

PRO-ZIONIST ZEALOTS AND INTELLECTUAL DISHONESTY: A REPLY TO KÜNTZEL AND MEADE

By Gilbert Achcar

Since I have been courteously invited to respond, I will oblige, but only succinctly as I do not have time for a 20-page reply, which is what it would have taken, had I addressed every single distortion and misrepresentation in what is definitely the most dishonest discussion of my book, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, that I have read to this day.

I won't here discuss the substance of the two authors' comments as they are so often vile that no person who has read my book or knows my positions could in good faith take their slanders for true, such as when my two critics write: "Achcar criticises Arab antisemitism not because it envisages the murder of Jews and renders the Middle East conflict insoluble, but because it impedes the necessary struggle against Israel." (p. 6). I will here content myself with examining only one example of their method, leaving it to interested readers to refer to the book itself and check all the quotes produced by my two critics—generally out of context, thus distorting my meaning, even when they seem to quote approvingly at the start of their essay.

They write about me:

"When standard academic practices fail him, Achcar resorts to other means, selecting and underlining whatever supports his prejudices and leaving out or dismissing the importance of everything else. A random examination of his use of quotations has brought to light several significant distortions."

It is their review and this accusation itself that are entirely based on the above-described "other means." As for standard academic practices, they could not "fail" my two critics since such practices seem to be totally alien to them.

On page 10, the two authors write:

[Achcar argues that] *"Israel's international image suffered severe damage in the wake of the invasion of Lebanon so that it resorted to invoking the Holocaust on a particularly massive scale in order to revive its reputation. It was, according to Achcar, this alleged propaganda offensive that first provoked Holocaust denial in the Arab world: 'The denial in the Arab world ... began with the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.'"*

The reference they give in the footnote (to the U.S. and U.K. editions of *The Arabs and the Holocaust*) is:

"Achcar, NY, p. 256; L, p. 243. See also the interview 'Gilbert Achcar, Arab attitudes to the Holocaust', at www.SocialistWorker.org, May 20, 2010."

Thus, the reader is led to believe that I wrote in my book that "the denial in the Arab world ... began with the invasion of Lebanon in 1982." This quote, however, is not taken from my book, but from the interview that is only mentioned as a "See also" in my critics' footnote. This alone is already a blatant falsification. Falsification number two is that the authors refer readers to a website of a far left U.S. organization (www.SocialistWorker.org), despite the

fact that that website clearly states at the bottom: “First published at Truthout.org.” Why did they refer their readers to this one of the many websites that reproduced the interview after it was posted on Truthout, instead of referring them to the original source (<http://archive.truthout.org/the-league-against-denial59474>), one wonders. The reason, perhaps, aside from exploiting the hatred for the radical left that their sympathizers share with them, is that, had they cited Truthout, they would have had to use the original title of the piece, “The League against Denial,” instead of “Arab attitudes to the Holocaust” as reworded by Socialist Worker (SW). But there is much worse than that. The introductory paragraph to the interview on the SW website, adapted from the presentation at the bottom of the Truthout page, says the following:

“At the end of April, Achcar was interviewed in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the daily newspaper with the widest circulation in Israel—the first time the native of Lebanon was interviewed in an Israeli newspaper. A differently edited English version was published May 2 in *The Jerusalem Report*, the best-known Israeli biweekly magazine in English. Here, we publish a translation of the interview as it was published in *Yedioth Ahronoth*.”

So my two utterly dishonest critics conceal from their readers that what they are quoting as an interview in *Socialist Worker* is actually an interview that was done for and published in Israel’s most widely circulated Hebrew-language daily newspaper (where the “League against Denial” title comes from; the article was published on two full pages, 4 and 5, on 27 April 2010) and published again in English translation in Israel’s best-known English-language magazine. They conceal this fact that shows to what extent pro-Zionist zealots like themselves may be much more fanatical in their defense of Israel than the Israeli mainstream itself—a truth that anyone who is familiar with the contrast between the Israeli press and Israel’s unconditional defenders in the West can confirm, and which moderate Israelis themselves readily acknowledge.

What is there in that interview? Here are a few excerpts—mixing the Israeli journalist’s comment and his quotes of what I told him, as in the original—so that the single bit of a sentence quoted by my critics can be read in true context (emphasis added in all quotations):

“The Phenomenon of Holocaust denial in the Arab world is wrong, misleading and causes damage to the Palestinian cause.” In his new book, Lebanese-French academic Gilbert Achcar grapples for the first time with the Arab attitudes towards the Holocaust.

“Gilbert Achcar left Lebanon in 1983, during the first major war Israel waged in his land. Nearly 30 years later, Achcar, a professor of international relations at the London School of Oriental and African Studies and a militant leftist and peace activist, asserts that it was that brutal war between Israel and the Palestinians in Lebanon that was a turning point in the way the Arab world related to the Holocaust.

“The comparisons that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin made at the time between Yasser Arafat and Hitler and between Israel’s rivals and the Nazis, he contends, cheapened the Holocaust and made many people on the Arab side compare Israel to the Nazis and even claim that Israel invented the Holocaust to justify its policy in the Middle East.

“A few weeks ago, the 59-year-old French Lebanese academic published a new book in France, whose title speaks of its unusual contents The Arabs and the Holocaust. In this book, Achcar, who previously published books with well-known U.S. and Israeli left-wing activists

Noam Chomsky and Michael Warschawski, addresses a most explosive subject for the first time: the Arabs' attitude towards the Holocaust, from the rise of the Nazis to power until today. The book, which does not shy away from the most problematic aspects of the issue, just came out in two Arabic editions, in Cairo and Beirut.

"Achcar, who has lectured in Paris and Berlin, begins his book with a quote from the Gospel of Matthew: 'And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?' 'The lesson of this parable is that before criticizing others, a person has to ask what is wrong with himself,' Achcar tells Yedioth Ahronoth, in the first interview he has ever given to an Israeli newspaper.

"But then, he goes on to ask what is wrong with us. 'On the Israeli side, a series of accusations are raised against the Arab world about the Holocaust, without any self-criticism,' he says. 'There are some Israeli writers who are so egocentric they cannot see that their claims against the Arab world could be directed at Israel, sometimes all the more so.

"'However, the parable also refers to the Arabs, of course. In the book I tried to address current issues that I think are reprehensible. I do not defend anybody uncritically. I think a critical look at the group to which you belong before criticizing others is the desirable approach. ...

"I am not comparing the expulsion of 1948 and the Holocaust. The Holocaust was genocide and therefore it was a much greater tragedy than the suffering of the Palestinians since 1948. But the Arabs and the Palestinians did not commit the Holocaust, whereas Israel stands behind the Nakba. ...

"In my book, I strongly denounce Palestinian and Arab Holocaust deniers, whose numbers are greater than they were 30 or 40 years ago. It is mainly a reaction driven by rage and not deliberate denial. A Palestinian or an Arab who says that the Holocaust was invented by the Zionists to justify their actions is reacting to Israel's use of the Holocaust for its needs.

"It is a stupid reaction. I think Holocaust denial is the anti-Zionism of fools. But these are people who are denying a historic phenomenon in which they and their people played no part.

"On the other hand, the Israeli denial of the Nakba is much more important because Israel was responsible for it. It was a defining moment in the foundation of Israel. There were other countries that arose under similar circumstances, but you must recognize the historic reality and the historic responsibility. The situation is getting worse today because of Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.' ...

Even those who don't agree with everything Achcar writes will acknowledge that he bravely engages with an issue that in recent years has become taboo in the Arab world. ...

"The denial in the Arab world today comes mainly from ignorance. However, you have to distinguish it from Holocaust denial in the West, which is a pathological phenomenon. In the West, these people are mentally ill, complete anti-Semites. In the Arab world, the denial that exists among certain strains of public opinion, who are still in the minority, comes from rage and frustration over the escalation of Israeli violence, along with the increased use of the Holocaust. It began with the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

“Menachem Begin abused the memory of the Holocaust, including in Israel’s domestic political discourse. This led people in the Arab world to react in the stupidest way and say: If Israel is trying to justify its actions by reference to the Holocaust, then the Holocaust is an exaggeration or a propaganda invention. The more violence there is, the more you will find this reaction, which is actually a symbolic challenge. It is nothing deeper.”

It is clear from the context that what I mentioned—and, mind you, this was an interview done over the phone—as beginning in 1982 is Israel’s “increased use of the Holocaust,” which is why I go on describing what Begin did. Even if there were any ambiguity, honest critics would have given the quote in full instead of doctoring it in a way suiting their claim that I said that Holocaust denial in the Arab world “began” in 1982, whereas I say in the same interview that “Palestinian and Arab Holocaust [deniers’] numbers are greater than they were 30 or 40 years ago,” i.e. in 1980 or 1970.

Moreover, if one checks what I wrote in my book on the pages the authors quoted in their footnote, the only reference to Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon is actually, there again, in discussing Israel’s exploitation of the memory of the Holocaust, not Holocaust denial in the Arab world:

“The further Israel’s image deteriorated in Western public opinion as a result of the Lebanese war and the intifada, the more Israel and its unconditional supporters in Europe and the United States—see Peter Novick’s admirable The Holocaust in American Life, published in 1999—felt the need to shore up the legitimacy and untouchability of the ‘Jewish state.’ It was in this context that the political exploitation of the memory of the Holocaust reached its height, accompanied by a deluge of literary and audiovisual productions that added a new dimension to the uniqueness of the Shoah: no genocide in history has received so much attention, a circumstance that has sharply exacerbated the ‘competition of the victims.’”

Küntzel is the author of an infamous Islamophobic book that was translated from German by Meade. It was only praised in Zionist propaganda outlets, and Küntzel was given an award by the notorious U.S. Anti-Defamation League. Even U.S. journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, known to be a staunch supporter of Israel, found it very much wanting, saying about it in the *New York Times* (6 January 2008) that it “oversimplifies the Israeli-Arab conflict. Jews today have actual power in the Middle East, and Israel is not innocent of excess and cruelty.” The book was strongly criticized and dismissed by scholars with a real knowledge of the Middle East (contrarily to Küntzel who doesn’t even read Arabic). The latest such criticism is to be found in the remarkable book by Tel-Aviv University Professor Israel Gershoni and University of Colorado Professor James Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

My own book was praised by prestigious Holocaust scholars and Israeli scholars (Michael Marrus, Francis Nicosia, Peter Novick, Avi Shlaim, Idith Zertal), and was positively, albeit critically, reviewed in both the *Jewish Review of Books* and the *Journal of Jewish Studies*. This is what my two critics call “Achcar’s Success” (p. 15), which they go on to explain as follows:

“How can the success of this book and its author be explained? Leaving aside the gullibility of an academic milieu in which historical truth has increasingly been replaced by

'narratives' and the transmission of facts by post-modern relativism, this book clearly meets an urgent need: it helps a particular group of academics to rationalize their own intellectual self-deception.'

No further comment is needed.

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