

BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth S. Stern's, *The Conflict Over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate* [2020 Toronto and Buffalo: The New Jewish Press/University of Toronto Press. \$29.95]

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In the responsibility for full disclosure, the reader should know the following: (1) Ken Stern is a close, personal friend with whom I have had many important conversations over the years about both antisemitism and the Middle East, including one-on-one dinners at the Annual Gonzaga Conferences on Hate Studies, and (2) I have had the privilege and opportunity to preliminarily review and input into both his initial extensive syllabus on antisemitism and this text as well as an Advisory Board member of the Justis and Karin Rosenberg Foundation and am included in the Acknowledgment section on page 200.

That having been said, *The Conflict Over the Conflict* is an important contribution to the overall literature regarding the (seeming) turmoil on many of our college and university campuses—but not all, including my own where controversial issues surface rarely if at all—vis-à-vis the Israel/Palestine conflict, free speech and controversial speakers, and the like.¹ Stern brings to the discussion not only his lawyerly training and his skill set, but, as of late, his directorship of the academic Bard College Center for the Study of Hate and thus combining both with a singular focus. Even more importantly, perhaps, his firm commitment to the campus as the locale for both the “free and open marketplace of ideas” and the true responsibility to teach properly young and growing minds capable of learning and discerning truth from falsehood and distortion shine forth with crystal clarity.² For example, with regard to his second commitment, Stern would have controversial even hateful speakers address students, faculty, and administration rather than engage in both censorship and the intrusion of outside organizations having a say in the work of higher education, even while recognizing that, in the contemporary moment, both take place on a regular, ongoing basis. And the Israel/Palestine conflict may very be the most egregious case where some campuses have shouted down and disrupted speakers, violence has taken place, and outside organizations and alumni have made their dissatisfactions known to the point of withholding significant contributory dollars. If Ken Stern may be accused of anything, it is that sense of hopeful or wishful naivete which undergirds this entire text and a naivete which, ultimately, may have caused a severing of his relationship with the American Jewish Committee where he was their resident expert on antisemitism for more than two decades.

Important to any reasoned and rational conversation/discussion, as he correctly notes, regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict must be the issue of antisemitism. Some, but obviously not all, supporters of Israel and Zionism, both Zionists and non-Zionists, Jews, and non-Jews, regard *any* criticism of Israel and its governmental and military policies especially as regards the Palestinians and Israeli governance over Palestinian locales and populations as antisemitic. Critics of Israel and Zionism, including Jews and non-Jews, continue to maintain that such is a legitimate expression applicable to any nation-state and ideology and not automatically antisemitic, though, honesty does compel the recognition that, all too often,

¹ Worth mentioning here are Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Erwin Chemerinsky, and Howard Glickman, *Free Speech on Campus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017); Ian Rosenberg, *The Fight for Free Speech: Ten Cases That Define Our First Amendment Freedoms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Nadine Stossen, *Hate: Why We Should Resist It With Free Speech Not Censorship* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); and, earlier, Martin P. Golding, *Free Speech on Campus* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). A fascinating recently-published historical text is Eric Thomas Chester's *Free Speech and the Suppression of Dissent During World War I* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

² Censorship is not the property of any one country, organization or political or religious orientation, including the Jewish community, as Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger made clear in his own little-known text *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History: Great Ideological and Literary Conflicts in Judaism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Sepher Hermon Press/Yeshiva University Press, 1977). See, also, Beth McMurtrie (January 22, 2021), “Teaching in the Age of Disinformation: Propaganda and conspiracy theories are everywhere. What’s a professor to do?”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19–23.

both have veered off course into the dark waters of antisemitism (i.e., applying to Israel standards not applied to other nation-states, rejecting fully and totally Israel's very existence after now more than 70 years old and the rationales which brought it into existence, labelling Israel both colonialist and apartheid as well as either manipulating the United States for being manipulated by it, etc.). Hence, the thermometer is ratcheted up closer to the boiling point, its mercury infused with antisemitism, as Stern addresses full on in Chapter 2, "Zionism and 1948", Chapter 4, "Durban and Its Aftermath", and Chapter 5, "The Academic Boycott of Israel".

He does, however, begin his text with the understanding at how we arrive at the positions we hold central to our identities—Chapter 1, "Thinking about Thinking"—addressing how we come to and hold onto our belief structures, how they are part of our own ethnocentric biases, including our tribal senses of our own group superiority and the devaluing and denigration of other groups, deeming them inferior or worse, and how we reinforce those belief structures and commitments regularly. As a standalone, this chapter could and should be abstracted and used in many courses in the humanities where human behaviors are central (e.g., psychology, sociology, religious and Judaic studies, hate and genocide studies, Holocaust studies, political science, speech and communications studies).

Most uncomfortable for some readers, to be sure, will most likely be Chapter 7, "The Antisemitism Awareness Act", where Stern carefully and pointedly shows how this seeming noblest of motives has taken the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism—of which he himself was a major drafter—with its primary intention and focus of data collection and sharing and has been used to, at times, muzzle both free speech and legitimate criticism of Israel in the United States.

Finally, Stern rounds out his discussion with Chapter 8 "Blueprint for Rational Campus Discussion on Israel and Palestine" and offers the following:

- Don't confuse feeling good with being smart.
- Take risks, show leadership, demonstrate what debate looks like.
- Instead of trying to curtail speech on campus, invest in promoting critical thinking about Israel/Palestine, and the subjects (hatred, identities, free speech, etc.) that inform our ability to discuss this difficult issue.

To which this reviewer (and others) might also add:

- Where the subject/topic is controversial, engage both student organizations and administration to develop, make public, and commit to policies that ensure the safety of all persons on campus including controversial speakers and an appropriate forum for hearing such.
- Draw upon the best legal thinking on these and related issues as opportunities to teach students how to best address them once they graduate and are "out there" in the so-called "real world".

And, of course, educate, educate, educate on the complex realities of the Middle East, including the Israel/Palestine conflict, so that students at all levels, including faculty and administration, come away with knowledge based on fact and not distorted by self- or collective group-interest.

The Conflict Over the Conflict is an important text, particularly on those campuses which have experienced and continue to experience confrontation at every level. It should be required reading on those campus up to and including those which address common book experiences throughout their college and university communities. That other colleges and universities would benefit as well goes without saying, as would institutions and organizations for whom Israel/Palestine is important as is their own interfacing with our institutions of higher learning. Ignoring this text across the board would only compound the present conflicts on our campuses of which there are far too many.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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