

“There’s the biggest antisemite in the country.” Disrupting Propaganda, Enduring Backlash

Sut Jhally interviewed by Bill Yousman

On April 19th, 2025, Bill Yousman interviewed Sut Jhally, emeritus professor at UMASS-Amherst and founder and executive director of the Media Education Foundation (MEF). They discussed the current climate of suppression of criticism of Israel and Jhally’s history of fighting for academic freedom as both an educator and filmmaker who seeks to spread awareness of the persecution of the Palestinian people. The following transcript of the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Bill Yousman: *We know that since October 7, and Israel's subsequent genocidal onslaught on Gaza, the climate has grown even more oppressive when it comes to both criticism of Israel and support for Palestine. But it's also true that censorship and intimidation around this issue is not new. It didn't just start happening. It's been going on for decades. So, can you say something about your own experiences with this, when you first encountered it, and how it's recurred over the years, even before this current moment?*

Sut Jhally: My own history with this is interesting, in that it wasn't something I was always focused on. When I first started teaching in 1984, I never used to deal with this, even though I taught courses on propaganda and international affairs. The Media Education Foundation released a film with Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in 1997, called the *Myth of the Liberal Media* and we didn't deal with this then either. Israel/Palestine wasn't one of the case studies in the film. In fact, when I interviewed Chomsky for the film, he asked me why not look at the Middle East as well, and I remember I was kind of bumbling around and said something about it being too complicated to examine in a short segment. Looking back, I can now see that I fell for the argument made by Zionist propagandists that this was a very complicated subject, and that unless you knew all the history and nuance from 4000 years ago, it was better that you just shut up and not embarrass yourself. But as I educated myself, it became clear to me, that actually, this is fairly straightforward – that it’s the furthest thing from complicated. It’s a textbook case of settler colonialism and not difficult to understand at all and that I had fallen victim to the lie that it was complicated. In fact, one of the major propaganda accomplishments of the Israel lobby has been to shame people into silence because they don’t think they have enough knowledge. I now say, give me fifteen minutes and a few maps and anyone can be educated on the basics of the situation. It is actually one of the

simplest so-called “conflicts” to understand. I think the real story is how the cult of Messianic Zionism that started off with these religious zealots in the late 19th century, early 20th century has conquered the West so all Western leaders now have to humble themselves before people like Netanyahu, how this cult has impacted the internal political structures of the United States and how central it is to the contemporary maintenance of the military/industrial complex.

Another important moment occurred when I interviewed Edward Said in 1996. He was coming to do an event in honor of the great anti-imperialist scholar and activist, Eqbal Ahmad, who was teaching at Hampshire College. And when Said got up to speak, he had tears running down his eyes, and he said the reason he was there was because when the rest of the left forgot the Palestinians, Eqbal did not! For which he paid a price in his own academic life and career.

By that time I was already a tenured full professor, and I thought: why am I not dealing with the most clearest ideological example of how the media system works? And to my great shame, I realized it was my own cowardice, that I was not ready, even as a tenured full professor to take the flak that I knew would come. But that's when I kind of decided well, what's the point of tenure if you remain silent on one of the great injustices of the modern world? This is precisely the reason why tenure exists. Tenure doesn't exist so you can work on your hobbies without having a lot of pressure. It exists so you can talk about the most important things in the society.

That was the start of it, and intellectually I had to do it, because if you're dealing with issues around ideology and propaganda, Israel/Palestine is THE main issue. To not deal with it would have been intellectually dishonest. Which is what large parts of the left have been. That's just intellectual cowardice. And so, I started to recognize my own culpability in this.

So, the first thing I did was figure out how to teach about this, because that's the way I approach most subjects, pedagogically. I already taught Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model in class and the case of Israel/Palestine of course fits right into that. In fact, it's the ultimate example.

And then MEF also had the capability to do it. We are an independent organization. We're not dependent upon grants. We're not dependent upon philanthropy. We can make these decisions.

So first, there was the film we did with Said, *On Orientalism*. And in one sense, making that film educated me. Just listening to Said and then trying to figure out, okay, how do you tell this story? You know that was part of my own education around this.

Then in 2003 MEF produced *Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land: U.S. Media & the Israeli Palestinian Conflict (PPPL)*. Again I was corresponding with Chomsky about it and I told him that I wanted to feature only Jewish scholars and activists, so it could not be accused of being antisemitic. Chomsky replied that he understood what I was doing, strategically but it also implied that only Jews can speak about this - and of course he was absolutely correct. And so, *Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land* featured a much broader range of interviewees than I had initially considered . Of course, I have

subsequently learnt that for Zionists if you do not have the “correct” position on Israel, you can be both Jewish AND antisemitic, in addition to being self-hating. It’s bizarre how twisted the fundamentalist mind is.

At this point people were still buying DVDS and having screenings and I think the film, which compared American and British coverage of Israel’s occupation, was very useful to a number of people and activist groups. (It’s noteworthy that comparison would be very different today, as British media have been tamed in the same way as the American media.)

But straight away, we ran into problems in terms of public screenings. For example, I had already arranged a screening for our film with Jean Kilbourne, *Killing Us Softly 3*, at the Museum of Fine Arts at Northeastern University, which went very well, and so I arranged for *PPPL* to be shown there as well. But about two weeks before the date, all hell broke loose. I heard from the MFA saying that they had heard from some of their very angry members, including from a group called the Jewish Action Task Force who demanded an apology to the Jewish community and a pledge for “greater sensitivity around Israel and the Middle East in the future”. They also said that their members “may want to consider threatening to cancel their memberships and to withhold contributions.” As a response the MFA said they wanted to have a panel after the screening with a diverse range of voices. I flatly refused to do that. They kept saying they would not cancel the film, and in the end I agreed that the first question after the film ended would come from someone they chose – a Professor Richard Landes from Boston University. After the screening, the film received a long ovation and then Landes offered the usual Israel lobby talking points. After he finished, I asked him to stand again and said to the audience that this was a concrete example of how the propaganda works, that anything that presents Palestinians as human cannot be left unchallenged. (We were never invited back to the MFA.)

That was the first public pushback I had about this issue and that's remained consistent right up until the present time. It's almost impossible to get this stuff screened. I mean, producing it is one thing, but it's almost impossible to get it screened. Look at the Academy Award-winning film *No Other Land* which cannot find an American distributor. Think about it – an Oscar winner that can't get an American distributor, can't be on Netflix, can't be on Amazon Prime. And we had an early version of that with *PPPL*. [Editor’s Note: Subsequent to this interview *No Other Land* has become available for streaming in the United States.]

Yousman: *Have you had pushback internal to the university as well?*

Predictably, I was accused of being antisemitic. There were articles in the student newspaper making this accusation, and Zionist students handed out leaflets in class when I was dealing with the media coverage of the situation. But that's what tenure is for, to not be cowed by that kind of intimidation. And in fact, I welcomed the response, as it made Israel/Palestine the focus of attention, which is more important than being ignored

Some of my faculty colleagues also targeted me. There was one UMASS history professor, who when he was head of the Honors College one year, invited me to give talk after the police killing of a young black man. I gave a speech on Stuart Hall's *Policing the Crisis*, and how it can be useful for us to think through this moment. I remember him responding to that lecture really positively, saying that he didn't agree with everything I had said, but it was a great talk that really got students thinking in complex ways about what was happening with police violence.

But then he found out that I did all this other work around Palestine and I became public enemy number one at UMASS to him. He wrote letters to the Chancellor, to the Provost, about "the propaganda" I was spewing in my classes.

At the time I was teaching online classes, and sometimes I had 800 or 900 people in them. One class had 1,300 people! And he was just really threatened by the fact that essentially, I had access to all these students, and that I was saying this stuff about Israel and Palestine. He wrote to me and said he was concerned that I was using my teaching to force people to take positions that they otherwise wouldn't take, because they needed a grade. He was worried that my exams were biased and that people had to say they believed things they don't really believe in to be able to get a grade.

Of course, that was not the case, so I offered, in the spirit of collegiality (and in confidence) to send him my exams. I was very careful when I made up those questions that it was not going to be about opinions. This was simply about what everyone could agree upon, whether it was history or the broad contours of media coverage. But the next thing I knew he had passed my exam on to CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis)!

Yousman: Despite their name, they are really a propaganda outfit for Israel, linked with far-right political forces, who try to smear critics of Israel.

Jhally: They did a huge hit piece on me called "A Primer on Sut Jhally's Shameless Propaganda." Again I wasn't surprised at the attack - it comes with the territory - but when your own faculty colleagues are willing to act in this totally unethical way... And it happened in my own department as well. A colleague thought I was the best thing since sliced bread (he was partly responsible for hiring me) but the more right-wing and Zionist he got, the more I became the devil. And I have recently discovered that one of my current colleagues has written to my Dean accusing me of anti-Semitism - something that is happening in colleges across the country, and in fact many faculty have suffered serious consequence to their careers. Pen America just published a comprehensive report documenting the extent of the attacks. [<https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-campuses-25-web-of-control/>]

When this reaction was occurring on the UMASS campus, the administration knew that they couldn't do anything about it at that time - today it might be different. The question is how does the pressure work? A lot of the pressure works to encourage self-censorship. I never did. Once I embraced my ethical responsibility, I did what I knew to be intellectually correct. The same with MEF, because we were independent.

The next major thing within the university was in 2019. I did these two big events at the 2000-seat Fine Arts Center. One was with Roger Waters, Dave Zirin, Mark Lamont Hill, and Linda Sarsour. And again, there was incredible pushback from the outside. In fact, there was an organization that took out a lawsuit to get an injunction against us even holding the event, and the university itself then started to respond very differently. And this is actually, when I found out how pressure from the outside works, because of the response from the Chancellor at that time.

A year before I'd gone to a dinner at his house in honor of a speaker who was a friend and colleague. At the end of the evening, the Chancellor got up and did his little speech, and he said: "Oh, I see the two people I get the most complaints about are here today." And it was me and someone from the philosophy department. But he said it in a kind of good-natured way. And when I was speaking to him before the dinner, he blithely dismissed the attacks from CAMERA and from other extremist places.

But when we had that event in 2019, and the calls were steadily coming in, not from only from the lunatics, but from donors and from political people, then it changed. The Chancellor knew he couldn't stop the event taking place, but he sent out an email saying we had essentially invited all these antisemites and there should be a greater range of views represented. That was when I realized where the real pressure comes from. The real pressure comes from political forces, donors, and media. And that's been constant since then.

What's different now is that the right-wing extremists are now the mainstream. They're the ones, that the Trump administration is using to target people. Groups like Canary Mission. I've got my own quite long page on their site.

Yousman: This is all before October 7th. Have you experienced the backlash more intensely since then? You talked about it becoming mainstream, but in other ways? Is it consistent, or has there been an intensification of the backlash since October 7th?

*Jhally: I think we have to distinguish between the way you experience things personally, and other ways in which things are restricted. So, one of the things that's continued, and I think has picked up even more, is now every time there's a screening of our 2016 film *The Occupation of the American Mind* there is a lot of pushback.*

After October 7th it was banned from being shown in some universities. I went down to Washington, DC. because it had been stopped from being shown at a university there. So instead, I did an event at the bookstore and restaurant, Busboys and Poets.

So, let me offer some background. All of this culminated in 2016 with our film *The Occupation of the American Mind*, which was focused on how the propaganda works, and an analysis of the Israel lobby and their impact on politics. I think it has been a very successful tool of organizing, for groups to use for their own self education. But as with our previous film we couldn't get any distribution for it. We submitted it to film festivals, which is the first step, and we couldn't get it in. We couldn't get accepted into any film

festival other than a Palestinian film festival. So, it was shown in Toronto during a Palestinian film festival. We had a screening of it in Mexico City when Roger Waters was playing there just by coincidence. And so, we had these screenings here and there. But I knew we were going to be in trouble right from the start because we had submitted the film to a very respected international documentary festival in the Netherlands. We had an international distributor who'd made arrangements for the film to be screened for the people making decisions about what to include. And he was certain it was going to be shown because it had been reviewed by the people at the very top. And then, a couple of days before I was leaving to go there, they decided not to show it. And I thought, well, this is not only in America. And since then, of course, we've now realized that the propaganda isn't just limited to here. The propaganda is global now, especially in Europe. We learned about it from the problems of trying to get that film distributed and shown anywhere. And it just has not been possible. But a lot of people have seen it because we've made it available for free on the internet. Because we wanted to get it out, we didn't want to try and restrict access to who could see it.

The major kind of attack on me at the university, based on the film, again came from CAMERA. Actually, I have my own personal stalker there, a guy called Dexter Van Zile. He made a complaint against me to the administration for falsifying research, claiming there were some deceptive edits in *The Occupation of the American Mind*. Now again, what's interesting is that I am not the editor or director of the movie – I am the Executive Producer, which is a position far removed from decisions about content and editing. But they could not go after the directors of the film because they were not employees at a public university – I was, so I became the focus. They claimed I was being dishonest and manipulating evidence.

Now because the University is a serious research institution it has all kinds of mechanisms to ensure that its faculty do not do what I was being accused of, so they were duty-bound to investigate. So, a senior administrator, a Dean, was tasked with doing an independent preliminary investigation to determine if there was any validity to the charges that required investigation. And of course, there was nothing to the charges and the case was dismissed. Again, what's interesting is that CAMERA essentially fact-checked the movie and could come up with nothing – just a couple of nonsensical claims that held zero validity.

But the religious fundamentalist mind is obsessive. And so, after the first accusation was rejected, they put in another complaint, that was also dismissed. And in one sense it's better that they focus their obsessions on me than other people who may not have the institutional protections that I do. And that's what we're now seeing with the international graduate students like Mahmoud Khalil and Rümeyşa Öztürk - they don't have enough institutional protection.

Yousman: *So, about these accusations of antisemitism. Even as a Jewish person I get accused of antisemitism for criticizing Israel. We have a White House now that is very friendly with real antisemites from the far right, and then also purporting to be cracking down on antisemitism and claiming to be defenders of the Jewish people. Can you talk a little bit about the rhetorical strategy behind articulating any criticism of Israel with antisemitism? The way it's used as a political weapon, the way it's used to silence dissent.*

Jhally: This has been a long-standing lobby strategy. If you are criticizing the genocidal actions of the Israeli state then you are either an antisemite or you're a self-hating Jew. In *The Occupation of the American Mind*, we show Abba Eban, Israel's former ambassador to the United Nations, actually saying that, and then Chomsky talking about how this was essentially the only options you have. So, it's been a long-term strategy, and I think now it has fallen apart. I think it can no longer be used in an ideological way, because it's very clear that the function of it is to silence, the function of it is to make sure that you can't talk about the illegal actions of the state of Israel. And I think they've lost that battle. Which is why we're seeing this incredible crackdown now. If they were winning the ideological battle they wouldn't be doing the kinds of things that they're doing now.

In fact, I've made the argument that the biggest antisemites in the world are those people that link Israel and Judaism. Just think about this from a semiotic perspective. If you define Israel as the representative of all Jewish people, which is what they do - Netanyahu talks about himself as the leader of the Jews and Israeli citizenship is connected to Judaism - then when the state of Israel acts in the most heinous and barbaric way, ALL Jews now become tarred with Israel's actions. That is what's really dangerous. Zionists are the biggest antisemites, because by linking their actions to Judaism they have created a situation that is dangerous to all Jews.

And that is not accidental – Israel's strategy is to foment real antisemitism towards Jews everywhere so they can say, “come to Israel and be safe.” They want the antisemitism. Without the antisemitism, or the accusation of it, or the perception of it, they have nothing. And so, they win both ways. And second, they can try to silence you with this accusation.

But, as I said, I don't think it's working anymore, and it's not working especially because it's being rejected by Jews themselves, especially younger Jews. There's a generational divide on this and that's why the campus encampments were full of young progressive Jews who had to be silenced, which is why the violence had to be so extreme. If they were winning the ideological battle there would be no need to resort to violence and state repression. But once you have lost the ideological and moral battle, all you have left is the iron fist of the state, because you can no longer pull the wool over people's eyes. And that's what we're seeing right now.

And the nature of the propaganda is changing as well. Before October 7th the Israel propagandists wouldn't really outright lie that often. It would be about where the emphasis was, it would be about defining and framing things in a particular way, but after the attack of October 7th they just started to lie and make stuff up. They invented the lie about beheaded babies. They made stuff up about mass rape being committed by Hamas. The old narratives and framings were no longer enough. If they were going to carry out their final solution to the Palestinian problem, they needed to justify the genocide, they needed the propaganda to be really extreme.

As the CEO of the tech firm Palantir, Alex Karp, said at a conference in May 2024, the campus encampments are not a sideshow, they are the main show. He called it an ideological battle. His exact words, which were also posted on social media were: “We think these things that are happening across

college campuses are a sideshow. No, they are the show. If we lose the intellectual debate, you will not be able to deploy any army in the West, ever.”

Which is why Palestine has become, and the campuses have become, the central axis of where this battle is going to take place.

In that sense, the intellectual role of universities has never been more important. So I think our job right now is to make sure that discussions about Israel/Palestine remain at the core of the intellectual life of the academy. The most visible way to do this is through events and lectures of various sorts. And without doubt the university is going to get pressure about these events. And they're going to have to decide what to do. So, we'll see. For example, the Chancellor at UMASS-Amherst sent out this great message in response to Trump's assault on higher education, how we're all in this together we have our shared traditions, etc. Blah! Blah! And my response was, great! But let's see what's going to happen when the speech you have to defend is pro-Palestinian speech. What are you going to do then?

I think that American democracy is now going to survive or fall around this particular issue. I would never have dreamt that. That's what October the 7th did. It precipitated this crisis, and that's what the encampments did by moving the crisis internally. And public opinion has shifted dramatically. And the Israel lobby has lost. In terms of people being aware of what's going on, being aware of what Israel is doing, it has shifted dramatically. And that's why we're having this incredible violent repression from the state.

So, the situation has changed totally since October 7. And that's why we're seeing this incredible crackdown. Because everything is now just much, much more explicit about what is at stake. And so, they've gone after the most vulnerable people first. Students, non-citizens. Essentially, they're floating the balloon. Great. If we can get away with this...

I mean, I'm not kidding when I say American democracy is going to survive or fall on this issue. If you can be locked away for what you say, then all bets are off for everything.

Yousman: So, this leads us to another topic I wanted to talk to you about. How is this current attack on academics and students involved in the Palestinian movement part of a larger ideological and policy agenda against critical education itself?

Jhally: It's been coming for a while, right? They focused first on so-called critical race theory, the attack on woke, and the attack on DEI. So, this is part of a broader thing. But it has coalesced around this issue because of October 7, and because of the reaction to October 7.

I mean, whatever else you might want to say about it, if you ask Hamas about why they did it, from their perspective, they would say the Palestinians were about to become invisible. There were going to be all these agreements made with Arab countries to normalize relationships with Israel, and the Palestinians were going to pay the price. And now Palestine is at the center of all these issues. That was not the case

before October 7. From that perspective, no matter what the strategy was, no matter what tactics were used, it precipitated the crisis. Now, how it will be resolved we don't know. But I think Israel is finished in the secular, democratic (dis)guise, that it was trying to have. It's no longer going to have the mask that it did have for a long time that Israel was the little David against the Arab Goliath.

Yousman: You already mentioned this, but I'd like to delve into it a bit more. And that's the reality that attacks on critics of Israel come from both liberals and the right. Mark Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick published a book in 2021 called Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics. I was at the Union for Democratic Communications Conference shortly after October 7, and two scholars, Paula Chakravartty and Deepa Kumar, were part of an opening plenary. And of course, their remarks mentioned what had happened, it was less than a week after. And a person in the audience got up and started to angrily denounce them for not acknowledging the horrors of October 7.

But there's two things at play here. First, I was there, I heard them, they had acknowledged it. They were explicit in acknowledging it. Second, this is a conference of leftist, not just liberal, but leftist communication and media studies scholars and activists. So, what is this? Why do liberals, and even some leftists, stop at the borders of Palestine?

Jhally: Well, I think that's an important distinction to make, because if you apply the same principles of equality and justice across the board, then, of course, there's only one position on this to take from a left perspective. But if your commitment is not ideological, if it's not moral or ethical, but it's something else, then you can make these distinctions. You know, PEP (Progressive Except Palestine). It's the liberal presence within the left, because the left itself is fairly small. There's a lot of people who consider themselves left. But they're not. They're really kind of just mainstream liberals, or Democrats. So, for me it's not surprising.

And for a lot of them it's about identity as well. Israel speaks to their identity in a way that other places don't. And that's why, whenever I hear about this, I think: You have to decide what's more important. Is your tribal identity more important? Or is your moral and ethical identity more important? And what we are finding out, that for younger Jews in particular, their commitment to Judaism is to do with the moral and ethical clarity it offers on questions of justice, not a blind loyalty to tribe.

But again, I had an early experience of this in 2002. I was doing something for an organization called Chicago Media Watch, now called Chicago Media Action, an alternative organization for media reform. They had me come to their conference one year, and they asked me back a couple of years later. And I said, I would come, but only want to talk about Israel and Palestine because this is the main example of propaganda when it comes to international affairs.

And then the backtracking started. First it was, well perhaps we can have a panel discussion. And I asked if they had a panel discussion for anything else. And the answer was no. Eventually I agreed to come, and to speak, but not for a panel discussion.

And when I arrived, I looked at the program and the next person speaking after me was Richard Baehr, the former Education Director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). I just hit the roof. I was going to leave, but then I thought, no, I'll give my talk, and I drew attention to what was actually happening in front of people on the stage. I pointed out that this was as concrete an example as you could have about how the control of the narrative works. Essentially, the organization subsequently fell apart as a result of internal division around this. And that was this dynamic working right there. The head of CMW was a Zionist. I saw her shortly after that at the National Conference for Media Reform. And one of the people I spoke to told me that when I was coming down the escalator she said: "there's the biggest antisemite in the country."

Yousman: This idea of needing a panel for balance, can you imagine if someone was talking about slavery or the Holocaust, and it was suggested that we need a balanced approach...

Jhally: When it comes to talking about Palestine at universities, I'm in favor of as many voices speaking as possible. But they don't have to be on the same panel. You want to organize your own talk, organize your own talk.

But that's the influence of the Israel lobby. It's a playbook. Hanan Ashrawi, the former Palestinian Authority Minister of Higher Education and Research and a winner of multiple peace prizes, used to say that for a long time she couldn't get on American media, because producers would say they could only have her on if there was someone from the "other side." And then no Israel-defender would agree to go on with her. There are various ways you can prevent people speaking, which is as important as speaking yourself. In fact, suppressing other speech is sometimes more important than speaking yourself.

Yousman: You know, this can be pretty bleak and depressing, but you often cite Gramsci about the need for both pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. James Baldwin has written about not succumbing to despair. Angela Davis has written about this. She wrote a book about the connections between black American and Palestinian activism that she called Freedom is a Constant Struggle. So, looking at what's happening on campuses, as you already mentioned, is the tide actually starting to turn? Have Israel's genocidal actions since October 7 more widely exposed people to the longer history of violence and oppression of the Palestinian people, and do the defenders of Israel sense this? And is that a partial explanation of why they're stepping up their propaganda and censorship? You already said that you do believe this is a radical new conjunctural crisis. But is there some hope to take from this current moment, even while simultaneously acknowledging how desperate the situation is in Palestine?

Jhally: Absolutely. I mean, if you'd have said to me even a year ago that the discussion around Israel and Palestine would be central to everything that we now have to deal with, and that there would be majorities in support of Palestinians, I would have said you were crazy. But public opinion has changed dramatically. There is always going to have to be a first step. But what hasn't changed, of course, is elite opinion. There is a great, incredible split between public opinion and elite opinion that is allied with the power of the state. But at least now you have a basis on which to build.

I think of what people like Bernie Sanders and Zoran Mamdani are doing in challenging power. Perhaps it may not be around Israel and Palestine, but they are talking about a hegemonic project in terms of what a unified opposition looks like. Not just as a set of policies, but as an idea of what America could be, or what democracy could be, of what justice could be, of what fairness could be. And I think this is a moment not only of great danger, but it is also a moment of possibility where new coalitions and what Gramsci called “historic blocs” could be constructed. As you said, pessimism and optimism. The danger is pessimism and paralysis and hopelessness. That is what we have to avoid.