

The Tribal Left Is a Mirror Image of the Tribal Right

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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Of course, I expect a backlash every time I write. It comes with the territory. There is no point being a Bari Weiss or a David Frum and crying out against “cancel culture”. Dissension is part of the rough and tumble of a modern world in which everyone – at least, for a little longer – gets their 15 minutes of sounding off, however ignorant their opinions. There are millions of people out there on social media, and some of them seem to have pretty disturbing views.

But I don’t write just to be provocative, as some readers appear to imagine. I write to influence. Not so much *what* we think – though that’s a nice bonus – but *how* we go about the task of thinking.

In societies bombarded with propaganda – propaganda that gets ever more sophisticated as software and algorithms learn through billions of tiny mind experiments how to trigger us, arouse us, incentivise us – it is extraordinarily hard to think clearly. It requires a huge amount of mental and spiritual energy to gain distance. That’s very difficult to do if we spend all day working, or we are exposed all day to the news cycle. The biggest problem is not just that our thoughts are likely to be someone else’s (often Rupert Murdoch’s), it is that we don’t even know that they belong to somebody else. That is how propaganda works.

This difficulty means I spend a lot of time thinking about which topics to write about. I need to select issues prominent enough in the news that people will wish to invest a little more time to read my contribution. But at the same time the topic I choose needs to illustrate my chief concerns – that we are being propagandised into ever more polarised, antagonised tribal identities – starkly enough that readers will be prepared to reconsider the strong views they already hold on the matter at hand.

Challenging ever more polarised and deeply entrenched tribal identities often feels like a high-wire act in which the only way to have an impact is to keep raising the wire a little higher. The more an audience loses critical distance on an issue – the more tribal it becomes – the more it has to be jolted out of its complacency, out of its sense of what constitutes normality or sanity. But the jolt itself can prove counter-productive, simply reinforcing the tribe’s certainty that anyone who disagrees must belong to the other tribe, the enemy, and can therefore be safely ignored.

My latest: Noam Chomsky was wrong to add his name to an open letter against 'cancel culture'. Many of the writers and intellectuals who signed it are more interested in stifling free speech than protecting it - and they have powerful allies <https://t.co/yIUudPubTD>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [July 9, 2020](#)

How we think

I have been researching and writing daily on foreign affairs, mostly related to the Middle East, for 20 years. That's a long time, and inevitably over that period I have grown more confident in my worldview and I have wanted to deepen and broaden my perspective.

Certainly, there are lessons I have learnt from two decades of reporting on, and analysing, Israel and Palestine that I think are of wider import. It is a region whose features I have been able to study with a degree of dispassion - because the so-called "conflict" isn't exactly mine - but also with a great deal of intimacy - because I ended up marrying into that conflict. I understand very well how a modern settler colonial state works and how a strong tribal identity is key to its success. I understand too the way it inevitably spawns the infrastructure of a militarised, hi-tech, surveillance state, and how an elite needs to constantly manipulate the public into a sense of existential crisis to keep itself enriched and powerful.

Any of that sound familiar outside Israel-Palestine?

The problem is that it is much easier to see how Israeli Jews are propagandised, how they are invested in an entirely manufactured tribal identity that keeps them oppressing Palestinians, than it is to see how we ourselves are propagandised, or how our own manufactured tribal identities work in much the same way.

Which is why every time I write about the United States, where the most propagandised population on the planet lives, I receive the biggest backlash from readers: "*Stick to writing about Palestine*"; "*You don't know enough about the US to have a view*"; "*What happened to you - you were great when you just wrote about Israel-Palestine*". And those are the polite responses.

What appears to be upsetting some readers isn't so much the facts I am writing about. After all, in this intensely globalised world, where we can all read the same newspapers online and we can all watch Youtube videos of the actual events themselves, I know as much as you most likely do about what happened - whether it's in Nablus, Bristol or Kenosha. Unless you were there, and got an angle on events denied the rest of us, we are debating the same set of real-world events or the same set of corporate media depictions of those events.

The issue often isn't *what* we know (though increasingly we choose to close our ears to information that does not confirm our prejudices), it's *how* we analyse what we know.

My latest: Our expectation shouldn't be that Kyle Rittenhouse is treated by the police and legal system like a black man. It is that black men, and women, should be treated like a white Rittenhouse; that legal facts should count whatever your skin colour <https://t.co/ixo99PxJYS>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [November 24, 2021](#)

Emotional investment

People who began following me because of my writings on Israel-Palestine, or the acres of related stuff I wrote countering the Zionist misinformation campaigns in the UK intended to vilify Jeremy Corbyn, are already a fairly select group of people who trust my analytical skills when it comes to an issue on which they have managed to see past the propaganda most others are still in thrall to.

What I know through meeting a small proportion of those readers is that their ability to break out of the mainstream mindset was typically based on an unusual or intensely personal experience they had. Maybe they visited Israel and Palestine and were shocked by the yawning gulf between what they had read in the corporate media and what they saw on the ground. Or maybe they knew Corbyn to be an authentic politician and a committed anti-racist and could not believe how he was depicted in every single corporate news outlet in the UK.

Direct experience of the way the news is skewed set them on a path towards questioning the propaganda they had been subjected to over a lifetime.

But just because we manage to break out of the propaganda construct on one issue does not mean we succeed on every issue. Things that feel intensely personal to us, in which we are emotionally or materially invested, are always going to be the hardest to view from a distance. And for obvious reasons, nothing is so personal, so deeply invested in, as our social and political identities. To question our identity is both to loosen ourselves from the rock that anchors us to the ground we know best and to risk alienating the social networks we depend on. Truly liberating oneself from propaganda – transcending the identities that have been largely manufactured for us – is the riskiest of ventures, which is why so few are willing to do it.

I witnessed that especially keenly in Israel-Palestine, where Jews who cast aside the tribal comfort blanket of Zionism were themselves cast out by their own societies. When we criticise Israeli Jews for failing to stand in solidarity with Palestinians, we should also remember how hard it is intellectually and emotionally to go against the grain of your society. It takes significant courage.

Keir Starmer's Labour:

- backs right-wing Jewish groups cheerleading for Israel
- suspends and expels left-wing Jews who dissent on Israel
- suspends and expels non-Jews who wonder aloud whether this might amount to the politicisation of antisemitism <https://t.co/snGJI08ut7>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [December 5, 2020](#)

I have seen it too in the way anti-Zionist Jews in the Labour party have been hounded out because they refuse to be used by the parliamentary party's dominant Blairite wing to settle political scores with the more socialist membership. When these anti-Zionist Jews refuse to

abandon their anti-racist principles and become tribal Zionists – Zionists who demand special diplomatic treatment for a self-declared ethnic state that, in turn, demands special privileges for Jews over Palestinians – they are demeaned as self-hating or the “wrong kind of Jews”. Seeing their treatment, one can understand why so many British Jews might never think to question what they have been told – or might prefer to keep their heads down.

And that is the point. It is not that we make a choice to stay propagandised. It doesn't require any effort from us at all. All we need do is *not* make a choice. Our socially constructed tribal identities are the default. All we need to do is go about our daily lives as normal.

Propagandised populations

For many of us, who lack a strongly Zionist tribal identity (though of course in the west we have been raised with a more general, colonial Zionist identity since at least the 1917 Balfour Declaration) it is fairly easy to understand how Zionist Jews have been propagandised and how far their thinking can stray from reality. In early 2015 – months after Israel's horrifying attack on Gaza that killed hundreds of Palestinian children and led to an outpouring of criticism of Israel in the UK and elsewhere – a [survey](#) found that 56 per cent of British Jews believed “anti-Semitism in Britain has some echoes of the 1930s”.

Remember this survey was before Corbyn had been elected Labour leader and before the furore about a supposed antisemitism crisis in the party had moved into full gear. God knows, what a similar survey of British Jews would find today.

At that stage, even a prominent liberal commentator for the Israeli Haaretz newspaper [found the views](#) of most fellow Jews in the UK preposterous:

“If the majority of British Jews and the authors of the CAA report actually believe that, then it's hard to take anything they say about contemporary anti-Semitism in their home country seriously. If they honestly think that the situation in Britain today echoes the 1930s when Jews were still banned from a wide variety of clubs and associations, when a popular fascist party, supported by members of the nobility and popular newspapers, were marching in support of Hitler, when large parts of the British establishment were appeasing Nazi Germany and the government was resolutely opposed to allowing Jewish refugees of Nazism in to Britain, finally relenting in 1938 to allow 10,000 children to arrive — but not their parents who were to die in the Holocaust (that shameful aspect of the Kindertransport that is seldom mentioned) — and when the situation of Jews in other European countries at the time was so much worse, then not only are they woefully ignorant of recent Jewish history but have little concept of what real anti-Semitism is beyond the type they see online.”

Paradoxically, Haaretz columnist Anshel Pfeffer would soon subscribe himself to much of the nonsense he excoriates here – as soon, in fact, as Corbyn was elected to head the Labour party.

Which is a reminder of how quickly we can adapt our understanding of what we think of as real, objective facts, or falsehoods, when it helps to protect our tribal identities. We see what we want to see.

Pfeffer, a liberal Zionist, thought the paranoia of conservative Zionist Jews was ridiculous

when Ed Miliband, a liberal Zionist like Pfeffer and a gentle critic of Israel, led the Labour party. But once Corbyn took over, a genuine anti-racist who opposed the “liberal” racism inherent in a self-declared Jewish state, Pfeffer started to feel much more ideologically aligned with conservative British Jews. Indeed, he soon shared most of their assumptions about a supposed rise in “leftwing antisemitism” he had derided more generally months previously.

My latest: Polls showing British Jews fear a Labour election victory, as well as Chief Rabbi Mirvis' new anti-Corbyn remarks, should not surprise us. The corporate media have made sure we've been living in a nationwide echo-chamber for the past four years <https://t.co/wDOclf3Br3>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [November 26, 2019](#)

In short, the survey did not tell us much useful about the state of antisemitism in Britain in 2015. But it did tell us an awful lot about how propagandised many British Jews already were about antisemitism in 2015. It was a signpost, a clue as to where things were about to head.

Losing the plot

Jews, it should go without saying, are not uniquely susceptible to propaganda or uniquely invested in a tribal identity. We all are.

It is easy to point the finger at Zionist Jews for some of their outrageous, self-serving, supremacist views. Much harder to spot those same tendencies in ourselves.

Which is why not only complete strangers harangue me on social media when I turn the spotlight on leftwing tribalism - I expect that - but long-standing followers do too.

If you love my Israel-Palestine stuff, or my Labour party criticisms, but think I've lost the plot on the other stuff, please believe me when I say my criticisms of western tribalism spring from exactly the same set of analytical skills I bring to bear on Israel-Palestine. I am not suddenly or arbitrarily applying a whole set of other analytical criteria to the issues you care most passionately about simply out of a perverse desire to provoke you.

My latest: Faced with the pandemic, we have turned on each other. We prioritise ourselves over the foreigner, we set parent against child, we pit the vaccinated against the unvaccinated - all in the name of a bogus humanitarianism and solidarity <https://t.co/ZjlmGBN38e>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [September 16, 2021](#)

It may be, just possibly, that you are provoked because the conclusions I arrive at on issues close to your heart challenge your own tribal identity - what you perceive to be the left, or to be progressive discourse, or to be anti-racism. Accepting my arguments might require you to become more flexible or curious than you want to be, or it might force you to consider that some of your views stand in stark contradiction to other values you profess to believe in. That inconsistency intrigues me enough to write about it, but it may well infuriate

you.

Which may explain the strange, angry responses from some followers to the soundbites from my lengthy articles – the snippets – I must necessarily post on social media. Rather than being provoked into reading the article, where they would need to grapple with a complex argument, some followers prefer to comment on the soundbite. But if you are among those who say you are fed up with our modern, dumbed-down, soundbite culture – those, for example, who supported Corbyn because he wasn't a focus-group politician – you should not really be fetishising that soundbite culture yourself. Well, not if you want to avoid the accusation of hypocrisy.

Carlson clones

If you're also wondering why all the writers you once loved so much have suddenly become raving Tucker Carlson clones, it might – just might – be because you changed rather than they did. Like Anshel Pfeffer, maybe you arrived at your Corbyn crisis moment. Let me take a punt and suggest that Donald Trump and the rise of the white right may have made your tribal identity seem much more precious to you.

My latest: By fixating on Trump, parts of the left have drifted into worryingly authoritarian ways of thinking – sometimes openly, more often implicitly – as a bulwark against the return of Trump or anyone like him
<https://t.co/d4pa19t5A5>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [June 22, 2021](#)

That won't have made you a clearer thinker. It will have simply made you an angrier, less compromising, less compassionate thinker. It will have encouraged you to think in zero-sum terms. It will have pushed you away from anyone who does not espouse exactly your pieties. It will have made you less willing to consider the arguments of anyone who no longer echoes your binary view of the world. It will have made you a liberal-left version George W Bush, with his warning: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

That should not surprise us. A tribal left is bound to be the mirror image of a tribal right. They have different pieties, different slogans, but the same intolerance, the same self-righteousness, the same anger.

In tribal times like these, those who see the dangers of tribalism – that it is a tool for dividing us, for weakening us against the power-elites and a billionaire-owned media that relishes and stokes our tribalism – will struggle to be heard. Anything they say that isn't for the tribe is assumed to be for the enemy. They have moved to the dark side.

In a time of tribalism, the left's duty is to speak out loudly for solidarity. We need to remember that we are no less exposed to propaganda than the other tribe. That doesn't mean we have to abandon our principles. But it does mean we have to remember they are as human as we are, that they have the same rights as us, that it is crucially important that we are fair and consistent, that our blindspots can be as big as theirs. Because otherwise we not only entrench our own tribalism, we entrench theirs too.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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