

Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief

By Greg Philo, Mike Berry, Justin Schlosberg, Antony Lerman and David Miller,
Pluto Press 2019

Review by Mica Nava

Forthcoming in *Theory and Struggle*, Vol 122 (2020) Liverpool University Press Online.

This is an important and valuable book which tracks the origins and outcomes of the accusations and perceptions that the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn is 'riddled' with antisemitism and is 'institutionally antisemitic'. How did this process happen? When did it start? What part did the media play? How did the notorious IHRA working definition of antisemitism feed into the crisis? Is antisemitism more prevalent in the Labour Party than elsewhere? These are among the questions that are addressed.

The book is written for people who are not quite clear or want to be reminded how the antisemitism crisis emerged and has been sustained over the last few years. Written by five academics with established publication records about distortions and putative 'balance' in the news media,¹ *Bad News for Labour* is rooted in a broadly left position. However, unlike the perpetrators of the allegations about antisemitism, the authors of this book present detailed evidence from both sides about what they claim has been a carefully managed campaign of 'disinformation' designed to discredit Corbyn and the left wing of the Labour Party.

Their starting point is to ask how members of the public consulted in a specially conducted poll and in focus groups in 2019 could believe that about a third of Labour Party members had been reported for antisemitism when in reality the figure was less than 0.1%. How could public belief be so inaccurate? Based on an examination of eight national newspapers and the BBC between June 2015 and March 2019, the authors argue that a good deal of the responsibility must be attributed to the media. During that time there were an astonishing five and a half thousand stories on the subject, almost all of which claimed, with little or no supporting evidence, that Corbyn and the Labour Party were antisemitic.

¹ See for example: Philo Greg and Berry, Mike (2007) *More Bad News from Israel*, Pluto Press; Schlosberg, Justin and Laker, Laura (2018) *Labour, Antisemitism and the News: a Disinformation Paradigm*, Media Reform Coalition; Lerman, Antony (20012) *The Making and Unmaking of a Zionist*, Pluto Press; Miller, David (2018) *Russia, Novichok and the long tradition of British government misinformation*, Open Democracy.

The book goes on to explore why the Party was so relatively ineffective in managing these largely unsubstantiated allegations. How could such an 'extraordinary public relations disaster' have happened? 'What were the political arguments, institutional divisions and policy decisions that made this crisis so intractable?'

The authors support the argument made by a number of left-wing critics that the accusations combined the interests of right-wing members of the LP who wanted to destabilise Corbyn with those of the Israeli government which feared the support for Palestinian rights by the left of the Labour Party and what they called 'the delegitimation' of the Israeli state. As Avi Shlaim (Israeli historian and Emeritus professor at the University of Oxford) put it:

The crisis in the Labour party was not primarily about anti-Semitism. It was part of a broader effort by a group of disgruntled Blairites and their allies outside the party to overthrow Jeremy Corbyn and reverse his progressive policies. In short, the crisis was manufactured to serve the ends of a right-wing faction within the labour party as well as those of the Israel lobby (Shlaim quoted in Philo et al, 2019:30).

But the general tendency of the mainstream media has been to disseminate the narrative of 'endemic' antisemitism in the party and ignore the views of critical opponents of that view, including those of Jewish Voice for Labour, a group inside the Labour Party which supports Jeremy Corbyn. For instance, right-wing Jewish Labour MP Margaret Hodge who called Corbyn a 'fucking racist and antisemite' was allocated numerous TV slots and column inches to repeat the gist of her slanderous accusations – especially in the Guardian and BBC -- whereas a letter to the Guardian from over 200 Jewish women disputing her allegations was not even published.

So, in sum, the dominant picture over the years since Corbyn's election has been that he and the Labour Party are antisemitic. This is not only as a result of media (mis)representation and framing – of the 'systematic reporting failures that privilege a particular ideological or political agenda' consistent with a 'disinformation paradigm', as Justin Schlosberg puts in his excellent chapter (2019:83). It is also in part, as Greg Philo and Mike Berry argue in theirs, because of the confusion and maladministration of the disciplinary procedures inside the Labour Party, attributable in part to a right-wing dominated executive committee, and also to a general lack of strategy and unity in the party about the ways in which to refute the accusations.

One of the pivotal concerns over the last two years has been with the controversial IHRA definition of antisemitism. The media have again played a major part in delimiting the boundaries of acceptable debate and in many cases of disseminating downright misinformation. Among the worst culprits has been the BBC which, for example, erroneously claimed on various occasions that the IHRA definition had been universally adopted and endorsed whereas in fact it had been adopted by a mere eight countries. All these instances are carefully documented and sourced in this valuable book which clearly tracks the skewed coverage of the issue.

In his chapter, Antony Lerman (former director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research) unpacks in great detail the distinct components and origins of the IHRA definition as well as its much-contested reception and adoption by some local councils and universities as well as by the Labour Party after being proposed as a way of dealing with the perceived antisemitism in the party. Most of the controversy centred not on the definition itself but on the acceptability or not of the ‘examples’, which accompanied the definition, some of which referred directly to Israel rather than Jews and were therefore considered unnecessary by the Labour Party but were promoted by Israel advocacy groups who insisted that criticisms of Zionism and the Israeli state were inevitably antisemitic.

The definition itself was also criticised by legal experts for its lack of precision. In the view of QC Sir Stephen Sedley, for example, the IHRA definition ‘fails the first test of any definition: it is indefinite’ (2019:131). Lerman’s extended discussion of the debate and the implications for free speech deserves close reading. Particularly important is his comparison between expressions of racism against BAME people and antisemitism. He points out that hate crime and ‘institutional racism’ is far more likely to be perpetrated against people of colour than against Jews. Moreover, although there is some antisemitism in the Labour Party – all agree on this --- it is about four times higher on the far right and among Tory voters than on the left. Lerman is also concerned about the impact on Palestinians of the adoption of the definition which effectively inhibits discussion of the discriminatory policies and territorial encroachment of the Israeli state and attempts to stifle Palestinian history and struggle for justice.

David Miller, in his chapter, illustrates how the IHRA definition can work in practice, in an academic setting, through a chilling account of its use to silence discussion about whether the state of Israel can be categorised as a ‘settler colonialist’ and ‘racist endeavour’ and to explore the difference between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. To do this Miller draws on his own experience of being denounced by students and the *Jewish Chronicle* to the Labour Party and his university management.

In their conclusion Berry and Philo argue for the development of better methods of countering antisemitism in the Labour Party and the crucial importance of *evidence*. The Labour Party should ‘refute the view that the party is “riddled” with antisemitism when the evidence suggests it is not’ (2019:177). They urge the party to establish an effective communications infrastructure and a well-resourced rebuttals unit. The party needs to improve its internal procedures and be able to provide stronger, more coherent and positive responses to the false accusations of the mainstream media – and to educate its members. Importantly, moreover, this is not just an issue for the Labour Party. The authors conclude by expressing their concerns about the growth not only of antisemitism, but of xenophobia, racism and fascism throughout Britain, Europe, the US and beyond. These are indeed troubling times.

An appendix provides an extended timeline (over 34 pages) of events and media reporting dating from the Labour Party leadership election in 2015 until 2019. For readers who want to have on record the chronological development and bibliographic detail of the miserable saga, this could be the most important part of the book. But I found being reminded of the relentlessly aggressive and mendacious accusations very depressing. The trouble with this

format is that it reproduces the allegations of antisemitism, but, because of its focus on the mainstream media, not much space is devoted to the refutations. So, for example, the responses of critical, online, independent, Corbyn-supporting websites, such as Canary, Skwawkbox, Jewish Voice for Labour and the Electronic Intifada, are mostly not cited. The film *WitchHunt*, which challenges the suspension from the party of Jackie Walker (who is both Jewish and black) on grounds of antisemitism, is not included in the index or bibliography. This means that the material in the timeline tends to endorse the allegations of antisemitism by reproducing them instead of providing material for the development and expression of counternarratives. It gives more space to the unevicenced allegations of the accusers than to the arguments made by the accused. I am sure this was not the intention of the authors, but unfortunately, this is one outcome. So, in sum, although this is an incredibly useful and significant book, it is somewhat flawed in my view by its adherence to a research format which concentrates principally on the distortions of mainstream media.

Mica Nava is emeritus professor of cultural studies at the University of East London and a member of Jewish Voice for Labour. Her publications include *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference*, Bloomsbury. Further information at <https://uel.academia.edu/MicaNava> .