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# On Antisemitism and the Student Protests

When a sociologist abandons tools of rational inference and resorts to the unconscious

Azmi Bishara

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## Introduction

A friend sent me an article by an Israeli sociologist, Eva Illouz, whom I had not heard of before (I'm unfamiliar these days with the roster of Israeli academic celebrities embraced by Western academies). Published in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, her article answers the question of whether the university protests are antisemitic in the affirmative.<sup>1</sup> My response does not stem from any negative feelings towards this particular author, but, because her essay goes from mere incitement to an attempt to prove her allegation, it offers a fine opportunity to discuss the subject. The topic could have been broached without mentioning the source, but that would be inappropriate.

Illouz is astonished by the protests at American and European universities and the call to boycott Israel. She repeats throughout the article that the demonstrations also advocated the dismantlement of Israel, a slogan that, she says, was not heard in the face of 'belligerent Russian imperialism', 'genocidal Rwanda', or even apartheid South Africa itself. She does not distinguish the call to dismantle the apartheid regime in South Africa and Israel from the call to dismantle the habitat itself, in the sense of demolishing it on top of its people, as the Zionist movement did in Palestine and as Israel is currently doing in Gaza. Dismantling apartheid is indeed the demand of some demonstrators, since the regime that has taken root in Israel as a result of the occupation and settlement construction is in fact apartheid, and this demand is articulated in the same terms used by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa decades ago. But, *pace* Illouz, this slogan is not embraced by the student movement as a whole, which is calling for an end to the war and divestment from Israel.

She wonders how Israel's response to a terrorist operation of the magnitude of 7 October 2023, even if it means bombing a densely populated area resulting in civilian casualties, can be considered a genocide. It is not only students, but also many researchers, jurists, and human rights defenders, including myself, who believe that Israel is targeting civilians and civilian facilities in Gaza, including schools and universities, in order to exact revenge, teach Gazan society a lesson. This is with the purpose of deterring support for any armed resistance to the occupation in the future and, in making Gaza pay such a high price for Hamas operations, turning it against the movement. In the announcement on 20 May 2024 that the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court is seeking an arrest warrant for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, the prosecutor levelled charges of the deliberate starvation of civilians and war crimes. Human rights defenders who believe that the killing of civilians is not sufficient to reach the bar of genocide in Gaza (the civilian death toll is attributable to the density of the population and the fact that Hamas is entrenched in the tunnels among the civilian population), admit that Israel's systematic policy of starvation in Gaza *does* amount to genocide.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eva Illouz, 'Antisemitismus an den Universitäten: Euer Hass auf Juden', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 May 2024, accessed 19 May 2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/vetf26bv>.

<sup>2</sup> Aryeh Neier, 'Is Israel Committing Genocide?' *The New York Review*, 6 June 2024, accessed 16 May 2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yrnsdru6>.

Illouz assiduously avoids addressing the subject of the student protests, the war, the occupation and its atrocities, the injury of more than 80,000 people and the maiming of tens of thousands, the killing more than 35,000 Palestinians in seven months, in addition to nearly 10,000 missing, two-thirds of whom are women and children, and the destruction of the Gaza Strip to render it uninhabitable. Instead, she delves into the cultural unconscious of students in US universities, or the deep cultural layers of their psyche. These are students motivated by noble moral sentiments to show solidarity with a people on another continent and to oppose their country's direct involvement in that people's oppression. In this, they have no direct interest, in contrast to the US student movement against the war in Vietnam, which was also moral, but was motivated by other considerations as well – namely, that the war directly affected them and their families.

But for some reason, Illouz views student protests against the war in Vietnam as more authentic than the current protests rocking US universities. Since she cannot deny the morality of the student movement, she makes the claim that it is influenced by antisemitic aspects of Christianity that inhere in deep cultural layers of the unconscious. She cannot prove any manifestations of antisemitic expression in the student protests using rational tools, but the assumption of unconscious motives makes them unnecessary.

The author relies on methods employed by 'woke' leftists and liberals against manifestations of racism and sexism that may not be conscious, but express cultural layers built up over the history of a society that are latent in the individual's unconscious and are embodied in verbal expressions and social behaviours. If the methodological basis of Illouz's article is her research on emotions in politics, its use here says much about her academic work. There are many ways in which people deal with unconscious cultural biases. The younger generation, in particular, in their struggle with the previous generation, may be aware of, resist, and rebel against them. Or these biases may be repressed and find expression in a fanatic, metaphysical identification with what is being repressed, in the way that Christian Zionism identifies with Israel despite its origins being rooted in religious antisemitism.

There are many mechanisms for dealing with unconscious cultural layers other than being driven by them. When one is unconsciously influenced by latent ideas, these notions may exist in tension with one's moral attitudes, but a person may correct themselves after becoming aware of this thanks to their moral principles and mental capacities of discernment. In the case of antisemitism, the reminder to discern is nearly universally present. Antisemitism is virtually the sole form of racism which is punishable by law in European countries, and its social unacceptability is inculcated in schools and through literature, theatre, and cinema. A cultural consensus has crystallized against it and against the racial pseudoscience in which it was wrapped as religious antisemitism was secularized.

These students often do not hail from such a culture. The majority of them are not originally Europeans, and this culture is not as prevalent in the United States as in Europe. Many of the students are from the Global South, where the culture of Christian antisemitism, to which Illouz



devotes the bulk of her essay, is not widespread. On the contrary, it is a moral approach that impels these students to oppose all forms of racism, including antisemitism. Being well-aware that the students' motives are moral, Illouz concludes her essay attacking this unique moral movement with the following sentence: 'Morality has never been so against goodness.' In fact, immorality has never been so against goodness as in Gaza. Illouz could blame the students of being naïve and not understanding politics, thus harming the 'good' represented by the peace camp in Israel by their moral commitment (which, in her odd analysis, has been harmed by these demonstrations). In this case, however, her charge would be the naiveté of the students' noble moral motives, not unconscious antisemitism.

However, she cannot hide her own motives. She wants simultaneously to preserve Israel's privileges in the West despite everything it does in the occupied territories and to be counted among the peace camp in Israel. So, she wants to have it both ways. We have a sociologist who counts herself among the peace camp and yet considers student anti-war protests to be motivated by deep-seated Christian antisemitism originating in the crucifixion of Christ, despite the participation of young Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others in the protests. The so-called peace camp in Israel was nowhere to be seen in the months prior to these protests, fusing seamlessly with the tribe that was mobilized for vengeance. I will not analyse the deep cultural layers in Illouz's unconscious that motivate her to smear anti-war demonstrations as antisemitic, but will limit the discussion to what she explicitly writes.

## I. Why Don't They Demonstrate against Russia, China, and Iran?

When Illouz wonders disapprovingly at the outset of her essay when the students last demonstrated so fervently against the repressive Iranian regime and China's genocide against the Uighurs, I was reminded of those supporters of dictatorships in Arab countries during the Arab revolutions who asked why the protestors did not demonstrate against Israel and US policies in Palestine and in Iraq. It bears mentioning that the chief demand of the ongoing student protests is that their universities divest from Israel. Does Illouz wish the students would urge their universities to divest from Iran and call on the United States to withdraw its support of China? Students do not need to demonstrate against US policies in North Korea, Iran, China, or Russia because their country already pursues policies hostile to the regimes of these countries, taking concrete measures against them such as blockades and sanctions (Iran) and supporting their opponents in war (Ukraine against Russia). In contrast, the United States provides the Israeli occupation unconditional political support, money, and weapons. It not only does not take any action against Israel, but Israel occupies a privileged position in both the US and Europe. At the very least, Illouz certainly knows that among Israel's privileges in the West is academic cooperation, exchange, investments, and support for scientific research, and it is clear from her intense opposition to the student protests that she does not want to lose these privileges.

The author begins her argument with the assertion that there has been an ongoing 'debate' about whether the protests are antisemitic or not. The word 'debate' here is papering over an ugly reality. The students have been smeared by accusations of antisemitism, instrumentalized by the likes of Netanyahu and several ignorant, extremist US congressmen who have incited against them to delegitimize their movement, taken action to suppress it, distracted attention from the substance of the movement, and forced students to go on the defensive in the face of these false allegations. In fact, the demonstrations sparked a dialogue in universities about the justice of the Palestinian cause, whereas the accusation of antisemitism was levelled to disrupt rational and moral debate. In the past, Israel did not need to restrict freedom of expression to defend itself because its discourse and narrative on Palestine and the region enjoyed cultural hegemony in the United States and Europe. Now, however, it needs its democratic allies to restrict freedom of expression in the media and in universities to protect its no longer dominant narrative. Compliance must now be enforced.

## II. On Definitions

After deciding that the protesters are bathing in deep-seated antisemitic cultural biases, consciously or not, Illouz offers a bizarre definition of antisemitism. At the outset, she underscores her lack of expertise in the subject matter. If this were not a prelude to offering her own definition of antisemitism, I would have chalked it up to the humility of scholars. Only a researcher fully versed in the subject-matter would dare to define the phenomenon; non-specialists rely on existing definitions. Illouz, who by her own admission is neither a specialist nor a historian in this vast field, declares that this has led her to define antisemitism 'personally' (it seems that every non-specialist can choose the definition that suits them) as 'the theory that holds Jews responsible for the spilling of non-Jewish blood'. It is an odd definition from both the expert and lay perspective, custom made to suit her position on opponents of the current war. Since, by her lights, antisemitism is the claim that Jews – notably, the word is grammatically undefined – are responsible for killing non-Jews, how can one escape the antisemitic implications latent in the assertion that Jews are shedding non-Jewish blood in Gaza? Best watch what you say!

Illouz derives this definition from the Gospels, which hold Jews responsible for the ultimate crime of killing Christ (deicide), and she sees the spilling of blood as the thread running through all the antisemitic libels that spread throughout medieval Europe. But antisemitism became broader than this. It means hatred of Jews *because* they are Jews, an extreme hate that allows for no distinctions. This was a religious hatred that became a national hatred. It was also manipulated to steer class struggles towards the hatred of Jews as usurers or parasites (unproductive capital) who were responsible for economic crises, or who had stabbed the nation in the back in the First World War. As nationalist thought was ascendent in France, Germany, and elsewhere, Jews were seen as alien to the national body, and in the midst of the 19th century, racial theories of Jewishness were constructed to give the hatred of Jews pseudoscientific underpinnings.



### III. Arguments

1. Illouz considers hostility to Israel to be implicitly anti-Jewish. This is a strange argument. Historically, the enlightened among us and those once known as progressives, both Arab and Jew, sought to convince the average Palestinian to distinguish between Jews and Zionism and between Jews and Israel, and not to project their anger at Israel's actions on to Jews in general. But now we have a scholar saying the opposite: one should not distinguish Jews from Israel, and anyone who demonstrates against Israel is actually demonstrating against the Jews. Which of these ways of thinking is closer to antisemitism: her approach or the approach of those who distinguish Israel from Jews and reject such generalizations? While she advocates generalization, I had thought, naively it seems, that racism stands on stereotyping and generalization. The line of thinking that more closely resembles antisemitism is of course hers, not that of the students or other liberals and progressives, secular and religiously observant people, Arabs and Jews, Muslims and Christians who make a distinction between Jews and Israel. So yes, it is important that Jewish young people and professors are present in large numbers in the anti-war demonstrations, a fact that Illouz completely ignores and considers an absurd argument (a point I'll return to below).

In their resistance to French colonialism, Algerians made use of Islamic religious expressions to mobilize against their Christian colonizers, as did others. Does this mean they resisted them because they were Christians or because they were colonizers? Hostility to Israel is hostility to the occupation, and the conflict is a conflict between a people under occupation and an occupying state. In all conflicts around the world, tribalist generalizations (religious, national, or other) are used against the other side, and this is true of conflicts in Europe among Christian Europeans, between Muslim and Christian peoples, and between peoples who both identified as Buddhist. All peoples in conflict find negative qualities to express their difference and then generalize them against the enemy. This dynamic manifests overtly, not on the unconscious level in deep cultural layers. But since this dynamic is not readily apparent within the student anti-war movement, Illouz searches for it in the collective cultural unconscious.

2. Illouz asserts that one of the most important manifestations of antisemitism is the way it fuels the hatred of Jews by constructing them in the consciousness as 'a threat to the moral order'. Accordingly, she argues that when Jews are constituted as a dangerous entity that sheds blood, disregards laws, and wreaks havoc, antisemitism becomes the party of humanity, morality, order, and law. Bloodshed, disregard of laws, and destruction is clearly what Israel is currently carrying out in Gaza, but Illouz has structured these actions as part of the antisemitic portrayal of Jews. Israel can kill, ignore laws, and destroy – and, in fact, it is – but saying so opens one up to the charge of antisemitism because it replicates this structure. It is no surprise, Illouz asserts, that young demonstrators around the globe who level such charges against Israel do not consider themselves antisemites, but what they express is nevertheless latent antisemitism. In my view, they rightly do not consider themselves antisemitic,



and yes this is not surprising, because they are not levelling these charges against the Jews. The basis of racism is the generalization of negative qualities, not the type of accusation that is made.

3. The writer claims that the protestors deny Israel's right to exist, 'a right that is not denied to any other people on earth' – she seems to have forgotten the Palestinians and other peoples who have long suffered under colonialism – because they are passionately defending the survival of the world that is threatened by this 'singularly criminal' state. In fact, the students do not want to 'save the world from this criminal state', but rather to save the Palestinian people (and Israelis too) from the occupation, and so they urge their countries not to support it at taxpayer expense. 'No other violence incurs the degree of moral outrage that Israel does,' the author writes. Yet the exact opposite is true: Israel has enjoyed a degree of tolerance like no other occupation, including for its repeated breaches of international law.

Demonstrations against Israel are decades overdue, and what is unique is how long they have taken to erupt. Otherwise, Illouz would not be so surprised now. Astonishingly, she fails to see that the world has witnessed innumerable protests, against the war in Vietnam, against the Iraq war, against the apartheid regime in South Africa, against France's policy in Algeria, against everything that Western states have been complicit in *except* the question of Palestine. The uniqueness of the Palestinian cause is that, until now, it has never been the object of widespread protest. There are many reasons for this, one of which is doubtlessly the Jewish question and its complexities in the West, and the way that Israel has helped Western states assuage their guilt by projecting it onto Arabs and Palestinians.

4. 'The whole thing, in my opinion, is that deep in Western culture lies the idea that Jews threaten the world,' Illouz writes. She says that this becomes apparent when the Israeli state 'sometimes' violates the law, like many other states around the world. Israel has thus breached international law, she admits, but nevertheless she finds it hard to believe that the United States or other countries in the free world would have behaved differently had they been subjected to what Israel has. In other words, in its war on Gaza, Israel is not acting in an exceptional way that would warrant protests against it. What is happening, according to her, is quite normal, and if you accuse Israel of committing crimes, you are repeating, consciously or not, the antisemitic idea that Jews are criminals who threaten the moral order. Woe to those who criticize Israel on moral grounds, for they expose themselves to the analysis of an Israeli sociologist who views their moral position as an expression of ideas deeply buried in the unconscious that make Jews a threat to the prevailing moral order.

5. The student demonstrators accuse the government of Israel and those in its camp specifically of committing crimes and even atrocities against humanity; they do not direct this charge at all Jews. But since Jews believe that Israel is part of their identity, according to surveys cited by Illouz – and this is expected – those who attack Israel are attacking them. This is metaphysics and not rational inference. The student protestors in US and European universities hail from multiple religions and ethnicities, and they include both secular and religious people. They are demonstrating against



their governments and their policies, and, as in the 1960s, for some, the protests may be a kind of generational rebellion. Only two groups are also protesting for reasons of identity: students of Palestinian origin who, through the demonstrations, affirm their identity and solidarity with their people, and Jews who, because of the religious connection between them and Israel, want to show that Israel does not represent their identity. The fact that there is a relationship of identity between adherents of Judaism and Israel does not mean that Jews are the target when Israel is attacked. Even a person who does feel defensive when Israel is attacked for war crimes and genocide possesses rational and emotional tools to deal with this. One of these is to identify with Israel, as Illouz does, but there are other tools as well. A person might stake out a moral position on Israeli policies that embarrass him because of his sense of identification or sever his emotional attachment to Israel, among other options. In any case, it cannot be inferred from a subjective link between Jews and Israel, or lack thereof, that anyone who attacks Israel is attacking Jews.

6. Finally, Illouz argues that the presence of Jews in the demonstrations is meaningless. Everyone in the Black Lives Matter movement understands that there are Black people who persecute other Blacks or have preconceived ideas about them. Similarly, many Jews are aware that Jews took part in the suppression of Jews in the Soviet Union. I would simply add here that the students know, too, that there are Palestinians who collaborate with the occupation and Arabs and Muslims who do not hesitate to suppress anti-war protests, among them Arab rulers. Many Jews know that there are Jews in Israel who deceive and oppress other Jews and are sacrificing them in this war. Illouz most closely resembles these people when she accuses young people who oppose the war, including Jews, of antisemitism.