MOISHE POSTONE

Zionism, anti-semitism and the left

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

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

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

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

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

A. A lot has to be disaggregated here. There is a kind of runoff of long histories of historical currents in the contemporary form of anti-Zionism.

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

There were various forms of this Jewish national self-expression. Zionism was one. There were others, like Jewish cultural autonomists, and the Bund, an autonomous socialist movement of Jewish workers, which was much larger than any of the other movements, and which split off from the Russian Social Democratic party in the first years of the 20th century. On the other hand there were Jews, many of them members of Communist parties, who viewed any expression of Jewish identity as anathema to their own notions of what I would call abstract Enlightenment notions of humanism. For example, in an earlier phase, referred to the Bund as “sea-sick Zionists”. Note that the critique of Zionism here had nothing to do with Palestine or the situation of the Palestinians, since the Bund was focused entirely on autonomy within the Russian empire and rejected Zionism. Rather, Trotsky’s equation of the Bund and Zionism implied a rejection of any form of Jewish communal self-identification. Trotsky, I think, changed his mind later on, but that attitude was fairly typical. Communist organisations tended to be very strongly opposed to Jewish nationalism of any sort, whether cultural nationalism, political nationalism, or Zionism. This is one strand of anti-Zionism. It is not necessarily anti-semitic, but rejects Jewish collective self-identification in the name of abstract universalism.

Yet, frequently, this form of anti-Zionism is inconsistent with its willingness to support self-determination for most peoples, but not to Jews. It is at this point that what presents itself as abstractly universal becomes specifically political. Most importantly, such abstract, universalist claims of Jews’ history of Jews in Europe. This fulfills a very useful, historically “cleansing” dual function: the violence historically perpetrated by Europeans on Jews is erased; at the same time the horrors of European colonialism now become attributed to the Jews. In this case, the abstract universalism expressed by many anti-Zionists today becomes an ideology of legitimation that helps constitute a form of amnesia regarding the long history of European actions, policies and ideologies toward the Jews, while essentially continuing that history. The Jews have once again become the singular object of European indignation. The solidarity most Jews feel toward other Jews, including in Israel — however understandable following the Holocaust — is now derided. This form of anti-Zionism has become one of the bases for a programme to eradicate actually existing Jewish self-determination. It converges with some forms of Arab nationalism — now coded as singularly progressive.

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

The Czechoslovak CP leaders, who had nothing to do with Zionism — most of them were Spanish Civil War veterans — were not Jewish. This strand of anti-semitism-anti-Zionism was import ed into the Middle East during the Cold War, in part by the intelligence services of countries like East Germany. A form of anti-semitism was introduced into the Middle East that was “legitimate” for the Left, and was called anti-Zionism.

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

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

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

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

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

Between 1967 and 2000, the left in Israel had always argued that what the Palestinians wanted was self-determination, and that this abstract notion that they wanted to eradicate Israel was a fantasy. Unfortunately that fantasy was the only fantasy, which has strengthened the right inimicably in attempts to prevent the coming into being of a Palestinian state. The Israeli right and the Palestinian right are reinforcing each other, and the left in the West is supporting what I regard as the Palestinian right, the ultra-nationalists and the Islamists.

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

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

A. Israel is far from being as powerful as charged. Yet you have people like my present and former colleagues at the University of Chicago, including Martin Thomas and Stephen Walt, strongly supported by circles in the UK, who maintain that the only key to policy in the Middle East is Israel, as mediated by the Jewish lobby. They make this sweeping charge in the absence of any serious attempt to analyze American policy in...
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Q. How much do you think anti-semitism today is tied up with attitudes to Israel? It seems to us that a strand in the attitudes of some left-wing forces towards Israel has anti-semitic implications. That is the strand which desires not just criticism and change of Israeli government policy towards the Palestinians, but the abolition of Israel as such, and a world where all other nation states would exist but not Israel. From that viewpoint, to be a Jew, to feel some common identity with other Jews and thus usually with the Jews of Israel, is to be a “Zionist”, and that is as abhorrent as being a racist.

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

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

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Yet, frequently, this form of anti-Zionism is inconsistent — it is willing to accord national self-determination to most peoples, but not to Jews. It is at this point that what presents itself as abstractly universal becomes ideological. Moreover, the meaning of such abstract universalism itself changes with historical context. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, this abstract universalism served to veil the history of Jews in Europe. This fulfils a very useful, historically “cleansing” dual function: the violence historically perpetrated by Europeans against Jews is erased, at the same time the horrors of European colonialism now become attributed to the Jews. In this case, the abstract universalism expressed by many Israelis today becomes an ideology of legitimation that helps constitute a form of amnesia regarding the long history of European actions, policies and ideologies towards the Jews, while essentially continuing that history. The Jews have once again become the singular object of European indignation. The solidarity most Jews feel toward other Jews, including in Israel — however understandable following the Holocaust — is now decreed. This form of anti-Zionism has become one of the bases for a programme to eradicate actually existing Jewish self-determination.

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