

The Smearing of Film Director Ken Loach and Jeremy Corbyn Is the Face of Our New Toxic Politics

The film-maker's crime – like Corbyn's – wasn't antisemitism but recalling a time when class solidarity inspired the struggle for a better world

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Ken Loach, one of Britain's most acclaimed film directors, has spent more than a half a century dramatising the plight of the poor and the vulnerable. His films have often depicted the casual indifference or active hostility of the state as it exercises unaccountable power over ordinary people.

Last month Loach found himself plunged into the heart of a pitiless drama that could have come straight from one of his own films. This veteran chronicler of society's ills was forced to stand down as a judge in a school anti-racism competition, falsely accused of racism himself and with no means of redress.

Voice of the powerless

There should be little doubt about Loach's credentials both as an anti-racist and a trenchant supporter of the powerless and the maligned.

In his films he has turned his unflinching gaze on some of the ugliest episodes of British state [repression](#) and [brutality](#) in Ireland, as well as historical struggles against fascism in other parts of the globe, from [Spain](#) to [Nicaragua](#).

But his critical attention has concentrated chiefly on Britain's shameful treatment of its own poor, its minorities and its refugees. In his recent film [I, Daniel Blake](#) he examined the callousness of state bureaucracies in implementing austerity policies, while this year's release [Sorry We Missed You](#) focused on the precarious lives of a zero-hours workforce compelled to choose between the need to work and responsibility to family.

Inevitably, these scathing studies of British social and political dysfunction – exposed even more starkly by the current coronavirus pandemic – mean Loach is much less feted at home than he is in the rest of the world, where his films are regularly honoured with awards.

Which may explain why the extraordinary accusations against him of racism – or more specifically antisemitism – have not been more widely denounced as malicious.

Campaign of vilification

From the moment it was announced in February that Loach and Michael Rosen, a renowned, leftwing children's poet, were to judge an anti-racism art competition for schools, the pair faced a relentless and high-profile [campaign of vilification](#). But given the fact that Rosen is

Jewish, Loach took the brunt of the attack.

The organisation behind the award, Show Racism the Red Card, which initially refused to capitulate to the bullying, quickly faced threats to its charitable status as well as its work eradicating racism from football.

In a [statement](#), Loach's production company, Sixteen Films, said Show Racism the Red Card had been the "subject of an aggressive campaign to persuade trade unions, government departments, football clubs and politicians to cease funding or otherwise supporting the charity and its work".

"Pressure behind the scenes" was exerted from the government and from football clubs, which began threatening to sever ties with the charity.

More than 200 prominent figures in sport, academia and the arts [came to Loach's defence](#), noted Sixteen Films, but the charity's "very existence" was soon at stake. Faced with this unremitting onslaught, Loach agreed to step down on March 18.

This had been no ordinary protest, but one organised with ruthless efficiency that quickly gained a highly sympathetic hearing in the corridors of power.

US-style Israel lobby

Leading the campaign against Loach and Rosen were the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Labour Movement - two groups that many on the left are already familiar with.

They previously worked from within and without the Labour party to help undermine Jeremy Corbyn, its elected leader. Corbyn stepped down this month to be replaced by Keir Starmer, his former Brexit minister, after losing a general election in December to the ruling Conservative party.

Long-running and covert efforts by the Jewish Labour Movement to unseat Corbyn were exposed two years ago in an undercover [investigation](#) filmed by Al-Jazeera.

The JLM is a small, [highly partisan](#) pro-Israel lobby group affiliated to the Labour party, while the Board of Deputies [falsely claims](#) to represent Britain's Jewish community, when in fact it serves as a lobby for the most conservative elements of it.

Echoing their latest campaign, against Loach, the two groups regularly [accused](#) Corbyn of antisemitism, and of presiding over what they termed an "institutionally antisemitic" Labour party. Despite attracting much uncritical media attention for their claims, neither organisation produced any [evidence](#) beyond the anecdotal.

The reason for these vilification campaigns has been barely concealed. Loach and Corbyn have shared a long history as passionate defenders of Palestinian rights, at a time when Israel is intensifying efforts to [extinguish](#) any hope of the Palestinians ever gaining statehood or a right to self-determination.

In recent years, the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Labour Movement have adopted the tactics of a US-style lobby determined to scrub criticism of Israel from the public sphere. Not coincidentally, the worse Israel's abuse of the Palestinians has grown, the harder these

groups have made it to talk about justice for Palestinians.

Starmer, Corbyn's successor, went out of his way to placate the lobby during last month's Labour leadership election campaign, happily [conflating](#) criticism of Israel with antisemitism to avoid a similar confrontation. His victory was [welcomed](#) by both the Board and the JLM.

Character assassination

But Ken Loach's treatment shows that the weaponisation of antisemitism is far from over, and will continue to be used against prominent critics of Israel. It is a sword hanging over future Labour leaders, forcing them to root out party members who persist in highlighting either Israel's intensifying abuse of the Palestinians or the nefarious role of pro-Israel lobby groups like the Board and the JLM.

The basis for the accusations against Loach were flimsy at best – rooted in a circular logic that has become the norm of late when judging supposed examples of antisemitism.

Loach's offence, according to the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Labour Movement, was the fact that he has denied – in line with all the [data](#) – that Labour is institutionally antisemitic.

The demand for evidence to support claims made by these two bodies that Labour has an antisemitism *crisis* is now itself [treated as proof of antisemitism](#), transforming it into the equivalent of Holocaust denial.

But when Show Racism the Red Card initially stood their ground against the smears, the Board and Jewish Labour Movement produced a follow-up allegation. The anti-racism charity appeared to use this as a [pretext](#) for extracting itself from the mounting trouble associated with supporting Loach.

The new claim against Loach consisted not so much of character assassination as of character assassination by tenuous association.

The Board and Jewish Labour Movement raised the unremarkable fact that a year ago Loach responded to an email from a member of the GMB union who had been expelled.

Peter Gregson sought Loach's professional assessment of a video in which he accused the union of victimising him over his opposition to a new advisory definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which openly conflates antisemitism with criticism of Israel.

The IHRA definition was foisted on the Labour party two years ago by the same groups – the Jewish Labour Movement and the Board of Deputies – in large part as a way to isolate Corbyn. There was a great deal of opposition from rank and file members.

Resisting new definition

Pro-Israel lobby group liked this new definition – seven of its 11 examples of antisemitism relate to Israel, not Jews – because it made it impossible for Corbyn and his supporters to critique Israel without running the gauntlet of claims they were antisemitic for doing so.

Loach was among the many Corbyn supporters who tried to resist the imposition of the IHRA definition. So it was hardly surprising, given Gregson's claims and the parallels of his story to many others Loach has been documenting for decades, that the film maker replied, offering his critical opinion of the video.

Only later was Loach told that there were separate concerns raised about Gregson's behaviour, including an [allegation](#) that he had fallen out with a Jewish member of the union. Loach distanced himself from Gregson and backed the GMB's decision.

That should have been an end to it. Loach is a public figure who sees it as part of his role to engage with ordinary people in need of help – anything less, given his political views, would make him a hypocrite. But he is not omniscient. He cannot know the backstory of every individual who crosses his path. He cannot vet every person before he sends an email.

It would be foolish, however, to take the professions of concern about Loach from the Board and the Jewish Labour Movement at face value. In fact, their opposition to him relates to a much more fundamental rift about what can and cannot be said about Israel, one in which the IHRA definition serves as the key battleground.

Toxic discourse

Their attacks highlight an increasingly, and intentionally, toxic discourse surrounding antisemitism that now dominates British public life. Through the recent [publication](#) of its so-called 10 pledges, the Board of Deputies has required all future Labour leaders to accept this same toxic discourse or face Corbyn's fate.

It is no coincidence that Loach's case has such strong echoes of Corbyn's own public hounding.

Both are rare public figures who have dedicated their time and energies over many decades to standing up for the weak against the strong, defending those least able to defend themselves.

Both are survivors of a fading generation of political activists and intellectuals who continue to champion the tradition of unabashed class struggle, based on universal rights, rather than the more fashionable, but highly divisive, politics of identity and culture wars.

Loach and Corbyn are the remnants of a British post-war left whose inspirations were very different from those of the political centre and the right – and from the influences on many of today's young.

Fight against fascism

At home, they were inspired by the anti-fascist struggles of their parents in the 1930s against Oswald Moseley's Brown Shirts, such as at the [Battle of Cable Street](#). And in their youth they were emboldened by the class solidarity that [built a National Health Service](#) from the late 1940s onwards, one that for the first time provided health care equally for all in the UK.

Abroad, they were galvanised by the popular, globe-spanning fight against the institutional racism of apartheid in South Africa, a struggle that gradually eroded western governments' support for the white regime. And they were at the forefront of the last great mass political

mobilisation, against the [official deceptions](#) that justified the US-UK war of aggression against Iraq in 2003.

But like most of this dying left they are haunted by their generation's biggest failure in international solidarity. Their protests did not end the many decades of colonial oppression suffered by the Palestinian people and sponsored by the same western states that once stood by apartheid South Africa.

The parallels between these two western-backed, settler-colonial projects, much obscured by British politicians and the media, are stark and troubling for them.

Purge of class politics

Loach and Corbyn's demonisation as antisemites – and [parallel efforts](#) across the Atlantic to silence Bernie Sanders (made more complicated by his Jewishness) – are evidence of a final public purge by the western political and media establishments of this kind of old-school class consciousness.

Activists like Loach and Corbyn want a historical reckoning for the west's colonial meddling in other parts of the world, including the catastrophic legacy from which so-called "immigrants" are fleeing to this day.

It was the west that pillaged foreign soils for centuries, then armed the dictators supposedly bringing independence to these former colonies, and now invade or attack these same societies in bogus "humanitarian interventions".

Similarly, the internationalist, class-based struggle of Loach and Corbyn rejects a politics of identity that, rather than recognising the west's long history of crimes committed against women, minorities and refugees, channels the energies of the marginalised into a competition for who may be allowed to sit at the top table with a white elite.

It is precisely this kind of false consciousness that leads to the cheering on of women as they [head up](#) the military-industrial complex, or the excitement at a black man becoming US president only to use his power to set new records in [extrajudicial killings](#) abroad and the [repression](#) of political dissent at home.

Loach and Corbyn's grassroots activism is the antithesis of a modern politics in which corporations use their huge wealth to lobby and buy politicians, who in turn use their spin-doctors to control the public discourse through a highly partisan and sympathetic corporate media.

Hollow concern

The Board of Deputies and the Jewish Labour Movement are very much embedded in this latter type of politics, exploiting a political identity to win a place at the top table and then use it to lobby for their chosen cause of Israel.

If this seems unfair, remember that while the Board and the Jewish Labour Movement have been hammering on about a supposed antisemitism crisis on the left defined chiefly in terms of its hostility to Israel, the right and far-right have been getting a free pass to [stoke](#) ever greater levels of white nationalism and racism against minorities.

These two organisations have not only averted their gaze from the rise of the nationalist right – which is now [embedded](#) inside the British government – but have rallied to its side.

In particular, the Board’s leaders – as well as the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, who publicly [reviled](#) Corbyn as an antisemite days before last year’s general election – have barely bothered to hide their [support](#) for the Conservative government and prime minister Boris Johnson.

Their professions of concern about racism and their attacks on the charitable status of Show Racism the Red Card ring all the more hollow, given their own records of supporting racism.

Both have repeatedly [backed](#) Israel in its violations of human rights and attacks on Palestinians, including Israel’s deployment of snipers to [shoot](#) men, women and children protesting against more than a decade of suffocating Gaza with a blockade.

The two organisations have remained studiously silent on Israel’s racist policy of allowing football teams from illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank to play in its football league in [violation](#) of FIFA’s rules.

And they have supported the charitable status of the Jewish National Fund in the UK, even as it [finances racist settler projects](#) and forestation programmes that are intended to displace Palestinians from their land.

Their hypocrisy has been boundless.

Truth turned on its head

The fact that the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Labour Movement have been able to exercise such clout against Loach on allegations for which there is no evidence indicates how enthusiastically the Israel lobby has been integrated into the British establishment and serves its purposes.

Israel is a key pillar of an informal western military alliance keen to project its power into the oil-rich Middle East. Israel exports its oppressive [technology](#) and surveillance systems, [refined](#) in ruling over the Palestinians, to western states hungry for more sophisticated [systems of control](#). And Israel has helped tear up the international rulebook in entrenching its occupation, as well as blazing a trail in legitimising [torture](#) and [extrajudicial executions](#) – now mainstays of US foreign policy.

Israel’s pivotal place in this matrix of power is rarely discussed –because western establishments have no interest in having their bad faith and double standards exposed.

The Board and the Jewish Labour Movement are helping to police and enforce that silence about Israel, a key western ally. In truly Orwellian style, they are turning the charge of racism on its head – using its against our most prominent and most resolute anti-racists.

And better still for western establishments, figures like Loach and Corbyn – veterans of class struggle, who have spent decades immersed in the fight to build a better society – are now being battered into oblivion on the anvil of identity politics.

Should this perversion of our democratic discourse be allowed to continue, our societies will be doomed to become even uglier, more divisive and divided places.

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This essay first appeared on [Jonathan Cook's blog](#).

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