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Citation

Hirsh, David. 2014. 'Civility' in contemporary debates about antisemitism. *Jewish Quarterly*, p. 39. [Article]

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‘Civility’ in contemporary debates about antisemitism – David Hirsh

This piece, by David Hirsh, is one of three responses in [Jewish Quarterley - Spring 2014](#) to Keith Kahn-Harris's book [Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community](#). The other two are by Jonathan Cummings and Stephen Frosh.

David Hirsh (2014) ‘Civil Reactions’, *Jewish Quarterley*, Spring 2014, London: Routledge, pp38-9.

<http://engageonline.wordpress.com/2014/07/07/civility-in-contemporary-debates-about-antisemitism-david-hirsh/>

There is a war of words between the diverse majority of the Jewish community and its tiny but influential antizionist fringe. Many Jews are worried that hostility to Israel is sometimes antisemitic, sometimes mirrors antisemitic forms, sometimes brings with it antisemitic exclusions or ways of thinking. The antizionists tend to dismiss this worry about antisemitism as an illegitimate attempt to silence criticism of Israel. Of course we may civilly disagree about what is antisemitic and what isn't; and we may argue, present evidence and discuss. But the space for rational discussion is often closed off in advance by an accusation of bad faith. It isn't said that Jews are mistaken when they think something is antisemitic, it is said that they've invented it, disgracefully, for short-term, tribal, or nationalist, reasons; that they are crying wolf.

This struggle happens in public and it is influential upon wider non-Jewish civil society. Blanket denial of antisemitism becomes an enabler of antisemitic discourse, boycotts and ways of thinking. Antizionist Jews play a key role in licensing, leading and encouraging movements which single out Israel as a unique evil on the planet.

A South African trade unionist declares that he intends to make life hell for ‘Zionists’, Zionists are like Hitler and they should leave South Africa on an El Al plane. The Jewish antizionist fringe insists that this is only to be understood as a vulgar way of carrying on a debate about Israel and Palestine. Antizionism tends to treat talk of antisemitism as a dirty tactic in the Israel/Palestine debate.

People get angry and upset because they are afraid that the actions of a small minority of Jews are influential in bringing antisemitism down on the heads of their fellow Jews while others get equally angry and upset because they are convinced that their fellow Jews are trying to silence criticism of Israel with a dishonest accusation of antisemitism.

There is no nice way to accuse you of being soft on antisemitism; there is no nice way to accuse you of raising the issue of antisemitism in bad faith. It is the content of the claims not their form which is hurtful. Re-framing the issue to make us all right will not do.

The *Livingstone Formulation*, the response to an accusation of antisemitism which declares that the accuser speaks in bad faith, makes debate impossible. If you say that somebody who raises the issue of antisemitism is just a liar then there is no discussion which can bring us towards agreement. It silences Jewish fears and portrays them as disgraceful tactics.

Because Nazism had already been defeated when we were formed politically, it was easy for us all to recognise it as the enemy. Because colonialism and racism had been discredited, we could all understand dockers who marched with Enoch Powell and racist Afrikaners as throwbacks to a disappearing age. But caricature might have been the price we paid for unanimity.

Whereas we thought of Nazism as representing the culmination of antisemitism, it was actually an exceptional form. We were tempted to ‘other’ antisemitism, to construct it as being something which

could only exist outside of our own, civilized sphere. But in fact, antisemitism had always existed very much within our own spheres; within Europe, within the left, within radical philosophy, even amongst Jews. Antisemitism has often taken political forms, it has attracted 'people like us', it has not always been easy to recognise; it has melded with criticism of capitalism and banking, nationalism, modernity and imperialism. There have always been some Jews who have succumbed to its logic. Nazism itself grew partly out of radical antihegemonic political traditions and was attractive to some within 'our world'. But it was comfortable, afterwards, for us to imagine antisemitism only as appearing with a silly moustache and a fascist uniform; and as being permanently discredited.

The defeat of colonialism was not so straightforward either. It was defeated by nationalist movements which had a tendency to succumb to the most ethnically based forms of nationalism and they tended to create regimes which mirrored some of the worst race-thinking and kleptocracy of the old empires. The Soviet Cold War common sense of a world divided into imperialism and anti-imperialism gave the gloss of the 'progressive' to some of the most despotic regimes. The notion of 'progressiveness' attached itself to peoples and nations rather than to political movements or to ideas. The violence of this black/white binary is illustrated by the fate of those who fell between the two camps: Tutsis, Tamils, African Asians, Jews, Armenians, Bosniaks, Tibetans, Kurds.

The colonialists who ran the great cosmopolitan cities of the Middle East were replaced by movements which tended towards ethnic nationalism in Cairo, Alexandria, Baghdad; Beirut, Tehran, Damascus, not only in Jerusalem.

We thought anti-Nazism was enough when we should have understood the complexities of antisemitism and we thought anti-colonialism and anti-racism were enough when we should have made more effort to forge a positive cosmopolitan politics.

Now we find ourselves in a world we have trouble understanding. Jews are thought of as white, and therefore never potential victims of racism; nobody looks like the Nazis so how can there be antisemitism? Israel, the refuge of the un-dead of Europe, is thought of as colonialist or apartheid. Jews, except for those who disavow, are conceived of as 'Zionists' which has become another word for racists or oppressors.

The conflict between Jews in the Middle East and their neighbours tends to be mystified into ready-made ways of thinking; either Jews are simply victims of the hostile antisemites around them or Arabs are victims of the Israeli white settler-colonialists. Israelis and Palestinians tend to attain a symbolic importance which is out of proportion to their actual weight in the world; they become an empty vessel into which everybody pours their own issues, a template by which people recognise themselves, a language in which they discuss their own angst.

There is an antisemitic threat in our world. Antisemitism is objective and external, recognizable through a set of clearly established characteristics. The French comedian Dieudonné makes Holocaust denial funny as he constructs a worldview where anti-imperialist thought and the right to *Sieg Heil* are curtailed by overwhelming Zionist power. Mainstream British and American academic organisations host campaigns to exclude Israelis, and only Israelis, from the global academic community. Open antisemitism is commonplace amongst Islamist and Arab nationalist movements which are considered by some to be part of the global left. The idea that Zionism is the key form of racism on the planet is common in radical circles. The assumption that Jews who fight against antisemitism are actually fighting for Jewish privilege lurks below the surface of much public debate. The possibility that the Israel lobby is responsible for war is taken seriously. The impulse to boycott

Israel is thought to be respectable; anybody who says it's antisemitic is thought to be vulgar and tribal.

There is a tiny minority of Jews which leads the movement to exclude Israelis from the global community, which insists that Israel is uniquely and essentially racist, which educates people to recognise anybody who worries about antisemitism as dishonest apologists for Zionism. Hardly any Jews are antizionist, but many antizionists are Jews.

This minority often mobilizes its Jewish identity, speaking loudly 'as a Jew'. In doing so, it seeks to erode and undermine the influence of ordinary Jews in the name of an authentic, radical, diasporic and ethical Judaism.

Jews who worry about antisemitism are written off as tribal and self-interested; they are constructed as 'Zionists' and hence not as antiracists, intellectuals or legitimate members of the left. This hostile, external construction of Jews is in sharp contrast to the eager self-definition of the 'as-a-Jew' critics, who parade their Jewishness in order to discredit, in the eyes of the onlooking world, the fears of their fellow Jews.

The 'as a Jew' preface is directed at non-Jews. It tempts non-Jews to suspend their own political judgment as to what is, and what is not, antisemitic. The force of the 'as a Jew' preface is to bear witness against the other Jews. It is based on the assumption that being Jewish gives you some kind of privileged insight into what is antisemitic and what is not; the claim to authority through identity substitutes for civil, rational debate. Anti-Zionist Jews do not simply make their arguments and adduce evidence; they mobilize their Jewishness to give themselves influence. They pose as courageous dissidents who stand up against the fearsome threat of mainstream Zionist power.

Ironically, this positioning by the tiny minority tends to set the boundaries of civil discourse in such a way as to exclude and silence the legitimate concerns of the majority. It characterizes antisemitism as a right-wing issue and it teaches antiracists to recognise talk of antisemitism as an indicator of racist apologetics.

We need to agree that antisemitism is serious and that it is real; it is not only a threat to Jews but it is also a threat to the labour movement, to intellectual culture and to wider society. Of course we need then to be able to present and discuss arguments and evidence as to what is antisemitic and what isn't; how we define it and how we recognise it are rightfully up for democratic discussion. The phenomenon which most definitely closes off the possibility of civilized discourse is the claim that Jews raise the issue of antisemitism, knowing that they're lying, in order to stifle free speech and criticism.

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