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'Hitler had a valid argument against *some* Jews': Repertoires for the denial of antisemitism in Facebook discussion of a survey of attitudes to Jews and Israel

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ABSTRACT

Existing research suggests that, in contemporary liberal democracies, complaints of racism are routinely rejected and prejudice may be both expressed and disavowed in the same breath. Surveys and historical research have established that – both in democratic states and in those of the Soviet Bloc (while it existed) – antisemitism has long been related to or expressed in the form of statements about Israel or 'Zionist', permitting anti-Jewish attitudes to circulate under cover of political critique. This article looks at how the findings of a survey of anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli attitudes were rejected by users of three Facebook pages associated with the British Left. Through thematic discourse analysis, three recurrent repertoires are identified: firstly, what David Hirsh calls the 'Livingstone Formulation' (i.e. the argument that complaints of antisemitism are made in bad faith to protect Israel and/or attack the Left), secondly, accusations of flawed methodology similar to those with which UK Labour Party supporters routinely dismiss the findings of unfavourable opinion polls, and thirdly, the argument that, because certain classically antisemitic beliefs pertain to a supposed Jewish or 'Zionist' elite and not to Jews in general, they are not antisemitic. In one case, the latter repertoire facilitates virtually unopposed apologism for Adolf Hitler. Contextual evidence suggests that the dominance of such repertoires within one very large UK Labour Party-aligned group may be the result of action on the part of certain 'admins' or moderators. It is argued that awareness of the repertoires used to express and defend antisemitic attitudes should inform the design of quantitative research into the latter, and be taken account of in the formulation of policy measures aiming to restrict or counter hate speech (in social media and elsewhere).

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1. Introduction

Although antisemitism has historically exhibited markedly different traits from other forms of racism, all forms of racism exhibit related adaptations to the anti-racist social norms of contemporary liberal democracy. Arising from a long-term investigation into social media use on the British Left, this article presents a qualitative analysis of interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) mobilised in response to a report on contemporary British attitudes to Jews and Israel (Staetsky, 2017). It argues (a) that scholarship on what have been called 'the New Racism' (Barker, 1981) and 'the New Antisemitism' (Taguieff, 2004) provides a useful explanatory frame for much of the discourse in question insofar as both describe a situation in which prejudice is denied even as it is expressed, but (b) that the understanding of racism as prejudice against *all* members of a particular group makes it particularly easy

to deny antisemitism, which is more typically expressed through insinuations about the supposedly disproportionate power of a Jewish or 'Zionist' elite.

The report that aroused the responses analysed below was based on survey research commissioned by the Community Security Trust and released on 13 September 2017 by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. It received highly positive coverage in the conventional media, but was treated as a problem by some on the Left in online responses that ranged from attempts to misrepresent or downplay its findings to assertions that people agreeing with antisemitic statements should not be considered antisemitic because the statements are true. It is here argued that close attention to such assertions may help to inform both policy – by revealing the discursive loopholes that purveyors of hate speech may exploit – and future quantitative research – by elucidating ways in which attitudes are expressed without the pollster's prompting. However, it also argues that the online success of such repertoires may in at least some cases also be attributed to the

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deliberate technological exclusion of individuals inclined to oppose them – a problem which would require other remedies.

2. Antisemitism and the Left

As Bonefeld argues, ‘Christian antisemitism... accused the “Jew” as the assassin of Jesus and a trafficker in money’ but ‘[m]odern antisemitism uses and exploits these historical constructions and transforms them’, nurturing paranoid fantasies of ‘the “rootless and invisible” power of the destructive Jew’ (2014: 209, 200). Thus, while the white racist looks upon non-white people as potential slaves, the anti-Semite looks upon Jews as a threat from which non-Jews must be protected (Bonefeld, 2014: 200): as Fine and Spencer write, Jews have been accused of damaging non-Jewish society through infliction upon it of ‘economic harms’ such as ‘usury and financial manipulation’, ‘political harms’ such as ‘betrayal and conspiracy’, and ‘moral harms’ such as ‘greed and cunning’ (2017: 2). The classic statement of modern antisemitism is the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (originally published 1903), which alleges that a secretive ‘Zionist’ elite is engaged in a conspiracy to control the world (see Cohn, 1967 for the international history of this proven forgery, and Lebzelter, 1978: 21–27 for further detail on the English-language edition). In a nutshell,

antisemitism differs from other forms of racism because it uses conspiracy theories to claim that Jews are a powerful, controlling influence in society. Whereas racism tends to depict non-white people as dirty, poor, diseased, and even subhuman, antisemitism accords Jews massive power, wealth, political influence, and media control (Nazism did both, by comparing Jews to rats and vermin while also claiming that there was a global Jewish conspiracy).

[Rich, 2016: 201–202]

What is sometimes described as ‘the New Antisemitism’, i.e. antisemitism since the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, is continuous with older forms of antisemitism in that conspiracy theory and the medieval ‘blood libel’ – the accusation of child murder by Jews – have become the defining themes of its discourse on Israel and Zionism (Hirsh, 2017: 206). Many examples of such discourse are provided in Jaspal’s (2014) interviews with young Muslims in the UK. In the following, the final two sentences contradict the first by invoking Islamic and medieval European beliefs about Jews in order to justify a view of *Israelis* apparently derived from the representation of *Zionists* in the *Protocols*:

Hating Jews is one thing and hating Israelis is another – they’ve got nothing to do with each other [...] Israelis are a cruel, they’re an evil group of people. They just want to get rich. Look all over the world and you can see them controlling it all, manipulating governments for their own selfish ends [...] The Koran has warned of their betrayal [...] Historically, they have been involved in murdering kids and innocent people, so it’s nothing new now, is it?

[quoted in Jaspal, 2014: 168, ellipses in original]

While antisemitism is popularly associated only with the Far Right, there exists a parallel tradition of left wing antisemitism – indeed, the word ‘antisemitism’ was coined by a left-wing antisemite, Wilhelm Marr (1880). There was a distinct strain of antisemitism within 19th century British anti-Imperial politics, and the USSR began to embrace anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish policies in the 1920s, becoming openly antisemitic in the last years of the Stalin regime (Rich, 2016: 199–203; Shindler, 2012: 73–76, 60–62, 140–141). From the end of World War II, the USSR tended to attack even anti-Zionist Jews as ‘Zionists’ because ‘the parallels with Nazi

Germany would have been too striking’ had they been identified as ‘Jews’ (Laqueur, 2006: 175), and the Far Right also began to attack ‘Zionists’ as the alleged exploiters and fabricators of a supposed Holocaust myth (Lipstadt, 1993: 51, 55–98, 95), blurring distinctions between left- and right-wing antisemitism.

The contemporary Left defines itself as anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-racist but typically views Jewish communities as ‘white’ and Israel as the ‘forefront of the neo-colonial world order’ – a conjunction which supports traditionally antisemitic ‘fantasies of [Jewish] world domination’ (Edthofer, 2015: 48). Left wing antisemitism has been much discussed since Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015 election as leader of the Labour Party (see especially Fine and Spencer, 2017; Hirsh, 2017; Rich, 2016). Until that time, Corbyn had been a minor member of a small and somewhat marginal group of Labour Party representatives who ‘combined an anti-American aversion to “Western imperialism” with a forthright, often polemical anti-Zionism’ (Vaughan, 2013: 15). In early 2016, Ken Livingstone – historically a more prominent member of that group and a long-term ally of Corbyn – publicly claimed that Adolf Hitler had supported Zionism (Fisher, 2016a), and it was revealed that Jackie Walker, the then vice-chair of the pro-Corbyn campaigning organisation, Momentum and the partner of one of Corbyn’s closest friends, had described Jews as ‘major financiers of the slave trade’ (Fisher, 2016b). In 2017, a vast pro-Corbyn banner was erected that attacked a rival politician by depicting her wearing Star of David earrings (Yong, 2017), and a Labour Conference fringe meeting heard calls to expel the Jewish Labour Movement and permit debate on ‘the Holocaust, yes or no’ (Morris, 2017: 8), prompting the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission to announce that ‘the Labour Party needs to do more to establish that it is not a racist party’ (Hilsenrath, 2017: n.p.). In 2018, independent researcher David Collier (2018) published evidence showing that Corbyn had been an active member of a secret Facebook group that promoted Holocaust denial and antisemitic conspiracy theories (although he was not one of the individuals posting such material there), and a former Chief Rabbi stated that he would not hold discussions with Corbyn until he saw ‘clearer signs of resolute action by [the] party and its leader’ (Justin Cohen, 2018). Antisemitic social media discourse on the Corbyn-supporting Left has been the object of sustained attention from voluntary sector organisations such as the Community Security Trust (see e.g. CST, 2017) and the Campaign Against Antisemitism (see e.g. CAA, 2017), and is regularly exposed by the Twitter accounts @GnasherJew and @LabourAgainstAS.

3. Quantitative research on the relationship between anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli attitudes

There have been a number of quantitative studies investigating the relationship between anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist attitudes. The largest was carried out by Kaplan and Small (2006), who presented over 5000 respondents across Europe with anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish statements, and found agreement with the former to predict agreement with the latter (for smaller studies with similar findings, see Cohen et al., 2009; Frindte et al., 2005; Jaspal, 2015; Swami, 2012; Weinstein and Jackson, 2010). Staetsky’s (2017) study, whose reception is analysed here, used a sample of just over 4000 people in the UK, including booster samples from the Far Left, the Far Right, and the Muslim community. It found a strong correlation between anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish attitudes across all groups, with the anti-Jewish statement receiving most frequent agreement among those with strong anti-Israeli attitudes being the highly antisemitic ‘Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes’ (assented to by 48% of that group; see Staetsky, 2017: 36).

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