

“Anti-Semitism” accusations used in attempt to prevent Ken Loach speaking at Oxford University

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The attempt to prevent the globally respected veteran British film director Ken Loach from speaking at Oxford University on charges of anti-Semitism is a filthy slander campaign.

The witch-hunt is being scaled up against any left comment or criticism of Israeli war crimes, with the aim of curtailing free speech and democratic rights. Although the event went ahead, it presages future restrictions.

The 84-year-old director had been invited to discuss aspects of his career at a virtual event organised by St Peter’s College, where he studied, and The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH). Such recognition of an eminent director is hardly unexpected, but the university’s Jewish Society (JSoc) and the Board of Deputies (BoD) of British Jews immediately called for the event to be cancelled. JSoc President Samuel Benjamin said the event was “deeply disappointing,” and organised at the “expense of the welfare of Jewish students in Oxford.” JSoc called continuing with the event “a decision which we condemn.”

BoD President Marie van der Zyl argued against the university giving Loach any platform. She called it “entirely unacceptable” that an Oxford college “would not conduct its due diligence and allow Ken Loach to address students... This event should not take place.”

The charges of anti-Semitism against Loach are both long discredited and made in bad faith. The demands for cancellation centred on the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism. The definition and listed examples, which largely focus on Israel, provide a pretext for condemning principled opposition to the Israeli state,

its criminal oppression of the Palestinians and the nationalist ideology of Zionism.

The insistence that Zionism is the legitimate and indeed unchallengeable political voice of the Jewish people, and the claim that anti-Zionism is anti-Jewish and most often a form of “left anti-Semitism”, became the basis of a witch-hunt of supporters of Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party by the Blairite right. Loach was vocal against that witch-hunt. In 2018, he called for the deselection of Labour MPs who had joined Conservatives and Unionists at an anti-Corbyn rally organised by the BoD.

Oxford, like most British universities, did not initially adopt the IHRA definition. Last October, however, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson threatened institutions with regulatory action, possibly including suspending “funding streams,” unless they adopted it. Oxford fell in line in December.

Loach, wrote JSoc, had “on numerous occasions... made remarks that are antisemitic under the IHRA definition.”

A letter from the campaign group Artists for Palestine, protesting the “McCarthyite campaign” against the director, was signed by dozens of artists, including Mike Leigh, Roger Waters, Mark Rylance, Samuel West, and Ahdaf Soueif. They wrote, “If any further evidence were needed to demonstrate how a vaguely worded definition is being deployed to silence critics of Israeli policy towards Palestinians—then this is it.”

The St Peter’s student body, the Junior Common Room (JCR), passed a motion accusing Loach of a “history of blatant anti-Semitism,” describing him as a “known apologist for anti-Semitism.” They called on

students to boycott this event by “a noted anti-Semite.” Other JCRs have since followed suit.

Professor Judith Buchanan, master of the college, said the event’s organisers had “not foreseen controversy.” Despite a protestation that “Neither St Peter’s College nor TORCH nor the university believes that no-platforming is the way to pursue goals of a free and open academic community,” she apologised in an email to Jewish students for “having caused hurt [and] made mistakes.” She was reported to have said she was “truly sorry” for allowing Loach to speak at the event.

Van der Zyl outlined the political thrust. “Higher education institutions have a duty of care to their students, which must include a zero tolerance policy to antisemitism and those who minimise or deny it.”

This is the crux. Every attempt to outline Loach’s anti-Semitism under the IHRA definition demonstrates that his alleged offence is criticism of Zionism. Each one points primarily to his involvement with Jim Allen’s play *Perdition* in 1987.

The play, which owed much to the trial of Dr Rudolf Kastner in Israel in 1953, explored the extent to which Zionism, as a nationalist tendency, found accommodations with fascism as a means towards building an Israeli state in Palestine. The Royal Court asked advice of prominent pro-Zionist academics eager to denounce the play as historically inaccurate, leading artistic director Max Stafford-Clark to withdraw his support. Loach asked why he had spoken “only to Zionist historians and activists about a play to which they were politically hostile?”

The socialist Allen, for daring to attack Zionism, was also denounced as “anti-Semitic.” Facing threats to the theatre’s funding, Stafford-Clark withdrew the play 48 hours before opening. It was 12 years before it was performed.

Perdition has been universally mentioned as the source of anti-Semitism charges against Loach. The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* devoted a whole piece to attacking the play following the St Peter’s event.

In 1987, Loach had pleaded for an opportunity to stage at least a reading of the play to disprove the allegations. As we noted in 1999, the play is “quite explicit on the difference between Zionism and Judaism, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism,” and “bristles with the agonies of the Holocaust, agonies which some of the play’s wilder critics in 1987 would

have had one believe Allen was denying.”

And not just then. *Jewish Chronicle* editor Stephen Pollard, ostensibly defending Loach’s right to free speech, casually described *Perdition* as “notoriously anti-Semitic.” Actress Tracy-Anne Oberman said it was “a horrible play” that “uses truly horrible racist language above and beyond what’s acceptable to make a political point.”

Oberman, who was prominent in the anti-Corbyn witch-hunt, was most explicit about the real reasons for the hostility to *Perdition*. The play “was written as a political weapon,” she said. “When you look at that period of history and say there was a collaboration between Zionist Jews to kill their own people in order to establish the state of Israel you are attempting to delegitimise the state of Israel.”

Even *Perdition*’s critics struggle to make such charges stick. The *Jewish Chronicle* admits that it accused “*some* Zionists of collaborating with the Nazis” (emphasis added)—not all, as is implied.

In a letter predating the IHRA definition, Loach noted that “the charge of anti-Semitism is the time-honoured way to deflect anti-Zionist arguments.” He has commented that the latest false accusations against him are “recycled” on the basis of “persistent misrepresentation and distortion.” As he has noted before, “The taint of anti-Semitism is toxic... To portray myself as anti-Semitic simply because I add my voice to those who denounce the plight of the Palestinians is grotesque.”



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