



David R. Verbeeten. *The Politics of Nonassimilation: The American Jewish Left in the Twentieth Century.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017. 230 pp. \$39.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87580-753-9.

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The political behavior of America's Jews has for decades mystified onlookers and been a perennial topic for political scientists, sociologists, political strategists, and historians. Jews have seemingly refuted the conventional wisdom that as ethnic groups prosper, they become politically more conservative. In his often-quoted quip on American Jewish political behavior voiced a half century ago, the essayist Milton Himmelfarb noted that Jews had the economic and social profile of white Anglo-Saxons but had the political profile of Puerto Ricans, and this apparent anomaly has continued to the present day. Since the 1960s conservatives have been eagerly anticipating an imminent rightward movement of Jews to what seemingly should be their natural political home, only to be disappointed. *The Politics of Nonassimilation* is the latest attempt to explain the puzzle of American Jewish political behavior.

That David R. Verbeeten, a native of Toronto, Canada, would choose the politics of US Jews to be the subject of his Cambridge University doctoral dissertation, of which this book is a revised version, indicates the topic's continuing fascination and relevance. The dominant historiography argues that the voting preferences of American Jews, as well as of Jews in Great Britain, France, South Africa, Canada, and South America, and wherever else a significant number of Jewish im-

migrants from eastern Europe settled, reflected a universalist impulse to escape anti-Semitism and to create a world in which ethnic and religious differences would be insignificant. Verbeeten, however, argues the exact opposite. In three sprightly chapters encompassing three generations of American Jews, he discusses the communist Alexander Bittelman (1890–1982), the early decades of the American Jewish Congress, and the New Jewish Agenda (NJA). Verbeeten's major argument is that American Jews on the left, whether they be radicals or liberals, did not seek to escape through politics their Jewishness but rather to create a distinctive Jewish political subculture in the face of strong assimilationist pressures. In discussing the American Jewish Congress, for example, Verbeeten says that its ultimate goal was not the elimination of anti-Semitism and racism, as is generally believed, but the construction of a pluralist America along the lines espoused by the philosopher Horace Kallen in which Jews would be free from the pressures of assimilation. Verbeeten quotes a statement of Leo Pfeffer, an important Congress official, claiming that the mission of the Jew was to stand apart from society to be “the radical, the malcontent, the one who sparks revolution” (p. 115). Pfeffer was typical of Verbeeten's Jews for whom radicalism was not an alternative to Jewishness but its very essence.

These Jews viewed Jewishness as an adversarial culture opposed to American materialism, consumerism, economic individualism, and assimilation into bourgeois culture, and they sought to use politics to preserve group cohesion against the strong destabilizing pressures of modernity and assimilation. “There is little empirical proof,” Verbeeten says, “to indicate a positive relationship between radicalism and acculturation or assimilation. General evidence suggests a negative correlation. The most radical Jews tended to be the most insular, and their radicalism naturally reinforced their insularity... As a general rule, acculturation and assimilation tended to undermine radicalism even as ethnocentricity tended to reinforce it” (p. 53).

The NJA was organized in 1980 by self-styled “progressive” Jews. Its program included support for the welfare state, acceptance of alternative lifestyles, multiculturalism, rejection of militarism, the expansion of civil liberties and gender equality, peace in the Middle East, and protection of the environment. The NJA distinguished itself from other left-wing organizations with similar agendas by claiming that its proposals stemmed from “higher Jewish values” (p. 125). The NJA was in part a protest against the domination of the Jewish establishment by wealthy businessmen and women, and it sought to substitute a post-bourgeois identity of a more authentic Jewishness. Despite its claim that the NJA represented “a deeper affirmation of our Jewishness” than that exhibited by its opponents, it attracted little support and by 1992 it had closed its doors (p. 151). The NJA’s ephemeral history leads one to wonder whether it warranted being the focus of one of Verbeeten’s three chapters.

Verbeeten’s brief book is interesting and provocative but incomplete and ultimately unconvincing. Bittelman, the American Jewish Congress, and the NJA are a vital but only a small part of the story of Jewish left-wing politics in America. How representative, after all, was Bittelman? For every

Bittelman seeking to preserve in America the essence of the Jewish culture he had experienced in the Ukraine, there were dozens of radical and liberal Jews, such as the communist Jay Lovestone, the politician Allard Lowenstein, and the civil rights martyr Michael Schwerner, who had severed any Jewish ties. There are dozens of biographies and autobiographies of Jews attesting to the role that radical politics played in their journey from the world of their Jewish ancestors.

One can also ask how eager were Jewish immigrants and their children, including the radicals in their midst, to erect barriers to acculturation? Jews stood out among all of America’s immigrant groups in the rapidity in which they learned English, in their eagerness to take advantage of American educational opportunities, in the speed in which they moved out of the initial areas of settlement, particularly New York City’s Lower East Side, and in their eagerness to absorb American culture. The history of Abraham Cahan’s *Forward*, the most popular of any American foreign-language newspaper, is instructive in this regard. Cahan, a fervent socialist, doubted that his newspaper, or any other Yiddish newspaper, could survive acculturation, and he encouraged this process by instructing immigrant readers through the paper’s popular letters-to-the-editors section on how to behave properly in America. Even Cahan would renounce socialism in 1936 when he broke ranks and urged his readers to vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt and not Norman Thomas, the socialist candidate.

Today Jews can be found in the highest pinnacles of American business, government, the professions, academia, and popular and high culture. Recent public opinion polls have revealed that Jews are among the most highly regarded of America’s ethnic and religious groups. Verbeeten is certainly correct that a sense of marginality and vulnerability sustained the left-wing politics of America’s Jews during the twentieth century. How

long this will continue in view of the changed status of America's Jews is another matter.

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