

Jews and the Left
By Arthur Liebman

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CASSANDRA OFF THE MARK

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"The Jewish contribution to the Left in the United States during the twentieth century ranks the highest of any immigrant or ethnic group." This commonplace observation by Arthur Liebman begins an uncommonly good book on what is surely among the most closely examined phenomena in American Jewish history: Jews' association with various forms of socialism and Communism. Be it said at once that Liebman knows that he is talking about a minority within a minority. Most Jews were neither socialists nor Communists. He is also aware that the Jewish people have produced "rightists" as well as "Leftists." His interests, however, are confined to the latter (the non-Left does not even rate a capital letter). *Jews and the Right* is a book that has yet to be written.

Some past students have credited (or blamed) Jewish tradition for Jews' liberal propensities: "socialism was Judaism secularized." Others have associated the phenomenon with history, antisemitism, self-hatred, and status disequilibrium (high achievement coupled with low ascribed status). Liebman deftly rebuts all of these theses. In their place, he offers a two-stage socioeconomic theory: 1) "class-linked factors enabled and motivated largely working-class Jews . . . to make Left political choices and to build a radical subculture"; 2) "this radical subculture . . . functioned to create, recreate, and sustain a vital link between Jews and the Left."

The theory is not totally convincing. One wonders why "class-linked factors" drove some Jews to Marx while others remained solidly in the camp of Moses and the rabbis. How many Jews committed themselves to the ideology of "the Left"? For how many was socialism a form of ethnic identification or protest? To answer these questions, Liebman would need to find more hard data on the social characteristics of the radical subculture. He has not studied

the extant membership lists of left-wing parties, nor has he subjected the Jewish Socialist vote to penetrating analysis. He has relied too heavily on secondary sources—and these are often woefully inadequate.

Still, the notion of a radical subculture has much to offer. As Liebman understands, the socialism of many Jews consisted entirely of their labor organizations, fraternal orders, and Yiddish journals—what Harry Roskolenko's father, thought of as "East Broadway, his sick and death benefit society, his membership in the union." *Jews and the Left* portrays this "socialism of the masses" skillfully and in great detail—though, unfortunately, without any of the verve found in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*. More important, Liebman analyzes the decline of the radical subculture after World War I. Where others have singled out individual causes, he paints a complex but vastly more convincing picture—one which

takes account of immigration restrictions, social and geographic mobility, Jewish communal growth, Americanization, antisemitism, Zionism, and finally "the Left parties' treatment of Jews and Jewish issues."

Liebman's subsequent discussion of "The New Left and Jewish New Left" is a thrice-told tale to which he has added nothing of importance. But in place of a solemn epitaph, *Jews and the Left* closes on an apocalyptic note: "I believe that, in America in the forthcoming decades, the Jewish community's harsh confrontation with capitalism will result in a renewed Jewish commitment to socialism." Liebman finds that "the occupational and economic structure of American Jewry within this monopolistic society" is tottering on the brink. He foresees economic, political, and

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status decline for Jews, and views socialism as the obvious response. Somewhat illogically, he hopes that Jewish socialism—born of weakness—will become "a centerpiece" capable of converting America into "a humane, democratic socialist society."

This prophecy of ultimate socialist victory is an unfortunate epilogue to an otherwise important book. In the interests of his secular faith, Liebman has abandoned facts and analysis and resorted to the defense of dogma at the expense of truth. It is not true that, as he claims, 50 per cent of Jews are self-employed (a better figure would be 25 to 35 per cent), nor do Jewish/Christian occupational differences appear so stark when controlled for college education. As for many of the other "facts," they merely demonstrate that Liebman is sadly out of touch with the American Jewish situation.

His misapprehension is not terribly surprising. The "Left" has been blind to Jewish realities for a full century. Liebman's analysis suggests that it may finally be getting a handle on its own past. But apparently it still can't understand the present. Certainly, it appears incapable of telling us anything of value about the future. □

