Starting on the political left, a guilty conscience about one's own history and achievements has taken hold in the West. Nowhere is the resulting self-hatred more evident than in our dealings with Israel.

From Jan Kapusnak

Why does outrage erupt in the West when Israel defends itself against genocidal terrorism, while it remains largely silent in the face of massacres in Syria, the execution of dissidents in Iran or the systematic disenfranchisement of women in Afghanistan?

Why do tens of thousands of people march through European capitals with Palestinian flags, while hardly anyone says a word when Hamas brutally executes Palestinians suspected of "cooperation" with Israel?

Why is there talk of "genocide" in Gaza – even after a ceasefire, which was strongly demanded by Western activists – while famine and mass crimes in Yemen, Sudan and elsewhere hardly cause a stir?

Why is Israel – a democratic state surrounded by hostile regimes – scrutinized microscopically in its actions, while the crimes of the world's tyrannies often remain unexamined?

The answer lies less in the Middle East than in the cultural and moral pathology of the modern West.

A phenomenon of prosperity

The term "oikophobia" – from the Greek "oikos" (house) – sums it up: the irrational disparagement of one's own civilization. First popularized by British philosopher Roger Scruton, the term describes a pathology in which self-criticism turns into self-loathing.

While xenophobia is directed against the foreign, oikophobia despises the familiar. It thrives in prosperous, stable societies where comfort creates feelings of guilt and elites confuse self-criticism with virtue.

This phenomenon has historical antecedents, from classical Athens and Rome to Enlightenment France and Victorian Britain. The result is not humility, but self-hatred – the conviction that one's own culture is uniquely corrupted. A twisted

fantasy of greatness. And, of course, the other cultures seem innocent in comparison.

This self-hatred has become the emotional core of the Western progressive left. When the economic utopias of the 20th century – Marxism and real socialism – collapsed under coercion, corruption, inefficiency and dysfunctionality, their adherents by no means abandoned the belief; they redirected it. The revolutionary impulse survived, but the goal shifted: from hatred of capitalism to a scathing critique of the Western tradition.

Where the old left condemned economic exploitation, the new left condemns civilization itself. The enemy is no longer “bourgeois capital”, but “whiteness”, “colonialism” and “Western hegemony”. Central to this worldview is the conviction that the West, which is based on “white” culture, is responsible for more or less all the evil in the world and that this evil overshadows all the good that could cast doubt on this condemnation.

Western history is reinterpreted as a record of crimes, almost exclusively through the lens of guilt: of slavery, colonialism and racism. Statues are toppled, national symbols defamed, education systems redesigned in order to do penance.

Paradoxically, the radical left uses Western ideals as weapons against the West itself. Reason, equality, human rights and justice – born of the Western Enlightenment – are reinterpreted as instruments of Western domination.

When the left speaks of justice, it often means revenge – not fairness, but retribution in the guise of virtue. The result is an intoxicating moral narrative: the West sins, others suffer, redemption lies in endless repentance and the prospect of forgiveness. Moral self-flagellation has become a kind of secular religion these days – a religion of guilty conscience.

Righteous and radical

What explains why the hatred of tradition in the West is so mercilessly focused on the West alone? It results from a shift in moral focus – from individuals and economic classes to supposed racial and ethnic groups. The modern left divides humanity into victims and oppressors, making Western civilization appear uniquely culpable.

The desire to retroactively help the historically disadvantaged to gain their rights easily turns into double standards. It is considered reprehensible to hold affected groups jointly responsible for their poor situation in the context of historical circumstances. In order to accentuate one's own guilt, other cultures are systematically exonerated and criticism of them is stigmatized as racism. The denunciation of one's own culture guarantees secure moral added value.

Nowhere is the West's self-hatred more evident than in its treatment of Israel. For large sections of the radical left, Israel represents everything they loathe: a small but successful Western democratic society, technologically advanced, militarily defensive, nationally united and self-confident in its identity.

A perfect target for projecting self-hatred outwards. The Jewish state becomes a lightning rod for the sins of its own imperial and colonial past. Hatred escalates into absurd Nazi comparisons and accusations of apartheid. When Jews defend themselves, they can do nothing other than practise genocide. Criticism of Israel becomes a virtue-signalling theater of demonization that allows the West to repent by demonizing the Jewish state.

Intertwined with cultural self-hatred, an unfortunate legacy that has outlasted the Soviet Union plays into this. During the Cold War, Moscow portrayed Zionists as colonial, racist aggressors and Palestinians as their innocent victims. The conflict became part of a broader "war against the West", a narrative that became deeply embedded in "progressive" politics. Arafat's PLO became the moral compass of the radical left, despite the myriad acts of terror it perpetrated; the credo of Third World anti-imperialism seemed to justify even the most heinous acts of violence.

Israel's existential war against the genocidal terrorist organization Hamas, which is entrenched among the civilian population of Gaza, has created what is probably the biggest global political wave of the 21st century to date: the pro-Palestinian movement, which is raging on the streets of Western cities and on social media.

What claims to be a fight for justice is less concerned with the suffering of the real victims of war than with the striking presentation of its own moral superiority. Demonstrators mouth slogans that they barely understand and reduce a complex conflict to a distorted image of brutal perpetrator and innocent victim.

Only a few of the mostly young protesters have the historical knowledge that the Jewish population in the Middle East was constantly exposed to jihadist terror before

and after the founding of the state of Israel. They have no idea that the Palestinian leadership has rejected serious peace offers time and time again. They rejected the offer of “peace for land” in the delusional hope that one day, after the successful expulsion of the Jews, they would get all the land. The slogan “From the river to the sea” is chanted without people realizing that it calls for the destruction of Israel.

Popular self-defense thesis

In the doctrine of the radical left, cultural relativism demands that no society can claim inherent superiority. In concrete terms, this means that the West – and Israel in particular – must meet an almost impossible standard of moral purity that is hardly ever applied to non-Western actors. Every military operation is considered barbaric; every act of defense violates international law, and war, no matter how “just”, is illegitimate as such.

In sharp contrast, the blind violence of terrorist groups that claim to be fighting for the underprivileged of this world is reinterpreted as self-defense. Philosopher Judith Butler, for example, legitimized the massacre of 7 October as an act of “armed resistance”. The deliberate and intentionally cruel killing of civilians by Hamas, its cynical use of people as shields and its systematic construction of a terrorist infrastructure that sabotages the development of prosperity and civil society thus appear to be intrinsically necessary.

This moral distortion reveals the true nature of the “Free Palestine” movement. The romanticization of Hamas violence, the slogan “End Zionism” and the exuberant outrage that has outlasted the October ceasefire – none of this really has anything to do with improving living conditions in Gaza.

Western feelings of guilt have become a political religion – and nowhere is this more evident than in migration policy. Illegal immigrants are taken in as “refugees” in large numbers and hardly ever sent back. This can be described as pragmatic or compassionate, but above all it is ready for repentance. Epic guilt and cultural masochism are proving to be the driving force behind large-scale illegal immigration: a large proportion of the elite believe that the time has come to pay for past sins, even if this damages their own society.

Newly arrived migrants, especially from Muslim-majority countries, often join the radical left. Loud and aggressive street protests have the purpose of pushing governments towards pro-Palestinian positions. In September, French President

Emmanuel Macron recognized Palestine as a state, although hardly any of the formal conditions for this had been met.

A real find

Islamist movements know how to exploit the Western tendency towards self-hatred with somnambulistic certainty. They constantly keep the Western conscience in the dock and feed the hot-running media outrage machine with ever new “crimes against humanity” that Israel is alleged to have committed. Cynically misappropriated terms such as “genocide”, “apartheid” or “colonialism” further fuel the discourse. By convincing liberal democrats that self-defense is immoral, Islamists are waging a psychological war that is more effective than any military offensive.

The convergence is striking. The radical left and Islamist extremism unite in militant hostility towards Israel and the West. One side instrumentalizes guilt, the other tolerance. Together they increase outrage, polarization and political instability. Their by no means hidden, but openly proclaimed goal, the “globalized intifada” (i.e. jihad), means nothing less than the destruction of the West.

The discourse on Gaza has developed its own dynamic. Liberal Western elites, who should be immune to totalitarian temptations, are joining the extremist talk – for fear of being labeled as “racists” or “Islamophobes”. There is a clear difference between genuine racism and the rejection of deeply destructive beliefs, attitudes and goals. The Western world has already strayed far from its moral foundations under the influence of widespread anti-Semitic propaganda – and the time to change course is running out.

Jan Kapusnak is a freelance author based in Tel Aviv and writes about the Middle East, Israel and geopolitical issues.

This article first appeared in the NZZ.