

## **The Left and the Jews, the Jews and the Left by David Cesarani – review**

Few books start life as a private document unintended for wider circulation. Fewer still are commissioned by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. But *The Left and the Jews, the Jews and the Left* by David Cesarani is like few others. Today, it is republished by *No Pasaran Media*, a publisher for those on the left wanting to fight left antisemitism, racism and conspiracy theories.

Cesarani's briefing for Gordon Brown, who has in turn written a foreword for this reprint, argues that the history between Jews and the left has "evolved and changed in a mutual dynamic over 150 years. Jewish values and the Jewish historical experience created a certain affinity for socialism amongst Jews, but there was never an intrinsic symbiosis – as right-wing antisemites alleged".

"During the 19th century," Cesarani suggests, "Jews welcomed the emancipatory thrust of socialism, but the left was never unconditional about what it offered to Jews." The book tells four distinct parts of that story. In each you can see why the connection is so strong but also the origins of the various strands of left antisemitism that led, in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, to this unique moment in the relationship between the Jewish community and the left.

The first part is foundational and examines the network of international Marxists and those early founders of social democratic parties across the world. Despite his own ethnic background, Karl Marx himself was a highly problematic figure. "Money," he declared, "is the zealous g-d of Israel, beside which no other g-d may stand." Vladimir Lenin treated Jews, and the Bund, their branch of Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, with suspicion, rejecting their "nationalist agenda". Thus, right at the foundation of the left, and despite Bundist revolutionaries suffering "horrendous casualties" in 1905-6, Jews were held at arm's length because of a noxious combination of conspiratorial anti-capitalism and what we would later define as anti-Zionism.

The second section looks at the early labour movement here in the UK, something which is very personal to me as it outlines the experiences of my family who arrived in the East End of London in the late 19th century from eastern Europe. Jewish workers were organised into separate trade unions or, because they largely lived in small pockets of east London, Manchester or Leeds, discrete branches of large unions or political groupings; my great grandfather was a founder member of the Yiddish cabinet makers East End branch.

Many left historians point to the 'battle of Cable Street' in 1936 – when Jews including my nana and great uncles, Irish dockers, trade unionists, socialists and communists blocked a march of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists through the East End of London – as exemplifying the character of the relationship between Jews and the left before the Second World War. But this is far from the whole story.

As Cesarani sets out, the labour movement's involvement came about only after immense pressure on unions and the Communist party from Jewish branches. That pressure forced the Communists to cancel a demonstration in solidarity with the besieged Spanish Republic in Trafalgar Square on the same day and instead direct their activists east.

Moreover, Cesarani believed that in romanticising the battle of Cable Street, some of the left ignored some inconvenient truths. Three decades previously, for instance, elements of the labour movement supported the kinds of restrictions on Jewish migration which were later embodied by the Tory government's 1905 Aliens Act. More widely, that legislation arguably had a long legacy, presenting Jews as outsiders in their own country.

Ironically, as well as backing curbs on penniless Jews fleeing persecution, parts of the left also engaged in 'rich Jew anti-semitism'. Its rhetoric about 'Randlords' during the Boer War, for instance, represented a Rothschild-esque mix of anti-capitalism and antisemitic conspiracy theories that endures to this day. Cesarani captured this double-headed socialism of fools, arguing: "On the eve of the First World War, it was common on the left in Britain to find Jews negatively coupled with both high finance and cheap, sweated labour."

The third element of the story comes in the wake of the Holocaust that put pay, albeit temporarily, to antisemitism on the left. "The mainstream social democratic left in Western Europe and North

America purged itself of any traces of ‘rich-Jew antisemitism’ and guarded against its recurrence,” Cesarani writes. But while the labour movement was ‘pro-Zionism’ and the Labour Party conference in 1944 voted to “enable the formation of the Jewish state”, Ernest Bevin, the extraordinary Labour Foreign Secretary, failed the survivors and “restricted Jewish immigration to post-war Palestine” creating the “most controversial and ugly chapters in the story of the British left and the Jews”. The final section is obviously the most recent. “The emergence of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism as central planks in the ideology and activism of the new left in the 1960s,” Cesarani argues, “turned Israel from being an asset into a liability for Jewish socialists.” This reflected not just the changed landscape following the 1967 six-day war between Israel and its neighbours, but also the former Soviet Union’s effort to paint Zionism as racism, or even Nazism. The latter, imported into the British left’s discourse via the Socialist Workers Party, polluted hard-left thinking.

Attempts to ban Jewish student societies on university campuses in the 1970s symbolised this radicalisation – a radicalisation that has lasted for decades. Cesarani’s note for Brown followed *The New Statesman*’s January 2002 cover depicting a golden star of David piercing a union flag with the headline: “A kosher conspiracy?” This was no isolated incident; six months previously, the late Tam Dalyell had told *Vanity Fair* that Tony Blair was “unduly influenced by a cabal of Jewish advisers”. Written in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war, the book also notes how demonstrations against British military action had seen protesters routinely carrying “placards juxtaposing the star of David with the swastika”. What later became known as anti-Zionist antisemitism had come to occupy a central place in the hard left’s ideology, with far-reaching and dangerous consequences.

“Anti-American and anti-globalisation polemicists who depict US policy in Iraq as serving Israel’s interests, or Israeli repression of the Palestinians as sanctioned by a Jewish-dominated Washington, are transforming and rehabilitating the myth of a worldwide Jewish network operating with selfish and malign intentions,” Cesarani argues. “While vehemently defensive of the rights of Jews as citizens, [the hard left] rejected the rights of Jews as a collectivity.” But, despite this history, Cesarani notes that Jews continued to “vote to the left of their economic interests”.

The line from this story – the interconnected tropes around ‘Jewish power’ and wealth, poisonous conspiracy theories, and the obsession with the Jewish homeland – to the rise of antisemitism in the Labour Party after 2015 is easily drawn. Cesarani’s essay also refutes the hard-left myth that Corbyn’s opponents invented the notion of left antisemitism as a political tool when their man came to lead the party. Corbyn, moreover, had a choice about how to respond and the power to stamp it out. But his response appeared to reflect the attitude of Marx and Lenin, not Clement Attlee, Blair or Brown. Cesarani would have been horrified to witness how the left treated its Jewish members in the years following his death. But I think it is fair to say that he would not have been surprised – although the [findings](#) of the Equality and Human Rights Commission report may have shocked even him. It is undoubtedly true that the British left misses Cesarani. We do, however, have his marvellous book to educate us about the past and serve as a reminder: we had been warned – we must guard against racism wherever we find it and we have to be strong enough to stand against it. We know where it leads.

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