



Jews and Leftist Politics: Judaism, Israel, Antisemitism, and Gender; Antisemitism and the left: On the return of the Jewish question

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Jews and Leftist Politics: Judaism, Israel, Antisemitism, and Gender
edited by Jack Jacobs

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 386 pages

Antisemitism and the left: On the return of the Jewish question
by Robert Fine and Philip Spencer

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 144 pages

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Why have so many Jews traditionally embraced left-wing causes? This is the main question tackled by the contributors to *Jews and Leftist Politics: Judaism, Israel, Antisemitism, and Gender*, edited by Jack Jacobs, professor of political science at the City University of New York. Some of them seek answers in Judaism and Jewish religious ideas, such as revolutionary messianism and an emphasis on personal action. Others attribute Jewish affinity for radicalism to social marginality due to limited economic, political, or cultural opportunities in a climate of antisemitism.

The topics covered range from reflections on modernity and capitalism, socialist Zionism, Jews and Communism in the Soviet Union and Poland, and Jews and American Communism to radical Jewish women in Imperial Russia. They include focused discussions on Gershom Scholem, Gustav Landauer, Martin Buber, Isaac Deutscher, the electoral left in New York during World War II, and Jewish contributions to the New School for Social Research. The information is interesting, the critiques insightful, but ultimately, the gruel is thin.

From the outset, Jacobs' introduction starts on the wrong foot, as "left" is left undefined. All we are told is that it "arose out of the French Revolution and was, initially, committed to that revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity" (p. 3). But did the totalitarian turn taken soon after that presumed "initial commitment" have any effect on the left? This vagueness continues: "The positions taken by these founders of the French Left," none of whom were Jews, "led some Jews in France to ally with the left." "Some" positions by "some" founders led to "some" Jews to ally with "the left." Why? We are told merely that "left-wing movements [that] ultimately came into being not only in France but also in many other lands [i]n general ... tended to favor equal treatment of citizens and opposed the legal disabilities that had been imposed upon Jews ..." (p. 4). "In general," they "tended to favor" these things. Except when they didn't.

It does not help that Jacobs rejects out of hand the conclusion of Robert Wistrich, the celebrated scholar of antisemitism, that Karl Marx suffered from “self-hatred.” The reason he finds Wistrich’s assessment “far-fetched” was that, after all, Marx “was not inclined to think of himself as Jewish.” Besides, Marx “never devoted sustained attention to the ‘Jewish question’ after he wrote the discussions of [Bruno] Bauer’s work” on the subject, in 1844. By contrast, in his book *Capitalism and the Jews*, Catholic University historian Jerry Z. Muller argues that Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” clearly “contains, in embryo, most of the subsequent themes of Marx’s critique of capitalism.”¹ By predicting that after “abolishing the empirical essence of Judaism—hucksterism and its preconditions—the Jew will have become impossible,” Marx could not have done more to fuel antisemitism. The cumulative impact of his vicious attacks on Judaism, according to Muller, “would be the theme, with variations, of subsequent anti-Jewish authors from Richard Wagner down to the Nazi ideologist Gottfried Feder.”²

Contributor Mitchell Cohen, Jacobs’ colleague at City University of New York, also mentions Marx’s antisemitic words, but he cites them alongside those of conservative Edmund Burke, feebly attempting to minimize the former by noting that “anti-Jewish notions and language are promiscuous” (p. 124). Focusing on the increasingly common and worrisome left-wing anti-Zionism, however, Cohen starts by distinguishing between “integral cosmopolitans” and “integral nationalists.” Rosa Luxemburg, who had confessed to being unable to “find a special corner in [her] heart for the ghetto” but felt “at home in the entire world,” is emblematic of the former, while the latter is exemplified by Vladimir Jabotinsky and his “right-wing heirs.” Rejecting them both as “monist” (p. 125), Cohen is nevertheless irked most by the impact of “several decades of growing right-wing dominance in Israel,” and suggests that “historians may one day discern that the combination of ideological commitment and cockiness of the ‘Jabotinsky movement’ caused extensive damage to Israel’s political culture, and to its relations with the world, including world Jewry, and helped to fertilize terrain for left-wing anti-Zionism and the ‘Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions’ movement” (p. 128).

After engaging in a lengthy critique of the outrageous Judith Butler, the leftist Jewish professor of rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley, Cohen asks her, rhetorically: “As Jews needed baptism as the entrance ticket to European culture, do they now need an odd species of integral cosmopolitanism to usher them into self-dissolution today” (p. 143)? The self-evident negative answer would argue against leftism itself—but Cohen doesn’t go there. Apparently, he cannot do so in good conscience.

Another major problem faced by leftists who seek to defend Zionism is its allegedly “colonial” legacy. Contributor Yoav Peled, a political science professor at Tel Aviv University, defends that charge, arguing that from the outset, “Zionist practices were very much in line with colonial practices of exploiting and/or excluding the

indigenous population;” how else can we “explain, for example, Israel’s policy of settlement in, and permanent occupation of, the Palestinian territories captured in 1967” (p. 119)? That question, too, has a variety of sensible answers, but none apparent to Peled. The reason leftists so often consider it rhetorical is explained by University of Chicago professor Moishe Postone: “For parts of the New Left, the Palestinian struggle, beginning after 1967, became regarded as the central anti-colonial struggle” (p. 62). Exponentially exacerbated by “the USSR [which] began promulgating a form of anti-Zionism that was essentially antisemitic,” (p. 61) it led to the ultimate obscenity: “an identity was posited between Israeli Jews and the Nazis, and the Palestinian became the true ‘Jews,’ victims of ‘genocide’. ... Emancipation [now requires] the eradication of the sources of global evil—‘Zionism’ and the United States” (p. 65). Postone thus reveals the enormous ideological birth defect that Jews in the leftist tradition cannot avoid addressing: the classical dialectic that pits the Jew/capitalist against the downtrodden, of whom the Palestinians are emblematic. It is but small comfort that this is not “an adequate critical theory of capitalism today,” (p. 68) when it provides such effective cover for what Wistrich called “a lethal obsession,” which refuses to die. Haters are seldom bothered by theoretical inadequacies.

Samuel Farber, professor emeritus at City University of New York, a self-identified Cuban-Jewish Marxist, recommends an internationalist approach, the essence of which is a refusal to place anyone’s particular interests—for example, Cubans’ or Jews’—“above the interests of other people” (p. 348). Only (so-called) facts matter. Accordingly, “nowadays for me being an internationalist Jew means recognizing that it is the Palestinians, and not the oppressive actions of the State of Israel, that deserve solidarity” (p. 349). What a most disconcerting Jewish answer to the wrong question.

Antisemitism and the left also seeks to tackle the relationship between “universalism and the Jewish question” from a “Marxist-socialist tradition.” Co-authors Robert Fine, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Warwick, and Philip Spencer, a professor at Kingston University and the University of London, observe that “‘the Jewish question’ is the classic term for the representation of Jews as harmful to humanity as a whole” (p. 2). This is indeed so. That means that their revered founder’s infamous treatment of the subject once again requires finessing.

They do so not by minimizing his antisemitism but denying it altogether. “Marx’s famous essays ‘On the Jewish Question’ were in substance a critique of the very idea of the Jewish question” (p. 5). “In substance,” as opposed to what—style, meaning, the actual words? Yet a “critique” that advocates the abolition of Judaism on the ground that it will (and should) become impossible is not easily distinguishable from what Professor David Nirenberg of the University of Chicago described as anti-Judaism,⁵ antisemitism’s evil cousin. The authors take an entire,

tortuous chapter to defend their mentor; yet their conclusion that “Marx reaffirmed the right of Jews to be citizens, to be Jews” is especially puzzling, given his outright rejection of citizenship as such, along with political rights and particular nations.

It is in their critique of Marx’s successors that the authors offer useful insights. After the obligatory criticisms of Israel (including “occupation of Palestinian land, human rights abuses that flow from the occupation, anti-Arab racism,” etc.), they note that “it is a predicament of all modern nation states to have to deal with contradictions that arise between the universal norms of constitutional government and the national boundaries in which these norms are set” (p. 112). That makes Israel just another nation, which means that the left has to figure out a defense for nationhood. At the same time, it helps to shed a realistic light on the putative “universal norms,” self-righteously championed by the likes of the UN Commission on Human Rights, the members of which are mainly representatives of regimes ranging from the authoritarian to the tyrannical.

To their credit, the authors do both, however gingerly. They note, for example, that a claim against some act of state “accords with or violates humanitarian or human rights law is rarely tested;” similarly, “genocide”—an epithet routinely used against Israel—“may be based ... on common usage that may substantially differ from legal definitions” (p. 115). Or, more bluntly, “when we look more closely at the appeal to humanitarian law in political argument, we find a propensity for all that is solid to melt into air” (p. 116). Amen.

They turn next to the constituency most clearly responsible for the attacks on Israel and the Jews: the epistemic community.⁴ But “the existence of double standards *within the elite*” (p. 121; original emphasis) is no garden-variety hypocrisy: “In this *Alice in Wonderland* world, everything is upside down” (p. 122). The authors diagnose the problem correctly enough, echoing Postone:

The Jewish question is not just an attitude of hostility to Jews or to those who invoke the sign of “the Jews” but a theory designed to explain the winners and losers of capitalist society. It is formulated in terms of dichotomies—the modern and the backward, the people and its enemies, the civic and the ethnic, the postnational and the national, imperialism and anti-imperialism, power and resistance, the West and the rest. In every case Jews appear as the “other of the universal” ... [which] creates an inequitable economy of compassion. ... In its spiritless radicalism it at once turns Israel into the primary source of violence in the world and places Palestinians into a single identity script as victims, only as victims and only as victims of Israel (p. 124).

Indeed. There is just one problem: their optimism that in Marxist-socialism “we have the best tradition of critical thought to inspire and guide us” (p. 125) leaves this reader, for one, utterly unconvinced.

Notes

¹ Jerry Z. Muller, *Capitalism and the Jews* (Princeton, 2010), p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York, 2014).

⁴ Defined by Council on Foreign Relations president Peter M. Haas in his “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization*, XLVI:1, “Knowledge, Power, and International Policy Coordination” (Winter, 1992), 1–35.