



LIBERAL CONSPIRACY



Dialogue, debate and political commitment

2:16 am - November 16th 2007

by [Keith Kahn-Harris](#)



Tweet



As website titles go, Liberal Conspiracy is pretty damn good: eye-catching, ironic, but not so ironic as not to contain a grain of truth. Of course the liberal-left conspiracy is a figment of the fevered imaginations of the Richard Littlejohns and Peter Hitchens of this world. Yet at the same time, the word conspiracy applies quite nicely to certain aspects of political action.

Any attempt to gather a group of like-minded people and to create change is conspiratorial, even if the word tends to be applied most often to nefarious forms of action. So, in principle at least, there's nothing wrong with being part of a conspiracy. The problem is, how do you balance such sectarian forms of politics with other kinds of politics that require listening, convincing, drawing people in?

This question has haunted me throughout the last year or two. I am a sociologist by profession and, whilst my work has always been politically-oriented in that I have always tried to raise issues of power and authority, I have had little involvement in the more direct and confrontational forms of politics. Much of my recent work has taken place in Anglo-Jewry, where I have had to show considerable acumen as to how to articulate my own leftist views (on Israel and much else) in the context of an often conservative community.

Over the last couple of years I've been increasingly frustrated with the discretion I've continually tried to show. I've wanted to intervene more directly in the political arena; to write for an audience broader than both academia and the Jewish community.

So I've started to dip my toe into the choppy waters of public debates. Last year I signed what I thought was a reasonable worded declaration pointing out that Anglo-Jewish communal institutions do not speak for everyone on the question of Israel. The declaration formed the basis for the launch in early 2007 of the group [Independent Jewish Voices](#). The storm of controversy that followed was extraordinary. The declaration was treated as an act of treachery by some and even in more progressive Jewish circles it was condemned as an attack on the community by secular Jews who only identify as Jews to criticize other Jews.

There was something to these criticisms – after all, it's pretty rich for signatories like Harold Pinter to claim that they are being silenced. Nonetheless, I was unprepared for the personal consequences that followed the publication of my name with the other signatories: A conference on Jewish music that I was organizing fell through as one of my co-organisers refused to work with me; leaders of a major Jewish organization intimated that I would not receive cooperation in the research I was undertaking if my name was associated with the declaration; leftist academics I respected castigated me in personal terms.

But the biggest problem that my signing the declaration caused me was that it endangered the existence of a group I have been involved in setting up called [New Jewish Thought](#). It is intended to be a group dedicated to nurturing dialogue and respectful relations between Jews. By publicly aligning myself with a group that was seen (however unfairly) as attacking the community, I jeopardized the survival of a group intended to create better relations within the community. Reluctantly I decided to withdraw my signature from Independent Jewish Voices.

This whole episode forced me to confront some difficult issues on the whole question of the politics of communities. On the one hand, change is stimulated and perpetuated by sectarian groups and personalities who drive forward their agendas. Elites and entrenched vested interests are an inevitable part of any community and at times they have to be confronted. But at the same time, if you really care for a community you shouldn't want to split it irrevocably apart. Change can also be produced through subtle, quiet processes of dialogue and community building.

Of course I'm perfectly aware that there's a long history of leftist debates about whether to be inside or outside the 'system', but I don't think that what I am talking about is exactly the same thing. What I am talking about is how to change a community without killing it in the process; how to be politically principled whilst still seeing those who don't share your politics as part of the same enterprise; how to balance passionate ideological commitment with dialogic, respectful solidarity between people.

What I've come to realize is that dialogic, respectful, solidarity between people is worth working for precisely as it guarantees a genuine political process. The problem in the Jewish community is not that political questions lead to bad-tempered debates that lead to bad communal relations; the problem is that the dominant tendency in the community is to avoid and even to suppress politics.

In research I've conducted on 'moderately engaged' Jews, it was striking to note just how much many of my respondents hated talking about Israel in anything other than the blandest tones. Jewish communal organizations try to create 'solidarity' with Israel and to take up a position that is 'apolitical'. What results is anger with people who politically engage with Israel, less because of what they argue, but because they argue at all. The fear of communal division results in a fear of politics.

Addressing this fear requires dialogue and community-building. So in my work for New Jewish Thought what I am doing is trying to create the conditions for politics to take place. I've published on [our website here](#) an exchange with the person who earlier this year would not work with me. We still don't agree, but at least we have a basis to build a relationship on.

In writing for Liberal Conspiracy, I want to try and explore these issues further and to see how they apply outside the Jewish community. Balancing political conspiracies with community building isn't just a task for Jews, it's a task for anyone who thinks that politics should be about more than student debating society-style point scoring.

Keith Kahn-Harris is a research associate at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College and the convener of [New Jewish Thought](#).

Tweet



About the author

Keith Kahn-Harris is a regular contributor to Liberal Conspiracy. He is a research associate at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College and the convener of [New Jewish Thought](#). Also at: [Metal Jew](#) and [www.kahn-harris.org](#)

· Other posts by [Keith Kahn-Harris](#)



Story Filed Under: [Religion](#)

Sorry, the comment form is closed at this time.

Reader comments

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Eamonn McDonagh | 1:50 pm, November 16, 2007 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|

Getting involved in serious political debate means accepting that some people may find your views so unacceptable that they may not wish to debate them with you and that they might reject any notion of being involved in the same enterprise as you.

All of this remains true even if your interlocutors are from the same religious/ethnic group as you are and there is nothing to lament about this. It would be a pretty sorry state of affairs if I said

"X, whose political views I find repugnant, is a member of the same ethnicity as I am therefore I will strive to work to work together with him in the building of a common enterprise in a way I wouldn't dream of doing if we were not ethnically linked."

So, if you are serious about politics, religious/ethnic solidarity has to take a back seat

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2. Keith Kahn-Harris | 2:37 pm, November 16, 2007 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|

Thanks for the comment Eamonn. My own experiences within the Jewish community were just an example. What I'm interested in is how we develop solidarities with people we don't always agree with. This is an issue that applies whether or not you are a member of a particular religious/ethnic group. We are all of us members of UK society, our local neighbourhoods and whatever else. Solidarities cannot only be formed on the basis of political ideology. Politics is just one of a number of possible identities around which solidarities cohere. We have to live with and to some extent to work with people whose politics we do not share.

I am also arguing that creating solidarities based around dialogue does not undermine politics but strengthens it. Many of the most pathological developments in politics stem from attempts to dehumanise people. Dialogue and respect frees up the possibility of genuine honest political debate.

As I said, I hope to explore these ideas further in other Liberal Conspiracy articles.

3. nv1962

3:47 pm, November 16, 2007

If one takes values as “needing to be” set in a single and exclusive hierarchy, or even stronger: that each value must live on “its own” level, then it follows as “logical” that solidarity with one’s fellow specimens and reasonable dialog with adversaries (especially the “mortal” ones) are deemed irreconcilable. Personally I believe that people with such artificial and rigid moral hierarchies have little merit claiming a humane virtue. It’s a bit like Galileo’s dilemma: official dogma (demanding unwavering allegiance, such as by way of “solidarity”) and integrity (basically in pursuit of freedom beyond the establishment) sometimes clash – violently.

Then again, I suspect that people who believe that such abstract and barren pyramids — those rigid hierarchies — are an adequate model to press humans into, are naturally more inclined to accept forceful impositions of morally authoritarian views. Which would make them an obstacle for thinking outside the box, and reaching out to others, in pursuit of sustainable (and profitable) harmony. Which also is a major reason why I believe such monolithic thinkers are not merely an obstacle to progress, but ultimately a threat to survival of the species, as sooner or later we all face an unorthodox crisis that can’t be resolved by the grace of dogma or “steel will”.

Denial doesn’t make the Earth flat; much less so does it foster a better understanding (and ultimately appreciation) of our diverse society.

(By the way – great blog, and fantastic design – I’m insanely jealous! Also, I trip-hopped over here via Eamonn’s blog...)

4. Shachtman

5:16 pm, November 16, 2007

IJV have amongst their main organsiers Professor Rose who supports and was one of the instigators of the academic boycott of Israel. Amongst it’s leaders and signatories are many who don’t believe that Israel has a right to exist even in a 2 states settlement. Why should people want to listen to this group.

Even today people who originaly joined are fed up with its bias including one of the original people involved in forming it. Sorry but IJV is irrelevant – always was , always will be , apart from being used by those who wish to attack the Jewish community.

[http://www.thejc.com/home.aspx?](http://www.thejc.com/home.aspx?AId=56630&ATypeld=1&search=true2&srchstr=david%20goldberg&srchtxt=1&srchhead=1&srchauthor=1&srchsandp=1&scsrch=0)

[AId=56630&ATypeld=1&search=true2&srchstr=david%20goldberg&srchtxt=1&srchhead=1&srchauthor=1&srchsandp=1&scsrch=0](http://www.thejc.com/home.aspx?AId=56630&ATypeld=1&search=true2&srchstr=david%20goldberg&srchtxt=1&srchhead=1&srchauthor=1&srchsandp=1&scsrch=0)

5. Jennie

2:37 pm, November 18, 2007

@ Eamonn

“X, whose political views I find repugnant, is a member of the same ethnicity as I am therefore I will strive to work to work together with him in the building of a common enterprise in a way I wouldn’t dream of doing if we were not ethnically linked.”

I don’t think that statement is as scary as it sounds. What about “X, whose political views I find repugnant, lives in the same neighbourhood as me therefore I will strive to work to work together with him in the building of a common enterprise in a way I wouldn’t dream of doing if we didn’t happen to live next door to each other.” That seems like a perfectly reasonable attitude to take, doesn’t it?

6. Keith Kahn-Harris

7:15 pm, November 18, 2007

I agree with Jennie (I wrote something similar in comment 2). It is impossible to always work on the national/societal or international level. It is entirely reasonable (and inevitable) to have

affiliations and affinities with smaller groups of people. The trick is how to work within the particular without losing sight of the universal.

It's also worth reminding oneself that 'minority' groupings can be no less fractious than national groupings.

7. **Conor Foley**

1:31 pm, November 19, 2007

I was surprised at the vociferous reaction to IJV. I did not see anything objectionable in the text and the only two of the signatories that I know – Nigel Rodley and Francesca Klugg – are both very well-respected human rights activists. Most of the attacks on it did seem to involve a charge of 'guilt by association'. If, as Shachtman says, it was irrelevant then why not just ignore it, but I do not understand how it can also be seen as an 'attack on the Jewish community'?

I think the point that Keith is arguing is not just that people disagreed with him, but that he was made to feel that he had committed some kind of act of treachery for having signed the statement. That did seem to be the tone of some of the attacks. Melanie Phillips's 'Jews for Genocide' attack on them (Nigel's grandparents did die in the holocaust) was particularly nasty. It seemed to me (as someone completely outside the Jewish community in Britain) that the reaction confirmed the point that its signatories were making.

The launch came at around the same time as Sunny's NGN and I thought that both were good initiatives. Some people also said that 'this will be used to attack Moslems', but I think that the opposite is the case. I would agree with Shachtman, however, that it is slightly ironic for one of IJV's members to also be a supporter of the academic boycott.

8. **Keith Kahn-Harris**

4:19 pm, November 19, 2007

Both NGN and IJV were in some ways part of the same phenomenon in that they were challenges to those who claim to represent communities. However, the key difference was that NGN had a much younger profile than IJV. The majority of IJV signatories were older, secular, leftist-oriented Jews. In a sense they were an alternative establishment to the one they were critiquing. This is why the initiative was so attacked – it was seen not as it should have been seen (a respectful request to open up debate and dialogue) but an attempt by one establishment to displace another. I'd like to say that this perception was all nonsense but it is certainly true that IJV did not make enough of an attempt to include a broad group of people.

Reactions: Twitter, blogs

1. **Community Politics « El Nuevo Pantano**

[...] My reply to a post by Keith Kahn-Harrish at the Liberal Conspiracy here [...]

Sorry, the comment form is closed at this time.