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Engage

Chip Berlet interviews David Hirsh on Contemporary Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theory

September 6, 2012 — David Hirsh

Chip Berlet's interview with David Hirsh is on PublicEye.org.

This conversation happened on Monday, June 29th, 2009 but was not published until September 2012.

The Public Eye: Interview with David Hirsh

Chip Berlet is a US-based investigative journalist and expert on the far right and conspiracy theories.

David Hirsh is a Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmith's College, University of London. He is the author of *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Cosmopolitan Reflections*, The Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism, (YIISA) Working Paper Series #1, New Haven CT, 2007; and "Law Against Genocide" in Freeman, M, (ed) *Law and Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Hirsh did an MA in Philosophy and Social Theory at Warwick University and he wrote his PhD there on Crimes against Humanity and International Law. He was interviewed in June 2009.

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BERLET: It seems that people who think of themselves as anti-racist and of some sort of progressive political bent have a hard time recognizing antisemitism, even if they recognize antisemitic statements they have a hard time seeing it in the same context of a broader global anti-racist struggle. Why do you think that is?

HIRSH: I think people are very good at recognizing some kinds of antisemitism. If it wears a Nazi uniform they understand it, if it's right-wing they understand it, if it's some sort of very simple worldview of racism and anti-racism. If it comes from the left and it comes from people who are anti-racist, then there's often much more difficulty in recognizing and understanding what's going on. There [are] many reasons for that.

One is that we think of antisemitism as being Nazism. Nazism was actually an unusual form of antisemitism; it was very clear, it allowed no exceptions; it allowed no escape for Jews. Most forms of antisemitism haven't been like that., Christian antisemitism allowed people to convert

to Christianity and therefore make themselves clean; also political antisemitism allowed Jews to put themselves on the right side of history. One of things we shouldn't get too hung up on is the idea that antisemites are all like Adolph Hitler, because they're not.

BERLET: In recent years, it's been clear that a lot of folks on the left have been part of a global anti-Zionist struggle and they don't seem to recognize the boundaries. There's another question which is embedded within that [in], which there seems to be a misunderstanding of Zionism as a monolithic project that has remained unchanged since the late 1800s, and that creates all sorts of problems. Can you explain what you've written about that, in terms of the basic misunderstanding of [Zionism] being a monolithic project?

HIRSH: It's actually very interesting, because although these anti-Zionists think of themselves as being very macho, Marxists [and] historical materialists, yet their narrative and how they explain Zionism is almost solely in terms of ideas. So it'll be explained that Theodore Herzl had an idea in the late nineteenth century which it will be explained [as] a racist idea that Jews and other people couldn't live together. And every subsequent manifestation of Zionism (or at least of what we don't like about Zionism) is explained in terms of the idea that Herzl had. Now of course, one of the flaws of that kind of reasoning is that material things happened in Europe and in the Middle East and in Russia in the 20th century which transformed Zionism from a whole set of rather utopian movements into a really existing state. So, I think sure, we should look at the ideas and the fight over ideas that have been going on ever since the beginning of Zionism, but we also need to understand the social and material realities of Jewish life.

BERLET: Clearly one of the most significant things that happened was the Nazi genocide of Jews and others in WWII., The formula that has emerged in anti-Zionist circles recently is that what Israel is doing to the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, is tantamount to what the German Nazis did to the Jews during WWII., That seems to be historically inaccurate but it also changes the understanding that Zionism changed dramatically after WWII because of the Holocaust.

HIRSH: Well, one can do all sorts of strange things with analogies. The important thing about Nazism, the reason that Nazism is Nazism in the popular and political imagination, is because it set out to exterminate the Jews. And extermination is a project that's even rather different from mass murder. So Nazism is known for extermination. Now the idea that what is happening in the Israeli-Palestine conflict is anything similar to that is just wrong. There's no extermination, there never was a plan of extermination, and there is no mass murder and there is no genocide. So why do people keep raising that as an analogy?

It seems to me that one of the reasons people raise that as an analogy is because they think it has a particular effect on Jews when it is said that the Jews or Israelis have become similar to those who persecuted them. And of course it does have a particular effect on Jews. It has an effect of upsetting Jews. I think that that's really the point of it, the point of it isn't to come out with a serious [analysis]. There are all sorts of serious historical analogies for the rise of Jewish and Palestinian nationalism in the Middle East. One can look at Europe in the 19th century, one can look at the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, one can look at the Balkans, one can look at many, many things. It's not similar to Nazism. Why do people say it's similar to Nazism? They say it's similar to Nazism in order to wind up the Jews, so actually the charge that the Israelis are the new Nazis is a kind of Jew-baiting. It's literally that. It is a charge whose function is to upset and to annoy and to wind up.

I also find that it's one of those things people think of, and they actually think they're very clever when they think of it. They say 'the Jews have become the Nazis.' There's a kind of kernel behind it [that] one can understand, the idea that if one has been subject to persecution then one should be able to recognize it and one should be less willing to become a part of something like that in the future. But it seems to me a fundamentally flawed kind of logic, partly because one only has to ask the question what were the Jews supposed to learn at Auschwitz?

The question itself is fundamentally flawed. Auschwitz wasn't any kind of positive learning experience, and the overwhelmingly majority of the Jews who had anything to do with the Holocaust learned nothing from it because they were killed by it. It wasn't a learning experience and it wasn't an experience which made people better, or more left-wing, or more anti-racist. There was no silver lining to the Holocaust.

What did people learn? People learned next time, don't rely on western civilization to prevent antisemitism and genocide, next time have bigger friends, next time have a state with which you can defend yourself and next time have more tanks. Now that's not my lesson it's not my politics

The idea that the Jews should have learned something from the Holocaust is a kind of category error in thinking about the Jews as one people, as a unity. Because in truth different Jews learned different things from the Holocaust, and different Jews have different kinds of politics and different kinds of worldviews and different kinds of attitudes to what goes on. And the idea that the Jews collectively should think one thing or learn one thing is problematic. It's an idea which comes up again and again, and I think it doesn't make much sense.

I'm afraid to articulate the thought, what should the Blacks have learned from slavery? You just have to articulate the thought to realize what a vile kind of way of thinking it is, yet people say this about the Jews routinely – and some serious people. Jacqueline Rose, the well-known literary theorist and psychoanalyst, has asked these questions in the press in quite a kind of angry way, and has put forward the analogy between Jews and Nazis. In my own institution, I went down the corridor six months ago and was handed a leaflet saying that what was happening in Gaza was the same as what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto. The leaflet advertise[d] a meeting for students at which a woman who was presented as a Holocaust survivor was going to make this argument. And this meeting was very well-attended

Because there was a Jewish woman making the argument, and because she called herself a Holocaust survivor, people really thought that that came with a significant authority. If one raised the question about the appropriateness of that kind of discussion on campus, the answer would be very straightforwardly, well [she's] a Holocaust survivor making this argument not us. How can you raise the question in that context?

BERLET: In terms of the consistency issue. If critics of the idea of the state of Israel – let's define that [as a state resulting from] Zionism [which itself is] a project that has a lot of different historical moments and a lot of different aspects—but people will argue that the idea of the state of Israel is itself a form of colonialism and settlerism. And what I find dramatically obvious is that the same people who raise that argument do not raise it in the same way with countries like Australia, New Zealand or even the United States. And it seems that very often

in these discussions people exceptionalize Israel. They run away from logical and sequential arguments that would be much more powerful if you wanted to be a critic, and yet they get away with it.

HIRSH: Well, I think the way you phrase it is very interesting... There's an old Jewish joke which was around I believe in the 1920s that asks, what's the definition of a Zionist? And the answer is a Zionist is one Jew who gives money to a second Jew so a third Jew can live in Palestine. Point being, Zionism was a utopian movement, it was a movement which didn't have much mass purchase in Europe in the 1920s. Why? Because nobody wanted to go live in a swamp on the coastal plain of Palestine.

So Zionism was an idea, it was a political movement which one could be for or one could be against. One could be a Bundist, one could be a socialist – actually all of these movements were movements of the left, were radical movements, were anti-racist movements. And of course the [political] Right didn't want to have anything to do with any of them.

Zionism was a minority and a rather utopian movement at that time – it was an idea with which one could agree or disagree and enter into discussions.

Things changed. After the experience of antisemitism in Europe, after the Holocaust when Europe attempted to wipe itself clean of Jews, after the pushing out of the Jews from the cosmopolitan cities of the Middle East, after the experience of antisemitism in Russia, after 1948 and the setting up of the state of Israel, after the wars of '48 and '56 and '67 and '73, Israel is no longer an idea, actually.

I think it's very important because Israel is often talked about as though it is an idea or Zionism is an idea or Israel is some kind of a political movement. One will often hear people talking about "the Zionists": The Zionists do this, the Zionists should be driven out, the Zionists think that.... I don't use the term "the Zionists" in that way because I don't think Israel is a political movement. Israel is a nation-state, rather like other nation-states. To talk about Israel as though it were a political movement is to ask whether it's a good political movement or a bad political movement. And one doesn't do that with Croatia or with France or with the United States – is the United States a good idea or a bad idea? Well, who cares— the United States exists. We oppose destructive kind of nationalism, we have a political program against racism, blah blah blah. But nation-states are not political movements and Israel isn't a political movement.

BERLET: There are a bunch of settler nations in the world.....

HIRSH: Well, I suspect that the overwhelming majority of nations are settler-nations in some sense.; Nations classically and pretty well always have been carved out by national movements which aim to create an idea of nationhood which defines itself against people who didn't fit into that idea of nationhood. It's a classic and ordinary history for nation-states, and its not pleasant anywhere actually, and of course Israel has particular unique features to its history. It's more recent than many states, but not than many others—because after the fall of the Soviet Union. for example, there was another huge wave of nationalism and the creation of nation-states and national self-determination. That came often with the defining of people who didn't fit. So Israel isn't anymore all that new, and isn't in any sense unique.

I think there's quite a lot at stake in the idea that Israel is unique. Antisemitism, I think, has always tried to understand and to construct the Jews as being centrally important to everything that happens in the world. The Jews are not centrally important to everything that happens in the world. Jews are a rather small and rather insignificant group of people, actually.

So antisemitism always created out of them a kind of huge threat, usually through conspiracy theory; or a huge threat because the Jews didn't accept Jesus; or a huge threat because the Jews were heralds of modernity and therefore [behind] the breakdown of traditional values. So Jews [were always constructed] as centrally important to what happened in the world, and they're not. And I think that when one sees the construction of Israel as though it were centrally important to everything that happens in the world, then one is in danger of seeing a similar pattern emerging.

One often sees people who claim that the Israel-Palestine conflict is the key to world peace, or even the key to peace in the Middle East. There was an interesting version of that in the ... Observer. The morning after the election in Iran, there was an editorial which was very fresh, nobody really knew what had happened in the election [yet], and the editorial said, 'the election may have been stolen by Ahmadinejad – it may have been stolen, there's people in the streets, we don't know what's happened yet, time will tell. Whatever happens, the most important event is Bibi Netanyahu's speech at Bar-Ilan University next week about the peace process.'

Now, I don't think that's true – I don't think a rather tedious speech by a rather tedious Israeli politician is more important than the stealing of an election in Iran and the fact that there's a huge mass popular movement against that stealing of that election. Iran is hugely important in its own right, for Iranians. It's an old state with a huge culture of its own, with a democratic tradition of its own, with a revolutionary tradition of its own. It's a state where there's been fighting over democracy for decades, where the busworkers from Tehran were brutally suppressed about a year ago when they went on strike, where's there a tradition of the Left.

So why would the Observer newspaper just kind of say 'well, we don't know yet what's going to happen in Iran, but the most important thing is Netanyahu'? The reason it does that, I think, is because that there's such a temptation to understand Israelis and Palestinians as being symbolic of much, much bigger, much, much more important things. So the importance of Israelis and Palestinians is blown up out of all proportion.

What comes with that then is an idea that Palestinians become the symbolic oppressed of the whole world, and Israelis and the Jews who argue [on the side of Israel] become symbolic of the oppressors throughout the world. One can see very straightforwardly how that can lead easily to conspiracy theory and to a reconstruction of the Jews as being central to everything that goes wrong in the world. So a lot of these debates about uniqueness are very important because Israel and Palestine are treated as though they were unique by many people, by many anti-Zionists.

Anti-Zionists claim to be universalists and cosmopolitans and anti-nationalists, but in truth, the way they relate to Israel is not the way they relate to anywhere else on the planet. For example, the boycott [sanctions and divestiture movement]. If you look at the debate which happened over the boycott in my trade union recently it was interesting because there was a lot of rhetoric [about] the Israeli incursion into Gaza in December/January [2009] that was very, very

unpleasant. The Israelis went in chasing after Hamas fighters and they killed a lot of people who were in and around the targets – [and] of course the targets base themselves in civilian areas.

So the war in Gaza was very, very unpleasant, and in my view the Israelis shouldn't have been doing it. However, a month later in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan state did to the Tamil Tigers what the Israelis didn't to Hamas – that is, they went in, they separated the fighters from the civilians, they put the civilians in camps, they killed many thousands of people, they shelled the camps, they finished off the fighters, they took their territory and then they went through the civilians one by one and found the Tamil Tigers and dealt with them.

Now I think that's appalling, and I'm very pleased that the Israelis don't behave like that in Gaza. So why is it that at my union conference there's an emergency motion about Sri Lanka, and people talk reasonable sense about Sri Lanka: people get up and say there's a history of colonialism and a peace movement which fell apart, there's important things we have to understand about the conflict, what we have to do as a trade union is to forge links with Sinhalese and Tamil [the two major ethnic groups] trade unionists, and we need to fight for politics of peace and reconciliation between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. [These are ideas reflecting] perfectly normal [and] reasonable trade union values.

The debate then moves straight on to Israel, and the debate hinges only around the idea of boycotting Israeli academics – the idea that Israeli academics need to be punished and Israelis needs to be shown that their academics are not part of a global academic community. What about the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka? Nothing. So [we have] a much more serious situation in Sri Lanka, but much more serious anger against Israelis than against the Sri Lankan state. And an anger which spreads not only to the Israeli state but to Israeli civil society, because one of the tropes of anti-Zionism is to portray Israel as though there's no distinction between the people and the state. So who do we punish? We punish the people, the academics. Why? Because they are the state.

[That's a] very threatening and menacing view, to say that working-class people or civil society or ordinary people in a city are the state. We don't normally do that. Anti-Zionists do that with Israel and they shouldn't do it.

BERLET: It would seem, conceptually, that attacking two large office buildings in downtown New York would be the same categorical error, that by punishing people in an office building which is viewed as the center of power is equally wrong. Once any group looks at a nation-state and says that they are a loci of power and therefore it is legitimate [to argue that] every civilian is a target. That's a collapse of understanding how complicated nations, governments, [and] societies are.

With the issue of Israel it's collapsed even further so that not only is it the state of Israel and the government of Israel and the Israeli people, but Jews worldwide [who] are all complicit in this "conspiracy."

HIRSH: During the conflict in Gaza, one of the official spokesmen of Hamas actually said publicly that since the Israelis are killing Palestinian children, then the Hamas movement is calling for the killing of Jewish children across the world. One would think that that was a kind of big, important statement from an antisemitic movement which was promising to kill Jewish children across the world. It wasn't taken seriously by anybody, by anti-racists, –nobody expressed surprise or shock, it was just said, 'well, what do the Israelis expect'?

One of the things about 9/11 is that people are able to look symbolically again. The Twin Towers are raised to symbolize something in people's imagination in a similar way that Israelis are raised to symbolized something in people's imagination. But really who was in the office boxes of the twin towers? They were cleaners and technicians and all sorts of people; they weren't all bankers, they weren't all the architects of global capital. And of course similarly — even more clearly — when buses are blown up in Tel Aviv. Rich people in Tel Aviv don't go around in buses [partly] because they get blown up. So there's a symbolism to the blowing up of buses which has nothing to do with the reality of it. There's a kind of likemindedness to it — 'wasn't it interesting to see the symbolism of capitalism in New York collapse; isn't it interesting to see the Palestinians gaining some revenge'? It's a kind of simple, likeminded symbolic thinking which has no relation to politics, to a serious political tradition of the left of anti-hegemonic politics which says ... 'we have to build a politics that doesn't replicate what we're fighting against.'

It's often said 'well what can one expect from Palestinians who endure occupation, one can only expect that they will be angry with Jews.' And I have some sympathy with that, actually, although in truth many, many Palestinians don't adopt that kind of racist politics. In Palestine there are...political discussions and many, many people find ways of expressing their politics and their resistance [other] than killing Jews.

Then there's another level [of] that discussion, which is one might say that if you were brought up in a Palestinian refugee camp policed by Jewish Israelis, you might dislike Jews. But what about us, in universities outside of Palestine? What's our responsibility in those discussions? And it seems to me that we have a particular responsibility to stand up against the kind of politics of hatred which is in some sense is understandable within Palestine.

BERLET: A point you've made is that in other forms of racism and oppression — institutionalized or systematic [forms] — it is very unusual to analyze the situation in terms of what the victims are doing to make people hate them. And yet that seems to be part of the equation of discussing not just the state of Israel and the politics of the government of Israel, but the whole Middle East conflict. [This is then] extended out to what is uncarefully described as the Jewish Lobby or the Zionist Lobby.

HIRSH: I think that's a very important point. The argument goes that Israel behaves badly, and I don't disagree with that. I think Israel often behaves badly, it often behaves stupidly, it often behaves in a way which is reckless of Palestinian life. I think in order to organize the kind of occupation that the Israelis find themselves organizing, a sort of daily regime of violence and humiliation and racism just goes along with that territory. That's why it's very important the occupation should come to an end and there should be a settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians.

But having said that, I think the idea that because Israel behaves badly in Palestine then its reasonable for people to hate Jews, takes a whole other step. [This] is a logic which people buy into in different kinds of ways, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not. One doesn't do that in other places. If one said 'well, its reasonable to be misogynistic because women do nag a lot and they do get annoying, and if they stop nagging people would stop being misogynistic,' there's nobody who wouldn't be able to see through that kind of logic. But the logic which says 'well Jews behave badly in the Middle East and all over the world; they kind of act as a sort of lobby in order to defend that bad behavior... and therefore its not all too surprising that people hate them', then that would be considered as some kind of legitimate argument amongst anti-

racist circles. Why? There's no reason for that I think. I think that one has to take seriously the transformation of hostility against human rights abuses into racist forms. One has to take that seriously.

I was in a debate with Seumas Milne who is a Guardian columnistI think we can go together some distance and I think we can agree that when the Palestinians are involved in fighting Jewish soldiers [...] the hostility which they may feel [can be] manifested in a language of antisemitism or in a trope of antisemitism.

How do we deal with that, how do we understand that? Now it seems to me that Seamus Milne's argument was what we have to do is translate it back into the language in which it was meant. He invents a rather Stalinist and a rather mystical notion of the real spirit of Palestinian resistance. And the real spirit of Palestinian resistance [Milne says] has been democratic and liberational. If it happens at one time or another to be expressed or manifested in the language of antisemitism, then what we need to do is translate it back into the real language of Palestine of resistance and liberation.

Now, I don't think it's quite as simple as that. I think that antisemitism mayYou know racism starts with something real in the world. It starts with some real grievance or some real hatred or some real thing and it becomes entrenched into a racial way of thinking. And it's that transformation of real grievance into a racial way of thinking that we have to take apart and we have to oppose. One of the reasons we have to oppose that is because then it becomes a thing in itself. So white people who are worried about poverty or poor housing—if they then translate that into a racist narrative and say 'well the blacks are taking our houses, the blacks are taking our jobs' then one loses any possibility of fighting over good housing and good jobs.

Racism always has some kind of legitimate grievance somewhere in its history. But one has to take seriously the forms that it takes. And if hostility to the occupation in Palestine is articulated through the language of Jew-hatred then we have to take that seriously.

There was something else I wanted to say, to go back to your question. [It] is the idea of... institutionalized antisemitism, because I think that's rather important. I don't think people who do antisemitic things or who say antisemitic things in Britain today are Jew-haters, [I don't think] they hate Jews. I think what they do is stumble into antisemitic ways of thinking of which they're not really aware. So I think the question shouldn't be 'does somebody intend to harm Jews or does someone intend to feel a hatred of Jews?' The question should be 'what is the nature of the arguments people are making?' If they are making a unique argument that Israeli Jews should be excluded from campuses; or if they're saying Israel is the uniquely bloodthirsty state, or a uniquely child-killing state—then one should relate that back to where those kinds of ideas come from.

If one is saying that the Jews or the Israel lobby are responsible for the Iraq War, then one has to relate that back. The Jews have been held responsible for every war – there's nothing new about this. In the Hamas charter it says explicitly the Jews were responsible for the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution and [for] global imperialism, for the First World War and for the Second World War....

In Britain there was a peace movement against the Boer War, and many people in that movement argued that the British Empire was being manipulated by Jewish diamond interests in Southern Africa.

Now I don't think the people in the Stop The War coalition today have any clue that their talk about the Israel lobby is similar to [the rhetoric of] the people who were in the Stop The War coalition at the time of the Boer War...who said that behind this imperialist action is Jewish diamond interests. There's no conception of the history in which people find themselves. So my point is that one shouldn't ask 'do people hate Jews?' and one shouldn't ask 'do people know what they're doing?' – one should ask why are these tropes and these images being replayed and refound [today] when one talks about Israel and Palestine?

In a sense it shouldn't surprise us – people have a hostility to Israel, some of it legitimate and some of it justified and some of it not. But putting that aside for one moment – if you want to express hostility to Israel and if you want to express hostility to the Jews who you think defend Israel's human rights abuses, then available to you is a huge cultural reservoir of ways in which you can express hostility to Jews.

There's conspiracy theory, there's blood libel, there's a whole set of ways of thinking. Now I can demonstrate that very often in rhetoric which is anti-Israeli, these tropes and these images from previous antisemitisms are replicated. Now if you're replicating these tropes and these ideas and these images you may well not know that you're doing it – you're not doing it because you hate Jews or because you're a convinced racist, you're doing it because there is a reservoir of resources available to you if you want to make propaganda against Jews.

Let me give you one example. There was a poster which...had a picture of a Jaffa orange and it had blood coming out of the orange and it said 'Don't buy a Jaffa, squeeze the occupation' – something like that. Now, anybody who knows anything about the history of antisemitism will know immediately that a combination of blood and food and Jews is already problematic. And the message of that poster is very clear – the message of that poster says that Jews are trying to give you food which is contaminated by the blood of the children that they've killed. Don't buy it, don't eat it, it should disgust you, it should encourage you and remind you to boycott Jaffa oranges.

There is a long history of this idea that Jews mix the blood of the people they kill and eat it— mix it with their food. Now, I don't think that the person who designed this rather striking poster knows anything about that. I don't think that the person who designed that poster is an antisemite. It's quite conceivable that [the designer] has never heard of the blood libel. Yet they produce a classic blood libel image. So this should be a lesson to us that we need to be careful. Yet, just asking people to be careful very often elicits a kind of hostile and angry response. The response is absolutely standard – the response to anyone who raises the issue of antisemitism in relation to hostility to Israel, to Zionism— the response is that 'you're accusing me of antisemitism not because you believe there is antisemitism but in order to play the antisemitism card, in order to make it impossible to delegitimize criticism of Israeli human rights abuses.'

Anyone who's ever called on this or that antisemitic comment...produces the same response. The response is to accuse the Jews who raise the issue of antisemitism of doing so in a despicably and dishonest way in order to close down free speech. [It is a] very serious allegation. It's an allegation that in my work I've come across explicitly and implicitly. It's an allegation that says that I'm not an academic...not a sociologist. I'm just some kind of scribbler for Israel.

This same [experience] happened to Harold Jacobson, the novelist. Howard made a very serious critique of Caryl Churchill's play "Seven Jewish Children." The play made an argument that the conflict in Gaza was a result of the neurotic ways in which Jews bring up their children to be unconcerned about the killing of the "Other" — about the killing of Palestinian children. Howard Jacobson made this [serious critique of the play and] he said the play was antisemitic. Caryl Churchill replies 'Well he would say that wouldn't he, it's the usual tactic.' Meaning Howard Jacobson [is] not an intellectual, he's not a novelist, he's not interested really in talking about antisemitism. He's really interested in doing is using antisemitism as a kind of despicable tactic to defend Israeli human rights abuses in Gaza.

BERLET: This is a question I struggle with. How do you approach a criticism of Israel or Zionism in a constructive way when you think some form of demonization or scapegoating is involved? Or a conspiracy theory that ties back to these historic tropes about Jews having power and control and plotting subversive [activities]. [Especially when we live in] a society that doesn't teach people about the history of allegation against the "Other." A lot of these criticisms that talk about global Jewish power track back to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

[In the] United States prior to [the Protocols] the same narratives were used against faceless plutocrats during the Populist movement and later deformed into open antisemitism. But all the way back to the late 1700s when in both France and Scotland there were books written that made the exact same allegations against the "Other." In this case being the Freemasons [and the] Illuminati.

We as a society have replicated...these analogues to the Protocols. We know there are techniques people use to demonize an "Other," and yet we don't seem to be teaching schoolchildren that this is in fact one of the techniques that they should be aware of and not copy.

HIRSH: I think it's very interesting because I think one of the things about the society in which we live, about modernity, is that it looks a bit like a conspiracy. We live in a world where the power is in the hands of a small number of people, and it looks as though the media does their bidding and does what's in their interests. It looks like the whole of society is set up for the benefit of the powerful. So it's not idiotic to believe in a conspiracy. But there's a history to this, and the history is very interesting.

People like Max Weber and Emil Durkheim and Karl Marx invented structural accounts of how the world works to explain how a minority of people take all the power to themselves which didn't rely on conspiracy theory. I think there's an argument which says sociology itself was invented in order to undercut conspiracy [theory]; and possibly quite explicitly to undercut antisemitic conspiracy theory. Marx — whether you like Marx or you don't like Marx — he offers a structural account of capitalism which doesn't rely on a conspiracy of the few interests. I teach Marx to our first-years, and it's quite difficult to teach because a lot of them they come away with the idea that that's precisely what [Marx] does. They write in their essays, 'well there are a small number of rich people who exploit everybody else' and they come out with conspiracy theory. But of course Capital is much more interesting than that.

More recently... there's something interesting that's happened to Marx and Durkheim and Weber and social theory; which is that the critiques of social theory and structure have...come to the fore.

It's actually very easy to critique anything about the world that exists.

You and me, we're clever guys; we can sit down and critique democracy. And we can critique law, and we can critique social theory. We can show that the powerful are in charge even if law says that everybody is equal. We can take very thing apart. We can even take the idea of truth apart. We can show how truth is related to power, and how knowledge is related. We can do all that.

The problem is that if one critiques everything simply negatively then one ends up with nothing. I think it's a kind of rather frightening view that people like George Orwell, for example, were very aware of. George Orwell was very aware that the people who critiqued everything in bourgeois society the most successfully were the totalitarians.

It was the totalitarians who said 'we don't believe in bourgeois law, it's just a trick. We don't believe in bourgeois democracy, it's just a trick, we don't believe in truth, it's just a trick. We know who really runs the world.'

Those kinds of ideas, and the collapse of structural ways of trying to understand the world, [have made it] illegitimate to try to understand the world. And this is true on a popular level, but also in a serious professorial level.

So it doesn't surprise me that when everything is critiqued then we move back to conspiracy theory, because all we are left with is power. If all notions of authority or democracy or law or anything become dissolved into power, than the question becomes 'well, who are the powerful?' And then take your pick: the Jews, the gays, the Muslims, whatever.

But I think there is a kind of bigger underlying problem, which leads towards this way of thinking, and I think it's a cynicism about the values of democracy, but [also about the] values of the Left. The Left I was brought up in was a place where we tried to understand how the world worked, and we tried to change the world. Changing human beings was part of changing the world. Now it's evident that there is a totalitarian moment to that as well. But I think we need to keep hold of that problem, but also keep hold of the original problem.

As my good friend Robert Fine [in *Political investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt*] puts it we have to hold the critique of existing society in one hand—and we also have to understand the critique of the critique. We have to understand that the people who have most successfully critiqued existing society were the totalitarians: the Stalinists and the Nazis. So I don't think there's anything surprising about the rise of conspiracy theory.

Chip Berlet's interview with David Hirsh is on PublicEye.org.

This conversation happened on Monday, June 29th, 2009 but was not published until September 2012.

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