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Enzo Traverso on the Dangerous Weaponization of Antisemitism

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Allegations of anti-Semitism are being used to silence pro-Palestinian student activists, as the media campaign against them mirrors earlier efforts to discredit Vietnam War protesters. Enzo Traverso writes about irresponsible journalism but also acknowledges the complex historical relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

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By Enzo Traverso*

The New York Times has published a number of articles making the analogy between the current antiwar demonstrations and the earlier ones. The comparison is fair enough, since the United States has not seen protests on this scale since the Vietnam War. Students are well aware of this. In the 1960s, an American army was engaged in war in Southeast Asia; today, Israel is destroying Gaza with weapons supplied by the United States.

Like their predecessors, today's students understand that their

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involvement is crucial to stopping the massacre, that their demonstrations are not mere gestures of solidarity but an uprising organically linked to the Palestinian resistance. In both cases, these movements have been violently denounced, and even repressed. During the Vietnam War, students who occupied college campuses and burned the American flag were painted as being enemies of the free world, communists, and totalitarians. Today they would be branded as antisemites.

The accusation is as serious as it is false. When I join pro-Palestinian demonstrations on the Cornell University campus, I see many Jewish students, often waving signs of endorsement from their organizations. At the rallies, Jewish students and professors—sometimes also Israeli students—express their anger at the massacre in Gaza. United in their demand for justice and equality, Jews and Palestinians display brotherly feelings toward each other.

When I go home and turn on the TV, I am immediately confronted, flipping through the main U.S. and European channels, with a talk show on the antisemitism of the antiwar movement. Mike Johnson, speaker of the United States House of Representatives, appears on every channel. Surrounded by policemen and people holding Israeli flags—not one of them young enough to be a student— Johnson positions himself next to the pro-Palestinian encampment at New York's Columbia University and denounces antisemitism.

Shortly afterward, I see him again at a press conference, and still later at a ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. This same man, a member of the Republican Party and an ardent supporter of Donald Trump, has been repeating for three and a half years that Joe Biden stole the election.

Should we believe that the students demonstrating for Palestine are deplorable antisemites and the attackers of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, true defenders of democracy? It strikes me that the journalists, special correspondents, and newscasters who tour American campuses, some with entire crews of photographers and cameramen, and who then tell us about the antisemitism of American students are lying and dishonoring their profession.

The reality is that antisemitism has been weaponized, to use the current expression. Not the antisemitism of yesteryear, which was directed against the Jews, but a new, imaginary antisemitism aimed at criminalizing any criticism of Israel. The antiwar movement is very broad and diverse, in the United States as in Europe.

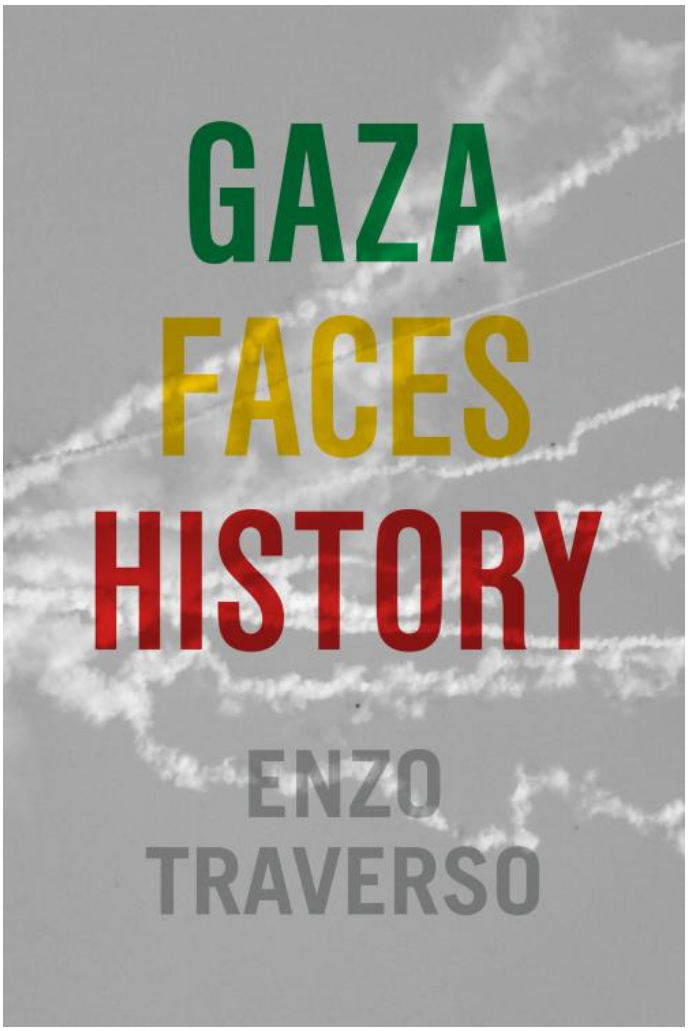
Within this large constellation, three main clusters stand out quite clearly. The first consists of young people of postcolonial origin, born in Europe or the Americas into families originally from Africa or Asia. For them, the Palestinian cause is a new stage in the struggle against colonialism.

Next come African Americans, who identify the liberation of Palestine with a global fight against racism and inequality. Palestinian lives matter. Israel has relegated Palestinians to an apartheid system comparable to what once existed in South Africa.

And finally, there are those who are reactivating a specifically Jewish universalist and internationalist tradition, though one that has always stood apart from Zionism—when not opposing it outright. Many of these youths are "non-Jewish Jews," in the sense that Isaac Deutscher gave that term: "heretics" who take part in the Jewish tradition by transcending Judaism. Others are what we might call "Dreyfusards," Jews who will not stand for discrimination, oppression, or killing to be carried out in their name, just as there were French citizens who, believing in a republican ideal of equality and justice, supported the Algerian cause.

In the twentieth century, this tradition placed Jews in the vanguard of liberation movements. Clearly, the tradition is still very much alive, and we should be thankful. The media campaign denouncing the alleged antisemitism of students who rally in support of Palestine is a direct attack on these three groups. Equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism kills three birds with one stone, striking at anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and Jewish nonconformism.

The link between anti-Zionism and antisemitism has always been ambiguous. On the one hand, a Jewish nationalist movement was always going to be viewed with hostility by European nationalists who found in antisemitism one of their baseline elements. On the other hand, Zionism sought from the outset to use antisemitism to achieve its own ends. Antisemites wanted to drive out Jews, and Zionists wanted to persuade Jews to emigrate to Palestine—there was ample room for a meeting of minds.



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The most striking case of convergence between these declared enemies is to be found in the 1933 Haavara Agreements, whose signatories were the Nazi government, a British bank, and the Zionist Federation of Germany, all of whom supported Jewish emigration to Palestine and set about establishing the practical framework (taxation, asset transfers, et cetera). The agreement collapsed after a few years: first, because the Nazis wanted to get rid of the Jews but didn't want a Jewish state; and second, because this agreement clearly had little appeal for those who were opposed to antisemitism and working toward an economic boycott of the Third Reich.

Whereas antifascists tried to create a mass movement against Nazism, Zionists made an agreement with Hitler. These strategies could not coexist without tensions. In the eyes of

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many anti-fascists, Zionism wished to find a compromise with the Nazis instead of fighting them.

There is no question that, especially on the right, many anti-Zionists were antisemitic. Moreover, after the birth of Israel, the Arab world imported many antisemitic stereotypes from Europe, which became widespread just as they were waning in their countries of origin.

But it's also true that Zionism has always been criticized, and often vehemently rejected, by a large part of the Jewish world. A list of anti-Zionist Jewish intellectuals would fill several volumes. Zionism was one of the many offshoots of the secularization and modernization that transformed the Jewish world starting in the nineteenth century, but for a long time it had relatively few adherents. Today the situation has changed, because Israel is a state, and in a secular world the memory of the Holocaust and the existence of Israel mark out the landscape in which the identity of diasporic Jews is defined.

But the situation has also changed because the conservative right and even the extreme far right have become ardent defenders of Zionism, having decided that Arab and Muslim immigrants make far better scapegoats than Jews. Yesterday's antisemites are today leading the fight against anti-Zionism, which they denounce as a form of antisemitism.

Italy offers a paradigmatic example: by their attack on anti-Zionism, the "postfascists," who are in power today and are the legitimate heirs of the racist laws of 1938, can simultaneously affirm their support for Israel and their membership in the Western camp, stigmatize the Left, and pursue xenophobic policies toward migrants.

Today, a persistent media campaign portrays pro-Palestinian students as antisemites. In some American universities, they are blacklisted or threatened with sanctions for having taken part in protests against the genocide in Gaza. The sacred principle of freedom of speech is suddenly no longer tolerated because it upsets the powerful donors of major universities, now revealed to be corporations first and spaces of freedom only second.

The anti-Zionist organization Jewish Voice for Peace was banned on several U.S. campuses. In Italy, demonstrations in support of Palestine have been brutally shut down (to the point that President Sergio Mattarella, marking a split with the Meloni government, issued a reminder that the people have a right to demonstrate).

In Paris, the mayor's office canceled a rally by several anti-racist associations, among them Tsedek, a Jewish anti-Zionist movement, at which the American Jewish philosopher Judith Butler was to have spoken. The people in charge of Paris's cultural policy then explained—presumably with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks—that they had wanted to avoid complicity with an antisemitic initiative.

Gabriel Attal, France's head of government, appeared at the Institut de Science Politique de Paris—uninvited and in flagrant violation of university autonomy—to announce sanctions against pro-Palestinian activists, after a Zionist student had been removed from a lecture hall where she had been photographing the organizers to denounce them on social networks.

Although Jewish students and Jewish organizations took an active and highly visible part in the marches and demonstrations against the genocide in Gaza, a false report quickly spread, widely echoed in the media, that some students were being barred from access to campuses "because they were Jewish." In New York, minivans drove around Columbia University bearing photographs of pro-Palestinian students with their names and the tagline "antisemite," a sad throwback to the Nazi Germany of 1935 and the era of the Nuremberg Laws, when Jews were paraded through the streets with a sign around their necks saying Jude.

"One easily believes what one needs to believe," Marc Bloch observed in his essay quoted earlier. Many examples confirm this. After World War II, communist Resistance fighters who had been deported to Nazi camps denied the existence of the gulags. In France, a number of them testified in court to defend Les Lettres Nouvelles, a cultural magazine that actively promoted the lie that the gulags were an anti-communist fantasy.

Their guiding myth had the power and simplicity of a syllogism: the USSR is a socialist country, socialism means freedom, ergo there cannot be concentration camps in the USSR. Anyone who said the contrary was a liar; the gulag was a product of American propaganda.

A similar denialism is widespread among many today who are convinced that Israel, a nation risen from the ashes of the Holocaust, could never commit genocide. For them, the UN reporters who say the opposite are liars and are being manipulated by pernicious antisemitic propaganda. Israel is a genuine democracy, and the occupation of the Palestinian territories a necessary measure to counter an existential threat.

Or else it's a misstep, an overreaction—the syndrome outlined by Nolte above—from a country that's in danger. Faith often calls for a denial of reality.

Orientalism is the breeding ground for the myths, lies, and fake news that surround this war. Reversing reality, a paradoxical narrative has emerged that makes Israel the victim, not the oppressor: anti-Zionism is merely a form of antisemitism; anti-colonialism has finally revealed its anti-Western, fundamentalist, and antisemitic roots. The Judeo-Bolshevist plotters of yore have become the Islamic-leftists of today.

Over the past few months, this mythology has spread in just the way that false news did during World War I. So extensive a reversal of reality is bound to have far-reaching consequences we should reflect on. Fighting antisemitism will become increasingly difficult given the distortion and misappropriation of the term.

The risks from misusing the concept are very real: if you can conduct a genocidal war in the name of fighting antisemitism, many good people will start to think it would be better to abandon such a dubious cause altogether. No one will be able to mention the Holocaust without raising suspicions and doubt; many will come to believe that it is a myth invented to defend the interests of Israel and its allies. The remembrance of the Holocaust as a "civil religion"—the ritual consecration of human rights through the memory of the Shoah's victims—will lose all its power to instruct.

Previously, this "civil religion" served as a paradigm for the remembrance of other genocides and crimes against humanity—from the extermination of the Armenians to military dictatorships in Latin America to the Holodomor famine in Ukraine, to Bosnia, and to the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. If this sacred and institutionalised memory serves only to support Israel and attack the defenders of the Palestinian cause on the pretext of antisemitism, our moral, political, and epistemological bearings will become unmoored, with devastating consequences.

Certain postulates that make up our moral and political conscience—the distinction between good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim—will be undermined. Our conception of democracy, which is not limited to a system of laws but is also founded on our culture, memory, and historical heritage, will be weakened.

Antisemitism, which every serious contemporary analysis found to be receding before October 7, will see a spectacular

resurgence. That is why, despite the good faith of many of its participants, the protest against antisemitism in Paris on November 10, 2023—organized by all the parties supporting the massacre in Gaza, including the far right—not only seemed slightly obscene but had deeply regressive political effects.

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