Twenty Years After Durban, What We Still Get Wrong About Left-Wing Antisemitism

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Twenty years ago, the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance took place in Durban, South Africa. The goal of the landmark conference was to explore effective methods to eradicate racial discrimination and promote awareness of the global fight against intolerance. The conference, however, immediately descended into an [anti-Jewish](https://thejewishnews.com/2021/09/13/remembering-durban-jewish-journalist-looks-back-on-the-antisemitic-hate-fest/), anti-Israel hatefest, prompting both Israel and the United States to pull their delegations.

Some conference participants renewed the slanderous charge of “Zionism is Racism.” The Arab Lawyers Union passed out booklets at the conference containing antisemitic images of Jews with fangs dripping blood. Friends of mine who were part of various Jewish delegations from the United States were completely shell-shocked and felt threatened by participants shouting them down at every turn.

The United Nations [marked](https://www.un.org/en/durban-20-anniversary) the twentieth anniversary of this disgraceful episode on Sept. 22, not to express the requisite remorse, but to celebrate its supposed achievements.

The Durban conference was a watershed moment for Jews around the world, a stark reminder that the deliverance from the forces of history was not yet in the offing. The world’s oldest hatred was alive and well, not just in the remnants of an unreconstructed Eastern Europe or the aggrieved masses of the Third World, but among the cosmopolitan classes of the West. Yet few people addressed a basic question about this revival of antisemitism: What was the underlying ideology driving the Jew-hatred at Durban? And, 20 years later, with a resurgence of left-wing antisemitism in the United States and Europe, many still haven’t figured out how a variant of that same virus generates antisemitism today.

In the wake of the Durban conference, journalist Jonathan Rosen wrote a widely-circulated [essay](https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/magazine/the-uncomfortable-question-of-anti-semitism.html) in *New York Times Magazine* about the “New Antisemitism,” which captured the sentiment of many Jews, including myself. “I have been reminded, in ways too plentiful to ignore, about the role Jews play in the fantasy life of the world,” he stated. “Singling out Israel made of a modern nation an archetypal villain — Jews were the problem and the countries of the world were figuring out the solution.”

There was, however, nary a word in Rosen’s article or anywhere else about the underlying ideology plaguing the Durban conference, one with which many of the Westerners and even Jews in attendance no doubt sympathized. The debacle at Durban was an expression of postcolonialism, a critical academic study turned dogma highlighting the legacy of colonialism, focusing on the human consequences of the exploitation of colonized people and lands.

Postcolonialism came to be regarded by an activist community as a complete and inviolable explanation for why some countries flourish and others languish. The haves caused the conditions of the have-nots. Full stop. Any other explanation, particularly those focused on cultural differences of various countries and regions, came to be [regarded](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/08/03/guns-germs-and-steel-reconsidered)as racist and beyond the pale.

The “Declaration and Programme of Action” of the Durban conference made its ideological orientation [clear](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Durban_text_en.pdf):

“We recognize that colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences. … We further regret that the effects and persistence of these structures and practices have been among the factors contributing to lasting social and economic inequalities in many parts of the world today.”

Of course, no other possible explanations for disparity are ever entertained.

For good measure, the Declaration, in addressing the Israel-Palestinian issue, added: “We recognize the right of refugees to return voluntarily to their homes and properties in dignity and safety, and urge all States to facilitate such return.” Such a policy, if adopted, would lead to the eradication of the Jewish state.

Like all intellectual monopolies, postcolonialism denies the validity of other explanations and in its certitude becomes an illiberal and dangerous source of extremism and hate. Of course, the ideology contains a modicum of truth — the horrors of colonialism do explain *some* of today’s global disparities. The proponents of postcolonialism, however, completely paper over the highly successful Asian countries that were once colonies, and what that says about the long-term impact of colonial rule.

In simplistically dividing the world into oppressors and oppressed, postcolonialism holds successful nations morally culpable and struggling nations morally pure. And in insisting on this perverse binary, the ideology enables the expression of the usual resentment and ill-will toward Jews and Israel, both of which have succeeded in their respective environments.

Talking about the antisemitism at Durban without reference to postcolonialist ideology is like talking about the attacks of Sept. 11 without reference to extreme Islamist ideology. We should have grasped it then. “It’s the ideology, stupid.”

Fast-forward 20 years, and we see the same political dynamic not in a remote international conference of NGOs and diplomats, but in myriad mainstream American institutions, including higher education, K-12 schools, corporations, the law, medicine, nonprofits and even scientific research. Woke ideology is postcolonialism applied to the domestic scene in Western countries, dividing people neatly into victimizers and victims. And just like the post-Durban reckoning, those concerned about the resurgence of antisemitism today largely fail to understand and name the animating ideology.

About five years ago, it became apparent that woke ideology and its concomitant antisemitism, once confined to the margins, was gaining ground. Then a CEO of a national Jewish advocacy organization dedicated to engaging progressives, I [wrote](https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-anti-israel-trend-youve-never-heard-of/) that “the growing acceptance of intersectionality arguably poses the most significant … challenge of our time [to the Jewish community]. Ultimately, how popular — and threatening — intersectionality becomes depends on the degree to which the far left … is successful in inculcating its black-and-white worldview … with the mainstream left.”

I thought at the time that Jewish organizations could best protect the community by positioning ourselves as members in good standing of the intersectional club. Such progressive certification would, I and others surmised, prevent the lion’s share of the left from fully embracing antisemitic and anti-Israel perspectives. I thought that these forces had a long way to go before gaining mainstream currency. Boy, was I wrong.

In the wake of the George Floyd murder in the summer of 2020, many American institutions went through a swift “racial reckoning.” They conducted, however, not just a much needed soul-searching, but bought the only socially acceptable explanation of racial disparities off the shelf: woke ideology.

They literally purchased, read, distributed and canonized books like “White Fragility” and “How to be an Anti-Racist,” which assert the one and only acceptable way to think about race and racism. Given the ascension of this ideology in our institutions, it’s not the least bit surprising there is also a rapid escalation in [antisemitism](https://jilv.org/whitepaper/) on the left. This upsurge in Jew hatred became undeniable during the [conflict](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/latest-israel-gaza-conflict-sent-waves-of-antisemitism-across-the-u-s)between Hamas and Israel last May when Jews were verbally attacked and several were beaten on the streets of major cities. The new wokeness [permeated](https://www.newsweek.com/when-wokeness-comes-israel-opinion-1591344) mainstream media narratives of the conflict, often altogether leaving out Israeli perspectives.

As in the aftermath of Durban, many inside and outside the Jewish community either still don’t recognize or cannot bring themselves to name the toxic ideology at the root of this wave of antisemitism. And it’s no wonder: some of them have bought into it. Sadly, prominent anti-hate groups, well-meaning though they are, have too often advanced wokism through their diversity programs and anti-bias training. They draw no connection between an ideology that enthrones the one and only explanation for disparity, and the same dogma that enthrones the one and only explanation for the Israel-Palestinian conflict. They ignore any connection between a rigid hierarchy of privilege and increasingly common accusations of “Jewish privilege.”

These voices speak about the growth of antisemitism on the left as the same hatred “cloaked in anti-Israel garb.” True enough. But they miss the fact that this eruption in hate is fueled by wokism. Opponents continue to fight Jew-hatred on the surface like an endless game of whack-a-mole, never acknowledging the root cause: a sanctimonious and dogmatic ideology that many in our own community continue to champion.