence of Israel and the existence of Palestine, progressive struggles are undermined. People who regard the struggle against the existence of Israel as progressive are taking something reactionary and regarding it as progressive.

In the past decade there has been a concerted campaign by some Palestinians, carried into the West by the left, to put the existence of Israel back on the table. Among other things, this has

the effect of strengthening the right in Israel.

Between 1967 and 2000, the left in Israel had always argued that what the Palestinians wanted was self-determination, and that the right-wing notion that they wanted to eradicate Israel was a fantasy. Unfortunately that fantasy was shown in 2000 not to be a fantasy, which has strengthened the right immeasurably in its attempts to prevent the coming into being of a Palestinian state. The Israeli right and the Palestinian right are reinforcing each other, and the left in the West is supporting what I regard as the Palestinian right, the ultra-nationalists and the Islamists.

The idea that every nation other than the Jews should be allowed self-determination does come back to the Soviet Union. One has only to read Stalin on the nationalities question.

Q. The other odd thing about some current left-wing attitudes to Israel is the projection onto Israel of huge and mysterious power. For example, it is often taken as axiomatic that Israel is the dominant power in the Middle East, and it is often argued that Israel has huge power in the ruling circles of the USA and Britain.

A. Israel is far from being as powerful as charged. Yet you have people like my present and former colleagues at the University of Chicago, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, strongly supported by circles in the UK, who argue that the only thing driving American policy in the Middle East is Israel, as mediated by the Jewish lobby. They make this sweeping charge in the absence of any serious attempt to analyze American policy in the Middle East since 1945, which certainly cannot adequately be understood as Israel-driven. So, for example, they completely ignore American policy toward Iran for the past 75 years. The real pillars of American policy in the Middle East after World War Two were Saudi Arabia and Iran. That has changed in recent decades, and the Americans aren't sure how to deal with that and secure the Gulf for their purposes. Yet you had a book written by these two academics claiming that American policy in the Middle East was primarily driven by the Jewish lobby without bothering to seriously analyze Great Power policies in the Middle East in the 20th century.

I've argued elsewhere that this sort of argument is anti-semitic. This has nothing to do with the personal attitudes of the people involved, but the sort of enormous global power it accords the Jews (as, in this case, the puppet-masters of the good-natured, slow-witted, giant, Uncle Sam) is typical for modern anti-semitic thought.

More generally that ideology represents what I call a fetishised form of anti-capitalism. That is, the mysterious power of capital, which is intangible, global, and which churns up nations and areas and people's lives, is attributed to the Jews. The abstract domination of capitalism is personified as the Jews. Anti-semitism is a revolt against global capital, misrecognized as the Jews. This approach might also help explain the spread of anti-semitism in the Middle East in the past two decades. I don't think it is a sufficient explanation only to point to the suffering of the Palestinians. Economically, the Middle East has declined precipitously in the past three decades. Only sub-Saharan Africa has fared worse. And this has occurred at a time when other countries and regions, thought of as part of the Third World fifty years ago, are developing rapidly. I think that anti-semitism in the Middle East today is an expression not only of the Israel-Palestine conflict, but also of a heightened general sense of helplessness in the light of these global developments.

On the German right a century ago, the global domination of capital used to be considered that of the Jews and Britain. Now the Left sees it as the domination of Israel and the United States. The thought pattern is the same.

We now have a form of anti-semitism that seems to be progressive and "anti-imperialist;" which is a real danger for the left.

Racism is rarely a danger for the left. The left has to be careful not to be racist, but it isn't an ongoing danger because racism doesn't have the apparent emancipatory dimension of anti-semitism.

Q. The identification of global capitalist power with the Jews and Britain goes back before the Nazis to sections of the British left at the time of the Boer war — when they condemned as a "Jewish war" — and to the Populist movement in the USA in

the late 19th century.

A. Yes, and it's coming back in the United States now. The so-called "tea parties", the so-called right-wing grass-roots fury about the financial crisis, have definite anti-semitic overtones.

Q. You have argued that the USSR and similar systems were not forms of emancipation from capitalism, but state-centred forms of capitalism. It follows that the general attitude on the left of siding with the USSR — sometimes very critically — against the USA was self-destructive. You have indicated parallels between the sort of anti-imperialism today which sides with political Islam as the counter-power to the USA, and the old Cold War. What do you think are the common features of those two political polarisations? And the differences?

A. The differences are that the older form of anti-Americanism was tied to promoting Communist revolution in Vietnam, Cuba, etc. Whatever one may have thought of it at the time, or may regard it retrospectively, its own self-understanding was that it promoted an emancipatory project. The United States was sharply criticized not only because it is the United States and a great power, but also because it was hindering the emergence of a more progressive social order. That was the self-understanding of many who were in solidarity with Vietnam or with Cuba.

Today, I doubt that even the people who proclaim "We are all Hezbollah" or "We are all Hamas" would say that those movements represent an emancipatory social order. At best what is involved is an Orientalist reification of the Arabs and/or Muslims as the Other, whereby the Other, this time, is affirmed. It is yet another indication of historical helplessness on the part of the left, the inability to come up with any imaginary of what a post-capitalist future might look like. Not having any vision of a post-capitalist future, many have substituted a reified notion of "resistance" for any conception of transformation. Anything that "resists" the United States becomes regarded positively. I regard this as an extremely questionable form of thought.

Even in the previous period — when solidarity with Vietnam, Cuba, etc. predominated — I think the division of the globe into two camps had very negative consequences for the left. The left too often found itself in the position of being the mirror image of Western nationalists.

Many on the left became nationalists of the other side. Most of them — there were some significant exceptions — were extremely apologetic about what was going on in Communist countries. Their critical gaze was blunted. Instead of developing a form of internationalism that was critical of all existing relations, the left became supporters of one side in another version of the Great Game.

This had disastrous effects on the left's critical faculties — and not only in the case of Communists. It's absurd that Michel Foucault went to Iran and regarded the revolution of the mullahs as having some progressive dimensions.

One thing that made the two-camp vision seductive is that Communists in the West tended to be very progressive people — very brave people, often — who suffered for their attempts to, in their minds, create a more humane and progressive and perhaps even socialist society. Those people were completely instrumentalised; but, because of the double character of Communism, it was very difficult for some people to see that. The segments of the Social Democratic left who opposed those Communists and saw how they were being manipulated themselves became ideologues of Cold War liberalism.

I don't think the left should have been on either side of that divide. But I also think the situation for the left is worse today.