

The Antisemitism of the Left

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The hatred of Jews has ancient origins. Today the hatred goes by the abstract and antiseptic modern term “antisemitism.” It persists in pockets of the right. But in the United States and throughout the West, antisemitism receives most conspicuous expression among those who back progressive causes while supporting Iran-backed Hamas’ ambitions to destroy Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people. Antisemitism’s recrudescence as a pathology of the left attests not only to the staying power of the hatred of Jews but also to the internal disorder afflicting rights-protecting democracies.

Free and democratic citizens tend to regard the protection of basic rights and fundamental freedoms as sacrosanct. Accordingly, those endowed with the liberal and democratic spirit recoil in horror at Hamas’ mass murder of Israeli civilians on Oct. 7, 2023. Those who respect human rights unequivocally condemn the jihadists’ use of rape as a weapon of war on that calamitous early autumn Sabbath. Those who take seriously the international laws of war decry unreservedly not only Hamas’ butchering, raping, and kidnapping of Israeli civilians but also the jihadists’ transformation of Palestinian civilians into human shields by embedding military forces within and under Gaza’s densely populated urban areas – rendering Hamas an outlaw organization and enemy of civilization.

Yet far from recoiling, condemning, or decrying Hamas, many progressives embrace the jihadists. At elite American universities, among left-leaning organizations in the United States, and on the streets of London, Paris, and Berlin, activists lionize Hamas for its uprising against Israel’s alleged “settler colonialism.” Progressive strongholds in America and Western Europe fete the jihadists as freedom fighters and wield “Zionist” as a slur. And left-wing enthusiasts espouse Hamas’ cause, the eradication of Israel, as a critical first step to attaining global emancipation from alleged forces of oppression – rule of law, capitalism, and meritocracy – they associate with Jews.

Progressive New York City abounds in antisemitism. The New York Times reported that on Monday, June 10, “Hundreds of people protested against Israel” that evening “outside an exhibition in Lower Manhattan that commemorates the more than 360 people who were killed by Hamas on Oct. 7 at a rave in southern Israel.” A White House spokesman characterized the protests as “outrageous and heartbreaking,” and New York City Mayor Eric Adams described them as “despicable.” Later that evening, according to ABC News in New York City, “Apparent pro-Palestinian protesters on a subway car called out, ‘Raise your hand if you're a Zionist... this is your chance to get out...,’ as part of a call-and-response chant. The leader of the chant concluded, ‘OK, no Zionists, we're good.’”

On Tuesday, June 11, reported The New York Post, “The Brooklyn Museum’s director and a number of its Jewish board members were targeted” late at night “by antisemitic vandals who tossed red paint and scrawled ‘blood on your hands’ across their homes.” The haters strung a large sign from pillars in front of the museum director’s doorway that read, “Anne Pasternak Brooklyn Museum White Supremacist Zionist.”

This recent round of hate follows eight months of coast-to-coast anti-Israeli protests – frequently marked by harassment of Jewish students, vandalism of university property, and unlawful encampments in campus common spaces – at top American universities. New York City’s Columbia University was among the hardest hit. In April, students rebuilt a tent village on the university’s main quad in defiance of Columbia President Minouche Shafiq. After pro-Palestinian demonstrators seized Hamilton Hall, situated on the main quad, on April 30, the university canceled the main commencement ceremony.

Concern for the plight of noncombatant Palestinians is not the issue. “It is entirely reasonable to sympathise with the Palestinians’ sense of grievance at losing their land in 1948, and even their resentment at having to share it – but not to the point of condoning Palestinian terrorism against Israelis,” affirms Hadley Freeman, in “Blindness: Oct. 7 and the Left,” a lengthy, perceptive, and piercing essay published in the May issue of The Jewish Quarterly. A resident of North London and a columnist for The Sunday Times, Freeman delves into left-wing antisemitism with an acute sense of betrayal – as a progressive and as a Jew.

The heartless condemnations of Israel began well before the Jewish state could mount a counterstrike in response to the Hamas massacre. On Oct. 7, “thirty-four Harvard student organizations issued a statement that they ‘hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all the unfolding violence,’” writes Freeman. “This is the generation raised on the beliefs that ‘victim blaming’ is wrong and ‘microaggressions’ – which Harvard has defined as ‘verbal or nonverbal slights/insults (whether intentional or unintentional) that negatively targeted a particular identity group’ – are unacceptable,” she mordantly adds. “But I guess massacring Jews is too micro to count.”

The Harvard students were among the first but hardly alone in the alacrity with which they leapt to denounce Israel and applaud Hamas. Commencing on Oct. 8, “In cities around the world, including Brighton and New York City – bastions of liberal sensibility, homes to thousands of Jews – protests were held,” according to Freeman. “But not against Hamas, who were at that moment still wiping the blood of Israelis off their boots. Against Israel.”

Nor did anti-Israel sentiment abate as the full dimensions of the slaughter came into view. “Over the next few months,” recalls Freeman, “anti-Israel protests happened so regularly in London that I stopped taking my children into town on the weekends, because they were bewildered by all the placards warning about ‘Zionist racism’ and ‘Jewish apartheid’ carried by people who looked like they could be our neighbors.”

Compassion for victims of the Israel-Hamas war needn't be a zero-sum game. But, maintains Freeman, the left counts only one side's suffering: "Everyone is horrified by what is happening to the Palestinians; what is striking is that so many have withheld similar concern for the Israelis."

The left-wing anti-Israel crowd's indifference to Jewish suffering stems not from absent-minded oversight but from antipathy to Israel and enthusiasm for its enemies. "Even after Israel collected the evidence from Hamas' own cameras and showed it around the world in a film titled Bearing Witness, many people on social media, including some with high profiles, dismissed it as 'PR' and not evidence of rape, despite the images of dead women naked below the waist," Freeman writes. "It's enough to almost make you feel sorry for Hamas: they filmed what they did and made it available and still some people refuse to believe it. What's a terrorist gotta do to get some credit around here?"

The antipathy to Israel and enthusiasm for its enemies derive support from the academy's most fashionable ideology. "Antisemitism found a new point of entry through identity politics, which was developed on US and – to a lesser degree – UK university campuses over the past twenty years," Freeman maintains. "This ideology has now escaped to the wider world as students schooled in it have moved into workplaces."

Identity politics serves as the default opinion – in large corporations' HR offices, the federal bureaucracy, mainstream media newsrooms and editorial pages, Hollywood studios and, not least, university administrations. It holds "that in order to see the world clearly, we need to divide it up into particular group identities, specifically racial and sexual identities, and quantify the degrees of their oppression." Identity politics then fits all group identities into one of "two racial categories: 'white' (defined as colonizing oppressors) and 'people of color' (the oppressed)," explains Freeman. "This is how the left pivoted from talking about class to talking about race. It is also why antisemitism is thriving again on campuses, as supporters of identity politics combine with activists for Black and Muslim causes, who see Jews as ultra white and therefore oppressive."

Identity politics suffuses the race-based alliance. The "activists aren't necessarily Black or Muslim themselves," Freeman stresses. Rather, "these activists are often white, but see supporting these causes – and trashing Israel and Jews – as a means of proving their allyship and exonerating themselves from white guilt."

Left-wing antisemitism and the identity politics that fuels it present a severe test to liberal democracy in America, and throughout the West.

Other bigotries that have marred America's promise of individual freedom and equality under law – discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and sex and gender – violate the nation's founding principles and constitutional imperatives. But by and large, other bigots did not

reject those principles and imperatives. To preserve an unjust status quo, they dissimulated, concocted ugly excuses or far-fetched rationalizations, or swept the contradiction under the rug.

In contrast, left-wing antisemitism's alliance with identity politics brazenly rejects America's most basic political commitments and seeks revolutionary transformation. To assume that rights inhere in groups, not individuals; to believe that people must be sorted into oppressor and oppressed classes; to insist that supposed oppressors can do no good and supposed oppressed can do no evil – is to repudiate America's constitutional ethos.

Left-wing anti-Americanism nourishes left-wing antisemitism. To prevail in the struggle against today's most virulent form of antisemitism, therefore, it is necessary to champion liberal democracy in America, and throughout the West.

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