

**Reframing Anti-Semitism: Alternative Jewish Perspectives**, Jewish Voice for Peace, eds. Oakland California, 2004. 92 pages. \$9.00, paperback.

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Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) is said to be the largest American Jewish peace organization; its newsletter boasts more than 7,000 subscribers. This size and reach underscores the often overlooked fact that Jewish opinion in America is not monolithic. Debate and dissent are core Jewish values in a longstanding tradition of social justice and humanitarianism. This collection of essays by JVP authors, *Reframing Anti-Semitism: Alternative Jewish Perspectives*, reveals perspectives on U.S. policy, Israel, Arab Jews, Zionism and anti-Semitism that are at variance with the American Jewish establishment. They offer critical discussion of American policy toward the Middle East and practices in Israel toward the Palestinians and Arab Jews and even Zionism itself.

In the introduction, co-editors Henri Picciotto and Mitchell Plitnick preemptively lay out a resounding denial of the accusation that criticism of Israel or Zionism is “antisemitic”:

[S]ome have equated all criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, while some anti-Semites have used the Palestinian cause to mask their hatred of Jews. Nevertheless, we refuse to get stuck: drawing our inspiration from Jewish tradition, we work for peace, social justice and human rights, even if our stance is unpopular in some circles... (p.ii).

Plitnick opens the book with “Reclaiming the Struggle against Anti-Semitism,” which examines the history and development of the term. He begins with the nineteenth century German linguist Wilhelm Marr, who invented the term “Semitic” to serve as a new anti-Jewish epithet purportedly based on racial characteristics. The term itself refers to a group of languages that includes Arabic and Hebrew, and Marr found that he could use this obscure linguistic reference to improve upon the current term of opprobrium, *Judenhass* (hatred of Jews).

The Holocaust, says Plitnick, is the ultimate expression of Marr’s racial anti-Jewishness, particularly because it was so different from the *religious* anti-Jewishness that characterized life in Christian Europe:

[The] Holocaust represented the ultimate betrayal of Jewish hopes that the modern, secular ideologies of socialism, communism and liberalism would at last free us from centuries of persecution. It convinced many Jews that we would always be at risk; that at any moment, no matter how good things seemed, the pogroms and exile would start all over again, and that the world does, and would always, hate us (p. 3).

Plitnick then examines antisemitism in the United States, beginning with its relationship to white supremacist groups such as the KKK, neo-Nazi groups and Christian identity groups, which also wage campaigns against women, gays and people of color. He also

discusses *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Russian Czarist-era forgery purporting to detail a Jewish/Masonic plot for global domination. This discredited propaganda tract is still being circulated today.

The question of the existence of antisemitism in the U.S. antiwar movement developed because pro-Israel Jews virtually erased the distinction between antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israel and the occupation. The question of antisemitism hinges on what role, if any, the Israel lobby plays in supporting the war on Iraq. As Noam Chomsky and Stephen Zunes have argued, the United States is pursuing its own strategic interests; the pro-Israel lobby is not “pulling the strings.” On the other hand, Alfred Lilienthal and Edward Tivnan argue that the Israel lobby and AIPAC are primary forces driving U.S. Middle East policy. Plitnick clearly sides with Chomsky and Zunes and states that blaming the pro-Israel lobby is harmful to the antiwar movement and morally repugnant:

... American foreign policy in the Middle East has remained remarkably consistent since the end of the 1967 war, which was well before AIPAC had grown its power. Israel’s position as a steadfast ally of the United States has been a centrepiece of American foreign-policy formation since that time. However, as more attention has been paid to the Middle East since September 11, 2001, the idea that “the Jews” are pulling the strings on American policy has gained more currency. Far easier than trying to take on the behemoth that is the American Government, the Christian Right, and the arms industry, as well as decades of entrenched policy, this view targets the relatively small group that has served as a mouthpiece for so many other forces. The forces that motivate the ill-advised and often immoral American policy in Israel/Palestine are complicated. A Jewish conspiracy is much simpler (p. 5).

Plitnick claims the issue of antisemitism in the Arab world is more complicated because Arabs have little reason to distinguish the actions of the Israeli government, of which they see only the very worst, from those of Jewish people, who are purportedly represented by the Jewish state. The problem is compounded in the United States by real antisemites like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who combine an end-of-days vision — which will see all Jews converted or destroyed — with fanatical support for Israel:

[T]his branch of right-wing Christianity is the source of much of the power of the incorrectly named “Jewish lobby.” The Christian right is what gives pro-Israel lobbying its voter power, generates stacks of letters to representatives, and pressures editorial boards with potential loss of circulation. There just aren’t enough Jews on the planet to have that kind of impact; and, anti-Jewish rhetoric notwithstanding, the greatest concentration of power continues to rest in the same hands it has for centuries (pp. 8-9).

The second and third essays examine the lengths to which Zionist organizations will go to suppress informed dissent. Cecilie Surasky’s “In Search of Anti-Semitism at the World Social Forum” focuses largely on the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s (SWC) defamation of the Jewish Voice for Peace and other NGOs as representatives of “the new anti-Semitism” and a “dangerous new trend on the left.” This theme was generally parroted in the mainstream American press. As Surasky notes, “Upon closer reading, most of these

accounts make little if any distinction at all between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel, or between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.”

Surasky continues,

The SWC is like many other mainstream Jewish organizations in the United States that have expanded their mission from fighting the oppression of Jews by others to attempting to silence critics *including other Jews* of Israel’s human- rights record. These organizations’ new role as arbiters of acceptable opinion is a far cry from their proud past. And it is ironic, given the spirited debate about Israel’s occupation that takes place in Israel but apparently is unacceptable in the rest of the world (p. 17).

Judith Butler’s, essay, “No, It’s Not Anti-Semitic,” is a powerful indictment of how defenders of the “official” views on Israel and Zionism use “anti-Semitism” to demonize critics. Butler takes direct aim at Harvard University president Laurence Summers, who equates criticism of Israel with antisemitism and condemns academics who advocate South Africa-style divestment from Israel: “Profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities. Serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent” (p. 21).

Butler shows that Summers hypocritically used the charge of antisemitism to stifle public criticism of Israel, even though he explicitly condemned censorship:

[He said] the only antidote to dangerous ideas is strong alternatives vigorously advocated, [but] how does one vigorously advocate the idea that the Israeli occupation is brutal and wrong, and Palestinian self-determination a necessary good, if the voicing of those views calls down the charge of anti-Semitism? If the charge of anti-Semitism is used to defend Israel at all costs, then its power when used against those who do discriminate against Jews “who do violence to synagogues in Europe, wave Nazi flags or support anti-Semitic organizations” is radically diluted (p. 27).

In fact, she notes, by equating Zionism with Jewishness, Summers employed a typical anti-Semitic tactic:

One aspect of anti-Semitism or, indeed, of any form of racism, is that an entire people is falsely and summarily equated with a particular position, view or disposition. To say that all Jews hold a general view in Israel or are adequately represented by Israel or, conversely, that the acts of Israel, the state, adequately stand for the acts of all Jews, is to conflate Jews with Israel and, thereby, to commit an anti-Semitic reduction of Jewishness (p. 35).

Butler was one of 3,700 American Jews to sign an open letter opposing the Israeli occupation. She calls for rethinking of the Jewish right of return and for fair distribution of water and medicine to Palestinians and the relocation of land.

Existential questions of anti-Semitism concern the next two essays, “What is Anti-Semitism and Does It Still Exist?” by Terry Fletcher, and “Bogus Charges,” by Henri Picciotto. Fletcher recounts her attempt to rediscover and reclaim her Jewish identity from her assimilationist upbringing. It was when she asserted her identity with people who

did not know she was Jewish that she encountered indifference and hostility toward her Jewishness: “Mainstream American culture continues to be dominated by Protestant Christians, making my culture invisible and marginalized” (pp. 39-40).

Fletcher distinguishes anti-Semitism from other forms of oppression because its purpose is not to keep Jews at the bottom of society, but to set them up as scapegoats for those who are really responsible for society’s ills:

[W]hat would U.S. policy look like were it not for AIPAC? Probably like U.S. policy in Central America, Colombia, Chile, the Philippines, Vietnam and Cuba. Only when it comes to the Middle East do many believe that the cause is not U.S. attempts at world domination, but the influence of a lobby. U.S. policy on Israel/Palestine is not an anomaly (p. 41).

“Bogus Charges” refers to the reflexive accusation of “anti-Semitism” at the slightest hint of criticism of Israel. Picciotto describes, for example, condemnations of Israel during anti-Iraq War demonstrations. Charging anti-Semitism ignores the fact that there is a profound link between U.S. support for the Israeli government and the U.S. war in Iraq. Another bogus charge concerns the idea that one may not criticize Israel without simultaneously criticizing other countries that have committed atrocities:

There are many reasons for people to focus on Israeli wrongdoings.... [A]ll Americans have a right to question how our foreign-aid dollars are spent. U.S. military aid to Israel is by far the largest given to any country. These billions of dollars a year make us accomplices to the illegal, immoral and ultimately self-destructive occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem (pp. 46-47).

The most salient discussion concerns the convergence of Israeli and U.S. interests in the occupation of Palestine and Iraq. Picciotto cautions against blanket accusations against Jews in regard to the Iraq War and that to only blame “the Jews” for the war is a classical antisemitic statement. He also sets out the JVC as a model for Zionist and anti-Zionist groups looking to cooperate to promote peace in the Middle East.

Essayist Laurie Polster, in “Discrimination, Racism and Anti-Semitism in Our Community,” argues that people should be outraged by any attacks of intolerance and condemns the indifference to the plight of European Jews from the mid-1930s to 1948. Polster addresses both the concern in the American-Jewish community about antisemitism and another one:

If one travels throughout Israel today, it is impossible not to notice, unless you cannot read Hebrew, numerous...graffiti which read: “Death to the Arabs,” and “Kill the Arabs”....One can only imagine the outcry from...Jewish leaders if graffiti were emblazoned across communities throughout America (or anywhere else in the world for that matter) with the words “Death to the Jews,” and “Kill all Jews” (pp. 52-53).

Since Zionism was a response to European Christian antisemitism, it was primarily a European Jewish movement. Historically, Jews living in Arab countries before 1948 were

for the most part secure in their respective communities, integrated into the prevailing culture and societies, with little or no interest in immigration to Palestine. Their centuries-old longing for a return to Zion was a cultural/religious desire and not a nationalist movement. That many second- and third-generation Mizrahi Jews have become subsequent supporters of right-wing Likud policies needs to be viewed as an anti-establishment vote, a legacy of total rejection by the Ashkenazi Labor party, which actually represents the ruling oligarchy (p. 54).

Polster proceeds to discuss discrimination and mistreatment of Arab Jews in Israel and the 1971 rise of the Israeli Black Panthers, a protest movement of these disenfranchised Arab Jews.

Overt racism against Arabs is endemic to Israeli, and by extension Diaspora Jewish society. Only when worldwide Jewry acknowledges, addresses and redresses its own racism will it establish itself a place of moral integrity within the world community to effectively challenge and condemn the ongoing legacy of anti-Semitism and to prevent its resurgence (p. 57).

Penny Rosenwasser's "Historical U.S. Anti-Semitism, the Invisible Oppression: Stereotyping, Scapegoating, Discounting" is an important examination of antisemitism in America. She discusses the racism against Jews in textbooks in the 1800s, the influence of the antisemitic Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s, and aviation hero Charles Lindbergh's attack on Jews over their "reputed" control of the media and motion picture industry. Rosenwasser also cites Rabbi Michael Lerner's warning that antisemitism is most to be feared from the conservative Christian Right, not from the Left.

Near her conclusion, Rosenwasser presents the following thought:

Just as anti-Semitism has been rising, anti-Arab racism inside Israel is rising as well, just as racism in this country has exploded against Muslims and people of Arab descent since 9/11. As Jews with a proud heritage of social justice we cannot let ourselves take comfort in the badge of victimization: when we target anti-Semitism, we must also target racism in this country and in Israel (p. 80).

In the last essay, "Is Criticizing Israel Anti-Semitic?" Chuck Sher discusses the disproportionate violence and targeted killings by what he describes as "the fourth largest army in the world" — more accurately, the fourth-most-powerful military — with state-of-the-art equipment (p. 84). Sher points out that the "current intifada started with Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Al-Aksa mosque with 1000 Israeli armed guards in tow." The predictable Palestinian demonstration in Jerusalem that followed the Israeli police could have easily dispersed using non-lethal means but did not. Instead, he reports: "They opened fire on the crowd, leaving at least six Palestinians dead and hundreds injured. During the next month, 125 Palestinians were killed, mostly unarmed demonstrators throwing rocks at well-defended Israeli soldiers — on Palestinian territory, by the way, not in Israel itself." Sher then notes, "Only after this had gone on for a month did the first suicide bombing in the current intifada occur. This is a crucial fact that belies the claim

that Israeli actions are in response to suicide bombings.” He further reports that Human Rights Watch at the time stated, “Israeli security forces have committed by far the most serious and systematic violations. We documented excessive and indiscriminate use of lethal force, arbitrary killings and collective punishment ...that far exceed any possible military necessity” (p. 85).

Sher’s conclusion:

In my opinion, Ariel Sharon’s actions in the past three years are well on the way to ruining the high moral standing of our people, developed over thousands of years. And he also bears the lion’s share of responsibility for the upswing in anti-Semitic incidents worldwide, as people become enraged at Israel’s tactics. Sticking your head in the sand and pretending that the world will not notice what Sharon is doing, is just not a realistic option. By trying to change Israel’s policies, I believe we are in fact fighting the root cause of increased anti-Semitism (p. 89).

This collection of essays is a significant contribution to the debate on antisemitism, the Palestinian issue and U.S. policy toward the Middle East. It clearly demonstrates that there is no monolithic Jewish position on Middle East issues. The book reminds us all to be on guard against antisemitism and all forms of racism, including anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism, but that the charge of antisemitism must not be used to suppress criticism of Israeli state practices or the political ideology of Zionism.