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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 antiracism and feminist struggles. For me, an antizionist Israeli Jewish woman, living in England and active in antiracist-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 begun on in the socialist movement in one way or another since the beginning of the century and in its latest form since 1987. I think that the way it has been conducted within the women's movement has illuminated several problems which are endemic in 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 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, Israelisation 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 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. This was the legal and political reality even before it occupied the West Bank, the Golan Heights and lately parts of Lebanon, where the presence 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 of the emancipation 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 exploited 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’. 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). 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. A previous example is 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 have been 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 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 working class.

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 Woids, 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 antisemitic 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).

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 to an international 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 ‘Israeli’ origin’, even if they have never been there, or have relatives who have, as well as the fact that 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 on 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 Jewish state (and calls for it to become a state which represents only 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 or to being religious — what does it then, you 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 Isaac 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 on colour who defined the whole debate as a ‘white women’s issue’. The implication is that Jewish women and people—even Palestinian women—are not black, cannot suffer from racism. This is an isolated response. It expresses a widely held...
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.

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.

Racial 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 combinable 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 targeted 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 anti-Semitic 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 is difficult to accept that Jews in Britain today suffer discrimination. After all, much 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 anti-Semitism not only left its mark on victims and their children and all Jews growing up in this society and forced to be anti-Semitic even to every hint of racism towards them, but has also 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 anti-Semitic 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 anti-Semitism with its conspiracy theories and the 'Jews as a
and liberation have not been only economic (which was the level at which Marxists originally defined imperialism). In fact very few economic dimensions 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 imperialists in this case are perceived not only as exploiters, but as foreigners (White Europeans, Asians, Greeks, Jews) who have come from the outside to colonize and/or exploit the people. As a primary incentive in anti-imperialist mobilisation has been, therefore, nationalism rather than, 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 power 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 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 'good' one. Well, I claim that Khomeini is genuinely anti-western 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 world fall victims to the non-critical support of 'nationalist 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 labor movement because it operated 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 fighting within the PLO in the last year showed, even internal contradictions and wrong ideologies and policies exist also among the Palestinians, although of course, as a disposessed and exploited people, living under occupation or as refugees persecuted also by the two 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 adminstrator - 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 are to put 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 disposing 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 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 so much to 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 anti-semitism, anti-Zionism, anti-racism and femininity debate

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

(a) That anti-Zionism is not a cover for anti-semitism, 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 anti-semitic.

(b) That anti-Zionism 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 anti-semitism and classical orthodoxy/Judaism about the eternal unbridgeable gap between Jews and non-Jews.

(c) That anti-semitism is a form of racism, even though it is not directed against Black people or primarily against lower economic classes. Racism oppression can take various forms and
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.

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