

‘Can reason end this witch hunt? Standing with Ken Loach’

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When, last week, I wrote about attacks on academic freedom in Turkey, I didn't expect to be following that article with one about attacks on academic freedom in the UK, but this an era of increasing authoritarianism in many different countries. The UK example is hardly as brutal as what is happening in Turkey, but it is an element of what might be described as a 'very British coup'. In both cases, these attacks need to be understood as an integral part of a major assault on the left and on opponents of the current order, and on the oppressed groups that the left has defended.

The prompts for this article are two pieces of news, one depressing, the other offering a chink of light.

Even after Jeremy Corbyn's hounding out of the Labour Party and the effective decimation of the revived Labour left, the witch-hunt continues of any left figure who has shown sympathy with the plight of the Palestinians. And why wouldn't it? The political right, together with Zionists who want to shut down all criticism of Israel, have developed a very successful formula to decimate their joint enemies, and they will go on using it.

Their weapon of choice is accusations of antisemitism, which, for a group that gives importance to the fight against racism, are particularly hurtful. These accusations need have no basis in reality, but can be enough to sink a career. And so, we have arrived at the absurd situation where those who have been most active in fighting racism are being accused of prejudice by a right-wing establishment and media whose own racism is rarely challenged – and where a disproportionate number of those smeared as antisemites are themselves Jews who also happen to be left-wing and supportive of Palestinian rights.

As a Jew, as a socialist, and just as a human being, I am well aware that antisemitism persists throughout society – though consistently much more on the right than on the left – and of the need to address this. What I am writing about here has nothing to do with tackling real antisemitism, but it succeeds by making people think that it does, and by feeding excessive fear among British Jews.

The most recent person to come under attack in this modern witch hunt is Ken Loach, who would be deemed a national treasure if his politics weren't so critical of the establishment, and who has come into the line of fire of Oxford University's very

politicised Jewish Society. In its response, the prestigious university has demonstrated a lamentable lack of critical understanding.

But, at the same time, the Academic Board of University College London (UCL) has just [voted](#) to retract their adoption of the highly problematic International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism – a definition that has been widely condemned for its examples that conflate antisemitism with criticism of Israel and of Zionism. This decision is based on a review compiled over the course of a year by a working group specially set up by the board. The review concludes that the IHRA definition, which has been an important tool in many of these defamation cases and was central to the complaint by the Oxford students, ‘is not fit for purpose within a university setting and has no legal basis for enforcement’.

Ken Loach’s case provides an illuminating (and infuriating) example of how a witch hunt operates. Various things he has said have been repackaged, with the help of the IHRA definition, as antisemitic, but the [main attack stems from the 2017 UK Labour Party Conference](#), where Miko Peled, an Israeli Jew, spoke at a fringe meeting organised by Free Speech on Israel. In illustrating his views on freedom of speech, he argued that people should even be free to question the holocaust without being criminalised. What he was defending is actually the existing situation in British law. However, several hostile reporters wrote that the meeting ‘questioned the holocaust’ – and Howard Jacobson even suggested that this was part of the conference, informing readers of the *New York Times* that a ‘motion to question the truth of the holocaust was proposed’. How many of these reporters heard what they wanted to hear and actually believed their own stories, we cannot know. The anti-Corbyn Labour right, including the party’s deputy leader, Tom Watson, was happy to play along with these reports.

Loach, a prominent supporter of Corbyn and of Palestine, entered the picture when he was [challenged by an aggressive BBC interviewer](#) to condemn the reported discussion. He had not been at the meeting on which he was being asked to comment, but, with more integrity than Watson, responded that he didn’t think that this had happened. He then made a somewhat clumsy attempt to turn the conversation onto Israel’s history.

A few poorly chosen words were enough for the *Guardian*’s Jonathan Freedland, who took a leading role in the smearing of Corbyn, to [twist into a story that suggested Loach thought holocaust denial acceptable](#). Of course, Freedland never approached Loach for his comments, and the *Guardian* wouldn’t print Loach’s proffered repost, allowing him only an (edited) letter.

The whole process had absolutely nothing to do with preventing antisemitism, but was all about smearing a prominent Corbyn supporter.

These events resurfaced this week when Oxford University Jewish Society attempted to prevent Loach from speaking at a meeting at St Peter's, his former college, where he took part in a discussion of his films with the college Master, Professor Judith Buchanan. Buchanan refused the society's demand that she cancel Loach's invitation but hasn't challenged the substance of their accusations. She has [apologised to the students](#) for the 'pain' generated by the 'events of this week [which] have caused significant hurt to many within the College, University and beyond, and specifically to members of the Jewish community.' What about the totally unwarranted pain, and worse, caused to Loach, the college guest?

Led by the Jewish Society, who [claimed](#) that 'On numerous occasions, Loach has made remarks that are antisemitic under the IHRA definition, which was recently adopted by the University of Oxford', St Peter's students voted to condemn the meeting, and this has been followed by similar votes at other Oxford colleges. The story has been lapped up by the press – the *Mail*, *Telegraph*, and *Jewish Chronicle*, of course, but also the *New Statesman*, which participated in the destruction of the Corbyn project.

The especially sleek nature of this British version of control is that people are persuaded to police themselves and vote to curtail their own freedoms. St Peter's students diligently produced a document that attempted to show how Loach breached various examples of 'antisemitism' given in the IHRA definition. While the students' document is hardly an advertisement for Oxford University's teaching in logical thought, it still manages to demonstrate the absurdity of the 'definition'.

Let's hope that the review from the UCL academics can help provide a robust rebuttal to this whole absurd process.

The UCL review argues that the IHRA definition is doubly problematic. As a tool for combatting antisemitism it is tokenistic, and actually less than useless as it can undermine other policies; and then there is the serious issue of restricting free speech. As the review summarises:

'Another concern is the manner in which the IHRA working definition disproportionately draws debates over Israel and Palestine into conversations around antisemitism, potentially conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and offering a large number of examples focusing on political conflict, thereby muddling the

explanatory power of the definition and risking the suppression of legitimate speech and academic research.'

It may seem to some readers that this review is another case of academics proving at great length that bears shit in the woods. The problems with the definition are well kent and have been discussed many times, not least by the man who wrote it, who never intended it to be used as it has been. However, this sort of thorough analysis with impeccable credentials may be necessary to cut across the extraordinary acceptance that has been given to the definition – an acceptance that owes much more to its pull on the heart strings and to carefully nurtured fears of appearing prejudiced, than to any serious examination of what it might achieve.

Of course, nothing is that easy. Even UCL, who – curiously – adopted the IHRA definition first and carried out their review afterwards, is currently still using the IHRA definition while their Council considers their Academic Board's recommendation to find an alternative definition and continues to consult the 'UCL community'.

The UCL report comes at a time when the UK government is trying to enforce adoption of the IHRA definition on all English universities. The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has even threatened that those who don't adopt it could face financial penalties, prompting a group of senior lawyers to describe his threat as 'legally and morally wrong'. In a letter to the *Guardian*, they quote the Human Rights Act, and [observe](#) 'The legally entrenched right to free expression is being undermined by an internally incoherent "non-legally binding working definition" of antisemitism. Its promotion by public bodies is leading to the curtailment of debate.' And they note that the implementation of the Minister's threat to the universities 'would be an improper interference with their autonomy.' As this letter makes clear, it is not just academic freedoms that are under attack. We must push for the UCL review to be noted by all public bodies – including the Scottish Government – who have adopted the definition.

We are continuously reminded that it takes more than good arguments to change minds and actions, but they do provide important ammunition, and if UCL can act on the recommendations of their Academic Board then we could begin to see a turning point. There will be a time when future university historians look back at the treatment of people such as Ken Loach and ask their students to write essays explaining how such an absurd situation was ever able to gain a foothold.