

# *Antisemitism and the Boycott: An Exchange between Martin Shaw and David Hirsh*

**Editor's Note:** *Democratiya* opposes the academic boycott of Israel and all forms of antisemitism. The relation between that boycott and antisemitism is debated here by two advisory editors of *Democratiya*, Martin Shaw and David Hirsh. It was initiated by Shaw, who sent us a short letter of objection to aspects of Hirsh's article in *Democratiya* 13, 'Unjust, unhelpful: arguments against the academic boycott of Israel.' Two further rounds followed.

## Letter 1

### **The Mote is in Hirsh's Eye: Martin Shaw responds to David Hirsh**

**Editors:** I have never supported the proposal for an academic boycott of Israel and so I agree with some of the reasons that David Hirsh advances against it in *Democratiya* 13. However when it comes to the alleged 'anti-semitism' of the boycott, the mote is in Hirsh's own eye. He writes that, 'Any impact assessment of a boycott of Israel would find that in a whole number of distinct ways, it would disadvantage Jews much more than others. In this sense then, already we can see that an academic boycott of Israel would be institutionally anti-Semitic.' By this topsy-turvy reasoning, the boycott of apartheid South Africa must have manifested anti-white or anti-Afrikaner racism, since it harmed whites and Afrikaners more than others. It simply will not do to say that action against a racially based state like Israel is itself racist because it must by definition harm the interests of the groups that benefit from that state.

Hirsh also repeats the suggestion that anti-semitism must lurk behind the choice to campaign against Israel rather than against other oppressive states. This too is a phoney argument as there are plenty of other reasons for selecting to campaign against Israel. Unlike Burma or China (and actually plenty of opponents of Israel's policies also oppose these regimes), Israel claims to be a democracy and receives enormous support from Western governments.

It is Hirsh's resort to the insinuation of anti-semitism that is the 'lazy' argument, effectively granting immunity to Israel against any serious opposition. His use of it

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suggests that he simply hasn't come to terms with the gravity of the affront which Israel's oppression of the Palestinians presents to the progressive left and indeed to most sectors of democratic opinion worldwide. After 60 years of expulsion and 40 years of occupation, it is hard to 'exaggerate' the Israeli problem.

### LETTER 2

#### **Antisemitism and the Boycott: A response to Martin Shaw by David Hirsh**

**Editors:** Martin Shaw argues that although a boycott of Israeli academics would be wrong, it would not be anti-Semitic. [1] Israel is a 'racially-based state,' he says, and hence any action against it would necessarily harm the 'racial' group upon which it is based. He argues that singling out Israel for unique punishment need not be anti-Semitic because there are reasons, other than hostility to Jews, for this singling out. He offers four such reasons: first that 'Israel claims to be a democracy'; second that 'it receives enormous support from Western governments'; third that Israel offers a grave affront to 'the progressive left' and more generally to democratic opinion; fourth, that its crimes of occupation and of expulsion are so huge that they are hard to exaggerate. His position is that the unwarranted 'singling out' is actually done by those who offer Israel a special immunity from criticism by inappropriately alleging anti-Semitism. In his view, those who see a campaign to exclude Israelis from our campuses as anti-Semitic have failed to grasp the gravity of the above reasons, especially the third and fourth ones. In making these claims he does not draw any distinction between a possible anti-Semitic intent and a possible anti-Semitic outcome; nor does he distinguish between singling out Israel for particular criticism and singling it out for unique punishment – in fact he subsumes both 'criticism' and 'boycott' into the category of 'serious opposition.'

In 1975 The UN General Assembly determined 'that Zionism [was] a form of racism and racial discrimination,' a determination which was not reversed until 1991. [2] The charge that Zionism is a form of apartheid [3] or is worse than apartheid [4] peppers the pro-boycott case; it is even considered unremarkable in the boycott campaign to compare Zionism to Nazism. [5] The claim that Israeli or Jewish nationalism is unique or unusual in its relationship to 'race' – a claim which Martin Shaw appears to endorse – is one which calls for some theoretical unpacking as well as comparative research.

There are distinct, contested and complex relationships between the state, nationalism, ethnicity and histories of internal and external conflict in most

countries. Syria, for example, is constitutionally defined as an Arab state; Iran as an Islamic state; Croatia, carved out only a decade and a half ago by campaigns of ethnic cleansing which drew on the Ustasha tradition, is a Catholic state; the Baltic states, containing large Russian populations which were originally brought in by the Stalinists as colonial-settlers, are finding ways to formulate more or less enlightened Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian nationalisms. But out of all these diverse nationalisms, there is a campaign to exclude the academics only of Israel from British universities. Many may criticise these others but what Martin Shaw calls the 'progressive left' only finds its collective blood boiling when it considers Israel's crimes.

Israel is not, however, adequately characterised by the phrase 'racially based state.' It is in fact an ethnically diverse society. Approximately 20 percent of its population is Arab and the Jewish population itself is by no means easy to characterise in terms of 'race.' Approximately half of the Jewish population is descended from people who were ethnically cleansed by Arab nationalist movements across the Middle East from the 1940s to the 1960s. There is a significant problem of racism against Arabs and against Muslims in Israel and certainly this problem is institutionalised in the state and in civil society in a large number of ways; but to characterise Israel as uniquely and necessarily racist is to allow a definitional essentialism to take the place of sociological and political analysis.

One curiosity of the view that Israel is a 'racially based state' is its a-historicism. It fails to acknowledge that Israel, when it was founded, was what Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher called a 'life-raft state.' [6] Jewish national self-determination and Israeli self-defence make sense to a lot of Jews, many of whose families were pushed out from Europe, from the Middle East and from Russia by state supported anti-Semitic movements. What Martin Shaw calls 'the progressive left' failed, in the end, successfully to defend Jews against these exclusions. It is because Jews have been persecuted *as Jews* that so many people feel the necessity for a state where Jews cannot be dominated by others, where they can practice self-determination *as Jews*, and where they can defend themselves against anti-Semitism if need be.

We should be careful not to legitimise a formulation (such as 'racially based state') which encourages people to identify the overwhelming majority of living Jews (i.e. those who identify in one way or another with Israel) as racists. Because such a characterisation would be both inaccurate – at the very least simplistic and one-sided – and would also breed hostility to those Jews designated as supporters of

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the ‘racially based state,’ it would be anti-Semitic. There is a strong Jewish collective memory of boycotts and exclusions, not least from universities. Indeed, part of the reason that Israel exists as a Jewish state is traceable back to a history of anti-Jewish boycotts and exclusions.

Of course we might well dissent from Jewish nationalist traditions and politics – I myself am not a Jewish nationalist. But in order to critique Jewish nationalisms effectively we need to understand their *raison d’être*, the richness of their histories and the power of their narratives.

Why then does there seem to be an enthusiasm present amongst a significant number of UK intellectuals to punish Israelis for human rights abuses while there is, at best, only a reluctant acceptance of the need to speak out against, for example Zanu PF or the Janjaweed, both of whom are responsible for crimes hugely greater in scale and in cruelty than Israel? Criticism of such genocidal organisations is generally accompanied by all the relevant contextualisations. It is pointed out that Zanu PF and the Janjaweed are products of long and complex colonial histories, are sustained by an imperialist system and are encouraged by the international arms industry. However, analogous contextualisation of Israeli human rights abuses seems to be prohibited by the (covert and unsupported) rule that one is not allowed to contextualise Israel in the history of anti-Semitism.

This kind of ‘enthusiasm imbalance’ was evident at UCU Congress in June where there was an observable excitement displayed by many delegates when they voted to flirt with breaking the taboo against excluding Jews from campuses and when they congratulated themselves on their courage as they refused ‘to be intimidated’ by those who said the boycott was anti-Semitic. As Moishe Postone has pointed out, anti-Semitism often appears to be anti-hegemonic. [7] In my *Democratiya* piece, I suggested an explanation for the ‘enthusiasm imbalance’ which does not rely on the circularity of analysing anti-Semitism by reference to previous anti-Semitism; I suggested an explanation in terms of the 20th century history of anti-hegemonic thought, particularly as it grappled to make sense of nationalism, totalitarianism and imperialism.

Martin Shaw offers the fact that ‘Israel claims to be a democracy’ as a reason to think that an exclusion of Israeli academics from the global academic community would not be anti-Semitic. According to this logic China should be held to a higher standard still than Israel because it claims to be socialist and not only democratic;

North Korea, which is constitutionally defined as a socialist paradise on earth, must be held to the highest standard of all.

The question of Israeli democracy is another which deserves analysis and research. Struggles and debates over Israeli democracy are commonplace in Israel, amongst Jews as well as Arabs and other minorities. How can the ideas of a Jewish homeland and of a democratic and inclusive Israel be worked together in practice and in theory? How can we, outside Israel, make sense of, and constructively intervene into, these controversies about democracy? How does Israel compare to other states in terms of its democratic practice, freedom of speech, academic freedom, rights for minorities and rule of law? To what extent does the enduring occupation, and the quotidian humiliation and violence which sustains it, weaken and undermine Israeli democracy? How does the increasing threat to Israel from the Hamas and Hezbollah militias, armed, encouraged and financed by the anti-Semitic regime in Iran, impact on the Israeli polity? The question of Israeli democracy is a big question and requires more consideration than a simplistic and ambiguous 'claims to be.' But in any case, it is not clear why claiming to be a democracy, with whatever degree of accuracy, should justify unique singling-out for hostility and punishment.

Martin Shaw does not distinguish between criticism and punishment when he writes: 'plenty of opponents of Israel's policies also oppose these regimes.' Of course it is true that plenty of us who oppose Israel's policies are also opponents of the regimes in Burma and China. But there is no campaign in the UCU or anywhere else to exclude Burmese or Chinese academics from UK campuses. All we are left with is the evidence-free suggestion that people who think a boycott of Israeli academics would be anti-Semitic are also people who don't 'oppose Israel's policies.' The implication is that when such people say they oppose Israeli human rights abuses, they should not be believed. It is difficult to have a debate on the basis of such *ad hominem* charges. It will be claimed in response that those who raise the issue of anti-Semitism are the ones who are guilty of the *ad hominem* attacks. But my argument is not that anti-Semites are engaged in a conscious plan to encode their anti-Semitism. It is rather, that decent antiracists are, without knowing it, falling into anti-Semitic ways of thinking via an over-enthusiastic anger with Israel. It is part of my project to try to explain where this anti-Israel enthusiasm comes from without assuming that it originates in an underlying anti-Semitism. There is no novelty in the idea of a structural, institutional or unconscious racism. It is time that people who think of themselves as sophisticated antiracists stopped reacting

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to discussion of unconscious anti-Semitism as though they were Police Federation reps from the early 1980s facing the challenge of institutional racism.

Today, people who say anti-Semitic things and who support anti-Semitic boycotts are likely to have stumbled into anti-Semitic ways of thinking. They are unlikely to be wicked people. Our intention should not be to reverse the logic of demonisation in order to demonise the demonisers. It should be, rather, to work within the kind of cosmopolitan framework that Robert Fine has outlined [8] which tries hard to avoid replicating that which it critiques.

There is little value in alleging the bad faith of one's opponents in a debate, and people on all sides should stop doing it unless they have evidence. In my case it is a false claim that I offer 'special immunity' to Israel to carry out human rights abuses. I have been involved for my entire adult life in speaking for peace between Israel and Palestine and in opposing the occupation and in opposing the routine violence and humiliation which comes with it. But in any case people, specifically Jews, should not be asked to establish their credentials in this way as a pre-condition for being allowed to discuss or to oppose anti-Semitism.

Martin Shaw offers the fact that Israel 'receives enormous support from Western governments' as another reason to think that a boycott of Israeli academics would not be anti-Semitic. The relationships between Israel and other states around the world are interesting and complex. The national interest calculation of classical international relations theory is just one factor influencing Israel's international relationships; others might be historical narratives, political campaigning, cultural and ethnic relationships. Israel is by no means unique in receiving aid from the US and Europe; Egypt, for example, also receives extensive funding, but its human rights abuses fail to attract the punitive attention of the UCU. Israel's human rights abuses are no more serious or widespread than those committed by Britain and the US in territories which they currently occupy. Israel, for example, has never carried out the kind of total assault in Gaza or the West Bank which the allies carried out against Fallujah in 2004, and neither has it carried out anything like as fierce an assault as the Russians did against Grozny in the 1990s. If the charge against Israel is that it is financed by the US or the UK, then any academics who are going to be punished, surely, should be British and American ones.

Martin Shaw is keen to defend the legitimacy of what he calls 'serious opposition' to Israel. His concern is that the charge that a boycott would be anti-Semitic has the

effect of undermining 'serious opposition.' My position is the opposite. Avoiding anti-Semitism is a necessary part of formulating serious opposition, not something which undermines it. Serious opposition takes careful precautions against anti-Semitism and makes its case in such a way as to offer no comfort to anti-Semites. [9] Such precautions are necessary because one would expect, given the historical embeddedness of anti-Semitism even on the left, that some opposition to Israel would be anti-Semitic. Sometimes, however, opponents of Israel act as though they believe that an explicitly antiracist opposition would be less effective against Israeli human rights abuses than an opposition which was relaxed about anti-Semitic rhetoric, images, tropes or exclusions.

Martin Shaw alleges that my raising of the problem of anti-Semitism in relation to the boycott campaign demonstrates that I have not come to terms with the

...gravity of the affront which Israel's oppression of the Palestinians presents to the progressive left and indeed to most sectors of democratic opinion worldwide.

But that is precisely what I am trying to 'come to terms with' in my work. [10] The questions that confront me are why Israel's oppression of the Palestinians is so often mystified in the language and tropes of anti-Semitism, [11] even, or particularly, by people on the antiracist left; why Israel has come to function as an essentialist and unique metaphor for all that is evil on the planet; why Israel's oppression of the Palestinians has such a disproportionate gravitational pull on 'most sectors of democratic opinion worldwide'; how we got to a situation where the word 'anti-Semitism' itself has become a signifier on the 'progressive left' for dishonest Zionist obfuscation.

Martin Shaw goes on to say:

After 60 years of expulsion and 40 years of occupation, it is hard to 'exaggerate' the Israeli problem.

This is a surprising claim, coming from a leading academic expert in war and genocide. In fact it is disturbingly easy to exaggerate the 'Israeli problem': we see it done all the time. It can be exaggerated by claiming, as Ilan Pappé does, that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza; [12] as Ronnie Kasrils does, that Israel is worse than an apartheid state; [13] as Mearsheimer and Walt do, that Israel is responsible

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for sending America to war in Iraq. [14] Hamas claims that Israel was responsible for the French Revolution. [15] Hassan Nasrallah claims that Jews are ‘...cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion....’ [16] Clare Short believes that ‘US backing for Israeli policies ... is the major cause of bitter division and violence in the world.’ [17] Jenny Tonge says that ‘...the pro-Israeli Lobby has got its [financial] grips on the Western World....’ [18] Richard Falk, the UN investigator into Israeli conduct in the occupied territories, feels himself ‘...compelled to portray the ... abuse of the Palestinian people by Israel through a reliance on such an inflammatory metaphor as “holocaust.”’ [19] It is *not* hard to exaggerate the ‘Israeli problem.’

A further problem with Martin Shaw’s view is that his third and fourth points suffer from a damaging circularity. He legitimises the singling out of Israel for boycott by saying that it is gravely offensive to the progressive left, and that it is hard to exaggerate its crimes. But given that its crimes are frequently exaggerated by, among others, the ‘progressive left,’ and given also that Israel is far from being the most serious human rights abuser in the world, we have to ask why it is found to be so uniquely offensive, and why its crimes are so readily exaggerated. Martin Shaw offers these two points as an explanation for the singling out of Israel, but far from performing the required intellectual task, they in fact replicate the explanandum. This is because they are themselves examples of singling out Israel for especially hostile attention and hence they are as much in need of explanation as the boycott proposal which they seek to legitimise. The need then, for an explanation, and preferably one which does not rely on an ahistorical theory of underlying anti-Semitism, is clearer than ever.

Further to that point, why would we characterise the problem of Palestinian unfreedom as specifically ‘the Israeli problem?’ How is it not also a Palestinian problem, a Lebanese problem, an Egyptian problem, a Syrian problem, an Iranian problem, a British imperial problem, an American problem, an Islamist problem – one could go on. Israel is not solely responsible for the plight of the Palestinians. We need to break out of a world of received wisdoms and one-sided clichés regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict. It is a world where the commonsense of ‘democratic opinion’ is assumed, in a much too unproblematised and unevidenced way, to be straightforwardly true. Politically we need a programme for peace rather than a schema for blame, punishment and total victory of one nation over the other. Sociologically we need to begin with a rigorous and cosmopolitan understanding of the world as it exists rather than trying to begin from where the world once was,



in a mythical past. A warm collective imaginary of essentialised victims rising up against essentialised villains doesn't help anybody, not least the actually existing victims.

Martin Shaw writes:

...when it comes to the alleged 'anti-semitism' of the boycott, the mote is in Hirsh's own eye.

This is an allusion to the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye...

If I understand him rightly, Shaw's claim is that raising anti-Semitism as an issue is a much greater wrong than excluding Israelis from universities. It is not far from Tariq Ali's particularly noxious but clear variant of the *Livingstone Formulation* [20]:

The campaign against the supposed new 'anti-Semitism' in Europe today is basically a cynical ploy on the part of the Israeli Government to seal off the Zionist state from any criticism of its regular and consistent brutality against the Palestinians. [21]

If we allow the normalisation of a presumption of bad faith when Jews and antiracists speak out against anti-Semitism then we run the risk of compounding the alleged problem. We should be careful not to do that.

#### Notes

[1] I would like warmly to thank Alexandra Simonon, Eve Garrard, Robert Fine, Jane Ashworth, Richard Gold and David Seymour and Kirsten Campbell for their help with this response.

[2] UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, *Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination*, 10 November 1975. <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/000/92/IMG/NR000092.pdf?OpenElement>, downloaded 10 July 2008.

[3] EG David Hirsh (2006) 'The argument for the boycott – Pacbi' *www.EngageOnline.org.uk*, 9 September, 2006, London. <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=643#>, downloaded 14 February, 2007.

For Rebuttals of the apartheid analogy see Rhoda Kadalie & Julia Bertelsmann (2008) 'Franchising "apartheid": why South Africans push the analogy,' *z-word.com*. <http://www.z->

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- word.com/z-word-essays/franchising-%25E2%2580%259Capartheid%25E2%2580%259D%253A-why-south-africans-push-the-analogy.html, downloaded 10 July, 2008. See also John Strawson (2006), 'Zionism and Apartheid: The Analogy in the Politics of International Law,' *Engage Journal*, Issue 2. [http://www.engageonline.org.uk/journal/index.php?journal\\_id=10&article\\_id=34](http://www.engageonline.org.uk/journal/index.php?journal_id=10&article_id=34), downloaded 25 July, 2007.
- [4] Ronnie Kasrils and Victoria Brittain, 'Israel should face sanctions,' *Comment Is Free*, 19 May 26 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/may/19/israel>, downloaded 10 July 2008.
- [5] EG Haim Bresheeth (2003) 'Zionism, anti-Zionism and the state of Israel,' *inminds.co.uk*, <http://www.inminds.co.uk/jews-against-zionism.html#t3>, downloaded 10 July 2008: 'I'm saying this in order to explain why it's so easy for me to understand the Palestinians in Gaza and in the rest of Palestine. It is very easy for me to understand them because they live in a combination of a concentration camp and Warsaw ghetto for so many years that we have stopped counting...'
- EG 'Israel's Nazi style assault and humiliation of Mohammed Omer,' *Anti-Zionists against Antisemitism*, 30 June 2008. <http://azvsas.blogspot.com/2008/06/israels-nazi-style-assault-humiliation.html>, downloaded 11 July 2008.
- [6] Isaac Deutscher (1968) *The Non-Jewish Jew and other essays*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 111-13, extract at: <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/archives/index.php?id=49>, downloaded 10 July 2008.
- [7] Postone, Moishe, (2006) 'History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,' in *Public Culture*, 18:1.
- [8] Robert Fine (2007) *Cosmopolitanism*, Oxford: Routledge.
- [9] David Hirsh (2007) *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Cosmopolitan Reflections*, The Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism (YIISA) Working Paper Series #1, New Haven CT (see particularly the critique of Tony Judt).
- [10] David Hirsh (2007) *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Cosmopolitan Reflections*, The Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism (YIISA) Working Paper Series #1, New Haven CT.
- [11] Seymour, David, (2007) *Law, Antisemitism and the Holocaust*, London: Routledge-Cavendish.
- [12] Pappé, Ilan, (2006), 'Genocide in Gaza.' *www.ElectronicIntifada.net*, 2 September 2006, <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article5656.shtml>, downloaded 16 February 2007.
- [13] Ronnie Kasrils and Victoria Brittain, 'Israel should face sanctions,' *Comment Is Free*, 19 May 26. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/may/19/israel>, downloaded 10 July 2008.
- [14] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, (2006) 'The Israel Lobby,' *London Review of books*, vol.28 no. 6, 23 March 2006, London. [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01_.html), downloaded February 26, 2007.
- John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2006) 'The Israel lobby and US foreign policy,' *Faculty research working paper series*, Harvard University and John F Kennedy School of Government, Working Paper. Number: RWP06-011, 13/03/2006. <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011>, downloaded 26 February 2007.
- [15] The Hamas Covenant 1988. <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>, downloaded 10 July 2008.
- [16] Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, (2002) *Hizbollah: Politics and Religion*, London: Pluto.
- [17] The Skies Are Weeping, website for the London premiere of the Cantata for Rachel Corrie, November 2005. <http://weepingskies.blogspot.com/>, downloaded 10 July 2008.

- [18] Hirsh, David, (2006a) 'Jenny Tonge: "The pro-Israel lobby has got its grips on the western world."' [www.EngageOnline.org.uk](http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=660), 20 September 2006. <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=660>, downloaded 15 February 2007.
- [19] David Hirsh (2008) 'Richard Falk and the Zionism-Nazism analogy,' *Engage*, 8 April 2008. <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=1806>, downloaded 11 July 2008. Tim Franks (2008) 'UN expert stands by Nazi comments,' 8 April 2008. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/7335875.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7335875.stm), downloaded 11 July 2008.
- [20] David Hirsh (2008) 'The Livingstone Formulation,' *Z-word.com*, February 2008. <http://www.z-word.com/on-zionism/antisemitism-and-anti-zionism/anti-zionism-and-antisemitism%253A-decoding-the-relationship.html?page=2>, downloaded 10 July 2008.
- [21] Tariq Ali (2004) 'To be intimidated is to be an accomplice: notes on anti-semitism, Zionism and Palestine' *Counterpunch*, March 4 2004. <http://www.counterpunch.org/ali03042004.html>, downloaded 10 July 2008.

### Letter 3

#### **Falsely criticising Israel's opponents of anti-Semitism is no answer to the boycott campaign: Martin Shaw responds to David Hirsh**

**Editors:** Clearly I should have known better than to write a short comment on an issue like Israel-Palestine, or in reply to a prolific writer like David Hirsh. Since Hirsh has widened the argument considerably, let me respond in some detail.

#### **'Punishment,' the boycott and racism**

First, I note that from the beginning of his response Hirsh attributes to me an argument that I did not make. Apparently I argue 'that singling out Israel for unique punishment need not be anti-Semitic because there are reasons, other than hostility to Jews, for this singling out.' However I never used the word 'punish' or 'punishment,' still less the word 'unique.' This is a telling distortion, based on the assumption that 'serious opposition' to Israel, which I endorsed, must necessarily constitute 'punishment,' and that the 'punishment' of Israelis or Jews must be 'unique.' This says more about the political victim-complex behind Hirsh's critique than it does about my argument.

As it happens, the main reasons why I oppose the academic boycott of Israel are indeed that it can be perceived as collective punishment of Israelis for the crimes of their state, and that it disadvantages Israelis who make criticise their government's policies as well as those who support them. Sanctions and boycotts are often blunt instruments and they are as likely to push the groups that are affected by them

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into stronger support of their state rather than into opposition. (I support dialogue and political negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians, and I fear that the boycott will not help this.) However that does not mean that such instruments are necessarily racist. No one suggested that the academic boycott of South Africa necessarily represented anti-white or anti-Afrikaner racism; likewise this proposed boycott does not necessarily represent anti-Israeli, let alone anti-Jewish, racism (or anti-Semitism).

### Israel is not unique

The problem, far from being unique to the Israeli case, is a common one in the politics of solidarity with oppressed peoples. Not only can broad-based economic sanctions often harm the oppressed, but the oppressors often mobilise particular ethnic or national groups who therefore feel themselves threatened, as groups, even by targeted ('smart') sanctions or boycotts. Thus the UN's sanctions against Iraq not only (notoriously) contributed to harming the Iraqi population as a whole, but international opposition to the Saddam regime was also felt as a particular threat by the Sunni Muslim minority, sections of whom constituted the regime's social base and benefited from the regime. But does that oblige us to draw the conclusion that international action, including the overthrow of Saddam, was institutionally racist against Sunnis? Of course not. Likewise, international action over Kosovo was particularly felt as a threat by the small Serb minority, many of whom supported and benefited from the Serbian regime. But international action was hardly based on, or involved, anti-Serb racism, intentional or institutional. Of course, in all cases like these, opponents of the regime must take account of the danger that, in attacking or overthrowing oppression, they open the door to reverse injustice against the group identified with the oppressor, as has indeed happened to some extent in both Iraq and Kosovo. But awareness of this responsibility is hardly a reason not to take effective action against the oppressor regime.

It should be clear by now that when Hirsh refers to 'The claim that Israeli or Jewish nationalism is unique or unusual in its relationship to "race" – a claim which Martin Shaw appears to endorse,' he is simply mistaken. I see Israel as simply *yet another* oppressor state, and *yet another* state established on racial foundations, which needs to be criticised, opposed, and transformed, in the way that all such states must be. It is Hirsh, with his argument that anti-Israeli politics must necessarily be anti-Semitic, who has the idea that there is something unique about the Israeli case.

**The sociology of activism**

It should be clear too, therefore, that I am not arguing for ‘singling out Israel’ in the sense that Israel warrants opposition above all other oppressive states. Not at all – there are far too many states as bad as or worse than Israel. But as a sociologist as well as an activist I understand that there are many reasons, good as well as bad, why particular causes attract support in particular periods. Few of us campaign against the atrocious regime in Uzbekistan because we know little about it, it rarely gets the Western media attention it deserves, and we (wrongly) feel little connection to or responsibility for it. We do campaign about Zimbabwe, as we did in the past about apartheid South Africa, and our media give them enormous attention, partly because of the deep historic connections between Britain and southern Africa, and the sense of responsibility that is involved. Something similar applies to Israel, which is hardly surprising given the ideological as well as financial investments that the USA and other Western states have made (of a different kind from the investments in Egypt to which Hirsh refers). If Israel’s supporters want its defence to be the first priority of Western policy in the Middle East, they can hardly complain if opposition to Israel is the first Middle Eastern priority of many anti-Western activists.

Understood in this way, opposition to Israel is more likely to be a reflex of left-wing opposition to US or British ‘imperialism’ than of anti-Semitism. I agree with Hirsh that ‘serious opposition takes careful precautions against anti-Semitism and makes its case in such a way as to offer no comfort to anti-Semites.’ I accept that there are anti-Semites among Israel’s critics and that as with all long-standing and widely diffused racial prejudices, low-level anti-Semitism may be widespread – probably even among Israel’s supporters in the US and British political classes. However I do not think that on any serious assessment, anti-Semitism can be regarded as politically potent in Western societies today – by historical standards it is definitely weak – or a major theme among Western critics of Israel. The charge of ‘anti-Semitism’ is however laid as a matter of routine by Israel’s supporters against almost every type of criticism of Israel (I myself found this out recently when I was libelled in this way in *Australian Jewish News*: they were forced to print an apology.) Whether this is a matter of Israeli policy, as Tariq Ali not so unreasonably suggested, I do not know: but it certainly seems to be part of Jewish-nationalist culture.

That Hirsh recognises the relative weakness of overt anti-Semitism in Western societies is probably the reason for his emphasis on the ‘institutional’ character of contemporary anti-Semitism. True, ‘There is no novelty in the idea of a structural,

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institutional or unconscious racism.’ Yet there needs to be caution in making this argument. If the British police were ‘institutionally racist’ this was not only because more blacks than whites fell foul of the law – that might also have reflected greater criminality among blacks – but fundamentally because racist attitudes were deep-rooted in the police and clearly seemed to drive some of the patterns of policing. I don’t think the same can be said about the role of anti-Semitism in the opposition to Israel. Yes, many Jewish Israelis would obviously be the prime losers from policies that would weaken Israel’s hold on Palestinian territories; but no, these policies are not primarily driven by anti-Semitism, intentional or institutional, but by the demand for justice for Palestinians. The equation does not work.

### **The racial basis of the Israeli state**

Certainly the racial basis of Israeli nationalism and the Israeli state ‘calls for some theoretical unpacking as well as comparative research.’ The definition of any state on a racial, ethnic or religious basis implicitly discriminates against non-members of the dominant group. Thus I might feel myself, as an atheist, discriminated against by the Anglican definition of the British state. But I am realistic enough to see that this hardly leads to any grave infringements of my civil rights. A French Muslim might have greater cause for complaint, since the secular state’s headscarf ban in schools seems to many a significant infringement of personal freedom. But again, one would be hard pushed to make a claim of deep oppression on this basis. The cases Hirsh mentions – Syria, Croatia, the Baltics – all involve more serious issues (I have myself commented on the genocidal impacts of Croatian nationalism in the 1990s). How then does Israel fare in theoretical and comparative perspective?

Hirsh says that Israel ‘is not ... adequately characterised by the phrase “racially based state.”’ It is indeed, as he says, an ethnically diverse society. Yet to say a state is ‘racially based’ is not to refer to the ethnic composition of its population but to the principles on which the state is founded and how, in practice, they affect different groups under its jurisdiction. Israel was indeed a ‘life-raft state’ for many Jews, but for many Palestinian Arabs it was from the outset a state from which they were expelled without a life-raft. Israel has a ‘law of return’ that allows all Jews, whether or not they, their parents or grandparents ever lived in its territory, to settle; yet it refuses to allow the genuine return of Arabs who themselves or whose parents or grandparents lived in its territory until 1948. The Israeli constitution privileges the ‘Jewish nation’ and renders the Arab minority second-class citizens, who suffer fundamental economic and social as well as political inequality. And this is without

considering the occupation, which is now fundamental to the project of continuing expansion by grinding down and squeezing out Palestinian society from many areas of the West Bank (the state can hardly be considered apart from this). So 'racism against Arabs and against Muslims in Israel' and its institutionalisation are not secondary features, but follow from how Israel was established, how it is constituted, and how it is currently developing.

Thus Israel is not 'uniquely' but it is 'necessarily' racist. This is not 'definitional essentialism' but the conclusion of any serious sociological and political analysis. This is not a question of 'legitimising a formulation (such as "racially based state") which encourages people to identify the overwhelming majority of living Jews (i.e. those who identify in one way or another with Israel) as racists.' Serious analysis will also recognise that many Jews, even if or to whatever extent they may support Israel, may not be consciously racist towards Palestinians, and may accept official Israeli and Zionist rationalisations for the oppression of Palestinians without perceiving the latter's structural and historical bases. It is not only possible but necessary to recognise the racial character of the state, at the same time as refusing the stigmatisation of most Israelis or Jews as automatically 'racist.' However it should be said that Hirsh's attempt to cast the shadow of anti-Semitism so broadly over anti-Israeli opinion is the mirror image of such an attempt to castigate pro-Israelis as racist.

### **Genocide and its contextualisation**

Hirsh calls for the 'relevant contextualisations' to be taken into account in relation to the Israeli state as they would be in assessing Zanu PF's or the Janjaweed's crimes. Yet the point of this comparison is that, whatever the relevance of British colonial oppression to understanding the development of Zanu PF, we are still justified in calling the latter, as Hirsh does, a 'genocidal organisation,' because of its history of massacre in Matabeleland in the 1980s and because of its murderous policy towards whole communities of its political opponents today. Likewise with Darfur. The context neither excuses genocidal action nor should it lead us to deny the 'genocidal' label. Israel's foundation in 1948, as Israeli historians like Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé have shown, was based on the deliberate, brutal destruction of the larger part of Arab society in Palestine. This destruction clearly fits the definition of genocide enshrined in the Genocide Convention of the same year, even if the UN itself had ironically prepared the ground for this destruction with its partition scheme. Neither the long history of European anti-Semitism nor the

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exceptional murderousness of the Holocaust, while relevant context for explaining and understanding Israeli actions, can excuse the often murderous expulsion of the Palestinians or deny the relevance of the 'genocide' paradigm to this case. So Israel is – not uniquely, because many societies, settler and other, have genocidal histories – based on genocide, and much of its history to the present day represents the slow-motion extension and consolidation of that violent beginning. In this context, while some of the comments Hirsh cites may indeed be exaggerations, they are not all so far from the point as he believes.

To argue this is not to call for Israel's destruction, any more than to acknowledge Australia's genocidal roots is to call for the dismantling of the Australian Commonwealth, or to recognise those of the USA is to argue for a reversal of the European settlement of North America. Yet the relatively recent occurrence of the destruction of Arab society in most of Palestine, the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians and the facts of Palestinian resistance, non-violent as well as violent, all make the consequential issues particularly acute. Of course, as Hirsh says, Israel is not uniquely responsible for the situation: Britain, the USA, the UN and others were all fundamentally implicated in 1948 and remain so today, and Palestinian (and other Arab) leaders have not always helped their people's cause. But the characters of the Jewish nationalist project, the Israeli state and the occupation remain the fundamental causes of the problem.

Looked at in this light, Hirsh would do better to stop worrying about 'over-enthusiastic anger with Israel' and look to what might be done now to halt Israeli colonisation and free Palestinian society. My claim is not, as Hirsh wrongly alleges, 'that raising anti-Semitism as an issue is a much greater wrong than excluding Israelis from universities.' Rather it is that *falsely criticising Israel's opponents as anti-Semitic*, especially using the argument of 'institutional racism' – which in this case is spurious – is no answer to the boycott campaign, let alone to the many deep-rooted objections to Israeli policies. Neither I nor most of Israel's critics are 'falling into antisemitic ways of thinking' – so Hirsh should not fall into the trap of seeing anti-Semitism as central to the debate about Israel and Palestine.



## Letter 4

**The Boycott is a symptom, and it's time to sound the alarm: David Hirsh replies to Martin Shaw**

**Editors:** The stakes are high. If the proposal to exclude Israelis – and only Israelis – from British universities is anti-Semitic in effect, if it risks normalising anti-Semitic ways of thinking and if it is a symptom, an indication and an escalation of a wider problem, then we should sound the alarm. If we judge that Jews are crying anti-Semitism as part of a communalist conspiracy or that they are misjudging the situation for some other reason, then we should reassure the British intelligentsia that anti-Semitism is not something about which it currently needs to worry. But we'd better get it right. Judging by their record, European intellectuals should be reluctant to gamble the future of Jews on their own ability to recognise and to oppose anti-Semitism.

The narrative which underpins the singling out of Israel and only Israel for an academic boycott is false in a number of key claims: for example, that Israel is a necessarily racist state; that it was founded upon the deliberate and brutal destruction of the larger part of Arab society in Palestine; and that this constituted genocide. The Jews in Palestine in 1948 were the remnants of genocide. The UN offered them half a little statelet but it did not offer to defend it nor did it oppose the British and American arms embargo which sought to deprive it of the means of self-defence. Nevertheless the Jews accepted the UN compromise. It was, in 1948, the Arab nationalist regimes which launched the second genocidal offensive of the decade against the Jews. As it turned out, it was the Palestinians and not the Jews who were the chief victims of this pan-Arabist aggression. The Palestinians suffered terribly as a result of the subordination of their own national interest to the ideology of Arab nationalism. Many Arab states, to this day, refuse to allow Palestinians to live as equal citizens. Lebanon, Jordan and the 'Syrian Arab Republic' keep the descendants of the Palestinian refugees corralled, with the collusion of the UN, into 'refugee camps' so that their symbolic value as victims of Israeli oppression may continue to be exploited. Imagine if Britain or the United States still kept Jewish refugees from anti-Semitism locked up in 'refugee camps.'

The war of 1948 was horrible. There were some massacres of Jews by Arabs and there were some massacres of Arabs by Jews. There was terror and forced population

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movements on both sides. The Jews, against all expectations, won the war against the invading Arab states, and 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven out as a result. What would have been the result if Israel had lost in 1948? I am not denying that this was a nakba for those Palestinians, nor am I denying that Israel should recognise its own considerable share of responsibility for ongoing Palestinian dispossession. But I am absolutely contesting the now standard British narrative of Israel's birth as an aggressive, imperialist and pre-planned campaign of ethnic cleansing, theft and genocide.

Left antizionist discourse owes much to its anti-Semitic Soviet heritage. The current boycott campaign relies on rhetoric similar to that which was used in the state purges of Jews from Polish and East German universities in 1968. Today's boycott campaign needs to make an emotional case as well as an intellectual one for boycotting a significant proportion of the world's Jewish academics. Not surprisingly therefore, it throws up many examples and echoes of the themes and images of global Jewish conspiracy and of the unalloyed nature of Jewish evil – an evil which was originally thought to be manifested in the murder of God and its periodic re-enactment on the bodies of innocent children. Left and antiracist antizionism exists alongside, and inter-twined with, other antizionist movements but it generally fails to notice this fact and the threat which comes with it. Sometimes it fails to resist the temptation of making political alliances with anti-Semitic antizionist movements.

Few on the British left seem bothered about anti-Semitism in predominately Arab or Muslim communities. The anti-Semitism of Hamas and Hezbollah, when not simply denied, is often judged in Britain to be politically unimportant; or it is just blamed on the Jews. The Holocaust-denying Iranian regime, which finances and arms the anti-Semitic and genocidal Hamas and Hezbollah movements, which promises to wipe Israel off the map and which is currently building nuclear weapons, is not generally regarded in Britain as a racist threat to Jews. The current research linking the rise of genocidal, anti-imperialist, anti-American anti-Semitism in the Middle East to Nazi war-time propaganda is not even read by British intellectuals; Ilan Pappé, by contrast, is treated as a serious historian. The high budget series, produced by Hezbollah TV (*Al Manar*) entitled 'Diaspora' and the one produced in Egypt called 'Knight without a Horse,' both of which dramatised and popularised the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to huge and mainstream audiences across the Middle East, are not considered by most British cultural studies scholars to be of any significance.

The campaign to exclude Israelis from UK universities impacted immediately within the University and College Union itself against Jewish members. People who raise the issue of anti-Semitism are disdainfully ignored by union activists and officials. The arguments they raise are routinely de-legitimised by means of accusations of bad faith; disgraceful insinuations and assumptions directly underpinned by official union policy and underwritten by union staff. Formal complaints about institutional anti-Semitism in the union have either gone uninvestigated or have been whitewashed by the General Secretary. The union has done nothing to stop a steady stream of opponents of anti-Semitism from resigning. It responded in a trivial way to the concerns of the Parliamentary Enquiry into Antisemitism. It is clear that our union has a problem of institutional anti-Semitism, and that this is a predictable result of the campaign to exclude Israelis – and only Israelis – from our campuses. Eminent anti-discrimination lawyers, who have described precisely and technically how the boycott campaign violates both Race Relations law and the union's own commitment to equality, have been ignored.

Yet there are British intellectuals who, when confronted by the evidence of the contemporary threat of anti-Semitism, show themselves quite incapable of recognising it as such. They respond by means of angry disavowal, denial, minimisation, *ad hominem* counter-accusation, and above all by changing the subject.

## Letter 5

**It's Hirsh, not the western Left that is eliding anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism:**

**Martin Shaw responds to David Hirsh**

**Editors:** It is difficult to continue this debate as David Hirsh has not done me the courtesy of responding directly to my arguments. A good deal of his 'reply' is taken up with complaints about the British Universities and Colleges Union, whose proposed boycott I made it clear I did not support. He introduces a new complaint, that 'few on the British left seem bothered about anti-Semitism in predominately Arab or Muslim communities.' Let me make it clear that I am well aware of this and agree that it is a disturbing aspect of the polarisation over Israel and Palestine. But our disagreement was about the debate in Western societies, especially Britain, and here his new argument – 'Left antizionist discourse owes much to its anti-Semitic Soviet heritage. The current boycott campaign relies on rhetoric similar to that which was used in the state purges of Jews from Polish and East German

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universities in 1968' – strikes me as disingenuous. Although some anti-Zionists here, including Jews, are from Communist backgrounds, there is little to suggest that their ideas, let alone those of other contemporary Western anti-Zionists, owe anything to Stalinist rhetoric in Eastern Europe nearly half a century ago.

The serious issues, and indirect reply, in Hirsh's latest contribution, concern the foundation of Israel. Although many newly arrived Jews in Palestine in 1948 were indeed 'the remnants of genocide,' the Jewish nationalist movement pre-existed their arrival and was led by earlier-settled Zionists. The UN did not offer the Zionists 'half a little statelet,' but the larger part of a territory in which Jews made up barely one-third of the population: even assuming that partition could have been just, this was an over- rather than under-generous 'offer.' If, then, Zionist leaders 'accepted the UN compromise,' this was because it gave them a basis to create a state, and enabled them to extend it further at the expense of Palestinian Arabs. Hirsh's account of the subsequent war – 'the Arab nationalist regimes ... launched the second genocidal offensive of the decade against the Jews. As it turned out, it was the Palestinians and not the Jews who were the chief victims of this pan-Arabist aggression' – is now discredited by historical research including by Israeli historians. Hirsh complains that 'Ilan Pappé ... is treated as a serious historian,' but in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Pappé has indeed written a seriously researched historical account, well received by other scholars (see Mark Levene's review in the *Journal of Genocide Research*). He shows from Israeli sources that the 'massacres of Jews by Arabs' were not accidental, but part of a carefully planned dispossession of a large part of the Arab population of Palestine. He also shows that when the Zionists won the war against the invading Arab states, this was not 'against all expectations.' On the contrary Zionist leaders had a realistic assessment that Arab resistance would crumble in the face of their better organised forces, and they planned their campaign to destroy Arab society in this expectation.

Hirsh complains about '*ad hominem* accusations' but his dismissal of Pappé suggests that in the current debate it is he who resorts to this kind of argument. Hirsh should actually read Pappé, and recognise that he builds on the work of other scholars like Benny Morris (who unlike Pappé broadly supports Israeli policy in 1948). If he wishes to contest a 'narrative of Israel's birth as an aggressive, imperialist and pre-planned campaign of ethnic cleansing, theft and genocide,' then he might at least refer to some of the arguments and evidence that have been adduced to support propositions similar to these.

I am glad that Hirsh is 'not denying that this was a nakba for those Palestinians.' But when he acknowledges 'that Israel should recognise its own considerable share of responsibility for ongoing Palestinian dispossession,' I think it would have been more accurate to have replaced 'considerable' with 'prime.' True, others like the USA aid and abet Israel, and the divided and often misconceived nature of Palestinian and Arab opposition may offer it unintended reinforcement. But only the Israeli state and Zionist movements have pursued, continuously for more than 60 years, policies for dispossessing Arab Palestinians. Perhaps Hirsh needs to recognise that the deep, often intended harm to millions of Palestinians enormously outweighs the misconceived and unsuccessful attempt to deny Israeli academics a platform in British universities.

One final point. I, like most Western opponents of the Israeli state, have been very careful to distinguish between Israel and Israelis, and between Israelis and Jews. Yet I have been implicitly accused (elsewhere) of actual anti-Semitism, and by David Hirsh (if I read him right) of being 'incapable of recognising' anti-Semitism. Yet Hirsh, in his remarks about 1948, only refers to 'the Jews in Palestine,' never once to the Zionist movement, leaders, armed forces or proto-state. It is clear that the identification of Israel with 'Jews' in general lies in the minds of Hirsh and other Israeli advocates rather than those of their critics. Not surprisingly then, opposition to Israel must be anti-Semitic, and if not consciously, then 'institutionally.' But this 'anti-Semitism' is largely the product of this mental elision on his (and their) part, not of the ideas of Israel's left-wing opponents.

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