Dear Reader,

I am delighted to make available to you three articles on contemporary antisemitism from Fathom Journal.

**Defining Antisemitism Down** by the sociologist David Hirsh of Goldsmiths College, University of London, argues that when the academics union rejected the European Union’s official definition of antisemitism (The EUMC Working Definition of Antisemitism) which states that some kinds of criticism of Israel may be anti-Semitic while others are legitimate, it opened up a loophole in the union’s guarantees against racism and bigotry.

**Alibi Antisemitism** by the political theorist Norman Geras describes how Israel has been made an alibi for a new climate of antisemitism on the left. (This is the text of a presentation by Norman Geras to the YIVO Conference on Jews and the Left held in May 2012 in New York City.)

**The Pleasures of Antisemitism** by the moral philosopher Eve Garrard claims that antisemitism is much more than a cognitive error. It attracts by providing the deep emotional satisfactions of hatred, tradition, and moral purity.

Fathom is a quarterly online journal and app that provides expert analysis, informed opinion and genuine debate about Israel and the region. It is available online free at [www.fathomjournal.org](http://www.fathomjournal.org) and as a free iPad and iPhone app.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Alan Johnson
Editor of Fathom
defining antisemitism down: the EUMC working definition and its disavowal by the university & college union

DAVID HIRSH

When the UCU rejected the EUMC Working Definition of antisemitism which states that some kinds of criticism of Israel may be anti-Semitic while others are legitimate, it opened up a loophole in the union’s guarantees against racism and bigotry.

What kinds of hostility to Israel may be understood as, or may lead to, or may be caused by, antisemitism? One of the ways this relationship is debated, or otherwise contested, is through disputes over how to define antisemitism. In this article I shed some light on the struggles over definition by tracing a brief genealogy of the EUMC Working Definition of Antisemitism. I go on to look at a case study of the definition’s disavowal during the 2011 debate within the University and College Union (UCU) in Britain and also the mobilisation of the Equality Act (2010) as an alternative definition of antisemitism by a member of the UCU who is alleging in court that the union has an unaddressed problem of institutional antisemitism.
Demonstrator with placard outside the American Embassy, London 2011
Howard Jones / Demotix / Demotix / Press Association Images

I’m Israel’s Bitch.

AND SO ARE YOU!
A brief genealogy of the EUMC working definition of antisemitism

The EUMC (European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, now the Agency For Fundamental Rights, FRA) Working Definition is controversial because it states that particular kinds of hostility to Israel ‘could, taking into account the overall context, include’: ‘accusing Israel as a state of exaggerating or inventing the Holocaust’ and ‘accusing Jews of being more loyal to Israel than to their own nations.’ It offers examples of the kinds of things which may be judged antisemitic, ‘taking into account the overall context’:

- denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor
- applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation
- using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis
- drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis
- holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel

The definition then makes it clear that, on the other hand, ‘criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.’

[Note that there are a number of US spellings in the definition and this fact was later mobilised in the UCU debate to demonstrate its illegitimacy as a European and an antiracist document.]

Mike Whine of the Community Security Trust (CST) traces the pre-history of the Working Definition back to the immediate aftermath of the fall of Communism. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was a pre-existing international forum in which Europe, East and West, the USSR, later Russia and the secession states, and the USA, could talk to each other. It was a forum which lent itself to the project of attempting to shape the new Europe, in particular by formulating states’ commitment to the principles of human rights and democracy. In the 1990 Copenhagen Conference, commitments were made to combat ‘...all forms of racial and ethnic hatred, antisemitism, xenophobia and discrimination...’ These commitments were subsequently endorsed by heads of state in the ‘Charter of Paris for a New Europe.’

The peace process between Israel and Palestine broke down decisively in 2000 with the start of the Second Intifada. The coalition of pro-peace forces in Israel and Palestine collapsed into opposing national consensuses each of which portrayed the other as being responsible for the renewal of conflict. In September 2001, at a UN conference to discuss strategies for dealing with racism globally, there was a formidable campaign to portray ‘Zionism’ as the key source of racism in the world. A number of factors came together that week, in the conference venues and on the city streets and beachfront of Durban. At both the inter-governmental forum and at the parallel NGO conference, a huge event in a cricket ground bringing
together tens of thousands of activists, there was an organised and hostile anti-Israel fervour. Some of it was expressed in openly antisemitic forms, some was legitimate criticism of Israel expressed in democratic antiracist forms, and some was antisemitism expressed in ostensibly democratic and antiracist language. A number of antiracists who were there experienced Durban as a swirling mass of toxic antisemitic hate. For some of them, the traumatic experience was heightened by the fact that they were unable to get home in the following days because air traffic was disrupted after the attacks on the USA on 11 September. The collapse of the peace process, Durban, and 9/11, as well as the reverberating symbolic representations of them, can be understood as heralding what some have called ‘the new antisemitism.’

The Porto Conference of the OSCE in December 2002 declared its concern over a rise in racist incidents against both Jews and Muslims and it authorized the OSCE to make strong public statements against racism and to follow them up in meetings and seminars. In Vienna in June 2003, the OSCE agreed to oppose antisemitism. However, argues Whine, there was disquiet from the Jewish participants...
at the assembled governments’ ‘failure to recognise that antisemitism was now coming from new and different directions.’

This sentiment was articulated particularly by the historian Robert Wistrich, the former French Justice Minister Robert Badinter, and the soon-to-be Canadian Justice Minister Irwin Cotler.

There were also, says Whine, attempts to raise the issue within the European Union. A series of meetings took place between the EUMC director Beate Winkler and European Jewish Congress (EJC) officials which resulted in the commissioning of a report on antisemitism in each country. The Centre for Research on Anti-Semitism (ZfA) at Berlin’s Technical University was asked to analyze the reports and publish a composite analysis. However, Whine notes, the report was badly received by the EUMC board because it apportioned much of the blame for the rise in antisemitism to Muslim communities.

Mike Whine writes:

In its 2004 report on antisemitism, the EUMC noted the lack of a common definition and requested one from a small group of Jewish NGOs. This [was] intended as a template for police forces and antiracist campaigners, for use on the streets. The definition was disseminated in March 2004, and although not directed at governments for incorporation into national legislation, it [was] nevertheless expected that it [would] seep into universal usage via adoption by the relevant parties.

This in fact happened. Delegates to the OSCE Cordoba Conference in May 2005 constantly referred to it and the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism in the UK recommended its adoption, as did a number of similar initiatives around the world.

There is a strong tradition on the antiracist left of understanding racism and antisemitism as closely related phenomena and of opposing both equally and on a similar basis. The exemplars of this tradition include Karl Marx, anti-Fascism, Franz Fanon, and the Black/Jewish alliance during the civil rights movement in the USA. At Durban in 2001, however, racism had been defined such that ‘Zionism’ was its archetypal and most threatening form, and antisemitism was not only denied but was also practiced with impunity. A significant number of antiracists activists and thinkers were subsequently willing to lend implicit or overt support to organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, judging their antisemitism of those groups either to be exaggerated or of little political significance. To be sure, there is also a strong tradition of antisemitism on the left, from Bruno Bauer to Mikhail Bakunin to the Stalinists. Durban illustrated the possibility of the re-emergence of a schism between the worldviews of antiracism and anti-antisemitism.

There is a strong tradition on the antiracist left of understanding racism and antisemitism as closely related phenomena and of opposing both equally and on a similar basis.
The ‘whitening’ of Jews & the schism between anti-antisemitism & antiracism

The issue of ‘whiteness’ is key to the understanding of contemporary antisemitism and it is linked to a number of developments in the 20th century left. The first is a tendency for parts of the left to understand ‘the oppressed,’ with whom it sides, more and more in terms of nations and national movements, which are fighting for liberation against the ‘imperialist states,’ or the ‘rich states,’ ‘the West,’ ‘the North,’ or the ‘white’ states. This is a different framework from the one in which the left thought of itself as supporting the self-liberation of the working class, of women, and of other subordinated groups.

Some found that the logic of their new position was to understand whites as the oppressors and non-whites as the oppressed, and to subordinate other forms of stratification to this central one.

Jews occupy an ambivalent position with respect to this black/white binary. On the one hand, antisemitism is a racism, arguably the prototype of European racism, and provides perhaps the clearest lesson about where racism can lead. On the other hand, antisemitism has often functioned, in the words of Moishe Postone, as a ‘fetishized form of oppositional consciousness’ through which Jews are thought of as conspiratorially powerful and lurking behind the oppression of others. In the USA Karen Brodkin’s 1998 book How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America presented a narrative of the ‘whitening’ of American Jews, and many began to picture Jews as part of the Judeo-Christian white elite.

Israel, which in the early days was understood by some to be a life-raft for oppressed victims of racism, a national liberation movement against European colonialism and a pioneer of socialist forms like the kibbutz, later came to be conceived of as a keystone of the global system of white imperialist oppression of black people. In April 2009, when President Ahmadinejad of Iran made an antisemitic speech at the UN, Seumas Milne asked in his Guardian column, ‘what credibility is there in Geneva’s all-white boycott’?

A number of Jewish communal NGOs responded to the defeat and the trauma experienced at Durban by withdrawing into the OSCE and the European Union where they had some success in getting a positive hearing for their concerns. In this way the ideational polarization between black and white came to be mirrored institutionally. Durban, dominated by states which thought of themselves as non-white, represented one way of defining antisemitism; the Jewish organisations retreated into the OSCE, which could be seen as the international coalition of white states, and won it over to quite a different way of defining antisemitism.
Opponents of the EUMC Working Definition have pointed to the fact that the definition was the result of purposive political action by international Jewish groups, and so it was. But this genealogy can only cast shadows over the definition if there is thought to be something inappropriate about their input. Normally it would be unremarkable for communal groups to be involved in defining a racism of which they are the object. But in this case the Jewish groups are accused by anti-Zionists of acting in bad faith. The accusation implicit in this understanding is that the Jewish groups are not really working in the interests of the struggle against antisemitism. Rather they are secretly prepared to sacrifice the struggle against real antisemitism by co-opting its political capital to a dishonest attempt to de-legitimise criticism of Israel.

The Jewish groups, and their EUMC Working Definition, are conceived of as being ‘white’ and not antiracist; as part of the struggle of Israel against Palestine and neither part of the struggle of Jews against antisemitism nor part of the global struggle against anti-black racism.

The UCU: a case study of the struggles over defining of antisemitism

In May 2011 the Congress of the University and College Union (UCU) in the UK voted overwhelmingly to pass a motion which alleged that the ‘so-called’ EUMC Working Definition is ‘being used’ to ‘silence debate about Israel and Palestine on campus.’ Congress resolved to make no use of the definition ‘e.g. in educating members or dealing with internal complaints’ and to ‘dissociate itself from the EUMC definition in any public discussion.’

Representatives of the institutions of the Jewish community in Britain judged this disavowal to be the last straw, and said that it was a manifestation of what they called ‘institutional antisemitism’ within the union. Jeremy Newmark, Chief Executive of the Jewish Leadership Council said ‘After today’s events, I believe the UCU is institutionally racist.’ His view was echoed by Jon Benjamin, the Chief Executive of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who said ‘the UCU has . . . simply redefined “antisemitism” . . . The truth is apparent: whatever the motivations of its members, we believe the UCU is an institutionally racist organisation.’

Since 2003, there had been an influential campaign within the UCU to boycott Israeli universities as a protest against Israeli human rights abuses while there had been no campaign against the universities of any other state. Some opponents of the boycott campaign argued that this singling out of Israel was antisemitic in effect and that it brought with it into the union antisemitic ways of thinking and antisemitic exclusions. Supporters of the campaign, as well as some opponents, objected strongly to the raising of the issue of antisemitism, arguing that it constituted an ad hominem attack against ‘critics of Israel.’

From the beginning, the boycott campaign sought to protect itself against a charge of antisemitism by including clauses in its boycott motions which defined antisemitism in such a way as to make its supporters not guilty.
Crime + Terror + Piracy = ISRAEL
At the Association of University Teachers (AUT) Council in 2003, Motion 54 was passed:

Council deplores the witch-hunting of colleagues, including AUT members, who are participating in the academic boycott of Israel. Council recognises that anti-Zionism is not anti-semitism, and resolves to give all possible support to members of AUT who are unjustly accused of anti-semitism because of their political opposition to Israeli government policy.

A witch-hunt involves accusing individuals of something which could not possibly be true: witchcraft. To characterise an accusation of anti-semitism as a witch-hunt implies that it, similarly, could not possibly be true. The statement that ‘anti-Zionism is not anti-semitism’ is formally true. And nobody could argue against the resolution to support members who are unjustly accused of anti-semitism, unless it was a purposely ambiguous way of insisting that all accusations of anti-semitism which relate to Israel or to the boycott or to political opposition to Israeli government policy must be unjust.

At the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) conference in June 2005, a motion was passed which included the text: ‘To criticise Israeli policy or institutions is not anti-semitic.’ While much criticism of Israel is anti-semitic, criticism of Israeli state policy cannot necessarily be construed as anti-semitic.

UCU Congress in 2008 passed a similar motion which was supportive of a boycott but which stopped short of implementing one. This time the wording on anti-semitism was as follows: ‘criticism of Israel or Israeli policy are [sic] not, as such, anti-semitic.’ This form of words dressed up all sorts of possibilities as ‘criticism’ and reassured us that ‘as such,’ it is not antisemitic.

This long pre-history to the disavowal of the EUMC definition is consistent. Each new form of words refuses the straightforward position that some kinds of hostility to Israel are anti-semitic while other kinds are not. Instead, each specifies that criticism of Israel is not anti-semitic, and it implicitly subsumes all kinds of hostility and exclusions under the category of ‘criticism’ [see The Livingstone Formulation]. Practically, the result has been to open up a loophole in the union’s guarantees against racism and bigotry. One kind of racism is excluded from these guarantees, and that is any antisemitism which can be read as taking the form of criticism of Israel.
Instead of addressing the antisemitic culture, the disavowal of the EUMC definition allows the union to carry on treating ‘Zionists’ as disloyal, singling out Israel and only Israel for boycott, holding Israeli universities and scholars responsible for their government, and allowing ‘Zionist’ union members to be denounced as Nazis or supporters of apartheid.

Israel murders children? Israel controls US foreign policy? Star of David = Swastika stuck on your office door? Jews invent antisemitism to delegitimise criticism of Israel? Host a man found guilty of hate speech by the South African Human Rights commission? Exclude nobody but Israelis from the global academic community? All of these are considered, implicitly by UCU motions, and clearly by UCU norms, to constitute ‘criticism of Israel’ and so are defined, in practice, as not being antisemitic.

Ronnie Fraser, a Jewish UCU member, is bringing a legal action against the UCU. His letter to the General Secretary of the union written by the lawyer Anthony Julius, says that UCU has breached ss. 26 and 57 (3) of the Equality Act 2010:

That is to say, the UCU has ‘harassed’ him by ‘engaging in unwanted conduct’ relating to his Jewish identity (a ‘relevant protected characteristic’), the ‘purpose and/or effect’ of which has been, and continues to be, to ‘violate his dignity’ and/or create ‘an intimidating, hostile, degrading humiliating’ and/or ‘offensive environment’ for him.

The letter alleges a course of action by the union which amounts to institutional antisemitism and it gives examples: annual boycott resolutions against only Israel; the conduct of these debates; the moderating of the activist list and the penalising of anti-boycott activists; the failure to engage with people who raised concerns; the failure to address resignations; the refusal to meet the OSCE’s special representative on antisemitism; the hosting of Bongani Masuku; the repudiation of the EUMC working definition of antisemitism.

In this article we have looked at two case studies of the practice of defining antisemitism. One is the result of an international coalition of Jewish NGOs fighting for their way of defining antisemitism within particular international institutions. The other is the result of a union with an anti-Zionist majority in its decision making bodies fighting for a conception of antisemitism which excludes any text, norms or practices from being understood as antisemitic so long as they are manifested in the language of hostility to Israel.

The struggle between these two ways of defining antisemitism is to be judged by a civil court according to the framework provided by the Equality Act. Of course, legal practice and legal definitions are also part of social life, not above it in some kind of magically impartial realm; they relate to ways of thinking with roots in wider civil society. Yet they also have a particular kind of weight and authority deriving from their ability to enforce their determinations and from the norms and practices which have developed over the centuries to make that feel legitimate.

What happens in R. Fraser v UCU will be significant in the ongoing debates and struggles over the definition of antisemitism and may turn out to be as influential as academic debates and the determinations of activists, pressure groups and social movements.

Dr. David Hirsh is a Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London and the founder of Engage, a campaign against academic boycotts of Israel. His book Law Against Genocide: Cosmopolitan Trials won the Philip Abrams Prize.
n Marx’s essay On the Jewish Question, written in 1844, there are two contrasting sets of themes vis-à-vis the Jews. In Part II of the essay Marx deploys some well-known negative stereotypes, according to which: the mundane basis of Judaism is self-interest, egoism, or, as Marx also calls it, ‘an anti-social element’; the worldly religion of the Jew is huckstering; and the Jew’s jealous god – ‘in face of which no other god may exist’ – is money. The emancipation of the Jews is said by him to be equivalent to the emancipation of mankind from Judaism. Part I, on the other hand, presents a version of secular democracy in which the Jews, like any religious or other particularistic grouping, may retain their religion and their separate identity consistently with the state itself rising above such particularisms, and rendering these politically irrelevant.

Though Marx himself regards this – political emancipation – as an
incomplete form of emancipation, he nonetheless articulates a genuine type of moral universalism: different faiths, ethnicities, peoples, have a right to assert their specific identities and shared beliefs within the free secular order of the democratic state. The distinctions between such groups just cease to have a political bearing. Marx does not extend this argument beyond the single state to the global arena (that not being part of the discursive context), but the correlate at international level of what he argues in Part I of *On the Jewish Question* is today embodied in the notion of a right of nations to self-determination, as affirmed in Article 1.2 of the United Nations Charter.

The contrasting themes of Marx’s essay may be taken as emblematic of the state of affairs obtaining today between Jews and the left. It is not difficult to understand the long affinity there has been between them. Common traditions of opposition to injustice, the commitment within liberal and socialist thought to ideals of equality (whether this is equality under the law or equality in substantive economic terms), opposition to racist and other similar types of prejudice – these things have long served to attract Jews to organisations and movements of the left, and they still do.

**Israel as alibi**

At the same time, that affinity has now been compromised by the existence of a new climate of anti-Semitic opinion within the left. This climate of opinion affects a section of the left only, and not the whole of it. But it is a substantial section. Its convenient alibi is the state of Israel – by which I mean that Israel is standardly invoked to deflect the charge that there is anything of antisemitism at work. Israel, so the story goes, is a delinquent state and, for many of those who regard it so, a non-legitimate one – colonialist, imperialist, vehicle of oppression and what have you. Similarly, diaspora Jews who defend Israel within their home countries are not seen as the conduit of Jewish interests and/or opinion in the normal way of any other democratic articulation; they are treated, rather, as a dubious force – the notorious ‘Jewish lobby’ – as if their organised existence were somehow improper.

These themes pitch those who sponsor them out of a genuine, and into a spurious, type of universalism: one where the Jews are special amongst other groups in being obliged to settle for forms of political freedom in which their identity may not be asserted collectively; Jews must be satisfied, instead, merely with the rights available to them as individuals. I call this a spurious universalism because people’s rights to live as they will (subject to the usual constraint of not harming others) is an incomplete right – a truncated and impaired right – if it does not include the freedom to associate with others of their own kind.

To repeat: Israel has been made an alibi for a new climate of antisemitism on the left.

But could it not be, perhaps, that there is no such climate? Could it not be that Israel’s critics are just what they say they are, no more and no less: critics of the policies of successive Israeli governments, just in the same way as there are critics of the governments of every country? Well, it *could* be. There has been enough to criticise, goodness knows – from the long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to the policy of permitting Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. It not only could be, it even in many cases is, since there are both critics and criticisms of Israel which are not anti-Semitic – such as the two criticisms I just made. Yet, if it both could be and is, it also in many cases is not. Much of the animus directed at
President Barack Obama receives applause as he speaks at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) convention in Washington, May 2011

Jose Luis Magana/AP/Press Association Images
Israel today is of a plainly anti-Semitic character. It relies (just as Marx did in Part II of On the Jewish Question) on anti-Jewish stereotypes. This can be shown with near mathematical precision; I endeavour to show it in the rest of what I have to say.

Antisemitism as epiphenomenal

A first form of the Israel alibi for contemporary antisemitism is the impulse to treat such of the antisemitism as there is acknowledged (by whomever) to be – in Europe, in the Arab world – as a pure epiphenomenon of the Israel-Palestine conflict. One instance of this was the statement by film director Ken Loach in March 2009 that if there was a rise of antisemitism in Europe, this was not surprising: ‘it is perfectly understandable’ (my emphasis), he was reported as saying, ‘because Israel feeds feelings of antisemitism’. The key word here is ‘understandable’. This might just mean ‘capable of being understood’; but since more or less everything is capable of being understood, it would be pointless to use the word in that sense about the specific phenomenon of a rise in antisemitism in Europe.

Another instance of this first form of the Israel alibi is provided by a thesis of Gilbert Achcar’s concerning Holocaust-denial in the Arab world. Achcar is a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and a longtime leftist; he is editor of a volume of essays on The Legacy of Ernest Mandel. Holocaust-denial – as I shall merely assert and not argue here – is a prominent trope of contemporary antisemitism; it is indeed continuous with a practice of the Nazi period itself, when camp guards and the like would mock their Jewish victims by telling them that not only were they doomed to die, but also all knowledge of what had happened to them would be erased. They would be forgotten; the world would never know. Achcar accepts that Western Holocaust-denial is an expression of antisemitism. Much Arab Holocaust-denial, on the other hand, he puts down to such factors as impatience in the Arab world with Western favouritism towards Israel, a suspicion that the Holocaust has been ‘amplified’ for pro-Zionist purposes, and exasperation with the cruelty of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

Whether or not these explanations are valid, a racist belief does not cease to be one on account of its having context-specific causes. No one on the left would dream of suggesting that a belief that black people were lazy, feckless or simple-minded, was less racist for being held by a certain group of white people on account of motives which eased their way towards that belief. But the Israel alibi is currently exceptional in its legitimating power in this respect.

“Much of the animus directed at Israel today is of a plainly anti-Semitic character. It relies (just as Marx did in Part II of On the Jewish Question) on anti-Jewish stereotypes.”

‘Understandable’ also means something along the lines of ‘excusable’ or, at any rate, not an issue to get excited about. To see plainly the way in which Israel acts as an exonerating alibi in this case, one need only imagine Loach, or anyone else on the left, delivering themselves of the opinion that a growth of hostility towards, say, black people, or towards immigrants from South Asia, or from Mexico, was understandable.
No antisemitism without deliberate intent

A second form of the Israel alibi for antisemitism is the plea that antisemitism should not be ascribed to anyone without evidence of active hatred of Jews on their part; without, that is to say, some clear sign of anti-Semitic intent. A well-known case of this second form arose with Caryl Churchill’s play ‘Seven Jewish Children’, following upon Israel’s invasion of Gaza in 2008-9. This play puts into Jewish mouths the view that Palestinians are ‘animals’ and that ‘they want their children killed to make people sorry for them’; but that there is no need to feel sorry for them; that we the Jews – are the chosen people and that it is our safety and our children that matter; in sum, that ‘I wouldn’t care if we wiped them out’. I will not insist here on how this echoes the blood libel; it is enough that Churchill ascribes to the Jews, seeing themselves as chosen, murderous racist attitudes bordering on the genocidal. On the face of it, one would think, this is a clear candidate for anti-Semitic discourse.

Churchill, however, disavowed that charge when it came from critics. She did so on the grounds of what one might call an innocent mind. No antisemitism had been intended by her. On the one hand, the blood libel analogy had not been part of her thinking when she wrote the play; on the other hand, those speaking the offending lines in it were not meant to be Jews in general, merely individual Israelis. Churchill is evidently innocent here of any memory of the figure of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, long thought of, despite his being only one character, as putting Jews in a bad light. She is innocent, too, of her own generalising tendencies in naming her play ‘Seven Jewish Children’ and then linking the broad themes of the Jews as victims of genocide and as putative perpetrators of it in their turn.

Contemplate, briefly, the idea of a sociology of racism in which racism was held to be a matter exclusively of mental attitudes, of what some given person or group of persons had in their minds and, most particularly, of hatreds explicitly formulated; but not also of a language that embodies negative stereotypes, or of unconscious prejudicial assumptions, or of discriminatory practices, and so forth. For no other kind of racism would such a narrowly-conceived sociology be taken seriously even for a moment.

A much more recent instance of the same thing is Günter Grass’s poem ‘What Must Be Said’. It imputed to Israel, on the basis of absolutely nothing in the way of evidence, a genocidal ambition against the Iranian people. Grass has been defended in his turn on the grounds that he is not personally an anti-Semite – as if this might settle the question of whether or not his poem contained anti-Semitic tropes.
You do not have to go far to find either journalists or activists of the left similarly playing down anti-Semitic elements within the programmatic objectives of Hamas and Hezbollah.

Grass’s poem may serve, also, to introduce a third form of what I am calling alibi antisemitism. For the poem contains a reference to the ‘loudmouth’ president of Iran – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – at once Holocaust-denier and lead spokesman for removing Israel from the page of history. Like others for whom this is a central goal, the loudmouth president sometimes has benefit of the consideration that such talk is mere rhetoric, and so not to be treated as in earnest.

And you do not have to go far to find either journalists or activists of the left similarly playing down anti-Semitic elements within the programmatic objectives of Hamas and Hezbollah: not just their commitment to getting rid of Israel; also openly Jew-hating statements, as for example in the Hamas Charter. This latter document cites ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ as authoritative and as establishing a Zionist ambition to dominate the world. It has Jews hiding behind rocks and trees against the threat (which it celebrates) that Jews will in due course be killed.

Leftists and liberals of a would-be pragmatist turn of mind can appear remarkably untroubled by this sort of thing. Either the offending contents of the Hamas Charter are consigned by them to a receding past, or they are said not to represent the thinking of a moderate section of Hamas willing to contemplate a long-term (though not unlimited) truce with Israel. It is never explained by such pragmatists why, if the anti-Jewish components of the document are a thing of the past, no longer relevant, of merely rhetorical status, they have not been, or cannot now be, amended away.

I shall leave aside here the question of whether or not there are sound tactical reasons for Israel to consider negotiating with Hamas; it is not germane to my present concern. However, and as before, one should try to imagine a person of the left able to adopt so casual and indulgent an attitude to other openly racist discourses, able to treat them as merely rhetorical racism – while continuing to be held in respect within the left or liberal political milieu to which he or she belongs. It doesn’t happen. Only Israel provides a pretext in that milieu for the mere-rhetoric plea. By some convenient metonymy, people saying ‘Jews’ may be taken really to mean ‘Israel’. And Israel today is fair game for being hated.
A climate of complicity

The fourth and final alibi phenomenon I shall deal with is more oblique. It consists neither of the direct expression of anti-Semitic themes nor of attempts to explain these away, but rather of turning a blind eye. It is relevant to the case here, all the same, since prejudice makes its way more successfully when there is a certain tolerance of it by others, not actively hostile themselves but indulgent towards those who are.

I will take as my example of this The Guardian newspaper today. This once great paper of British liberalism now provides space on its opinion pages for the spokesmen of Hamas, the contents of its programmatic charter notwithstanding; provides space on its letters page for philosophers justifying the murder of Jews; and provides space on its website for people who deploy well-known anti-Semitic themes even while professing that they have nothing whatever against Jews. The Guardian is, as you would expect, on record as being vigorously opposed to racism: as, for example, when it referred in a leader of November 2011 to ‘a message that is not heard often enough... that racism is never acceptable, wherever it takes place’.

Instructive, in the light of that, is to examine how the paper reacted editorially to the Toulouse killings. On March 20 of this year, before the identity of the killer was known and when it was assumed he was from the French far right, The Guardian echoed the sentiment I have just quoted from its November leader, saying that ‘the [French] republic will come together in the face of such an assault on its minorities’. While cautioning against speculation about the killer’s motives, it nonetheless allowed itself to allude to Sarkozy’s lurch to the right, his claims of ‘there being too many immigrants
A liberal newspaper can find the words to name the poison that is rightwing anti-immigrant xenophobia, but not the word for hatred of Jews. Incomprehensible – but for that familiar alibi, Israel as cause.

and then added precisely nothing about the kind of ideas which might have been influential in Merah’s willingness – not as a Muslim but as an Islamist and jihadi – to slaughter three Jewish children. ‘Mad crimes of a terrorist’ was all, and not so much as a breath about antisemitism. But the killing of Jewish children, even if to avenge the deaths of Palestinian children, is antisemitism of the most unadulterated kind. Those children were guilty of nothing and were killed by Merah because they were Jewish.

A liberal newspaper, committed to racism’s never being acceptable anywhere, can find the words to name the poison that is rightwing anti-immigrant xenophobia, but not the word for hatred of Jews. Incomprehensible – but for that familiar alibi, Israel as cause.

Conclusion

It is a moral scandal that some few decades after the unmeasurable catastrophe that overtook the Jewish people in Europe, these anti-Semitic themes and ruses are once again respectable; respectable not just down there with the thugs but pervasively also within polite society, and within the perimeters of a self-flattering liberal and left opinion. It is a bleak lesson to all but those unwilling to see. The message of ‘never again’ has already proved to have been too sanguine. Genocides still occur. We now know, as well, that should a new calamity ever befall the Jewish people, there will be, again, not only the direct architects and executants but also those who collaborate, who collude, who look away and find the words to go with doing so. Some of these, dismaying, shamefully, will be of the left.

This is not a hopeful conclusion, but it is a necessary one. The best of hope in politics must always be allied to a truthful realism. We need to know what we are up against.

This is the text of a presentation by Norman Geras to the YIVO Conference on Jews and the Left held in May 2012 in New York City.

Antisemitism is fun, there’s no doubt about it. Like other forms of racism, antisemitism provides a variety of satisfactions for those who endorse it, and it is worth trying to analyse these pleasures, so that we may better understand the whole phenomenon. For there is something strangely ineffective about many of our attempts to combat antisemitism. We treat it as involving various cognitive errors – false beliefs about Jews or about Israel, the application of double standards to the assessment of Jewish activities, the one-sided focus on things which can be criticised and the neglect of things which might be praiseworthy. We try to combat these cognitive failures (of which there certainly are plenty) by pointing out the errors involved, listing the relevant facts which correct those errors, and revealing the logical inconsistencies involved in, for example, the use of double standards.

Eve Garrard

Antisemitism is much more than a cognitive error. It attracts by providing the deep emotional satisfactions of hatred, tradition, and moral purity.

The pleasures of antisemitism
And when these attempts prove totally fruitless, as they so often do, we are puzzled and dismayed. Don’t people want truths which would enable them to abandon their hostilities to various aspects of Jewish existence?

“Don’t people want truths which would enable them to abandon their hostilities to various aspects of Jewish existence? Very often they do not.”

The answer, of course, is very often that no, they really don’t want these truths. We have to look outside the cognitive domain to the realm of the emotions and ask: what are the pleasures, what are the emotional rewards which antisemitism has to offer to its adherents?

The pleasures of hatred and tradition

There are at least three principal sources of pleasure which antisemitism provides: first, the pleasure of hatred; second, the pleasure of tradition; and third, the pleasure of displaying moral purity. Each of these is an independent source of satisfaction, but the three interact in various ways, which often strengthens their effects. The satisfactions which hatred has to offer us are regrettably familiar to most people. Most of us know only too well the surge of self-righteousness, the thrill of condemning others, the intense bonding with a like-minded hater, which we feel when a good jolt of vicious hostility has risen within us. As for the pleasures of tradition, there is a Jew-shaped space in Western culture, and the shape is not a pleasant one. Long centuries of tradition have constructed the Jew as a being who is both contemptible and dangerous, the purveyor and transmitter of evil. Various tropes have been deployed to flesh out this picture – in particular the blood libel, according to which Jews use the blood of Christian children for their terrible ceremonies of machination and control, but also tropes about uncanny power, in which Jews are depicted as the puppet-masters of the rest of the helpless non-Jewish world.

The tradition of antisemitism is very flexible, and it generally gets expressed in terms of the preoccupations of the period. Medieval Jew-hatred was religiously based; 19th and early 20th century hostility was given a scientific top-dressing in terms of now discredited theories of ‘race science’; and late 20th...
century and early 21st century prejudice is generally cast in terms of human rights violations. Here there has been a special focus on the Jewish state. Israel can be cast, though only at the expense of an enormous distortion of historical facts, into the role of imperial coloniser, and hence hostility towards Israel and the Jews who support her existence can be legitimised as part, sometimes a leading part, of the global fight against imperialism.

The pleasures of moral purity

However, in this shortened version of my argument I will focus on the third main source of pleasure which antisemitism affords: the pleasures of moral purity. (The full-length article is available on the Fathom website). The desire for moral purity, especially a purity which is readily visible to others and can count as a ticket of entry to socially and politically desirable circles, seems to be the motive du jour of antisemitism in sections of the Left, which might have been expected to be hostile to all forms of racism but sadly is not.

Moral goodness and purity is of course genuinely desirable and admirable. It is good if people have deep moral insight; and the ability to judge correctly what’s the right thing to do in complicated circumstances; and the strength of character and will to carry out their decisions; and the understanding, factual knowledge, courage, kindness and sympathy to judge others fairly, and to fight for justice where need be. But one look at that list is enough to remind us of how hard it is to be good, and how much easier it is to pursue the appearance rather than the reality.

Israel as the Jewish state is a real opportunity for people who want to display their supposed moral purity, and harvest a suitable quantity of admiration from like-minded others, without having to deliver on the exacting demands of genuine moral probity. So we find people declaring that Israel is an apartheid state, thus allying themselves to the righteous fight against apartheid half a century ago, but failing to notice the huge moral, social and political differences between Israel and apartheid South Africa. They declare that Israel is a colonial settler state, thus displaying their hostility to colonialism without having to ask who the colonising power is, and where else the survivors of the mid-century horrors should have gone, and why the UN decided that the Jews of the world should have the opportunity for self-determination, and why they were so clearly in need of it. We have people publishing in the broadsheet press complaints about how their hostile views about Israel have been silenced by powerful unnamed forces, without noticing the performative contradiction in what they say. We have people explaining that they do of course completely condemn the Holocaust, and this shows that they can’t be antisemitic, but, they go on to declare, it is appalling to find Jews behaving in the same way against the Palestinians that the Nazis did in the Warsaw ghetto. And so on, and on.

However, my concern here is not with the factual and logical errors in these various charges; I want rather to point out the emotional dividend they provide to those who deploy them. Such people can present themselves as the champions of the weak against the strong, of the colonised against the supposedly imperialist colonisers, of wholly innocent Palestinian victims against bloody and heartless Jewish oppressors. They can also present themselves as being victimised, both by the way in which powerful forces have imposed silence on them
A protester outside the Israeli embassy, 19 August 2011

Pete Riches/De molix/De molix/Press Association Images
Focussing on Jews for singular criticism can be also be presented as subversive and transgressive, thus conferring on the critic the accolade of being untrammelled by convention, excitingly edgy, possibly even outrageous. That is an awful lot of moral bang for your antisemitic buck.

The reason that it is plausible to construe these claims and attitudes as driven by a concern to display moral purity, rather than simply as showing honest moral commitments, is that the hostile attitudes displayed towards Israel and Zionists are rarely directed against other malefactors, including those who have committed far more, and far more serious, violations of human rights than Israel has managed. Furthermore, the charges made against Israel are often simply false, and demonstrably so. These two considerations together suggest that what is in play is not serious moral concern, but rather an easy simulacrum of it, along with a conviction of moral rectitude which, though misplaced, offers distinctive pleasures of its own.

Having your moral cake and eating it

The various sources of pleasure which antisemitism provides – hatred, tradition and moral purity – interact in diverse ways. Sometimes the effect of this interaction is simply to reinforce the rewards on offer: tradition plus hatred is a natural pairing, as is tradition plus the desire for moral purity – these relations are simply multipliers. But other relations look at first sight as if they might involve a certain tension: tradition plus transgressiveness, or hatred and condemnation plus the desire for moral purity. However these tensions can be, and often are, resolved in antisemitic discourse in ways which leave the discriminatory drive undisturbed.

For example, it is possible to claim one is being transgressive in relation to the post-war convention of being polite about Jews, by suggesting it is now exploited by Jews to cover up their wrongdoings. And in the description of such alleged wrongdoings, the rich seam of traditional Jew-hatred can be drawn on without embarrassment, indeed
with a delicious frisson, because the transgressiveness defuses in advance any objections based on more conventional concerns about racism. The defusing of such concerns is further expedited where the transgressor uses the device of claiming that he himself is not antisemitic, but he can understand those who are, since the Jews bring hostility on themselves by their behaviour.

Out of an overwhelming sensitivity to injustice, and is a sign of the extreme moral purity of the hater, who selflessly struggles for justice for the innocent victims of a tyrannical state and its supporters. It is easy to see the attractions of this self-serving self-image to one who wishes to claim moral rectitude, and also to enjoy the pleasures of hatred. It is a terrific opportunity both to have your moral cake, and to eat it up in huge and satisfying gulps.

What can be done about this state of affairs is not immediately obvious. The fact that some pleasures are vile doesn’t stop them being pleasurable, or prevent some people wanting to taste them again and again. In order to do so these people must bolster up their image of the Jewish state as oppressive and illegitimate, and the Zionists who support her as lying, manipulative, and hostile to human solidarity and justice. Here the devil frequently does have the best tunes, and the thin and reedy voice of rational argument is often drowned out by their brassy insistence. But we will do better in the combat, however we conduct it, if we realise that the views which we are struggling against provide deep emotional satisfactions to those who hold them, satisfactions not easy to overcome or to replace.

Eve Garrard is Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Manchester.

The tension between the pleasures of hatred and those of moral purity can also be reconciled, allowing them to co-exist and even reinforce each other. Hatred, it can be suggested, is an excusable and perhaps even appropriate response to the bloodthirsty acts of Israel. The hatred supposedly arises out of an overwhelming sensitivity to injustice, and is a sign of the extreme moral purity of the hater, who selflessly struggles for justice for the innocent victims of a tyrannical state and its supporters. It is easy to see the attractions of this self-serving self-image to one who wishes to claim moral rectitude, and also to enjoy the pleasures of hatred. It is a terrific opportunity both to have your moral cake, and to eat it up in huge and satisfying gulps.

What can be done about this state of affairs is not immediately obvious. The fact that some pleasures are vile doesn’t stop them being pleasurable, or prevent some people wanting to taste them again and again. In order to do so these people must bolster up their image of the Jewish state as oppressive and illegitimate, and the Zionists who support her as lying, manipulative, and hostile to human solidarity and justice. Here the devil frequently does have the best tunes, and the thin and reedy voice of rational argument is often drowned out by their brassy insistence. But we will do better in the combat, however we conduct it, if we realise that the views which we are struggling against provide deep emotional satisfactions to those who hold them, satisfactions not easy to overcome or to replace.

Eve Garrard is Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Manchester.

The devil frequently does have the best tunes, and the thin and reedy voice of rational argument is often drowned out by their brassy insistence.

...
WE HOPE YOU’VE ENJOYED READING THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF FATHOM.
LOOK OUT FOR FATHOM ISSUE 4 COMING THIS AUTUMN.
FOR THE FULL FATHOM EXPERIENCE, INCLUDING VIDEO AND AUDIO, DOWNLOAD THE FREE iPAD AND iPHONE APP FROM THE iTUNES APP STORE.