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For the first time in my life, I'm frightened to be Jewish

And non-Jews attacking the Labour party aren't helping.

David Graeber

6 September 2019

I am 58 years old, and for the first time in my life, I am frightened to be Jewish.

We live in a time when racism is being normalized, when Nazis parade in the streets in Europe and America; Jew baiters like Hungary's Orban are treated as respectable players on the international scene, "white nationalist" propagandist Steve Bannon can openly coordinate scare-mongering tactics with Boris Johnson in London at the same time as in Pittsburg, murderers deluded by white nationalist propaganda are literally mowing Jews down with automatic weapons. How is it, then, that our political class has come to a consensus that the greatest threat to Britain's Jewish community is a lifelong anti-racist accused of not being assiduous enough in disciplining party members who make offensive comments on the internet?

For almost all my Jewish friends, this is what is currently creating the greatest and most immediate sense of trepidation,

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even more than the actual Nazis: the apparently endless campaign by politicians like Margaret Hodge, Wes Streeting, and Tom Watson to weaponize antisemitism accusations against the current leadership of the Labour party. It is a campaign – which however it started, has been sustained primarily by people who are not themselves Jewish – so cynical and irresponsible that I genuinely believe it to be a form of antisemitism in itself. And it is a clear and present danger to Jewish people. To any of these politicians who may be reading this, I am begging you: if you really do care about Jews, please, stop this.

One might ask how this happened? Here I feel I must tell a somewhat brutal truth. Originally this scandal has very little to do with antisemitism. It is in its origins a crisis of democratization in the Labour Party.

Let me hasten to emphasize: this is not because bigoted attitudes towards Jews do not exist in the Labour Party. Far from. But Antisemitism can be found on almost every level of British society. As a transplanted New Yorker, I'm often startled by what can pass in casual conversation (from "of course he's cheap, he's Jewish" to "Hitler should have killed them all"). Surveys show that antisemitic attitudes are more common among supporters of the ruling Conservative party than Labour supporters. But the latter are in no sense immune.

What makes Labour unique however is that for four years now, Jeremy Corbyn and his allies have been spearheading an effort to democratize the internal workings of the party. It has inspired hundreds of thousands of new members to join, and turned once rubber-stamp branches into lively forums for public debate. Momentum, a mass action group, has been created to try to turn the party back into a mass movement, which it has not really been since the 1930s. All this has been anathema to a large number of MPs on the party's right, who, having been placed in their positions under Tony Blair as effective MPs-for-life, are by now so out of step with their Constituency Labour Parties that they would almost certainly lose their seats

if anything like an American-style primary system were put in place. And many Corbyn supporters have been campaigning for exactly that.

Still, a politician can't very well say they're against democratization. So over the past four years, they've tried throwing practically everything else they can think to throw at Corbyn and his supporters. Tolerance of antisemitism was the first to really stick. The reason is that any process of democratization, opening the floor to everyone, will necessarily mean a lot of angry people with no training are going to be placed in front of microphones. (This is the reason why few parallel scandals come out of the Tory side, despite the wider prevalence of antisemitism—not to mention other forms of racism and class hostility — no one without media training gets anywhere near a microphone. When the Tories briefly flirted with the idea of creating their own Momentum-style youth group, the project had to be quickly abandoned because participants began to call for the poor to be exterminated.) In a society as rife with anti-Jewish attitudes as Britain, opening the floor to everyone means some are, inevitably, going to say outrageous things. As I can well attest, this can be startling and appalling, but if one is actually interested in purging antisemitic views from society, one is also aware it's not ultimately a bad thing. It's only by bringing forms of unrecognized racism out in the open that they can be challenged and minds changed. There is evidence that in the first two years under Corbyn (2015–2017), this is exactly what was starting to happen: the prevalence of antisemitic attitudes among Labour supporters were sharply declining.

Still, superficially, this democratizing process *does* result, initially, in more antisemitic comments being made in public, which is precisely what made Corbyn and his followers vulnerable. By all indications, the right wing of the party made a conscious choice to turn this process for their own advantage. In a way it was a political masterstroke. If one accuses one's

opponents of promulgating antisemitism, almost any reply they make can itself be treated as antisemitic. It's no surprise that some Jews, both right-leaning elements in the Jewish community, and Labour supporters, who began looking nervously over their shoulders, have allowed themselves to be drawn into what can only be described now as a tragic spiral. The process is designed to feed on itself. Still, it's important to note that most of the protagonists were not Jewish and many if not most had never before taken any particular interest in Jewish issues. By all appearances, it was pure, cynical, political calculation. But it worked.

The problem is that exploiting Jewish issues in ways guaranteed to create rancor, panic, and resentment is itself a form of antisemitism. (This is true whether or not the architects are fully aware of what they're doing.) It creates terror in the Jewish community. It deprives us of our strongest allies. If one were actively trying to create ill-feeling towards Jewish people on the left, then surely purges, sensationalized denunciations in the media, wild exaggerations, and the endless twisting around of words (a skilled propagandist can after all prove anything – if I wanted to cherry-pick quotes, I'm sure I could demonstrate that Margaret Thatcher was a Communist or the Pope is anti-Catholic), would be the best way to go about it.

One could argue that none of this matters too much, since, as far as dangers to the Jewish community is concerned, internal left politics will always be a bit of a sideshow. In a sense this is true. There is no conceivable scenario in which admirers of the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg or Leon Trotsky are going to start shooting up synagogues, or Momentum (an organization three of whose four co-founders were Jewish) is going to make anyone wear yellow stars. That's what Nazis do. And Nazis are on the rise. But in another way, this makes the damage even more pernicious. As the racist right gains power and legitimacy across Europe, the very last thing we need is to leave

the public with the impression the Jewish community are a bunch of hypersensitive alarmists who start screaming about Auschwitz the moment they disagree with the exact wording of policy statement. It's crazy to cry wolf while real wolves are baying at the door. It's even crazier when those you're crying wolf about are the very people most likely to defend you against them. Because anyone who knows Jewish history also knows this is how it begins. And history from Cable Street to Charlottesville teaches us when the brownshirts do hit the streets, police tend to prove useless or worse, and it's precisely the "hard left" that is willing to stand by us. If that day comes, I know that Jewish left intellectuals such as myself are likely to be first on their list, but I also know that Corbyn and his supporters will be the first to place their bodies on the line to defend me. Will Tom Watson, the current purger-in-chief of purported antisemites in the Labour party, be there with them? Why do I doubt this?

Such scenarios might seem an impossible fantasy, but so, not so long ago, was a President Trump.

All I can do is plead to anyone involved in promulgating this campaign, in politics and media: please, stop. My safety is not your political chess piece. If you actually want to help, you could work with the party leadership, instead of using it as yet another way to seize power that you've repeatedly failed to win by legitimate, electoral means: If you're not capable of actual constructive behaviour, then at the very least, stop making things worse. Because what you are doing in the name of "protecting" me is driving us all to disaster. And for the first time in my life, I am genuinely afraid.