

Challenging assumptions

Geography, antisemitism and Zionism

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Abstract

This article challenges the representation of Zionism as the globalising hub of worldwide racist and colonial harm to humanity and the neglect of antisemitism as a contemporary form of racism. This article is not a challenge to the consensus understanding of the nation state of Israel as having racist and colonial characteristics, rather, it questions a mode of analysis which exceptionalises Israel's ills to the point of exceptionally demanding the nation state's dissolution, while negating Zionism's origins as a lifeboat amid the Holocaust. In essence, this article seeks an anti-racist imagination that is informed by a holistic and universal comprehension of Zionism vis-à-vis racism, colonialism and nationalism, and that recognises the reality of contemporary anti-Jewish racism, including in the leftist milieux.

Keywords: antisemitism, Zionism, Israel, decolonisation

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Introduction

'The ghost of Israel-Palestine haunts the current separatism between racism and antisemitism', Cousin and Fine (2012, pp. 181) astutely observe. This article questions the separation of antisemitism, or anti-Jewish racism, from the study of racism and (as related to this) an approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that demands the erasure of Israel proper. The article's premise is that a colonial model of racism effectively banishes antisemitism from view while wholly framing Zionism (that is, Jewish nationalism) as racism. Furthermore, the presence of "the Jewish question" in leftist ideological milieux – 'the classic term for the representation of Jews as harmful to humanity as a whole' (Fine and Spencer, 2017, pp. 2) – takes the casting of Zionism as racism one critical step further in seeing Zionism as *the* global outlier of a decolonisation era and *the* globalising frontrunner of racist and colonial ills to come.

As a way forward, this article suggests a more holistic historical and geographical approach to the study of racism, which considers the development of racism alongside the formation of nation states and its mutual reflection in nationalism, as well as its ideological use in colonialism. Such an approach has the possibility of opening up enquiry into racism, including anti-Jewish racism. It could also enable a specific and universal understanding of the colonial and racist dimensions of the nation state of Israel, whilst recognising early Zionism as a nationalist movement seeking escape and insulation from unprecedented, murderous antisemitism.

A colonial model of racism

‘One of the regrettable features of much contemporary theorising about race and racism’, acknowledge Back and Solomos (2000, pp. 191), in their edited collection *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ‘has been the tendency to leave the question of anti-semitism to one side, treating it almost as a separate issue.’ In the first edition of *Racism (Key Ideas)*, Miles (1989, pp. 67-68) provides an important explanation:

‘Much of the British and North American theorising about capitalism and racism since the 1960s, while drawing upon the immoral status of racism which derives to a significant degree from the final solution, utilises a colonial model which has little scope to explain much of the European racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and certainly not that form of racism which others label anti-semitism [...]; it does, however, have a relevance to the controversial debate about whether or not Zionism can be defined as an instance of racism [...].’

Even though anti-Jewish racism was central to racist ideology from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and the rise of fascism in western Europe during the 1930s (see Mosse, 1985), the study of racism since the 1960s has been largely shaped by a need to comprehend colonialism, either in a postcolonial situation or in the context of migration from the ex-colonies into western European countries (Miles and Brown, 2003). This colonial model of racism is a conceptual deflation of racism to ‘a “white ideology” created exclusively to dominate “blacks”’ (Miles, 1993, pp. 7; see also: Miles, 1989; Miles and Brown, 2003). Moreover, as an academic approach that emerged in the United States and which has been transposed to a British context, it is a peculiar geographical and historical straitjacket.

Although colonialism was ‘an integral moment’ in the history of racism, Miles (1993, pp. 21) makes plain that it was ‘the articulation between the capitalist mode of production and the

nation state' that mapped 'the primary set of social relations within which racism had its origins and initial effects'. A colonial model ties racism tightly to a history of colonialism and slavery and it restricts what is considered racism to a white-over-black structural relationship. Along with other forms of racism, both inside and beyond Europe, anti-Jewish racism is removed from view and an exploration into the wider dynamics of racism with nationalism and capitalist social relations is neglected.

In his book *Multiracism: Rethinking Racism in Global Context*, Bonnett (2022, pp. 21) also points out the consequence of framing the study of racism in the black and white terms of a United States context, such that 'anti-Black racism is made visible at the cost of the invisibility of other racisms' both from other parts of the world and from within Europe, including the Holocaust. He proposes a focus on plural racisms and plural modernities: specifically, to examine the exchange between western and white-identified racisms and modernities with 'other roots and routes of racialized and ethnicized modernity' (Bonnett, 2022, pp. 8). Not only does Bonnett's proposal offer a more holistic approach to the study of racism, it provides a nuanced conceptual means for doing so by comprehending the reproduction, reconfiguration and creation of racist ideologies between an expansive range of geographical contexts and times.

Antisemitism and Zionism

Miles and Brown (2003, pp. 75) warn that a colonial model of racism effectively 'condemn[s] "white" people to a universal condition that implies possession of a permanent essence that inevitably sets them apart'. The essentialist immorality of racism, which is central to the concept of white (colonial) power, has serious inferences for an understanding of anti-Jewish racism and Zionism. For the postcolonial theorist Wolfe (2016, pp. 18), for example, racism is a European colonial invention and project of 'Whiteness' and 'White supremacy'. Within this framework, Wolfe (2016, pp. 110) assigns antisemitism to history and keeps this trace of racism alive in Zionism's channelling of past antisemitism into the racist exclusion of the Palestinians:

'[Zionism] retained the racial topography that it shared with antisemitism and sought to project it, structurally intact, to another country. [...] the regime of race that Zionism sought to impose in Palestine retained and redirected the Judeophobic trace – the project of exclusion – that Zionism shared with antisemitism in Europe.'

The danger in Wolfe's analysis is in taking the aforementioned essentialism that Miles and Brown caution against a step further: claiming that Zionism weaponizes antisemitism such that antisemitism is a form of racism not *against* the Jews but *of* the Jews. "The Jewish question" presents here in the idea that the Jews are not (or are no longer) harmed, they are harmful.

The work of the late Orientalist and independent Marxist scholar Rodinson (1983) offers a useful rejoinder here. The 'exasperation' felt by anti-Zionists at the weaponization of antisemitism by some Zionists is 'psychologically understandable', he remarks; however, to then 'deny or minimize the wrongs suffered by the Jews' as a response 'is no less stupid for being understandable' (ibid, pp. 183). Rodinson (1983, pp. 145) elucidates, although the leaders of the Zionist movement sought and gained the support of British and later American imperialist powers, Zionism 'cannot be considered simply the product of a particular class of Jews', because the unfolding tragedy for the Jews in Europe during the 1930s and especially after 1939, 'won it the support of many Jews of all social layers and all ideological tendencies who had long remained reticent'. Totally collapsing Zionism into racism and colonialism removes consideration of early Zionism as a nationalist aspiration and movement that developed amidst violent antisemitic conditions in central and eastern Europe (Golan, 2001). Moreover, this total collapse ignores the fact that German fascism and the Holocaust, and the refusal of Jewish emigration elsewhere in the West, made Zionism not simply another chapter of European colonialism, but a '*colonialism of ethnic survival*' (Yiftachel, 2002, pp. 225).

Israel-Palestine

The settler-colonialism paradigm of postcolonial research draws a distinction between colonialism's logic of exploitation and settler-colonialism's logic of elimination. It is a comparative lens that potentially opens up a range of geographies across the world and could incorporate Bonnett's (2022) call for a focus on plural modernities and plural racisms. Indeed, the settler-colonialism paradigm is applicable to the Russian state's war in Ukraine and previously Chechnya, and the Chinese state's mass detention of the Uyghurs in re-education camps in Xinjiang and longstanding repression in Tibet.

However, as Busbridge (2018, pp. 97) reflects, in this body of postcolonial work 'there is a particularly strong emphasis' on white European settler-colonialism, vis-à-vis Americas,

Australasia and Israel-Palestine. This article provides two reasons for why this is the case. A colonial model of racism is part of the explanation. ‘The story here is a simple story,’ Pappé (2007) states, it is ‘a story of white people who were persecuted in Europe and who drove away the black people who used to live here.’ The presence of “the Jewish question” – the idea of what is to be done with the Jews who are harmful to humanity – is another part of the explanation. The ‘villains’ (presenting themselves as ‘heroes’) are ‘the Israelis’, Pappé (2013, pp. 350) tells us: the Israelis were and are the ‘servants of the bureaucracy of evil’, with only a ‘very few among them’ not ‘succumb[ing] to its *raison d’etre* and *modus operandi*’. As such, the ‘pariah state’ of Israel must be revoked (Pappé, 2007). In brief, it is not only the ghost of Israel-Palestine that haunts the separatism between racism and antisemitism, the severance of antisemitism from racism haunts an understanding of Israel-Palestine.

There is a bigger tragedy here, which Busbridge (2018) incisively recognises, since the absolutist solution of decolonisation to Israel-Palestine is no solution at all for the Palestinians. Israeli Jews will not en masse and voluntarily give up their nation state, unless forced (and by much force) to do so. What is left then is a conflict that ‘hurtles from the past to the present into the future, never to be fully extinguished until the native is, or until history itself ends’ (ibid, pp.101). Under the banner of various versions of one-state solution, the story of Israel-Palestine becomes one of ““either total victory or total failure” (Veracini, 2007)’ (Busbridge, 2018, pp. 102) - either the fantasy of one victorious Palestinian state, making room for Jews ‘as a neutral and repentant collectivity (Farsakh, 2011: 70)’ (ibid, pp. 108), or the grim near-reality of a Greater Israel.

Conclusion

The blending of a colonial model of racism with “the Jewish question” both banishes anti-Jewish racism from anti-racist consideration while also insisting on the banishment of Israel proper as a nation state (see Bassi, 2023). Contemporary anti-Jewish racism within the leftist ideological milieu is based on the idea that the Jewish collective - in the form of Israel and Zionism - represents a unique threat to humanity and that for humanity to progress, both an out-of-time and out-of-place Israel and a forerunner globalising Zionism must be eliminated. On the one hand, ‘the problem with Israel’, Judt (2003) tells us, is that ‘it arrived too late’ in an era of decolonisation. On the other hand, Zionism, it is imagined, is not the past but the present and the future of global ills. As Veracini (2019, pp. 580) puts it, ‘Palestine is today a crucial laboratory of global dispossessions’ prior to ‘being transferred, that is, *sold*

elsewhere'. Or, as Hage (2014, pp. 9, cited in Busbridge, 2018, pp. 99) states, the western world is 'subliminally' being 'Israelized'.

The anti-racist imagination, if it is to see, analyse and fight all forms of racism, including antisemitism, must be able to comprehend racism as a mutual reflection of nationalism and nation states and as ideologically related to capitalist social relations in fluid and contested ways. Moreover, this imagination needs to understand racism as an ideological component of colonialisms and imperialisms along and beyond a white-over-black colour line. Racism is not a fixed and innate structural relationship of the white-identified capitalist West over the rest that can be assumed prior to empirical investigation. What Bonnett (2022, pp. 5) coins the "Western racism paradigm", which dominates ethnic and racial studies, prevents a study of racism that is genuinely international - by ignoring, downplaying or denying what are, in actuality, 'cross-hatching and intermingling sites of modern racism' in most of the world (ibid, pp. 8). Furthermore, a sole focus on Western power versus non-Western obedience or rebellion is, he spells out, 'Eurocentric' (ibid, pp. 3). The central casting of a globalising white colonial racism has effectively cast out-of-sight other racisms. Future research into racism should employ a universal lens of enquiry into the spatially and temporally specific, dialectical exchanges and generations of racist ideologies across the world. Such a direction could advance thinking into how, for example, the reworking of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by "Zionologists" in Stalinist Russia into a Marxist critique of Zionism for the Communist Party bureaucracy and a global left audience (see Tabarovsky, 2023) has had ideological ramifications since.

In sum, this article suggests that, as geographers, we should fold into our analysis of Zionism as racism and colonialism, the history of Zionism as a nationalist movement seeking haven from genocidal antisemitism. We should also be able to intellectually grasp and challenge both the weaponization of antisemitism, that is done in an effort to silence criticism of the Israeli state's repression of the Palestinians, and the reality of antisemitism, against people who identify as Jewish and relate to Israel proper as a national homeland.

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