"You, Zionist!"
Uses and Misuses of the Z-Word in Current Political Discourse
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St. Paul, Minnesota, March 29, 2011

Ms. Helen Thomas, veteran American journalist, famously got into trouble in the first days of June 2010 after she was caught on video saying to a Jewish blogger that the Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine" and "go home" to "Poland, Germany (...) and America and everywhere else." Although she published what seemed to be an apology, she was compelled to resign from her job as a columnist for Hearst Newspapers.

Six months later, Ms. Thomas, then 90 years old, was the guest of an Arab-American group in Dearborn. There, she stood by her earlier comments—because, she said, "it's worth it to speak the truth". And what was the truth? "Congress, the White House and Hollywood, Wall Street, are owned by the Zionists."

Ms. Thomas's initial remarks about sending the Jews from Israel to Europe "and everywhere else" were obviously tasteless, but one could argue that they were not anti-Semitic in nature. By contrast, the additional remarks were widely perceived as far more offensive, because the reference to a so-called "Zionist" power in America was a reminder of the old canard about "Jewish Power."

Wayne State University, Ms. Thomas's alma mater, "strongly" condemned "the anti-Semitic remarks made by Helen Thomas," and announced the cancellation of an annual Spirit of Diversity Award named after her. In the uproar that followed, many Arab-American organizations took sides with Ms. Thomas, whose parents were Lebanese. Osama Siblani, spokesman of the Congress of Arab American Organizations, said: "We do not understand why a remark against a political group—the Zionists—would be interpreted as being anti-Semitic."

Here, we get to the crux of the matter. To be sure, Zionists appear to be a political group. But how can Mr. Siblani explain Ms. Thomas's assertion that such a political group retains ownership of Congress, the White House, Hollywood and Wall Street? When you say "Zionists," what do you really mean?

Of course, what is at stake here is not just the reputation of Ms. Thomas. It isn't a purely American issue, either: from time to time, we learn about similar accusations leveled against "Zionists" in many other countries in the world. Our approach, therefore, is basically comparative. We do not intend to condemn individuals or organizations, communities or countries. Our aim is to understand what's going on, why people make a systematic use of the two Z-words, "Zionist" and "Zionism," in contexts where those words have not been present for quite a long time. I'll mention here a few examples; but there are lots of them and, alas, every other week brings new ones.

In France, there is a political party called the Anti-Zionist Party. Its chairman, Yahia Gouasmi, is also chairman of the Federation of Shiites in France, but that party isn't just a front for Islamic fundamentalism. Its public leadership is actually made up of people originating in the extreme left and in the extreme right. The *raison d'être* of the Anti-Zionist Party is the fact that, in its own words, the "Zionists" have "taken the power in France," that they control "the media, the major corporations, and political life." Moreover, they say, "financial markets are in the hands of a global lobby of which Zionism is both the cement and the motor."

Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis said in February 2011, in a television interview, that "everything that happens today in the world has to do with the Zionists" and that "American Jews are behind the world economic crisis." When he was accused of anti-Semitism, Mr. Theodorakis felt offended. A former member of the anti-Nazi Greek resistance, and for many years a leading member of the Greek Communist Party, although he drifted later on toward the right, Mr. Theodorakis— internationally known for having composed the score of the movie *Zorba the Greek*—is an icon of Greek cultural life. He isn't anti-Semitic, he explained, he's anti-Zionist. And he paid a high price for it, he wrote on February 9, 2011, on his own website, "mostly as a composer, since Zionists control 99% of global musical life." Zionists, really?

By the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, a campaign against "Zionism" was waged in the Soviet Union and in Communist-led Eastern European countries. In 1952, a show trial opened in Prague. In the box: 14 high-ranking members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, including Rudolf Slansky, former secretary-general of the Party, were indicted for belonging to a Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy. The emphasis was on the word "Zionist," and of the 14 people in the box, 11 were Jewish.

Of the 14, only three escaped execution. One of them, Artur London, later wrote a book, *The Confession.* In that book, London explains how the "Zionist" theme was planted in the indictment. The police interrogator would ask him about people who served together with him in the International Brigades in Spain. Every time London gave the name of a Jew, the interrogator noted in his report: "Zionist." London protested: that man is not a Zionist, I know him for being a lifelong Communist. The interrogator answered: "we live in a socialist society, anti-Semitism is illegal and it is prohibited to use the word "Jew," therefore I write down "Zionist."

Today, when you say "Zionists", what do you really mean? The same question might have been posed to Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam. On the 25th of February 2011, Mr. Farrakhan addressed thousands of his followers massed in Rosemont, Ill. The house organ of the Nation of Islam, which goes by the name the Final Call, reports that Mr. Farrakhan told the audience that "Zionists dominate the government and the banking system in this country." There is no room for doubt as to the true identity of those "Zionists," because when the Nation of Islam leader asked: "what man do you see in America who is standing up to the Jews?" the crowd answered "Farrakhan!"

Let's go back to Helen Thomas. She got an additional chance to correct her language in an extensive interview with David Hochman, in the April 2011 issue of Playboy. At some point, the interviewer objected that "Jews make up roughly two percent of the U.S. population." Ms. Thomas's answer: "you know damn well the power they have." When she said "they," she meant, of course, those two percent.

Still, we must answer the objection raised earlier on by Mr. Siblani in defense of Ms. Thomas's utterings. Because he seems to have a case, irrespective of the specific issue he was referring to. Zionism is indeed a political movement, and as such it should not be immune to criticism. So, even if the way Helen Thomas allowed herself to use the Z-word was dubious – to say the least – another speaker should be allowed to refer negatively to Zionism and Zionists without having to defend himself or herself from the accusation of anti-Semitism. Isn't that so?

Well, not exactly. And the reason is that, if people want to express critical views on the State of Israel, its citizens, its successive governments, even its very existence, they may say it in so

many words. When they use instead the word "Zionist," they mean something else—or, in any case, what they say is widely understood as meaning something else.

The word "Zionism" appeared around the year 1890, well after the emergence of Zionism as a contemporary school of thought (in the middle of the nineteenth century) and after the beginning of modern immigration to Ottoman Palestine (in the 1880s.) At the time, the word referred to an informal movement that shared the old Jewish dream of a return to the land of Israel. With the creation of the World Zionist Organization in 1897, under the leadership of Theodor Herzl, "Zionism" was defined in the program of the organization: "Zionism aspires to the establishment in Palestine of a home for the Jewish people guaranteed by public law."

Very soon, Zionism became a political movement involved in bitter fighting, both among the Jewish people and in the land of Palestine. The Zionists, their ideologies and their activities were legitimate subjects for a public debate.   It was natural for Jewish people to define themselves as Zionist, pro-Zionist, non-Zionist or anti-Zionist. However, even at that time, things were more complex than some people may believe. With the development of the Zionist movement, thousands of blossoming Jewish organizations generated as many variations of that word. Soon enough, "Zionist" became the most hyphenated concept in Jewish culture: left-wing Zionists and right-wing Zionists, bourgeois Zionists and proletarian Zionists, religious Zionists and Zionist atheists, cultural Zionists, political Zionists and practical Zionists, Jews committed to the gathering of all Jews in *Eretz* Israel (the Land of Israel), and Zionists fitting the classical definition of "a Jew who receives money from another Jew in order to send a third Jew to *Eretz* Israel."

By the 1930s, the center of gravity of the Zionist movement tilted toward the Jewish population in Palestine. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the World Zionist Organization and its sister organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel, relinquished their political powers, and their scope of activity was more or less reduced to Jewish education in the Diaspora. People, in Israel and in the Diaspora, still saw themselves as "Zionists," but it became increasingly difficult to tell the difference between them and Jews who did not define themselves as such. In the Middle East, the actual issues were by now about the State of Israel (its society, its institutions, its policies), while in the Jewish Diaspora the controversies between Zionists and non-Zionists gave way to a broad consensus, more or less identical to the positions that were once the prerogative of the sole Zionists.

In Palestine, under the British Mandate, the major divide was between the Zionists and their opponents in the local Arab population; therefore, the use of a "Zionist"-correlated vocabulary was natural, even necessary. But this use does not make sense any more. It is true that the dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians is difficult, and that it sometimes gives way to violent confrontations; but the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and almost all Arab leaders speak about Israel—if not with Israel — and therefore artifices of language, such as saying "Zionist" instead of "Israel," should belong to another epoch. It is true that the Jewish identity of the State of Israel is one of the many issues being debated right now; but, within the Israeli population, only a tiny minority formulates this debate in terms of adherence or opposition to "Zionism." It is true that some people who stick to the Z-word claim to distinguish in this way "good" Jews from "evil" Zionists; but such a claim is illusory or misleading because, if we follow their definition of "good" Jews, it means that almost all real Jews are "evil," even those who are most critical of the State of Israel.

In the present situation, qualifying a person or an organization as "Zionist" does not provide any meaningful information about the attitudes of that person, or about the organization on the major

issues that are now in debate. A Jewish "Zionist" may be religious or atheist, left-wing or right-wing, a supporter of the annexation of the West Bank by Israel or a supporter of Israeli withdrawal from all territories. More generally speaking, a "Zionist" may also be an average citizen supporting the right of existence of the State of Israel—and, in this sense; almost everyone in our countries is a Zionist.

The word "Zionist" adds no information to an educated discussion on all the pending problems in the Middle East. One could therefore expect a less widespread use of the word "Zionist" today. But that is not the case. On the contrary, we have been witnessing during the last years a spectacular surge in the use of the word. And we must ask ourselves why that is so.

The rhetorical use of the word "Zionist" within the scapegoat system, set up during consecutive "anti-Zionist" campaigns in Eastern Europe, was ultimately destroyed with the breakdown of the Communist system. But another rhetorical use survived, as a way of expressing negative feelings against the Jews and/or Israel. Some individuals and organizations, for whom the non-recognition of the State of Israel had the strength of a dogma, wanted to avoid the word "Israel" at any price. Hence the systematic uses of circumlocutions like "Zionist entity," "Zionist leader" or "Zionist army," in order to refer to Israel without saying its name. Such a practice, which persists in the fringes of the pro-Palestinian militancy in the Western world, as well as in the most extreme parts of the Arab and Islamic world, is somehow strange, even childish; it also reflects a tendency to dehumanize the enemy, which remains strong until today.

In recent times, an additional rhetorical use of the word "Zionist" has emerged in the U.S. and in Europe. It has its origins in the extreme right. In such an environment, saying "Zionist" instead of saying "Jew" may be just a disguise, a convenient code in order to refer to Jews without being immediately exposed as an anti-Semite. It may also be the result of a deep conviction, which associates hatred of the Jews and hatred of the Zionist movement as such.

In the U.S., this practice is well-known since the eighties, when rabid anti-Semitic groups, such as the Aryan Nations, started referring to the federal government by the name ZOG, meaning not a former king of Albania but "Zionist Occupation Government" or "Zionist Occupied Government" (there is, by the way, a substantial difference between the two formulations, but I'm not sure those guys got into the depth of it). In France, in the early nineties, a fascist youth organization named GUD covered the walls of Paris with posters which read "In Paris as in Gaza, Intifada," and they declared their support for the Islamic cause, lest "Europe be destroyed by Zionism." Anti-Zionism is nowadays the staple diet of extreme right activists, such as David Duke in the United States and David Irving in the United Kingdom.

There were therefore two different backgrounds for the consistent use of the word "Zionist," in times when such a practice might have seemed outmoded: fundamentalist deniers of Israel, and fundamentalist haters of the Jews. Both of them served as incubators, so to speak, for that word until it came back with a vengeance. In fact, the polemic use of the word "Zionist" as we know it today has roots in both traditions. The migration of the word "Zionist" may reveal the existence of common points between them. But this is not about people, let alone organizations: language has its own logic, beyond ideological barriers.

Those two incubators functioned, more or less, until the end of the last century. Then came the great surge of the years 2000; all of a sudden the word "Zionist" reached new summits in both anti-Israeli speech and anti-Jewish speech. This may seem paradoxical, even taking into account the emergence of a new kind of militants with a high level of motivation. For, as I have stressed, there is not a single accusation against the State of Israel and the Israelis, including

the most outrageous ones that could not be formulated by using the usual lexicon, without saying "Zionism" and "Zionist." But that is precisely the reason why the Z-word is now so popular. It is available for all kinds of rhetorical purposes, like fantasizing about "Zionist Power" and its many misdeeds.

Let's consider an American writer, a retired professor of sociology by the name of James Petras. A self-described "revolutionary and anti-imperialist" activist and writer with "a long history of commitment to social justice," Mr. Petras is a prolific author of essays and articles against "Zionism" and "Zionists". In September 2010, he published a lengthy article, "The State and Local Bases of Zionist Power in America," which is already widely reproduced on the Web. "Zionist Power," we learn in that article, means "media ownership and wealth concentration," and "a deliberate strategy of infiltrating the government." According to Mr. Petras, "those who deny Zionist power" are "left-Zionists, namely Noam Chomsky and his acolytes." Whoever heard about Mr. Chomsky's opinions on Israel will understand that his very characterization as a "Zionist," albeit a "left" one, is a powerful example of what "Zionist" means in present "anti-Zionist" discourse.

Occasionally, it turns funny. In 2003, Tam Dalyell, a colorful Labor member of the British Parliament, said in an interview with the American magazine Vanity Fair that then Prime Minister Tony Blair was "unduly influenced by a cabal of Jewish advisers." He gave three names to support that statement: Lord Levy, Peter Mandelson and Jack Straw.

Lord Levy is certainly Jewish; Peter Mandelson isn't, although his father is; and then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw happens to have one Jewish grandfather. So much for the "Jewish cabal."

Tam Dalyell came under strong criticism, and militant left-wing British journalist Paul Foot hurried to his defense. Here is what Paul Foot, writing in The Guardian, had to say about Tam Dalyell: "obviously he is wrong to complain about Jewish pressure on Blair and Bush when he means Zionist pressure." Now, let's read that again. Criticism of Jews as such is bad, said Paul Foot, criticism of Zionists is right. So, in order to make Tam Dalyell's criticism acceptable, Jack Straw had be qualified a "Zionist," although his one and only qualification for that was a Jewish grandfather. Usually, the Jew is hidden under the "Zionist," but here Paul Foot applied "reverse-engineering" to find the "Zionist" under the Jew.

"Zionist" has become a "free word," a word whose meaning cannot be checked in any specific dictionary. It is no longer a tool to describe accurately people and situations. It has become a passive vehicle for all abuses and manipulations. This is not about actual Zionism; it is about a construction made by anti-Zionist writers. In so-called "anti-Zionist" polemics, anybody can be labeled a Zionist, at any time. Noam Chomsky has been called a Zionist, but so have Nicolas Sarkozy and George Bush, the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers. In militant parlance, the word "Zionist" absorbs all the negative representations associated with all these people, and thereafter any newly-discovered "Zionist" will be tainted by them.

At the time of the Prague trial, in November 1952, the French daily *Le Monde* published a front page article under the title "Anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism." The author was basically right: hostility to Zionism, as such, is not identical with hostility to the Jews. The problem was that, in that case, the so-called "anti-Zionism" associated with the Prague trial was nothing else than anti-Semitism. No Zionists were involved; only Communist leaders who happened to be Jewish, and who because of that were indicted, condemned and (most of them) executed, their trial being nothing else than an argument for an overall anti-Jewish campaign.

The blindness of the French journalist was self-inflicted blindness, a violent effort not to see what was under his very eyes, at a time when the "anti-Zionist" discourse came from a dictatorial regime, and those holding it were policemen, prosecutors and executioners. But that same formula, "anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism," has been repeated since then, times and times again, in all kinds of contexts and in all conceivable circumstances.

Such a way of thinking belongs seemingly to the world of intellectual fairness: let's not block the free flow of political talk by putting a stigma of anti-Semitism on a discourse, the denunciation of Zionism that is intrinsically legitimate. Indeed, it is true that "anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism." The two are sometimes close, and they sometimes interact in a dangerous way, but they are not identical—just like, on a broader level, criticism of Israel should not be confused with hatred of Jews.

However, such an argument is often turned upside down. It, then, becomes an effort to absolve at once any anti-Zionist rant. People are so afraid of falling into the trap of forbidding a rightful discourse that they endorse, even passively, the most hateful discourses. People translate the formula "anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism" into another, quite different formula, namely: "what is anti-Zionist cannot be truly anti-Semitic." What they are doing, actually, is whitewashing anti-Semitism whenever it comes under the disguise of anti-Zionism.

Those who repeat the mantra "anti-Zionist, not anti-Semite" seemingly react to a presumption of guilt, according to which any anti-Zionist discourse is suspected of anti-Semitism. In fact, they have reversed the terms of the argument. They have created an overall presumption of innocence, whereby any anti-Zionist discourse should be, ipso facto, free from the suspicion of anti-Semitism. This presumption of innocence becomes then part and parcel of a militant way of thinking; with the result that anti-Semitism is given free rein if only it is housed under the large folds of the anti-Zionist flag.

There is a way of speaking about—or against—"Zionism" and Israel that differs radically from a more or less factual criticism of Israeli policy. Once we reach a turning point, criticism is no longer about what people (Israelis, Jews) do, or are supposed to do, but about who they are. Everything is traced back to a "Zionist" character, which explains the essentially evil nature of the State of Israel. Hostility to Israeli leadership turns into hatred of Israelis as a whole, and of the Jews in general. If the word "Zionist" comes to hold such a central place in the discourse, it is because it calls up the international dimension of Jewish identity, with more than a flavor of conspiracy theory.

That kind of "anti-Zionism" is no more a denunciation of "Zionism" than "anti-Semitism" is a denunciation of "Semitism" (a concept devoid, as we know, of any meaning.) That kind of "anti-Zionism" does not look at Zionism as it really is—a political movement with many facets and whose activity spanned decades, a movement that may be criticized, just like any human enterprise. What those people have in mind is another "Zionism:" an evil and borderless conspiracy, both Israeli and international, with agents and surrogates everywhere; a global power, whose tentacles reach into our cities and into our homes.

After he was for many years the leading philosopher of the French Communist Party, Roger Garaudy converted to Islam in 1982, at the age of 69. In 1995, he published a book called "The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics" that was entirely based on Holocaust denial. In one chapter, devoted to "The Myth of the Holocaust," we learn that people "grossly exaggerate" the numbers of the Jewish victims and that the existence of "gas chambers" is nothing but an invention. Two

chapters deal with "The Israeli-Zionist Lobby in the United States" and with "The Israeli-Zionist Lobby in France;" Mr. Garaudy bemoans, inter alia, "the almost total domination of the French and American media by Israeli Zionism."

That book didn't diminish Mr. Garaudy's popularity in the Arab and Moslem world, quite the contrary: Libyan leader Muammar Kaddhafi hailed Mr. Garaudy as "Europe's greatest philosopher since Plato and Aristotle." But the philosopher was indicted and condemned in a French court for racial defamation, incitement of racial hatred, and Holocaust denial. The judges found that Mr. Garaudy's defense —the book, he claimed, was "anti-Zionist" and not "anti-Semitic"—had no merit, because the content of the book was "clearly an onslaught on all the Jews." At the audience, Mr. Garaudy said: "I challenge anyone to find the word 'Jew' used pejoratively anywhere in my book." That was the point. He didn't need to use the J-word, because the Z-word was there, precisely for that purpose.

Did Mr. Garaudy become an anti-Semite because of his late conversion to Islam, which fostered a commitment to the anti-Zionist struggle? Or was he a closet anti-Semite, who just waited for an opportunity to express himself as such? We will never know. There are no blanket answers for questions of that kind. In the words of the British sociologist David Hirsch, "the central relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism may be thought of either as one of cause (underlying anti-Semitism motivates a disproportionate response to Israel) or as one of effect (a disproportionate response to Israel leads to anti-Semitic ways of thinking or to anti-Semitic exclusions of 'Zionists.')"

Anyway, the very fact that Mr. Garaudy did not just mimic anti-Zionist slogans written by others, that he so easily found a language of his own to convey anti-Semitic feelings, speaks volumes about the intensity of his beliefs. Maybe the Z-word made it easier for him. If there is something disturbing, frightening even, about today's wide use of that word, it is its dehumanizing function. Remember Paul Foot's clumsy defense of Tam Dalyell: what cannot be said about Jews, can be said after they have been conveniently disguised as "Zionists." That's what such words are for: facilitating remorseless prejudice.

In France, we hold in high respect the memory of a priest, Archbishop (later Cardinal) Saliège. In 1942, under the German occupation, Monseigneur Saliège wrote a pastoral letter to be read aloud in churches. It said: "Jews are men, Jews are women." There are times when the highest ethical deed is to say nothing else but that. Any attempt to deprive people of their human nature, by calling them names that are supposed to make them easy prey for their hunters, is potential murder. Not that those names are evil in and of themselves: being a Zionist today is no more shameful than being Jewish in 1942. It all depends on the intentions of the speaker. Such is the true meaning of the Z-word.