


Anti-Americanism Fans the Flames of “The New Antisemitism”

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COMMENTARY

TEL AVIV—In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many young Jews who sought to escape the scourge of European antisemitism turned to political Zionism, a movement that culminated in 1948 in the establishment of the state of Israel. According to the Zionist dream, as masters of their own fate in their ancestral homeland, Jews no longer would face, in the worst of times, expulsion and massacre and, in the best of times, discriminatory laws and bigoted attitudes and practices. Israelis therefore have been shocked to witness the transformation of anti-Zionism into a leading form of antisemitism.

The transformation did not occur all at once. The ancient and enduring hatred of Jews had been on the rise for years in Western liberal democracies before thousands of Hamas jihadists invaded Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, to commit unspeakable acts of depravity mostly against Jewish civilians. In a staggering instance of blaming the victim, antisemitism surged in the days and weeks following the slaughter.

Israel had hardly begun to defend itself when American campuses and the streets of London and other European cities exploded with demonstrations against the Jewish state. Protesters condemned not only Israel's conduct but also its very existence. On the same day that thousands of Hamas jihadists murdered, raped, mutilated, and kidnapped Israeli civilians, 34 Harvard student organizations spoke the thoughts of many American intellectuals and pro-Palestinian protesters in Europe in an online statement declaring "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence."

Criticism of Israel is no more inherently antisemitic than is criticism of the United States inherently anti-American. However, blaming Jews collectively for Israel's policies, holding Israel to standards to which no other country is held, and denying Israel's right to exist – an indignity to which no other UN member state is routinely exposed – express antisemitism.

While focused on Israel and the Jewish people, antisemitism also imperils liberal democracy – in America and throughout the West – which requires government and citizens to respect the equal rights that inhere in each person and to tolerate differences of opinion and alternative ways of pursuing happiness. What begins with the Jews, moreover, never ends with the Jews. Antisemitism's resurgence in the West reflects a dysfunction within liberal democracy that creates room for and energizes other forms of intolerance and violence.

In "The New Antisemitism," a lengthy essay published in late February in Time magazine, Noah Feldman addresses the fraught question, "Why won't antisemitism die, or at least die down?" Wishing to approach the tense subject with "charity and sensitivity" and hoping "to encourage introspection," he did not want "to accuse anyone of antisemitism, but to explore the topic in a way that deepens our understanding of where it comes from, and where it's going."

A Harvard Law School professor, Feldman goes a long way toward capturing the spirit of the new antisemitism by distinguishing it from older forms. He rightly argues that the new antisemitism derives from fashionable ideas within our universities revolving around the distinction between oppressor and oppressed. But it is not merely, as he gently contends, the *misapplication* of those ideas that incites hatred of Jews. It is also the ideas *themselves*.

For much of history, Feldman observes, religion fueled antisemitism. Christians blamed the Jews for killing Christ and resented them for clinging to their ancient faith. Meanwhile, Middle Eastern Muslims treated Jews as second-class citizens though protecting them, like Christians, as "people of the book." But, argues Feldman, times have changed. Organized Christianity repudiated antisemitism. And Islamist antisemitism springs not from traditional Islamic texts, he somewhat tendentiously maintains, but from tropes imported from Europe.

In the 19th century, with religion's decline and enlightenment's rise, antisemitism took on new hues and shapes. Jews, according to Feldman, were reviled as supreme capitalists and as supreme communists. Either way, antisemites alleged, Jews ran the world, which damaged

humanity because they were an inferior race. Nazi Germany set out to exterminate the Jewish people. The Soviet Union merely persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured them.

While antisemitism taints the contemporary far right, Feldman recognizes that “the most perniciously creative current in contemporary antisemitic thought is more likely to come from the left.” Leading strands of progressive thought converge in postcolonial theory – a fashionable set of ideas that explains the conduct of great powers like the United Kingdom and the United States as driven by the racist and rapacious determination to dominate non-white peoples and foreign lands.

Postcolonial theory, which is deeply entrenched in American universities’ Middle East studies programs, understands politics exclusively through the lens of oppressor and oppressed while typically classifying Israel among the villains. “The core of this new antisemitism lies in the idea that Jews are not a historically oppressed people seeking self-preservation but instead oppressors: imperialists, colonialists, and even white supremacists,” writes Feldman. “This view preserves vestiges of the trope that Jews exercise vast power” at the same time as “It creatively updates that narrative to contemporary circumstances and current cultural preoccupations with the nature of power and injustice.

The contemporary critique, however, does not fit Israel’s complex reality. While “the concept of imperialism was developed to describe European powers that conquered, controlled, and exploited vast territories in the Global South and East,” explains Feldman, “The theory of settler-colonial white supremacy was developed as a critical account of countries like Australia and the U.S., in which, according to the theory, the colonialists’ aim was to displace the local population, not to extract value from its labor.” Contrary to the imperialism narrative, however, “Israel is a regional Middle Eastern power with a tiny footprint, not a global or continental empire designed to extract resources and labor.” And in opposition to the theory of settler colonialism, in 1947, the UN voted to establish a Jewish state and an Arab state. Five Arab armies’ efforts to destroy Israel after it declared independence in 1948 created the Palestinian refugee crisis. Half of Israel’s Jewish population is not ethnically European and more than 20% of its citizens are Arabs.

“To emphasize the narrative of Jews as oppressors,” writes Feldman, “the new antisemitism must also somehow sidestep not only two millennia of Jewish oppression, but also the Holocaust, the largest organized, institutionalized murder of any ethnic group in human history.” Nevertheless, the new antisemitism seized on the terrible war of self-defense forced on Israel by Hamas’ monstrous assault to contend that the Jewish state is perpetrating genocide against Gazan Palestinians. This obscene calumny advances the goal, argues Feldman, “of erasing the memory of the Holocaust and transforming Jews from victims into oppressors.”

Israel's war aims – destroy Hamas' ability to govern in Gaza and to wage war and secure the hostages' release – are lawful, Feldman stresses. And while one can quarrel with this or that targeting decision, Israel strives, as the laws of war require, to protect noncombatants to the extent possible consistent with the achievement of its legitimate military goals. Meanwhile, contrary to the laws of war, Hamas has converted urban areas into battle zones. That makes the jihadists *prima facie* responsible – morally and legally – for the tragic loss of thousands of noncombatants' lives in Gaza and the reduction of much of the territory's civilian infrastructure to rubble.

Feldman effectively shows that the imposition of postcolonial theory on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fuels and is fueled by the new antisemitism. To leave matters at that, however, obscures the damage done by the theory itself.

Postcolonial theory – an offshoot of which is the diversity, equity, and inclusion industry now entrenched in America's universities, corporations, and federal bureaucracy – is an all-embracing ideology. It does not merely call attention to power and injustice – what school of social and political thought does not? – but rather reduces human affairs to relations of power while forcing all people into the crude categories of oppressor and oppressed.

The practical results of American universities' promulgation of postcolonial theory are as pernicious as they are inevitable. Postcolonial theory sows ignorance because no single binary distinction can capture the complexity of human affairs. Among those who style themselves the oppressed, it fomenters scorn for the past, resentment of the present, and a haughty sense of entitlement to special privileges in the future. For those classified as oppressors, it fosters guilt among the more impressionable, and anger and resentment among those who reject blame for crimes dating back centuries in which they played no part and deny their complicity with the supposed stealth norms and invisible structures that purportedly continue to subjugate minorities and women.

Postcolonial theory typically targets the United States as the greatest oppressor. It is a short step to indicting Israel, America's leading friend and partner in the Middle East and the region's only rights-protecting democracy, as a co-conspirator.

Feldman is righter than he realizes in counseling that, "The best way to start climbing out of the abyss of antisemitism is to self-examine our impulses, our stories about power and injustice, and our beliefs."

The self-examination, which will redound not only to the benefit of Israel and the Jews but also to that of liberal democracy in America, should begin on U.S. campuses, whose fashionable anti-Americanism fans the flames of the new antisemitism.

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