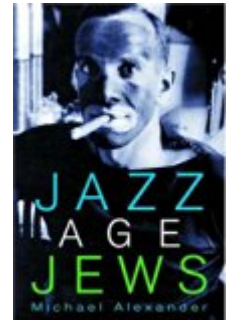


Michael Alexander. *Jazz Age Jews*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. 239 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-08679-8.



Reviewed by Daniel Greene

Published on H-Judaic (September, 2002)

Michael Alexander's *Jazz Age Jews* asks an important question about a paradox in American Jewish history: why, as many American Jews entered the middle-class during the early twentieth century, did such a large portion of American Jewry identify so strongly with those at the margins of society? Or, as Alexander succinctly declares, "As Jews moved up, they identified down" (p. 1). In *Jazz Age Jews*, a revision of his 1999 Yale dissertation, Alexander uses case studies in gambling (Arnold Rothstein), law (Felix Frankfurter), and entertainment (Al Jolson) to examine the "origins, influences, and consequences of this exceptional Jewish liberalism" (p. 1). Alexander argues that a timeless understanding of Jewish difference, which overrode the Jews' relative success in a host society, accounts for the Jewish propensity to "identifying down." In other words, American Jews always have remained conscious that they are an exiled, outsider people in the United States, and this realization has accounted for their sympathy with other downtrodden and marginalized American peoples. Unfortunately, Alexander too

often allows this provocative thesis to govern his assessment within each case study.

Alexander makes his case most convincingly in the book's second section, which examines Felix Frankfurter's role in the infamous trial and execution of Italian radicals Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In defending Sacco and Vanzetti's right to a fair trial, Frankfurter combined his passion for the American judicial system with his sympathy for two radical immigrants. Alexander argues that Frankfurter, a Jewish immigrant who had reached the pinnacle of his field and who worked tirelessly for the rights of these two Italian anarchists, exemplifies Jews' tendency to identify down-even in a case that might call into question Jewish loyalty to America. Frankfurter avoided any such suspicion of his own radicalism not by sympathizing with the radicals' cause, but by maintaining that the justice system promised to defend America's enemies as well as its friends. Frankfurter claimed that the denial of a fair trial to those charged, no matter their personal beliefs, represented a travesty of justice, which was quintessentially un-American.

Alexander ably demonstrates how Frankfurter lobbied not in a court of law, but instead in the court of public opinion, in an effort to have a retrial granted. Although this effort failed, Alexander persuasively shows that Frankfurter's passion for the cause rested not only on his beliefs about American justice, but also on his identification with the accused as outsiders. This section would have been enhanced by some discussion of the nature of public opinion in 1920s America. Alexander correctly contends that "Frankfurter had created the cause celebre" of the late 1920s, but he does not historicize the nature of public opinion for his readers (p. 106).

Alexander's treatment of Arnold Rothstein, the man charged with "fixing" the 1919 World Series between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds, is more problematic. Alexander concludes that Rothstein became one of the most powerful criminal figures of his day because "in America that was what a Jew had to do to make it" (p. 63). This somewhat overstates the case, ignoring not only the many successful legitimate Jewish businessmen of the era, but also denying the likelihood that Rothstein aspired to control the seductive and lucrative world of bookmaking, rather than to pursue a more legitimate business career. Without knowing enough about Rothstein's Jewish identity, it becomes impossible to determine whether his being born to Jewish parents had anything to do with what Alexander calls "the strange proclivity that certain Jews in America had for gray-area business[.]" (p. 18). Admittedly, these questions may have to remain open because of the scarcity of source material available to historians. Alexander relies heavily, for example, on a memoir written by Rothstein's widow in 1934, but does not explicitly acknowledge the limits of her memory or challenge her agenda in writing about her husband. Instead of supporting the larger claim about Jews' tendency to identify down, this section leaves the reader wondering whether Rothstein's Jewishness was anything

more than incidental to his fame and influence in American crime.

Alexander suggests an important new argument in the book's final section, which posits that Al Jolson's blackface routines represent not a claim to Jews' whiteness, but instead Jews' reinforcing of their outsider identity by identifying with African Americans. This re-reading relies on Alexander's understanding of America as a nation of outsiders, rather than, as recent historiography has suggested, a nation where power resides in whiteness. [1] Alexander's assertion here is plausible, but it would have been strengthened by evidence from Jolson (who, Alexander correctly demonstrates, must be read with particular care because of his penchant for self-promotion) or others involved with his career. Instead, Alexander writes, "Jews were marginalized, blacks were marginalized, and somehow Americans were marginalized." (177, emphasis in original). This may be true, but Alexander does not sufficiently explain the meaning and limits of "Americans" here. In an era dominated by discourse about the melting pot, cultural pluralism, and hyphenated Americanism, understandings of who belonged to the category "Americans" was more complicated than portrayed in this case.

Further, Alexander oversimplifies some of the recent scholarship on whiteness when he asserts that historians have argued that becoming white necessitates "abandonment" of one's Jewish identity. (especially page 173). In fact, what is so dynamic about this period are the ways that many Jews made claims to whiteness while simultaneously reinventing their Jewish identity for a modern American setting. Being white and being Jewish has not been an "either/or" situation in twentieth-century America. It is that complex self-understanding that makes American Jewish identity so fascinating to study.

Although very entertaining to read, the book would have, in some places, benefited from more critical analysis of how primary evidence sup-

ports the author's broader contentions. Alexander has made a significant contribution to the field by positing "identifying down" as an important paradox for twentieth century American Jews. This paradox, however, may not explain American Jewish behavior as he wants it to. At the very least it would require greater qualification than provided here.

NOTES:

[1] See especially Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Alexander also directly refutes Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

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Citation: Daniel Greene. Review of Alexander, Michael. *Jazz Age Jews*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

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