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Who counts? Anti-antisemitism and the racial politics of emotion

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Abstract

This article focuses on the rise of anti-antisemitic discourse in Britain over the past fifteen years. It explores the relationship between the increasingly emotional tone of public discourse in Britain and other western countries and the miring of anti-antisemitism in dynamics of competitive victimhood and ethnic antagonism. The development of this dynamic is traced from the bitter arguments over the representation and reporting of the Palestine/Israel conflict at the time of the Israeli ground assault in the Gaza Strip in early 2009 – with special attention to Caryl Churchill's short play *Seven Jewish Children* – through to recent anti-antisemitic interventions such as David Baddiel's bestselling polemic *Jews Don't Count* (2021) and Jonathan Freedland's verbatim play recently staged at London's Royal Court Theatre (2022). These interventions, the article shows, call for the 'normal' treatment of anti-Jewish prejudice while simultaneously appealing on exceptionalist grounds for public sympathy with Jewish perceptions of antisemitism. The exceptional moral authority widely accorded to anti-antisemitism has made the cause an attractive one for those who resent what they believe to be the unwarranted priority accorded to non-white victimhood. Various forms of anti-antisemitism, such as Baddiel's, have thus become front-line arguments in shrill culture-war tussles suffused with intellectual confusion and racially tinged rhetorical combat. This racialization, politicization and emotionalization of anti-antisemitism has reached new heights, the article concludes, following the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023.

Keywords

Antisemitism, anti-antisemitism, political emotions, political theatre, Islamophobia, Anglo-Jewry, Labour Party, Caryl Churchill, David Baddiel, Israel / Hamas War (2023-24)

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Jonathan Freedland's play *Jews. In Their Own Words.*, staged at London's Royal Court Theatre in autumn 2022, was presented to the public as a landmark moment in British-Jewish theatrical visibility. An all-Jewish cast gave voice to the thoughts, feelings and personal testimony of twelve other Jews on the endurance of antisemitism in Britain. This marked a break, according to Freedland, from an Anglo-Jewish past of 'quietism and fear'. The staging of the play, he argued, also signalled a significant and positive change on the part of the Royal Court, a mainstay of politically progressive theatre in the UK since the 1950s. An institution previously regarded by many as 'closed to Jewish concerns' had now shown itself 'ready to listen' (Freedland, 2022).

Freedland's summary of the historical relationship of British Jews to the nation's theatrical scene, and to the Royal Court in particular, is difficult to align with the historical record. The Royal Court has long been a familiar address for theatre involving Jews and featuring Jewish themes and perspectives. Oscar Lewenstein, the Hackney-born son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, was general manager of the theatre in Chelsea when in reopened in 1952, and one of the four driving figures behind its establishment as a leading home for adventurous drama. Prominent among the 'Angry Young Men' playwrights whose work was staged there was Arnold Wesker, whose portrayal of interwar East End Jewish radicalism and postwar disillusionment in *Chicken Soup With Barley*, drawing on his own familial experience, received its London premiere at the Royal Court in 1958, and was revived there, to critical acclaim, in 2011 (Roberts, 1999: 17–44; Lawson, 2021: 31–43). Dominic Cooke, artistic director and chief executive of the Royal Court from 2006 to 2013, was widely regarded, alongside Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre and David Lan at the Young Vic as well as others, as part of a generation of Jewish directors who played a leading role in the invigoration of British theatre in the new millennium (Malkin et al., 2021: 172–4). The presentation of Jewish-related topics at the Royal Court has been punctuated with controversies, the most bitter of which was over Jim Allen's play *Perdition*, which drew on a libel case in Israel in the mid 1950s over allegations of collaboration between the former Budapest Jewish community leader Rudolf Kastner and the Nazis, and which following protests was cancelled by the theatre just before its scheduled opening in 1987 (Roberts, 1999: 192–210). The institutional context of these controversies, though, was not one in which Jewish voices were absent or marginalized.

The reception of Freedland's play nonetheless reflects a widespread perception in contemporary Britain, particularly but by no means only within the Jewish community, that the perspectives of Jews, and especially their experiences of antisemitism, have long been trivialized or ignored by circles and organizations on the political left. The heated arguments over antisemitism in the Labour Party, which raged throughout the period of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, centred around this perception, and around largely the same underlying charges that led to the Royal Court's commissioning and staging of *Jews*. The core allegation against the mindset of the British left has been most influentially encapsulated by the writer and comedian David Baddiel: that for most British *bien pensant* progressives, 'Jews don't count' as meaningful victims of prejudice or hatred (Baddiel, 2021).

The saturation coverage given to the issue of antisemitism in the Labour Party by British media outlets from across the political spectrum stands at odds, though, with the

notion that the British left is indifferent to this issue. According to one study, between mid 2015 and early 2019 national newspaper articles mentioning antisemitism and either Jeremy Corbyn or Labour were running at an average rate of approximately four per day, with the *Guardian* – the leading bastion of British left-liberal opinion – giving particularly immersive and sympathetic coverage of these charges against the party and its leadership (Philo et al., 2019: 92–3, 189–90). Articles and books on left-wing antisemitism nonetheless continue to accumulate (Fine and Spencer, 2017; Hirsh, 2018, 2024; Rich, 2018). Some valiant attempts notwithstanding (Klug, 2018; Kahn-Harris, 2019; Solomos 2023: 155–80), calm and clear debate that reaches across the entrenched divisions on this topic has become almost impossible. Two opposing camps glower at each other: those who believe that the political left is alarmingly riddled with antisemitism, and those who are convinced that these allegations have received vastly disproportionate attention and have been instrumentalized to constrain legitimate criticism of Israel.

'The left' is an extremely protean category, and in the context of this controversy particularly so. Allegations of left-wing antisemitism sometimes focus on the radical or 'hard' left, and at other times on the perceived attitudes of a more moderate and bourgeois 'north London dinner party' milieu, or on no clearly identified political or cultural stream. This vagueness of referent is not, though, the most profound obstacle to the serious exploration of the topic. Differences of opinion on antisemitism and the left are now so extraordinarily difficult to discuss because the subject has become entangled within a web of complex emotions.

Anti-imperialism, opposition to racism and antisemitism, and the labour and kibbutznik traditions of Zionism are all deeply entwined into the emotional history of the left, and of the Jewish left in particular. The broad sense of alliance between these perspectives has, though, been fraying since the late 1960s, and has come under intensifying strain since the turn of the millennium. Support for Israel and opposition to antisemitism have over the past two decades become increasingly closely connected causes, more often positioned in an adversarial rather than a solidaristic relationship to broader anti-imperialist or anti-racist agendas. These clashes have generated complicated and painful emotions among many who consider themselves on the left, often closely related, in a variety of ways, to personal feelings of cultural and political identity. The political and emotional journey of Jews who have moved from a belief in left-wing Zionism to a rejection of this movement as incompatible with their politics has been thoughtfully excavated in personal accounts (Lerman, 2012; Marqusee, 2010). The feelings associated with the intertwinement of anti-antisemitism, support for Israel, and particular emotional standpoints within or towards 'the left' are no less complicated, but have hitherto not been so closely explored.

If we are to have any hope of moving beyond the discursive blockage in current debates on antisemitism, we need a clearer understanding of the historical development and political role of feelings in these heated arguments. This article is an attempt to contribute to such an understanding, focusing on the entanglement of anti-antisemitism in wider controversies over race, identity and progressive politics in Britain since the Israeli military assault on Gaza in January 2009. At the time of writing – May 2024 – the much vaster Israeli assault on Gaza following the unprecedented Hamas incursion into Israel on

7 October 2023 is once again generating extremely emotionally charged clashes in British and international public debate between opposing frameworks of empathy and solidarity. It is too early to take stock of these raw and continuing arguments, but it is of pressing importance to set them in their recent historical context.

The rapidly developing field of the history of emotions offers a fertile conceptual terrain for this inquiry. Emotions, historians increasingly recognize, play a fundamentally important role in the structuring of public life. Different historical periods, William Reddy has influentially suggested, are governed by distinct 'emotional regimes': formations of ideas and language that frame the norms and possibilities of emotional experience and expression (Reddy, 2001). Studies of these cultural formations – alternatively conceptualized as 'emotional communities', 'emotional codes' or 'historical economies of emotions' – have very valuably illuminated our understanding of the historical importance of emotional values such as honour, compassion, fortitude and love. These values – and their varied expressive and performative norms, often highly gendered or associated with particular life stages – have, historians of emotions have shown, played a key role in shaping, channelling and intensifying the cultural and political engagement of individuals with political movements and power structures (Boddice, 2018; Frevert, 2011; Matt and Stearns, 2014; Rosenwein, 2016).

The leading historian of Zionism Derek Penslar has recently very fruitfully applied these insights to his own field. The Zionist movement, he shows, was from the outset fuelled by intense emotions, while also generating emotionally powerful responses among its observers, adversaries and detractors. Emotions of love, pride and solidarity, he shows, were central to the early mobilizing rhetoric and affective life of the movement. From 1948 onwards, Zionism was lived through a more complex and unstable range of emotions: exhilaration and disappointment; joy and fear; gratitude towards international supporters of Israel and feelings of betrayal when this was not forthcoming. Hatred, Penslar argues, is also highly salient, both as an emotion felt towards Zionism by its most intense critics and as a Zionist feeling towards Palestinians that has become increasingly overt and widespread over the past two decades (Penslar, 2023: 5–13, 99–240).

Penslar's work provides a useful starting point for considering the emotional politics of anti-antisemitism in contemporary Britain. The complex emotional life of Zionism has been an important psychic strand for many British Jews in recent decades, and feelings of vulnerability in the face of perceived antisemitism in Britain, especially when this includes expressions of anti-Zionism, are clearly for many Jews closely intertwined with those wider political emotions. The emotional economy of anti-antisemitism cannot, though, be conflated with that of Zionism. Despite the convergence between these two agendas since the turn of the millennium, their emotional arenas and registers are distinct, and – notwithstanding anti-antisemites' widespread conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism – anti-antisemitism does not necessarily have any connection with Zionism whatsoever.

Understanding the dynamics of contemporary anti-antisemitism also requires moving beyond existing models for the study of political emotions. The fundamental importance of Holocaust memory, and the exceptional redemptive significance associated with Holocaust education since the 1990s, has imbued anti-antisemitism with a unique moral

and emotional sanctity (Sutcliffe, 2022). The diffusion and contestation of this sanctity has taken place within a dramatically evolving communications landscape, which has driven a continual increase in the prominence of emotions. Cross-fertilization between the uniquely charged emotions associated with anti-antisemitism and the core political confrontations of institutional, racial and postcolonial debate has given rise to some of the most heated and confused controversies of the social media era. This article attempts to contribute to a clearer understanding of these controversies and their stakes, by setting them in their historical, emotional and political context. Starting with an interpretive survey of the emotional development of anti-antisemitism in Britain from the 1990s to the Corbyn era, I then discuss how these themes have ramified in recent 'culture war' debates, in Britain and in closely related arguments elsewhere. I conclude with some reflections on the significance of these disputes in contemporary tussles of competitive empathy, with respect both to racial politics in Britain and beyond and to the intensifying crisis of 'the Palestinian question' (Massad, 2006).

From Oprah to Gaza: Public victimhood and the emotionalization of Politics

Until the late 1960s, support for Zionism stirred little controversy within the British Labour Party. During the first two postwar decades, the party was in close fraternal contact with Israel's politically dominant Labour Party, and was regarded by most British Jews, both Zionist and not, as their natural political home. This orientation began to fray in the aftermath after the 1967 Six-Day War, and came under further strain in the 1970s with the rise of a more radical New Left that regarded Israel as a colonial oppressor of Palestinians. Similar political shifts took place in the United States, where many Jewish intellectuals moved rightward over the course of the 1970s. Domestic factors in both countries played an important role in these realignments. Also significant, though, was a widespread rallying of the Jewish diaspora behind Israel, in large measure in response to the increasingly vocal anticolonial criticisms of the Jewish state that were voiced most prominently in the United Nations 'Zionism is Racism' resolution of 1975 (Rich, 2018: 1–29; Sinkoff, 2020: 201–228).

With the emergence of a more consensual and optimistic political mood following the end of the Cold War, these rifts seemed to heal, or at least to recede into the background. The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 ushered in a period of widespread hopes of peace in the Middle East (Roy, 2002). This optimism was particularly emotionally resonant on the mainstream left, which, repositioned towards the centre, was politically resurgent on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1990s. The Oslo process itself was brokered by leading figures in the Norwegian Labour Party, and was visually symbolized by the September 1993 handshake on the White House lawn between Israel's Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, both loosely embraced by President Bill Clinton. In Britain, the landslide Labour victory of 1997 encompassed considerable newly-won support from Jews. Overcoming a pronounced Anglo-Jewish drift to the right since the 1960s, underpinned by socio-economic factors and sealed in the 1980s in the very close relationship between rabbinic leaders and Margaret Thatcher's government, Jewish votes

played a significant role in 1997 in bringing key marginals (including Thatcher's former constituency) into the Labour column (Alderman, 1996; Josephs, 1997). The 'moral foreign policy' introduced by New Labour on coming to power dovetailed neatly with the international rise of Holocaust education during the 1990s. This connection was underscored by Tony Blair's inauguration of Britain's Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001 (Stone, 2000).

Also in the 1990s, a newly emotional style of political communication was becoming increasingly widespread across the West. The cultural ground for this development was prepared by the emergence in the 1980s, on American daytime television, of a new hybrid form of entertainment and public debate. The confessional talk show – invented by Phil Donohue, popularized above all by Oprah Winfrey, and turbo-charged by Jerry Springer – swiftly became an immensely successful cultural genre both in the United States and internationally. Oprah's empathetic blurring of the emotional boundary between herself and her guests was particularly popular with television audiences. The therapeutic ethic of her show was extremely influential in promoting a conversational ideal of healing through the sharing of suffering, which diffused more broadly into the political language of progressive politics in the era of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (Illouz, 2003: 47–56).

In Britain, the death of Princess Diana a few months after Labour's victory in 1997 unleashed an unprecedented wave of national emotion. This outpouring of grief echoed and endorsed Diana's own public recognition of suffering – both her sharing of her own emotional pain and her embrace of people with AIDS – and was loosely harnessed to the political language of New Labour through Blair's resonant description of her as 'the people's princess' (Dixon, 2015: 300–304). The surge of attention to the Holocaust in the 1990s was also shaped by this cultural mood. Unprecedented attention in this 'era of the witness' was given to the testimony of Holocaust survivors, and much new activity in the field of Holocaust education was underpinned by a belief that cultivating empathy with their suffering offered a unique pathway to moral learning and growth (Wieviorka, 2006; Novick, 1999: 257–260; Sutcliffe, 2022: 4–12.)

In the new millennium, especially after the terror attacks of 9/11, the political optimism associated in the 1990s with the healing power of shared suffering swiftly drained away. The tougher political rhetoric of 'the war on terror', adopted by Blair alongside George W. Bush in the run-up to the bitterly contested invasion of Iraq by their 'coalition of the willing' in 2003, drew sharply divided responses from the British public. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians became the domain in which this split was most persistently and acrimoniously exposed. The sharing of suffering became, in this context, a terrain not of healing but of bitter contestation. After 9/11, the prevailing emotion of Western public discourse flipped from hope to fear. This shift was sharply crystallised in the rapid waning of the optimistic 1990s perspective that promoting empathy with the victims of the Holocaust would steadily lead to the overcoming of antisemitism and all other forms of hatred and prejudice. The countervailing rise of an emotionally contrasting angry and embattled anti-antisemitism was in turn most vividly apparent in the eruption of exceptionally heated arguments over events in Palestine and Israel.

Whose suffering was more deserving of empathy: the Israelis', or the Palestinians'? In the spring of 2002 especially, as images of suicide-bombed Israeli buses and cafés and of homes in Jenin and other Palestinian communities destroyed by the Israeli army vied for sympathetic attention, this question hovered continually over Western public debate (Stein, 2005). Media coverage of the Middle East was carefully scrutinized, with left-of-centre outlets, especially *The Guardian*, facing allegations of antisemitically tinged pro-Palestinian bias (Baram, 2004: 183–212). In the aftermath of the 3-week Israeli ground assault in the Gaza Strip in 2008-9, which resulted in over 1000 Palestinian and 13 Israeli casualties, controversy over this issue came close to boiling point. The catalyst in Britain for the most intense arguments over the politics of feeling in response to the military theatre of Israel/Palestine was an event at a stage theatre: the Royal Court.

Caryl Churchill's short play *Seven Jewish Children* was first performed at the Royal Court in February 2009 as a fundraiser for Gaza. The play won widespread admiration for its exploration, through Jewish voices, of the deeply conflicted emotions – vulnerability, fear, familial protectiveness, confusion, anger, denial – stirred by the intertwined consciousness of past and present during this conflict. It provoked fierce condemnation, though, from critics who perceived its representation of Jews as hostile or even hateful. *Seven Jewish Children* was widely deemed to be antisemitic, and even a modern-day blood libel. This charge centred on a line just before the end of the play, spoken – as is the entire play – by a Jewish parent or other adult about a child in their care: 'tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? Tell her all I feel is happy it's not her' (Churchill, 2009). For the British Jewish novelist Howard Jacobson this was 'Jew-hating pure and simple'. Churchill's presentation of this sentiment as in some way related to the inherited trauma of persecution in the past amounted, for Jacobson, to 'disinheriting [Jews] from pity', which was 'the latest species of Holocaust denial' (Craps, 2014; Jacobson, 2009; Mackey, 2009).

Jacobson's allegations reflect the intense passions that were invested at this time in protecting the association of Holocaust memory with empathy for Jews as transcendental victims. Churchill's play is in fact far from lacking in fellow-feeling with its Jewish protagonists. In its first scenes, the characters are hiding from the Nazis or other potential killers, and then mourning exterminated relatives; the play focuses throughout on Jewish anxiety, uncertainty and fear. Read in this context, the contested line strongly invites interpretation as a humanizing and indeed empathetic portrayal, while simultaneously politically critical, of fearful and loving parents or carers caught within a bitter armed conflict. *Seven Jewish Children*, with its focus on Jewish intergenerational grappling with victimhood and with power over others, can itself be read as holding out a hint of hope in learning from the hatreds of the past, and from the history of Jewish suffering in particular. It highlights, though, the dissonance between those hopes and the realities of Gaza in 2009. For many committed believers in the unambiguous straightforwardness of the moral lessons diffused by Holocaust memory and pedagogy, this dissonance was extremely difficult to accept.

In the immediate wake of the bitter controversies over Churchill's play, and the wider emotional engagement of the British public in early 2009 with the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the topic of antisemitism became increasingly prominent in the

national conversation. In 2010, the lawyer Anthony Julius – already prominently associated with emotional truth-telling in public life through his roles as Princess Diana's legal representative and as a leading overseer of the charitable work continued in her name after her death – published his *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England*. Over a quarter of this hefty volume, which extended back to the medieval period, was devoted to an exposure of the alleged antisemitic roots of contemporary anti-Zionism. Julius was particularly vexed by the anti-Zionist traditions of the Jewish left, devoting more pages to denouncing this than to either Christian or Muslim anti-Zionism (Julius, 2010: 441–558). A similar polemic animated Howard Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question*, which won the 2010 Man Booker Prize. Jacobson portrayed a contemporary Britain preoccupied with Jewish matters and riddled with antisemitism of various forms. The comic heart of his novel, though, is a lampooning of a fictional Jewish anti-Zionist group, 'ASHamed Jews', which was clearly based on an actual organization, Independent Jewish Voices, formed in London in 2007 by non-Zionist Jewish academics and public intellectuals (Jacobson, 2010; Karpf et al., 2008).

The emotive tone of this anti-antisemitic rhetoric, directed with particular venom against 'cosmopolitan' left-wing anti-Zionist Jews, broadly aligned with the rise at this time of nationalist and anti-cosmopolitan feeling in Britain as a whole. The 'hostile environment' for immigration introduced by the Cameron-Clegg coalition of 2010-15 reflected this mood, and contributed to the further rise of anti-European sentiments. With Nigel Farage setting the pace and newly ubiquitous social media the shrillness and amplification, emotionally driven expressions of grievance, resentment and self-assertion became the political norm. After the 2015 election, the country was plunged into an argument over Brexit that circulated almost entirely around feeling and identity. Britain became split into adversarial 'leave' and 'remain' camps, characterized, especially after the June 2016 referendum, by a high degree of what political scientists now describe as 'affective polarization' (Hobolt et al., 2021).

Disagreements over antisemitism did not map neatly onto these opposing camps, but they did resonate more powerfully in the emotionally charged echo chamber of British politics during the peak years of Brexit acrimony. Theresa May's pronouncement in October 2016 that diehard 'remainer' cosmopolitanism could only produce 'citizens of nowhere' was vociferously condemned as implicitly antisemitic (Chakelian, 2017). More typically, though, an emphasis on the importance of emotional and physical security for Jews, and the perception that the primary threat to this security came from Muslim immigrants and their allies on the anti-Zionist left, aligned opposition to antisemitism with British and Zionist nationalisms. This coalition was more readily at home on the right of the political spectrum, and chimed with the anti-immigrant cultural politics of the pro-Brexit camp. Anti-antisemitism also gained a great deal of traction within Labour, where it functioned as a rallying issue for ardent opponents of the party's Corbynite wing (Lerman, 2022: 253–7).

The antisemitic abuse of some prominent Jewish figures in the Labour Party was a much-discussed issue in the British media almost throughout Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as party leader, from September 2015 until the party's crushing electoral defeat in December 2019. The online abuse of Jewish women MPs such as Luciana Berger and Ruth Smeeth,

who were highly critical of what they regarded as Corbyn's inadequate response to the spread of antisemitism in the party, drew particularly intense condemnation and sympathy. While the details of some incidents involving these two MPs have been contested, there is no doubt that Berger and Smeeth were both subjected to a considerable amount of antisemitic hate speech. It is nonetheless reasonable and important to consider why there seems to have been a considerably greater level of public concern over their experiences of antisemitism than over the racist abuse of other women in the party. The shadow home secretary Diane Abbott, it was widely reported, alone received almost half of the abusive tweets directed to female MPs in the weeks leading up to the June 2017 general election. Racism directed at her and at other Black MPs did not, though, attract a comparable level of media attention or public sympathy (Philo et al., 2019: 69, 149–54; Elgot, 2017).

The protection of Jews has been part of Britain's rhetoric of self-congratulatory imperialist moralism since the Damascus Affair of 1840, when public opinion was mobilized, especially through the columns of *The Times* and other newspapers, in support of the Jews of that city who were imprisoned on ritual murder charges (Green, 2001: 141–45). This national sense of moral superiority, especially in contrast with the Islamic world, and intertwined with messianic and missionizing currents of Christian thinking, has also played a long-standing role in British interest in and support for Zionism. This stretches back to the early promotion, from the 1830s, by Lord Shaftesbury and other English evangelical Christians of the 'restoration' of the Jews to the Holy Land (Lewis, 2010: 173–89). A similar mix of resonances fed into the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government declared its sympathy with the Zionist goal of a Jewish 'national home' in Palestine (Markley, 1998: 37–96). These deep-seated imperial perspectives were reanimated by the nostalgic hunger for free-standing national significance on the global stage that was fuelled by the Brexit campaign. Solidarity with Jews, in fervent opposition against what was often conceived as a fundamentally alien 'virus' of antisemitism – associated with Britain's historical enemies in the Second World War (the Nazis) and the Cold War (the communist left), and in the present with immigrants (especially Muslims) – readily assumed in this context a uniquely compelling patina of emotional and rhetorical righteousness.

The protection of vulnerable Jewish women also has deep roots in Victorian culture, when it was widely mobilized through the literary figure of the 'virtuous Jewess', idealized for her sensitivity and her fortitude in the face of suffering (Valman, 2011). At certain moments, the demonstrative support of female victims of antisemitism in the Labour Party, and the rhetorical emphasis on their emotional pain, unconsciously echoed this cultural tradition. The widely reported escort of Ruth Smeeth to an antisemitism hearing in April 2018 by a sizeable phalanx of her parliamentary colleagues, for example, theatrically restaged the emotional drama of this trope of nineteenth-century Christian philosemitism (BBC, 2018; Ferguson, 2018). The twenty-first-century emotionalization of anti-antisemitism, while fuelled by the particular political and media dynamics of the new millennium, also subliminally drew rhetorical strength from some deep-seated emotional templates of British religiosity, imperialism, and national pride.

Anti-antisemitism and the culture wars

The claiming of voice is a prominent feature of today's progressive politics. Historically marginalized groups are increasingly asserting their entitlement to speak for themselves, and are finding greater responsiveness to this demand from the political and cultural mainstream. Jews have in various ways made similar demands. The claim that Jews should determine the terms of public discussion on Jewish matters is, though, particularly problematic, because Jewish, Christian, and western secular traditions of thought share intimately entangled cultural roots in the Jewish Bible/Christian Old Testament. This complex issue of cultural ownership has emerged since the 1990s as a new terrain of anti-antisemitic controversy. Universalist articulations of the significance of Jews and Judaism by some non-Jewish thinkers associated with postmodernism and/or with the left, such as the French theorists Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard, have been critiqued from avowedly Jewish perspectives as structurally antisemitic acts of intellectual distortion and appropriation (Chaouat, 2016; Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993: 699–701; Samuels, 2016: 162–85).

The belief that eternal vigilance towards antisemitism was a fundamental and universalist lesson of the Holocaust commanded broad support across the West in the 1990s. This underpinning of anti-antisemitism was axiomatic to the establishment of Holocaust memory in that decade as a global cornerstone of cosmopolitan ethical pedagogy (Levy and Sznaider, 2006; Sutcliffe, 2020: 229–41). Since 9/11, faith in cosmopolitan universalism has considerably weakened. This broad shift has intertwined with and contributed to the changing emotional tenor of anti-antisemitism over the same period, from a predominantly optimistic hopefulness to a more pessimistic pugnaciousness. Over the past few years especially, arguments over antisemitism have played a major role in the intensification of 'culture war' squabbles between left and right. Before exploring a particularly prominent example of this in Britain, it is useful to survey the core arguments and anxieties that have shaped anti-antisemitic culture-war interventions across the West.

The recent critique of anti-antisemitism by the philosopher Elad Lapidot lucidly puts forward the underlying objection of many recent commentators to the universalistic pedagogical approach inherited from the 1990s. Anti-antisemitism's opposition to the essentialising, stereotyping or judging of Jews, Lapidot argues, essentially denudes them of their cultural content. The logic of anti-antisemitism, he claims, makes it almost impossible to say anything of a general nature about Jews, as such statements so readily fall foul of its strictures. Anti-antisemitism itself, according to his argument, thus obstructs recognition of Jewish particularity, and is therefore paradoxically tantamount to antisemitism. A better response to anti-Jewish prejudice, he suggests, would be to be more open to the alterity of Jewish modes of thought such as the Talmud (Lapidot, 2020: 1–22, 285–304). His call, in effect, is for a radically different form of anti-antisemitism, which would decisively break with its 1990s universalistic heritage and emphasize instead the particularity of Judaism, Jewishness, and presumably also Jewish suffering.

These intellectually highbrow arguments have been paralleled by a broader cultural shift in the Jewish world away from universalistic claims and arguments. Many American Jews, convulsed especially by the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting of 2018, have been

drawn to a more straightforward critique of universalistic anti-antisemitism: that it hasn't worked. Dara Horn, in her recent book *People Love Dead Jews*, sardonically notes in her second sentence the flipside she perceives to her titular observation: 'Living Jews, not so much' (Horn, 2021: 1). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which opened in 1993 and stood at the fore of the pedagogical representation of the Holocaust to the public in the 1990s, was designed, Horn rightly notes, to promote empathy with Holocaust victims by presenting them as fundamentally similar to the museum's mainstream audience. The millions of traditionally religious eastern European Jews who formed a very large proportion of the exterminated therefore tended somewhat to fall out of the frame. Arguing that the persistence of antisemitism in contemporary America exposes the failure of that 1990s approach, Horn calls instead, like Lapidot, for a fuller recognition of Jewish difference and religious specificity (Horn, 2021: 183–4, 218–30). Unlike him, though, she presents her arguments in a highly emotional register, dominated by anxiety over the ubiquitous peril of antisemitism and anger over the failure of others to properly acknowledge and address this.

Horn's discussions of contemporary antisemitism eschew contextualization, or the drawing of connections to other forms of hatred and prejudice. Her chapter on the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam opens with an indignant discussion of the temporary unwillingness of the museum's management to allow a Jewish employee visibly to wear a yarmulke. This hesitancy, which clearly stemmed from unease over the display by visitor-facing employees of any religious clothing or symbols (including crosses or headscarves), is portrayed by her as a bitterly ironic repetition of Anne Frank's own story: an attempt, once again, 'to force a Jew into hiding' (Horn, 2021: 2-3). Horn barely mentions other communities' experiences of persecution. Antisemitism, on her account, is a phenomenon of transcendental significance and seriousness, which should self-evidently be considered in isolation from the comparative and contextual methods of analysis that might normally be applied to cross-cultural animosity or hate.

According to a recent poll, approximately three-quarters of European Jews consider 'remembering the Holocaust' and 'combating antisemitism' as 'very important' to their Jewish identity. These two concerns rank significantly higher than any of the others suggested in the survey (such as 'celebrating festivals' or 'believing in God'). Polling of American Jews has revealed broadly similar priorities (DellaPergola and Staetsky, 2022). This is also reflected in the current popularity of pugnacious books about anti-antisemitism, such as Bari Weiss's American National Jewish Book Award-winning *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. Weiss's argument is shaped by the ethnic rivalries of the culture wars. Her culminating chapter focuses on 'radical Islam', which she describes as 'exceptional in its animosity toward the Jewish people'. Because of recent Muslim immigration, she asserts, 'it is dangerous to be a Jew in Europe'; far right parties are gaining in popularity there because they are the only ones willing to confront this reality. In America, Weiss argues that this danger is less severe, but is rising. Her book is amply garnished with expressions of humane sensitivity and reminders of Judaism's insistence on hospitality to strangers. This does not, though, mask her book's political alignment. She reserves special outrage for America's liberal intelligentsia, which she portrays as eager to speak out against every form of intolerance except Muslim antisemitism. This is

exemplified by the Democratic Party's embrace of the Muslim congresswoman Ilhan Omar, and its 'explaining away' of what Weiss regards as her antisemitic comments (Weiss, 2019: esp. 131–63).

David Baddiel's succinct polemic *Jews Don't Count*, an immediate bestseller in the UK, pushes this line of attack further. His argument is specifically directed against progressives, whom he accuses of treating antisemitism as if does not count as a truly serious form of racism. He rails against various examples of this alleged hypocrisy. Why, he rhetorically asks, are Jews excluded from the widely used 'BAME' (black and minority ethnic) designation? Why is there outrage over blackface but not over non-Jewish actors performing Jewish roles ('Jewface')? What we need, he argues, is 'a level playing field around racism', on which Jews feel able 'to make the same sort of fuss as other minorities' (Baddiel, 2021: 104).

Baddiel briefly considers the obvious response to his argument: that antisemitism might raise less concern than other forms of racism because British Jews are not structurally disadvantaged or underrepresented due to prejudice against them, whereas minorities considered as BAME often are. He dismisses this, though, as itself an anti-semitic line of thought. Progressives do not place Jews in the 'sacred circle' of the oppressed because of the 'racist mythology' that regards them as moneyed and controlling oppressors (Baddiel, 2021: 18-19). Baddiel rejects the left's 'hierarchy of racisms', and in its place seems to advocate for a regime in which there are no criteria for comparatively evaluating grievances, and all are welcome to shout as loud as they can about their own. In a restaurant review of the Ivy Café in an affluent neighbourhood of northwest London, a Jewish food critic muses over whether he should object when a non-Jew calls it the 'Oy Vey Café'; Baddiel tweets in response that he should 'name and shame the racist fuckwit'. The contrast between this perhaps mildly off-colour joke (in common circulation among the restaurant's Jewish clientele) and, say, murderous police violence towards African Americans (the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis took place about 9 months before the publication of *Jews Don't Count*), is for Baddiel irrelevant. Jews like this restaurant critic, he asserts, must 'stop thinking offence against us doesn't matter like it does to other minorities' (Baddiel, 2021: 103-4).

Baddiel claims that he is arguing against the competitiveness and hierarchy of identity politics. In fact, though, he is competing very hard on precisely this terrain. Between the lines of his ostensible argument against the illegitimate deprioritization of Jewish victimhood, he puts forward a largely undeclared case for exceptional priority being accorded to offence against Jews. This implication is made through appeal to Jewish feelings. The injury felt by Jews when they encounter antisemitism, Baddiel makes clear, is rooted in the cultural memory of the Holocaust – and the implicit logic of his argument rests on his expectation of recognition and emotional fellow-feeling for this special emotional sensitivity.

Jews, Baddiel stresses, do not always feel white – or, in other words, secure – due to their inherited memories of extermination and exile. The evidence he presents for Jews 'not counting' is less important for his argument than his insistence that, however one might evaluate that evidence, this perception of not counting is the painful emotional experience of many Jews. He concludes his book by sharing his own feeling that 'a tiny

part of me died' when the actor Robert Lindsay, whose 1970s television role as the crusading radical Wolfie Smith Baddiel had idealized as a child, tweeted that he didn't think that Jeremy Corbyn was antisemitic (Baddiel, 2021: 122-3). The self-evident legitimacy of Lindsay's expression of his opinion is buried beneath Baddiel's emotional experience of his tweet as a painful instance of prejudice against Jews not counting. Claiming the political validity of one's own emotional truth is a prominent feature of the 2020s zeitgeist. Its particularly potent moral authority as deployed by Baddiel, though, rests on an appeal to the unique sanctity of empathetic anti-antisemitism.

Baddiel's style of anti-antisemitism wraps a coating of self-righteousness around an outlook of uncritical self-involvement that unhesitatingly asserts the political validity of one's own emotional truth. The emotional sanctification of pained memory of the Nazi genocide, which has been foundational to Holocaust pedagogy since the 1990s, underwrites his push-back against the left, which, he claims, antisemitically prioritises non-white over Jewish victimhood. This is an alluring argument for anybody who feels a measure of resentment towards those whom Baddiel regards as occupying the left's 'sacred circle' of the recognised oppressed, and who might be on the lookout for a more socially and politically acceptable framing for those sentiments.

Over the past 20 years, most European far right parties have repositioned themselves as passionately anti-antisemitic in large measure because this has offered them a politically acceptable language through which to denigrate non-whites and Muslims as lesser victims and likely antisemites (Kahmann, 2017). The wave of transnational Black Lives Matter activism following the murder of George Floyd, in the brooding and polarized political atmosphere of the Covid pandemic, generated intense tensions between supporters and detractors of the Black Lives Matter movement. Against this medium- and short-term background, one might reasonably wonder how many supporters of Baddiel's call for a 'level playing field around racism' resemble football fans cheering for whatever team is playing against their own team's rivals. For those harbouring attitudes that if directly expressed might be deemed racist, the most obvious appeal of his argument lies in the prospect it offers of the 'BAME' side being knocked from the top of the oppression table, rather than in the nifty goalscoring of their specific white (or not quite?) opponents.

Feeling whose pain?

Emotions, as Sara Ahmed and others have reminded us, are deeply imbricated in contemporary cultural politics. Feelings, and especially feelings of sympathy with the pain of others, are mobilized in public discourse in a wide range of politically significant ways. Participation in mass expressions of collective fellow-feeling, in particular, often offers the reward of 'feeling better', through the reassurance of knowing that one's appropriately channelled communing with suffering has placed one on the side of the victims rather than the inflictors of pain (Ahmed, 2014: 191–203; Berlant, 2004; Staiger et al., 2010). These public rituals of shared emotional expression, which have taken on new and heightened forms in the age of social media, steer attention away from the complexities of political positionality and complicity, or of determining whose pain is most deserving of sympathy and remedy. Fellow-feeling can offer therapeutic catharsis regardless of whether it is

appropriately or efficaciously targeted. In the cultural marketplace of political emotions, empathy with the pain of others readily focuses on whichever victim group is most compellingly designated in public culture as deserving of solidarity.

Statistics on antisemitic incidents in Britain, published annually by the Community Security Trust (a Jewish community organization) are regularly met with widespread and prominently reported concern from politicians and media commentators. Critical scrutiny of these statistics, which include many expressions of anti-Israel sentiment that might well not be considered as instances of antisemitic hate, is largely absent from the public discussion: there is, instead, an eagerness to participate in ritualized condemnation of the scourge of antisemitism, and in the display of empathy with its victims (Lerman, 2022: 219–26). Politicians and pundits have also highlighted with alarm the peril posed to Jewish students by alleged antisemitism on campuses (Hall, 2021; Parker, 2023). Muslim students' experiences of alienation, discrimination and surveillance, despite being clearly documented, have not prompted a similar level of engagement or concern (Bothwell, 2016; Scott Baumann et al., 2020). There is abundant evidence of Islamophobia in Britain, above all on the political right: one 2019 YouGov poll found that two-thirds of Conservative Party members believed that areas of Britain operated under Sharia law (Hope Not Hate/YouGov, 2019). This issue has not found traction in public debate, though, because it does not tap into to the same deep-seated historical and cultural wellsprings of emotion that antisemitism does. The level of the exhaustively reported antisemitism accusations in the Labour Party, meanwhile, according to a focus group study in 2019, was typically overestimated by members of the public by a factor of over 100 (Philo et al.: 1–22).

The profound confusion over the place of emotions in contemporary British political life is starkly apparent in debates over the regulation of speech on university campuses. Successive Conservative governments have strongly criticized the supposedly excessive sensitivity of 'snowflake students', with new freedom of speech legislation, enacted in 2023, designed to confront and curb this perceived peril (Davies, 2018). With respect to the sensitivity of Jewish students, though, the government has taken the opposite approach. Allegations of antisemitism on campuses have been taken very seriously, and policy in this area has been shaped not by the defence of free speech but by strenuous and controversial efforts to define and police the limits of acceptable speech. Education ministers have placed heavy pressure on universities to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) 'working definition of antisemitism' as an aid for protecting Jewish students from emotional injury, despite powerful arguments that the definition chills free speech on the Israel/Palestine conflict (Gould, 2020; Lerman, 2022: 237–9; ELSC/BRISMES, 2023).

The increasing emotionalization of political argument over the past few decades has been intensified by the blurring of the boundary between entertainment and politics. These processes have been particularly pronounced in the United States, where they can be traced from Bill Clinton's famous declaration, in response to a question from a member of the public in a presidential debate in 1992, that 'I feel your pain', through to Donald Trump's use of social media to shape public debate by dramatizing his projection of his own feelings. David Baddiel is an avid tweeter, and the tone of *Jews Don't Count* is to a

large extent shaped by the twitterstorms that feed into it. His adaptation of his polemic as a television programme openly combined political argument with light entertainment: the unfolding of his case on screen is interleaved with a considerable measure of Jewish celebrity shtick-swapping (Baddiel, 2022). Jonathan Freedland's play at the Royal Court also dabbled in anti-antisemitic razzmatazz, including a full cast dance number, 'It Was the Jews That Did It' (Kellaway, 2022).

This blending of jocular entertainment with emotional appeals to fellow-feeling and high moral seriousness has deepened a particular confusion of register in debates over anti-antisemitism. The status of feelings, when set alongside reasoned arguments, is often unclear: arguments aim to persuade through their logic and evidence, but is the persuasiveness of feelings similarly compelling, or are we free to embrace and endorse whichever feelings of others that enable us to 'feel better' ourselves? Contemporary anti-antisemitic rhetoric straddles both these pathways. On the one hand, through invocations of the long history of Jewish suffering culminating with the Holocaust, inherited Jewish feelings of vulnerability lay claim to unique historical and emotional significance. The packaging of this emotional argument as entertainment, however, presents identification with Jewish suffering as appealingly stylish, clever or witty. This light-hearted leavening of anti-antisemitism deflects attention away from the questionability of its underlying emotional argument, while attracting support to a righteous cause that presents itself as sharp and sassy rather than bleak or depressing.

Over the past decade, scholars have devoted considerable attention to thinking through the relationship of antisemitism to other forms of prejudice, and especially to Islamophobia (Achinger and Fine, 2015; Meer, 2014; Renton and Gidley, 2017). These comparativist efforts for the most part swim against the tide, though, of the trend in public discourse to set anti-antisemitism apart from campaigns against other forms of racism. This exceptionalism is often articulated in confused or indirect terms. Baddiel's argument is a stark example of this: he declares himself firmly *against* the exceptional treatment of antisemitism (by leftists who uniquely overlook it), but his underlying argument for the importance of taking even trivial instances of alleged antisemitism seriously rests on his appeal to the exceptional emotional legacy of the Holocaust. The psychological scars left by the Nazi genocide should indubitably be accorded serious and sensitive consideration. They do not, though, transcendentally mark Jewish experiences of antisemitism apart from all other minorities' experiences of hatred and prejudice.

The emotionalism and rhetorical muddling of mainstream contemporary anti-antisemitism is problematically contributing to the spread of confused, antagonistic and racially charged 'culture war' disputes over the politics of identity and competitive victimhood. The policing of discussion of the Palestine/Israel conflict – for example through the argument that Israel, standing as 'the collective Jew', has become a primary focus of antisemitic vilification – is a central terrain of this anti-antisemitic activism, which requires its own careful analysis (Klug, 2003; Lerman, 2022). The legacy of the Holocaust looms large in these debates: searches for a 'new grammar' of memory and emotion that might enable Israelis and Palestinians to recognize and empathize with each other's historical trauma (the Holocaust and the Nakba) struggle to overcome the

entrenched incomparability of the Holocaust in global thought (Abu El-Haj, 2020; Bashir and Goldberg, 2019).

In Britain and the rest of Europe, anti-antisemitic exceptionalism, rooted in Holocaust memory and pedagogy, is firmly established orthodoxy across almost the entire political spectrum. Opposition to antisemitism, understood as fundamental to the defence of western values, not only overshadows opposition to the racism experienced by other minorities: it positions non-western migrants, especially Arabs and Muslims, as responsible for 're-importing' into Europe the heinous antisemitic hatred that white Europeans, through their diligent focus on the lessons of the Holocaust, have largely overcome. This racialized logic has fuelled the eager embrace of anti-antisemitism not only by the European far right but also by much of the political mainstream, and in the case of Germany most of the left also (Kahmann, 2017; Kalmar, 2020; Romeyn, 2020; Özyürek, 2023).

Afterword: Gaza (again), Israel, and the current crisis of competitive empathy

For most Israelis and those who identify closely with them, the killings perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October 2023 induced an emotional shock of overwhelming proportions. Most Palestinians, and those who identify more closely with them and their political cause, unsurprisingly responded differently, primarily seeing the Hamas attack not as an unprovoked act of terroristic barbarism (the dominant Israeli interpretation), but as part of a legitimate liberation struggle stretching back to 1948. These two perspectives, each responding above all to the suffering on 'their' side of the conflict, clash jarringly when set alongside each other, but both make emotional sense in their own terms (Achcar, 2023; Schama, 2023). Many of those supportive of Israel, though, have expressed upset and outrage over the failure of others to express sufficient empathy with the hundreds of civilian Israelis killed or kidnapped on 7 October. Jewish feelings of anger and abandonment, particularly towards those on the left from whom they expected allyship, have been extensively and sympathetically reported in the British and American media (Booth, 2023; Medina and Lerer, 2023). This response, while it may well be the authentic emotional experience of many, is of dubious validity as a political argument. In times of bitter conflict, people typically take sides, and empathy is almost invariably partisan.

These expectations of empathy with Jewish suffering only make sense in the context of the exceptional emotional weight of Holocaust memory, which hovers closely over Western public debates during the current conflict, as it has since the surge in public attention to the Nazi genocide in the 1990s (Sutcliffe, 2018). Direct invocations of the Holocaust – such as the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations pinning a yellow star to his suit, with the words 'never again' in its middle, during an emergency Security Council session in late October 2023 – have stirred controversy (Bigg, 2023; Pollock, 2023). The unique emotional resonance of the Holocaust in European historical consciousness, though, and its role in heightening political responsiveness to Jewish declarations of unease in the public realm, underlies the extremely critical scrutiny of expressions of sympathy with Palestinian suffering and struggle. In Germany, France and elsewhere,

many Palestine solidarity protests have been banned by the authorities. In Britain, the Home Secretary Suella Braverman urged police chiefs in the first week of the conflict to consider whether the chanting of long-standing slogans of the Palestine solidarity movement, and even the waving of a Palestinian flag, should in some contexts be considered as racially aggravated offences (Braverman, 2023; Shamir, 2023).

A racially charged 'Jews don't count' logic, leaning, implicitly or explicitly, on an exceptionalist understanding of the priority of anti-antisemitism in the wake of the Holocaust, has found new voice in recent months. This has been particularly apparent in the bitter political and media arguments over public protests against the Israeli assault on Gaza, especially on university campuses. According to the political scientist Yascha Mounk, the 'identity trap' of contemporary campus politics has led left-wing activists to view Israel, antisemitically, as a white colonialist oppressor state, while reserving their solidarity for those 'intersectional' causes that they align with anti-racism and anti-imperialism (Mounk, 2023). For Dara Horn, writing in the wake of the ousting of the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania over their handling of these issues, and broadly echoing the views of some of the private donors who played a prominent role in the unfolding of events at those institutions, the preoccupation of university leaders with 'DEI' (diversity, equity and inclusion) initiatives is closely linked to their indifference to the rampant left-liberal antisemitism she perceives on elite American campuses (Horn, 2014).

These arguments starkly position anti-antisemitism in direct opposition to other forms of anti-racism. The universalist hopes of 1990s Holocaust education seem today to be close to absolute inversion: the memory of the Nazi genocide is currently emotionally underwriting appeals for greater responsiveness to Jewish than to Palestinian suffering, and, through the Nazification of Hamas, justification for the relentless bombing of Gaza (Samudzi, 2024). If we are to find a way to exit from this dynamic, we urgently need to think more critically about the emotionalization of ethnic and racial politics, and to ensure that our responses to the feelings of others are accompanied by a robust commitment to equity and justice.

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