

What Genocide?

Project Esther:

The Next Chapter of Project 2025

Patrick Dufrene

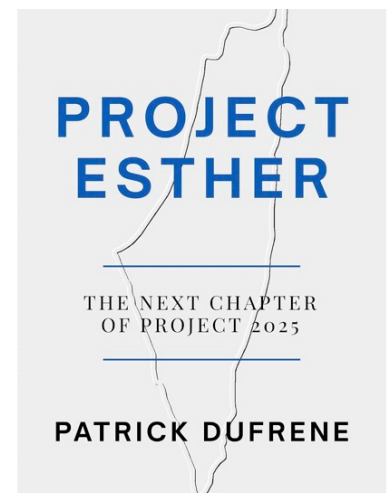
Independently published, 2025, £16.97 (from Amazon) p/b

John Newsinger

The Heritage Foundation published its Project 2025 in April 2023. It soon became notorious for its proposed installation of an authoritarian system of government in the United States, so notorious that Donald Trump on one occasion actually felt obliged to deny that he knew anything about it. Despite which, since becoming president for a second term, he has set about implementing many of its recommendations. What is much less well-known is another Heritage Foundation policy publication, Project Esther, and this is the subject of Patrick Dufrene's revelatory book.

Dufrene makes clear that Trump has made 'a concerted effort to implement the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint' with many of his unprecedented wave of executive orders intended to instal authoritarian government and values. (p. 27) But what of Project Esther? This was published in October 2023 and was intended to open a new front in the culture wars that the MAGA Right were waging. As he puts it, Project Esther was intended to become 'a flagship in a fleet of cultural offensives', framing 'pro-Palestinian activism as a civilisational threat', reframing 'antisemitism as a leftist phenomenon' and using 'religious symbolism to justify aggressive legal and bureaucratic responses'. Project Esther provides the 'intellectual ammunition' to fuel a 'moral panic with Fox News and other media outlets amplifying the cause, making it a national issue'. (p. 16)

Opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, indeed opposition to Zionism, was to be conflated with, smeared as, anti-Semitism. What Project Esther identified was a ' Hamas Support Network' – not an underground network of terrorist cells, but rather 'a sprawling constellation of student groups, human



rights organisations, academics and activists'. There was also a ' Hamas Caucus' that included the likes of Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar and Bernie Sanders. The term became 'a shorthand in partisan media for any Democrat who criticised Israeli policy or opposed military aid to Israel'. And all this has been intended to close down any criticism of Israel and US support for Israeli genocide; and to divide and intimidate the Left more generally. (pp. 33-34) One other interesting point that Dufrene makes is the importance of Project Esther as far as establishing good relations with the evangelical Christian Right.

The equating of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism did not begin with Project Esther. The Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 took place while Joe Biden was still president and part of his administration's response was to promote the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism. His government's support for Israel's response to the attack was unconditional. At the same time the liberal media in the United States scrupulously downplayed Israeli crimes and atrocities, quite independently of the Heritage Foundation. What Project Esther called for, however, was the active waging of a cultural war around the issue, a cultural war backed up by intimidation and repression, and this has been the Trump administration's policy.

One of the main battlefields in this cultural war has been academia. With Project Esther:

the targeting of universities has reached a new level of precision and intensity. Heritage materials argue that American universities have become 'incubators of extremism', citing syllabi, guest speakers, and faculty affiliations as evidence.

And the Project also:

calls for the deployment of digital monitoring tools to identify and track what it calls 'ideological disinformation'. Collaborating with platforms like Canary Mission and privately held cybersecurity firms, Heritage-affiliated analysts have mapped student and faculty affiliations using metadata from petitions, public rosters and social media.

Dossiers have been distributed to university donors and boards of trustees. (pp 47-48) Dufrene's discussion of the role played in all this by Canary Mission is particularly interesting with its 'digital blacklist' continually growing. Its website 'publishes dossiers on individuals it accuses of antisemitism, often linking that

charge to activism critical of Israel and Zionism'. And it has consequences: for example, he refers to one student 'profiled for posting a meme in 2020' and who 'was later denied a State Department internship'. Many others have been successfully intimidated into silence and passivity. (pp. 168-169) This is the new McCarthyism.

Particularly draconian has been Project Esther's focus on immigration, targeting foreign students. Dufrene cites, among others, the cases of a Palestinian graduate student at Columbia University, Mahmoud Khalil, detained by ICE agents in March 2025, and of two other Columbia students, Mohsen Mahdawi and Yunsea Chung also detained by ICE. This was all part of a general crackdown on students protesting against Israel. It was not just undergraduate students. On 17 March 2025, ICE detained Baar Khan Suri, a post-doctoral fellow at Georgetown University who was teaching a course entitled 'Majoritarianism and Minority Rights in South Asia'. He was picked up for 'spreading Hamas propaganda and alleged familial ties to Hamas'. (pp. 163-164) Many have actually been deported or have self-deported. The Trump administration also went after the universities themselves. In March 2025, Trump cancelled \$400 million of federal funding for Columbia. This generalised assault on higher education was not just over protests against Israel, but was part of the MAGA assault on DEI. The assault is still being resisted by many universities, it has to be said.

One other issue that Dufrene briefly explores, that is very much worth noticing, is the relationship between Meta and the Israeli government. He writes of how, since 7 October 2023, Meta has complied with 94% 'of takedown requests issued by the Israeli government . . . These requests targeted posts critical of Israel or supportive of Palestinians'. Meta also suspended the Palestinian Quds News Network which had 10 million followers and the pro-Palestinian Instagram account, 'Eye on Palestine', that reported Israeli conduct in Gaza and the West Bank. These acts of repressive censorship provoked condemnation and opposition, including from Meta staff. (pp. 175-176)

Dufrene argues that all of this has backfired, that Project Esther has actually 'led to a notable increase in pro-Palestinian activism, a decline in Israel's popularity and a rise in antisemitic incidents'. While he acknowledges the complexities of the situation, nevertheless a case can be made that he underestimates the circumstances that have made this outcome possible. The impact of the full horror of the Israeli genocide in Gaza; the openly brutal, indeed murderous racism, of key figures in the Netanyahu government; and the

Trump administration's own growing unpopularity – accentuated by the disastrous attack on Iran, carried out in alliance with Israel – have all undoubtedly helped undermine Project Esther. The attempt to suppress support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israeli genocide in the United States has failed.

Dufrene briefly discusses the stance taken by the Starmer government over this issue. He writes that it has taken a more 'nuanced' approach than the Trump administration, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, and he praises David Lammy's support for a 'two-state solution'. (p. 251) The situation looks somewhat different this side of the Atlantic. Here what we see is a Labour government refusing to condemn genocide and continuing to provide Israel with arms and intelligence at the same time as launching an unprecedented assault on civil liberties, on the right to free speech and to protest, an assault involving the mass arrest of hundreds of old age pensioners. The implications of this assault have been pretty much completely ignored by the liberal media, although the courts are causing the government some problems. One can only welcome, for example, the recent acquittal of 72 year-old Tony Greenstein, charged with supporting Hamas, facing serious prison time and found not guilty on 21 August 2026.¹ In both the United States and in the United Kingdom this is all still a developing situation.

John Newsinger is a retired academic.

His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

¹ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwym4gg7vr1o>>