Jewish Academics DEBUNK "Widespread Campus Antisemitism" Narrative

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Late last week, three academics, three professors, Eli Meyerhoff, Emily Schneider, and Brooke Lober, wrote for the Academe Blog, which is a very prestigious site that a lot of scholars and academics use to communicate with one another. And they published a pretty stinging rebuke of the now common narrative that anti-Semitism is rampant on college campuses, actually become a crisis and an epidemic in the United States as never seen before. And two of them join us tonight to discuss their findings, their concerns of that narrative. And that's the narrative being espoused by officials of the Trump administration, previously so the Obama administration, to justify a whole range of erosions and attacks on core liberties inside the United States, including academic freedom, free speech, the right to study on a visa or have a green card and express whatever views you have, against whatever foreign country, all of which is being eroded, and it depends upon this narrative that there's an anti-Semitism crisis consuming American colleges. Professor Meyerhoff is the programme coordinator at Duke University's John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute in addition to serving as the lab manager of FHI's Amazon Lab and Manuscript Migration Lab. He has previously worked as an adjunct instructor at the University of Minnesota and in Duke's programmes in International Comparative Studies, Education, and Literature. Professor Schneider, Emily Schneider is an assistant professor in the department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University. She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she completed her dissertation on Jewish tourism to Israel and Palestine in 2019. She has published extensively about travel in criminality, in Israel. Both of them, all three of them actually are Jewish and wrote from that perspective about anti-Semitism on campus and whether this narrative of an epidemic or an explosion of anti-Semitism has any basis in reality and neither of them do. We are really excited to welcome each of two of them to our show. Professors, good evening. It's great to see you.

Professors: Good to see you.

GG: Alright, so I really want to encourage as many people as possible to read what it is that the three of you publish because it's so relevant to so many debates that are now dependent

upon this narrative and I think very enlightening of a perspective that's very rarely heard. So by the way, the name of the article is *It's Not Too Late to Tell the Truth about Antisemitism on Campus* and we will include the link in the show notes. But let me ask each of you, what is it that motivated you to decide that you needed to explain this perspective and write this article? You can start Professor Schneider and then Professor Meyerhoff will go to you just to arbitrarily create a sequence.

Professor Emily Schneider (ES): Yeah, I mean, the impetus for writing this article was essentially things that you've already laid out watching kind of this explosion of smears take place across our college campuses to basically conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. And so we felt that it was important to be a specifically Jewish voice of academics that could come out and stop trying to provide this overly complicated response to these accusations and instead to basically say that these are a tool, right, of the current political administration, of earlier administrations as well, and that we no longer need to give validity to these arguments. It's time to call it what it is, which is a lie, a tool of manipulation that's meant to promote a particular political agenda.

GG: Professor Meyerhoff, you want to weigh in on that? What was your impetus for wanting to talk about this?

Professor Eli Meyerhoff (EM): I think my impetus personally came from attending a anti-Semitism workshop that the Hillel at Duke University put on. I experienced this workshop as basically pro-Israel propaganda, where they were equating critiques of Israel and support for the Palestine Solidarity Movement with anti-Semitism, and I saw that as their attempt to shut down a student-led movement against Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza. It just felt disgusting to me to see and hear them wield Jewish identity as an excuse for crushing protest and distracting from horrible genocide happening in Palestine.

GG: I want to read just a short passage in your article. And then, Professor, I do want to ask you about it. You wrote, quote, "We are Jewish academics who have devoted our lives to teaching and research on college campuses. If there were a pervasive culture of anti-Semitism on campuses, we would know about it, and we would fight it. But we have observed no such thing". When you say if this epidemic of anti Semitism or this massive explosion of anti Semitism, existed on campuses, we would know it, we'd see it, what is it that you think you would be seeing? How would you detect that if it were happening?

ES: Yeah, so the usual kind of charges are levied against pro-Palestinian students who are speaking out against Israel's genocide. And what I think that would look like is them taking a blanket kind of approach to all Jewish students, and one assuming all Jewish students believe in what Israel is doing and support it, and then extending that assumption to a prejudiced and discriminatory approach to how they interact with Jewish students. I think to me that that is the definition of anti-Semitism. That's what real anti-Semitism looks like. It's taking that assumption in a stereotype and then policing Jewish students and treating Jewish students in a discriminatory way. And I have not experienced that at all. I've been deeply involved in various movements for justice in Palestine, and I'm deeply connected to many of the student

activists on my campus and other places as well. And not only has there not been a culture of anti-Smitism, I would say there has been actually a celebration of Jewish identity and support for Jewish involvement in these movements and a real desire to learn about Jewish history. And so I've been incredibly proud and moved by the ways that pro-Palestinian activists have welcomed Jewish students and have wanted to work with us at faculty as well. And so to me, that is just the complete antithesis of a culture of antisemitism within these campus movements.

GG: You know, I think one of the biggest deceits, the most deliberate deceit about these college protest movements is to pretend that there are no Jews inside these protest movements or participating in or helping organise them. And the victims or the people who are targeted or made uncomfortable are just Jews. Not necessarily Israel supporters, but Jews. And I mean, the amazing thing is that it has long been an anti-Semitic trope to conflate Israel with Jews and to say, Oh, if you oppose Israel, it means you're anti-Semitic, or all Jews have loyalty to Israel. And now this is basically this conflation has become the foundation for applying this anti semitism label to the protest movement. We interviewed Columbia students who participated in and even led these movements. Some of them are Jewish. They had Shabbat dinner inside the encampments at Columbia every Friday night where everybody participated. The case of Mahmoud Khalil, as I'm sure you know, the allegation is he's an anti-Semite, yet you talk to everybody at Columbia who knew him, Jewish students as well, and they all say that he was always the first person, if there was anything that even bordered on anti-Semitism in terms of a sentiment or statement, who would step in and denounce it. But this is the conflation that's happening exactly in order to say a criticism of Israel is by definition an anti-Semitic attack or a criticism of Jews themselves. At your campus, Professor Meyerhoff, what has been the role of Jewish students and the nature of these protests?

EM: Jewish students have played a big role in the Palestine Solidarity movement here at my campus. There's a group called the Jewish Solidarity Movement that has been organising events in collaboration with the Students for Justice in Palestine group both at Duke and at other local campuses like UNC. And this Jewish group is open to anyone and has a non-Zionist and anti-Zionist understanding of Jewishness, which is a way of understanding what Jewish identity means in a way that doesn't tie it with support of Israel instead of the kind of Zionist reduction of Jewish-ness to support for Israel. And they've held Jewish ritual events like a Passover Seder that was open to anyone and that gave interpretations of the Seder ritual in a way that supported the idea of liberation for all, including Palestinian people. It's wild how in the way that pro-Israel organisations like the Anti-Defamation League or ADL tarred or smeared these anti-Zionist Jewish organisations by calling them anti-Semitic. Like in the ADL's most recent audit of anti-semitism, they included a ritual event by Jewish Voice for Peace, a Jewish ritual, as an anti-Semitic incident.

GG: I want to ask you about the same thing, but I just want to say, I think about two weeks ago, maybe three weeks ago now, I had a debate with Megyn Kelly on her programme where we very vociferously debated the Mahmoud Khalil case, but the notion of deporting people who have participated in protests or in many cases not even participated in any protest, just

like wrote op-eds or have social media content critical of Israel. And when I brought up and continued to bring up this fact that is almost never mentioned, that there are a tonne of Jewish students inside these protests, that we've interviewed them in Columbia, they're all over the place, she said, Oh, yeah, those are the Jewish voices for peace. Those are the Jews who don't support Israel, so they don't really count. Meaning like the only real Jews are the ones who support Israel .and there is like a latent anti-semitism in that to me, I'm not accusing her specifically of that but this conflation, like I said, used to be one of the most toxic anti-Semitic tropes and ironically this expanded hate speech definition of anti-Semitism that Trump is now demanding be adopted on college campuses. This IHRA definition includes one of its examples holding Jewish people in general responsible for what Israel does, that's considered formally to be anti-Semitism, even though in so many ways it's become the foundation of this narrative that you wrote this article to debunk. What has been your experience with Jewish students on your campus?

ES: I mean, I've had a similar experience to Eli in terms of Jewish students being involved, and we've seen stories of this all over the country. So I don't think it's at all exceptional for Jewish students to be involved in the encampments and the protest movement. I think what's even more important, though, is to know that there's a long history of this. And I'll give a shout out to Jeff Levin's book, *Our Palestine Question,* which is a book that chronicles the history of Jewish-Americans' relationship to Israel. And so the Jewish-American relationship to Israel has changed drastically throughout the course of Israel's existence. And what's so interesting and like you imply, slightly anti-Semitic, is to act as if, you know, the Jewish connection, Jewish- American connection to Israel is non-negotiable and is ahistorical. It's something that's changed over time. And I mean, going back even further, like to the early years of Zionism, Jews have always opposed Zionism. Zionism was relatively unpopular in its early years among Jews for this reason, that they didn't want to be conflated with a nation state. And so there's nothing anti-Semitic in essentially being a normal Jewish person who might have political positions that differ from the state of Israel. And it's that conflation itself that I find so dangerous and threatening to the Jewish people.

GG: Let me ask you both, and you can consider this sort of devil's advocacy, but there's a part of me that also does actually believe it, which is there has been similar narratives on college campuses that have largely come from the left about other groups – there's a racism epidemic, there's an epidemic against Latinos, against immigrants, against Muslims, against trans people – and as a result of this epidemic of bigotry or the systemic bigotries on college campuses, we need protections for those groups, including kind of curbing the outer limits of hate speech that might make those groups feel uncomfortable or unsafe. And my concern with it had always been, and I think we're seeing it now, but that's what I want to ask you, is that this is now the framework that a lot of people who mock those narratives are now embracing, in order to justify all the controls that they want and the powers they want to impose, including censorship on campuses, the elimination of academic freedom, the requirement that you cleanse or purge a lot of Israel critics from faculty. Do you think there is any kind of unintended connection between what had been this left-wing narrative about various minority groups and the solutions required on college campuses and what we're

seeing now?

ES: Yeah, I mean, what I see happening is I feel like progressives made a mistake in many ways of relying on these institutions and relying on the law and censorship to promote their ideology. And so I think that ultimately that didn't work. We can see how quickly DEI has been rolled back and how all of these different kinds of safeguards we had in mechanisms to promote racial equality on college campuses just got wiped away as soon as it threatened the budget of these campuses. And so I think that what we're seeing now is that the left thought that they could maybe rely on these institutions to protect them, but that didn't actually work out. And I think Jews are making the same mistake in many ways. I'm thinking that these institutions that are really just beholden to power in many ways are going to provide safeguards against racial oppression and discrimination and ultimately the only thing that can keep us safe is solidarity and is working together as people who are you know equally implicated in these systems to fight back against various forms of oppressive powers.

GG: Yeah, I think that's very well said. Professor Meyerhoff, what's your view on that question?

EM: Yeah, I think you could see the kind of liberal incorporation of the radical leftist demands of social movements from the 60s as part of the source of where groups like the ADL are getting their language for talking about anti-Semitism in the way that they do now. It's really an overlap. I think, looking back at the history of those movements from the 60s and 70s, late 60s, when there was kind of transnational grassroots movement on U.S. college campuses that was making connections between the kind of racism that they were experiencing in the U.S. with the racism and other forms of oppression that anti-colonial movements we're experiencing and fighting against around the world, those kinds of transnational social movement connections were seen as a real threat by the U.S. government and by the Israeli government and pro-Israel organisations. Because these groups were drawing connections between structural institutional forms of violence, structural racism, settler colonialism that oppressed peoples were experiencing in the U.S. and that oppressed Palestinian peoples are experiencing in Israel by the Israeli government. So it was really in response to the threat that those grassroots movements presented to the Zionist Israeli project that pro-Israel groups like the ADL created this narrative of the new anti-Semitism. So it's this conflation of critique of Israel with anti-Semitism, especially from the left. They've basically used that new anti-Semitism narrative as a kind of shield in a sword against potential delegitimizing threats to Israel, and we see that new anti-Semitism narrative continuing to today with the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism that universities and police and governments have been instituting. It's a definition of anti-Semitism that really individualises it to hate speech and kind of obscures a more structural understanding of anti-Semitism, which is interlinked with racism. So like in the ADLs, anti-Semitism audit counts. They include critiques of Israel by anti-Zionist Jewish groups, which allows them to inflate their account of anti-Semitism on college campuses, but then they obscure and exclude white nationalist movements, events, and propaganda, even though those white nationalist groups are explicitly and fundamentally pushing, kind of white supremacist ideology that

includes anti-Semitism at its core, like what we see with the Great Replacement Theory.

GG: Yeah, you know, I would add, too, that like a lot of people have been convinced that the sort of focus on supposed anti-Semitism on college campuses began only after October 7th. Similar to the way a lot of people had been falsely convinced that war between Gaza and Israel only happened after October seventh, that before everything was so peaceful there, so perfect and wonderful, everyone was just happy and minding their own business and suddenly Hamas attacked out of nowhere. And you can actually go back ten, 15 years where I think the Israeli government and the supporters in the U.S. begin to become very afraid specifically about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement where the epicentre was on college campuses because there was a huge amount of American student activism in the 80s to divest and boycott South Africa that brought down that regime. And I think they became very concerned that that would happen again here and they set out to start criminalising BDS in Europe, but also focusing a lot of money, a lot of institutional power on essentially characterising formally Israel criticism as anti-Semitism. You can see this going back many years, and October 7th sort of became the galvanising event of something that had been in motion for a long time.

Let me ask you this last question, which is about administrations at universities. And part of me wants to be surprised by how many of them have capitulated so quickly. And even with Harvard now standing up and saying, No, we're going to resist, that only came after a year's worth of concessions and all sorts of attempts to prove they were cracking down on these protests, including adopting formally the IHRA definition at Harvard. But you see Columbia capitulating so quickly; basically, schools all around the country. They got the president of Penn fired over this, ousting Ivy League presidents, which used to be unheard of. Part of me, especially for bigger universities that are less vulnerable, would want to believe that it's kind of embedded in university administrators that the one thing you don't allow to be eroded or attacked is academic freedom. That's the value. You're really there to protect campus free speech, free discourse and academic freedom, the right of faculty members to do the kind of work they want, to express things that they want. And yet, that's clearly not happening. I mean, there are a couple here and there where you're seeing some resistance. But by and large, you're seeing the kind crackdown on these protests that the government demanded under Biden and now under Trump. What do you make of that? Does that surprise you in any way? I'd like to hear from both of you on that.

ES: I can go ahead. I mean, I think what it shows us is just how deeply invested our government is in its alliance with Israel. Um, I don't believe that university presidents wanted to crack down on student protestors in the way that they did. I think that the pressure for this came from above. And I think that whether it's boards of regents or donors or that kind of thing, I think that that pressure is more connected to kind of the governmental level rather than any sort of like individual whim of university presidents. I think they found themselves in a very unfortunate situation. And so I guess it doesn't surprise me because I think pro-Israel ideology is so deeply ingrained in U.S. empire and U.S. militarism. And it's not something that our universities are able to easily kind of create a sort of symbolic way of

acknowledging it. And I think that in many ways it is the power of the pro-Palestinian movement, whereas other issues can kind of get folded into performative acts of solidarity and ways of kind of giving lip service to different issues of inequality. The Palestinian issue really unravels a lot of the kind of foundational myths of the U.S. empire, of global capitalism, of militarism. And I think that's why it's so dangerous, not necessarily to university presidents per se, but to those who they are beholden to and who they must answer to.

GG: Yeah, Professor Meyerhoff, what about you? Are you surprised by the reaction of administrators? And by administrators, I agree with Professor Schneider, it's not necessarily the coming from college presidents, but more this institutional pressure from above to force them to do it. But either way, you still see these academic institutions, including the largest, most powerful ones, capitulating on what is supposed to be their core value. Does this surprise you at all, and what do you make of this dynamic?

EM: It doesn't surprise me because I know that academic freedom has long been a contested terrain. It's really about understanding who gets to decide what the academy is for, what its purpose is, and so academics are the people who are supposed to enjoy that freedom, but their conditions for enjoying that freedom have long been limited by a kind of structure of the university that gives so much power to both administrations and the boards, the trustees. And I think since the creation of the AAUP or American Association of University Professors, which has been the main protagonist for academic freedom since its foundation in 19-teens, they've struggled as professors to gain more power, democratic control over the university against the outside attempts to influence what they can do. But not only in the past few decades have professors really turned to try to create a more democratic worker and student control academy ,where not administrators and boards and trustees but instead faculty and students themselves could have more control over what they get to teach and learn and think and ask questions about. I think there's long been this kind of backdoor loophole that has allowed outside organisations like these pro-Isreal organisations like the ADL and Hillel to influence what happens on college campuses. But I think today we are seeing movements of faculty and students led by student groups and faculty groups like the AAUP pushing for more democratic control over their universities, seeing students and faculty as the people who should get to say what the limits of thinking of college production are and not allowing outside organisations like the ADL to say what you can and cannot think and what you cannot ask critical questions about.

GG: Well, I want to congratulate both of you for publishing this article. I know, no matter who you are, it is not easy to debunk so explicitly a narrative that has become among the most sacrosanct and orthodox in our country, one that's being weaponized in a lot of different ways and therefore is very valuable to people. But I think the way you did it was great. The fact that you did was very commendable as well. Glad to see that coming from academia. And I also really appreciate your taking the time to come on our show and talk about it as well. Thanks very much.

ES: Thank you for having us.

GG: Okay, have a good day. Have a good evening. Bye bye.

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