

Philip Spencer: 'Britain's Jews feel isolated and under siege'

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Philip Spencer, author of numerous texts on modern anti-Semitism and the Holocaust – and more particularly on the issues raised by their treatment on the left – is now participating in the new London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, founded by David Hirsh. In his interview with the ReviewK., in which he evokes his own political journey, he returns to the reactions to October 7 in England, going through the history of the undigested legacy of the British Mandate over Palestine as well as that of the Ploughing under the leadership of David Corbyn.

Philip Spencer

You come from the militant left. You've come back from it. Can you tell us about this conversion? It took place even before Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader, didn't it?

Philip Spencer: I do come from a background marked by the radical left. As one of your recent contributors ([Mitchell Abidor](#)), I was radicalized during my stay in Paris in 1968, during the May events to which the revolutionary left, many of whose leaders were Jews like me, largely contributed. I had been very seduced by their universalist aspirations for radical change. I then joined the most anti-Stalinist Trotskyist organisation in the UK (the *International Socialists*, now the *Socialist Workers Party*). This organization saw the Soviet Union as a form of state capitalism and criticized the movements that the rest of the radical left fantasized about, in China, Cuba, Algeria, etc. This critical gesture was salutary, but I distanced myself from this analysis in terms of state capitalism, not least because it does not explain why these regimes exercise brutal and repeated violence against their own peoples. It was especially after the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda that I began to be concerned with issues of solidarity with the victims of genocide. Obviously, anyone interested in genocide comes to reflect on the Shoah, which the concept of genocide and the Genocide Convention have come to qualify. And when we think of the Holocaust, we have to go through its central element: anti-Semitism. In doing this work, I realized that, even at the time, anti-Semitism had not been taken seriously enough by a significant part of the radical left. I have also come (as Hannah Arendt and the leaders of the Frankfurt School did, each in their own way) to view the Holocaust as both specific (committed against the Jews) and universal (an attack on humanity, whose intrinsic diversity must be protected).

What do you remember from your time on the radical left?

What I remember above all is universalism: a commitment to solidarity that transcends national borders, towards all victims of violence inflicted not only by imperialist states (increasingly non-Western), but also by their own (often postcolonial) leaders. But this universalism must never exclude Jews and must also take anti-Semitism seriously, even when it manifests itself within the left. When he excludes Jews and refuses to take anti-Semitism seriously (or worse), he is not universalist at all, but anti-Semitic. The distinction between a universalism that seeks to include Jews and a universalism that sees Jews as its "other," as its enemy, is at the heart of the book I wrote with Robert Fine on left-wing anti-Semitism and the return of the so-called "Jewish question." In this book, we have identified two very different traditions on the left, both of which date back to the Age of Enlightenment.

And one of the two would have been adopted by Jeremy Corbyn...

What Corbyn meant to the radical left shocked me deeply. I see this as a total degeneration, both ethically and politically. I had always thought that the radical left would be the most inclined to defend the Jews. I have lived through at least three waves of anti-Semitism in the UK. One in the 1960s, because of neo-Nazis; another in the 1970s; and a third today. In the first two, the radical left had mobilized, especially in the 1970s in the form of the Anti-Nazi League, which was in fact an initiative of the SWP^[1] and which enjoyed significant support from the Jewish community (which it now denies). The idea that the radical left would not defend Jews, that it would excuse anti-Semitism, that it would collude with it, or even participate in it, was therefore inconceivable. All that has changed. Some lament that the left has left them. For my part, I think that a good part of the radical left is no longer left-wing at all. By supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, it has become pro-fascist.

Those who claim that this is anti-Zionism and not anti-Semitism are, in my opinion, deliberately dishonest. As far as anti-Zionism is concerned, everything changed after the Holocaust: it highlighted the existential need for Jews to have their own state in a world of nation-states, a world that failed to protect them. The question that could naturally be asked of me is why I have remained a member of an organization that remained anti-Zionist for so long by refusing to admit this evidence. I was certainly aware (Mitchell Abidor speaks of "moral idiocy" and this judgment also applies to me from this point of view) that part of the revolutionary left after 1967, and then after 1973, was anti-Zionist, but I neglected it for three (wrong) reasons. The first is that I assumed it was all rhetoric and no one really knew what he was talking about, since all our efforts (rightly in my view) were focused on building a socialist movement here in the UK. Second, being anti-Zionist was not a requirement for joining the SWP. And thirdly, I assumed that, since we were all anti-Stalinists through and through, and Stalinism had been anti-Semitic to the highest degree, we could not share this prejudice.

I was completely wrong on this last point. What happened was that almost the entire radical left completely abandoned its anti-Stalinism to embrace the legacy of Stalinist anti-Semitic anti-Zionism, especially after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

For years, *Labour* has been swallowed up by these trends. What are the intellectual sources of this phagocytization? Is there also a link with the criticism of the management of the British Empire? Or, more specifically, the question of Palestine?

The Labour Party is obviously not part of the radical left and has never been a Marxist party at any time in its history. Until recently, the radical left had little presence in the party, despite various unsuccessful attempts to penetrate and steer it openly or clandestinely towards what it considered a truly socialist leadership (somewhat according to the method employed by the Lambertists in France). As the hopes of Western revolutionaries were repeatedly dashed in the 1970s, and even more so after 1989 when the former communist states embraced capitalism, the West, and especially the United States, came to be seen as the source of all the world's woes. This was a global phenomenon, but the British radical left was certainly predisposed to it by its sustained criticism of Britain's imperial past and its enduring legacy. The radical left was of course right to point out the racism that had accompanied and justified the Empire, the way in which Britain had profited from slavery for so long, and the way in which this racism continued to be exercised against immigrants arriving in the UK, particularly in the wake of decolonisation. But this worldview did not have the means to explain how and why the State of Israel came into being after the Holocaust, nor to take anti-Semitism seriously unless it showed up in Nazi uniform. It was a reductive and very partial conception of the world, which could only work by removing inconvenient evidence and distorting history to force it to fit preconceptions.

With what worldview does the British left understand the birth of the State of Israel?

The initial assumption was that Britain had acted with Israel and Palestine as it had done in other parts of the Empire, so that "we" should feel as guilty about the fate of the Palestinians as we did about the fate of former slaves and so on. (I leave aside here the question of who exactly is the "we" in this formulation.) Even leaving aside the few differences between the various situations that arose from the disintegration of the Empire, applying this schema to the Israeli-Palestinian problem makes no sense. Few members of the radical left today seem to know, for example, that Britain did not vote in favor of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. or that it was communist Czechoslovakia that supplied crucial weapons to the Haganah during the War of Independence. But even this willful ignorance does not fully explain how Israel has gradually come to be perceived as the worst state in the world. It is not enough to point out (although it is important) that after 1967, Israel no longer appeared to be a country weak enough to automatically merit the sympathy of the international community. Indeed, this change in position was also accompanied by a systematic refusal to consider the Palestinians as having any capacity to act, or to take seriously the violently anti-Semitic ideas (some, but not all, of which had been successfully disseminated in the Middle East by Nazi propaganda from the 1930s onwards) commonly professed in the region. even before the rise of Islamism. To understand what is at stake here, we must take into account the recurrent presence and attraction of anti-Semitism for that part of the radical left that has often been tempted to embrace a façade of radicalism, in which Jews are individually and collectively considered responsible for everything that is wrong in the world.

How is this rhetoric being updated today?

The contemporary version of this superficial radicalism focuses on U.S. support for Israel. Any good anti-imperialist must then consider that Israel is either an instrument of Western imperialism in the region, or the other way around (even better!). In contrast, any force opposing America and Israel is "objectively" on the side of progress, since it seeks to overthrow an iniquitous world order in which the British state also participates (as an ally of the evil Americans and Israel and with its own fraught racist and imperialist past).



Politics

But what was going on in Corbyn's Labour?

- Milo Lévy-Bruhl & Adrien Zirah
- October 27, 2021

Corbyn himself had imbibed these ideas a long time ago. In the eyes of his supporters, this made him a man of convictions and principles. So when the opportunity arose for him to run for the leadership of the Labour Party, he relied on his track record as a staunch opponent of the deeply unpopular Iraq war, which Tony Blair's previous Labour government had supported. He also rode on the frustration felt by many at the inability of the party, then in opposition and led by Blair's successors, to effectively challenge the policies of the Conservatives who returned to power in the wake of the 2008 crash and are now embarking on a harsh austerity programme that is clearly exacerbating inequality. Corbyn seemed to represent principled opposition to the Conservatives, but at the heart of his worldview was a primal anti-Americanism and tenacious anti-Zionism that had led him, without shame or remorse, to repeatedly associate himself with avowed anti-Semites. Once Corbyn surprisingly became leader of the party in 2015, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were unleashed within Labour. The lives of Jewish party members have become extremely complicated (even though the party has historically been the community's preferred party in Britain). Many of them, as well as all those who refused to subscribe to the new orthodoxy, were forced to leave the party in

desperation. Fortunately, the electorate unambiguously rejected Corbyn in 2019, handing Labour its most humiliating defeat since the 1930s.

What were the reasons for this rejection?

There were many reasons for this, not least a certain weariness following the long Brexit debate (which is not to say that one should underestimate the chauvinism and xenophobia that ensured the victory of the Brexiteers in the first place). It's unclear to what extent Corbyn's overt anti-Semitism played a role in Labour's defeat, but what happened next came as a huge relief to Britain's Jews and anyone who cares about anti-Semitism. From the outset, new leader Keir Starmer forced a fundamental change in his position, openly apologizing to the Jewish community for everything that had happened under his predecessor. Equally important, a major finding by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which had previously only investigated far-right racism, unambiguously established that the Labour Party under Corbyn had been guilty of institutionalized anti-Semitism^[2]. Corbyn dismissed the findings as exaggerated, and many of his supporters blamed Jews for ensuring Labour's defeat. These are, of course, two classic tropes of left-wing anti-Semitism: attacking Jews for exaggerating their misfortunes for selfish and malevolent ends, and for engaging in conspiracies to block the forces of progress. Mélenchon resembles, I think, Corbyn in many ways, although he seems to me to be a more virulent anti-Semite. After all, he criticized Corbyn for making too many concessions to the Jews! An important difference is that the Socialist Party collapsed in France when Mélenchon was no longer part of it (and had never led it), so he can present himself from the outside as the man who will bring the French left back to both its principles and power. Corbyn presided over the debacle of the Labour Party. Starmer is thus in a much stronger position than Mélenchon's detractors within the French left. He can make it abundantly clear that it was Corbyn who led Labour to a catastrophic defeat. But beyond this difference in situation, Starmer's position is to restore what should be a principle dear to *Labour*, namely that anti-Semitism is something that must be rejected not only for tactical reasons, but also for reasons of principle. No party that collaborates, or even participates, in the dissemination of this doctrine should be able to claim to be on the left.

What is *Labour's* position on the conflict between Israel and Hamas and the wave of anti-Semitism in the UK?

Currently, in the United Kingdom, there are still a significant number of anti-Semites within the party, although several of them have been expelled or left it. Corbyn himself is no longer a Labour member of Parliament and, at the next election, he will not be allowed to stand as a Labour candidate. In response to the horrific events of October 7, Starmer took a clear and unambiguous stance of support for Israel. He understood well the despicable and reactionary nature of Hamas, as well as the brutality of its attacks. However, he came under considerable pressure from a significant section of the party, especially at the local level, from people who immediately supported Hamas, even before Israel had taken any action. To his credit, he did not give in to these pressures, but they continue to grow because of the organization, week after week, of large mobilizations against Israel and against all those who support the Jewish state.

Faced with Starmer's position, we can roughly identify three positions of the left on this question. The first, defended by a significant number at the heart of the protests,

unequivocally supports Hamas for the reasons set out above. The second formally recognizes the nefarious nature of Hamas' actions. However, this concession (often expressed as a "self-evident" when it is not) is immediately followed by a "but" — that the Israeli response is far worse and that Israel is fundamentally the culprit in this conflict (deliberately ignoring the fact that Hamas attacked the Jewish state). This group supports the slogan "from the river to the sea" (which obviously implies the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews in large numbers) and takes up the increasingly widespread idea that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. There is a third position that considers both Hamas and Israel to be violent and calls for a ceasefire, refusing to acknowledge that Hamas will obviously use this temporary cessation of fighting to rearm and launch new attacks.

In the United Kingdom, too, the rhetoric of the spectre of genocide is being heard...

For my part, I find the accusation of genocide against Israel particularly shocking. It betrays a deliberate refusal to acknowledge that Hamas openly stated its genocidal intentions and perpetrated acts that clearly meet the definition of genocidal acts under the Convention^[3] which were deliberately carried out in such a way as to remind Jews of the extreme violence used by the *Einsatzgruppen*. But, in addition, this accusation is anti-Semitic, since it accuses the Jews of the crime committed against them. This is no coincidence. It has its origins in a partial and limited (at best) understanding of the Holocaust as having only a universal significance from which, supposedly, only Jews would not have learned the lessons. And we quickly arrive at Israel, the new Nazi Germany. There is something exciting, I think, in what would perhaps benefit from being understood as a kind of perversion, a pleasure in imagining the victims transformed into executioners. To be sure, Sartre has long stressed that anti-Semitism is not a reasoned attitude, but a passion, as can be seen very easily in anti-Israel demonstrations. As the great French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch once noted: "The Jews are therefore the new Nazis. What a joy! ». It is certainly hard not to perceive a certain excitement in the way the demonstrators are shouting slogans so offensive to Jews that they are plunging them into a state of anxiety they have not experienced in this country for ages.

We have seen impressive images of these protests in the United Kingdom. Do you have an idea of the numbers, who is mobilizing?

Those who attack Starmer's position consider it a shameful betrayal and accuse him of having blood on his hands. Allegations of treason and complicity in the massacres have featured prominently in the large demonstrations so far. Mobilizations have also taken place at the local level against Starmer himself and against members of parliament who supported his course of action. (A large majority of them, however, continued to support him, and not all of them were targeted, far from it.) It is difficult to put an exact figure on the number of participants in at least four events to date, but it is likely to be well over 100,000 week after week. We don't know enough at this time to make generalizations about the protesters and their motivations.

Another argument is put forward by the radical left to mobilise, and manages to find some resonance in the UK, given the history of racism I mentioned earlier. It is to say that all victims of racism should automatically be anti-Zionist because, we are told, Jews have managed (since the Holocaust) to become "white" and are therefore now an integral part of an inherently oppressive local and global power structure. It is hard to imagine, however,

that in communities as diverse as those originating in Afro-Caribbean countries or the Indian subcontinent, crowds of people would be attracted to what is fundamentally yet another example of the refusal of part of the radical left to take anti-Semitism seriously. In any case, this line of argument is an import from the United States, just like *Black Lives Matter*. This slogan has managed to resonate here for a while, even though the living conditions of people who experience anti-black racism in the UK differ considerably, in many ways, from those in the US, both then and now.

But it must be acknowledged that these arguments are especially important in British universities, which have become worrying hotbeds for the spread of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Again, this is a global phenomenon, but the UK saw a particularly significant development in the early 2000s, when the Academics' Union (UCU) voted to boycott Israeli universities. Much of the anti-Semitism, which so disfigured the Labour Party in the Corbyn years, was first expressed in this boycott campaign. Although Corbyn is no longer there, his ideas have actually gained even more support in universities, where some of the former Labour leader's most enthusiastic supporters have coalesced. In many universities, professors and students are advocating the victory of Hamas, vilifying Israel for war crimes and genocide, and asserting with aplomb that it is a totally illegitimate colonizing and apartheid state. The level of ignorance displayed here should be of great concern, as it is in this space that the next generation of activists, journalists, politicians and decision-makers see their ideas shaped and consolidated. A recent initiative to create a Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism — tasked with supporting often isolated scholars and vulnerable students seeking to challenge this "common sense" — offers a glimmer of hope. I must say that I myself am closely associated with this project led by the eminent sociologist David Hirsh, who played a central role in the campaign against the academic boycott and whose writings on contemporary anti-Semitism in the United Kingdom are an indispensable guide to understanding how we got here.

How did Jews react?

The students are just one of the groups in the UK's Jewish community facing this unprecedented wave of hostility. The Jews felt isolated and besieged, as did the members of the French Jewish community, which was numerically much larger. Moreover, the British community has never enjoyed the overt support that the French Republic has sometimes given to Jews since the Revolution, when they were first granted equal rights (even if only in an individual capacity). Britain has no such republican tradition, but rather a culture of liberal tolerance. The traditional position of the Jewish community in the United Kingdom is characterized by a general sense of grateful acceptance, accompanied by a certain reluctance to openly take the lead in the fight against anti-Semitism. It has generally struggled to find allies capable of taking the initiative — as in the case of Cable Street and the LNA — within the left. For some time, this response has been deemed insufficient and many Jews are becoming more assertive, which partly corresponds to a wider acceptance in the UK of the importance of group identification (an attitude that is arguably more problematic in France). Nevertheless, there remains a deep sense of gratitude to the United Kingdom for standing firm in the face of Nazi Germany and a relief that there was no equivalent of Vichy betrayal here.

The immediate reaction to October 7 was marked by vigils and commemorations — in which largely, but not exclusively, Jews participated — but also, interestingly, by a sharp increase in

synagogue attendance. Obviously, this sudden influx does not reflect any kind of return to faith, but rather the desire of many Jews for a safe space. Very recently, a demonstration took place in London, by far the largest mobilization (between 60,000 and 100,000 people according to various estimates) to be directed directly against anti-Semitism since the famous events on Cable Street in the 1930s. The demonstration against anti-Semitism also echoed some of the mobilizations of the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s. While the majority of the participants in this demonstration were probably Jews, it is clear that it also attracted non-Jews and that many Britons do not approve of the hatred that is now openly expressed against them. It is extremely important for Jews to know that they are not isolated and that Starmer's Conservative government and Labour are not the only ones supporting them. It is nevertheless tragic that a significant part of the radical left, whose predecessors closely contributed to the success of Cable Street and then the LNA, now finds itself at the heart of the anti-Semitic mobilization.

Interview by Elie Petit and Danny Trom

Notes

- 1 Socialist *Workers Party*, a Trotskyist party founded in 1962.
- 2 See, in K., "But what was going on in Corbyn's ploughing? »
- 3 This is the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948 and signed or ratified by 152 parties.
- 4 The events on Cable Street evoke the moment when Jews (mostly from the left and in partnership with the Communist Party) prevented fascists from marching in the East End. Ironically, Corbyn himself used to boast about his mother's presence in Cable Street that day and explained that he could not possess a single drop of anti-Semitic blood as a result.