

‘WE ARE ALL GERMAN JEWS’: EXPLORING THE PROMINENCE OF JEWS IN THE NEW LEFT

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Jews were disproportionately involved in the 1960s student movement known as the New Left. Drawing on research data from primarily the USA and Australia, we explore some of the key factors that contributed to this prominence including the significant number of Jewish students at key universities, the impact of left-wing family backgrounds on many Jewish students, and the general influence of Jewish cultural values and experiences. We argue that Jewish student radicals incorporated the whole spectrum of Jewish identity from those who either rejected or expressed ambivalence about their Jewishness to those whose radical and Jewish commitments were closely aligned. We also explain why the Jewish contribution to the New Left had so little impact on mainstream Jewish political culture.

The disproportionate historical contribution of Jews to the political Left has been well documented. Both as individual theorists and activists of the stature of Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Blum and Emma Goldman, and as organised mass labour movements in, for example, revolutionary Russia and early-mid twentieth century Warsaw, Amsterdam, Paris, Toronto, New York and London, Jews have been conspicuous for their socialist and communist affiliations (Wistrich 1976, 1).

This Jewish alliance with the Left reflected a number of complex historical and political factors including the class oppression of Jews who were mostly poor and working-class, the ethnic/national oppression of Jews by various European right-wing governments and movements, and the defence of Jewish claims to equality by most left-wing European parties

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and movements (Mendes 1999, 483-488). It is therefore not surprising that Jewish students played a disproportionate role in the 1960s radical student movement known as the New Left.

This essay will largely confine itself to an analysis of this phenomenon in the United States, Australia and France given the availability of empirical data on Jewish involvement in the New Left in these countries. However, some brief reference will also be made to the limited documentation of this phenomenon in other countries in order to demonstrate the breadth of the Jewish contribution to the New Left.

United States

The American New Left arguably comprised two distinct periods. The first was the early 1960s when students travelled to the southern states to support the emerging civil rights movement. Then in the mid 1960s the movement switched to the northern campuses to address issues of student rights, free speech, and above all opposition to the Vietnam War (Liebman 1979, 67-68 & 540-541).

Jewish activists came from a range of backgrounds. Most of those who joined the New Left in the early-to-mid 1960s appear to have been largely assimilated third generation Jews from Old Left backgrounds, although some had participated in labor Zionist groups. Conversely, those Jews who entered the New Left after the mid 1960s appear to have had a stronger Jewish identity. Both groups seem to have grown up in a culture that validated the questioning of accepted ideas and authority (Liebman 1979, 542; Zeitz 2007, 171).

It has been estimated that roughly one third to one half of committed New Left activists in the USA were Jewish including key leaders such as Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. Twenty three percent of Jewish students surveyed identified as leftist compared to four percent of Protestant students and two percent of Catholic students (Glazer 1969a, 112; Heineman 2001, 64).

Jews were prominent in the struggle for black civil rights, and in the anti-Vietnam War campaigns. Jews made up approximately two-thirds of the white Freedom Riders that went South in 1961. In 1964 they represented from one-half to two-thirds of the volunteers who flooded Mississippi to help register black voters. And two of the three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, murdered by the Ku Klux Klan were Jewish.

At Berkeley in 1964, about one-third of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) demonstrators were Jewish as were over half of the movement's steering committee including Bettina Aptheker, Suzanne Goldberg, Steve Weisman, and Jack Weinberg, who coined the famous phrase 'You can't trust anybody over thirty'. Jewish students lit candles during the sit-in at the University administration building to mark the festival of *Chanukah*, and also sang *Hatikvah* (Aptheker 2006, 128-163; Whitfield 1983, 141). In 1965 at the University of Chicago, 45 per cent of the protestors against the university's collaboration with the Selective Service System were Jews. At Columbia University in 1968 one-third of the protestors were of Jewish origin, and three of the four student demonstrators killed at Kent State in 1970 were Jewish (Liebman 1979, 68).

Jews comprised a large proportion of the leaders and activists within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Some of the key leaders included the founder Al Haber, Todd Gitlin, Richard Flacks, Steve Max, Bob Ross, Mike Spiegel, Mike Klonsky, and Mark Rudd. Approximately 30 to 50 per cent of the SDS membership in the early-mid 1960s were Jewish. At one point in the late 1960s, SDS presidents on the campuses of Columbia University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Wisconsin (Madison), North Western University, and Michigan University were all Jews. Jewish participation in SDS was particularly high at Pennsylvania University and the State University of New York. There was also a number of Jews in the violent Weatherman group (Caute 1988, 388-389; Cohen 1980, 21; Heineman 1993, 83-123; Heineman 2001, 64; Liebman 1979, 67; Rothman & Lichter 1982, 23-24, 81).

Jews contributed significantly to the theoretical underpinning of the New Left. From 30 to 50 per cent of the founders and editorial boards of such New Left journals as *Studies on the Left*, *New University Thought*, and *Root and Branch* (later *Ramparts*) were of Jewish origin.

Radical academic bodies such as the Caucus for a New Politics and the Union of Radical Political Economists were overwhelmingly Jewish. A number of the key intellectual gurus of the New Left such as Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Herbert Marcuse were also Jewish (Franks 1991, 26; Heineman 2001, 81-82; Liebman 1979, 541; Muller 2002, 341-343; Sachar 1993, 804-805).

Australia

The Australian New Left started somewhat later than the American New Left, and did not really become a mass movement until 1967. Some of the student campaigns addressed issues of censorship, racism and university discipline, but the key issue was overwhelmingly opposition to conscription and the Vietnam War (Mendes 1993, 25-34).

In contrast to the American scene, the Australian new leftists were overwhelmingly first generation Jews whose parents had entered Australia as immigrants or refugees shortly prior to or following World War Two. Most had participated in Jewish youth groups as children, and appear to have had a strong Jewish cultural, although not particularly religious, upbringing (Mendes 1993, 39-44).

Jewish students were involved in significant numbers, both as leaders and as activists in anti-Vietnam War campaigns at Monash and Melbourne Universities and the wider Vietnam Moratorium Movement. At Monash University, it has been estimated that about 20 per cent of left-wing activists were Jewish, of whom 83 per cent were members of the hardline Left (Carroll, 1970). A number of the leaders of the Maoist-influenced Monash Labor Club including Albert Langer and Dave Nadel were of Jewish background. Jews were also prominent in the New Left Club which had informal links with the Communist Party of Australia.

Similarly at Melbourne University, Jewish students were prominent in the two key left-wing organisations, the Labor Club and Students for a Democratic Society. Labor Club leaders Doug Kirsner and Bernie Grinberg earned particular notoriety in 1967 for raising money for

the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF). Younger Jewish students were also prominent in the secondary schools’ student underground movement (Mendes 1993, 35-38).

Jewish students also made a significant contribution to the New Left movement in Sydney. A number of Jewish students including Jim Spigelman were prominent in the 1965 Freedom Ride in support of Aboriginal rights, and many Jews were active in the anti-Vietnam War movement (Mendes 1993, 145-46).

France

The French New Left became most famous for the student riots of May 1968 which targeted concerns about the university system (Caute 1988, 183-227). Many of the Jewish activists seem to have come from immigrant and refugee backgrounds including parents who had spent the war in Nazi or Soviet camps. A number had grown up in Communist youth groups, but some had also participated in left Zionist organisations such as Hashomer Hatzair (Berman 1996, 30-31; 2005, 207).

Jews appear to have constituted between one third and one half of the key radical leaders including prominent figures such as Alain Krivine, Alain Geismar, Pierre Goldman, Benny Levy, Andre Glucksmann and the famous Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Eleven of the twelve members of the political bureau of the trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire were Jewish comprising ten Ashkenazi Jews plus Daniel Bensaid who was a North African Jew by birth. This led another member to joke that the only reason the group didn’t speak Yiddish at its meetings was because Bensaid would not be able to understand.

Overall it has been estimated that about three-quarters of the members of Trotskyist groups in the Paris area were identifiably Jewish. Jews were also very well represented in general among those who occupied the universities and engaged in a number of other radical activities, such as confrontation with the authorities and with the police (Berman 1996, 30-34; Cohen 1980, 49- 52; Friedlander 1990, 34-37, 124-131; Judaken 2006, 215-216; Memmi 1968).

Other Countries

In Britain, a significant proportion of prominent New Left activists including Radical Student Alliance leader, David Adelstein, were Jewish. Jews were involved in particularly large numbers in the two main Trotskyist groups, the International Marxist Group and the International Socialists. A number of key intellectual influences on the New Left such as Ralph Miliband, Raphael Samuel and Hyman Levy were also Jewish (Cohen 1980, 37-40; Chun 1993, 22-23).

Less specific details are available concerning the role of Jews in the Italian New Left. However, it would appear that many Jews were prominent in the range of far Left Italian groups, both at university and at high school level (Nissan 2009). In Argentina, a large number of young Jews were sympathetic to and/or active participants in the New Left (Cohen 1980, 56-58, 73). Jewish activists also appear to have played a key role in the Canadian New Left (Finkel 2003, 201).

As a qualification, it should be noted that such activists always constituted only a small minority of the larger Jewish student community. Most Jewish students in the USA, Australia and elsewhere do not appear to have been either left-wing or politically active (Glazer 1969a, 112; Liebman 1979, 540; Mendes 1993, 105; Porter & Dreier 1973, xx). Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that Jewish students were over-represented within the New Left.

Why were so many Jews involved in the New Left?

The first and most obvious factor is the high number of Jews attending the universities that were at the forefront of student activism (Cohen 1980, 3). For example, it has been estimated that Jews comprised about five per cent of American university students in 1969 – that being about 325,000 out of a total population of 6,700,000 students. In addition, they constituted a higher proportion of the enrolments of some of the elite colleges, and were often concentrated in the humanities and social science schools which were most receptive to New Left views (Glazer 1969a, 112; 1971, 57; Unger 1975, 128). Similarly in Australia, it has been estimated

that about 900-1000 Jews attended Monash University out of a total student population which grew from 4283 in 1965 to 9542 in 1969 (Mendes 1993, 161).

These figures suggest that Jewish students were well placed to participate in student politics. But they do not explain in isolation why so many Jews became involved in radical Left rather than moderate Left or conservative politics. And in most cases, Jews still seem to have been over-represented as activists and leaders in the New Left even when compared to their percentage of total university populations.

A further explanatory factor is that many of the radical Jewish students came from left-wing family backgrounds. This argument is often referred to as the 'red diaper baby' thesis whereby it is assumed left-wing political views are directly handed from one generation to another (Kaplan & Shapiro 1998; Liebman 1979, 551-553; Mehnert 1976, 301). This argument appears to have some validity given that many of the Jewish student radicals surveyed in an international study had grown up in families with overt left-wing affiliations, and most believed that their parents agreed with or at least sympathized in part with their activism (Cohen 1980, 180). Studies of American Jewish radicals reveal similar findings. Heineman (2001, 69-70) and Klatch (1999, 40-41) both cite a significant number of student radicals who had grown up in highly politicized left-wing family environments, whilst Schultz (2001, 4-5) suggested that many of the Jewish women involved in the civil rights movements came from families with strong social justice beliefs. Zeitz (2007, 202-205) notes with specific reference to student activism at Columbia University that a group of several hundred parents of SDS activists – many of the most vocal being Jewish – organized a meeting in May 1968 to defend the student takeover of campus buildings, and condemn the response of the university administration. Similarly, an Australian study based on in-depth interviews with 28 leading Jewish student radicals from Monash and Melbourne universities found that 22 came from overtly left-wing family backgrounds. They included ten students whose parents had been Communist Party members or supporters, seven who had left-wing sympathies, four who were Labour Zionists, and one from the Jewish Labour Bund. The other six described their family as 'small l liberals' or apolitical or centrist. None came from conservative or right-wing backgrounds. Half of these 28 activists identified the left-wing views of their parents as a prime political influence (Mendes 1993, 39-41). And a study of a

number of the leading French Jewish radicals (Berman 1996, 30-31) confirmed that most grew up in Communist or left-wing homes which were often influenced by earlier parental participation in the anti-Nazi resistance.

An associated factor is that Jewish parents – even when not leftist themselves – were far more likely to be tolerant of radical activism (Glazer 1969b, 129; Heineman 1992, 81-82; Whitfield 2001, 227-228). For example, SDS leader Mark Rudd’s parents publicly expressed pride in his politics whilst clarifying that they did not agree with all his views. In contrast, radicals from non-Jewish backgrounds were often involved in major political conflict with their families (Liebman 1973, 164-165; Rothman & Lichter 1982, 82-83). However, the ‘red diaper baby’ thesis has one major weakness which is that it fails to specifically account for the significant minority of Jewish student radicals who were not influenced by left-wing parents (Cohen 1980, 180-181).

A third factor which arguably complemented the influence of families was a progressive interpretation of Jewish cultural values and experiences based on a synthesis of universalistic social justice beliefs with secular Jewish values and morality. These cultural influences would have included the historical tradition of Jewish radicalism, and particularly the established Jewish leftist sub-culture and institutional frameworks which reinforced the left-wing values of many families. Many of the Jewish New Leftists had attended left-wing youth groups, schools and summer camps which encouraged their activism (Liebman 1979, 542-545, 555-559; Naison 2002, 31).

Another influence would have been the atmosphere of critical and intellectual inquiry predominating in many Jewish homes which led Jewish students to be actively concerned with public issues such as the Vietnam War and civil rights even if they did not come from left-wing backgrounds (Glazer 1969a, 126; Whitfield 2001, 228-229; Zeitz 2007, 39-43 & 201). A further influence driving the radicalism of many Jewish students was the impact of the Holocaust (and sometimes personal experiences of anti-Semitism) which generated a passionate abhorrence for racism and injustice (Klatch 1999, 56-57; Mendes 2003, 41; Schultz 2001, 181-190). According to Mark Rudd: ‘World War II and the Holocaust were our

fixed reference points. We often talked about the moral imperative not to be Good Germans. We saw American racism as akin to German racism towards the Jews’ (Rudd 2008, 4).

How Jewish were the New Left Jews?

Historically, considerable debate has ensued regarding the extent to which leading Jewish radicals and radical Jewish movements were influenced by specifically Jewish concerns and consciousness. Most commentators agree that Jewish involvement in the Left can best be understood as reflecting a spectrum of Jewish influences and identity ranging from so-called ‘non-Jewish Jews’ whose Jewishness was virtually irrelevant to their radicalism to those whose activism was driven by specifically Jewish factors and beliefs (Cohen 1980, 9; Schatz 1988, 36). This spectrum can also arguably be applied to Jewish involvement in the New Left.

On the one hand, many commentators argue that Jewish involvement in the American New Left did not reflect – at least consciously – any specifically Jewish motivations (Finkel 2003, 201; Kaye/Kantrowitz 1996, 105-108; Porter & Dreier 1973, xxii-xxiv; Strickland 1988, 50). A number of students interviewed in the USA expressed a specific rejection of Jewish identity, and were highly critical of the insularity of much of the organized Jewish community and its exclusive emphasis on Jewish suffering (Feuer 1969, 427-429). SDS leader Mark Rudd later acknowledged: ‘I don’t remember a single conversation in which we discussed the fact that so many of us were Jewish. This glaring lack alone might serve as a clue to what we were up to: by being radicals, we thought we could escape our Jewishness’ (Rudd 2008, 4).

This distancing from Judaism was also apparent in the life stories of the two murdered civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. Neither specifically identified as Jews, neither received Jewish funerals, and twenty years after their death Goodman’s mother commented that it had never occurred to her that her son had gone south as a Jew (Friedman 1995, 188-189).

But others argue that their radical politics were driven by particular visions of Jewishness and the Jewish historical experience based on a heritage of marginalisation and oppression. Many Jewish SDS activists had grown up in secular households, but still identified culturally with Judaism, and believed that progressive Jewish values had significantly influenced their politics. Family experiences of the Holocaust often sharpened their opposition to racism and oppression of all kinds (Bershtel & Graubard 1992, 240; Klatch 1999, 52-57; Schultz 2001, 4-5).

For example, leading SDS radical Michael Lerner (1969, 478) argued that Jewish tradition could provide a guide for ‘a revolutionary overthrow both of the present corrupt Jewish community and the larger bourgeois society of which it is a part’. Lerner claimed that the ideas of the *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible), Yehudah HaLevi and A. J. Heschel would inform the struggle against ‘the institutions of racist, imperialist, capitalist American’ and in favour of ‘justice, peace and brotherhood’. Such interpretations of Jewish tradition, however, remain contentious given that the Bible can just as easily be utilized to justify conservative and oppressive perspectives (Marqusee 2008, 221).

Some of the Jewish-identifying radicals created specifically Jewish New Left groups such as the Radical Jewish Union, Jews for Urban Justice, and the Radical Zionist Alliance in order to better integrate their political and ethnic/cultural identities. This included critiquing the internal dynamics of Jewish community institutions as reflected in Arthur Waskow’s famous 1969 ‘Freedom Seder’ which attacked alleged Jewish collaboration with exploitative and unjust social and economic structures and practices (Isaacs 1974, 93-94; Staub 2002, 153-193). Another motivating factor was the concern to defend the State of Israel’s existence against the increasing anti-Zionism emanating from sections of the New Left. The emergence of the ‘black power’ movement may also have made it easier for radicals to openly express their ethnic as well as political affiliations (Bershtel & Graubard 1992, 244-248; Liebman 1979, 576-587; Porter & Dreier 1973, xxiv-xxv).

The Australian radicals also encompassed a range of Jewish influences. Thirteen of the 28 interviewees identified strongly as Jews at the time of their radical activities, and believed that their Jewishness had exercised a strong influence on their political beliefs. Two of the

interviewees expressed ambivalence regarding their Jewish identity, and were concerned to maintain a balance between their nationalist and universalistic values. The other thirteen interviewees claimed to have little or no Jewish identity (Mendes 1993, 42-43).

Similar diversity can be found amongst the French Jewish radicals. Benbassa (1999, 190) argues that most of the leading activists separated their radicalism and their Jewish identity, but nevertheless still acknowledged their Jewish backgrounds. Some such as Pierre Goldman did posit a direct link between their Jewishness and their radicalism. Others recognized the key influence of the Holocaust on the development of their political militancy.

What was the key difference between Jewish involvement in the New Left and the Old Left?

The 'Jewish question' was a prominent dividing factor in left-right political debates in the first half of the twentieth century. In general, secular working-class groups on the Left tended to defend Jewish civil and political rights, whilst right-wing groups were more likely to oppose Jewish equality. As a result, Jews from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds became involved in disproportionate numbers in left-wing political groups and parties. This support reflected both class and ethnic considerations. Poverty and anti-Semitism influenced Jews to join a movement which promised to end capitalist and racial oppression. Many Jews in the 1930s joined the Left specifically to oppose Nazism and anti-Semitism (Mendes 1999, 486).

In contrast, few Jews had specific class or ethnic considerations for joining the New Left. Most of the New Left Jewish radicals appear to have come from relatively affluent backgrounds, and were not motivated by material self-interest (Isaacs 1974, 104; Whitfield 2001, 222). In addition, there was rarely any specific Jewish concern or interest such as the threat of anti-Semitism that pushed them into seeking involvement with the Left. In fact, Jewish issues were largely invisible on the left during this period (Liebman 1979, 560-561). Jewish involvement in the New Left reflected solely universalistic concerns related to Black equality or opposition to the Vietnam War. To be sure, some Jewish radicals in the post-1967

period were involved in defending Israel or critiquing Soviet anti-Semitism (Mendes 1993, 119-126), but these issues were generally not the factors which drove them to join the New Left *per se*.

Another significant difference between Jewish involvement in the Old Left and the New Left was that the latter rarely provoked any anti-Jewish backlash. The equation of Jews with Communism had been a central component of anti-Semitic agendas in the first half of the twentieth century, and was often used – most notably in Hitler’s program of ideological genocide – to provoke murderous and irrational violence against Jews (Gerrits 1995, 49-50; Gerrits 2009). Consequently, a number of Jewish leaders expressed fears that the prominence of Jews in the New Left would provoke renewed anti-Jewish prejudice (Cohen 1980, ix; Glazer 1971, 57; Hertzberg 1997, 355; Memmi 1968, 28; Mendes 1993, 102; Porter & Dreier 1973, xix).

However, these concerns appear to have been unwarranted. There was no organized campaign to discredit Jews by associating them with New Left radicalism, or alternatively to discredit the New Left by stereotyping it as Jewish (Cohen 1980, x) At worst, there were a few isolated and relatively insignificant instances of anti-Semitism. For example, some SDS groups and individuals in the USA received anti-Semitic phone calls or experienced anti-Semitic comments during protests, and there were some euphemistic references to East Coast intellectuals and New York agitators undermining the moral and economic fabric of society (Aptheker 2006, 145-146 & 167; Balsler 1977, 17; Cohen 1980, x; Heineman 2001, 135; Naison 2002, 70; Sachar 1993, 806-07).

Similarly in Australia, there was a handful of implicit references to the Jewish origins of some of the leading radicals in parliament and the media, and some occasional instances of hate mail to the New Left student groups (Mendes 1993, 109-110). The best known anti-Semitic statement was the reference in France by the Gaullist and Communist media to the prominent New Left radical Danny Cohn-Bendit as a ‘German Jew’. This statement only served to provoke the famous response, on the part of many young radical students in Paris, that they were all ‘German Jews’. Some of De Gaulle’s supporters replied: ‘Cohn-Bendit to Dachau’ (Judaken 2006, 220-221; Memmi 1968, 28).

The relative absence of anti-Semitism seems to have reflected a number of factors. One was almost certainly that many in the general public were not even aware of the Jewish background of many of the radical leaders. And even those who were aware tended either not to stereotype Jews and/or to recognize that the minority of radical Jews involved were not necessarily representative of the whole Jewish community. A second associated factor was that the radicals were not campaigning about any specifically Jewish issues that would have focused attention on Jews *per se*. A third factor was probably the general decline in anti-Semitism since World War Two, and the particular discrediting of the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that had driven the Holocaust (Cohen 1980, 200).

The Aftermath

The disproportionate Jewish contribution to the New Left had remarkably little long-term influence on mainstream Jewish political culture. This was because there was arguably no specific Jewish political context to their involvement in this universalistic movement. In contrast to the Old Left, there was no alignment between New Left activities and Jewish interests. And even though many Jews appear to have been influenced by progressive interpretations of Jewish values and experiences into participating in the New Left, there was generally little or nothing about their radical agenda that distinguished them from other New Left activists.

To be sure, a minority of Jewish radicals appear to have been passionately concerned with defending Zionism and Israel. But most of these Jewish activists appear gradually to have prioritized their Jewish rather than radical affiliations. Many simply gave up on left-wing politics. Others immigrated to Israel to pursue their beliefs in a more congenial environment. Some began to theorize a specifically Jewish religious and value base for their radical beliefs based on linking traditional Jewish texts such as the teachings of the biblical prophets with contemporary social concerns which would later be reflected in publications such as *Tikkun Magazine* (Liebman 1979, 568-580; Mendes 1993, 111-122; Rose et al 2008).

But overall, the New Left appears to have been seen by most Jews as either irrelevant or openly unsympathetic to their interests. In particular, the perceived anti-Zionism (and at times overt anti-Semitism) of the New Left from 1967 onwards only served to alienate the majority of Jews including the vast majority of Jewish students who were not involved in its activities, and to confirm their commitment to nationalist, rather than internationalist solutions (Cohen 1984, 38-56; Glazer 1969a, 129-130; Liebman 1979, 562; Mendes 1993, 102-103).

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