

Jews and the Left

An Exchange With
Paul Buhle and Arthur Liebman

Paul Buhle: OLD STRAINS IN A NEW MELODY

Social historians tell us that the immigrant experience must be understood above all in terms of culture, which is to say, in terms of habits, traditions and acquired knowledge which the people bring along with them, and pick up in the new land, to complete a unified world view.

I do not claim to be an expert on that European experience. But the shtetl of the mid-19th century was notoriously a place ideologically outside history, where the breath of the prophets seemed more real to many inhabitants than the factory smoke of the invading industrial society. In one generation or two, their descendants would create the greatest immigrant radicalism ever known in the US, write and read the most popular Yiddish daily in the world, the most popular socialist daily in America, and lay the basis for modern industrial unionism. of course, one can trace influences from the Russian political cultural situation to the American sweatshop and tenement house.

One can talk very logically about physical misery, pogroms, anti-Semitism, tuberculosis, starvation and so on.

These remarks are excerpted from the transcript of a forum on "Jewish Culture and the Jewish Left" held on February 25, 1982, sponsored by the Medem Jewish Socialist Group.

All this should not disguise, however, what made Jewish radical response more intense on some levels than that of other contemporary immigrant groups, and more tenacious for generations of relative social mobility. From the very first important strike leaflet in 1882, which called upon Jews to strike a blow at Israel's oppressor, to the New Jewish Agenda conference a year ago December, the thread of self-consciousness and spiritual consciousness has been present.

Itche Goldberg, editor of Yiddishe Kultur, said recently that if his old friends had the chance to choose once more between Lenin and the Bund, they would have no difficulty choosing the Bund. This is not so much a statement of disillusionment in Lenin, as the realization of the cultural issues at stake for the Jews, and the given conclusion that the movement must go upward from its own strengths in order to contribute to any internationalist socialist movement. Here I want to add that first the Black movement and then the women's movement made a very similar point in the 1960s and 1970s. Those members and observers of those movements who chose to see only the exclusionary element missed the point and repeated the worst mistake of the old left- reductionism.

The wonder is that in such a political climate, where ethnic identity had to be forced on Socialist, and later Communist, movements, and never really succeeded as a firm theoretical principle, so much could still be done and understood. Admittedly, sometimes history has to take place behind the backs of even the best actors. If many Jewish radicals could deny their Jewishness, then the ones who set themselves upon the task of restoration and revivification remained unclear. Still, thousands of them grasped the signal importance of Yiddish-language schools, of organized theater, of summer camps for children and adults, and so forth, decisive links between radical commitment and the Jewish cultural tradition.

The great poets had the symbiotic perception that the highest achievement of Yiddish would be to recapture the non-rational folk-traditions, and to reweave the old strains into a new melody. They understood also that the folk-tradition did not stop at the shtetl, but recomenced with the popular culture of the American urban scene.

Big Bill Haywood used to end his speeches by saying he was a two-gun man from the West, and pull out of one of his pockets a Socialist Party card, and out of the other pocket an IWW card. Now I say we should be two-gun radicals, with two sets of credentials; in one hand general organizational credentials, in the other the New Jewish Agenda, Medem Group, something of a special identity. That identity has something special to give the left and all the world.

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Arthur Liebman: ETHNICITY A TWO-EDGED SWORD

To what extent did the Jewish left subculture contribute to or diminish Jewish ties to the left? There is widespread agreement on this question by many different kinds of leftists and non-leftists at many different times in history. There is no question that Lenin and Trotzky felt this to be the case, as evidenced in part by their opposition to the Bund as a separate organization representing the Jewish workers. On American shores, Morris Hilquit, and like minded cosmopolitan socialists held similar attitudes towards the establishment of a uniquely Jewish socialist organization, as evidenced by their opposition to the formation of the Jewish Socialist Federation.

Later, the American Communist leadership, including Jews as well as non-Jews, resolutely opposed, not only the Jewish language federation, but every other ethnic one as well. In the period of the New Left, officials of the Jewish Agency and the American Zionist Youth Foundation allegedly subsidized the Jewish New Left, believing that once Jewish New Leftists operated within Jewish, rather than left, channels, they would eventually move from leftist to Jewish concerns. The rationale for this position was best articulated by Lenin when he attacked the Bund for strengthening, as he put it, reactionary elements within the Jewish community, fostering a ghetto mentality, and isolating the Jewish workers from the common struggle of all proletarians. Sectioning off Jewish workers and leftists from non-Jewish ones, the general argument runs, will strengthen the position of Jewish particularism or nationalism.

It is necessary to stress that there is a contrary position. The counter argument runs thusly. Jews do have spec-

ial interests and concerns that can best be addressed in the context of their own organizations and movements. In ethnically divided societies, individual ethnic communities suffer from different types of exploitation and oppression that can best be dealt with by their own institutions. Artificial unity cannot be imposed upon workers that speak different languages, are immersed in different cultures, have different historical experiences and different occupational and job settings.

According to this theory, different national and ethnic communities progress towards unions, left parties and movements for social justice at their own peculiar pace, in response to their own unique historical experience and location in the economic and class structure of the society in which they live. It might be necessary to allow them the autonomy to develop rather than force them into a common movement before they are ready. This is not to say that those with a more developed organizational structure or a more heightened sense of socialist class consciousness cannot assist the non-ethnic fellow leftist. The history of the left, particularly the Jewish left, is replete with such instances of assistance to, and common struggle with, non-Jews. It could also be argued that building and maintaining your own strong and vibrant left sub-culture gives participants self-confidence and motivation to move outside and engage in a common struggle.

Ethnicity was a two-edged sword for the Jewish left. When there was a strong and large Jewish working class, as existed in the 1910s and 1920s, into the 1930s, a Jewish left subculture had little difficulty in being left and Jewish. The base, and the leaders inspired by it, were able to define Jewishness as a leftist phenomenon. Socialism for many Jews in that period was indeed Judaism secularized. The difficulties emerged when the Jewish community became more class differentiated. That is, developed a middle class, and less of a working class. The difficulty was compounded by the rise of Jewish nationalism, or Zionism, and the rise of Judaism as a strong organized force.

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