



# Durban Antizionism: Its Sources, Its Impact, and Its Relation to Older Anti-Jewish Ideologies

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The antizionism that dominated the 2001 UN “World Conference against Racism” was neither a completely “new antisemitism” nor was it simply the latest manifestation of an ahistorical and eternal phenomenon. During the peace process in the late 80s and 90s, the intensifying focus on Israel as a key symbol of all that was bad in the world had been in remission, but at Durban, the 1970s “Zionism=Racism” culture returned. Many participants internalized and embraced the reconfigured antizionism. Others failed to speak out, even when they witnessed the recognizable older antisemitic tropes with which it came intertwined. The proposal to agree that Zionism was the key symbolic form of racism in the world after the fall of apartheid offered unity across different movements and milieus: post-colonialism, human rights and humanitarian law; the women’s movement, anti-racism, much of the global left and NGOs; even oppressive governments if they positioned themselves as anti-imperialist or “Islamic.” Activists, diplomats, and UN personnel at Durban were not passively infected by this antizionist ideology, they chose actively to embrace it or to tolerate it. Based on elements of truth, exaggeration, and invention, and made plausible by half-visible fragments of older antisemitisms, Durban antizionism was attractive because it offered an emotionally potent way of imagining and communicating all that “good people” oppose and that they have difficulty facing rationally. It portrayed racism, and in the end oppression itself, with an Israeli face. Delegates brought this worldview home to where they lived and to the spheres in which they operated intellectually and politically. They worked to make Durban antizionism into the radical common sense of the twenty-first century. There were people at the conference and in anti-hegemonic spaces around the world who understood the dangers of a unity built around opposition to a universal Jewish threat, but they found themselves on the defensive against a self-confident, formidable, and ostensibly coherent ideology or worldview.

**Keywords:** agency, anti-Zionism; antizionism, anti-Semitism; antisemitism, Arendt, Durban, Nirenberg, historicism, responsibility, United Nations, UN women’s conferences

## INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

Wherever you turn, Israel is compared to Nazi Germany. Posters associate Israel with the former South African regime and its apartheid policies. Everywhere, there are images of suffering Palestinian children. Arab women display photos of their “martyred” husbands, killed during the Second Intifada.

The stand of the Arab Lawyers Union is selling *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Caricatures are hung up. One of them depicts a rabbi with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* under his arm and an Israeli army cap on his head. Another poster describes how the Jews make their bread: with the blood of Muslims.

Joëlle Fiss, *Durban Diary*<sup>3</sup>

Durban was a super-spreader event for a new variant of the antisemitism virus. This new variant was especially well-adapted to thrive in populations which were thought to have already been vaccinated against racism and other bigotries. It had been assumed that the experience of the Holocaust had functioned like a vaccine, achieving effective herd immunity for antisemitism in human populations. It turns out that existing vaccines fail to inhibit the new variant. In fact the new variant has evolved a mechanism that specifically makes use of the complacency caused by the existing vaccination programs to make its way around the natural defenses of populations that believe themselves to be immune to racism.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps this 2021 reconfiguration of the virus metaphor for antisemitism helps us to think about the significance of Durban even if we have to overlook, for the moment, the well-rehearsed shortcomings of the analogy. Should one judge that Durban was not especially significant because the antisemitism that erupted there was little more than a continuation of what was always present? Or should Durban be thought of as a moment of creation, of what was at the time named the “new antisemitism.”<sup>5</sup> The super-spreader metaphor positions Durban as a significant step-change, but not as an innovator of something completely new.

The conference was attended by people from all over the world who were influential, or who would become influential: in government and civil society, in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as in left wing, antiracist, and feminist movements and their associated scholarly spaces. The worldview that was consolidated at Durban was to become influential in academia as well as in human rights and international humanitarian law circles, in teaching, journalism, and the arts, in practical and activist politics and in more scholarly and theoretical thinking.

Key people from each of those milieus had already been finding their ways, by different paths, to similar worldviews that put Israel and

Zionism at their center. There was no conspiracy. There was no genius who decided that Durban was the moment to entrench Israel-hatred and antisemitism as the new radical common sense, and who had the political talent to make it happen. Rather, these key people were already infected by the new variant of antisemitism before September 2001. At the conference, they created such a huge viral load in such a small and intense space that a significant proportion of participants took it home and infected, in turn, other influential people in many countries and in distinct social, political, and intellectual milieus.

Over the next twenty years many layers of people were indeed influenced. A call for an academic boycott of Israel was made in Britain in 2002<sup>6</sup> and has continued to gain legitimacy and traction around the world, to the present day. It functioned as a targeted campaign for the exclusion of Israelis, and nobody else, from the global academic community. More general campaigns for “boycott, divestment and sanctions” (BDS) followed, which functioned as campaigns to exclude Israelis, and nobody else, from the global community of humankind. The boycott campaigns were built on ideological foundations that were taken into the 2001 conference by diverse streams of leading activists and delegates, who succeeded in transforming them into truisms for wider groups of participants.

Campuses around the world were especially affected. The delegitimization of Israel and Zionism, and the acceptance of Israel and Zionism as being materially, symbolically and globally significant, have come to be seen as more and more normal over the two decades since Durban. David Miller, for example, defined his aim as the ending of Zionism “as the functioning ideology of the world.”<sup>7</sup> These new common sense notions are only enthusiastically embraced by a minority on campus, but that minority has succeeded in forcing much wider layers of people to recognize them as important and legitimate positions in a wide range of

debates. The description of Israel as nothing more than a manifestation of European and American imperialism, and as symbolic of colonialism, racism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and apartheid,<sup>8</sup> closely mirrors the language mobilized by students at the Durban youth summit, by justice activists at the Durban NGO Forum, by diplomats at the government conference, and by thousands of protesters in and around the bustling cricket stadium in which the conference was held.

The final arguments over the wording of the official declarations at the Durban conference were scheduled for Saturday, September 8. Because it was Shabbat, many Jewish delegates were excluded, although some attended. In the end, business went on into the evening and observant Jews were then able to join for the end of proceedings. The following Tuesday was 9/11, the day of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and on the Pentagon, and the thwarted attempt to destroy the White House.

Durban was influential in the ways the left, broadly conceived, came to think about the world. In both symbolic and also material ways, Durban can be seen with hindsight to be associated with the twenty-first-century reemergence of a way of thinking that centers Jews in its understanding of universal problems. 9/11 was perpetrated by a movement that embraced antisemitism and antizionism, without finding the distinction between the two significant. 9/11 saw radical totalitarian politics, which defined itself in relation to its own reinterpretation of the texts and symbols of Islam, come to global prominence. The parts of the left that were especially vulnerable to antizionism had significant commonalities and points of contact with the factions that defined themselves by these twentieth-century political interpretations of Islam. They both understood the world as being fundamentally divided between what might be called “imperialism,” “capitalism,” “modernity,” “Judeo-Christianity,” or “the West,” on the one hand, and victims of that formidable global system of domination, on the other. Many were

ready to overlook the potential for disagreement around issues like democracy, human rights, women’s rights, LGBT+ equality, freedom of speech and pluralism. The left seems largely to have forgotten the experience of going into coalition with fellow “anti-imperialists” in Iran during the 1979 revolution. There, much of the left had helped Khomeini consolidate his power before it was then murderously suppressed and defeated by the new regime.

This paper starts by looking at the ways in which Jews at the Durban conference were themselves alienated from a social space in which they had felt they belonged, by the acceptance of the idea that Zionism was the key racism in the world and that Zionists were oppressors. They looked for solidarity against the antisemitism they felt they were experiencing and they found little.

The paper goes on to focus on the relationship between this Durban antizionism and other, older anti-Jewish ideologies. It finds a route through some of the debates about the alleged historical essentialism of Nirenberg’s anti-Judaism, on the one hand, and the Arendtian focus on geographical, temporal and social specificities of each distinct anti-Jewish movement, on the other. This leads to a consideration of agency and responsibility for a form of antisemitism which is angrily denied by those who appear to embrace and carry it. This question of agency is one of the key problems with the metaphor of antisemitism as a virus. The paper tentatively suggests ways in which we might think of antisemitism in a functionalist way and ways in which we might draw from the vocabulary of evolution and adaptation to specific environments.

As a case study, the paper traces an antizionist thread from the UN women’s conferences, starting in 1975, through the time of the peace process, and into Durban. It suggests that one might look at a number of other threads which similarly connected Durban back to the UN “Zionism is racism” culture of the 1970s. Although antizionism was not dominant on the

left in the 80s and the 90s it was kept alive in a number of specific social spaces by committed supporters. That is one reason it was able so ferociously to reemerge at the Durban conference.

## DURBAN AS A TRAUMATIC EVENT FOR JEWISH PARTICIPANTS

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One of the characteristic impacts of antisemitism is to exclude Jews from places where they feel a genuine sense of belonging. Antisemitism alienates Jewish members of any community where it is tolerated. It constructs Jews as alien, accusing them of simulating loyalty, while really betraying their ostensible community to their actual Jewish interests. Jews in fifteenth-century Spain were forced to convert or were driven out of the country. Alfred Dreyfus was accused of using his position as an officer in the French army to spy for Germany. The Rothschilds were accused of fomenting the First World War and financing the war effort of every belligerent state against the others. “Jewish finance” was accused of pushing the British Empire into the Boer War in the interests of its gold and diamond investments.<sup>9</sup> German Jews were stripped of their citizenship by the National Socialist movement and were later stripped of all other remaining rights. Prominent universities in the United States put racial quotas on Jews in the 1930s, which remained, for example at Yale, until the 1960s. The “America First” movement argued that Jews were trying to draw the United States into the war against the Nazis against its own interests. In 2007, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published an ostensibly respectable academic thesis that the “Israel Lobby” had been decisive in sending the USA to war against Iraq against its own interests.<sup>10</sup> Jewish feminists in the 1980s were accused of betraying their Palestinian sisters on account of their “Zionism,” and were excluded from the Spare Rib collective, amongst other feminist spaces. Jewish academics who opposed boycotts of Israeli colleagues were treated in their trade unions as disloyal to the principles of solidarity and in their universities

as unscholarly. Jewish Labour Party members in Britain were accused of disloyalty when they spoke out against the antisemitism of the Jeremy Corbyn faction. Jewish lesbians were excluded from the Chicago Dyke Marches due to their alleged failures of intersectional solidarity. Antisemitic replacement fantasists on the right seek to warn white people that Jews are bringing in non-whites to replace them and on the left they seek to warn non-white people that Jews are bringing in white colonists to replace them.<sup>11</sup>

Antisemites have not always held state power and alienation from spaces in which Jews felt they were at home has not always ended in death. But the act of constructing Jews as disloyal to their nation, their class, their sex, their sexuality, their community of scholarship, their fellow trade unionists; the act of constructing Jews as disloyal to humankind as a whole, is a familiar one. It is traumatic to be constructed as disloyal and dishonest by one’s own community. To feel at home is to feel that people around you accept you as one of them, to feel that they value you as you value them and to feel that you share basic notions of what is important. It is to feel that people will stand with you if you are threatened and to promise that you will stand with them if they are threatened.

Many Jewish participants at Durban experienced a sudden and complete alienation from the global community of anti-racism, from the social space of which they had felt themselves to be a part. Their anti-racism was not transactional, it was not offered in exchange for reciprocity against antisemitism. But when solidarity was appropriate and urgent, it did not materialize from those who purported to stand against racism, xenophobia, discrimination and *all* forms of hatred. The conference was a concentrated and intense event. Jews in the anti-racist world had experienced antizionism before but what was new to many at Durban was the experience of antizionism as a hegemonic ideology and as something that their anti-racist colleagues either embraced with enthusiasm or feared to oppose. Criticism of Israel, antisemitic

tropes, Jew-hating crowds, the centering of Zionism as a key global enemy and the singling out of Jewish delegates as representative of it, swirled one into the other, around the meetings, the streets, and the spirit of the conference.

Some of the Jews who were present at Durban, and who we interviewed, report that the 9/11 attacks felt entirely in keeping with the atmosphere of fear and unreality, which still enveloped them on Tuesday morning. Others report that 9/11 made Durban feel like it had never happened, and an ordinary kind of rational, political, and emotional processing of what had happened was abruptly cut off by the enormity of the new event. Many report that Durban changed their lives and many of them have devoted the two decades since to resisting and critiquing what they experienced as exclusionary antisemitism which has the potential to cause significant harm.

## DURBAN ANTIZIONISM IN RELATION TO PREVIOUS ANTI-JEWISH IDEOLOGIES

Left-wing antisemitism was not new at Durban. For as long as there has been a left, there have been authentically left-wing currents tempted by antisemitic shortcuts to making sense of the world, and tempted by shortcuts to liberation. There have always also been other left currents which recognized and resisted antisemitism. Moshe Postone writes that antisemitism can appear to be anti-hegemonic: “to be the expression of a movement of the little people against an intangible, global form of domination.”<sup>12</sup>

Left antisemitism was not new at Durban, but neither, even, was the anti-Jewish ideology or worldview of *antizionism*. There has been anti-Zionism since the 1890s. There had been Jewish opposition to Herzl’s call for Jews to migrate to Palestine and build a nation state there. There was debate amongst Jews about how to best deal with the antisemitism that they faced. But after the Holocaust and after 1948, antizionism appeared in a world which had been

wholly, materially transformed for Jews since those old-time debates about Jewish strategy. Antizionism now presented itself as the innocent inheritor of those older movements; but the pre-war arguments had not been won or lost, the arguers had been obliterated. Socialists, Zionists, Bundists, assimilationists, and traditionalists were murdered together by the Nazis. What could opposition to Zionism possibly mean now, in a world where Jews had been driven out of Europe anyway, where Jews lived under Stalin’s totalitarian terror and where life in the Middle East was being transformed by ethnic Arab nationalist movements throwing off the old European empires? And in a world where Jews in Israel had prevented themselves from going the way of Jews in Europe?

The new antizionism was not a critique of an idea, it was an ideology that designated the Israel that now existed as being racist in its very essence. The antizionism that was to erupt at Durban had been pioneered by the antisemitic and totalitarian propagandists of the Soviet Union, after the Jewish world had been radically and materially transformed in the twentieth century, but long before 2001.<sup>13</sup>

Jews were targeted by antizionism as early as 1951. Rudolf Slánský, the leader of the Communist state in Czechoslovakia, was “found guilty” of “bourgeois Jewish nationalism,” and hanged, together with his mostly Jewish comrades. In 1968, Jews who had been loyal to the Communist regimes in Poland and East Germany were purged from positions of power and influence after being accused of “Zionism.”

“Tel Aviv and Pretoria are akin, just as Apartheid in the South African Republic and Zionism in Israel are simply different brands of racialism,”<sup>14</sup> wrote N. Oleynikov in 1977, for TASS, the official propaganda organ of the USSR. Soviet antizionism was not “criticism of Israel,” nor was it related to the local conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, it was a universal ideology of Jewish evil influence. In the newspaper *Izvestia*, the 1975 article titled

“The Criminal Handwriting of Zionism” proclaimed:

Israeli aggression, which maintains the entire Middle East, as well as the whole world, in a state of tension, has for many years been “substantiated” by Zionist ideology. Zionism has taken to extremes Judaism’s assertion that the Jewish people is “God-chosen” and “exclusive” and is superior to other peoples.<sup>15</sup>

Antizionism was here positioning everything bad in the world to be caused by Zionism and the evil of Zionism to be a direct outcome of the essential evil of Judaism.

Antizionism had also become a common thread in left wing, Arab nationalist, and Islamist understandings of their shared enemy, whether named “imperialism,” “the West,” or “modernity.” Campaigns to construct Zionism as a form of racism and apartheid had already been raging in the 1970s.

In Israel’s early years there had also been much left-wing warmth towards it. Zionism was thought of as the movement of the “oppressed” from Europe and Russia. Zionism’s role as a movement of the oppressed Jews from the Middle East and Africa was less well understood. Israel was thought of as a pioneer of socialist and “progressive” institutions and cultures, as a motor for economic development and as an enemy of British imperialism. In the 1980s and 90s, at least within mainstream democratic left and liberal opinion, the demonizing narratives of Israel had been kept marginal by the widely shared hope that peace would soon be realized between Israel and its neighbors. Israel was not thought of as an evil to be eradicated but as a potential constituent of a new, peaceful, democratic, and liberated Middle East.

When the peace process began to collapse and the Second Intifada raged, the barriers confining antizionism to the margins of left and liberal opinion began to collapse, too. For some, this happened as early as 1995, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered by a Jewish Israeli opponent of Palestinian independence. So

even the post-peace process resurgence of antizionism predated Durban by up to six years. Many on the left gave up on the peace process during Benjamin Netanyahu’s premiership from 1996 to 1999, which they interpreted as indicating the end of Israeli support for a Palestinian state. Ehud Barak was elected with an Israeli mandate to make the deal, but within a year the Second Intifada had erupted and Yassir Arafat appeared to be unambiguously re-committed to the destruction of Israel and to the rejection of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

At the Durban conference, an ostensibly coherent and specifically antisemitic way of seeing and understanding Israel was pushed hard. Contrary to appearances, antisemitism is never really about Jews, and antizionism is not really about Israel. Both are ways of projecting all that is bad in the whole world onto an “other.” At the “World Conference against Racism” the evil that needed explaining was racism.

Hannah Arendt wrote that antisemitism makes Jews into the keys of history. She meant that for the antisemite, history can only be understood via the role of Jews in it. Everything that happens in the world seems to make sense to those who believe that the Jews are the real root cause of it. Antisemitism is conspiracy fantasy. In architecture, a keystone is the single wedge-shaped block at the top of an arch without which the arch would fall. Durban antizionism was a worldview which made Israel into the keystone of a global, interlinked and coherent system of oppression.

In his huge work of history, David Nirenberg shows what each anti-Jewish movement has in common with the others. He tells a single story of the development of “Anti-Judaism” over thirty centuries.<sup>16</sup> Yet in her equally impressive “Origins of Totalitarianism,” Arendt warns us not to essentialize antisemitism as a single determining fact of human history.<sup>17</sup> She emphasizes the aspects of antisemitism that are specific to the particular antisemites who mobilize them, and to their particular purposes. She pays attention to the different times, places, and societies in which

antisemitism finds new forms even if the new forms borrow, but reconstruct, emotionally powerful language and tropes from previous ones.

In the spirit of Nirenberg's understanding, we can see that Durban projected racism, the thing which is most hated and feared in twenty-first-century society, especially amongst the left and liberals, onto Israel. Previous antisemitisms had projected their own conceptions of pure evil onto "the Jews": the rejection and murder of the universal God, a murder ritually reenacted on children; the rejection of progress and modernity; the clinging to reactionary tradition; betraying their community be it nation, class, people, or humanity. Both those who hated "socialism," and those who hated "capitalism," which had been rechristened "neoliberalism" by the time of Durban, gave what they hated Jewish faces so everyone could grasp the depth of the evil in their hearts and in their bones.

In the spirit of Arendt's understanding, Durban antizionism, and the way it resonated and caught on, tells us something about our own society in the twenty-first century. This anti-Jewish ideology is not just the latest head of an eternal monster, which grows anew each time the old one is cut off. Durban tells us nothing about Jews or Israel but plenty about the particular society in which people pick up old bits and pieces of discarded antisemitism and use them to build their own way of dealing with what they find unbearable. Antisemitism, and antizionism too, are not only effects of "society," they are ideologies which specific human beings construct and use for their own purposes.

## AGENCY FOR AN ANTISEMITISM THAT ITS PROPONENTS DISAVOW

However when I tried to air some of these problems in conversation with UCU activists I encountered a sense of honest bewilderment that I could possibly have any objection to Ken Loach. The idea was unthinkable. . . .

Sarah Annes Brown<sup>18</sup>

Sarah Annes Brown writes of the "honest bewilderment" she observed when union activists were told that one of their socialist heroes had a record of engaging in antisemitic rhetoric. The question of human agency is challenging in this context because the people who pushed antisemitism at Durban thought of themselves as good people seeking justice, and as people who stood firmly *against* antisemitism. In general, the denial seems genuine, even if its shrillness and certainty may sometimes point in the direction of unacknowledgeable doubt. The denials are also characteristically followed by aggressive counter-accusations that the very suggestion of antisemitism itself could only be understood as evidence of Jewish dishonesty and double-dealing.<sup>19</sup>

It is often said that Israel's bad behavior is the cause of the "new antisemitism" variant but, in truth, the antisemitism is caused by the ways in which people make sense of Israel's behavior, as they describe and imagine it. Antisemites are responsible for the antisemitic things they say and do. They are responsible for their own ignorance and for their own mechanisms of denial.

The somewhat clichéd metaphor of antisemitism as a virus rather sides with the ahistorical Nirenberg picture of antisemitism. It also seems to absolve antisemites of agency. Those who attended Durban were not passively infected by antisemitism. They decided to embrace it. Many who did not go so far as to embrace antisemitism either denied or trivialized it. Participants were offered an ostensibly coherent worldview which resonated emotionally and powerfully, albeit perhaps for reasons of which they were not fully aware. Because, as Karin Stögner argues, antisemitism is itself a quintessentially intersectional ideology, it is well suited to function as a unifying framework for people embedded in different religious and political traditions, as well as people situated in different parts of complex global power structures.<sup>20</sup> But they wanted to be unified and they valued the unity that it brought.

So we insist that antisemites, that is people who embrace and who legitimize antisemitic

worldviews, have agency and that they are politically and morally responsible for what they do. But we also observe that they are often clear about their own subjective opposition to antisemitism. They insist on their own innocence. We also observe that some at Durban appeared fully conscious and rather relaxed at the prospect that their antizionism could, and would, be instrumentalized for the advancement of openly antisemitic purposes. At Durban, they could see the antisemitism quite clearly, around them. But still they chose not to notice it, not to understand it, to disavow it or simply to downplay its importance or significance. Was not the antisemitism, which did not exist, caused by Israel?

Antizionists had fought hard for Israel and Zionism to be at the top of the agenda of the “World Conference against Racism” long before anyone arrived in South Africa. One of the planning conferences was held in Tehran. The Iranian government did not grant visas to Israeli passport holders or to people associated with Jewish non-governmental organizations. They were thus barred from contributing to the writing of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action which would be adopted months later at the government conference. This was a clear violation of the rules and norms of the UN, but one which was allowed by other delegates to stand. The draft text, proposed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and adopted at the Tehran conference, referred to Israel as “a new kind of apartheid,” and a “crime against humanity,” while it designated “Zionism” as a “form of genocide.” At the follow-up Geneva conference, the OIC delegates also sought to dilute any mention of “Holocaust” to “holocausts” in an apparent effort to normalize the Nazi genocide of the Jews in Europe.

Agency and responsibility for antisemitism are difficult to pin down but it is clear that there were many at Durban, such as the Iranian government delegation, who endowed no significance to nice distinctions between hostility to Jews, to Zionism, and to Israel, which are held by subjectively antiracist antizionists to be of crucial signif-

icance. There were many at the conference who were quite prepared to work alongside antisemites in the construction of declarations against racism and more still who were prepared to downplay the significance of antisemitism. The minority which stood up against antisemitism during the process was marginalized, delegitimized, and was itself denounced as racist. This was allowed to happen by the mainstream of the global antiracist movement.

### **A FUNCTIONALIST WAY OF UNDERSTANDING ANTIZIONISM?**

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The fact that a variant of antisemitism is so well suited to the purpose of unifying disparate individuals and movements in picturing evil as having a Jewish face is not accidental, nor is it a product of conspiracy, nor simply is it a given fact of human history. The antisemitic notion of “the Jews” has evolved through the profoundly changing ecosystems of human history into a nest of emotions, ideas, and images that are perfectly adapted to symbolize the nightmares of the collective subconscious. Antisemitism survived because it could be adapted by social agents to their specific needs in each new context. The remnants of previous variants of antisemitism retained enough emotional potency to make it worthwhile recycling them rather than building from scratch. But, as David Seymour writes, they do not do so without some shame. They disavow the old before they employ it in building the new:

A common characteristic between “classic” and “new” antisemitic ideology is that each begins with a disavowal and a distinction. Both iterations will often begin by acknowledging and lamenting prior forms of anti-Jewish hostility. This opening gambit of disavowal is followed immediately by a distinction between these disavowed ideologies and the writer’s own “novel” contribution.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps, in Darwinian terms, anti-democratic movements that embrace antisemitism thrive

compared to the ones that do not embrace antisemitism. This makes sense when one recalls that antisemitism has evolved in ways that are specifically adapted to thrive in the specific conditions of a succession of historical anti-democratic environments. This idea of antisemitism having evolved to be well adapted in particular environments might lead us to try thinking of antisemitism in functionalist terms, not as a virus but as a resource and as a source of power.

Antisemitism is especially attractive when the evil which it is mobilized to explain is too painful to address rationally. What is more profoundly dreaded in America than racism? Is America founded on human equality or is it corrupt in its heart because of its original sin of slavery? In Britain, the partly addressed nightmare is colonialism. Britain was the colonial power and the Israelis overthrew the mandate but now there is a British temptation to project its own partly resolved past onto Israel's present. Today's Europe is founded on the narrative that antisemitism and racism have been transcended and overcome. Europe was often tempted to project its own unacknowledged horrors onto "the Jews" in its midst and onto other "races" outside. Now Europeans can project their own disavowed racism onto Jews who are no longer European; even if about half of Israelis were never European at all and the other half are hardly "not European" in any relevant sense simply on the basis that they were given the choice of death or trying to escape.<sup>22</sup> It is Europeans who accuse Israelis of failing to learn the lessons of Auschwitz and then of re-importing racism back into the now clean again Europe, in the form of Islamophobia. In South Africa, the global and nation-founding triumph over apartheid can feel like a token victory as hopelessness, violence and inequality persist under a state that appears dysfunctional and quite unable to make life better.<sup>23</sup> The temptation to refocus anger and despair onto an emotionally satisfying symbolic target is irresistible to some. The spirit of Durban, then, was to portray racism, apartheid,

imperialism, state violence, and the negation of human rights as having an Israeli face.

Recently we have seen the appearance of the slogan "Globalize the Intifada."<sup>24</sup> It cements a fantasy of Israel as being symbolic of all evil and it raises a fantasy of the Palestinian struggle as a universal symbol of the innocence and courage of all those who suffer. "Globalize the Intifada" reconstitutes the passion plays of old Europe, by which good people could identify with the divine, and with the ultimate justice which would be theirs. The meek shall inherit the earth. And they shall do so by defeating Zionism.

During the 2021 conflict in Gaza, academics were passing around statements pressuring each other to affirm that the substance of the antizionism that was spread from Durban was integral to their scholarship and to their personal morality.<sup>25</sup> Students too, some of whom were not yet born in 2001, are socialized into a culture in which it is common to believe that justice cannot prevail around the world until Israel is destroyed; that racist cops in Minnesota were taught by Zionists how to murder African American men;<sup>26</sup> and that it is legitimate to exclude feminists from asserting pride in their identities, which they locate at the intersection of their lesbianism and their Jewishness, by flying a rainbow flag with a Magen David on it. These are examples of elements of an accepted political culture, which make one's attitude towards Israel into a universal test of one's human value. They constitute antisemitic loyalty tests that exclude Jews.

#### **CASE STUDY: ANTIZIONISM AT THE UN WOMEN'S CONFERENCES PREDATED THE PEACE PROCESS, SURVIVED DURING IT, AND FED INTO THE DURBAN CONFERENCE AFTER IT**

Durban antizionism was not authored or organized by a single actor and it was not the product of a secret conspiracy. It happened because of a confluence of factors: a coming together of distinct trajectories into something nearing a perfect storm.

One example of a current that fed antisemitism into Durban was the UN women's movement. There was a series of world conferences on women, starting in 1975, which embraced a deepening antizionism throughout the period when most of the broad left had embraced the "two-state solution" that the peace movement was working towards. The women's conferences constituted one unbroken thread connecting the radical antizionism of the 1970s to the 2001 Durban conference. There were others.

UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, adopted in November 1975, declared formally that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination."<sup>27</sup> But this kind of language in official UN documents had itself already been pioneered at the first UN "World Conference on Women" in Mexico City earlier in the year. Delegates there voted to adopt a text that repeatedly listed Zionism among every other "scourge" to be eliminated, such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, foreign occupation, apartheid, and racial discrimination. The "Declaration on the Equality of Women," which ought to have been remembered because it was a historic step forward for the global women's movement, was also innovative as one of the first international documents to label Zionism as a form of racism. The Declaration singles out Israel, and only Israel, by calling on the UN body for women's rights to devote specific assistance to the campaign to realize self-determination for Palestinian women in "their struggle against zionism" and "alien domination."<sup>28</sup> It may be remembered how many other nations were fighting "alien domination" at that time, for example within the Soviet Union itself, but of course much more widely too. Cambodian women, Lithuanian women, Polish women, Bosnian and Croatian women, Kurdish and Tibetan women, Tamil women, Tutsi women, women in Indonesia and East Timor, Algeria, and Equatorial Guinea, in Argentina, and Uganda, to name but a few, were not mentioned in the Declaration.

In 1963 Betty Friedan had written of one of the founding texts of Second Wave Feminism,

"The Feminine Mystique."<sup>29</sup> In 1966 she was the founding president of the National Organization for Women, the key institution of the women's movement in the United States. Friedan led a delegation of American feminists to Mexico City for the 1975 conference in the hope of helping to "advance the worldwide movement of women to equality."<sup>30</sup>

Born in 1921 Bettye Naomi Goldstein, Friedan was Jewish. She was twenty years old at the time the Holocaust began and twenty-eight when Israel declared its independence. Leah Rabin, the wife of Yitzchak Rabin, who was serving his first term as the Prime Minister of Israel, was also at the Mexico City gathering. When she rose to address the plenary, many delegates booed and walked out. "We shall wait until the exodus is over," Rabin said, with faux patience as more than half of the room poured out of the conference hall at the Mexican Foreign Ministry building.<sup>31</sup>

Friedan recalls feeling shocked by the anti-Americanism, antisemitism, and antizionism that was pulsing through the conference. She felt they served to divert attention away from the goal of the conference, which was to promote the causes of women's rights and women's equality.<sup>32</sup>

Delegates from states that defined themselves constitutionally as "Arab" or "Communist" moved to link the Ten-Year Plan of Action for Women to the abolition of "racism, apartheid and Zionism." The New Zealand delegation head, Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, who was of both Maori and Jewish descent, said in response: "If Zionism is to be included in the declaration, we cannot understand why sexism was not included."<sup>33</sup> This followed some wrangling over the claim that the word "sexism" was a "nasty North American neologism."<sup>34</sup>

At the parallel NGO conference, Jewish feminists faced an equally hostile environment. Many were harassed and intimidated. Friedan herself received anonymous letters warning her not to speak or she would be denounced "first as an American and then as a Jew."<sup>35</sup> At key moments

microphones were muted and speakers were silenced. Jewish feminists left the conference feeling demoralized: the assault on them as “Zionists” was entirely inappropriate in the context of what they had assumed would be a shared endeavor to advance the feminism shared by women around the world. The follow-up conference in Copenhagen in 1980 again adopted a resolution that defined Zionism as a form of racism and it went further, constructing Zionism as an obstacle to the full enjoyment of universal women’s rights. The centering of Zionism as a universal obstacle to all liberation was antisemitic because it put Jewish evil, real, imagined, and exaggerated, at the center of all evils.

The rhetorical attacks on Israel at the UN women’s conferences, led by the OIC and by the Soviet Bloc, were part of a concerted effort to make Israel into an international pariah in the way that apartheid South Africa had been.

At the 2001 conference, held in a South Africa still glowing from the victory over officially sanctioned racism there, it must have been clear that there would be a particular opportunity to leverage the portrayal of Israel as apartheid.

### **OTHER THREADS LINKING 1970S ANTIZIONISM TO DURBAN**

Parallel campaigns can be traced through the antiracism conferences, too. These efforts to construct Israel as a unique and symbolic evil in the world also made significant progress at the UN world racism conferences in 1978 and 1983 in Geneva. Apart from the UN women’s and the racism conferences, there were other routes to the 2001 Durban event for this same focus on the evils of Israel. They were neither entirely independent of each other nor were they part of a single, organized campaign.

There had been analogous trajectories, for example, in the related UN, activist, and academic worlds of human rights, and international humanitarian and human rights law.

Apartheid, for example, was abstracted from the context of South Africa and transformed into an ostensibly universal violation of specific human rights principles, and into a crime in international humanitarian law. But rhetorics of universality sometimes function in the interest of specific particularisms. This danger was realized when the universal standards of humankind were forged into specific traps for the Jewish state, and for its allied Jewish ideology, “Zionism.” There were also analogous trajectories within some of the internal political cultures of some of the increasingly influential and vocal non-governmental organizations. Although they saw themselves as taking responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of universal standards, they were similarly not immune to the temptations of a similarly eccentric and particularistic focus on Israel.

Leading tendencies in the left more generally were open to the Durban focus on Zionism. The 1968 “New Left” had mushroomed as a response to Stalinism but it had tended to replicate some of Stalinism’s key features: in particular its devaluing of Enlightenment democratic values as “bourgeois,” and its raising of a rhetoric of anti-imperialism to an absolute principle, above all other left wing and democratic principles. Class, with its arguably inherent universalism, a structure both of exploitation and of potential liberation, was often decentered and replaced by “race” and then by a rainbow of other “intersecting” “oppressions.” With the decline of labor movements in the democratic states and with the collapse of “actually existing socialism,” there was movement on the left away from the material politics of making the world better towards performative and symbolic substitutes.

These developments in left-wing thinking and practice were diverse and they led in many directions. But one possibility that they opened up was an intellectual and emotional openness to the kind of antizionism which felt to so many who were at Durban to be radical, exciting, and new. People concerned with antiracism, women’s liberation, human rights, and international

humanitarian law and global justice found a way in which they could feel united and confident. The left had lost the possibility of associating itself with powerful “socialist” states and the programmed of harnessing the power of organized labor to realize its restructuring of society was also feeling increasingly utopian to many.

Some heads on the left were turning with interest towards the power of states that ruled in the name of the struggle against imperialism, and towards religious and nationalist political movements which seemed, from afar, to know how to mobilize the oppressed. If the plan was to maneuver close to these new sources of power, values such as women’s rights, democracy, the rule of law, liberty, and freedom of speech would need to be firmly subordinated to the overriding principle of opposing imperialism, which was a rhetoric in which these governments and movements were fluent.

One possible shortcut to left and liberal unity, related to these political temptations, was antisemitism. It marked the abandonment of the common project of making the world better and it traded measurable progress for symbolic and emotionally satisfying explanations of why the world was so essentially compromised. What remained for those who gave up the positive project of changing the world was the business of assigning responsibility for the injustices which could not be addressed, and in particular for making sure that they themselves were seen to be not. The danger of a “not in my name” approach to injustice is that concern for one’s own moral and political cleanliness may come to seem more important than the seemingly impossible aspiration to make things better. As some social justice movements withdraw from the material world they tended to rely more and more on moral statements of their own innocence and on a performative politics of resistance, which did not aspire, in practical terms, to positive change. The temptation of conspiracy fantasy is always there, together with the temptation to reach for ways of designating others as responsible for, and as symbolic of, that which

cannot be addressed. Those held responsible for the state of the world must be formidable, to explain our inability to overcome them, and cunning, to explain why they are able to create such unjust structures, but camouflage them with the appearance of fairness and liberty.

## CONCLUSION

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This paper has tried to weave together a number of questions, and tentative answers, relating to the antizionism of Durban and its impact on the first twenty years of the century.

We see Durban neither as a moment of creation of something completely new nor as an indistinguishable part of a fundamentally eternal antisemitism. We have described it as a significant moment of crystallization of an antizionist antisemitism, which had roots in the past and continuities with the past, but which also formed something which would be recognizable, important, and influential, into the future. The rewards potentially available for recycling the shapes and emotions of old antisemitic movements into the twenty-first century were significant. But if people for whom positioning on the anti-racist left was important were to profit from them, they would have to formulate their worldview such that it did not remind them either too much, or too little, of other anti-Jewish worldviews.

We have raised questions about antisemitism and human agency. Antisemitism is more than a reservoir of emotionally significant tropes which overflow onto, or which infect, unsuspecting people and movements.<sup>36</sup> Antisemitism is the act itself of picking up these old poisons, reconfiguring them for one’s own specific purposes, and those actions successfully constructing significant shared meanings amongst communities of people. We have also used the metaphor of evolution. Antisemitism has evolved in distinct environments in human history to be well-adapted to live in symbiosis with anti-democratic movements. Durban antisemites angrily deny their antisemitism.

While we might accept some of these denials as honest reporting of their own inner subjective feelings, they are not thereby absolved of political or moral responsibility. The contention that antisemitism is caused by the bad behavior of Jews is hardly unusual in relation to ideologies of illegitimate and unjust structural power. Every racism and bigotry contends that the racist or the bigot is innocent while the object of the hatred is actually dangerous and threatening to the happiness of “the people.”

The defenders of Durban antizionism endow great importance to the distinction between antizionism as an antiracist movement of the oppressed, and antisemitism as a racist movement of the oppressors. The “Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism” takes the key elements of antizionist rhetoric and insists that they are not “in and of themselves” antisemitic.<sup>37</sup> But we should be concerned with those key elements as they appear in the world, not as they appear in the defensive imagination of the Declarationists. The antizionism that erupted at Durban, the antizionism that constitutes a worldview, the antizionism that constructs an ideology around an invented caricature of Israel and the antizionism that depicts racism and imperialism with an Israeli face—this antizionism fits comfortably into a series of historical phenomena: Christian, anti-capitalist, anti-communist, nationalist, anti-nationalist, and totalitarian antisemitisms.

Perhaps, in a sense, the questions of when antizionism becomes antisemitic, or whether antizionism is antisemitism, are redundant. Antizionism in the twenty-first century, as it was crystallized at Durban, is a movement that puts Jews at the symbolic and material center of all that is most feared and hated in the world. The tools of organizing and understanding that Durban offered have been significantly and progressively picked up and honed in the following years. The normalization of antizionism is not yet catastrophic, neither is it unopposed; yet it advances slowly and relentlessly. It clouds scholarly and academic attempts to understand the world; it

perverts emancipatory movements; it mis-educates people who grow to become educators, opinion-formers and lawmakers.

Why is this happening now? Perhaps people are always attracted to the notion that they live in the end of times, that this moment in history, the now, is the key turning point. This is an especially present zeitgeist in the twenty-first century. Democracy feels to so many as fragile and discredited as it did to so many of their great grandparents in the 1930s. Humanity is confronted by climate change, COVID, the rise of illegitimate power, and the decline of clarity about legitimacy itself. These all constitute fertile ground for an ideology with the characteristics of Durban antizionism.

Populism is a framework that simplifies social life into a homogenous and fundamentally innocent “people” that is held down and lied to by an elite, which pretends to be democratic and liberal but which really only acts to increase its own money and power.<sup>38</sup> In populist rhetoric, this elite is responsible for conditions of significant exploitation and subjugation, but it disguises the situation with illusions of democracy, freedom of information, the rule of law, free markets, and international cooperation. Insofar as populism is conspiracy fantasy, antizionism is a system of thought that is in keeping with the spirit of contemporary populism. Antizionism makes Zionism symbolic of these powerful and dishonest global elites. Insofar as antizionism disables rational, democratic, and antiracist movements, it also weakens political forces that might be expected to oppose populism.

We are aware of the irony that as we critique the notion that the Jews are at the center of all that is most to be feared in the world, we ourselves are open to criticism that we do the same: that we say that *antizionism* is in danger of becoming a phenomenon that is central to all that is to be genuinely feared in the world. But then, if we are right, that the practice of putting Jews at the center of the world might become globally significant, then we are right to treat that as globally threatening.

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