



Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism: Ideology, Nostalgia, the Re-politicization of the Victim, and the Inverted David and Goliath Paradigm – Dr. Alon Helled

Introduction

An analytical examination of antisemitism and anti-Zionism poses a significant challenge for scholars of politics, ideology, and memory. Antisemitism is a persistent historical ideology that identifies Jews as a problem or a threat, whereas anti-Zionism - opposition to the Zionist movement or to the State of Israel - is a controversial or at least ambivalent political stance. It encompasses a spectrum of positions ranging from opposition to the very existence of Israel as the Jewish nation-state and/or opposition to the policies and actions of successive Israeli governments, based on the perception that the Jewish collective is primarily religious rather than political. From this perspective, any identitarian political activity is seen as discriminatory toward the non-Jewish population and as leading to the establishment of a nationalist and imperialist society.

In contemporary political cultures, anti-Zionist rhetoric often emerges from radical left movements, decolonial frameworks, and progressive critiques, and at times intersects with longstanding antisemitic structures. Scholars such as Brian Klug and Enzo Traverso have analyzed how elements of radical left critique can reproduce or echo antisemitic imagery, sometimes in good faith. This short article examines antisemitism and anti-Zionism through four analytical categories - ideology, nostalgia, the re-politicization of the victim, and the inverted David-and-Goliath paradigm - while integrating insights from Klug and Traverso regarding the involvement of the radical left in these issues.

A. Antisemitism as a Persistent Ideology

Antisemitism is more than a personal bias; it is a systemic ideology that interprets social and political problems through the lens of an imagined Jewish presence or influence. Enzo Traverso describes antisemitism as an enduring interpretive framework that persists beyond specific



historical contexts, adapting to new forms while retaining core patterns. Antisemitism survives by absorbing modern anxieties about capitalism, cosmopolitanism, and state power and reframing them as manifestations of Jewish agency. Similarly, Hannah Arendt described how modern antisemitism turns Jews into an “explanatory principle” for broad social developments. This ideological function reduces complex social processes to narratives centered on a blamed Other, offering a dichotomous and mass-legible template for social conflict.

Brian Klug, known for his critique of equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, analyzes in his essay *The Myth of the New Antisemitism* how parts of the radical left adopt discourse that reflects antisemitic logic, particularly with respect to Israel and Jewish identity. Klug identifies a pattern in which opposition to “Western imperialism” or “colonialism” can slide into frameworks that single out Jews or Zionism as symbols of global oppression. This is neither traditional biological antisemitism, which views Jews as racially inferior, nor religious-cultural hatred of Jews. Rather, it involves structural parallels: the projection of global evil onto Jews or onto Jewish political expressions. The implication is that the nationalization of Jewish identity within the history of nations and the nation-state model is framed as particularistic nationalism opposed to universal liberal conceptions. As a result, antisemitism is not confined to the far right or to overt racism; it can also surface in progressive discourse when concrete history and nuance are blurred by broad moral narratives.

B. Anti-Zionism, the Radical Left, and Ideological Articulation

Anti-Zionism on the radical left often draws on anti-colonial and anti-imperialist language. In principle, these frameworks critique domination and inequality. However, as Klug emphasizes, when anti-Zionism functions as a metaphysical denunciation of Zionism as an intrinsic evil, it can echo antisemitic images of Jews as uniquely illegitimate political actors - a tendency historically rooted in conservative religious right-wing traditions. Conversely, Enzo Traverso highlights that elements of the European radical left have experienced a “moralization of politics,” whereby political critique is articulated through universal moral categories detached from empirical context. Within this framework, Israel becomes a symbolic focal point for



everything perceived as oppressive in modernity: capitalism, militarism, and Western hegemony. The danger, according to Traverso, lies not in criticism itself but in its transformation into moral absolutism.

Moreover, radical anti-Zionism can hold ideological and moral value when it addresses historical policies, colonial dynamics, and universal human rights. It becomes problematic, however, when it reproduces antisemitic patterns of delegitimization - for example, by isolating Jewish political identity as an exception among national identities, attributing collective malicious intent to it, or equating Israel with a universal source of injustice.

C. Nostalgia and the Moral Economy of the Past

Nostalgia - the longing for an imagined, morally pure past - plays a significant role in both antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct a mythical past, and reflective nostalgia, which dwells on loss and complexity. Antisemitic narratives often mobilize restorative nostalgia, imagining pre-modern social orders supposedly free of Jewish influence. A similar nostalgia appears in radical left discourse, particularly when intersecting with anti-colonial narratives. The Middle East prior to 1948 is sometimes depicted as a harmonious landscape disrupted solely by Zionism. This selective nostalgia creates a “moral economy” that clearly delineates benefactors and perpetrators: a pure past and an indigenous victim versus the Zionist intrusion. Historical complexity is sidelined, producing a morally powerful yet distorted simplicity.

D. The Re-politicization of the Victim

The elevation of victimhood - emerging after World War II through human rights and decolonization movements - has reshaped political legitimacy around suffering. Didier Fassin has described how the victim narrative became a central moral category in international politics. Prior to 1948, Jews were perceived as archetypal victims: persecuted, murdered, and ultimately victims of genocide. With the establishment of the State of Israel, moral attention shifted toward the Palestinian narrative of suffering associated with occupation and displacement. Re-



politicization - the renewed attribution of political value to an issue of collective significance - does not negate Palestinian claims to justice. It becomes problematic, however, when it erases historical and contemporary Jewish vulnerability and when moral narratives reduce political complexity to a binary schema of oppressor versus oppressed. This pattern can sometimes echo older antisemitic motifs, portraying Jews as manipulative actors who exploit victimhood for popularity and political gain within a superficial conception of what is deemed politically correct.

E. The Inverted David-and-Goliath Paradigm

The biblical story of David and Goliath symbolizes justice against overwhelming odds. Early Zionist narratives cast Jews as David facing multiple existential threats. Today, the metaphor is often inverted: Palestinians as David and Israel as Goliath. While this metaphor may reflect certain power asymmetries, when absolutized and detached from historical context it distorts political reality. The inverted paradigm portrays Israel as a one-dimensional force of oppression and Palestinians as absolute victims, erasing regional and internal political complexities.

This inversion can also reactivate antisemitic imagery of Jews as wielders of absolute power, depicting Israel as a uniquely guilty, irredeemable military force. Conceptual and methodological caution is required when using the term “antisemitic imagery.” The claim is not that all criticism of Jews, Zionism, or Israel is inherently antisemitic, but rather that political critique can—consciously or unconsciously - draw on symbolic, narrative, or moral patterns rooted in historical antisemitic traditions. These images operate at the structural level of discourse: they simplify historical complexity, attribute collective malicious intent, and position Jews or Jewish political expression as a comprehensive explanatory principle for social and political processes.

As emphasized by Brian Klug, Hannah Arendt, and Jonathan Leader Maynard, the problem lies not in criticism per se but in the substitution of concrete historical analysis with ideology and moral metaphors. When political discourse adopts absolute categories of good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, it risks reproducing logics of delegitimization and collective



blame, even when its declared intention is progressive. Identifying antisemitic imagery, therefore, is not a tool of silencing but a critical means of examining the boundary between legitimate political critique and a slide into reductive, exclusionary ideology. Klug notes, for example, that symbolic frameworks matter: when moral metaphors replace empirical nuance, they can generate delegitimization reminiscent of prejudice as an explanatory device, thus forming a bridge between cultural-symbolic discourse and material political practice.

Conclusion

Antisemitism and anti-Zionism are not static categories; they are shaped by history, ideology, narrative, and moral memory. Through the prisms of ideology, nostalgia, the re-politicization of the victim, and the inverted David-and-Goliath paradigm, it is possible to trace how older antisemitic structures persist in updated forms, particularly within the radical left. Integrating the insights of Brian Klug and Enzo Traverso deepens our understanding of how legitimate political critique can intersect with - and sometimes reproduce - ideological patterns of delegitimization. Recognizing this dynamic does not invalidate criticism of Israel or Zionism, but it demands conceptual precision, historical responsibility, and awareness of how moral narratives shape political judgment.

Moreover, adopting a context-sensitive analytical approach allows for a distinction between concrete criticism of policies, institutions, and political practices and essentializing discourse that turns a collective identity into a negative moral object. This distinction is especially vital in contemporary public and academic arenas, where categories of justice, victimhood, and resistance carry intense emotional weight. When political discourse loses its historical and empirical grounding and is transformed into an absolute moral metaphor, it risks not only weakening the critique itself but also reproducing logics of exclusion and othering familiar from the history of antisemitism. Responsible discussion of antisemitism and anti-Zionism therefore requires not only a clear normative stance against racism and oppression, but also critical reflexivity regarding the conceptual and narrative tools through which political reality is interpreted.



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