

Harvard in the Dock

by Edward S. Shapiro

Final Report: Presidential Task Force on Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Bias, Harvard University, April 29, 2025, pp. 311. Available <https://www.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/FINAL-Harvard-ASAIB-Report-5.7.25.pdf>.

“Is Harvard Worth Saving—and How?” screamed a headline of an article in the June 7-8, 2025 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*. The article quoted seven of its journalists regarding the future of America’s oldest, wealthiest, and most prestigious American university and was precipitated by the university’s many conflicts with the Trump administration, which believes Harvard has violated federal laws or government policy in such areas as antisemitism, racial discrimination, biased curricula, and university research.

The journalists were split on this question. James Taranto, its editorial features editor, asked, “what is the public interest in propping up the conglomerate known as Harvard Corp., which refuses to shut down or reform departments and subsidiaries that are a public menace?” Tunku Varadarajan, a contributor to its editorial page, disagreed. “That Harvard is under threat is cause for national, even international, alarm,”

he wrote. But the “war on this great pillar of American civilization appears to be driven as much by course populist vindictiveness as by the unconservative philistinism that characterizes the MAGA platoons on questions of knowledge, culture, and science. . . . Harvard needs to be re-engineered and perhaps even reinvented, not burned to the ground.”

In fact, Harvard was in the very process of self-examination suggested by Varadarajan. This resulted from the serious questions which had been raised regarding the university’s anemic response to the unrest on campus in the wake of the Hamas attacks on Israeli settlements on October 7, 2023 and Israel’s military actions in Gaza. This lengthy report is one of two such university reports, the other one produced by its Task Force on Combating anti-Muslim and anti-Arab Bias.

The report on antisemitism and anti-Israel bias has two parts: a lengthy

history of the status of Jews and Jewish studies at Harvard during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and then a section of over fifty single-spaced pages of recommendations and steps already taken to alleviate the fears and anxieties of Harvard's Jewish and Israeli students. Any report of such length and effort from Harvard, and especially one on such an important topic, warrants careful attention. As the report noted, "never before in Harvard's history did a conflict in a distant land, in which no American troops were serving, attract such attention." (82-83)

The Task Force on Combatting Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Bias was established on January 19, 2024 by Interim President Alan Garber in response to pressures emanating from within and without the university. Garber was the university's provost and a professor at its medical school prior to being appointed Interim President. This followed the forced resignation earlier that month of President Claudine Gay after her heavily criticized testimony on December 5, 2023 before a congressional committee investigating antisemitism in academia. In response to a question by New York Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik as to whether calling for the genocide of Jews would be permitted at Harvard, Gay responded that it would depend on the "context."

Gay's comment went viral online and resulted in demands that she either resign or be fired. Especially important in this regard was the announcement

by several of Harvard's most generous benefactors that they were immediately ending their financial support of the university. They included Wall Street titan Kenneth C. Griffin, who had recently contributed \$300 million to the university and for whom its graduate school of arts and sciences was renamed, and commodities trader Len Blavatnik, who had given \$200 million dollars to Harvard but has switched his support to the University of Austin, a newly established "anti-woke" school in Texas. Griffin and Blavatnik were not alone. A headline in the *New York Post* of October 17, 2024 read "Harvard donations plunge 15 percent as alumni cut ties over the weak response to campus antisemitism." The decline amounted to \$151,000,000 compared to the previous fiscal year. The *Harvard Crimson* of October 18, 2024 called it "one of the most significant year-over-year drops in donations in the past decade."

The antisemitism task force included nine faculty members and two students. They were assisted by three members of the university's administration and a former executive of Harvard Hillel, one of the two organizations serving Harvard's Jewish community (the other being Harvard Chabad). The two chairmen of the task force were law school professor Jared Ellias and historian Derek Penslar, a specialist in Jewish history. The task force's charge was to examine

the recent history of antisemitism and its current manifestations on the Harvard campus. It will identify causes of and contributing factors to anti-Jewish behaviors on campus; evaluate

evidence regarding the characteristics and frequency of these behaviors; and recommend approaches to combat antisemitism and its impact on campus. (3)

The task force's major sources of written information were the *Harvard Crimson*, the student-run daily newspaper, and various administration documents. This was supplemented by 2,300 interviews of students, faculty, and staff, of whom 477 identified themselves as Jews. The report assumed that the number of Jewish respondents was large enough to come to definitive and precise judgments regarding their complaints, and that these were not exaggerated but should be taken at face value. The report noted that 39 percent of the Jewish respondents felt alienated at Harvard, 26 percent felt physically unsafe, 44 percent felt mentally unsafe, 46 percent were reluctant to express their beliefs to those with differing backgrounds and political views, 49 percent felt that Harvard was oblivious to their well-being, and 60 percent had "experienced some form of discrimination, stereotyping, or negative bias on campus due to [their] views on current events." (120-21)

Jewish students claimed that they were being shunned socially by other students, were reluctant to wear clothing and jewelry indicating they were Jewish, were uncomfortable in some classes because of the animosity of the professors toward Israel, the university's enforcement of its student code of conduct was inconsistently enforced with violators let off with a slap on the

wrist, and complaints by Jewish students were not taken as seriously as were those by blacks and gays.

The report particularly condemned the Palestine Program at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and the program on Religion and Public Life at the Harvard Divinity School. It noted that here as well as elsewhere "lax approval and oversight processes for instructors in some Harvard Schools may have inadvertently contributed to a decline in academic rigor, the propagation of antisemitism and anti-Israeli bias, and the politicization of Harvard's reputation." (171) The report singled out the RPL program at the divinity school as an especially egregious example of extreme anti-Israel sentiment on campus.

The RPL program and its Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative, the report claimed, was "infected" with "one-sidedness and the promotion of a specific political ideology under the guise of academic inquiry." (162) In response, Atalia Omer, an Israeli teaching at RPL, along with other academicians within and outside the divinity school, accused the report of conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, eliding the fact that ardent critics of Zionism and Israel included Jews such as Omer, and violating the norms of academic freedom.¹

But as Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, has noted, the report had accurately exposed and documented the lack of intellectual diversity within the RPL faculty, their "obsessive focus on criticism of

Israel,” and their hostility toward students who did not share their animus toward Israel and Zionism. Kurtz was especially dismayed by a field trip to Israel arranged by Omer. One of the trip’s announced goals was to “de-Zionize” the student participants. Kurtz believed that this political bias within the divinity school was symptomatic of “the postmodern and neo-Marxist turn in the academy as a whole” and that “similarly politicized teaching is going on in many other parts of Harvard.” In June, 2025 the university abolished the RPL program.²

The first part of the report discusses the “golden age” of Jews at Harvard following World War II. These years saw the transformation of Harvard and other elite institutions from redoubts of the white Protestant establishment into meritocratic institutions in which scholarly excellence was paramount. In the 1960s over 80 percent of Harvard’s students were white, and around one-fourth of these were Jews. Jews were also a significant percentage of the faculty and among its most important administrators. This golden age ended, at least for students, when Harvard decided to diversify its student body.

The entering Harvard College class of 2024 was only 33 percent white, and Jews comprised less than 10 percent of the class. By contrast, blacks were only one percent of the students at Harvard College during the 1950s, but their numbers skyrocketed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, along with those of Hispanics,

Asian-Americans, and foreign students. This demographic transformation occurred at Columbia, Yale, Princeton, and other elite institutions as well.

Another factor emphasized by the report on antisemitism was the influence of social media beginning in the early twenty-first century. Social media, the report claimed, was having a “poisonous effect on many dimensions of campus life.” Facebook and other such outlets had made it “easier for students to not only dwell in virtual communities of the like-minded but also to shame and exclude peers without having to confront them in person.” (83) The central issue, the report determined, was whether members of the Harvard community could counteract the effects of social media and work together as partners in learning.

This balkanization of the study body was intensified by the increase in foreign students who brought their political loyalties to Harvard. This was particularly true of students from the Middle East and North Africa, for whom support for the Palestinian cause was an important element in their ethnic and religious identity. They would find political allies among leftist non-Arab students. One recommendation of the task force on antisemitism is for Harvard to be more selective in its admission process, especially in its graduate programs, in order to weed out potential troublemakers.

The report’s many recommendations to combat prejudice against Jews and bias toward Israel would require sig-

nificant funding, more involvement of the faculty in matters other than teaching and research, changes in residential life, and a significant increase in the university's bureaucracy. One bromidic proposal was to create an Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life which would "support students in their faith engagements and proactively advance interfaith programming." (215) Another was to establish a Reimagined Harvard Foundation/Center for Pluralism which would

anchor the practices of the University around a commitment to pluralism, and to engage all members of our campus community in exploring, embracing, and bringing our University values to life across a variety of contexts—from orientation and onboarding to interdisciplinary exchanges and language learning, to interfaith experiences, student life, and the arts on campus. (182)

These would require faculty, staff, fellowships for students, mediation resources, and a headquarters, and the proposal reflects the overly optimistic faith in academic engineering common throughout the report and in academia at large. "Harvard, like the country and world it serves," the report concluded, "is in need of profound repair. We must dedicate ourselves to this essential work, and we must do so as a unified and resolute community. Let us begin." (192)

Finally, and perhaps most important, the report ignores entirely what is arguably the most decisive factor in the explosion of hate on campus which erupted after October 7. How, one must ask,

could thirty-four Harvard student organizations blame Israel immediately after October 7 for the Hamas attacks? How could gay organizations praise Hamas, which adamantly opposes homosexuality and murders homosexuals? How could human rights advocates express sympathy for murderers and baby-killers? How could radical feminists be indifferent to the kidnapping and rape of Israeli women? How could pacifists, or at least "peaceniks," ignore slogans such as "globalize the intifada" and "free Palestine" which tacitly call for the killing of Israelis and their supporters in America?

From whence does such thinking come? Part of the answer is the influence that a set of ideas have had on America's elite universities during the last several decades. The Harvard report barely mentions these, perhaps out of fear that any such discussion would impinge on academic freedom and the right of professors to speak freely about any topic. It would also generate a debate over the nature and quality of the academic curriculum, something that is fiercely guarded by professors, many of whom are driven by strong ideological commitments.

But the absence of this discussion in the report must be considered a major failure of Harvard's antisemitism task force, one that carries with it the potential to vitiate the work contained in the report. The classroom is perhaps the most critical battleground in combatting antisemitism and bias toward Israel, and it is there where professors

disseminate the ideas that foster these bigotries. As John Ellis, a literature professor at the University of California-Santa Cruz, wrote recently “Personnel is policy,” and there’ll be no reforming the universities until the near monopoly of the woke “faculty is broken up.”³

What are the ideas that seem to foster antisemitism? They come under a variety of labels: DEI, social justice, postmodernism, cultural Marxism, etc. But it is useful to describe three theories in particular that stand out for their outsized influence: intersectionality, critical race theory, and settler colonialism.

Intersectionality came of age in 1989 with the publication of Columbia Law School professor Kimberle Crenshaw’s famous article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. In this and other works, Crenshaw advised the courts how to respond when historically marginalized individuals are simultaneously confronted with anti-black, anti-female, and anti-gay prejudices. These prejudices, she wrote, when working in conjunction with one another, strengthen the power of the most privileged members of society at the expense of the most vulnerable. Crenshaw emphasized how these prejudices reinforce one another and that their commonalities were far more important than any differences. Intersectionality advocates

expanded Crenshaw’s list of victims to include prejudices involving caste, ethnicity, religion, disability, intellectual ability, and appearance. They were all interlocked victims of the same oppressive system.

The theory of intersectionality encouraged Palestinian partisans to argue that they too were the victims of the same racist and capitalist forces persecuting gays, women, blacks, Hispanics, and native populations throughout the globe.⁴ In one example of intersectional thinking, Congresswoman Cori Bush of Missouri declared that “the fight for Black lives and the fight for Palestinian liberation are interconnected. We oppose our money going to fund militarized policing, occupation, and systems of violent oppression and trauma.”

Critical Race Theory intensified the tendency to interpret the struggle between Israelis and Arabs in racial terms. CRT argued that racism was so deeply imbedded in American politics, law, social institutions, and public discourse that it could not be dislodged through the normal workings of the political and legal system. The earliest and most prominent advocate of CRT was Derrick A. Bell, a Harvard Law school professor and author of *Race, Racism, and American Law* (1970) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992). He believed that expectations of eventual racial equality were “illusory” and that racism was a permanent aspect of American life, despite such liberal political bromides as equality before the law, affirmative action, and the merit

principle. In the late twentieth century, CRT became a major presence within the American legal community and it confirmed the assumption of those on the Left of their country's racial iniquity. It was not a wide leap to impose this racial paradigm on the Middle East and to see Israelis as white oppressors and Arabs as their black victims. Thus, Harvard students called Zionism a racist ideology and Israel an "apartheid" state, even though it bore little if any resemblance to the South Africa of the pre-Mandela era.

The final and by far most important intellectual construct disseminated on campus by Israel's foes has been settler colonialism, an idea which its devotees claim has been among the most important themes of modern history. The ultimate goal of settler colonialism, in contrast to mere imperialism, has been the displacement and even extermination of native populations in Asia, Africa, and the United States and the occupation of their land by Western migrants. It is common now in the United States for the hosts of academic and other events to acknowledge that they are taking place on land once occupied by Indians.

The father of settler colonialism was the Anglo-Australian anthropologist Patrick Wolfe (1949-2016), the author of *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics of an Ethnographic Event* (1999). Wolfe's focus was the displacement of the aborigine population of Australia by immigrants from the British Isles. But the idea of settler colonialism was quickly applied

to the establishment and growth of Israel, with charges of Israeli genocide thrown around with abandon, in direct opposition to the facts on the ground.

In the wake of October 7, the Israelis were accused of settler colonialism and genocide even though no Israelis had lived in Gaza for nearly two decades, had made no efforts to expel Arabs from Gaza, and were not engaging in genocide. In fact, the population of Gaza prior to October 7 had been increasing rapidly. Nevertheless, the charge of settler colonialism proved popular among Israel's critics and was the rationale for the bizarre claim that Israel bore responsibility for the attacks of October 7.

By excluding an analysis of these theories and their pathways of distribution on campus, the report of the Presidential Task Force on Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Bias leaves little hope that Harvard will successfully address antisemitism on campus. As prof. Ellis explains, "Effective reform means only one thing: getting those political activists out of the classrooms and replacing them with academic thinkers and teachers."⁵

This is unfortunate, as it comes at a time when recent reform initiatives seem to be affecting at least some positive change. Many higher education institutions have at least claimed to be dismantling DEI bureaucracies and new institutions committed to liberal education have been established. Pressure for reform from state and federal government officials has convinced many colleges to discontinue "diversity state-

ments” on employment applications, and more care is being taken with admissions in terms of affirmative action and foreign students. One hopes that the Harvard report is more than a straw in the wind. But antisemitism will not fade as long as the ideologies that sustain it retain their vice-like grip on university faculty.

Edward S. Shapiro is professor emeritus of history at Seton Hall University; edshapiro07052@yahoo.com. He is the author of *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II* (1992), *Crown Heights: Blacks, Jews, and the 1991 Brooklyn Riot* (2006), *A Unique People in a Unique Land: Essays on American Jewish History* (2022) and is the editor of *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism and the Cold War* (1995). Shapiro received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard in 1968, while one of his sons also received a Ph.D. from Harvard and another son graduated from the Harvard Law School.

1. For Omer’s outlook, see her book *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
2. Stanley Kurtz, “Inside Harvard’s Indoctrination Factory,” *National Review* (online), June 18, 2025.
3. John Ellis, “The Public Needs Campus Viewpoint Diversity,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2025.
4. For the troubled and cult-like condition of intersectionality, see Tal Fortgang, “The Brief and Wondrous Life of Intersectionality,” *Commentary*, 158 (May 2025), 45-50. He notes that intersectionality “is made up out of whole cloth, resistant to correction, and systematically unable to account for persistent facts that undermine its most basic premises ... A theory of everything that explains nothing, intersectionality represented the worst of the academic and activist left.”
5. *Ibid.*