

[COMMENTARY 52A, APRIL 2018]

REASONING – ANTI-SEMITISM AND POLITICAL SPACE

“Don’t play with that girl. She’s a Jew.”

Shortly afterwards my friend was on the Kindertransport to Britain.

Draft of a chapter for *Values, World Society and Modelling Yearbook 2018*

Overview. A mural alludes to an argument of a kind that led to the holocaust. It can be the case that sound arguments have bad consequences. Here however the argument is unsound. Unsound arguments can be challenged by appealing to the principles of valid reasoning. In the darkening days of the 1930s the philosopher Susan Stebbing wrote a book *Thinking to Some Purpose*.

The chapter starts with a discussion of reasoning. Unsound arguments can occur anywhere in society – politics, education, sport. For example Daniel Finkelstein’s Finktank column in The Times notes the arguments which are made in discussions about football and tests their validity using empirical evidence, statistics and mathematical models. Relevant also is an article I wrote some time ago with the title “strong statements about weak relationships” – denoted ‘SSWR’.

In March into April 2018 a news story ran about antisemitism in the UK Labour Party (an issue which had led to the Chakrabarti report in 2016), prompted by leader Jeremy Corbyn’s comments about a mural. Within two weeks there had been thirty-odd articles in The Times and The Observer.

This chapter focuses on just one of those – an article by Daniel Finkelstein: “Corbyn’s worldview is made for anti-Semites ... Hatred of colonialism, capitalism and Zionism are so intertwined in left-wing minds that distaste for Jews comes easily.” The main part of the article describes the argument the mural is making and then closely associates that argument with Jeremy Corbyn and those around him.

There are a number of arguments or worldviews in play here: M the argument of the mural, C the worldview of Corbyn, A the worldview of Corbyn’s associates, F the worldview of Finkelstein and F(M)

Finkelstein's portrayal of M. These are discussed in terms of the SSWR notion and in terms of models of political space and of the social structure of opinion.

A YouGov survey of Labour party members is analysed. Perception of Israel has a negative balance of -55%. A somewhat-unsophisticated one-dimensional 20-point Antisemitism Perception scale has people varying widely along the scale – with variation within and between groups.

Reasoning

I tend to believe that the gold standard for reasoning is to be found in the disciplines of philosophy, logic, mathematics, science and statistics. Ordinary language discussion can sometimes be flawed in terms of the criteria in these disciplines. Psychologists have identified several common ways in which people can reason wrongly.

Reasoning involves weaving together concepts, statements and arguments. Back in 1971 the first students started their studies at the Open University. They were studying 'at a distance' and it was vital that the teaching texts should contain clear and valid reasoning. At that time I was a member of a research group at the Open University looking at 'knowledge structures' and 'argumentative procedures'. I hope to apply some of that work in the present chapter.

We shall shortly be discussing an article by Daniel Finkelstein and it is relevant to note that, amongst other things, he writes the Fink Tank column in *The Times*. The rationale for his column is the same as the rationale for this chapter: people sometimes say things that cannot be justified by more careful reasoning.

In politics too people sometimes say things that cannot be justified by more careful reasoning. In the darkening days of the 1930s the philosopher Susan Stebbing wrote a book *Thinking to Some Purpose*:

"There is an urgent need to-day for the citizens of a democracy to think well. It is not enough to have freedom of the Press and parliamentary institutions. Our difficulties are due partly to our own stupidity, partly to the exploitation of that stupidity, and partly to our own prejudices and personal desires."¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Stebbing

Conspiracy theories provide spectacular examples of invalid reasoning, with David Aaronovitch's book *Voodoo Histories* providing a valuable discussion.²

Antisemitism and the UK Labour Party, March 2018

“The Labour Party is not overrun by antisemitism, Islamophobia or other forms of racism. Further, it is the party that initiated every single United Kingdom race equality law. However, as with wider society, there is too much clear evidence (going back some years) of minority hateful or ignorant attitudes and behaviours festering within a sometimes bitter incivility of discourse. This has no place in a modern democratic socialist party that puts equality, inclusion and human rights at its heart. Moreover, I have heard too many Jewish voices express concern that antisemitism has not been taken seriously enough in the Labour Party and broader Left for some years.”

(The Shami Chakrabarti Inquiry. Report. 30 June 2016.)³

The Shami Chakrabarti Inquiry had been set up by the Labour Party following concerns and a particular incident involving a remark by Ken Livingstone which led to his suspension from the party. From time to time concerns continued to be expressed. There was a recurrence of the concern and towards the end of March 2018 it became a major story.⁴ The Times had been criticising Corbyn on other grounds, namely his response to Russia, but then on March 23 a headline linked Corbyn and anti-Semites. The story unfolded over the next ten days or so with the Observer joining in and with over thirty news articles. See Table 1.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/03/david-aaronovitch-voodoo-histories>

³ The Shami Chakrabarti Inquiry. Report. 30 June 2016.)

<https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chakrabarti-Inquiry-Report-30June16.pdf>

⁴ Humphrys, John. “Antisemitism in Labour: how serious a problem?” *YouGov News*. March 29, 2018.

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2018/03/29/anti-semitism-labour-how-serious-problem/>

Table 1 Headlines about Corbyn and anti-Semites, March-April 2018

March

18 *Observer*. Corbyn's cross-eyed attitude towards the Kremlin doesn't inspire confidence. 45.

[Cartoon: Corbyn and Russia.] 46

19 Corbyn's drive for tolerance 'gave platform to extremists'. 2.

20 Labour's moderates have hit breaking point. With Corbyn's anti-western bias coming out in the open, many of his MPS have concluded they can't help make him PM. 21.

21 –

22 Hat-gate shows Labour has lost the plot. The cult of the Immaculate Corbyn means left-wing disciples will use any means to defend their leader, whatever he says. 29.

23 Corbyn in second Facebook group with antisemites. 10.

24 Corbyn apology over antisemitic mural. 16.

25 *Observer*. MPs round on Corbyn over antisemitism and Brexit. 6.

26 [cartoon about Corbyn and antisemitism, 27]

27 Antisemites will destroy Labour, senior MPS warn. Party veterans condemn Corbyn's failure to act. Jewish community protests in Westminster. 1, 2.

No more talk, Jewish leaders warn Corbyn. 10 Corbyn can't pretend he has only just noticed. The Labour leader refers to 'pockets' of antisemitism in his party but fails to say that for 30 years he was in them too. 27.

Corbyn and Israel. Letter. 28.

Corbyn and antisemitism. Labour has deep historical links with British Jewry. That tradition is traduced by a leader of dubious alliances and inflammatory remarks. 29.

29 Corbyn ally quits after Holocaust 'hoax' row. 1, 4.

Antisemitism demo MPs in sights for deselection. 4.

Corbynite left is hooked on conspiracy theories. The row over antisemitism shows how many Labour members have swallowed lies we thought we'd seen the back of. 25.

Labour and antisemitism. 28.

29 Corbyn ally quits after Holocaust 'hoax' row. pp1, 4

30 Corbyn is failing to tackle antisemitism, say his MPs. 8

[cartoon: Corbyn and antisemitism mural] 23.

31 Labour poll says antisemitism row is exaggerated. 8.

Local party meeting falsely linked Jewish group to Isis. 8.

Labour has been lost to fools and crackpots. My party is led by a man who prefers to entrench division on every occasion instead of searching for common ground. 27.

My Week. Jeremy Corbyn. [spoof by Hugo Rifkind.] 40.

April

1 *Observer*. Leading Jewish donor ditches Labour over antisemitism. Sir David Garrard voices dismay at party leadership's conduct. Top official quits NEC after criticism. Labour faces backlog of over 70 alleged cases. 1, 2.

The shame of antisemitism on the left has a long, malign history. 43

Only action, not words, can purge this evil. 44.

If Corbyn is not to appear a passenger in his own party, he must learn how to lead. 45.

2 Labour loses 17,000 members amid antisemitism anger. 1

Corbyn's inaction is like the 1930s, warns peer. Labour urged to speed up expulsion of antisemites. 5.

Corbyn cannot be trusted by the Jewish community. 22

[Cartoon: Corbyn saying "Perhaps I'm just out of my depth ..."]

3 Corbyn must denounce allies for antisemitism, says Beckett. 2

Five 'race hate' dossiers are handed to Labour. 2.

Labour's inaction over antisemitism. 24.

4 Corbyn defends joining in far-left group's Passover satire. 1.

Corbyn's Labour tainted for ever as anti-Semitic, says Jewish donor. 8.

Media friends on left remain loyal. 8.

[Cartoon: Corbyn on a perpetual banana skin.] 23.

Editorial: Enough is enough. Jeremy Corbyn's attendance at a meal with a Jewish group that shares his world view suggests he is not serious about tackling antisemitism in the Labour Party. 25.

The Finkelstein article

We now turn our attention to the Finkelstein article⁵, starting with its headline:

"Corbyn's worldview is made for antisemites."

An antisemite is someone who is antisemitic. What is the definition of antisemitic? Being antisemitic means being against Jews. Is antisemitism a binary or a continuous variable? There may be varying degrees of antisemitism. 'Against' may refer to 'hatred' or 'distaste'. One may be against all, all except a few, some or just a few Jews. Is one against Jews or against attributes of Jews? Is it about Jews or about Zionism or about Israel? These questions recur in the articles cited in Table 1.

⁵ Finkelstein, Daniel. "Corbyn's worldview is made for antisemites. Hatred of colonialism, capitalism and Zionism are so intertwined in left-wing minds that distaste for Jews comes easily." *The Times*, March 28, 2018: 27.

The phrase ‘is made for’ is not straightforward for me. I think it means something like ‘is likely to lead one to infer [an antisemitic view]’.

There is also a secondary sub-headline:

Hatred of colonialism, capitalism and Zionism are so intertwined in left-wing minds that distaste for Jews comes easily.”

The two headlines have the same abstract form:

A of B is related R to C

Table 2 portrays the corresponding parts of the two headlines: ‘Corbyn’s’, ‘in left-wing minds’; ‘worldview’, ‘hatred of colonialism, capitalism and Zionism’; ‘is made for’, ‘are so intertwined that ... comes easily’; and ‘anti-Semites’, ‘distaste for Jews’. The corresponding parts are similar in meaning but not necessarily identical.

The statements refer to political space: a certain position on the left-right political continuum relates to certain political concerns.

Table 2 Corresponding parts of the two headlines

A	of B	R is related to	C
A: worldview	B: Corbyn’s	R: is made for	C: antisemites
A: Hatred of colonialism, capitalism and Zionism	B in left-wing minds	R are so intertwined that ... comes easily	C: distaste for Jews

The headlines are a fairly reasonable encapsulation of the conclusions of the article.

The article starts with Finkelstein noting that he has been on two political demonstrations in his life. The first was in the 1980s against apartheid in South Africa. The actors he mentions might be placed on a left-right political continuum: Socialist Workers Party (SWP), [Jeremy Corbyn], Tribune editor Chris Mullins, Finkelstein ... Margaret Thatcher, PW Botha. The SWP were chanting “Soweto and Palestine, one struggle, one fight”. In political space: the left-right continuum relates to a

continuum of political concerns - Soweto and Palestine, just Soweto, and neither – thus linking back to the article headlines.

Finkelstein's second demonstration occurred on 26 March 2018. The main communal bodies representing the overwhelming majority of Britain's Jews gathered on Parliament Square before delivering a letter to a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party protesting about the continuing and most recent antisemitic incidents in the party, some involving the leader. Speakers included Labour MPs. It was an amateur peaceful demonstration. There was a counter-demonstration "because ... a Jewish night out involves five people, six cars and seven opinions". In political space: there is a lack of perfect correlation – not all left-wing minds are against Jews, and not all Jews are against Corbyn.

Finkelstein follows Labour MP John Mann's statement that he does not know if Jeremy Corbyn is himself antisemitic ...

... but finds it hard to believe that Corbyn had not perceived that the mural was antisemitic. That would be like perceiving that the Nazi eagle and swastika was a parrot holding an electric fan. Finkelstein turns to 'the argument the mural was making'.

[At this point I paused in my writing. "Incidit in Scylla qui vult vitare Charybdis." Like the cartoon, am I getting out of my depth? Looking up 'Corbyn mural' on the internet I found a lot of unpleasant stuff from all quarters. I went back and remembered that on April 2 the Times had an article 'Corbyn cannot be trusted by the Jewish community' – see Table 1 above. This was by the editor of the Jewish News⁶. I looked at the full Corbyn interview by Justin Cohen⁷. There was also a 'third party' blog by Joseph Finlay⁸; and a report that Corbyn attended seder hosted by left-wing Jewish group Jewdas⁹.]

In the beginning the left saw communism as the alternative to capitalism with the Soviet Union in the vanguard. However, following the denunciation of Stalin, the left looked to insurgent movements and nationalist revolutions in emerging economies (Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, the Sandinistas and Hugo Chavas). This was recorded in the *New Left Review*. In political space: a continuum of the Soviet Union, emerging economies and the west.

"And along the way, the Palestinian cause was added. Malcolm X had a good deal to do with this." African-American separatism ... Nation of

⁶ <http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/>

⁷ <http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/exclusive-corbyn-interview/>

⁸ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jeremy-corbyn-is-an-anti-racist-not-an-antisemite/>

⁹ <http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/jeremy-corbyn-attends-seder-hosted-by-left-wing-jewish-group-jewdas/>

Islam ... Middle East ... orthodox Islam ... pan-Africanism in newly independent countries, a single people victimised by colonialism plus unorthodox socialist economics ... Jews were economic exploiters, colonial oppression backed by the Zionist dollar.

Zionism can refer to the creation of Israel and to Israel's government. Zionism can be a symbol of, the worst example of, the greatest sin of, a shorthand for, colonialism and the oppression that brings. Nazism was also imperialist/colonialist and "so Zionism must be like Nazism". So "Hitler and the Jews must be collaborators." Criticising all this involves a rejection of western capitalism and confidence in a workable popular alternative to the free market economy. There is a global conspiracy of bankers, Zionist colonialists and freemasons to oppress the workers of the world – a conspiracy-driven view of the world.

These were the ideas that Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell worked on together in the 1980s on *London Labour Briefing* and *Labour Herald*, each with their own emphasis, using their own language. It defined the allies they accumulated, the Facebook groups they joined, the items brought to their attention – such as the mural.

That is Finkelstein's representation of "the argument the mural was making". There are a number of arguments or worldviews in play here: M the argument of the mural, C the worldview of Corbyn, A the worldview of Corbyn's associates, F the worldview of Finkelstein and F(M) Finkelstein's portrayal of M.

What follows are some very tentative thoughts – this is not an area I am familiar with.

The argument of the mural becomes seven richly-packed paragraphs. To my mind this shows that murals, if they are capable of making arguments at all, make very impoverished arguments compared with the richness of arguments in text. In particular F(M) does not equal M although it might contain it.

Consider F(M). Finkelstein refers to it as "a dangerously bonkers idea". I agree. It is a simple representation of a complex world. It is too simple to say that variables and actors are so strongly tied together. My SSWR notion applies: strong statements about what are in fact weak (or possibly even non-existent) relationships. For example there would appear to be a substantial complex literature on the relationship between Zionism and colonialism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Israeli historical revisionism: from left to right. *Journal of Israeli History. Politics, Society, Culture*. Volume 20, 2-3, 2001.
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/is-zionism-colonialism> ;

How does F(M) relate to C and A? According to Finkelstein, F(M) was “all over” what C and A wrote. “[The ideas of Malcom X were] very influential on the new left.” I found this surprising. Just very quickly, the Wikipedia page for the New Left makes no mention of Zionism or Jews. Malcolm X is indeed an influence on the New Left – but only one of 33 influences.¹¹

Finally what about F, the view of Finkelstein himself? He says a lot in a very small budget of words. Perhaps of necessity the statements are strong. But I do wonder if he also is providing a simple representation of a complex world. It is perhaps too simple to say that new left variables and new left actors are so strongly tied together.

Instead I would like to champion, in addition to the SSWR notion, thinking in terms of models of political space and of the social structure of opinion – topics which we now turn to.

Political space: Labour perceptions of antisemitism

A survey of Labour Party members was carried out by YouGov. The sample had 816 who had voted Corbyn in the 2016 leadership contest and 236 who had voted Smith (when weighted this becomes 731 and 307).¹²

One of the questions was: ‘Do you think each of the following countries are generally a force for good in the world or a force for bad in the world?’. Table 3 presents the results giving the good-bad balance for each country. For example 89% felt Sweden was a force for good and only 2% felt it was a force for bad. Germany also has a high positive balance, the UK less so but still positive. There is a strong anti-USA and anti-Israel sentiment. Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia are overwhelmingly seen as bad. Splitting the respondents according to their 2016 vote, Corbyn voters are less positive than Smith voters about all countries except that their criticism of Iran and Russia is less overwhelming.

Of particular interest for the antisemitism issue is that Israel has a large negative balance: -55% amongst all party members, -63% amongst Corbyn voters and -38% even amongst Smith voters. On the other hand, both groups are more anti-Russian and more anti-Saudi than anti-Israel.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Left
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X

¹² 31 Labour poll says antisemitism row is exaggerated. 8.
http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/a1lnfhilsh/TimesResults_180329_LabourMembers_W.pdf

Table 3 A force for good or bad in the world? the balance, % good - % bad

	all	Corbyn	Smith
Sweden	89-2	88-2	94-1
Germany	78-6	73-8	91-3
UK	50-26	44-31	67-17
USA	16-68	11-76	28-55
Israel	10-65	7-70	18-56
Iran	7-59	9-54	3-74
Russia	5-79	7-74	1-93
Saudi Arabia	3-86	3-87	1-90

Seven questions were asked about the antisemitism issue. I have categorised the various responses as indicating a perception of greater or lesser presence of antisemitism in relation to Labour. On the basis of this I propose a one-dimensional twenty-point scale: 'Antisemitism Perception'. The twenty points are ordered in Table 4 below. (There are more sophisticated ways of establishing a scale but this approach is not a bad starting point.)

The lowest perception was that antisemitism is less widespread than it was, a response given by just 7%. The highest perception was that antisemitism was more present in Labour than in other parties, a response given by just 5%.

The scale works well for Corbyn voters and fairly well for Smith voters. Smith voters express higher perception of antisemitism than do Corbyn voters. However there was substantial variation within both groups - Corbyn percentages ranging between 8 and 79 (and between 1 and 53); and Smith percentages ranging between 2 and 44 (and between 28 and 80). In political space the Antisemitism Perception dimension correlates with [this section of] the left-right dimension. People are spread out along the dimension – with variation within and between groups.

Table 4 Political space: the Antisemitism Perception scale: % responses. 'AS' is antisemitism.

	all	Corbyn	Smith
<i>low Antisemitism Perception</i>			
AS less widespread than before	7	8	4
AS not in Labour but in others	10 (16)	13	3
Labour doing very well re AS	16	22	2
Wrong to suspend Livingstone	18 (24)	24	10
Corbyn doing very well re AS	27	38	4
Not a serious problem at all ...	30	40	11
Allow Livingstone to return	33	42	16
AS less widespread or same	48	51	44
Labour doing v/fairly well re AS	55	70	23
Corbyn doing v/fairly well re AS	61	79	23
Right to suspend Livingstone	59 (62)	54	80
Don't allow Livingstone to return	41	31	66
Labour doing v/fairly badly re AS	38	23	75
Corbyn doing v/fairly badly re AS	33	16	73
A serious and genuine problem ...	19	8	46
AS more widespread than before	13	4	35
Corbyn doing very badly re AS	11	1	35
Labour doing very badly re AS	10	3	28
AS more in Labour than in others	5 (11)	4	30
<i>high Antisemitism Perception</i>			