



**Jack Jacobs, ed.** *Jews and Leftist Politics: Judaism, Israel, Antisemitism, and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 386 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-04786-0.

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## Antisemitism and the Left

The strange rebirth of overtly public antisemitism has been one of the most curious, and disturbing, manifestations of the crisis of the twenty-first century. Rhetorical Jew-hatred on the far right—the “Jews Will Not Replace Us” slogan heard in Charlottesville, the casually antisemitic slips-of-the-tongue of populist politicians, the vast conspiracies constructed around the figure of George Soros—underpins the violence shown in the recent shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. In the UK, a controversy about antisemitism in the Labour Party has been smoldering for much of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership; this is partly a canard thrown out by the Blairite right wing of the party, but also partly a function of anti-Jewish currents that do genuinely exist within the party. The Left’s well-established sympathy for Palestinians has, in a discrete number of cases, manifested itself in antisemitic vocabulary (or has perhaps just acted as a vehicle for a latent antisemitism that has zero connections to Israel-Palestine).

2018 is an unambiguously important moment for a re-analysis of antisemitism and the Left, both of the problem of recusant anti-Jewish feeling on the left, but also of how to tackle the far more blatant (and far more violent) problem of rightist antisemitism. It is thus a disappointment that the essays gathered in *Jews and Leftist Politics*—many of them written by leading scholars—provide so uneven a response to these tasks.

Jack Jacobs’s introductory essay, as well as provid-

ing a standard programmatic entry, signposts how the pieces assembled here tend to be written within a context of absence: “At the present time, left-wing ideas no longer hold the same degree of attraction for Jews as they did one hundred years ago” (p. 1), he writes, and “all of the components of the American Jewish left ... have declined precipitously in size and strength in recent generations” (p. 21). The decline of these Jewish leftisms parallels the decline of the Left more broadly. Though it would be worth considering whether the phenomena of Bernie Sanders in the United States, Jewdas in the United Kingdom, and the Jewish Solidarity caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America contradict, if only somewhat, the inexorability of that decline. Such contemporary politics are largely excised from these pages, however.

The focus remains instead on Jews in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, the indubitable fact that they were overrepresented in social-democratic, socialist, and communist parties across most of the continent, and the vast mountains that antisemites built out of that molehill of a fact. The focus also remains stuck on a Euro-American narrative (with some brief trips to Israel-Palestine); the large-scale involvement of Jews in the Iraqi Communist Party or the likes of Henri Curiel or Hillel Schwartz, the Jewish progenitors of Egyptian communism, are not considered. Thus, there is a distinct Eurocentrism to this collection, at odds with the more engaged transnationalism of contemporary Jewish studies.

Such fusty old-fashionedness is on marked display in Anita Shapira's "Socialist Zionism and Nation Building," an oddly anachronistic essay that ignores a huge amount of literature on Zionism from the last three or four decades, particularly that which understands Zionism's relationship with the Palestinians as potentially or inherently colonialist. Shapira accepts uncritically the idea that Zionists were undiluted Marxist socialists while simultaneously ignoring the colonialist context in which their project was realized. She talks of the Israeli Labour Party as "Keynesian-statist," but also Marxist socialist, and never considers how contradictory a claim that is (p. 101). Shapira's labeling of pre-Zionist Palestine as "a primitive country" (p. 94) is particularly off-putting, while her claim that the seismic 1977 Israeli general election was the result of hostility to Zionist socialism completely ignores the internal ethnic divisions of Israeli Jewish society and their role in the rise of Likud in '77. Shapira is an undeniably important historian of Zionism, yet this essay reads like a relic from a time before the Israeli New Historians, before critical sociology, or before the recognition that Mizrachim have political agency.

Moishe Postone's essay, "The Dualism of Capitalist Modernity," is a meandering and sometimes intriguing examination of antisemitism's persistent appeal. His conclusion is that "antisemitism can appear to be anti-hegemonic and hence emancipatory, it can blur the differences between reactionary and progressive critiques of capitalism and lead to conceptual and political confusion, especially on the left" (p. 48). Yet, as true as this might be, Postone never really gives any concrete examples, other than a vaguely worded claim about the Middle East.

Mitchell Cohen's contribution asks the rhetorical question, "Does the Left Have a Zionist Problem? From the General to a Particular." This is a misnamed essay (which the subtitle tries to exonerate), since it is primarily a discussion of Judith Butler and is a generally low-quality piece of work at that. Cohen claims that the contemporary Left is often characterized by an "integral cosmopolitanism" which sees constructed identities as "keys to all past discord" (p. 125). This is a caricature of reality. It is hugely questionable if anyone exists on the socialist left who actually believes that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of identity struggle. Cohen's tone throughout is shrill and unproductive; he regularly engages in facetious claims that willfully ignore Butler's actual arguments about identity and Zionism, in favor of easier straw-man targets. To assert that Butler "circled in the same orbit" as Pat

Buchanan, an actual antisemite, "when it came to Israel," is to ignore the vastly different political motivations of these two figures (p. 129). Cohen seems particularly incensed by Butler's desire to establish an alternative Jewish identity, grounded in diaspora and multivocality. In Butler's "thought experiment"—itself borrowed from Edward Said—Moses is reimagined as a Mizrachi with roots in Arab Egypt. Cohen proceeds to dismantle such claims, but in so doing he surely ignores the nature of a "thought experiment." Moreover, he ignores Butler's broader points about identity and the question of what does or does not count as authentically Jewish. Butler's prose is notoriously difficult (and easy to misunderstand) but Cohen seems to be willfully misreading her; his apparent take-down thus remains a damp squib. And his claim (p. 132) that elite universities have become hives of postmodernism does not deserve to be taken seriously.

Other essays, for sure, are more satisfying. Yoav Peled's review of the debates about Israel and settler-colonialism is useful and evenhanded. Harvey Klehr's "Jews and American Communism," Daniel Soyer's, "The Soviet Union, Jewish Concerns and the New York Electoral Left, 1939-1944," and Judith Friedlander's "Jews and the Left at the New School" all offer engaged and enlightening examinations of differing Jewish and leftist milieux (as well as the misconceptions that have grown up around them). Likewise, Antony Polonsky's chapter on Jews in the Polish and Soviet communist parties is statistics-heavy and all the more instructive as a result. Three essays on canonical figures in twentieth-century Jewish intellectual life—Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Gustav Landauer—unpack their complicated relationships with the Left with verve and sophistication. Similarly, three essays on Jewish women—grouped into a section on "Gendered Perspectives"—are tightly organized, mainly biographical examinations, although, by conflating "women" with "gender," the editorial choice points to the book's outmoded architecture. Surely men also have a gender? Surely some essays could have been included about any number of leftist Jewish men and their gender(s): from Zionists' hypermasculine performance to antisemitism's unremitting focus on stereotypical caricatures of Jewish men to Bernie Sanders's self-presentation as an image of Jewish grandfatherliness? It is always a bit miserly to critique a diverse edited collection for what it did not include, but there are some adverse blind spots at work in how this collection understands the thing called "gender" (a word included in the book's subtitle, after all).

There is an obvious need for probing analyses of an-

tisemitism and the Left, from the complicated politics of the European Left and its relationship with the State of Israel to the deployment, on the swampier corners of the internet, of “cultural Marxism” as a thinly concealed euphemism for Jews. Such analyses, if not grounded in the Left, would still have to be willing to take leftist and

Marxist thought seriously. And it would, surely, also have to be alert to contemporary currents in Jewish studies scholarship, gender studies, and critical race theory. Such are the tasks that this book, unfortunately, never takes on.

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