

From quotas to DEI – the evolution of campus antisemitism

If anything, the fallout from DEI shows how antisemitism in academia has come full circle. Op-ed.

By Matthew M. Hausman

As a legal studies professor in the community college system, I was asked to teach a new course on basic student skills mandated for undergraduates at all state colleges and universities. Though I initially agreed to do so, I changed my mind upon discovering that the curriculum includes a component on “diversity, equity and inclusion,” which seeks to indoctrinate rather than teach. In addition, the ideology underlying DEI depicts Jews as oppressors and Israel as a colonial occupier, promotes anti-Israel revisionist history, and has been instrumental in facilitating the antisemitic encampments and riots currently plaguing campuses across the country.



Anti-Israel encampment at DePaul University

REUTERS/Jim Vondruska

When asked by a well-meaning colleague whether I could somehow use DEI to facilitate constructive dialogue about antisemitism, I said it was impossible because of core progressive tenets that draw on classical anti-Jewish stereotypes and conspiracy theories.

If anything, the fallout from DEI shows how antisemitism in academia has come full circle.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jews in the US and Europe had to overcome strict quotas to gain acceptance to universities, and once enrolled were often subjected to discrimination, ostracization, and harassment. The quota system persisted well into the twentieth century, and during the 1930s, many American universities were amenable to Nazi sympathies, racial antisemitism thrived, and dehumanizing stereotypes prevailed in classrooms, fraternities, and dormitories.

It was socially unacceptable after the Holocaust for institutions to be forthright in their prejudice, however, and

admissions quotas grew more subtle or were relaxed entirely. Campus antisemitism was no longer as monolithic as it once was, and Jews experienced varying degrees of acceptance across a wide spectrum. Many institutions welcomed Jewish students and faculty while some were less inviting; and this pretty much remained the norm until 1967.

After the Six-Day War, terrorism against Israel and global Jewish targets increased, liberals embraced the Palestinian Arabs, and there was a seismic shift in the way antisemitism was expressed in academia. Though it is a modern political construct without historical foundation, Palestinian Arab "national identity" provided the vehicle for mainstreaming Jew-hatred through pretextual philosophical lenses and revisionist historical narratives.

When Israel was no longer regarded as an underdog deserving of sympathy, it became acceptable to apply pejorative stereotypes to her as a Jewish state by camouflaging them as political criticism. Indeed, delegitimizing Israel became common in intellectual circles, even though it required her detractors to engage in tortured sophistry using moral relativism, moral equivalence, or historical revisionism.

Thus, antisemitism and anti-Israel hatred were repackaged as academic theory and taught in the classroom.

Moral relativism was employed to criticize Israel while exonerating her enemies from culpability for brutality and terrorism. This view repudiates the concept of absolute morality, holding instead that standards of right and wrong are culturally relative and there are no universal ethical constants. Some moral relativists believe, as did Jean-Paul Sartre, that ethics and morality are purely subjective and not amenable to absolute standards.

In the view of many moral relativists, hatred and terrorism against Israel are not inherently wrong because such conduct

arises in cultures where it is organically acceptable. And since the atrocities of October 7th were considered rational acts within the society that nurtured the perpetrators, moral relativists have not been inclined to condemn them in absolute terms. They might find rape, torture, and murder reprehensible when perpetrated by common criminals (or on them, ed.) , but not when inflicted by Hamas as acts of "resistance." Conversely, moral relativists have no problem chastising Israel for seeking to destroy Hamas and dismantle its infrastructure.

The relativist view evaluates acts of violent antisemitism against the perception of Arab victimhood. Thus, because Islamists believe Israel's very existence is illegitimate and victimizes all Muslims, even the barbaric atrocities of October 7th can be considered morally justifiable. According to this view, no sovereign nation would ever be permitted to defend itself – even when its civilians are raped, tortured, and murdered – if the aggressors are seen as victims and therefore morally superior to their perceived oppressors.

The doctrine of moral equivalence, in contrast, compares disparate positions or actions and holds that they are equally good or equally bad, and that no party to a conflict is ethically superior to any other. This concept was elucidated by William James in his 1910 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War." As applied to Israel, it means that Hamas's atrocities are no less moral than Israel's acts of self-defense. A crass example of this was the International Criminal Court's recent decision to issue arrest warrants for Bibi Netanyahu as well as Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Ismail Haniyeh for war crimes and crimes against humanity. That is, the ICC (which has a long history of anti-Israel bias) would not charge Hamas terrorists without also charging the Israeli Prime Minister for supposedly equivalent conduct.

Regardless of which syllogism they use, anti-Israel academics must also engage in historical revisionism to claim that Jews

are strangers to the Mideast, Israel is a colonial state, and Palestinian Arabs are a repressed indigenous population. Moreover, they must rewrite history to erase the fact that Jewish nationhood goes back 3,500 years and is reflected in the archaeological, literary, and scriptural records. In contrast, the Palestinian Arab narrative is only about sixty years old and is a modern political creation based on a rejection of Jewish history.

In the decades since 1967, these philosophical paradigms have dominated university classrooms, where professors undercut Israel's legitimacy, validate a Palestinian Arab myth devoid of historicity, and imbue antisemitic hatred of Israel with academic credibility. Ironically, many of these professors also preach the concept of "natural law," which eschews religion and instead posits the existence of universal moral standards cutting across time and culture. But conceding the existence of any kind of absolute morality – whether religious or natural – undermines the precepts they use to intellectualize anti-Israel hatred (and exposes their logical inconsistency).

When confronted with the incongruity of their paradigms, these academic critics usually default to blaming the victim by attributing anti-Israel extremism to Jewish provocations – a view that ignores both ancient history and modern reality. Indeed, Jewish faith and culture never taught hatred of Arabs, and Jews never subjugated Muslims at any point in their history. The lynchpin of this position is the myth that Israel was created on the ruins of an indigenous nation of Palestine – which in fact never existed.

Such revisionist claims are absurd because Jews never persecuted or colonized Arabs or Muslims. Really, it was the Jews who were subjugated and abused under Islam and had their ancestral homeland usurped through conquest and forced dhimmitude.

As noxious as these theories were when introduced into the classroom, they did not typically manifest in widespread violence against Jews on the campus street. However, since the advent of DEI and validation of the twin myths of Palestinian Arab victimhood and superseding indigeneity, campuses have erupted in vicious protests, Jewish students have been threatened, harassed, and assaulted, and demonstrators have chanted "from the river to the sea...", "death to Israel," and "gas the Jews." Rather than restore order by punishing antisemitic violence, university presidents have actually negotiated with the mobs, dignified their grievances, and in some cases agreed to their demands.

And they have utterly failed their Jewish students.

In what universe could administrators from Harvard, UPenn, Columbia, and other elite institutions be seen as acting responsibly? Their failure to assert authority indicates either cowardice or complicity and goes far beyond the enabling of hate-fests like Israel Apartheid Week and divestment campaigns by vapid student governments and advocacy groups.

Most of the offending universities have conduct codes that penalize the exercise of speech when it (a) is deemed hurtful to black, gay, Muslim, female, or trans students, (b) is supportive of conservative or traditional family values, or (c) gives rise to "microaggressions" upsetting to progressive sensibilities. Clearly, they have no problem suppressing speech that violates leftist ideology or quashing dissent. But they will not protect Jewish students from physical harm, eject outside agitators from their property, expel students for terrorizing others, or condemn antisemitism without qualification.

For Jewish students and faculty (excluding those radicals who identify with antisemitic, pro-Hamas progressives), the fear and loathing experienced today is reminiscent of that faced by

earlier generations – particularly during the Nazi era, when racist antisemitism suffused American academia. Though conspicuous antisemitic intimidation and harassment were discouraged during the latter half of the twentieth century, anti-Jewish violence has returned with a vengeance, thanks in no small measure to the fundamental disdain for Jews and Israel inherent in DEI ideology and baked into the modern progressive agenda.

Some institutions have recognized this and are dismantling their DEI programs, but most lack the honesty to admit their ethical malfeasance or the fortitude to correct it.

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