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From Ferguson to Gaza. Sport, political sensibility, and the Israel/Palestine conflict in the age of Black Lives Matter

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ABSTRACT

In June 2020, Black Lives Matter UK (BLM-UK) posted a series of tweets in which they endorsed the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Calling for 'targeted sanctions in line with international law against Israel's colonial, apartheid regime,' one tweet claimed that 'mainstream British politics is gagged of the right to critique Zionism'. The tweets were seen by some to be antisemitic and resulted in the English Premier League, the BBC and Sky Sports, which had hitherto been supportive of the Black Lives Matter protests, distance themselves from the Black Lives Matter movement. One month later, during the BLM protests in the USA, Black NFL player DeSean Jackson posted material to his Instagram story that was also viewed as antisemitic. This article unpacks, via these two sports-based incidents, the relationship between anti-racism, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism. I discuss how these tensions are not new, but a clear echo of the tensions that existed in the 1960s and 1970s during the height of the Civil Rights Movement; these tensions continue because the foundational issues remain unchanged. These two incidents raise important questions about how sports organisations operate in a world where sport is seen as 'apolitical' and strive for 'neutrality' but fail to recognise sport *is* political and that a position of neutrality cannot be successfully achieved. The article assesses the challenges that arise when sports organisations, and their athletes, choose to engage in a certain kind of sport politics.

KEYWORDS

Racism; sports organisations; antisemitism; Human Rights; social media

Introduction

In June 2020, Black Lives Matter UK (BLM-UK), the British arm of the anti-racist organisation founded in the United States in 2013, posted a series of tweets from their verified Twitter account (@ukblm) in which they endorsed the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Calling for 'targeted sanctions in line with

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international law against Israel's colonial, apartheid regime' one tweet claimed that 'mainstream British politics is gagged of the right to critique Zionism'. The tweets were seen by some to be antisemitic¹. The English Premier League (EPL) which had been very supportive of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and had endorsed the wearing of the Black Lives Matter logo on football shirts for the 2019/20 season, immediately distanced themselves from the movement. They stated that any attempts by groups to 'hijack' the anti-racism cause to suit their own political ends were 'unwelcome'. Similarly, both the BBC and Sky Sports, which had initially allowed its presenters and guests to wear BLM badges, advised them not to.

In July 2020, during the BLM protests in the USA following the televised death of African American George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in May, Black NFL player DeSean Jackson posted material to his Instagram story that was widely viewed as antisemitic. Jackson posted comments that were supportive of Adolf Hitler and quotations (incorrectly attributed) to Hitler, adding a comment that 'Hitler was right'. Other Black US athletes joined the fray, either supporting Jackson or being critical of his posts. Facing a growing backlash, Jackson deleted his posts and apologised.

Racism has been a core issue in the sociological study of sport. Fresh impetus has been given by the emergence of the BLM movement, greater awareness of issues of social justice, and the role of sports organisations (Bradbury et al., 2020; Burdsey, 2011; Carrington, 2010; Dart & Long, 2020; Farrington et al, 2014; Hylton, 2018; Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Love et al., 2019; Weems & Singer, 2017). Within this extensive body of work, the terminology used has not been constant, but contingent upon their geographical location and time of writing (Back, 2009; Cashmore, 1996). In this article, the holistic terms 'Black' and 'Jew' are not viewed as 'properties' that are inherent within individuals (van Sterkenburg et al., 2019), but as social constructions that exist in everyday life, recognising that minority ethnic groups often have shared histories of discrimination. It is fully acknowledged that there are significant variations *within* each of these communities and that the experiences of individuals included under these 'umbrella terms' will be very different. It is also necessary to clarify the differences that exist between the different actors and their political actions (specifically, the BLM movement, the State of Israel, and groups advocating for the Palestinians), and the ideologies of racism, anti-racism and antisemitism (in relation to Black, Jewish and Palestinian communities). It is important to avoid any hint of reductionism within what are, internally, very diverse communities.

The article begins with a brief outline of the origins and agenda of the BLM movement, of antisemitism, and the politics of Zionism and anti-Zionism. I then present the two incidents; the first being the series of @ukblm tweets; the second, Instagram posts by NFL player, DeSean Jackson. I then explore the response of various sport and media organisations, before noting the key differences between the two incidents and explaining why the @ukblm posts were not antisemitic (but were anti-Zionist), and why DeSean Jackson's posts were antisemitic. The specific words used in the posts is then considered, with the author rejecting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism (IHRA, 2016), due to its inherent fundamental flaws (Stern, 2019). What is discussed here is not a wholly new phenomenon but a

continuation of debates that occurred throughout the period of US Civil Rights; the arguments continue because the foundational causes remain unchanged. The article concludes by identifying the challenges facing sport governing bodies and organisations when they, and their athletes, mix human rights and social media.

Black civil rights and antisemitism

Fischbach (2019) identifies the different world views held historically by Black Civil Rights groups in the US and by leading figures towards the Israel-Palestine conflict. He distinguishes two main camps: a group of older, established, mainstream, bourgeois civil rights leaders (wearing coats and ties), and younger, more revolutionary, 'Black Power' militants sporting dashikis or black berets (see also Dollinger, 2018 for relations between Black Power and Jewish groups in the 1960s). Many of the mainstream Black civil rights organisations vacillated in their approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict, with Fischbach (2019) concluding they often expressed support for the Israeli state. Arguably, their main motivation was due to the significant financial support that came from mainstream liberal and progressive elements within the US Jewish community, and that criticism of Israel might have had a negative impact on this financial support.

By contrast, more militant elements within the Civil Rights movement, in particular the revolutionary Black Panther Party (BPP), adopted a more consistent position and along with the Vietnamese, put the Palestinians at the forefront of their struggle (Spencer, 2016; Malcolm & Haley, 1965). The BPP picked up on the sentiments expressed by Malcolm X and others on the importance of internationalism and cultivating links with 'third world' groups and issues (Baig, 2019; Rodriguez, 2006; Ture, 2007). The Palestinian struggle was seen as part of a global anticolonial, liberation struggle being waged by all people of colour against imperialism and white settler colonialism (Greenstein, 2019; Salamanca et al., 2012). Erakat and Lamont Hill (2019) describe how Black solidarity with the Palestinians developed during the 1960s², the decade that saw a much wider anti-imperial, anti-colonial turn, and the 1967 Arab-Israel (Six Day) War, which saw Israel occupy the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights (Bregman, 2014).

Founded in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in response to the separate killings of three African American men (Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Michael Brown). The Movement for Black Lives is a nationwide network of U.S. activist groups and continues the Civil Rights protests that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Black Lives Matter now exists as a global organisation, with several goals including the eradication of inequality, institutional racism, white supremacy and of police violence towards Black communities.

There have been growing links between Black people in the US and the Palestinians (Davis, 2016; Lamont Hill, 2018; Mislán & Shaban, 2019; Rickford, 2019), with Erakat and Lamont Hill (2019) stating that events in 2014 created a 'Ferguson-Gaza' moment—a reference to the town of Ferguson, Missouri, in the USA, where African American Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer (see also Thomas, 2020). The 51-day Israeli military offensive on the Gaza Strip, which resulted in two thousand Palestinian deaths and ten thousand injuries, coincided with the US

government's occupation of Ferguson. Erakat and Lamont Hill (2019, p. 9) describe how these two 'spectacles of violence spotlighted the devaluation, dehumanisation, and destruction of both Black and Palestinian life'. Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank have been compared to the 'stop and frisk' policy aimed at Black youth in the US, with the Black Lives Matter uprising compared to the Palestinian Intifadas ('uprisings') in 1987–1993 and 2000–2005. In 2015 a delegation of American activists associated with BLM and Dream Defenders visited the West Bank.³ In 2020 the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) expressed its support for the BLM movement and their ongoing struggle against police brutality in the US,

As indigenous people of Palestine, we have first-hand experience with settler-colonialism, apartheid and racist violence wielded by Israel's regime of oppression – with the military funding and unconditional support of the US government – to dispossess us, ethnically cleanse us, and reduce us to lesser humans. (BDS).

In 2016, an alliance of groups affiliated to the BLM movement unveiled their first official platform. The 40,000-word manifesto contained policy proposals and recommendations aimed at rectifying the wrongs perpetrated against America's African-American citizens (<https://neweconomy.net/resources/vision-black-lives-policy-demands-black-power-freedom-and-justice>). The document, titled 'A Vision for Black Lives,' was drafted by more than 50 organisations collectively known as the Movement for Black Lives. It went beyond issues of criminal justice to include issues relating to education, health, and economics. Of particular relevance to this article is the document's identification of Israel as an 'apartheid' state that was perpetrating 'genocide ... against the Palestinian people'. In one sub-section, headed 'Invest/Divest' (<https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/>), the manifesto criticises the US government for providing military aid to Israel (see also Giroux, 2014). The charter explicitly criticises the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and its illegal settlement expansion. Seeking to highlight the intersections between these two groups, activists have organised 'solidarity' visits to the occupied West Bank.⁴

In response to the BLM manifesto, pro-Israeli groups called the policy document antisemitic (Sidahmed, 2016). Highly critical of the language, they claim that traditional forms of antisemitism, which saw attacks on individual Jews and communities, were being replaced by a new form of antisemitism based on criticism of the State of Israel. In response to the emergence of the global non-violent BDS movement in 2005, successive Israeli governments have challenged pro-Palestine campaigns. Funding and working with a wide range of organisations and groups, the Israeli government launched *hasbara* ('propaganda/explanation') to promote counter-delegitimization narratives (Aouragh, 2016; Dart, 2016, 2017; Oren, 2016).

There is growing confusion as to what is antisemitism, a situation created, in part, by the well-meaning but fundamentally flawed International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition (IHRA, 2016). The definition is being used by various pro-Israeli groups to press governments, organisations and businesses to adopt it in full. The IHRA definition contains an appendix of 'advisory examples' which are used to undermine pro-Palestine campaigns. Because these examples conflate Zionism and Israel with antisemitism, criticism of Israel can be classified as 'hate speech' (Friedman, 2020). Pro-Palestine activity, under the IHRA code, is thus seen as both anti-Zionist

and antisemitic. Conflict over what is, and what is not, permissible in terms of support for the Palestinians, is evident in the often vitriolic, personalised and muddled debates on antisemitism and anti-Zionism (Dart, 2017; Gidley, McGeever and Feldman, 2020; Kelemen, 2012). The misuse of the term antisemitism led Lerman (2019) to conclude that there is now ‘total confusion about antisemitism ... including among Jews’ with Klug (2004) suggesting that ‘when antisemitism is everywhere, it is nowhere, and when every anti-Zionist is an antisemite we no longer know how to recognise the real thing. The concept of antisemitism loses its significance’. Arguments over the adoption of the IHRA definition continue, although it is increasingly being accepted that it is ‘not fit for purpose’ (Feldman, 2016; Philo et al., 2019; Stern, 2019; Ullrich, 2019).

Method

Studies involving the use of social media are increasingly common in the sociology of sport, with discourse analysis being used to explore the changing ways we are communicating (Cleland, 2014; Kilvington & Price, 2019; Moreau, et al, 2021). Critical Discourse Analysis is a form of discourse analysis that uses an interdisciplinary approach to study how power is exercised through language (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997). It is concerned with the analysis of texts, which are often subject to different interpretations, and seeks to show how discourses within language are used to maintain power and existing social relations (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). The combination of social media and Critical Discourse Analysis is opening up new avenues of research (Dowling, 2020; Hattem & Lomicka, 2016; McGannon, 2016), and is used here to unpack how language and power are being played out in a rapidly changing cultural and political landscape.

Fairclough’s (1995) model of critical discourse analysis consists of three categories or dimensions: text discourse, discursive practice, and social practice. Text discourse refers to the words chosen when writing/speaking which indicate the author’s position. The words we choose are important, with our use of language not neutral, but reflecting the values and attitudes we want to convey. Here, the selected tweets and Instagram posts are used to show the different interpretations that were generated, drawing on Fairclough’s third dimension, social practice. The words/language used by @blmuk and Jackson in their social media posts illustrate the authors’ attitudes. Later, I explain how these social media posts reveal wider issues of power, and how they were interpreted by different organisations, and how their reception was indicative of the culture and values of those organisations.

At the time of writing the @ukblm Twitter account had just under 80,000 followers, with 1.4 million people following DeSean Jackson on Instagram. The article draws upon their publicly available posts, and responses, to explore how ideas about racism are mediated and their impact on sports organisations. As Carrington (2012, p. 965) has argued, certain incidents within sport can be used to powerfully illustrate, often more than any other cultural form, what does, and does not ‘constitute racism ... [and] ... the importance of racist intent’. These two sports-related incidents have been selected because they allow for a historically informed discussion on the complexity of contemporary racisms, specifically antisemitism. Both incidents were

described as antisemitic; however, I will argue that the first was not antisemitic, while the second was.

@ukblm tweets

When the English Premier League restarted on June 17th, 2020, after an enforced shut-down in response to the Covid-19 peak, it supported all twenty clubs in their decision to replace the players' names (worn on the back of the shirts) with 'Black Lives Matter'. In addition, players and staff showed their support for BLM by 'taking the knee' before the start of each game. Football presenters and pundits showed their support by wearing BLM badges, with one leading broadcaster, Sky Sports, displaying #BlackLivesMatter before advertising breaks during its football coverage.

On June 28th, 2020 Black Lives Matter UK, using the verified [@ukblm](#) Twitter account, posted a series of tweets on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first tweet stated:

As Israel moves forward with the annexation of the West Bank, and mainstream British politics is gagged of the right to critique Zionism, and Israel's settler-colonial pursuits, we loudly and clearly stand beside our Palestinian comrades. FREE PALESTINE.

A following tweet stated:

More than 40 Jewish groups around the world in 2018 opposed 'cynical and false accusations of antisemitism that dangerously conflate anti-Jewish racism with opposition to Israel's policies and system of occupation and apartheid'.

The thread included ten related posts all expressing support for the Palestinians. At the time of writing the initial tweet had been retweeted over 27,000 times and had received over 48,000 likes.

In response to these tweets, the legitimacy of those supporting BLM-UK was questioned. On June 30th Sky Sports presenters and pundits, who had previously worn BLM badges, were no longer doing so.⁵ While at the start of the game between Brighton and Hove Albion FC and Manchester United FC, the players all 'took a knee', studio pundits Jamie Redknapp and Patrice Evra appeared without a BLM badge, as did the host, Kelly Cates and commentator Gary Neville. One of the pundits on Sky Sports, Matt Le Tissier stated that originally, he had been required to wear a BLM badge. Sky Sports stated that the decision to wear BLM badge was an individual's choice, although there were reports that 'the only reason they wore the badges was because they were asked to do so by the channel' (Middleton & Duell, 2020). Similarly, some BBC sport hosts and pundits were no longer wearing BLM badges. Gary Lineker, the highest profile British sports presenter, was also caught up in the furore. Having previously retweeted BLM posts, he was trolled by those seeking a response to the BLM tweets on June 20th. In response, Lineker tweeted: 'There are aspects of it [BLM] that I wouldn't endorse.' 'I agree with the cause but there are parts of the organisation that I just cannot support'. English Cricket also responded to the [@ukblm](#) tweets, with the sport's national governing body, the England and Wales Cricket Board, stating that players would continue to wear the BLM logo on their match shirts, but that they rejected any politicisation of the BLM movement (Wisden, 2020).

Many organisations found themselves having to negotiate the distinction between their stated opposition to all forms of racism and the wider agenda of the BLM movement. On June 30th 2020, the English Premier League issued a statement in response to the @ukblm tweets (Premier League, 2020). While they offered their support to the single objective of eradicating racial prejudice wherever it existed, the statement continued,

we do not endorse any political organisation or movement, nor support any group that calls for violence or condones illegal activity. We are aware of the risk posed by groups that seek to hijack popular causes and to promote their own political views. These actions are entirely unwelcome and are rejected by the Premier League and all other professional football bodies, and they underline the importance of our sport coming together to declare a very clear position against prejudice. (Premier League, 2020).

The EPL concluded their statement with their own hashtag #NoRoomforRacism, rather than #BLM.

Some football clubs, including Crystal Palace FC and Tottenham Hotspur FC (THFC), sought to distance themselves from the BLM movement which they viewed as attempting to ‘hijack popular causes’. One director at THFC claimed the club were ‘disappointed’ by the @ukblm tweets, stating that it was ‘unacceptable that a value-based action is being hijacked by those with their own political agenda’ (quoted in Delaney, 2020). The awkward position adopted by the EPL was evident when its Chief Executive spoke to MPs. Asked if he felt the EPL’s support for the BLM campaign might ‘open the door’ to other forms of activism. Richard Masters replied,

I don’t think it sets any particular precedent and, going back to the point about political messaging, I think it might become slightly torturous, but it might be possible to support Black Lives Matter, the sentiment, without being seen to be supporting any political organisation. We are an apolitical organisation, we don’t support political organisations. (DCMS, 2020).

When asked whether fines would continue to be issued for unapproved political gestures, Masters responded: ‘Yes, if you do something without permission you are breaching the regulations, so you can expect to be punished or fined’.⁶ Masters continued,

We are running a football competition, we are not a campaigning body, if players did want to come forward we would listen to them but there has obviously got to be a very high bar and unique circumstances in place. Whilst there might be difficulties sometimes dividing the two, our position is clear: politics no, moral causes yes, when agreed. As I said we’re living in special times at the moment. (DCMS, 2020)

The BLM-UK organisation was accused of using language that was antisemitic. Those opposed to the tweets were angered by the ‘settler-colonial’ statement and the suggestion that ‘mainstream British politics is gagged of the right to critique Zionism’. The Anglo-Jewish, pro-Zionist charity, the Campaign Against Antisemitism, led the call for the tweets to be seen as antisemitic. The President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews tweeted that it was ‘beyond disappointing’ how a,

supposedly anti-racist organisation has leaned into the antisemitic trope that British politics is ‘gagged’ in terms of debating Israel, a claim particularly preposterous because Israel is one of the most-discussed foreign policy issues in this country.

The chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, Karen Pollock, also tweeted that it was 'disappointing and dangerous to post something like this to thousands of followers who sincerely want to fight racism'. Pollock was one of those who highlighted the term 'gagged', asking in her tweet, 'Gagged by whom? The insinuation is depressingly clear'.

DeSean Jackson's Instagram posts

DeSean Jackson is a Black American football wide receiver who plays for the Philadelphia Eagles in the US National Football League. Over the July 4th US holiday weekend in 2020 Jackson posted several times to his Instagram story. His posts included a screenshot of an antisemitic quote (falsely) attributed to Adolf Hitler,

because the white Jews knows that the Negroes are the real Children of Israel and to keep Americas secret the Jews will blackmail America. They will extort America, their plan for world domination won't work if the Negroes know who they were ...

He referred to quotes attributed to the Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan, in a series of Instagram posts on Monday, July 6th. Farrakhan has been a long-time, vocal activist on the importance of Black empowerment and self-reliance, and the injustices against African Americans and Muslims, and police brutality; he is also explicitly anti-Jewish (Southern Poverty Law Centre, n.d.). Amidst a growing backlash to his initial posts, Jackson continued to repost quotes from Farrakhan on his Instagram story. At the same time as posting new material, Jackson sought to clarify his earlier posts, 'Anyone who feels I have hate towards the Jewish community took my post the wrong way. I have no hatred in my heart towards no one!! Equality. Equality.' Following this clarification Jackson then posted an edited screenshot: 'This will extort America, their plan for world domination won't work if the Negroes know who they are.' He offered another apology on the Tuesday in an Instagram video in which he stated that he 'knows Hitler is a bad person'.

DeSean Jackson was suspended from his team, and apologised for his posts, including to the Eagles owner and general manager, both of whom were Jewish. It was also reported that he was planning to talk to a Rabbi and to visit the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp to learn more about antisemitism. Statements were issued by the team and the NFL condemning his comments as being 'highly inappropriate, offensive and divisive and stand in stark contrast to the NFL's values of respect, equality and inclusion'.

One of those who came to the defence of DeSean Jackson was Stephen Jackson (no relation), a former NBA player. Stephen Jackson had been a close friend of George Floyd and, since his killing by US police, had become a leading anti-racist advocate. In a discussion in which he was defending DeSean Jackson, Stephen Jackson referred to a well-known antisemitic trope,

You know who the Rothschilds are? They own all the banks.... I haven't said one thing that's untrue yet.' Stephen Jackson felt that DeSean Jackson 'was trying to educate himself, educate people and he's speaking the truth. Right? He's speaking the truth. You know he don't hate nobody, but he's speaking the truth, the facts that he know and try to educate others.

In a subsequent television interview Stephen Jackson sought to defend himself,

I stated I could have changed my words. There's nothing that I said that I support any of that. There's nothing I said that I hate anybody. I apologize for my words and I could have switched up. That's the end of it. I love everybody. (CNN, 2020)

Malcolm Jenkins, who plays for the NFL team the New Orleans Saints, uploaded a short video to his Instagram account in which he said that DeSean Jackson's comments were 'wrong' and a 'distraction'. Jenkins stated that DeSean Jackson's social media activity was drawing attention away from the main problem and that,

We can honor the Jewish heritage and trauma while staying focused on what matters. Jewish people aren't our problem, and we aren't their problem. Let's not lose focus on what the problem truly is, and that's that black lives still don't matter in this country. Push this energy toward arresting and convicting the killers of Breonna Taylor and burning systemic racism to the ground. (https://www.instagram.com/p/CCd-F9Ehydi/?utm_source=ig_embed)

The US journalist and activist, Dave Zirin (2020), lamented the limited response to and recognition of antisemitism by those involved in antiracist activity, calling for the activists to 'condemn anti-Semitism as a point of principle'. He was also highly critical of the faux concerns amongst those on the political right wing: 'The outrage machine is always focussed on Black people, particularly on whoever knows someone who knows someone who met with Louis Farrakhan'. Identifying the crux of the issue Zirin (2020) continued, 'We should be patient to explain what anti-Semitism is, what purpose it serves in such a profoundly unequal and oppressive society, who actually perpetuates it (hint: It's not Black people), and why it is wrong and must be vociferously resisted'.

Former professional basketball player, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, also questioned what he saw as a muted response to DeSean Jackson's antisemitic comments. Abdul-Jabbar felt Jackson's offensive social-media postings did not receive the universal disapproval that they merited. Highlighting what he saw as a lack of condemnation from most others in sports and entertainment, compared to the support given to the Black Lives Matter movement, Abdul-Jabbar called for a 'better response' and questioned whether people were afraid to rebuke Jackson because they felt it may damage the BLM movement. Abdul-Jabbar highlighted the comments made by the musician Ice Cube against Jews (Kaufman, 2020) and bemoaned the muted response to antisemitism,

Given the New Woke-fulness in Hollywood and the sports world, we expected more passionate public outrage. What we got was a shrug of meh-rage. When reading the dark squishy entrails of popular culture, meh-rage in the face of sustained prejudice is an indisputable sign of the coming Apatholypse: apathy to all forms of social justice.

I now explain how and why these two sports-based incidents are different, showing that Jackson's Insta posts were clearly antisemitic, unlike the @ukblm's tweets which were not. I focus on why the words used matter, and why education matters. I then suggest that sports organisations will have to negotiate their willingness to support socially progressive movements while sanctioning their athletes when they make 'political' statements.

Why DeSean Jackson's posts about 'the Jews' were antisemitic

They were antisemitic because they drew upon tropes about Jewish people and communities. By quoting Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (NOI), DeSean was aligning himself with the NOI, which has, since its establishment in the 1930s, had a hostile relationship with what they routinely refer to as 'the Jews'. Its long-time leader, Louis Farrakhan, has promoted antisemitism by focussing on the role of 'the Jews' in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, of manipulating the US government, of controlling the global media, of Holocaust revisionism, and accusing the Jewish religion to be responsible for paedophilia and sexual perversion in Hollywood; in addition, he has called Jewish people 'termites' whilst praising Adolf Hitler. There is little doubt that Farrakhan is an antisemite.

The Black US sports journalist, Jemele Hill, in a personal commentary on Jackson's social media posts, draws upon a previous newspaper column in which she made an 'unthinking antisemitic comment,' and that Black Americans' experience of racism did not automatically sensitise them towards other forms of prejudice. Hill (2020) reflected that Jackson might have thought he was saying something that was historically accurate but failed to recognise it was antisemitic. Drawing on the stereotypes of Jewish people 'owning everything' feeds into the wider tropes of Jewish power and control. Suggesting that stereotypical and hurtful tropes about Jews are widely accepted within the African American community, Hill (2020) claims there are elements within the Black American population that have a 'blind spot' about Jews. Hill (2020) concluded that despite experiencing discrimination and stereotyping, this did not prevent some Black people from spreading negative stereotypes about others.

Why the @ukblm tweets were not antisemitic

In direct contrast to Jackson's posts, the @ukblm tweets were not antisemitic, because they refer directly to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and not generalised tropes about Jewish people. There is no automatic association between Jewish people and Israel. One of the central issues is the use and abuse of the terms 'anti-Zionism' and 'antisemitism'. In the same way that fighting for Black rights should not be seen as anti-white, calling for Palestinian rights should not be seen as antisemitic. Criticism of Israel should not be seen as antisemitic; if it were, how can activists make legitimate criticism of Israel without being viewed as being antisemitic?⁷

As outlined earlier, accusations of antisemitism are designed to undercut criticism of the actions of the Israeli state and its treatment of the Palestinians. Since the 1960s Black activists have drawn connections between the treatment of Blacks in the US and the Israeli authorities' treatment of Palestinians. Increasingly, the human rights abuses happening in both regions, which hitherto went unreported and/or disbelieved are now being captured and posted on social media and providing the necessary evidence of the abuses taking place. Erakat and Lamont Hill (2019) point to how intersectional solidarity is a catalyst for social resistance both in the United States and abroad, with increasing collaboration between Black groups in the United States and of Palestinian groups creating what they term Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity.

Supporters of the Israeli state question why it is that Israel is targeted when there are so many other human rights abuses taking place, for example, Kurds in Iraq, Rohingya in Myanmar, Qatar's treatment of migrant workers, or Saudi Arabia's oppression of Shiite Muslims. Supporters of the Israeli state/government argue that the disproportionate attention it receives is a 'new' form of antisemitism (Klug, 2013; Lerman, 2015). Supporters of the Palestinians acknowledge that there are many countries with poor human rights records, but their support of the Palestinians does not automatically put Israel at the top of a league table of human rights abusers (see Dart, 2017). As Ryall (2006) has noted, no country has a 'perfect' record on human rights. Distinguishing between approved and failed states (in a non-hypocritical fashion) is, as Dein and Calder (2007) have pointed out, a highly complex, philosophical matter. While there is a time and place for abstract philosophising about which of the world's problems to address first, it should not be used as an excuse for inaction. As Marqusee (2014) has suggested, the logic of choosing not to get involved in any specific issue would leave every struggle isolated from international support.

In response to growing calls for rights activists to take an intersectional and transnational approach (Erakat & Lamont Hill, 2019), pro-Israel groups, using *hasbara*, have sought to manage and diffuse criticisms of Israel. They have sought to present the BLM movement as violent, antisemitic and white-hating. The second tactic is to advance a misleading and politically motivated definition of antisemitism which conflates legitimate criticism of Israel, as a self-declared Jewish (only) state. The conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism is being coordinated by self-appointed spokespersons and organisations who claim to speak 'for the Jews'. Of course, no one group is representative of 'the Jews' and get to decide what is antisemitism.⁸

Why words matter. Why education matters

Confusion arose because of the language used in the posts, less so in Jackson's case, but language is central to understanding the @ukblm tweets. The words used in the BLM tweets and manifesto hold particular meaning for many Jews. The word 'gagged' can be interpreted as a codeword for the antisemitic trope of Jewish influence and power (see 'the Jewish lobby' – Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007). Whilst the term 'lobby' is used in other contexts (e.g. gun lobby, environmental lobby, business lobby), sensitivity needs to be shown when using the term 'Jewish lobby'. There are many well-funded, highly organised groups that support Israel (Osborne & Jones, 2009), but activists need to avoid slipping into tropes about 'world dominating Jewish cabals'. However, with the words 'Israel' and 'Jewish' becoming interchangeable, thus closing down legitimate criticism of Israeli state action, it has become difficult to see how this might be accomplished. Moreover, politicians, including some on the right of the British Labour Party, have begun to argue that criticism of capitalism itself is de facto anti-Semitic, since many Jewish people are capitalists. This means that the 'Jewish Cabal' trope, once the exclusive property of the extreme right, has now become a tool in the ideological armoury of pro-Israeli supporters.

Other 'red flag' words that activists need to be sensitive towards include 'genocide' and 'apartheid', both of which were used in the BLM manifesto to describe Israel's

actions against the Palestinians. Tensions are heightened when the historical experiences of the Jewish people are compared to the contemporary experiences of the Palestinians. What is happening to the Palestinians, although abhorrent, cannot be described as genocide. Similarly, comparisons between the Nazis and the IDF, although easily made, should also be avoided. The complexity of this was discussed by Dart (2017) in his research on pro-Palestinian supporters, in particular the comments made by Jewish pro-Palestinian activists which, if made by a non-Jew, could be seen as insensitive, and potentially antisemitic. Rather than making comparisons with the Nazis, a more apposite comparison is with Apartheid South Africa (B'Tselem, 2021; Dart, 2017; MacLean 2014). Activists could also make a legitimate comparison between Israel and Southern Rhodesia and/or French-Algeria, and the settler-colonial foundations of the USA, Canada, and Australia.

Some of the problems arise, arguably, because of a lack of knowledge of the history of the Jewish people, of persecution and of antisemitism, and the difference between Jews and the Israeli state (i.e. 'they are not the same'). Therefore, it is incumbent on activists and all those seeking progressive change to educate themselves on the history of the Jews, and thus make informed contributions. This was the response of DeSean Jackson, who after the reaction to his posts, spoke with Jews (including a Holocaust survivor) and agreed to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp to find out more about the Holocaust (Bonesteel, 2020). In England, similar educational efforts were organised by Premier League club Chelsea FC to better inform fans on antisemitism⁹. However, not everyone who expresses antisemitic views can visit Auschwitz.

Although much attention (often disproportionate) has been given to 'left antisemitism' (Kahn-Harris, 2019; Kelemen, 2012; Philo et al., 2019), with displays of performative outrage taking place on Twitter (Waterson, 2020), a far greater threat to both Black and Jewish communities comes from white power supremacists. There have been attempts in the media to 'ethnicise' antisemitism and construct it as a peculiarly Black or Muslim 'problem'¹⁰ with promoters of Black antisemitism typically failing to recognise that white, Christian societies have much longer histories of antisemitism than Black or Muslim societies. Such attempts to ethnicise antisemitism can be seen as an attempt to discredit those seeking social justice and racial equality (Richmond 2020).

The challenge facing sports organisations

When the EPL, BBC and Sky Sports withdrew their support for BLM, it showed their backing was conditional. They temporarily lent their support to the BLM movement when it was fashionable and had widespread grassroots endorsement. As De Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) identified, previously 'politically averse' averse professional sports leagues started to issue anti-racist statements. However, the decision by the EPL, BBC and Sky Sports to withdraw their support for 'Black Lives Matter' exposed their uncomfortableness with the Black Lives Matter movement and its call for radical reform and social justice. The decision to drop support for BLM might thus be interpreted as a victory for those advocating 'All Lives Matter', which as Storey (2020) has noted, is a deliberate misreading of the original BLM message as anti-white. When

these organisations expressed dismay at what they saw as ulterior ‘political agendas’ and attempts at ‘hijacking’, they absolved themselves from directly confronting the different forms that racism takes. When pressed, many organisations who want to be seen as progressive, are often not, particularly on the ‘Palestinian Question’. They accuse those who call for a broader, intersectional challenge to all forms of racism and discrimination as being ‘politically motivated’—rather than offering their support or choosing to frame it as a matter of human and civil rights. These institutions chose to view racial inequalities through a simple and uncomplicated lens (for similar US examples, see TePoel & Narcotta-Welp, 2020). Like many large corporations they, no doubt, commit to offer diversity training opportunities (including ‘anti-racist’ and ‘unconscious bias training’) to address individual prejudices, and appoint people from minority ethnic backgrounds into managerial positions, but seamless willing to recognise other forms of systemic, structural forms of racism and discrimination.

Despite the advent of the commodification of athlete activism, sport governing bodies will need to engage in more than gesture politics if they want to avoid becoming unwillingly entangled in untenable and indefensible positions—for example, of being anti-racist, but not beyond a very limited/narrow definition of racism. Sports governing bodies and organisations are likely to find themselves having to respond to greater levels of activism. It is likely there will be many more athletes using their status to highlight human and civil rights abuses, abuses that might be global and non-sport related, for example, Arsenal FC player Mezt Ozul’s comments about the persecution of Muslim Uighurs in China (Ames, 2019, and Aya Khattab (who plays for the Palestinian National Women’s football team), who has called for a boycott of sportswear company Puma because of their sponsorship of the Israel Football Association (IFA) (Khattab, 2019).). The issues discussed here illustrate the difference between those with the sentiment of being nominally ‘anti-racist’ and those calling for fundamental structural change.

Conclusion

This article has unpacked, via two sports-based incidents, the relationship between anti-racism, antisemitism and anti-Zionism. I have offered a partially reflective commentary of how the narrative of ‘new antisemitism’ distracts attention from the rise in antisemitism driven by the far right. As Fischbach (2019) has noted the resurgence in support of the BLM movement, caused by the deaths of Black men in 2020, reignited the Black-Jewish conflict that had been dormant since the 1960s. Peter Beinart, a leading Liberal Jewish activist, who has called for a one-state solution in Israel, has proposed that BLM movement has changed the Israel-Palestine debate by showing what is possible through mass movements and by making it harder to rationalise the refusal to grant others, specifically the Palestinians, their full human and civil rights (see Klion, 2020). The Israel-Palestine conflict remains a flashpoint for all those involved in the struggle for civil and human rights. The re-emergence of visible Black activism has seen a renewal of the reality of the lives of Black Americans and Palestinians, with the violence that took place in Ferguson and Gaza demonstrating the shared experiences of the two communities. As Erakat and Lamont Hill (2019, p. 8) have noted, criticism

of Israeli policy has been '*part of a Black radical tradition that has always been trans-national in character and multivalent in scope*'.

Sports organisations have a role to play in the educational work needed to address the different forms of racism, discrimination and human rights abuses that exist at all levels, in all sports. To be clear, antisemitism has no place in any movement that is advocating greater human and/or civil rights. Antisemitic tropes, such as those posted by Jackson cause hurt to Jewish people and divide and deter supporters. Activists need to be precise in their criticism of the actions of the Israeli state/government (but not 'the Jews'); at the same time, activists should not avoid making criticism of the Israeli state for fear of (wrongly) being labelled an antisemite. It is possible to be critical of the Saudi Arabia or Qatar regimes without being labelled Islamophobic, or China without being accused of Sinophobia.

Pro-Israeli Zionist groups, using *hasbara*, view the Black Lives Matter movement as a major threat to their preferred narrative and will seek any opportunity to discredit Palestinian supporters in their fight for full equality. Athletes, activists, sports organisations, and business corporations cannot continue to adopt and 'pick and mix' approach and differentiate between those deserving, or not, of their human and civil rights.

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Notes

1. In this paper the terms 'antisemitic/antisemitism' are used, as opposed to 'anti-Semitic/ism', on the grounds that there is no such thing as Semitism.
2. In 1979, the leading US Black civil rights activist, Wyatt Tee Walker, said: '*All you have to do is visit a refugee camp one time and you will know that the Palestinians are the niggers of the Middle East*' (quoted in Fischbach, 2020, p. 206).
3. In 1974 Muhammed Ali visited Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon, following Malcolm X who visited Gaza's refugee camps 10 years earlier (Fischbach, 2020, p.139).
4. In 2017, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), launched its 'Deadly Exchange' campaign, which focused on links between the Israel security services and US law enforcement (see deadleyexchange.org).
5. While the BBC and Sky Sports saw its presenters remove their BLM badges and replace them with 'Kick it Out', some BT Sport presenters continued to show their support to the BLM movement (see Davis, 2020).
6. An example of an unapproved political action was the fine imposed on Manchester City FC manager, Pep Guardiola, for wearing of a yellow ribbon in support of Catalan independence.
7. Some of those who have expressed support for Palestinians have been accused of antisemitism, see Ritman (2014), Burdsey (2015) and Zirin (2017).

8. While some British Jewish organisations might claim to speak on behalf of British Jews, no single group, despite what they might profess, can represent Britain's diverse and pluralistic Jewish population.
9. Some football fans view Tottenham Hotspur FC as a 'Jewish club' and target its fans with antisemitic comments (Poulton & Durell, 2016).
10. Black musicians Wiley (BBC, 2020) Jay-Z (Serwer, 2017) and Ice Cube (Kaufman, 2020), have all posted antisemitic material on social media. The French footballer, Nicholas Anelka has expressed antisemitic sentiments (Ervin, 2017), as have various English football managers and club owners (Conn, 2014).

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