

# Spare Rib

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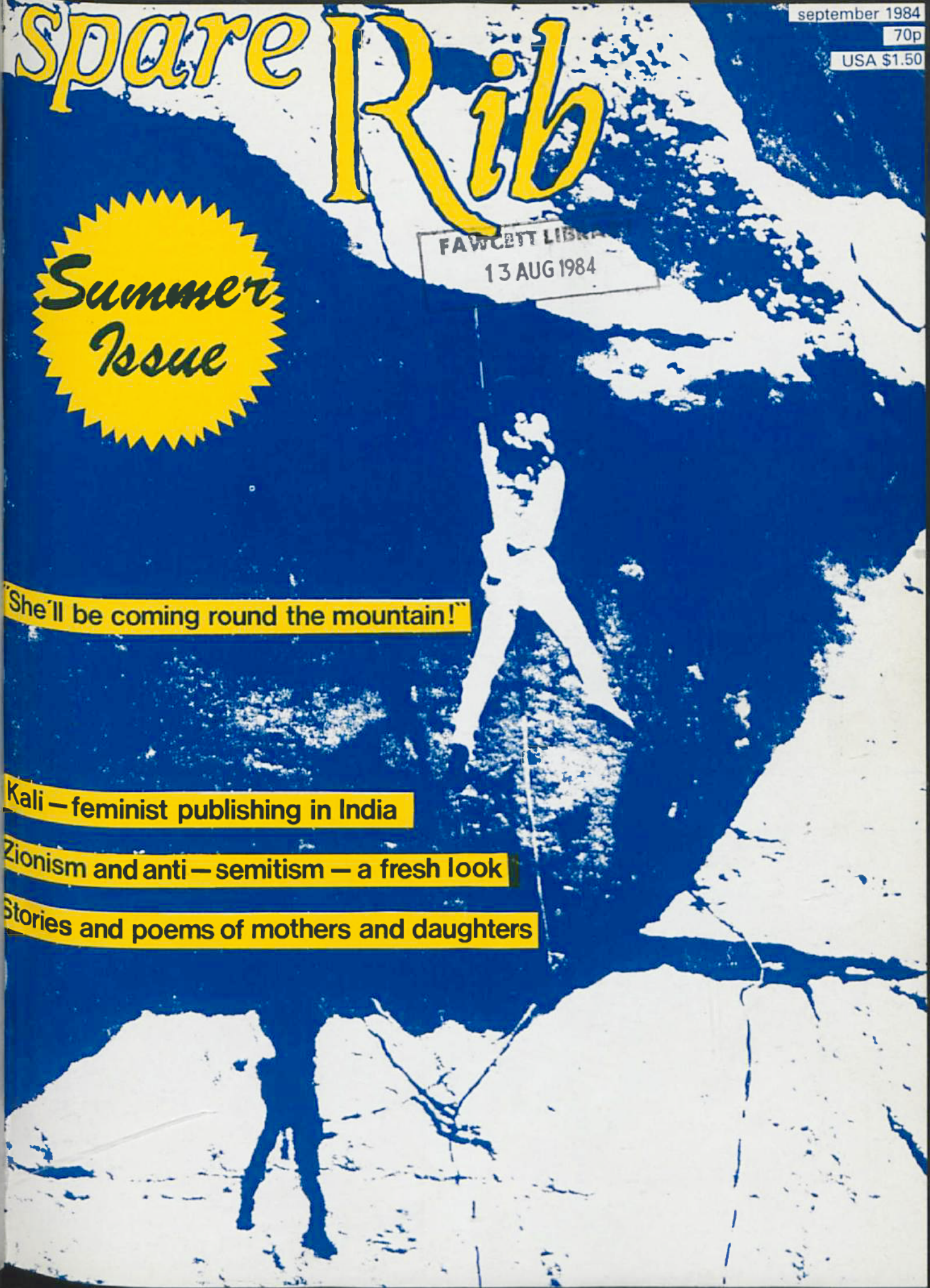
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Zionism and anti-semitism — a fresh look

Stories and poems of mothers and daughters



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# ZIONISM ANTISEMITISM AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM:

*Some reflections on a painful current debate among feminists*

by Nira Yuval-Davis

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This article is written as an intervention in a debate which has proved very painful and divisive to wide circles of feminists in Britain recently — the debate on antizionism and antisemitism and its relation to antiracist and feminist struggles. For me, an antizionist Israeli Jewish woman, living in England and active in anti-racist anti-sexist struggles, to decide *not* to intervene would have been a political act, especially as I found myself more and more unable to identify with any of the major sides involved, the bitterer the debate became.

My position is that the struggles against zionism, antisemitism and racism are complementary, rather than competing, as has been assumed all too often in this debate. I see these assumptions not as accidental but as a direct result of certain political perspectives, mainly inspired by zionism, which have dominated parts of the debate. In order to counterpose them, I will analyse the relationship between antisemitism and zionism; antisemitism and racism; and their relation to solidarity with international struggles against imperialism.

This has not been an easy article to write and I know I am going to touch various sensitive points for lots of people. This debate has by now touched most of *my* sensitive points. It seems to me, however, that the solution chosen by most of its participants so far — i.e. to relate only to parts of the issues which are closest to them, is not going to bring us any further.

This is written for *Spare Rib* — a feminist magazine, rather than for a general left-wing journal. This has become by now also a specific feminist debate, although it has been going on in the socialist movement in one way or another since the beginning of the century and in its latest form since 1967. I think that the way it has been conducted within the women's movement has illuminated several problems which are endemic to the feminist perspective and which we, as feminists, should confront. My conclusion will look at the implications this debate has had for basic feminist assumptions concerning 'sisterhood' and 'the personal is political'.

## Zionism and Antisemitism

How is it possible for the two factions to claim vehemently, with apparently the same degree of conviction, that, on the one hand — antizionist attacks are only a cover for antisemitism, and on the other hand — that antizionist struggles and struggles against antisemitism complement each other? I am not neutral in this debate — I accept the second argument. But I also accept that certain arguments from the first are valid as well.

In order to clarify what seems to be a contradiction, we need to look at zionism and its relation to antisemitism. I have no space here to go into a detailed history<sup>1</sup> but will present some generalisations that can act as a starting point.

Zionism has presented itself as a 'modern alternative' way of being Jewish to the orthodox religious one. The Jews, according to zionist ideology, constitute a nation (in the Western European sense of the term) rather than a religious

community. But Zionism needed the Jewish religious tradition to justify its claim to represent the Jewish people as a whole — as well as claiming Palestine as the land of Israel. (This inseparability became much more obvious after 1967 when religion was used to legitimate settlement of the West Bank). So, Israeli legislation had to perpetuate in various ways sexist and racist medieval Jewish laws.

All wings of the zionist movement have had as their main goal the establishment and promotion of the Jewish state in Palestine, which according to Jewish tradition is the Jewish homeland. This was done by settling in Palestine in a process which dispossessed and excluded the indigenous Palestinians from the new society.

It is important to emphasise that the zionist movement (in all its wings) did not want to establish a state for Jews who lived in Palestine, or even for those who would settle there, but *the* Jewish state which represents symbolically and politically Jews all over the world. For this reason, Israel could never be *in principle* a democratic state — it always represented some people (Jews) who were not its citizens more than some of its citizens (the non-Jewish ones — the few who did not turn into refugees in 1948).

This was always apparent, not only through having explicit national and religious Jewish symbols for the state (as do many other social democratic states) or in the partial non-separation of religion and state (ditto), but also in explicit legal discrimination between Jews and non Jews (like in the Law of Return). Less explicitly, yet more effectively, there is a *de facto* apartheid system, achieved by the 'double act' of the Jewish Agency (the operative arm of the zionist movement) and the state.<sup>3</sup> This was the legal and political reality in Israel even before it occupied the West Bank, the Gaza strip and lately parts of Lebanon, where even the pretence of democracy is not kept in regards to at least a third of the population under formal Israeli rule over the last 15 years.

There are, nevertheless, zionists who are subjectively democrats or socialists, and in the history of zionism there were voices protesting against some of the unavoidable implications of zionism in the hope that they were avoidable. But all along, zionism, both as a political movement and as an ideological one, has operated basically in the way I've described.

The zionist movement arose as a reaction to the crisis in the position of East European Jewry in the 19th century. Industrialisation jeopardised their

traditional economic roles and their way of life as a middle-caste between the landed nobility and the peasantry. It also disrupted and dispossessed the traditional peasantry who, encouraged by the ruling class, directed their frustrations in the form of riots and pogroms against the most vulnerable link in the hierarchy of the old feudal order — the Jews. These conflicts were fuelled by the Christian antisemitic tradition, which also gained some 'modern innovations', the most famous of which is the forged 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'<sup>4</sup> — supposedly proof that Jews were conspiring to take over the world.

In Western Europe, the arrival of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, with their different culture and appearance, re-awakened the issue of antisemitism which to a great extent had been dormant since the Jewish emancipation (when the small number of West European Jews became integrated into the new bourgeoisie).<sup>5</sup> Antisemitism in Western Europe, however, was based much more on biological 'theories' and paved the way for Nazi racial ideology.

Zionism, therefore, was not only an inner-Jewish development but a direct reaction to post-industrial European antisemitic ideologies. Like many other reactions, it shares some of the major assumptions of that which it opposes. Zionist founder Herzl saw antisemitism as part of human nature, beyond the realm of history, unchangeable. As a result of that first assumption, Zionists saw the solution of the 'Jewish problem' as dependent on Jews changing, rather than antisemites. The Zionist movement wanted to 'normalise' the Jewish people ('And we shall be like all the other

Goyim [non-Jewish peoples]'). From this point of view Zionism is an attempt at collective assimilation.

This 'normalisation' involved the exodus of the Jews from the countries where they lived to a different territory. Thus, ironically, both antisemites and Zionists end up rejecting the membership of Jews of the societies where they live.

Because of these common assumptions, many antisemites, especially after WW2 and the Holocaust, when open anti-semitism was no longer acceptable, became ardent Zionists. An obvious example are the southern fundamentalists in the USA. The Israelis are not only so much 'nicer' than the traditional Jews, they are also physically far away, how admirable . . . (not to mention what service they do to American imperialism . . .).

I want to clarify immediately that I do *not* mean that all, or even the majority, of non-Jews who support Zionism and Israel are antisemites under cover. Just the opposite. Most supporters of Israel have seen it (mistakenly) as adequate compensation to Jews for the horrors of the Holocaust and accepted Zionist belief that this is the way to solve the 'Jewish problem'. Of course, individuals, and especially states (like the superpowers) have also supported Israel for very different, politically expedient, reasons.

Just as support of Zionism in itself is not a sign that a certain person or state are anti- or pro-Jewish, so is opposition to Zionism. The East-European Left, for instance, objected to Zionism at the outset because it did not offer a strategy to fight antisemitism in their societies, nor did it offer a realistic solution to the majority of Jews, only to a select group who could afford to migrate to Palestine. Zionism was also blamed for dividing the working class ideologically and politically when a united struggle was necessary. Later, when the Zionist state had become a reality, the main objection to Zionism from the Left and humanitarians, focussed on the Palestinians and the effects on the whole Middle East.

On the other hand, opposition to Zionism has been used as a hypocritical substitute for antisemitism; by those who do not like Jews in any shape or form; those whose 'Laurence of Arabia' romanticism connected them to the Arab world; and those for whom Israel is just one more state of Wogs, although maybe a bit less so than most. In the 50s and 60s there were also indications that European antisemitic literature was being used in Arab propaganda as well, e.g. cartoons of East European orthodox Jews from the 30s were used to symbolise Israel.

What differentiates anti-semitic propaganda from other forms of racism is that it accuses Jews of a conspiracy to 'take over' the world. Thus antizionism is used in an antisemitic way when the influence of Zionism, remarkable in itself, is exaggerated to the level of anti-semitic fears of the Jews e.g. when 'Zionists' are seen to dominate the

world press, to be responsible for virtually every reactionary victory anywhere in the world, or when contemporary Britain is described as a country where 'all industrial life is in the grip of Zionist merchants, bankers and international capitalists' (*Shakti*, Aug–Sept. 82).<sup>6</sup>

The most confusing thing is that now, in the eyes of world Jewry, any opposition to Zionism is seen as antisemitism. Since the Nazi Holocaust and establishment of Israel, the Zionist movement has transformed itself from a minority movement in the Jewish community into the dominant one. To the majority of Jews, Israel has become their 'post-factum' homeland. To send money to Israel has become an easy way of being Jewish, especially to non-religious Jews. Although, like migrants from other countries, they see themselves as part of the society in which they live, they also see themselves as of 'Israeli' 'origin', even if they have never been there, or have no relatives who have, or even when they do not agree with Israel's policies. Israel's existence has become an emotional 'insurance' policy, a refuge in case of disaster. Even if they do not consciously rely upon Israel in this way, it has come to be part of their identity. And because Israel's existence is a direct product of the Zionist movement, many Jews feel irrationally threatened if somebody objects to it as *the* Jewish state (and calls for it to become a state which represents *only* and *all* of its citizens), — even if this call comes from those who genuinely and clearly oppose antisemitism and all other discrimination.

This feeling of threat, as well as the occasional cynical use of antizionism as a cover for antisemitism, can disappear, only if the hegemony of Zionism weakens among non-Israeli Jews. In my opinion this is a political task of the first priority.

A natural reaction which is directed to me often by Jews and non-Jews alike is, so you don't equate being Jewish to being Zionist nor to being religious — what does it then mean to you to be a Jew? There are many ways to be a Jew. The way which is closest to me is the one which is related by Issac Deutscher in his essay 'What is to be a Jew?', "Religion? I am an atheist. Jewish nationalism? I am an internationalist. In neither sense am I, therefore, a Jew. I am, however, a Jew . . . because I feel the Jewish tragedy as my own tragedy . . . because I should like to do all I can to assume the real, not spurious, security and self respect of the Jews." (I. Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew*, p.51).

### Antisemitism as Racism

For me, one of the most upsetting elements in this upsetting debate has been a statement by one of the SR women of colour who defined the whole debate as a 'white women's issue'. The implication is that Jewish women and probably even Palestinian women, as they are not Black, cannot suffer from racism. This is not an isolated response. It expresses a widely held

Migrations West





... to New York

belief, not only among Black people, but the Left in general in Britain, that only Black people can be the victims of racism — i.e. the definition of racism can be determined, not by the ideology itself, but by the skin colour of its victims. For me this is an unacceptable position, although, of course skin colour has a most important and specific role to play in contemporary British racism.<sup>7</sup>

I want to make it clear — racism in general and racism against blacks in particular, (in its legal, economic, political and interpersonal forms) is one of the most important political issues in contemporary Britain, and it continues to affect not only migrants but also people, especially Blacks, who were born and grew up in Britain. Moreover, racism has been, not so much probably from ill will, but as a result of 'tunnel vision' and lack of awareness and interest, a major feature of feminist analysis as well, and has to be struggled against continuously and explicitly. My objection to identifying Black people as the only victims of racism is not to deny their experience as the *primary* victims of British racism today but to expand the basis for common anti-racist struggles.

Racist language always includes some kind of biological determination. Once you are identified as a member of a certain group — and this membership is determined by being born into it, usually — you are ascribed with a set of condemnable characteristics. Skin colour is used very often to 'identify'

such membership. But the definition of the colour is social and historical, not biological — this is why Turks are considered white in Britain and black in Germany; why Asians are considered black in Britain but not in Africa. Moreover, victims of racism can be targetted in ways other than skin colour — it can be an accent, a way of dress or a more subtle mannerism. (I have seen an American antisemitic poster in which Jews are said to be identifiable not only by their noses, but also, amongst other things, by their 'round knees' and 'big ears'.) But most importantly — skin colour and other 'characteristics' are not really important in themselves — they are just the means of identifying the objects of racist discrimination and oppression. Fighting against racism means first of all fighting against that discrimination and oppression rather than just the ways the victims are selected.

This is, by the way, why the United Nations resolution which defined zionism as a racist ideology is correct, although both Jews and Palestinians are supposedly part of the same 'race' (they are both semites). Under zionism, the 'origin' of a person, whether Jewish or Palestinian, rather than any personal performance or capability, determines their position in Israeli society, in a way which cross-cuts, although enmeshed in, the class structure.

The relationship between racism and class is important in assessing anti-semitism as a racist ideology. Ethnic

minorities who suffer from racism are located at certain positions within the social structure. Racism is about power relations between collective groups, and is one of the most forceful means by which one group excludes another. However, these power relations do not necessarily coincide with economic relations, although often they are partly or fully enmeshed in them. Marxism has always had difficulty in dealing with non-economic social divisions: gender, ethnic and racial divisions have often been subjected to reductionist analyses which talk about 'false consciousness' covering up the 'real' class relations. But this is a false approach. A middle class Black person is still put in a different social structural position to a middle class English person in Britain. To a lesser extent, but just as real, this applies to other ethnic minorities, be they Irish or Jewish.

To those with a dogmatic reductionist approach it's difficult to accept that Jews in Britain today suffer discrimination. After all, no such discrimination can be found on the legal or economic levels (although the 1905 Alien Act was mostly directed against East European Jewish refugees). And this is the case in marked difference to many other ethnic minorities

Economically, although relatively less than in other western countries, the majority of British Jews can be found today in the middle class. The social and economic positions from which they are excluded (e.g. the high echelons of the aristocracy and the Church of England) are not very different from those suffered by Catholics. The only significant difference is in the economic sector which primarily deals with Arab oil (as a result of the confusion between being Jewish and Zionist by Arabs as well as Jews).

However, this is by no means the full extent of exclusions that Jews suffer in Britain. The history of antisemitism not only left its past victims and their children and *all* Jews hyper-sensitive to every hint of racism towards them, but also has made them a salient and obvious focus for every 'self-respecting' racist, (of the National Front or the British Movement), who looks for 'literature' with which to ground their racism towards *today's* primary victims — Black people.

Nor does economic upward mobility give Jews any respite. In the early part of this century in East London, they, like other groups of migrant labourers, were seen as competing for and pressurising scarce resources of work, housing, education etc. But, as their economic position generally improved, another antisemitic ideology prevailed. This was the one promoted by the Nazis, which in different forms (Shakespeare's Shylock etc.) has existed much longer in Europe and is related to the socio-economic caste role Jews have traditionally performed in pre-capitalist Europe — the economy of money. This tradition well suited the development of modern antisemitism with its conspiracy theories and the 'Jews as a

cancer in the body of Europe'. So economic affluence is not enough to assuage Jewish fears or make them immune to persecution. For that we need an anti-racist ideology which will not regard economic exploitation as the only, or even most significant, criterion for the existence of racism.

Beyond the structural level, on the interpersonal one, the traditional leftist one-dimensional view of racism (i.e. that it exists only in an economic context) has created another gap. In this society where only one culture dominates and is perceived as natural, it is a struggle to make a truly pluralist cultural system. Most personal accounts of antisemitism by Jewish feminists relate to the sort of 'liberal antisemitism' which negates and denies their experience. The 'Black is Beautiful' struggle was launched in that context. As the middle class is traditionally much more closely controlled by the dominant culture than lower and working classes, such cultural struggles will have very subtle parameters — also less chance of overall success. But they are still valid struggles.

### Anti-Zionism, anti-racism and anti-imperialism

One more central dimension has to be added to this analysis. That is, the way the antizionist struggle has been linked in the current debate to anti-imperialist struggles and the way the latter are linked to anti-racist struggles.

The Black Power movement, and the Black feminist movement after it, have received a lot of inspiration from the anti-imperialist struggles of the third world in general and Africa in particular. Struggles for independence

and liberation have not been only economic (which was the level at which Marxists originally defined imperialism). In fact very often the economic dimension is relatively marginal. Often the main issue is to establish political and territorial independence for the national group (mostly composed of several conflicting ethnic groups). The imperialist superpowers are perceived not only as exploiters, but as foreigners (White Europeans, Asians, Greeks, Jews) who have come from the outside to colonise and/or exploit the people. A primary force in anti-imperialist mobilisation has been, therefore, nationalism rather than, or in addition to, socialism/universalism. Likewise, the message of the Black power movement has always been, to a certain degree at least, exclusive, i.e. redefining the boundaries of the ethnic group in powerful terms rather than fighting to abolish them altogether. This has been a very effective strategy for Black people in their anti-racist struggles but it poses problems of solidarity when they see people outside the boundaries of the group also claiming to be victims (rather than only practitioners) of racism, as is the case with middle class Jews or African Asians.

Another question is that of the nature of international solidarity with anti-imperialist struggles. All too often, anyone identified as 'anti-imperialist' is treated automatically as having progressive politics. A somewhat extreme example occurred in the 1983 International Women's Day conference at London's County Hall when a raging debate broke out as to whether or not Iran's Khomeini is a genuine anti-imperialist. The assumption was that if he is, then he is a 'goodie'. Well, I claim that Khomeini is genuinely anti-west and anti-imperialist, but that he is very reactionary with it.

International solidarity with liberation struggles should not stop us from being critical when, all too often, they operate class, ethnic and sexual oppression under anti-imperialist labels. Too many progressive forces in the third world fall victims to the non-critical support of 'national front' organisations by the international left.

These general points have specific importance when related to the debate concerning zionism, first of all because zionism, for most of its history, succeeded in getting international support from the labour movement because it presented itself as a national liberation movement.

The truth is that, even on its own terms, to see zionism as a national liberation movement for Jews all over the world is to very much stretch the point. Only a minority of Jews live in Israel; only an accidental British victory in North Africa prevented the Nazis from exterminating the Jews in Palestine, and some argue that zionism has only succeeded in establishing a large armed ghetto instead of smaller non-armed ones, for which the human, political and economic price to the Jews themselves, not to mention the

Palestinians, is absolutely unjustifiable.

Secondly, as the fights within the Fatah in the last year show clearly, internal contradictions and wrong ideologies and policies exist also among the Palestinians, although of course, as a dispossessed and exploited people, living under occupation or as refugees persecuted also by their host countries, very few peoples in the world have such a claim for international solidarity and support.

The role Israel has played in relation to the Palestinians — their dispossessor, occupier, exploiter and even exterminator — does not make it *automatically* the representative or even the puppet of imperialism in the area. It has been a political movement with its own goals. Objectively, its goals do put it in a united front most of the time with the imperial power dominant in the area at the time. Establishing the exclusive Jewish state meant dispossessing and excluding the Palestinians, thus setting up a situation of inherent confrontation, for which Israel needs constant backing from external imperialists. For these imperialists, an ally like Israel is very useful, as the alliance does not depend on a specific regime or small elite but is secure as long as Israel is zionist. Still, this does not mean, as we have just seen in Lebanon, that in every situation Israel's interests are the same as those of the USA.

This is not just an academic point, but has political significance. There now exists in the Middle East an Israeli national group: formed artificially by the zionist movement but existing nevertheless. Any socialist solution of the Middle East conflict has to take it into account, not ascribe to it the status of a foreign imperialist body. Israeli Jews, especially those from Europe, have no 'homeland' to go back to, and even the middle class element would find it harder and harder to migrate as refugees, with the tightening up internationally of immigration laws.

### The antisemitism, anti-Zionism, anti-racism and feminism debate

It might be useful, at this point, to summarise my main arguments vis-a-vis the antisemitism/antizionism/anti-racism debate. I have argued:

- (a) That antizionism is not a cover for antisemitism, although it can be, and sometimes has been, used in that way; support or rejection of zionism does not in itself predict whether or not a person is antisemitic.
- (b) That antizionism is a valid political position, not only because of Zionism's dispossession, oppression and exploitation of the Palestinians, but also because it inherently shares racist assumptions with antisemitism (and classical orthodox Judaism) about the eternal unbridgeable gap between Jews and non-Jews.
- (c) That antisemitism is a form of racism, even though it is not directed against Black people or primarily against lower economic classes. Racist oppression can have various forms and

Refugees east . . .





... from Palestine

intensities in its exclusions and exploitations. Racism against middle class minorities (Jews and others) can take the elusive form of denial of differences in being.

(d) That although antisemitism is not dominant in contemporary British racism, Jews are still vulnerable to it because historically it has been the model for modern racism.

(e) That solidarity with liberation struggles is imperative; that keeping a critical perspective of the politics of the oppressed is also imperative.

Well, at this point, readers might ask what such an article is doing in a feminist magazine! In marked contrast to most of the contributions on this subject which have appeared in *SR*, I haven't specifically related it to women's struggles or experiences. Does this put my arguments beyond the pale of a feminist debate?

My answer, of course, is no. Racism, zionism, anti-semitism and anti-imperialism are ideologies and movements which have deeply affected the lives of many women in Britain, either directly or as part of solidarity activity which involved them emotionally. Anyone present in any of the feminist forums on these questions could not but be struck by the intensity with which they have been debated, shouted, quarreled about. One of the most striking features of these debates, however, besides the fact that they made many women very upset, has been its deadlock.

In my opinion, one of the major factors contributing to this has been the way each faction has clung to the medium of personal experience as the justification of their position, without being able to transcend their own perspective, and go into dimensions of the debate in which they had no personal stake. My writing of this article is in critical reaction to that.

Taking personal experience into account is an organic part of feminist philosophy and practice. It is vitally important for examining 'the personal is political' and for consciousness raising in groups. However, it is not without its problems. If done uncritically, it can develop extreme relativisation — there is no valid criterion from which to judge between the different perspectives developed by women who have undergone different personal experiences. This is of course totally opposite to the original intention of using personal experience in consciousness raising, to induce general truths about the condition of women.

It could work in consciousness raising groups, because women there usually came from similar class and ethnic backgrounds. But it cannot work when the experiences are of women there usually came from similar class and ethnic backgrounds. But it cannot work when the experiences are of women who come not only from different, but, also *conflicting*, groups and classes. The fact that this is not clear to many participants in the 'Zionism'

debate is because of another, even more basic, automatic (though it should not be), assumption of the feminist movement, concerning the notion of 'sisterhood'. This notion assumes that all women have, or would have (if they did not have false consciousness) the same political interests, as their basic position in society is the same. Again, this is very problematic. There exist real divisions and relations of oppression and exploitation among women, and notions of automatic sisterhood are at best misleading.

Recognising the internal divisions among women and the complexity of the issues involved does not necessarily have to paralyse us politically, even if it means using analytic and ideological language as a bridge between the personal and the political, without forgetting the insights that analysis of personal experience has given us.

The most important insight the feminist movement has brought to the Left is the recognition that such complexities are inherent to most situations, (the exploited male workers go home and oppress their wives . . .). We should not forget this, but continue to struggle against women's oppression and against workers' exploitation; against Palestinian oppression and against anti-semitism; to express solidarity with liberation struggles in the Third World without losing a critical perspective; to be active on a local level without losing international and historical perspectives.

I know it is easier said than done. So what?

#### Footnotes

1. Interested readers can look up books such as: N Weinstock, *Zionism: a false Messiah*, Ink Print, London 1979; M Rodinson, *Israel: a colonial settler state*, Pathfinder, NY 1973; or U Davis, A Maek & N Yuval-Davis (eds), *Israel and the Palestinians*, Ithaca Press, London 1975.
2. Read, for example, I Shahak articles in *Khamsin*, nos 8-9, and *Feminist Review* 4 'The bearers of the collective: women and religious legislation in Israel', and the *Change* booklet on Israeli women and men.
3. Read, for example, A Bober (ed.), *The Other Israel*, Doubleday, 1970; S Jirys, *The Arabs in Israel*, Inst. of Palestine studies, Beirut, 1968; U Davis, *Israel, Utopia incorporated*, Zed Press, London 1977.
4. Forged documents, originally distributed by the Russian tsarist secret police in which it's supposedly revealed how the Jews conspire to take over the world. Although after WW2 they virtually disappeared from Europe, it seems that during the 50s they unfortunately found their way to Arab countries and were used as part of the anti-Israeli propaganda machine.
5. After the French revolution Jews gradually received full citizenship rights in all Western European countries which substituted their special legal status in feudal times.
6. Asian journal appearing in London in English.
7. For reasons of space I cannot give an elaborate analysis of this complicated issue and shall only state several central points. For more detail see the paper I wrote with F. Anthias in *Feminist Review* 17, 'Contextualizing feminism: class, ethnic and gender divisions'.