

Rebuttal to Nimer Sultany's critique of Zionism

Nimer Sultany, a Senior Lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, recently posted an article denying the existence of a meaningful liberal Zionist tradition at <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2018/08/27/against-appeasement-whats-wrong-with-zionism/#comment-114188>. Paul Scham, President of Partners for Progressive Israel, has published a refutation of Sultany's argument.

As an interloper from across the pond, I'm not going to weigh in on the debate over Jeremy Corbyn and anti-Zionism or anti-semitism. But I do contend the Nimer Sultany's critique of Zionism as simply a bad piece of scholarship and worse history. There is plenty to criticize in Zionism or Israeli policy – and I have done a lot of it over several decades in a number of forums. But to claim some sort of anti-liberal 'essence of Zionism' – and compound it by relying on the largely idiosyncratic analyses Sultany employs, makes it hard to take him seriously.

Sultany's aim, apart from the Corbyn controversy, is to refute the notion that Zionism, even in its most liberal forms, was ever or could ever be democratic or liberal. This is the basis for his argument that the recent 'Nation-State' Basic Law, passed by the Knesset this summer, was in no way an aberration but, rather, that Zionism has been recognized from its beginnings as inherently non-democratic, illiberal, and a lackey of imperialism. I will demonstrate this is ahistorical and rests on cherry-picking his sources.

Sultany employs a monolithic conceptualization of Zionism that is severely flawed from the outset, and proceeds to compound it by relying primarily on the writings of two Jewish but avowedly anti-Zionist commentators – Morris Cohen (1919) and Hannah Arendt (1943 and 1946). Their critiques are anachronistic because they, in addition to disliking Zionism's conception and nature, are clearly convinced it could never be workable. Now, whatever you may think of Israel as a state, it is clearly a going concern – and it was Zionism's (very disparate) ideological and practical activities that brought it about, that gathered the critical mass of Zionist-oriented Jews in Palestine so that the state could be proclaimed in 1948 and survive thereafter. It was improbable and unlikely – until it happened. So Cohen and Arendt's main critiques have been utterly refuted by history.

Now to Sultany's main point, that Zionism was not and never could not be liberal and democratic. Besides citing primarily Cohen and Arendt, he spends a good deal of time quoting Theodor Herzl, considered by both proponents and detractors as Zionism's founder. But Herzl's own views and writings are a red herring for anyone who wants to understand what Zionism became. Herzl's contributions – certainly not insignificant – were a) as the founder of the Zionist Organization and the convenor of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, and b) as the very successful publicist of the idea of a Jewish state primarily among the Jewish masses in eastern Europe, as realistic in real

time. He then failed utterly at obtaining a charter for Zionism from any of the potentates he visited – and was thoroughly and humiliatingly repudiated by the Zionist movement itself when he suggested ‘Uganda’ as a nachtasyl (emergency refuge) for threatened Jews. The only thing that saved his reputation for posterity was that he conveniently died the next year (1904), thus sparing himself further humiliation. He could therefore be continually lionized – even today, his picture hangs in the Knesset – but his ideological influence on Zionism’s ideological development was minimal, virtually nonexistent. So Sultany’s extensive attempts to pile on the opprobrium is simply irrelevant. Zionism was quickly taken over by “practical” and then socialist Zionists, whose views were very different from Herzl’s. So taking Herzl down says little or nothing about Zionism. Can Sultany seriously claim that the extensive selections he quotes from Herzl’s writings had the slightest effect of what the Zionist movement or the State of Israel became? The answer is unequivocally no.

I have great respect for Hannah Arendt as a political theorist, but most of Sultany’s extensive quotations from her writings on Zionism refute themselves. For example he writes that ‘the Zionist debate with the assimilationists marginalized the “fundamental conflict between the Jewish national movement and Jewish plutocrats.”’ What plutocrats? There were indeed some very rich Jews, but few of them supported Zionism, with the exception of Edmond de Rothschild, whose financial contribution was crucial in the early years but who had little or no ideological influence. Nor did Lord Rothschild, the addressee of the Balfour Declaration. Most rich Jews, in fact, opposed Zionism. The distinctive institutions of Zionism, namely, the kibbutz, the moshav, and the Histadrut (the labor federation that was also a holding company and Israel’s largest employer during its first decades) were invented precisely because there was very little private investment to be had. In fact, Israel was one of the world’s two or three most egalitarian countries in the 1960s. This changed with the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980’s, but that is not Sultany’s argument.

Sultany resurrects the old claim that Zionism was inherently imperialistic and colonialist. I discuss these claims at length in my article on “Zionism and Israel” in the Encyclopedia of Race and Racism (2d ed. 2013), in which I contend that that the nature of Zionist settlement of the land was simply so different from most colonialist endeavors that the word in its usual meaning is simply inapposite, even though, as Sultany, correctly points out, it was embraced by early Zionists because it didn’t contain the pejorative resonance that it has today.

My point is certainly not to claim that Zionism, as exemplified by today’s Israel government, is liberal or admirable. Nor do I assert that there was an original Zionism that was pure – and that it has been corrupted by 40 years of largely rightwing governance. Rather, I take issue with Sultany’s unproven and demonstrably false claim that there was never anything liberal or democratic in Zionism – that it was inherently and originally so tainted that it cannot be defended, even historically, by any progressive. That is flatly wrong – and Sultany’s use of flawed and idiosyncratic texts to prove his contentions instead illustrate his wrong-headed methodology and arguments.

Rather, Zionism was never a monolithic ideology at any point from the First Zionist Congress on. There were Marxists like Ber Borochov, who envisioned Jewish and Arab workers uniting against feudal sheikhs and plutocrats – something actually attempted by groups in the 1930s. There was – and is – Israel’s universalistic and humanistic ‘Declaration of Independence’ and the “Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty” (1992) whose spirit – though not their provisions – are contradicted by the Nation-State Law.

I am not happy with Israel’s current trajectory, along with the numerous Israelis who express themselves in the many organizations and movements against the Occupation and for social justice. They are following in the footsteps of many Zionists at different points in the 20th century, who tried heroically to combine the quest for a Jewish State with universalist rights.

There is no doubt that there is difficulty in marrying a particularistic ideology like Zionism – even in its many different liberal forms – with democracy; and the rightwing ideologies currently governing Israel are no help. But the effort has been made many times in many ways – including today – and Sultany is simply wrong when he denies the existence of a liberal and democratic tradition in Zionism.