

Notes on an article by Jonathan Freedland

The article below was written in the wake of the *Panorama* programme *Is Labour Antisemitic?*. It is reproduced here in full, with comments added after each paragraph.

Comments by David Pavett, 14 July 2019

The roots of Labour's antisemitism lie deep within the populist left



Much of the hate spewed out against Jews harks back to conspiracy theories about bankers and the Rothschilds

Jonathan Freedland, **The Guardian**, Fri 12 Jul 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/12/labour-antisemitism-populist-left-jews-bankers-rothschild>

In Britain we sometimes imagine that populism lurks in our future or over there, in Donald Trump's America or Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Even those who are alarmed by the prospect of populist politics and all it entails take comfort that we're not there yet, that it's still some time, or distance, away. But what if that's wrong? What if it's already here?

Comment. *Is there anyone in Britain with an interest in current politics who thinks that populism might reach us in the future but is currently something only encountered in places like Orbán's Hungary or Trump's America? After the rise and impact of UKIP, not to speak of Tory populism, the claim in this paragraph shows Johnathan Freedland to be at an uncomfortable remove from reality.*

If [populism](#) is a politics that pits the virtuous mass of ordinary people against a wicked, corrupt elite, then Britain was an early adopter. The leave campaign won in 2016 by suggesting the noble British people had been cheated of their democratic birthright by the evil bureaucrats of Brussels. Now the Brexit party [offers textbook populism](#), railing against an establishment bent on thwarting the "will of the people".

Comment. *If we follow Freedland in defining populism as a politics which "pits the virtuous mass of ordinary people against a wicked, corrupt elite" then how do you comment on a political situation in which the large numbers of ordinary people become aware that society functions against their interest and in the interests of a small minority? On this basis, powerful minorities who can dismiss serious analyses of their role as mere "populist politics". "Populism" is a diffuse notion with many meanings according to the writer and the circumstances. Freedland does not take account of this.*

But populism in Britain does not begin and end with Nigel Farage. Boris Johnson is remoulding himself into a populist figure too, not least to take on Farage. His refusal to rule out the [suspension of parliament](#) to drive through a no-deal Brexit is a move that would make even Orbán blush. Like all populists, the Hungarian leader would happily argue that only the will of the people matters and that all other institutions that safeguard liberal democracy – the rule of law, an independent judiciary and civil service, a free press – are obstacles to be cast aside to ensure that will is done. He calls it "[illiberal democracy](#)".

Comment. *In this paragraph Freedland contradicts his starting point in paragraph 1 by recognising the existence of our populist politics as expounded by Farage and the right of the Tory party.*

While Orbán has sought to emasculate the courts and the press, even he has not yet dared to bypass parliament. Johnson, however, refuses to rule out that very move, just as he trashed the

principle of a non-partisan, professional civil service when he failed to defend Britain's ambassador to Washington, effectively [firing Kim Darroch](#) for the crime of giving expert advice.

Comment. *The comments on Johnson's reckless populist politics further contradict the claim of paragraph 1.*

So much for Britain's main party of the right. What of the main party of the left? This week has been shaming for Labour, as [BBC's Panorama](#) revealed that the leader's office had interfered in the handling of antisemitism cases within the party, even as they insisted they had nothing to do with the process, driving their own complaints staff to despair and depression.

Comment. *Here the case presented by the BBC programme **Is Labour Antisemitic?** is taken at face value without a hint of doubt as to its veracity. And yet we know that it distorted emails by selective quotation and set up a series of accusations (e.g. of rampant antisemitism in Labour Party branches) into which there was no investigation at all. The programme was as clear a hatchet job for which its producer John Ware has all the necessary credentials. But Freedland is not interested in objective evaluation. He is interested in bolstering the claims of Labour Party members "spewing out" hatred of Jews. If ever there was a case of axe-grinding journalism, then this is it.*

Labour's former head of disputes, [Sam Matthews](#), told how he had witnessed "a deliberate attempt" by Jeremy Corbyn's most senior aides "to redefine what constituted modern day antisemitism – mainly so they could let their mates off the charge."

Comment. *Freedland knows of the attempts by many, including himself, to redefine antisemitism in terms of those "whose hatred of Israel is so intense, unmatched by the animus directed at any other state". Many writers speak of the "new antisemitism" and there is no way that Freedland is not aware of that. So, redefining antisemitism in terms of modern conditions cannot reasonably be described by Freedland as in itself a nefarious activity. Labour is said to have tried to redefine antisemitism so that favoured people could escape its disciplinary procedures. Freedland provides no substance whatsoever for the charge. And that is, largely, the name of the game: just keep piling on the accusations and don't let the facts get in the way. In fact Labour has an official definition of antisemitism and it is the one it was encouraged to adopt by Freedland among many others.*

On Thursday the Guardian reported that as many as [30 whistleblowers](#) were ready to testify to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, currently conducting what is only their second statutory investigation into a political party for race discrimination. The first was into the [British National Party](#).

Comment. *Anyone who has experienced the lethargic and unhelpful nature of the Labour bureaucracy that had developed over the years of New Labour will know that a change of leadership and of Party direction was going to run counter to the culture of many working within Labour's administrative apparatus. There have been many signs of this. That some now wish to hit back by offering their account of what they see as Labour's mishandling of the complaints of antisemitism is not surprising. And again, this is all gloss and no substance. What are the issues exactly? We are not told. For more on the **Panorama** programme see reviews such as [this one](#).*

It's easy to get lost in processes and procedures – including the jaw-dropping revelations of party officials deleting potentially damaging emails, and discussing cases of anti-Jewish racism on non-party email addresses, apparently to avoid scrutiny. But the key question lies elsewhere: why would a party that defines itself as anti-racist have [attracted antisemites](#) in the first place?

Comment. *We are told of "jaw-dropping revelations of party officials deleting potentially damaging emails ..." but not of the Labour Party's response denying these allegations. But hey, why let the protestations of the accused get in the way of a sensational story?*

Some try to say that any mass membership organisation will always reflect the wider society, and since Britain includes antisemites, so too will the [Labour](#) party. But that doesn't wash. Britain includes a fair number of meat-eaters, but you wouldn't expect to find any in the Vegetarian

Society. Others say that it must have something to do with the Middle East, as if antisemitism is bound to arise when people feel so strongly against Israel and for the Palestinians.

Comment. Freedland tries to refute of the idea that a party of half a million members might pick up some with views that are contrary to its principles. He says, "Britain includes a fair number of meat-eaters, but you wouldn't expect to find any in the Vegetarian Society". Of course, you wouldn't expect that, but the analogy is absurd. A vegetarian society has only one thing on its menu (so to speak). A political party has no limits to the issues in which it can get involved. Political issues are complex. A large political party will include many whose political views are not thought through or who are very immature and who, in both cases can believe things which are mutually contradictory. The suggestion that the Labour Party must itself be antisemitic if people end up in its ranks who have not worked through their views to fully eliminate all forms of racism is patently absurd.

But that misses the fact that huge chunks of the egregious anti-Jewish racism spewed out in left circles and on social media has nothing to do with Israel or Palestine: it's all bankers and Rothschilds, control of the media and Holocaust denial. Of course, sometimes "Zionism" is deployed as a handy codeword, but today's anti-Jewish racists have often left the Middle East behind. It's Jews they're obsessed with.

Comment. Now we are told of "... huge chunks of the egregious anti-Jewish racism spewed out in left circles ... " (note the rhetoric - DP) is in fact not about Israel or Palestine, "it's all bankers and Rothschilds".

It is true that in the early history of socialism the image of rich Jews sometimes become confused with the critique of capitalism. Keir Hardie, for example, was prone to make that confusion. But such anti-Jewish tropes declined in the course of the 20th century. Nevertheless, it is impossible to imagine any Labour leader today following Hardie in speaking of "hooked nosed Rothschilds" as the control masters of imperialism. Instead, Labour Racism has gone in other directions, principally against the subjects of Britain's erstwhile empire as in the Labour government's **Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968**, which created two classes of British passport to limit the immigration of Kenyan Asians then under pressure from the Kenyan government.

Antisemitic tropes remain among a tiny minority of Labour Party members. One still encounters them too frequently however, particularly on some social media sites. An important part of anti-racist activity within the Party should be aimed at eliminating appeal to such tropes altogether. Their use is largely confined to politically immature members who have become involved in campaigns for Palestinian rights but have not learned that the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians is the oppression by a nation state and not by "Jews" (however much that nation state may proclaim itself to be the state of the Jewish people). There may also be an issue with some people influenced by the culture of some immigrant groups in which sectarian attitudes of all sorts, including antisemitism, are common. These issues need to be brought into the open by a clearly worked out education programme that will help members to understand insidious nature of the tropes.

Which brings us back to populism. For antisemitism is populism in perhaps its purest and most distilled form. It says that politics is indeed a battle between the virtuous masses and a nefarious, corrupt elite – and that that elite is "the Jews". That's why antisemitism carries so many of populism's distinguishing features, from the fear of an enemy within, to its insistence that the media is bent on distorting reality. Earlier this year a global study by the Guardian found that a distinguishing feature of those with a populist worldview is a willingness to [believe conspiracy theories](#), whether on the climate crisis, [vaccines](#) or aliens from outer space. Antisemitism is nothing if not an all-encompassing conspiracy theory, suggesting that Jews are the secret rulers of the world.

Comment. For Freedland antisemitism is the purist form of populism because it pits the masses against the Jews as an identifiable elite. As pointed out above this is a rather outdated view that had some limited relevance in the early socialist movement. Now it is a view which attracts only a minuscule minority of people on the left. It is offensive and objectionable and must always be challenged but the great majority of Labour Party members never encounter it. As for conspiracy

theories we need to distinguish between the idea that history is explained at root as the consequence of the machinations of secret groups bending humanity to their will, with the view that in class-divided society small groups with economic and social power are able, in the normal course of events, to bend political decisions to serve their economic interests. These are two entirely different propositions but there is not the slightest hint of the distinction in what Freedland writes.

This gets us closer to that question, of why any antisemite would feel Corbyn's Labour is the party for them. It's tempting to link it with Corbyn's fierce hostility to Israel, and his long record of [not seeing anti-Jewish racism](#) even when it's right in front of him. But the subtler view is that, under Corbyn, Labour has shifted towards a left populism.

Comment. *Now the argument shifts to Corbyn's alleged "fierce hostility to Israel". That phrase in itself masks a whole series of prejudices about criticism of Israel. What is "fierce criticism"? Corbyn argues for the recognition of the state of Israel and for the creation of a Palestinian state. Freedland sometimes seems to say the same. So what is the issue exactly? We are not told.*

All we have is Corbyn's alleged "... long record of not seeing anti-Jewish racism even when it's right in front of him". This "long record" claim is supported only by one incident in which Corbyn's judgement was, admittedly, negligent and for which he later apologised.

In a fascinating [critique](#) from the anti-capitalist left, Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts argue that Corbynism's big move is away from seeing capitalism as a system with its own unalterable dynamics, compelling all within it to operate according to its own logic, to seeing its cruelties instead as the work of malign individuals. "From this perspective," they write, "capitalist crises, poverty and inequality are wholly avoidable phenomena. They are the result of an immoral minority wilfully using the power of money, financial trickery and ideology to undermine – or, indeed, 'rig' – a society based on 'real' production which would otherwise work to the benefit of all."

Comment. *Freedland here claims that Corbyn's critique of capitalism has morphed from one based on capitalism's inherent logic to one based on the work of malign individuals. His evidence for this is an article in the **Jewish Chronicle** that, in fact, produces no evidence at all for the claim. What it does argue is that the view of "capitalism as a 'rigged system' imposed by a minority of 'wealth extractors' on 'the many' carries potentially troubling resonances". What can we therefore say about a system which does in fact favour just such a small minority? The accommodation of Freedland's views with the existing social and economic status quo is plain here for all to see.*

Such a view of capitalism – focusing on individuals, not structures – doesn't necessarily end in hatred of Jews: you might blame some other "immoral minority". But this is the problem with talking endlessly of the "many, not the few" (a sinister slogan which I loathed when Tony Blair was using it). Pretty soon, and especially after the 2008 crash, people will ask: who exactly are this few, working so hard to deny the rest of us our utopia? The antisemite has a ready answer.

Comment. *Of course, the antisemite will have a ready answer as to who is the minority benefitting from the inequality generated by capitalism. But that is hardly a reason for not believing that there is a minority benefitting from our growing inequality. The antisemite might sometimes see a real problem but always provides the wrong answer. Freedland produces zero evidence for his claim that Corbyn's Labour has turned from a critique of capitalism to one of malign individuals.*

The point is, this is not a problem that can be solved with a few tweaks to Labour's disciplinary code. This is a political problem, one tied to a strand of left politics and with roots centuries deep. We see it now because that version of leftism currently controls Britain's main opposition party and because we are living through a new age of populism. Tackling it will require not a change to the rulebook, but a change in the very way Labour's leaders see the world.

Comment. *Here Freedland tells us that Labour's currently policies are "tied to a strand of left politics" which has "roots centuries deep". This suggests that Labour policies are tied to a critique of society based on antisemitism. There is not a shred of evidence for this view. All we have are anecdotes and*

unsubstantiated allegations. That passes the Guardian's editorial test and that of Jonathan Freedland. It does not, however, meet the most basic standards for an objective case based on available evidence.

David Pavett 16 July 2019