

Beware of Left Anti-Semitism

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Jew-Hatred Appears in Conspiracy Theories, Anti-Americanism, Lesser-Evilism, and Single-Issue Thinking

We are compelled to denounce the ancient practice of blaming Jewish people for the world's ills, because anti-Semitism (as prejudice and discrimination against Jews is commonly called) has been rearing its ugly head—within the U.S. Left. The incident we just experienced began August 29, when the administrator of a feminist email list sent around a virulently anti-Semitic video which, in the process of supporting ousted Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, blamed global poverty and injustice on the Rothschild banking family. Only a few of the 100 people on the email list responded, even after we immediately pointed out and denounced the content of the video. Then we were shocked again by the tepid nature of some of the responses.

For centuries, racism against Jews has been integral to the cultures of Europe, many Muslim-majority countries, and the Americas. It waxes and wanes, but is especially strong in times of economic woes, for which Jews are always a convenient scapegoat. They are “outsiders” to the dominant religions, nationalities, and ethnic groups; Jewish merchants make visible targets; and Jewish “cosmopolitans” are portrayed as the agents of capitalism and modernity. For the same reasons, anti-Semitism has been a mainstay of conspiracy theories for centuries—conspiracies in which Jews secretly run the world.

Throughout the racist history of the U.S., Jews have been associated with Afro-Americans and gays for attack. Today, common misconceptions persist that all Jews are rich and that they control the U.S. media and Hollywood. However, overt anti-Semitism is seen infrequently outside the racist Right, at least as compared to the number of physical attacks on Jews and synagogues that occur regularly in France, Germany, Argentina, and elsewhere. And we do not expect the Left to find it acceptable. (For information about Left anti-Semitism today, see <http://leftantisemitism.wordpress.com/> and the sources listed there, including <http://contested-terrain.net/>).

We are well aware that the Left can turn into the Right, as happened in Nazi Germany, and that racism, including anti-Semitism, flourishes in times like these. We urge the Left to expose and oppose anti-Semitism, along with all forms of racism and xenophobia, and to root them out of Left thought, along with the theories that support them.

The Feminist Email List Incident

Here is what happened recently: At a Left Forum conference a few years ago, we signed up to be on an email list for a “Left Feminist Conference,” which, as far as we know, never took place. The list was commonly used for announcements and commentaries. On August 29, the list moderator sent

an email with the subject line, “FWD: LIBYA – Thoughts?” The email message said, “Please watch this video!”

Apparently British-made, the video shows Qaddafi riding through the streets with his head and torso poking through the open rooftop of a vehicle. He is pumping his fists. The people he passes on the streets are waving. The dubbed soundtrack is dreamy synthesized music. A written narrative is superimposed. The opening verbiage cites Qaddafi’s alleged humanitarian and economic accomplishments for his countrymen. It then goes on to say (emphasis added):

“The Libyan Central Bank is state owned and unlike ALL banks in the west is not owned by **Rothschild** and issues debt free money.”

We cringed at this mention of Rothschild, as anti-Semites have long used “Rothschild” as code for “Jews.” (The Rothschilds are a European Jewish family that has owned financial institutions since the 18th century, and grew very rich.)

The video’s verbiage then states that Libya was falsely accused of the bombing of PanAm Flight 103 (and killing 270 people). It continues as follows:

“One of the first acts of the Libyan ‘rebels’ was to create a new central bank . . . to one that was owned by **Rothschild**, just as ours in the west are. The **Rothschild** family are estimated to own over half the world’s wealth. **Rothschild** owned banks create money out of thin air and sell it to the people at interest. This means we never have enough money to pay back what is ‘owed,’ so we and our unborn children are made debt slaves to **Rothschild** banking interests. Unlike our leaders, Cameron, Obama, Sarkozy, et. al., Qaddafi refused to sell his people out. Libya was DEBT FREE! Are you beginning to see why Qaddafi gets this response from his people and who is behind the NATO bombing of a free and sovereign people? Libyans had much that we do not have in the UK, USA & EU. They have a leader who has integrity and courage and who worked in their best interests and not the **Rothschilds’** best interests. Libyans shared in the wealth of their country free from the shackles of usury and **Rothschild** banking interests. Without the tyranny of **Rothschild** control over the issuance of money, we could all live as wealthy people. We have been literally robbed of trillions of Pounds/Dollars/Euros by **Rothschild** bankers and their rent boy politicians.”

The term “rent boy” could be construed as a slur against gay men.

The video ends with obscenities against NATO, the U.N., and “the New World Order.”

That last term is code for “international Jewish conspiracy to run the world.” The Rothschilds have frequently been the subject of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. These take differing forms, such as claims that the family belongs to the “Illuminati,” a purported organization that acts as a shadowy worldwide government dedicated to establishing the “New World Order.” You can easily find instances of the continuation of these myths, which proliferate on the internet.

Conspiracy Theories Proliferate

Conspiracy theories used to be associated with the radical Right, at least in the U.S., although they have been prevalent in the European Left for some time. But the U.S. has changed dramatically in recent years, especially since 9/11. In their zeal to claim that the U.S. government planned and executed the events of 9/11, some of the Left has come up with explanations not very different in

kind from those that blame it on “the Jews”—in spite of the fact that hundreds of Jews died that day. As Chip Berlet wrote in “ZOG Ate My Brains” in *New Internationalist Magazine* (<http://www.newint.org/features/2004/10/01/conspiracism/>):

“If you surf the web, you may have encountered the claim that the Israeli spy agency Mossad warned 4,000 Jews who worked in the World Trade Centre to stay home on 11 September 2001; or that a handful of Jewish lobbyists control US foreign policy; or the world is run by the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG). All these claims are patently false, yet they have devoted defenders.

“The idea that a secret group of powerful people is conspiring to control world events is centuries old, and it is seeing a troubling resurgence on the political Left. Unlike most progressive theories about political power that stress systemic, institutional or structural analyses, conspiracy theories claim a handful of sinister plotters are mucking things up. This often devolves into charges that ‘The Jews’ are behind some sinister plan for global subversion.”

When the Left Feminist Conference moderator was questioned about the video she sent, she said she had received it from “one of the young radicals in New Jersey.” The email trail shows that it was from the email account of the Jersey City Peace Movement. Its founder and director is Erik-Anders Nilsson, a middle aged actor with a handful of credits. Nilsson has also aspired (unsuccessfully, it seems) to other leadership roles—president of the New York chapter of the Screen Actors Guild and a seat on the Jersey City Council. A video on YouTube shows Nilsson (presumably as activist, not actor) speaking prior to the screening of “9/11: Explosive Evidence – Experts Speak Out.” In introducing the movie, Nilsson cites “Rothschild” as a possible perpetrator of the September 11 attacks.

The anti-Semitic video about Libya is not only on the Facebook page for the Jersey City Peace Movement, but elsewhere on the internet, including the website of The Truth Seeker, <http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk>. There one can read such insane articles as, “Did New York Orchestrate the Asian Tsunami?” Here, “New York” is code for “Jews.” The premise is that “the Zionist Cabal” obtained a thermonuclear weapon from the U.S. and set off the December 26, 2004 tidal wave, killing 100,000 Muslims. One can also view the video, “Holocaust, Hate Speech, and Were the Germans so Stupid?” The website is a virtual treasure trove for the Holocaust-denier and Jew-hater.

How Did It Come To This?

In response to the video, Fran Luck, producer of the only feminist program on the formerly Left radio station WBAI (which is now featuring conspiracy theorists), wrote to the list:

“What’s really depressing about this video and what it may represent, is that Left wing anti-imperialist theory—and it’s becoming painfully obvious that the ‘rebels’ are financed by Neo-liberal governments—is being seamlessly blended with classic right-wing (dangerous) anti-semitic conspiracy theory—and perhaps not only in this video! All the more reason we MUST have a functioning Left—or this kind of dangerous rightwing populism will fill the vacuum.”

We agree, and we ask: *How is it that so-called “young radicals” in New Jersey and a blatantly anti-Semitic website in the U.K. are promoting the same propagandist video? Why did only about*

seven people on the Left Feminist Conference list express outrage at the anti-Semitic message of the video, and why did some who distanced themselves from it nonetheless appear to excuse it because of the anti-imperialist sentiment it expressed? Why did the email list administrator disseminate it uncritically? Is she just ignorant? Or does the Left conflate anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Semitism to such an extent that Leftists are not able to discern (or do not care about) dangerous, targeted, and false rhetoric?

One wonders how something as medieval and patently untrue as blaming the Jews for everything evil in the world could gain traction in the 21st century. The sorry fact is that emergent anti-Semitism tells us a lot about the degeneration of the so-called Left in the U.S. Divorced from any concept of liberation or any grounding in workers' or other mass movements, a noisy segment of the Left has turned to conspiracy theories. They see the government's purposeful hand in everything bad that happens, from 9/11 to the economic crisis. (We are sure the government would like to have that much power to control events, but it clearly does not—otherwise, Obama would not be in the trouble he's in.)

Conspiracy theories substitute a small band of nasty people for the large historical and systemic forces at work in society. Such theories make it simple to understanding who is to blame for your troubles. Thus, they not only mislead people; they can lead them right into deadly racism. It is not such a big step to move from saying that the economic crisis and seemingly permanent recession conditions are caused by “greedy bankers” or “Wall Street bankers” (as just about every Left demonstration's fliers and chants do say), to saying that they are caused by “Jewish bankers.”

And anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists are not the only ones who attribute world events to a small group of intentional actors rather than to the necessities of capitalism, as it constantly pushes to expand in order to survive as a system. As is discussed in many articles in *With Sober Senses'* section on “Economic Crisis,” capital seeks out where ever it can make the highest rate of profit, and for many years the average rate of profit has been falling, causing businesses to fail and investment to slow, leading to crisis and recession.

The failure of the Left to grapple theoretically with Marx's revolutionary philosophy, and the Left's failure to understand the economic system which controls our lives, makes it vulnerable to simplistic and wrong explanations. (For a relevant analysis of the Left at the G8 protests in Germany in 2007, see <http://www.zcommunications.org/g8-summit-protests-in-germany-by-rob-augman>.)

It is easy to blame things on a conspiracy or other dedicated cabal if you start with the premise that the ills of the world spring from individuals' intentions rather than from the capitalist system, which in fact has nothing to do with human needs or desires.

Anti-Americanism, Lesser-Evilism, Single-Issue Thinking Stifle Revolutionary Ideas

The Left's failure to orient itself within liberatory mass movements leaves it floundering for explanations and susceptible to wrong ones. For example, the strong tendency in the so-called Left to support any person or nation that the U.S. opposes—“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”—results in mindless support for terrible tyrants such as Qaddafi and Iran's Ahmadinejad. **Such**

support does not make you Left; it just makes you anti-American. And anti-Americanism is no substitute for revolutionary ideas.

MHI people have battled this kind of thinking in the anti-war movement for many years, emphasizing that the movement needs to say what we *for* as well as what we oppose. We have urged support work for Iraqi and Afghan, women, workers, youth, and national minorities who are articulating ideas about freedom, *and the projection of that support to Americans*, as the way to build the anti-war movement. We have urged this largely without success.

There are two worlds in each country: the rulers and the ruled, those who manage the means of production for capitalism and those who are forced to sell their labor-power to survive. Once you act as if all Jews are capitalists, or conflate Jews with the policies of the State of Israel, you cut off any basis for building a movement for real change, which can only succeed if it is international and based in ideas of workers' self-emancipation.

One would like to think that the increased anti-Semitism in the U.S. Left springs from youth's identification with those Arab masses who are misled into blaming Jews in general, rather than certain nation-states, for their oppression. But we fear that most of the U.S. Left doesn't care any more about the Arab masses than it does about the American or any other masses. Rather, being anti-American seems to be the beginning and end of their radicalism, an end-in-itself.

Another noose around our necks is the limitation of "either-or" thinking. Once you accept that you have to choose between support for U.S. imperialism or support for Qaddafi, you have closed off further thought and stifled any possibility of developing liberatory ideas. The same is true of choosing between, or prioritizing, struggles against imperialism and anti-Semitism. Why should we forego fighting anti-Semitism while fighting imperialism, when both of them persist within, and benefit, the same capitalist system? *Why should we designate (and overlook) one as "the lesser evil," when what we want and need is for liberatory ideas to develop in another direction entirely?*

Equivocal Reactions

While we were shocked at the apparently ignorant list moderator who posted the Qaddafi video, we were more shocked at the response to our objection to the video by a woman who was a brilliant theorist of Second Wave feminism, Ti-Grace Atkinson. She wrote the list,

"I am disturbed by the Rothschild references, but I am even MORE disturbed by what the US and NATO have been doing to Libya. Looks like we learned NOTHING from Iraq. Or maybe that's the point: 'Iraq' taught the powers that be how much they could get away with in terms of atrocities. Looks like after Libya, Syria is next. Is it an accident that it's the Left-leaning Arab countries that are getting the shaft now?"

She then thanked the woman who sent the video "for opening the subject up"!

Putting aside the question of whether there is anything "Left" about Qaddafi or Assad in Syria, we do not understand why a feminist like Atkinson thinks she needs to rank the atrocities in the world.

To us, saying that anti-Semitism is less disturbing than U.S. imperialism is a lot like saying that sexism is less disturbing than the Vietnam War—the reason that the male Left gave when it told women to wait for their rights until after we fought the war, racism, etc. It was precisely that

attitude against which women on the Left rebelled in the 1960s and 70s, and which impelled them to start a women's liberation movement. The new movement was not concerned solely with traditional "women's issues," but was also anti-racist and anti-war, bringing a new perspective to all the struggles. The fact that the women's movement arose from within the Left, critiquing the Left's limitations *in practice and thought*, gave the new movement a profound dimension of human liberation, and an ability to talk about human liberation, which Atkinson did very eloquently.

Why are we no longer discussing movements and ideas from a multi-dimensional standpoint? Why should anyone choose between the false alternatives of working against only one or another form of oppression, instead of working out an entirely different path for revolutionary movements, a path that can lead to the transformation of society? And are we so exhausted from a lifetime of fighting U.S. imperialism that we have given up fighting anything else, even something as potentially deadly (to people and to the Left) as anti-Semitism? If so, why bother to fight at all?

During the Left Feminist Conference list's discussion of the video, there was another example of the limitation in current Left thought: A double standard that serves to excuse Leftists' anti-Semitic actions and conspiracy theories, as if they were just stupid mistakes.

This attitude was evinced by Todd Eaton, who moderates and edits the New York Protest List. He first wrote the Left Feminist Conference list to say that Fran Luck's message (above) had

"said it better than I could. I'm glad that video didn't pass unnoticed. One disagreement. PREVIOUSLY, I've seen nothing but worthwhile-sounding actions & politics from Jersey City Peace Movement. (...OK, well, maybe give or take a touch of occasional Trutherism, which is just not my thing.) JCPM is good people and only I wish that half NYC's groups were as active. They simply did something stupid, sending out that crackpot crypto-racist nonsense" (paragraph breaks omitted).

Only after the list was sent the link to the Erik-Anders Nilsson video described above, which mentions his affiliation with the Jersey City Peace Movement, did Eaton write again and say, apparently after watching the Nilsson video,

"Oh hell. OK, he's nuts. I thought the rest of the speech was well to the Left of most Truther analysis, though" (paragraph breaks omitted).

This kind of thinking—that an anti-war group simply did something stupid, and that a Leftist's conspiracy theory can be better than a Right one, reminds us that the designation "Left" can cover a lot of things that are not Left at all. Everyone knows that Hitler called his fascist party "National Socialist."

We believe in calling racism and xenophobia exactly that, and always condemning them loudly and unequivocally, without any ifs, ands, or buts.

How Leftists Could Better Spend Their Time Than By Cozying Up To Anti-Semitism

Here's a short list:

- Talk and write about what's wrong with anti-Semitism, and how it differs from opposition to the policies of the Israeli government. Opposition to U.S. support for the Israeli government should not be put in anti-Semitic terms.
- Study up on what *does* cause the world's ills. Read Marx. Share your knowledge.
- Engage in solidarity work to support those "Arab Spring" rebels who are talking about human liberation, and warn them of the dangers of mimicking the anti-Semitism of the dictators they oppose, and of hurting their ability to re-build their countries by buying into false explanations of how the world economy runs.
- Engage in solidarity work with the new Israeli protest movement. Help them and Arab-Springers to forge links. *Now, wouldn't that alliance raise the prospects for real social-economic revolution all over the world!*

[Note added Oct. 14, 2011: Shortly after we published this editorial, anti-Semitism appeared at Occupy Wall Street; see ["Wall Street Protests Marred by Anti-Semitism."](#)]