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## Lewis Feuer and the Study of American Jewish History

Jonathan D. Sarna

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**Abstract** From 1976–1988, Lewis Feuer produced a series of significant papers in American Jewish History dealing with such subjects as Harry Wolfson, Joachim Gaunse, the history of Jews in the American academy, James Joseph Sylvester, and more. In each case, Feuer glimpsed himself in what he studied. He selected and viewed his subjects from the perspective of his own life, values and intellectual concerns.

Prof. Lewis Samuel Feuer (1912–2002) first entered the field of American Jewish history in his sixties with an article entitled “Recollections of Harry Austryn Wolfson” (Feuer 1976). Wolfson (1887–1974), the great Jewish sage of Harvard and pioneering scholar of Jewish philosophy and thought, had died 2 years earlier, and Feuer’s piece, with its modest title, appeared at first glance to be a laudatory necrology-cum-memoir, a warm-hearted remembrance by a grateful former student.

But, as so often the case with Feuer, appearances proved deceptive. His article delivered much more than mere recollections. Instead, through Wolfson, he endeavored to penetrate into the mind of the first generation of East European Jews who won acceptance as university professors in the United States. In his hands, Wolfson became both a towering scholar in his own right and a sociological case study. Indeed, there is much in his portrait of Wolfson as a *mélange* of traditionalism and rebelliousness, radicalism and conservatism, religious consciousness coupled with an heretical bent, all combined with an unshakeable commitment to scholarship and the life of the mind that reminds one, ultimately, of Feuer himself. Contemplating Wolfson, I suspect, led Feuer to think about Jewish academics, about his own life and career, and about American Jewry as a whole. It changed the trajectory of his scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography, Feuer described his turn to Jewish Studies this way: “As I turned 60 years of age, I began to write more frequently on Jewish subjects. . . My chief aim in these Jewish studies was to tell a story of hope and accomplishment not of ideology nor of prophetic criticism, but of work done and a position achieved through the respect that the love of work and its realization have always inspired.” (Feuer 1988: 83).

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Subsequently, over the next dozen or so years, Lewis Feuer produced a whole series of penetrating essays dealing with American Jewish history and life. For his research, he traveled to Cincinnati on several occasions to use the collections of the American Jewish Archives, and to consult with its founder and director, the dean of the field of American Jewish history, Professor Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995) of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I was teaching at HUC-JIR at that time, and there, as a very young scholar, I first came to know Lewis Feuer.

Jacob Rader Marcus (Sarna 1997), who was then in his 80s (he completed his last book at the age of 99) was tremendously excited that a scholar of the quality of Lewis Feuer, distinguished professor at the University of Virginia, was pursuing scholarship in American Jewish history. What better proof could there be that the field he had spent his lifetime cultivating had emerged from the provincialism of its former days? He was even more excited by Feuer’s burgeoning interest (Feuer 1987a) in a hitherto little-known sixteenth-century Jewish metallurgist and mining engineer named Joachim Gaunse. Born in Bohemia, Gaunse had been brought to England in 1581 to help its struggling mining industry, and was subsequently hired by Sir Walter Raleigh as part of his Roanoke expedition to prospect for minerals in what was then called Virginia. He arrived in the New World in 1585 as part of the first group of Roanoke colonists, and returned to England in 1586. (A second group of Roanoke colonists arrived in 1587, and is remembered as the “lost colony”—that is an entirely different story).

Marcus’s excitement is easy to understand. He had written his magnum opus on *The Colonial American Jew 1492–1776* (Marcus 1970), three enormous and erudite volumes, 1,650 pages in total, exploring what he thought was *everything* connected to colonial American Jewish life. But his volumes, comprehensive as they were, contained not one word on Joachim Gaunse, to whom nobody has previously paid much attention. So for Marcus, Feuer’s discovery of Gaunse, whom he instantly realized was the first recorded

Jew in all of English-speaking North America, was roughly akin to the discovery of the Higgs boson in our day. For weeks, he talked of nothing else. Indeed, when, at age 99, he published his one-volume history of American Jewry (Marcus 1995), it carried the significant title *The American Jew: 1585–1990*. That starting date—1585—was a bow to Lewis Feuer and the importance of his discovery. Marcus also recommended Feuer for an honorary degree at Hebrew Union College; it was awarded in 1986. One of my senior colleagues characterized Feuer to me at that time as the most learned man he had ever met.

I must confess that I did not initially share Marcus' exuberance. Was it really so important, I wondered, that there was a person of the Jewish faith who had arrived in Roanoke in 1585 and departed back to England, along with others of that first Roanoke group, a year later in 1586? So what? Had not Marcus himself taught us that "no Jew is ever the first Jew anywhere; there is always one before him" (Marcus 1989: 21)?

But in this case, I was quite wrong, for when Feuer finally published his monograph under the long and ponderous title, *Jews in the Origins of Modern Science and Bacon's Scientific Utopia: The Life and Work of Joachim Gaunse, Mining Technologist and First Recorded Jew in English-Speaking North America* (Feuer 1987a), I understood the cause of Marcus' excitement. Feuer's amazing study turned out to have nothing in common with the standard, filiopietistic "who was the first Jew in—" genre. Instead, it was a work of immense learning that, among other things, provided the full scientific context for Gaunse's contribution to mining technology. Using obscure 16th century sources, Feuer showed that Gaunse had reduced the time consumed in smelting copper from 16 weeks to 4 days, a discovery that single-handedly transformed British industry. Feuer also filled out the biography of Gaunse, who, his sponsors hoped, "might help launch for Virginia a new mining industry of iron and copper" (Feuer 1987a: 5). While that did not happen, Feuer showed that Gaunse did manage to create a great stir soon after he returned to England, for he had the temerity (or perhaps the momentary insanity) to declare in 1589 that "there was but one God, who had no wife nor child" (Feuer 1987a: 8). That heresy—and it is well to recall here how much Lewis Feuer loved heretics—quickly landed Gaunse in prison. That is the very last that we hear of him; thereafter he dropped from the pages of history.

Yet Feuer, unlike Gaunse's contemporary friends, did not abandon the unorthodox metallurgist. Amazingly, he found echoes of Gaunse and his career in Francis Bacon's 17th century scientific romance, the *New Atlantis* (Weinberger 1989), which, among other things, envisioned scientific progress and the modern research university. Feuer argued, brilliantly albeit inconclusively, that Gaunse was the prototype for

Bacon's Jewish character in that utopian work, a wise scientist named Joabin (see also Feuer 1986).<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not Feuer was correct, the monograph on Gaunse, "the first recorded Jew in English-Speaking North America," was a remarkable work of historical reconstruction. Bringing to bear the full weight and breadth of Feuer's immense learning, it shed light on the history of science and technology, the history of England, the story of Roanoke, as well as on literary studies, political history, Jewish studies, and much, much more. It was and remains a tour-de-force: an example of renaissance scholarship at its very best.

In addition to this work on America's earliest Jew, Feuer in the 1980s built upon his recollections of Wolfson and attempted to understand the distinctive impact of Jewish professors on American colleges and universities from the 19th century onwards. His own long experience in the academy, his recollections of Harvard in the 1930s (where he first met Wolfson and other pioneering Jewish faculty members), and his sustained interest in the study of different generations and in the sociology of knowledge shaped this work, which likely also reflected his deep awareness of the changes that had taken place over the course of his own lifetime in the culture of the academy and its openness to Jews.

Feuer's survey article on this subject—entitled "The Stages in the Social History of Jewish Professors in American Colleges and Universities" (Feuer 1982)—is at one level a cornucopia of fascinating information on early Jewish academics in all fields of scholarship, their contributions, and their travails from 1841 onward (mostly 1890–1920). He knew many of these figures personally, as his correspondence demonstrates, and he had mastered the literature concerning their contributions. But what makes the piece so important are the sociological principles that Feuer developed to explain why Jews entered the fields they did, why they succeeded, and why they faced particular kinds of problems—here he prefigured some of the work of Susanne Klingenstein (1991) and David Hollinger (2002). First, Feuer observed, that "the sociological law for academic concentration was much the same as that which governed Jewish business ventures (Feuer 1982: 434)." In both cases, he argued, Jews moved into fields where the risks were high and the capital requirements low. Second, he suggested that when Jews moved to the top of a field, it was a sure sign of crisis. Just as Jews only became leading figures in transportation once railways began to go bankrupt, so, he concluded, when universities went into intellectual and organizational bankruptcy Jews also rose to the top. Third, he postulated that the laws of intellectual economy resemble those of political economy. "Novel intellectual

<sup>2</sup> That name, according to Feuer, may actually have been a cross between the name Joachim (as in Joachim Gaunse) and the biblical Job, whose misfortunes and suffering Gaunse's career echoed. Strangely, Feuer's theory has gone unnoticed by subsequent scholars. His work is not even referenced in a recent volume of essays devoted to *New Atlantis* (Price 2002).

capital or intelligence, when it is precluded by monopolistic restrictions from entering into secure, traditional channels of intellectual investment, will then be directed into non-traditional, high risk, and still open fields (Feuer 1982: 434).” In other words, when the hard sciences excluded Jews, as they often did, Jews shifted into neglected fields, like psychology and the social sciences. For years, he showed, Jews therefore tended to cluster only in certain areas of the academy. These early Jewish academics were, to an astonishing extent, pioneers, he concluded, and many of them became embroiled in episodes involving violations of academic freedom. Here, once again, Feuer drew upon his own life and experience to shed light on broader and at the time totally neglected aspects of the history of higher education and of American Jewish history.

As a spinoff of this research into early Jewish professors, Feuer produced an amazing article (Feuer 1984a) on a man whom he dubbed “America’s first Jewish professor”—meaning the first one who had not converted to Christianity, as Judah Monis at Harvard had done already in colonial days. By happy coincidence, that first Jewish professor had taught at the very university where Feuer was himself then teaching, and he was able to uncover a wealth of new archival data about his subject. The subject was the great mathematician James Joseph Sylvester (1814–1897), “chief creator of the formal language of modern science.” Sylvester gave us words like “graph” and “universal algebra,” and, according to Feuer, “more names to novel conceptions than all the other mathematicians of the age combined” (Feuer 1984a: 152). Sylvester, in 1841–42, actually spent only about 5 months at Virginia (which is even less time than Joachim Gaunse had spent there). Ostensibly, he left for reasons similar to those, in 1966, that motivated Feuer himself to leave Berkeley: he found himself “an intellectual Samson captive among the Philistines” (Feuer 1984a: 169). In Sylvester’s case, he was abused by students and then physically attacked. He stabbed one of his student antagonists in self-defense, and then hastened back to England where, after significant hardship, he eventually enjoyed a distinguished career. Much later, in 1877, he returned to America to occupy the first chair in Mathematics at Johns Hopkins, where Jews were then welcomed, and he founded the *American Journal of Mathematics*. In 1889, at the age of 69, he returned to England to assume a chair at Oxford.

Feuer’s article, embellished with 143 footnotes mostly to obscure primary sources, completely rewrote previous accounts of Sylvester’s brief career at Virginia. It painted a devastating portrait of his university in its early years, uncovered an ugly history of antisemitism in antebellum Charlottesville, and—surely not least important to Feuer—it served as a cautionary tale from the past concerning the dangers of student takeovers, of faculty cowardice, of the loss of academic freedom, of the abandonment of academic standards—all themes very dear to Feuer in his later years.

In the article on Sylvester, as earlier in his recollections of Wolfson, there is also a revealing discussion of religion. Both

men, in Feuer’s telling, were broadminded, ecumenical, liberal, somewhat heterodox, and yet in the end devoted Jews. Sylvester, he reports, was “a believing Jew all his life,” somewhat “Spinozist,” an admirer of Protestant evangelist Dwight Moody, an advocate of “spiritual revolution” in Judaism, and most importantly “a staunch Jew from first to last” (Feuer 1984a: 190–192). Wolfson, he says, was likewise akin to Spinoza, would have attended church services in the absence of a synagogue, was a “rationalizer” rather than a “rebel,” and ultimately a religious traditionalist (Feuer 1976: 46–48).<sup>3</sup> One suspects that he viewed both men, even religiously, as worthy intellectual ancestors of himself.

Space does not permit consideration of some of Feuer’s other important, Jewish-related essays from this period: his recollections of his friend, the largely forgotten Jewish writer Meyer (“Mike”) Liben (Feuer 1984b); his courageous article on “Alfred North Whitehead in the Harvard Setting,” notable for its revelations concerning the Whiteheads’ genteel English antisemitism (Feuer 1987b); his study of “The East Side Philosophers” (Feuer 1987c); his autobiographical “narrative of personal events and ideas,” which is filled with Jewish references (Feuer 1988); and one of his very last papers, delivered at my invitation as a lecture at Brandeis University and apparently never published, entitled “The Golden Age of the Downtown Talmud Torah in New York City’s Lower East Side.”

In each case, indeed in all of his scholarship concerning American Jewish history, Feuer seems to me to have glimpsed much of himself in what he studied. He selected and viewed his subjects from the perspective of his own life, values and intellectual concerns. At the same time, he demonstrated, by example, a deep devotion—shared with his friend Harry Wolfson—to rigorous scholarship, broad and capacious learning, and unvarnished truth.

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<sup>3</sup> Feuer failed to mention Wolfson’s oft-repeated characterization of himself as a “non-observant Orthodox Jew” (Schwarz 1978: viii). Privately, Wolfson was also less than ecumenical. The triumphalistic Jewish holiday of Purim, with its pronounced anti-gentile bias, was, he once smilingly revealed to my father, his favorite Jewish holiday.

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