

The Use and Abuse of Martin Luther King Jr. by Israel's Apologists

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In formal logic, Argumentum Ad Verecundiam refers to arguing a point with an appeal to authority. This type is categorized as a logical fallacy. Citing one seemingly authoritative source is simply not conclusive evidence, even if the authority is seen as an expert on the given subject.

For the sake of clarity, there are three degradations of this maxim enumerated in this essay. First, it is especially fallacious as proof when the quoted authority demonstrates no special knowledge on the subject. Second, when the authority who is not an expert on the given subject is also quoted out of context, the argument is even weaker. Third, the lowest violation of this formal logic principle is when an advocate uses a false rendition, or a fabricated quote, by the same authority who can claim no expertise.

This is the best framework for understanding how various exponents of Israel have used Martin Luther King Jr. to promote their cause.

Dr. King's expertise as a non-violent civil rights leader and visionary are unparalleled in U.S. history. However, that does not make him an informed commentator on Middle Eastern affairs or on the ideological facets of Zionism. As impressive as the references to his views on Israel may seem, this is a textbook example of Argumentum Ad Verecundiam.

Finding direct and published utterances by Dr. King about the modern Middle East and Zionism is extremely rare. A cursory review of dozens of books on and by the civil rights leader turned up nothing.

Nonetheless, defenders of Israel often refer to a letter by Dr. King. This letter is reprinted in full on many web pages and in print. One example of a quotation derived from this letter is:

"... You declare, my friend; that you do not hate the Jews, you are merely 'anti-Zionist' ... And I say, let the truth ring forth from the high mountain tops, let it echo through the valleys of God's green earth: When people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews... Anti-Semitism, the hatred of the Jewish people, has been and remains a blot on the soul of mankind. In this we are in full agreement. So know also this: anti-Zionist is inherently anti-Semitic, and ever will be so."

Antiracism writer Tim Wise checked the citation, which claimed that it originated from a "Letter to an Anti-Zionist Friend" in an August, 1967 edition of Saturday Review. In an article on January, 2003, essay he declared that he found no letters from Dr. King in any of the four August, 1967 editions. The authors of this essay verified Wise's discovery. The letter was commonly cited to also have been published

in a book by Dr. King entitled, "This I Believe: Selections from the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." No such book was listed in the bibliography provided by the King Center in Atlanta, nor in the catalogs of several large public and university libraries. Soon afterwards, CAMERA, a rabidly pro-Israeli organization, published a statement declaring that the letter was "apparently" a hoax. CAMERA explained how it gained so much currency. The "letter" came from a "reputable" book, *Shared Dreams*, by Rabbi Marc Shneier. Martin Luther King III authored the preface for the book, giving the impression of familial approval. Also, the Anti-Defamation League's Michael Salberg used the same quotes in his July 31st, 2001 testimony before the U.S. House of Representative's International Relations Committee's Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights.

The bogus letter was further quoted by writers in prominent publications one would imagine armed with fact-checkers capable of spending the short amount of time needed to verify the primary source. Mort Zuckerman, the editor-in-chief of the U.S. News & World Report quoted the letter in a column (9/17/01). Warren Kinsella followed suit in an article for *Maclean's* (1/20/03). Commentary, which is known more for its ideological zeal than any appreciation for factual scruples, ran a piece by Natan Sharansky. He quoted the false passage as a block--some ten months after CAMERA declared it a hoax.

More recently, the Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) featured excerpts from the letter prominently on its website. Despite its name, SPME is an advocacy group seeking to bolster Israel's image on campus--a mission it claims promotes peace in the region. Ironically, right under the false Dr. King quotation is an announcement of the formation of a task force "dealing with academic integrity with respect to fabricating and falsifying data when discussing the Middle East." After one of the authors of this article informed SPME's director of the quotation's discredited status, he replied with hostility despite the simple verifiability of the claim that the citation is incorrect. After several exchanges he replaced it with another seemingly far-fetched quote:

Martin Luther King addressed the issue in 1968, in a speech at Harvard when he said: "... You declare, my friend, that you do not hate the Jews, you are merely 'anti-Zionist.' ...When people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews... And what is anti-Zionist? It is the denial to the Jewish people of a fundamental right that we justly claim for the people of Africa and freely accord all other nations of the Globe...When people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews--make no mistake about it."

When a citation for this new quote was requested, he refused to provide one, leaving visitors only with its claim that Dr. King delivered it in a 1968 Harvard "speech." However, the language of SMPE's new posting strongly resembles their original one -- on account of the fact that it too comes from the same discredited "Letter to an Anti-Zionist Friend."

The first time the fake letter was quoted, it could have been a mistake, but to draw on different lines from the same fictitious letter is strikingly unscholarly -- as is the false citation of it to a 1968 "speech" at Harvard. Either this citation was invented or taken from another unspecified source--classic plagiarism, whether intentional or out of gross negligence.

SPME's reference to a 1968 "speech" at Harvard mirrors the details from a published account that appeared in two sources: First, it was in right-

wing and ardently pro-Israeli sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset's 1969 article in *Encounter*. Second, it was in a January, 2002 San Francisco Chronicle op/ed by Congressman John Lewis, who knew Dr. King personally.

Lipset wrote in his essay "The Socialism of Fools: The Left, the Jews & Israel" about a "dinner" for Dr. King he attended. When one black student made "some remark against the Zionists," Dr. King "snapped" back, "When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You are talking anti-Semitism." The piece by Congressman Lewis also quotes this same remark though it is not clear if it is gathered from Lipset's essay.

Congressman Lewis claims Dr. King made this comment "shortly before his death" during "an appearance at Harvard." Lipset states it was "shortly before he was assassinated" at a "dinner given for him in Cambridge." This quotation seems on its face much more credible. Yet, SPME presents snippets from the fake letter while apparently citing this statement (a 1968 "speech" at Harvard).

There are still, however, a few reasons for casting doubt on the authenticity of this statement. According to the Harvard Crimson, "The Rev. Martin Luther King was last in Cambridge almost exactly a year ago--April 23, 1967" ("While You Were Away" 4/8/68). If this is true, Dr. King could not have been in Cambridge in 1968. Lipset stated he was in the area for a "fund-raising mission," which would seem to imply a high profile visit. Also, an intensive inventory of publications by Stanford University's Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project accounts for numerous speeches in 1968. None of them are for talks in Cambridge or Boston.

While these points raise some doubt, let us assume that the quote is accurate.

This is where context comes in. One of the principal arguments of Lipset's 1969 article is that the split between blacks and Jews "stems much more from the American situation than from the Middle East Conflict." He identifies Jews as a dominating force within the civil rights movement. Black nationalist leadership wanted to distance themselves from Whites in the movement, Lipset argues. In Lipset's own words, he summarized what Black nationalists were saying: "We don't want whites, but we particularly don't want Jews, and we are expressing antagonism to Jews in the form of opposition to Israel."

Few of the articles that cite Lipset's essay mention this crucial context. One individual who did explore this, albeit crudely, still managed to contrive another Dr. King quote unimaginatively. Dr. Andrew Bostom, a medical professor at Brown University, wrote an article for *Front Page Magazine* (1/20/03) that was reprinted on former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's website. In it, he claimed that Dr. King had the "moral courage" to confront the anti-Jewish rhetoric of black left-wing and Muslim organizations. This is not to say that Dr. Bostom is a reliable source. Central to his article is a 347 word passage which he attributes to Dr. King. He fails to cite a source for the outlandish tirade. A quick google search determined it was lifted entirely from original material on the homepage of www.yahoodi.com (which has a copyright date of 2002), plus healthy portions of the fake "Letter to an Anti-Zionist Friend." Dr. Bostom's article featured the least creative and perhaps most fraudulent doctored script yet: a patchwork of plagiarism.

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Taking the context described by Lipset and Dr. Bostom to be generally correct for the sake of argument would shed light on the credible Dr.

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King quotes. If the movement he figured so prominently in was facing such a rift, his response was only natural. To borrow Lipset's analysis then, Dr. King's statement also "stems much more from the American situation than from the Middle East Conflict." Given his local political anxieties, Dr. King was hardly the kind of disinterested authority worth quoting on the subject.

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As a note: the actual validity of Lipset and Dr. Bostom's views of that context is beyond the scope of this essay. While it is true that black nationalists, such as SNCC's leadership, became increasingly critical of Israel after 1967, it is not convincing that the motive was to alienate American Jews even if that was the foreseeable effect. An ardent internationalist for example would care more about linking oppressed people's struggles across the globe than they would about the relatively mainstream political movement for equality in the American polity.

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Back to the main point: if the forged quotes reflecting Dr. King's views on Israel were accurate, citing him would still be classic Argumentum Ad Verecundiam. Where is the proof that Dr. King studied the region or its modern history? The dearth of then-publicized comments and writings on the region by Dr. King shows that it was probably not a subject he was well-versed on, nor did it appear to be a priority of his throughout his career.

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Even the statements Congressman Lewis attributes to him are low in substance and high on flourishing rhetoric. For example, Dr. King stated that Israel is a "marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy." Referring to it as "marvelous" and an "oasis" sounds rather uninformed given the realities of military occupation and the forced exile the Palestinians have witnessed since Israel's foundation. They surely do not sound like the words of someone familiar with both sides of the story.

More significantly, as Tim Wise pointed out, Dr. King's supposed statements on Zionism came before the more than three decades of crippling Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the 1987 intifada that grabbed the world's attention. The Palestinian narrative was sparsely conveyed in the United States up to that point. There were few Arabs or Palestinians in the U.S. and fewer Arab academics, policymakers, and activists working with Dr. King. Wise also suggests that application of Dr. King's principles logically give way to more sympathy to the Palestinian side given the systematic inequality it faces.

That advocates of Israel have relied on fabricated and out-of-context quotations from a leading moral figure of yesteryear only underscores the absurdity of the general point that all opposition to a Jewish state in a diverse land is anti-Semitic. There are obviously many legitimate ways to critique Zionism. One quite reasonable observation is that after more than a half-century of conflict, the Zionist project has failed to bring the Jews of Israel peace and security--its *raison d'être*. One might counter that this is due to Arab intransigence; the Palestinians should accept their dispossession. However, Palestinian opposition to this fate is an indisputable fact, and security was and is Zionism's key goal. This necessarily was an analytical failure on the part of the Zionists who assumed the Palestinians would blend in to other Arab countries while the later generations forget their past. To dismiss this argument--one that evaluates Zionism by its own goals--and every other critique of Zionism as anti-Semitism is not only dishonest but a cowardly evasion of meaningful debate.

This is not to say that all opponents of Israel are not anti-Semitic. Of course the Palestinian cause, like all movements, is exploited by those with other agendas, such as David Duke and Osama Bin Laden. Blanket statements in either direction are inaccurate.

The main reason why critique of Zionism persists is that whether Israeli officials like it or not, history as it is written and the actual land are still disputed by the millions of Palestinians who are refugees as a result of Israel's birth, the 3.5 million Palestinians living under Israel's direct military rule, and the Palestinians who compose 20% of Israel's citizens in second class status. If Israel was founded and developed on uncontested terrain then arguments against its existence would more likely be out of hatred against the Jewish people. For supporters of Israel to wipe away all critics of the methods and outcomes of Israel's foundation with the "anti-Semitic" label denies completely the legitimacy of the Palestinian narrative--the experiences and perspectives that never show up in Dr. King's imagined "oasis."

Dr. King, though long-passed, is still monumental in the continuing movement for civil rights in the United States. His legacy should be celebrated, and also critiqued constructively; it should not be falsified or stretched to accommodate a different agenda today. The context behind Dr. King's authentic statements on Zionism was unique to a particular domestic political moment in order to sustain a fragile political coalition. Beyond that, Dr. King never claimed any expertise on the subject, nor made it a frequent topic of his speeches or writings. Claiming that all critiques of Zionism are anti-Semitic based on the force Martin Luther King Jr.'s words on the matter fails as an argument on many different levels.

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