

#Jewsdontcount: David Baddiel, British Jews, Antisemitism and Israel

Introduction

In 2021, British Jewish writer and comedian David Baddiel published 'Jews Don't Count', a polemic seeking to highlight and explain double standards over antisemitic prejudices he observes among progressive-left British culture.

In recent years progressive political culture has become ever more responsive to prejudice and discrimination seen to be facing groups marginalised due to race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. Social media, especially Twitter, is frequently the venue for "calling-out" discrimination and ostracizing those responsible. It is a fraught and contested new cultural battleground characterised by terms like "cancel culture" and "woke".

It is in this context of heightened sensitivity, Baddiel argues, that "Jews don't count", meaning that antisemitic prejudices or stereotypes are overlooked by the same progressive community that is so sensitive to them regarding other minorities.

What is Baddiel's explanation? For many progressives, Jews are not a minority facing deep-rooted prejudice. They are part or, even exemplary of, the privileged white majority. This antisemitic stereotype conspicuously obscures the distinct ethnicity of Jews, and the long history of antisemitism. If being white means being part of the privileged majority, Baddiel argues, Jews are not white. Yet anti-Jewish attitudes are not called out like other racisms.

Baddiel is interesting not only for his powerful argument, but his personal story, which highlights the complexity of contemporary British Jewish identity. A particular curiosity is Baddiel's disinterest in Israel and Zionism. This makes him an awkward spokesman for the anxieties of British Jews, and in different ways can be seen to strengthen, but also weaken the force of his argument.

Anti-Semitism in the UK

Whilst comparative surveys show antisemitic attitudes are low in the UK¹, and British Jews have enjoyed sustained security and prosperity unmatched by any other major European community, Baddiel's book follows an unprecedented surge in antisemitism on the British left.

Hostility felt by British Jews in relation to Israel grew with the escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians following the collapse of the Oslo Peace Process. The intensification of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian arena coincided with the rapid expansion of social media, now the central arena for antisemitism and other expressions of extremism and hatred. The extended conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2014 prompted an unprecedented outpouring of vitriol against Israel, catalysing a surge in antisemitism.

The situation worsened dramatically with the election of Jeremy Corbyn – a radical left ideologue with a long record of anti-Zionism – as leader of the Labour party. When British Jews pointed out many examples of Corbyn associating with or defending individuals expressing not just criticism of Israel but antisemitism, it led to a spiralling clash between Corbyn's supporters and the Jewish community.

¹ Anti-defamation league comparative survey data for 2019 available at <https://global100.adl.org/about/2019>.

Expressions of antisemitism associating Jews (or 'Zionists' or 'Israel') with hidden influence, privilege and power, mushroomed within Labour.²

The repeated failure of Corbyn to seriously acknowledge or address the growing problem of antisemitism deeply divided the party. An independent 2020 inquiry found that in failing to deal with antisemitism, Labour was responsible for "unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination".³

It was a relief to British Jews when Labour was badly beaten in 2019 and Corbyn was replaced by Kier Starmer, a centrist, whose wife is Jewish, who has sought to purge antisemitism from Labour.

But for parts of the British left, the clash between Corbyn and British Jews strengthened a perception that Jews were part of a privileged establishment that attacked a leader who threatened their status. Though Baddiel does not focus excessively on Corbyn or Labour, this recent eruption of left antisemitism is the backdrop for his book.

David Baddiel and 'Jews Don't Count'

Baddiel has enjoyed thirty years of success as a comedian and writer. In the 1990s he co-presented a hit show taking a fans eye of view of English football. He co-wrote the football anthem 'Football's Coming Home', making him an icon for English football fans.

He has long joked that his ethnicity is not obvious. He writes that one of his first stand-up jokes was, "I've been beaten up twice in my life, once for being Jewish, once for being a Pakistani." He is an atheist. His wife is not Jewish. He has little involvement in Jewish communal life. A fleeting reference to the Talmud in "Jew's Don't Count" reveals scant knowledge of Jewish history.⁴

But Jewishness is central to Baddiel's identity. Born to a Welsh-Jewish father and German-Jewish mother (who fled Germany in 1939), he attended a London Jewish primary school and went to the socialist-Zionist youth movement Habonim. His novel 'The Secret Purposes', about the British internment of German Jewish refugees during WWII reflects his grandfather's experiences. His film and musical 'The Infidel' is about a British Muslim who discovers he was born Jewish. Baddiel describes himself in his twitter profile with a single word: "Jew".

Baddiel also identifies as a Labour voter. His attack on progressives for downplaying antisemitism is that of someone who broadly identifies with that political camp.

His book is packed with examples. One comes from football. The use of the word 'Yid' (an English hate-term for a Jew) has long been chanted at games involving Tottenham Hotspur, perceived as a Jewish club because of a historically large Jewish fanbase. Originating as a term of abuse by opposing fans, it was adopted as a badge of pride by Tottenham fans, despite them being mostly not Jewish. Over decades when other racist terms were being stamped out in the English game, 'Yid' was still tolerated, along with other examples of antisemitic abuse hurled at Tottenham fans. Baddiel asks why.

² Alan Johnson, *Institutionally Antisemitic: Contemporary Left Antisemitism and the Crisis in the British Labour Party* (London: Fathom, 2019), available at <https://fathomjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Institutionally-Antisemitic-Report-FINAL-6.pdf>.

³ *Investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party* (London: Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020), available at <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/investigation-into-antisemitism-in-the-labour-party.pdf>.

⁴ Rabbi Howard Cooper, "Review: Jews Don't Count: How Identity Politics Failed One Particular Identity," *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 February 2021, available at <https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/all/review-jews-don't-count-how-identity-politics-failed-one-particular-identity-1.511673>.

Other examples come from popular culture. Seyi Omooba, an Evangelical Christian actress cast to play the role of Celie (a lesbian role) in a stage production of 'The Color Purple' by Alice Walker, was fired because she had posted homophobic remarks on Facebook. Omooba was, to use the current term, "cancelled". Yet no one thought that Walker or her play should be cancelled, despite Walker publishing antisemitic poetry.

Baddiel himself was grotesquely characterised as a Rabbi (big nose, peyot, etc.) by another British comedian in the 2000s, who similarly characterised many celebrities in grotesque ways. Years later he apologised for his impersonations of people of colour. He never apologised to Baddiel.

Another example of double standards applies to casting. It is increasingly unacceptable to cast a performer to play a character of minority ethnicity or sexuality, who does not share that identity. This is partly out of concern that a performer who does not belong to that minority will be mimicking perceived characteristics, with the risk of stereotyping and mockery. Yet non-Jewish actors frequently depict Jewish characters on stage and screen, often in stereotypical ways. When Jewish actors have raised concerns, even introducing the phrase 'Jewface' (an equivalent to the culturally unacceptable 'blackface', i.e. a white actor using makeup to depict a non-white character) they have largely been ignored. This controversy gained recent prominence, when Sarah Silverman highlighted the casting of Kathryn Hahn to play Jewish American comedian Joan Rivers. British Jewish actress Maureen Lipman raised the same issues about Helen Mirren playing Golda Meir.

Baddiel does not say non-Jews cannot play Jewish roles. He is highlighting that the increased sensitivity to offending or stereotyping minority groups excludes one minority group in particular.

Another dimension of the double standard is that non-Jewish supporters of Corbyn felt no problem telling Jews that their claims of antisemitism were invalid, in a cultural age where members of minorities are assumed to be authoritative regarding prejudices they experience.

Baddiel argues that this double standard is rooted in the unique double headed stereotyping of Jews, who can be depicted both as "lying, thieving, dirty, vile, stinking – but *also* a moneyed, privileged, powerful, and secretly in control of the world". It is this stereotype of the Jew as rich, powerful and white, which leads antisemitism to be overlooked on parts of the left. Even if Jewish wealth was not a stereotype, the absurdity of the idea that wealth protects against persecution is illustrated by Baddiel's own history. The fact that his German grandparents were wealthy, did not stop the Nazis seizing their assets, forcing them to flee, and murdering their family.

David Baddiel's atypical Jewish identity

As the child of a Holocaust survivor, Baddiel is an apt symbol of the European Jewish experience. In other ways Baddiel is an awkward spokesman for British Jews. The most striking disconnect is his disinterest in Israel. He writes, "my position on Israel is: I don't care about it more than any other country, and to assume I do is racist.". His Jewish identity "is about Groucho Marx, and Larry David, and Sarah Silverman ... and pickled herring, and Passovers in Cricklewood in 1973, and my mother being a refugee from the Nazis, and wearing a yarmulke at my Jewish primary school – and none of that has anything to do with a Middle Eastern country three thousand miles away."

Baddiel does not avoid calling out claims relating to Israel that invoke anti-Jewish stereotypes. Nor is he in the small but vocal category of British Jews who feel compelled to publicly condemn Israel in

order to disassociate themselves from mainstream Jewish support for it.⁵ Baddiel does not go out of his way to criticise Israel, he rather rejects the assumption that it has anything to do with him.

He argues that this disinterest is an asset in confronting antisemitism. Often those accused of antisemitism claim it is only because they criticise Israel. Sociologist David Hirsh called this “The Livingstone Formulation”, after former London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who used this defence often.⁶

Baddiel may be right that his disinterest in Israel disarms claims that his accusations of antisemitism are intended to silence critics. He has certainly done a service by highlighting forms of antisemitism that cannot be confused with criticism of Israel.

But indifference to Israel puts Baddiel out of step with most British Jews, who identify with Israel as a source of security and cultural enrichment; have friends and family in the country; and visit regularly. They do not uniformly support Israeli policies, and the recent dominance of the Israeli right has caused acute discomfort for many.⁷ But in a 2015 survey, 93% said Israel plays a part in their Jewish identity.⁸

Baddiel is not only out of step because of his disinterest in Israel, he also displays a notable coolness towards Israelis. He writes that “Israelis aren’t very Jewish anyway... They’re too macho, too ripped and aggressive and confident ... Jews without angst, without guilt. So not really Jews at all.” He gets away with this because he is Jewish, he is a comedian, and because it is meant to be funny. But it is also an insensitive stereotype. The lack of empathy is striking when so many Israeli families share Baddiel’s own family experience of dispossession and flight from Nazi oppression.

More to the point, Baddiel’s disinterest in Israel means he fails to articulate the hurt British Jews feel when Israel is demonised. Most British Jews want to express their connection to Israel as part of their identity, in a society where ethnic diversity is celebrated. Millions of British citizens publicly celebrate their special attachment to an ethnic homeland, without being held responsible for its government’s actions. Jews want to do likewise without being ostracised by ‘progressives’ on university campuses or on Twitter, and without facing protestors when attending a performance or talk involving an Israeli performer or speaker.

It is the unique levels of vitriol that Israel attracts, and the striking lack of empathy for Jewish history and identity that connects Jews to Israel, which are among the most potent examples of antisemitic double standards on the left.

British Jews will thank him

Nonetheless, Baddiel has shone a spotlight on progressive double standards; even providing a hashtag-friendly label. His widely read book highlights not the confusing anti-Zionist antisemitism with its contested definitions and blurred boundaries, but an antisemitism that stereotypes Jews as white and privileged, obscuring millennia of Jewish vulnerability and persecution.

⁵ See David Hirsh, “‘Civility’ in contemporary debates about antisemitism,” Engageonline, 7 July 2014, available at <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2014/07/07/civility-in-contemporary-debates-about-antisemitism-david-hirsh/>.

⁶ David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁷ Toby Greene and Yossi Shain, “The Israelization of British Jewry: Balancing between Home and Homeland,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2016): 848–865.

⁸ Stephen Miller et al., *The Attitudes of British Jews Towards Israel* (London: City University London, 2015), https://www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/295361/Israel-Report-FINAL.PDF.

Now every time an anti-Jewish stereotype emerges in popular British culture, and those responsible appear not to notice, Jews know what to say, or to tweet: #jewsdontcount. For this, British Jews will be thanking David Baddiel.

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