

**Robert S. Wistrich.** *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel.*  
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FROM AMBIVALENCE  
TO BETRAYAL  
*The Left, the Jews, and Israel*

ROBERT S. WISTRICH

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Most novel areas of scholarly inquiry tend to undergo a development from borderline dilettantism and antiquarianism to increasing conceptual sophistication, although to some extent this may be a rather uncharitable way to put it. What subsequently comes to seem overly simplistic tends to have been, in its day, indispensable empirical groundwork without which the subsequent more mature scholarship would not have been possible. Taking a very broad-sweep approach to the historiography of the Left's grappling with anti-semitism and matters supposedly Jewish, one can readily identify Edmund Silberner as the pioneer whose energies were too comprehensively absorbed by the process of amassing empirical material to allow for any great conceptual sophistication. All of us who work in this field stand on his shoulders and yet his simplistic interpretation of the material is by today's standards often baffling.

Robert Wistrich is the second major scholar in the field on whose shoulders we all stand. He added considerably to the stock of empirical material at our disposal but also sought, with a cer-

tain measure of success, to go beyond Silberner in doing more to contextualize that material. Beginning with a succession of articles in the early 1970s, his initial efforts culminated, *inter alia*, in the publication of his monograph *Socialism and the Jews: The Dilemmas of Assimilation in Germany and Austria-Hungary* in 1982. Alongside the late Jonathan Frankel's masterwork, *Prophecy and Politics* (also published in 1982), this work made an important contribution and helped scholars in the field like Jack Jacobs and myself move forward. In recent years, Wistrich has developed a particular interest in Islamicist anti-semitism and Western responses to this phenomenon, not least among the political Left.

In the volume under review, Wistrich seeks to combine these more historical and contemporary interests to offer a survey of the Left's dealings with Jews and antisemitism for the entire period stretching from the early nineteenth century to current alignments he characterizes as "the Marxist-Islamist Alliance." While many of the chapters focus on individuals, from Karl Marx and

Friedrich Engels to Eduard Bernstein and Franz Mehring, from Bernard Lazare and Karl Kautsky to Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and Bruno Kreisky, a few chapters are more thematic in nature, examining the track record of the Left in general and mainstream socialism in particular through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The central problem with this volume is that Wistrich sets out by claiming that he has a thesis but never actually in any meaningful sense demonstrates that thesis; instead he simply presupposes its validity. If I understand it correctly, his overarching thesis is that the left-wing politics evolving in the early nineteenth century were “profoundly antisemitic” (p. 1) and played a crucial role in generating modern antisemitism (p. 37). This antisemitic orientation was later partially, though never wholly, ameliorated in mainstream Socialism but perpetuated among the more radical Left and is now becoming as central to what is left of the Left as it once was “during the birthpangs of modern socialism over 150 years ago” (p. 28). Although Wistrich’s account of the earlier period consists almost entirely of texts he already published elsewhere in the course of the last two to three decades and has updated only in the most perfunctory of ways, this posited thesis does indicate an interpretative shift of sorts. “Forty years on,” he explains, “I have to say that the *classical* Marxist Left ... seems to me to belong to a very different political universe from the pro-Palestinian leftism of our own time” (p. xi).

The problem with all this is that the precise connection between all the phenomena Wistrich presents remains unclear. This results from a problem of method. For the most part, Wistrich resorts to the technique of in/felicitous-phrase hunting. One examines everything one can find that an individual/sect/faction/group/party/movement ever said explicitly about Jews. If it contains more than one or two infelicities the individual/

sect/faction/group/party/movement in question is then declared to have been antisemitic. If it contains fewer than one or two infelicities the individual/sect/faction/group/party/movement is cleared. However, if these otherwise automatic moves militate against the author’s overarching thesis the infelicitous (or felicitous) remarks standing in the way are declared exceptions that confirm the rule. Hegel, for instance, had some pretty unsettling ideas about Jews but was also one of the most outspoken and unreserved proponents of Jewish emancipation in his generation. Since Hegel was a leftie, however, for Wistrich this can only mean that Hegel was not being Hegel when he spoke out in favor of Jewish emancipation but was “in this respect ... still a pupil of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition of universalist rationality” (p. 75). Moses Hess, on the other hand, wrote one of the most vitriolic rants about Jews and Judaism ever produced among the political Left. Yet given that he is also one of the precursors of Zionism this is, on Wistrich’s reading, “an isolated reference” (p. 93). Eduard Bernstein, the founding father of Marxist revisionism, features positively in Wistrich’s canon and therefore has to be defended against (in this case my) “somewhat unfairly critical discussion” of his stance (p. 174) (thus dismissing with exactly three words a carefully crafted forty-page discussion of Bernstein’s position).

In short, what Wistrich basically does and, to be sure, for the most part does well, is assemble a wide range of examples demonstrating that individuals/sects/factions/groups/parties/movements on the political left have displayed a staggering array of problematic attitudes towards antisemitism and Jews, ranging from callous indifference to deep-seated animosity towards, and violent fantasies about, Jews. Without any great attention to the meanings of these attitudes in their specific contexts Wistrich then infers that, if a significant number of individuals/sects/factions/groups/parties/movements on the political left can be shown to have subscribed to similar peculiar

or disturbing ideas about Jews then this must result from the fact that they were/are on the political left. This may be the case but would surely actually need to be demonstrated and cannot simply be taken for granted.

On a theoretical level, Wistrich is evidently aware of this. He writes early on in the book, for instance, that “I want to examine how far modern antisemitism, in its early phases (i.e., before 1900) was a movement of the left or right, radical or conservative—or whether it belongs to some more heterogeneous, hybrid category” (p. 37). Here we see an indication of the insight that individuals involved in left-wing politics are not shaped exclusively by left-wing influences. Alas, Wistrich does not actually act on this promise. My own argument has always been that the grave misapprehensions and problematic attitudes towards Jews and antisemitism displayed by left-wing individuals/sects/factions/groups/parties/movements are principally to do with the fact that in this particular respect left-wing politics failed to deconstruct a fetish pervasive in society at large. Wistrich, as already indicated, wishes to argue the exact opposite, namely, that society at large is ultimately pulled or pushed towards antisemitism (if at all) by the political Left. Either of these contentions can obviously be substantiated only if we pay close attention to the specificity of the phenomena we are examining and the very first question would surely have to be that of how the problematic attitudes of left-wingers compare to those of other political groupings and society at large.

While the situation becomes rather more complicated in the course of the twentieth century, the simple truth of the matter is that in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century virtually all non-Jewish Europeans were, in terms of their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, Jews by the standards that most people would accept today, antisemites. That many involved in left-wing politics should have shared these perceptions and attitudes, in and of

itself, tells us precious little except that they were disappointingly like everyone else, nor does it demonstrate that they necessarily influenced each other in this respect, rather than all being influenced by society at large, regardless of their left-wing orientation. Even if they adapted their problematic attitudes towards Jews and antisemitism to fit with their left-wing worldview this would not establish their left-wing orientation as the actual cause of these problematic attitudes. My point here is not that Wistrich could not conceivably be right but simply that he fails to make the argument. Consequently, his claims about “a poisonous anti-Jewish legacy ... in Marx, Fourier, and Proudhon, extending through the orthodox Communists and ‘non-conformist’ Trotskyists to the Islamo-Leftist hybrids of today” or “from Karl Marx to Sheikh al-Qaradawi, via Ken Livingstone” are pure, unsubstantiated polemic (p. xiii).

It is little wonder, therefore, that Wistrich operates with constantly shifting targets. I have to confess that for one absent-minded moment I found myself wondering how Wistrich would like it if somebody made statements about “the Jews” in the same way that he makes them about “the Left.” The subtitle of the book, however, is *The Left, the Jews, and Israel*. This already gives a pretty clear indication that Wistrich does not intend to win us over primarily with conceptual finesse. I have tried to order the various butts of Wistrich’s criticism, as he lays them out in the early part of the book, from the more specific to the more sweeping: he takes issue with “the pro-Islamic Left” (p. xii), “the anti-Zionist Left” (p. 2), with “anti-racist” leftists” (p. 16), with “a significant segment of left-wing opinion” (p. 17), “a broad section of the contemporary Left” (p. 3), “a whole section of the Left” (p. xiii), “much contemporary left-wing discourse” (p. 25), “large sections of the Left today” (p. 3), “the radical left” (p. 25), “most left-wing thinkers” (p. 19) “most of the Left” (p. xv), and “the European Left” (p. xiii). He speaks without any qualification of “the Left’s general amnesia regarding the Holocaust” (p. 19). Some-

times his focus is on “the 19<sup>th</sup>-century seedbed of antisemitic socialism” (p. xii), at other junctures on “socialists, anarchists or Communists” (p. 18). Nor does he consistently manage to maintain his focus on the Left, for instance, when he criticizes “the left (and ... parts of the European liberal mainstream)” (p. 2) or “liberals, leftists and ... some mainstream Jewish organizations” (p. 18), or tackles an issue “whether it be Muslim, leftist, liberal, or neo-fascist in origin” (p. xv). “Marxist believers” are no better in dealing with religious fanaticism “than most liberals and conservatives in the West” (p. 19) and “Marxists and Islamists share a curiously similar apocalyptic agenda” with “parts of the neo-fascist Right” (p. 28).

Michael Berkowitz noted in a largely favorable survey of Wistrich’s work published in the *Journal of Modern History* in 1998 that “he explores the phenomenon of antisemitism with much the same lenses that have been used by others.”[1] Some fifteen years lie between this statement and the publication of the volume under review yet it is evident that Berkowitz’s reservations about Wistrich’s conceptual originality or prowess hold as true today as they did then. Berkowitz especially noted that “Wistrich has a more general aversion to recognizing that Jews were able to embody several different identities simultaneously, even some that were apparently at odds with each other.”[2] It is surely fair to say that this complexity and messiness, and the insight that Jews and non-Jews alike were conflicted in their attitudes to one another, have come to take center stage in the scholarly assessment of Jewish/non-Jewish relations in general and antisemitism in particular. Why, if he remains unwilling to engage this trend, critically or otherwise, has Wistrich chosen to publish this pastiche or, to put it more bluntly, to write the present book yet again? He himself states that he assumes this to be the most “comprehensive study of this historical phenomenon ... attempted in a global perspective” (p. xvii). This is probably true but it is, of course, an argu-

ment from quantity, not quality, and the most comprehensive study of the bigger picture is by no means inevitably the most comprehensive study of the individual component parts of which that bigger picture consists; the exact opposite is in fact highly likely.

There is one group of potential readers, of course, for whom this volume, as far as it goes, is positively ideal: anyone who has previously read none of Wistrich’s work in this field will find the bulk of it neatly assembled in this one volume. Yet what are those of us already familiar with Wistrich’s work to make of this volume?

Having read a fair cross-section of Wistrich’s earlier work on the Second International in the context of my own doctoral research, I have focused principally on those parts of the book with which I instantly felt overfamiliar as I began to read this volume. I wanted to be sure, needless to say, that my memory wasn’t simply playing tricks on me but on closer inspection it transpires that entire chapters have indeed simply been reprinted in this volume with only the most perfunctory of revisions (if any). I imagine we’ve all been there at some time in our life: a reader has pointed to certain issues or scholars we neglected to discuss. Yet, be it for good reasons or bad, we are not in the mood to take on the reader’s comments in earnest and instead seek to resolve the challenge by inserting the occasional additional reference of the “see also” kind. This would certainly seem to be Wistrich’s preferred method of updating old texts.

As far as I can tell, the unqualified inserted “see also” reference implies that Wistrich has found a subsequent author who agrees with him. Only on very few occasions does he go beyond this to include a judgement on subsequent scholars who have questioned his conclusions. I myself, for instance, have taken issue with one of his statements “without providing any compelling evidence to the contrary” (p. 173). Bang go another fifty pages of carefully crafted argument in my

book. (That I seem to hold pride of place among recent scholars deemed worthy of dismissal by Wistrich is something of an honor in the bigger scheme of things but a potential embarrassment in the context of this review. I am as confident as one can be, though, that I have not allowed this to influence the tone of the review unduly.) In the chapters I examined carefully, all of these insertions were made in the references, incidentally, and none in the main text.

To the extent that any changes have been made to the main text these are, with very few exceptions, merely stylistic. In one chapter, ten lines on H. G. Wells have been inserted (though with no specific references attached). My favorite revision of the main text can be found in chapter 6. This chapter reproduces an article Wistrich published in the 1992 *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* ("Socialism and Judeophobia--Antisemitism in Europe before 1914"). In the original version, Wistrich referred to "current historiography dealing more narrowly with Marx and his writing on the 'Jewish Question'" (p. 116). Twenty years on, this same historiography is obviously no longer quite as current. Instead of actually updating the text by reading up on the more recent scholarship, however, Wistrich has simply substituted "biographies" for "current historiography" (p. 181). Yet since when do monographs focusing specifically on one thematic aspect of a person's profile count as biographies?

Incidentally, Wistrich has not only recycled vast swathes of his own earlier work in this volume, he has already begun to cannibalize this volume itself as well. Not only will a substantial part of this book's chapter on Rosa Luxemburg be familiar reading for those who know Wistrich's contribution to the festschrift for Chimen Abramsky that Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steve Zipperstein published in 1988; readers will also find most of the chapter from this new 2012 book published as an article on Rosa Luxemburg in the 2012 *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*.

One of my dearest and most trusted mentors has for many years tried to impress on me that one just shouldn't say anything at all about bad or weak books. I have sometimes followed her counsel, especially in dealing with first books by junior scholars, but in a case like this I think it is important to speak out for at least two reasons, one of them ethical, the other political.

Firstly, Wistrich enjoys an enormous reputation as one of the world's foremost scholars on antisemitism and he has a considerable range of resources in his gift. With this sort of power comes (or at least should come) responsibility and that responsibility would surely begin with a genuine and serious willingness to engage current scholarship other than his own. To expect one's peers to plough through a 600-page tome on the off chance there might be something new in it seems to me to reflect an all too healthy sense of one's own importance and hardly constitutes collegial behavior.

Secondly, like Wistrich, I am an arch-alarmist when it comes to evaluating antisemitism as a contemporary threat, indeed a catastrophist (to steal a term I recently heard a colleague use). Moreover, Wistrich would be hard-pressed to top my anger and frustration at the failure of so many on the political left to position themselves appropriately, not least because my goal is a reconstructed Left that will get it right in future while Wistrich assumes that the "degeneration" he describes in his book signifies "the final state of decomposition in the slow death of Socialism and Communism" (p. 28). It is precisely because the situation we are in is as dangerous as it is, however, that the last thing we can afford is simplistic alarmism. Instead of presenting a genuine challenge to those beholden to complacency and denial, Wistrich offers them an unnecessarily easy opportunity to discredit the alarmist case as undercontextualized and underconceptualized and a mere reiteration of the same old, same old.

Notes

[1]. Michael Berkowitz, "Robert S. Wistrich and European Jewish History: Straddling the Public and Scholarly Spheres," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (1998): 119-136; 123.

[2]. Ibid., 127.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

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