

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stuart Svonkin. *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 364 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10638-2.

Reviewed by Stephen Baily (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Antisemitism (December, 1997)

Suppose you begin by describing your connections to what Stuart Svonkin refers to as the intergroup-relations movement in the organized Jewish community.

–I once had occasion to call the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith.

Go on.

–The woman on the other end of the line was laughing when she picked up the phone. It didn’t make a very good impression on me.

And that’s it?

–Afraid so.

Then what qualifications do you bring to Svonkin’s *Jews Against Prejudice*, which examines the activities of the ADL and similar self-appointed Jewish advocacy groups in the aftermath of World War II?

–As it happens, one of my earliest memories dates from that same sunlit period. I’m walking with my mother in the Bronx, in the housing project where we live, and we bump into a Christian acquaintance of hers, an older childless woman, who proceeds with a little too much enthusiasm to make an embarrassing fuss over me. “Work hard in school,” she goes so far as to tell me, “and you just might grow up to be president.” My mother waits till we’re alone again to set me straight. “Maybe senator or governor,” she says, “but not president.”

So your mother had a vested interest in the intergroup-relations movement?

–What makes you think that?

Wasn’t it working to clear the way to the White House for you?

–Not so we noticed. In the first place the organized Jewish community was nowhere in evidence in our neighborhood. We might have heard of—and turned a deaf ear to—the United Jewish Appeal, but that was about it. And in the second place—as Svonkin explains—after the war the major Jewish groups suddenly dropped their traditional defensive posture for a more oblique approach.

In consultation with guidance counselors and psychologists they came to the curious conclusion—curious in view of the fact that it was arrived at so soon after the Allies entered the camps in Europe—that antisemitism was just another form of prejudice. Eliminate prejudice—itsself now reconceived as an aberrant outlook susceptible of modification or cure—and antisemitism would disappear with it. Or so these intergroup-relations “professionals” reasoned, in deference to the man-in-the-white-coat mentality of the day. The sequel, as insightfully recounted and meticulously documented by Svonkin, was a national public-relations campaign of stunning dishonesty.

I was under the impression all public-relations campaigns are dishonest.

–This one more than most. Consider, for starters, the old subway-car poster reproduced on the cover of Svonkin’s book. No doubt on the sensible theory that strap-hangers are at especially high risk for fascism, to rush-hour passengers in the late 1940s it administered a prophylactic close-up of a kid of eleven or twelve who’s just had his feelings hurt, obviously by more than one little Nazi. You can tell he’s outnumbered because, instead of making his hand into a fist, he’s reaching up with it to wipe a dewdrop-shaped tear from his cheek as he whines: “I am SO an American!”

Well, and what’s so dishonest about that? I seem to recall being in similar situations.

–Me too. In fact when I first started soloing in the streets my apprehensive mother—whose own earliest memories were of a pogrom—made a point of advising me, if anybody asked, to say I was an American. But the dishonesty I’m talking about has less to do with the poster kid’s wimpishness than with his looks. Not only does he have blue eyes, blond hair, and a peaches-and-cream complexion, but where you’d logically expect a big foreign schnozz—or at least some evidence of the “nostrility” Arthur Koestler professed to find in Jewish noses—he has a perfect little pug complete with freckles. In short

he's as phony as the "Institute for American Democracy," the outfit credited with his dissemination. Because— as Svonkin reveals—this noble-sounding entity was in reality nothing but a front for the ADL.

Why would the ADL want to conceal its responsibility for a message so unobjectionable?

—It was pretty dumb, wasn't it? By lurking in the shadows its strategists couldn't have provided better ammunition for a guy I know—a lifelong student of the works of William Dudley Pelley—who's convinced the ADL is the unseen hand behind every evil in the world, not excluding his arthritis. If only the truth were so romantic. As Svonkin tells it, the ADL chose to lie low simply because it was afraid the public wouldn't see farther than the conflict of interest in any anti-hate campaign explicitly originating with Jews.

One can—without approving of the ruse—understand the insecurity behind it.

—I guess. But it's tough to dance around Svonkin's further revelation that the ADL deliberately and cynically appropriated for this propaganda blitz techniques pioneered by the Nazis and the Kremlin.

At all events the ADL is only one of three groups whose tactics in the post-war period Svonkin explores. What about the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee?

—If you forced me at gunpoint to join one of the three, I'd have to go with the AJ Congress. Unlike the other two, which preferred operating behind the scenes, it looked to the courts to reconcile bigots to their bogies. Having grown up under fascism—that is, in a housing project run by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company—I was particularly interested in Svonkin's account of the AJ Congress's legal battle, in partnership with the NAACP and the ACLU, to integrate Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan. Met Life—the biggest insurance company in the country, with thirty-one million policy-holders and more assets than AT&T—built Stuyvesant Town right after the war in a sweetheart deal with New York City. The city condemned an entire lousy neighborhood just north of the Lower East Side—displacing thousands of people in the process—sold the land to Met Life at cost, exempted Met Life from taxes for twenty-five years, and so on. In light of all this the AJ Congress could hardly be blamed for concluding that Stuyvesant Town, with its twenty-five thousand residents, was in effect public housing, and that Met Life's refusal to rent apartments in it to blacks on grounds that "Negroes and whites don't mix" was unconstitutional. The courts of course came up with reasons

to reject this compelling argument, but finally in 1957— thanks in large part to continuing pressure from the AJ Congress—the city banned discrimination in public and private housing alike.

You said the project you grew up in was owned by Met Life, too. I take it it was similarly restricted to whites?

—Parkchester—which was twice as big as Stuyvesant Town and twice as evil—wouldn't even hire black janitors. It was also an open secret it had a quota on Jews— probably in the range of ten or fifteen percent —though how you could be Jewish and sleep there at night was a question nobody ever seemed to think of asking. Okay, so apartments with dirt-cheap rent and free utilities are a powerful temptation. The waiting period to get into this South Africa on East 177th Street stretched into years. All the same one of the ironies of the AJ Congress's fight to integrate housing was that the distaste for discrimination that fueled it was almost certainly shared by thousands of Jews then peacefully snoring under the lily-white roofs of Stuyvesant Town and Parkchester.

What happened after the city banned discrimination in 1957?

—Nothing. As Svonkin points out in an astute appraisal of the limitations of the AJ Congress's single-minded reliance on the courts, it's one thing to pass fair-housing laws and another thing to enforce them. A few token black families may have been grudgingly lodged by Met Life over the ensuing years to gratify editorial writers, but the last time I was in Parkchester, I think around 1968, it was still as white as Finland.

Svonkin, I gather, looks with an unsparing eye on the subjects of his book.

—You gather right. He seems more comfortable with the AJ Congress than with its two colleagues, but on balance he faults all three for taking too medicinal an approach to prejudice and paying little or no attention to its socioeconomic underpinnings.

You mean he's written a leftist critique of the intergroup-relations movement?

—To an extent. He's too scrupulous not to make it clear, though, that— certainly during the Cold War—you'd have had to be nuts to look for sympathy for the social revolution in that quarter. On the contrary, if anything was inevitable it was that these prosperous Jewish professionals—as much from attachment to their securities as from insecurities about their attachments— would rush to embrace the genteel form of McCarthyism known as liberal anti-communism. Far from being

prepared to point out the obvious—that communism in the U.S. was a joke—they were only too happy to ape Roy Cohn in using communism as a pretext to stamp out inconvenient signs of conscience wherever they appeared. Among intergroup-relations professionals the worst offender in this regard was the American Jewish Committee—creature of the noblesse oblige of the Schiffs, Sulzbergers, and Strauses. As Svonkin tells it, the AJ Committee unabashedly attempted to purge the Jewish community of anyone tinged with red. So much for the vaunted “fight for civil liberties.” Indeed the AJ Committee sank so low as to make excuses after the Peekskill riots in 1949 for the Jew-baiting thugs who protested a Paul Robeson concert by throwing stones at, among many other labor-union militants, my favorite aunt, a Communist. It’s true my aunt in those days was as much a nightmare to the rest of the family as she was to the professional Jewish community. But, unlike the AJ Committee, we wouldn’t have been happy to see her deprived of her freedom of speech by a rock.

The conclusion you appear to be drawing from Svonkin’s book is that the intergroup-relations movement was—in moral terms anyhow—a failure.

—Ironically, even its successes didn’t take quite the shape those who’d struggled for them anticipated. According to Svonkin, the ADL, the AJ Congress, and the AJ Committee were all operating on the same unexamined assumption—that individual identity is best fulfilled through membership in a group. Everything they did they did with the object of making it easier for Jews to live with, for, and through each other. The AJ Congress, for example, hoped its anti-discrimination campaign would have the effect, not just of opening doors to Jews, but

of rallying and uniting them. But the opposite happened. With every barrier the AJ Congress knocked down, more Jews slipped away and were “lost” to assimilation. Similarly, instead of disappearing with prejudice, anti-Semitism with its customary ingenuity broadened its base. Jews made it into the country club only to discover that this glorious triumph was resented, not simply by their traditional white enemies on the right, but by their traditional black allies on the left. The green-eyed monster began to break apart the civil-rights coalition.

This would appear to support the idea that the real roots of intergroup antagonism lie in economic inequality.

—Unless what we’re dealing with is a genetic defect in the human beast, Svonkin—who’s written a fine and illuminating book in case I’ve forgotten to mention it—could indeed be right when he suggests that “meaningful improvements in intergroup relations might require a redistribution of power among members of various racial, religious, and ethnic groups.”

You don’t sound altogether persuaded.

—It’s just that the redistribution of power usually involves a fair amount of unpleasantness, doesn’t it? And afterwards things—that I’ve noticed—never seem to improve much.

That’s a pretty hopeless outlook if you don’t mind my saying so.

—Ah well. Who’d want to be president anyway?

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Stephen Baily. Review of Svonkin, Stuart, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*. H-Antisemitism, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1579>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.