The Crisis of the American Jewish Intellectual: Marxism, God, and Jewish Identity in the 1940s

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Note: this is a chapter of a book-in-progress on the relationship between American Jews and Soviet Russia. The footnotes are not yet complete.

During the 1940s, the theoretical system of Karl Marx lost much of its purchase on politically engaged intellectuals, who, with mounting skepticism, questioned whether Marxism was capable of explaining the world and guiding its transformation. What had previously seemed inevitable—the liberation of humanity from capitalism—appeared increasingly dubious. As the decade progressed, many intellectuals concluded that Marxism required thorough revision, if not total rejection.

More than one factor contributed to this crisis in Marxism. The horrors of World War II, the subsequent stabilization of capitalism, and the chilling effect of the Cold War exerted strong pressures. The fundamental cause, however, arose from within Marxism’s ambit, namely, the tragic course of the Russian Revolution under Joseph Stalin’s rule. Many of the Soviet Union’s former admirers came to view the world’s first workers’ state as not merely flawed but a colossal failure of international consequence. Between 1939 and 1940, the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, invaded Poland, conquered Finland, and assassinated Leon Trotsky in Mexico City. What did those developments, following the Great Purges, the Moscow Show...
Trials, and the death of millions of Soviet citizens by forced collectivization, mean for the future of socialism? Was history moving toward proletarian revolution or careening toward an abyss? Did Marxism contain within itself the seeds of dictatorship? Could socialism’s emancipatory promise be salvaged? Intellectuals who had, during the 1920s and 1930s, staked their political commitment on the October Revolution grappled with those questions during a decade pocked by catastrophes.¹

Reassessment of Marxism did not lead in any single direction. While many intellectuals travelled toward liberalism and even conservatism, a story well told by historians,² many others searched for alternative forms of socialism based on democratic, humanistic, and libertarian values. They founded magazines, produced important historical and theoretical works, made available little-known texts in English translation, and investigated questions of economic planning and bureaucracy that grew out of debates over Soviet Russia. Attempts at socialist renewal were persistent. Although few stable institutions emerged from the 1940s, and more than a few individuals who attempted to rethink socialism eventually gave up on it altogether, the


decade witnessed one of the most creative, if underappreciated, periods in American socialist thought.³

In addition to reassessing Marxism, intellectuals embarked on a second process of reconsideration, one focused on Jewish identity, culture, and communal belonging. Matters of specifically Jewish concern had long been considered parochial in the eyes of Marxists, but they assumed new significance during the 1940s. Against the backdrop of the Holocaust and the rise of the state of Israel, intellectuals felt a need to understand Jews in some affirmative way. These two undertakings—critical scrutiny of Marxism and positive reevaluation of Jewishness—bore on one another. No longer bound by Marxian presuppositions and categories, intellectuals could think about Jews more freely than before. In turn, sympathetic attention to Jews and their predicaments pushed against Marxism’s faith in universal human progress at the expense of Jewish particularity. To be sure, the new interest in Jewishness did not necessarily proceed in a smooth, easy manner. Self-described “alienated” and “marginal” intellectuals wrestled with their identities to greater or lesser degrees of satisfaction by their own estimations. Nonetheless, they produced a rich outpouring of essays and books on Judaism, Zionism, Yiddish literature, and Jewish history that reached large audiences within the Jewish community and beyond. Some of the most influential works of the post-war period, such as, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954), edited by Eliezer Greenberg and Irving

Howe, and Will Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955) resulted from the struggle with Jewishness that began in the 1940s.

Two shifts in thought thus occurred: one away from Marxism, the other toward Jewish identification. One was prompted by the rise of totalitarianism in Russia, the other by the destruction of European Jewry and Jewish national revival in Palestine. Historians have discussed these shifts, but rarely have they examined them in depth or in relation to one another.

The dual reconsideration of Marxism and Jewishness continued an historical cycle. Since the nineteenth century, socialists had periodically found it necessary to reconsider “the Jewish question” in response to flare-ups of anti-semitism. In Russia, the pogroms of 1881-1882, 1903, and 1905-1907 stimulated feelings of Jewish solidarity, produced new political programs that combined socialism with Jewish nationalism, and prompted bursts of cultural creativity in Hebrew and Yiddish. The October Revolution partially reversed this cycle by establishing Bolshevism as the only political force capable of stopping the slaughter of Jews between 1918-1920. Even so, the revolution had more than one effect, at least in the U. S., where internationalist and nationalist currents existed within the Communist movement from its beginning. The point to be stressed here is that the turn to Jewishness in the 1940s may be considered the latest manifestation of an historical pattern in which socialists felt compelled to rethink their previous indifference to Jewish peoplehood. In this most recent cycle, however, the rethinking was done, not by Russian-born Jews, but American—raised children of immigrants. Had the Bolshevik Revolution remained an attractive model of
social transformation, the destruction of European Jewry and the rise of Israel might not have prompted a reevaluation of Jewish issues. But, as it happened, Soviet Russia came to be seen as a terrible failure of global proportions. No longer wedded to the Bolshevik tradition, intellectuals experimented with ideas about socialism and Jews with no clear vision ahead.

**From Marxism to Judaism**

In December 1940, members of the Independent Labor League of America (ILLA) held their final convention. Known informally as the Lovestoneites (after Jay Lovestone, the ILLA’s leader), they had existed in different organizational forms for eleven years, following their expulsion from the Communist Party in 1929 for the heresy of “American exceptionalism,” the belief in capitalism’s relative stability in the United States. Lovestoneites did not consider themselves heretics or revisionists, but genuine Marxist-Leninists who supported most of the Soviet government’s domestic policies. What they objected to was Moscow’s strict control over the American Communist movement. Eventually, however, Stalin’s brutality threw the Lovestoneites into disarray. “The neat and tidy picture of steady advance to a clearly defined, destined goal of socialism has been shattered to bits,” the ILLA declared in 1940. “In its place, we have a world in endless turmoil in perpetual eruption. The neat and tidy formulas of yesterday, and the organizations based upon and embodying them will no longer do.” In the United States, the prospects for socialism in democratic form looked bleak. The Communist Party, which dominated the American left, amounted to “nothing more than a foreign agency of the Stalin dictatorship.” Other Marxist organizations had failed to provide viable
alternatives. Concluding that the ILLA had “outlived its usefulness,” its members voted to disband. This was a remarkable decision. Never before in the history of American socialism, a history replete with splits and mergers, had an organization of any significance simply liquidated itself. Such was the depth of crisis in 1940.4

In public forums and in the press, Lovestoneites pondered what went wrong. Why had Marxists failed to anticipate, let alone prevent, the Russian Revolution’s transmogrification into totalitarianism?5 Will Herberg, editor of the ILLA’s organ, *Workers Age*, and an educator in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), posed just that question. Herberg’s premise did not exactly match the historical record. Russian Social Democrats had all along warned of Bolshevik dictatorship. “The ‘soviet regime’,” Julius Martov charged in 1919, “becomes the means of bringing into power and maintaining in power a revolutionary minority which claims to defend the interests of the majority, though the latter has not recognized these interests as its own...”6 Perhaps Herberg, who had read Martov’s writings closely, still adhered to the Communist conceit that the only true Marxist was of the Leninist variety. Or maybe he could not bear to admit that some kind of oppressive regime, if not the

specific formation presided over by Stalin, was predictable at the outset. Whatever the case, Herberg had begun to trace his disenchantment with the Russian Revolution back to Marxism itself.

Drawing from Robert Michels’ *Political Parties* (1911), read avidly in socialist circles during the 1940s, Herberg identified an inescapable dilemma arising from a “contradictory, complicated relation” between the end-goal of emancipation from wage slavery and the “measures, means and mechanisms” needed to achieve it. On the one hand, socialists must build political parties capable of mobilizing large numbers of workers on behalf of their class interests. On the other hand, all political organizations inexorably produce a bureaucratic elite, a process Michels dubbed “the iron law of oligarchy.” Even parties firmly committed to democratic procedures and goals are subject to the contradictory relationship between good intentions and antithetical outcomes, thus placing “thinking socialists” in a quandary. Their efforts to build workers’ movements and ultimately socialist societies “give rise to situations and release forces that run directly counter to the goal and even threaten to vitiate or destroy it.”

Herberg applied Michels’ analysis to the Russian Revolution, formerly regarded as a glorious victory but now understood in tragic terms. The tragedy arose from the kind of conspiratorial, hierarchical party devised by Lenin. The “super-centralized” Bolshevik party was justified, in Herberg’s opinion, as the only form of organization

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7 Originally published in German, in 1911, the book was republished in English translation in 1915, under the title *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*.

8 Herberg, “Basic Dilemma of Socialism,” *Workers Age*, 8 June 1940, p. 4.
capable of carrying out a revolution in tsarist Russia. Yet this same party, once in power, proved a “very grave hindrance” to the realization of working-class liberation, indeed, created a monstrous system of government. “The very form of organization that facilitated—nay, was indispensable for—the struggle against Czarism and the victory of the revolution turned out to be the form of organization that helped turn the fruits of the revolution into ashes, that led to Stalinism and totalitarianism,” Herberg concluded. The Russian Revolution was not “betrayed” by Stalin (as Trotsky had it), but ruined by its own success. Marxists had always believed that the right theory, the correct program, and the most effective organization would lead to socialist revolution and, ultimately, human emancipation. The Russian Revolution taught otherwise.⁹

Herberg recognized the troubling implication of his argument. Not only did he call into question socialism’s inevitability, but also cast doubt on its mere possibility. He maintained that wherever socialists might achieve power, they ran a high risk of establishing new regimes of oppression, perhaps worse than those that existed previously. “Organization makes for bureaucracy; discipline for authoritarianism; solidarity for the submergence of the individual in the mass—in every case the tendency runs counter to the goals that socialism sets out to achieve.” Herberg detected dangers, not only within socialist movements and totalitarian states, but all industrialized countries, including the U. S. Government bureaucracies mushroomed above and beyond the citizenry’s control. Professional managers and administrators amassed power and justified this as natural and good. Corporations treated employees as

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“nothing but a cog in the great industrial mechanism of mass-production.” Trade unions grew ossified and corrupt.¹⁰ Could anything be done to counteract these developments, to advance democracy by rescuing socialism from itself?

Of the many intellectuals who addressed that question no one responded more pessimistically than James Burnham. Burnham had been a member of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and co-editor of its theoretical journal, *The New International*, in the 1930s. He disagreed with Trotsky, however, over “the Russian Question,” which pivoted on the class character of the Soviet regime. Trotsky had argued that the Soviet Union, despite its totalitarian political system, remained a workers’ state because private capital had been nationalized on behalf of the proletariat. Although Soviet socialism had “degenerated” under Stalin’s vicious bureaucracy, it was still more progressive than capitalism and therefore required defense by workers the world over. This line of reasoning led Trotsky to justify the Soviet invasion of Finland, in 1939, on the grounds that the Red Army served to spread socialism, albeit in distorted form, across new territory. At that point, Burnham and his colleague, Max Shachtman, broke ranks. Rejecting Trotsky’s “degenerated workers’ state” theory, Burnham and Shachtman argued that the Soviet Union was not a workers’ state of any sort, but a new kind of exploitive class society that was “bureaucratic collectivist” in character. According to their theory, the Soviet government constituted a new ruling class by virtue of its control over the means of production and distribution. Burnham and Shachtman argued that Marxists must oppose the USSR as resolutely as they did capitalist countries

on the expectation that the Russian proletariat would someday soon enact a second revolution that would complete the work of 1917. After lengthy polemics, they led a minority of some 200-300 members out of the Socialist Workers Party and established the Workers Party, the latest in a series of Marxist-Leninist organizations with roots in the American Communist Party of the 1920s. Yet Burnham soon bolted the new party and renounced socialism altogether. In short order, he composed a widely read book about the fate of democracy in an age of bureaucratization.

_The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World_ (1941) presented a grim vision of the future to an American public unsure about the New Deal and fearful of a world engulfed by war. Burnham posited that all industrial societies, regardless of their specific political regimes, were becoming “managerial societies.” He outlined a long-term convergence between capitalist, fascist, and Stalinist countries, in which private businesses would give way to state-owned concerns run by administrators, experts, technicians, and bureaucrats, who together would form a new ruling class. Managers would assume responsibility for assigning jobs and determining wages; free labor would disappear. The result, Burnham predicted, “will not be classlessness and freedom, not even universal material well-being, but a new form of exploiting, class society—managerial society.” Democratically elected legislatures were destined to be replaced by unaccountable administrative bureaus that “proclaim the rules, make the laws, issue the decrees.” Burnham did not go so far as to claim the United States was identical to Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany but insisted that the U. S. was headed in a similar direction. Burnham noted:
The New Deal is not Stalinism and not Nazism. It is not even a direct analogue of them, for the New Deal is far more primitive with respect to managerial development, and capitalism is not yet over in the United States. But no candid observer, friend or enemy of the New Deal, can deny that in terms of economic, social, political, ideological changes from traditional capitalism, the New Deal moves in the same direction as Stalinism and Nazism.

Burnham viewed the New Deal as a transitional phase in the rapid evolution from capitalism to state-run managerialism, a process the current world war threatened to accelerate. His forecast denied any possibility of socialism. Burnham deemed it a utopian ideal without concrete foundation.  

*The Managerial Revolution* was that rare book able to engage general readers and intellectuals alike. A well-timed provocation, it sold 100,000 hardcover copies in the U. S. and England during the war, and many more paperbacks. (It was later translated into Italian, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, and other languages.) According to *Fortune* magazine, *The Managerial Revolution* was “by all odds the most debated book published so far this year.”

Burnham found a large readership, but he did not speak for those ex-Marxists in search of a new socialist orientation. Herberg considered *The Managerial Revolution* “rather superficial and dubious,” as he jotted in the margins of his copy of the book. In the Socialist Party’s *Call*, Philip Selznick criticized *The Managerial Revolution’s*

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unsubstantiated claims and poor conceptualization. A former member of the Workers Party, Selznick recognized the danger of bureaucratization. He had studied Michels’ *Political Parties* and considered it so important that he urged members of his faction within the WP to do the same. (One of Selznick’s followers, Jeremiah Kaplan, eventually published a new edition of *Political Parties* in his capacity as editor of The Free Press.) Dismayed by Michels’ argument, Selznick investigated the problem of bureaucracy as a graduate student in Columbia University’s Sociology Department, but, unlike Burnham, he reached a hopeful conclusion. Selznick discovered that organizations have “characteristic tendencies” toward centralization, but do not inexorably arrive at a single outcome. “To state these tendencies [toward bureaucratization] is merely to set a problem, for although they ascribe to organizations an initial presumption of bureaucratic consequence, it always remains to be determined to what degree the bureaucratic tendencies have become dominant.” In other words, there is no iron law of oligarchy. There is, rather, an omnipresent tendency toward “bureaucratic drift” that can be overcome by individuals active at the grassroots. (Selznick’s response to Michels formed the basis of his first book, a landmark study of

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the Tennessee Valley Authority, that launched his eminent career at the University of California.) Selznick’s research enabled him to affirm a libertarian form of socialism independent of Marxism. On the pages of Enquiry, a little magazine edited by Selznick, Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and others, Selznick argued for a “new individualism” that would advance a “revolutionary outlook with a thoroughgoing concern for the maintenance and the extension of the procedures and institutions of democracy.” “We should modify our idea of what a socialist economy is,” he ventured, “strengthening its libertarian aspects, such as the necessity for a free market and planning on the basis of conscious choices by individuals rather than planning by an omniscient state for the pre-judged needs of the people.” Socialism was not obsolete nor doomed to bureaucratization. Properly theorized, it offered the only realistic, democratic alternative to war, fascism, and unemployment.16

Herberg, too, stressed the importance of democratic procedures as a counterweight to bureaucratic centralization. In his 1940 series in Workers Age, Herberg displayed a newfound appreciation of constitutional liberties and institutional checks-and-balances. Such “restraints and safeguards,” he wrote, were not mere smokescreens used to obscure bourgeois rule, but crucial mechanisms to curb abuses of

power. Herberg’s observation would have struck most Americans as obvious, but to a recovering Leninist, liberalism’s virtues came as a realization.\(^\text{17}\)

Still, Herberg worried about the viability of democratic institutions. Necessary though they were, something else was needed to check oligarchic tendencies from within and the threat of totalitarianism from without. A democratic socialist movement required a “strong, unflagging will-to-freedom permeating every functional group and every section of the population, and manifesting itself in eternal vigilance and an ever-ready determination to act.”\(^\text{18}\) Herberg did not know where this “will-to-freedom” might be discovered, what its characteristics might be, or how it could be instilled in “every section of the population.” Disorientation plagued him, so much so that he ceased writing (or at least publishing) between 1941 and 1943, while he remained on staff at the ILGWU. Whereas Selznick quickly reoriented himself through the study of organizational sociology, Herberg felt bereft. For two decades, Marxism had provided him with “a vast, all-embracing doctrine of man and the universe, a passionate faith endowing life with meaning, vindicating the aims of the movement, idealizing its activities, and guaranteeing its ultimate triumph.” Marxism had given him “the commitment and understanding that alone had made life livable.”\(^\text{19}\) But Herberg now found himself in the grip of an existential crisis. An answer had to be found, not in sociology or liberalism, but in something deeper. “Socialism—mankind—needs something at once more profound and more dynamic” than “secular humanitarianism”

\(^\text{17}\) Herberg, “Basic Dilemma of Socialism,” 8 June 1940, p. 4.
\(^\text{18}\) Part 3, 22 June 1940, p. 3.
and “sociological positivism,” Herberg wrote. But what? While he grappled with that question, Herberg embarked on a “slow,” “painful,” and “agonizing” process of reconsideration.

Herberg did not abandon Marxism suddenly or entirely. In a 1943 letter to Bertram Wolfe, a close comrade in the ILLA and future historian of Russia (his Three Who Made a Revolution sold more than 800,000 copies between 1948 and 1984), Herberg gave assurance that he had not strayed too far. “Marxism represents the only really valuable, realistic and effective approach in social knowledge...If I had to call myself something, I would call myself a Marxist—a very critical, revisionist Marxist but a Marxist anyway,” he intimated. One can glean from Herberg’s essays and lectures two aspects of Marxian thought he found especially compelling and enduring. One was Marx’s conceptualization of historical progress. Herberg had in mind, not historical materialism’s “scientific pretensions,” but rather Marx’s “Prophetic-Messianic” worldview. In a 1943 essay in The Antioch Review, Herberg argued that Marx’s understanding of history derived from the “Judaeo-Christian drama of human destiny and salvation.” This drama begins with a “primitive state of harmony, justice, and happiness,” moves to “an intermediate stage...of conflict, injustice, and mystery,” and

22 This is contrary to the suggestion of some scholars [cite JAH article].
23 Bertram Wolfe, Three Who Made Revolution
24 Herberg to Wolfe, 13 July 1943. (Bertram Wolfe Papers, Box 7, Folder 63, Hoover Institution)
concludes with an “ultimate state of regained harmony, justice, and happiness forever and ever.” Marxism inherited from Christianity “a wholeness of view, a promise of final achievement, [and] a vision of ultimates” necessary to sustain a “dynamic social movement.” Later in the decade, for reasons to be discussed, Herberg shifted his emphasis to Judaism. In a 1948 lecture at the Jackson Heights Jewish Center in Queens, and on other occasions, Herberg identified three commonalities between Judaism and Marxism. Both held that “life and history have meaning and are heading for fulfillment,” humans have the capacity and obligation to transform society, and “those who suffer injustice and oppression in the world as-it-is inherit their reward in the world-as-it-will be.” Herberg did not probe these ideas deeply, but he contended repeatedly that Judaism could advance Marxism’s “best insights and ultimate ideals.”

Equally profound, in Herberg’s eyes, was Marx’s critique of reification (verdinglichung): the process by which industrial production and market exchange is said to transform humans into thing-like beings alienated from their labor, the commodities they produce, and themselves as creative, thinking individuals. According to Marx, capitalism physically and spiritually degrades humans by robbing them of autonomy and warping their personalities in the service of commodity production. “Socialism arose in the modern world as a protest against bourgeois society for

enslaving man by turning him into a thing, an instrument, a mere depersonalized adjunct of the machine,” Herberg noted in the socialist-Zionist magazine, *Jewish Frontier*. It was Herberg’s conviction that Marx’s philosophical objection to reification stood as a towering contribution to knowledge in the service of freedom. He, thus, displayed an unusual understanding of Marx at the time. Between the two World Wars, Marxists paid most attention to questions of class formation, the nature of the state, the labor theory of value, and the philosophy of historical materialism. The Hungarian-born philosopher, Georg Lukacs, developed the concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), but Soviet authorities condemned the book, Lukacs himself disavowed it, and the study remained largely inaccessible in the United States until its full translation into English in 1971. Herberg seems to have adopted the concept directly from Marx, particularly his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), which Herberg read in the original German. Paying attention to that little-known text, unpublished in any language until 1932, Herberg underscored the humanistic dimension of Marx’s thought that most of his contemporaries had overlooked.

The major exception was the philosopher Sidney Hook of New York University. In *Reason, Social Myths, and Democracy* (1940), a book hailed as an “intellectual event”

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by the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Hook defended Marx from critics who claimed his social philosophy suffered from “soulless materialism.” Hook also faulted contemporary Marxists for contributing to this misunderstanding by neglecting the essential humanism of Marx’s philosophical, political, and even economic writings.

Hook identified three fundamentals. The first was Marx’s belief that private property, specifically “articles of use and enjoyment” (as distinct from capital), was “indissolubly connected” to the development of individuality. “There can be no effective freedom if we can call nothing our own,” Hook wrote, concurring with Marx. “Without the possession of some things...the only personalities we can develop are those of saints or ascetics for whom the whole of life is preparation for death.” Marx, furthermore, upheld the Greek ideal of “the whole man,” free to cultivate his talents and skills, currently rendered impossible by the ever-greater specialization imposed by industrial capitalism. A genuinely socialist society would encourage “all around self-development” for everyone. Finally, Marx accorded supreme importance to democracy (“the active participation of all members of the community” in political affairs), so much so that he expected professional politicians to disappear in post-capitalist societies. Freedom, self-development, and democratic decision-making formed the core, lasting elements of Marx’s social philosophy, according to Hook.

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Similarly, Herberg differentiated Marx from those who called themselves Marxists. Whereas Marx regarded the individual as primary, his followers tended to view individuality as tantamount to “isolation and selfishness.” In their minds, collectivism was “an ideal state of being.” Marx, in contrast, understood that collective organization “must mean not the total submergence of the individual in the mass but a better chance for the full and free development of the individual personality.” In Marx’s words, “One must always avoid setting up ‘society’ as an abstraction opposed to the individual. The individual is the social entity. His life is therefore an expression and verification of the life of society.” From a truly Marxian perspective, then, the choice before socialists was not between individualism or collectivism, but between two, antagonistic versions of collectivism: democratic versus totalitarian. The former promised to advance individuality, the latter threatened to crush it. “Socialism,” Herberg insisted, “must lead to a higher and more complete individualism than exists under capitalism.”

In retrospect, one can see that Herberg anticipated the philosophical current that came to be known as Marxist humanism in the 1950s. (In the U. S., the thinker most closely associated with that trend was Raya Dunayevskaya, a

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Ukrainian-born Jew and former Trotskyist.\textsuperscript{33} Instead of revising Marxism into a new theoretical form, however, Herberg concentrated his efforts on exposing its problems.\textsuperscript{34}

The central problem for Herberg was Marxism’s rejection of moral absolutes. He excoriated historical materialism’s “extreme moral relativism,” according to which “good and evil are constituted by shifting class interest.” This class-based conception of morality, Herberg argued, permitted any action that could be said to advance the struggle for a just world built on equality and brotherhood. Marxists exhibited a two-sided attitude toward power. They imagined a future society in which “mutuality, goodwill, and universal harmony” would obviate the need for coercion while they simultaneously justified the use of force without moral restraint to achieve the anticipated harmonious future. “Ultimate utopianism...,” Herberg stated, “sustains and sanctifies a provisional Machiavellianism of unrestrained power politics.”\textsuperscript{35} All branches of Marxism had succumbed to this valorization of power, but none more so than Communism, he continued. In its role as the self-declared vanguard of the proletariat, the Soviet Communist Party arrogated to itself sole authority to determine the direction of history and, therefore, questions of right and wrong. Communists submerged morality to class interest as justified by historical necessity. “Whatever served the


‘interest of the proletariat’ was good” in the eyes of Communists, “whatever ran counter was evil.” It should be noted that Herberg overstated his case. Austrian Marxists, for instance, had devoted sustained attention to questions of ethics prior to World War I and even Communists felt compelled to take up the issue as of late. Still, Marxists in the U. S. had generally failed to venture beyond generalities, making few efforts to formulate moral norms. If Herberg’s judgement suffered from over-generalization, he identified a genuine problem, one that would continue to perplex Marxists over subsequent decades. As late as 1981, the philosopher Agnes Heller, who had studied under Lukacs in Budapest, could write, “The question of whether we can say anything at all about a Marxian ethics today has to be taken in all its grave seriousness.”

Convinced of Marxism’s incapacity to develop a positive moral philosophy, Herberg turned to theology. Details are unavailable, but according to his own recollection, Herberg “vaguely and almost fearfully” moved toward belief in God in the early 1940s. At some point, probably in 1943, Herberg paid a visit to Reinhold Niebuhr 

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39 Thus, Hook, in 1940, commented, “The lack of a positive moral philosophy among all the Marxist movements of the world and the substantiation of organizational piety for a genuinely scientific study of the problems of social change, has revenged itself upon them.” (141)
41 Asmus, *Will Herberg*, p. 69-70.”
at the Union Theological Seminary to discuss the possibility of conversion to Christianity. Niebuhr had spent much of the previous decade grappling with questions of means and ends, good and evil, that bedeviled Herberg and many of his contemporaries. That the transformation of capitalism into socialism required force Niebuhr did not doubt. Socialism presupposed a well-organized working class prepared to exercise power through strikes, boycotts, and other forms of struggle. Yet Niebuhr was also acutely aware of the dangers of power. Unlike liberals and Marxists, who typically believed in the “goodness of man” or rejected any notion of human nature, Niebuhr attributed the ultimate source of evil to man’s inherent sinfulness. Man’s egotism, his drive to control others, had to be recognized in order to comprehend social injustice. All the same, Niebuhr was not a pessimist. A believer in original sin, the cornerstone of his neo-Orthodox Christianity, Niebuhr also had faith in the human capacity to make moral choices and act positively in society. This combination of realism and idealism animated Niebuhr’s political thought. He denied the possibility of human perfection and, by extension, social perfection, but also projected social equality as his ultimate goal. Socialism had to be pursued, even if the perfect society could never be achieved.42 “What impressed me most profoundly was the paradoxical combination of realism and radicalism that Niebuhr’s ‘prophetic faith’ made possible,” Herberg recounted in 1956. “Here, in short, was a ‘social idealism’ without illusions, in comparison with which even

the most ‘advanced’ Marxism appeared confused, inconsistent, and hopelessly illusion-ridden.”

Herberg entered Niebuhr’s office prepared to convert to Christianity but left dissuaded. An admirer of Judaism, Niebuhr elevated it to the status of equal partner in an ongoing Judeo-Christian tradition. He was no supersessionist. As Niebuhr stated in his introduction to Waldo Frank’s *The Jew in Our Day* (1944), Judaism “lies at the foundation of the world-affirming side of Christianity and of ethical seriousness in our Western culture....I have, as a Christian theologian, sought to strengthen the Hebraic-prophetic content of the Christian tradition...” Niebuhr convinced Herberg, who had received a minimal Jewish education as a child, to study his own religious inheritance at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the esteemed Conservative rabbinical college located a few blocks from Niebuhr’s building. At JTS, Herberg went on to establish his “religious existence in authentic Jewish terms.”

Herberg played an extraordinary role at the Conservative seminary, where he informally mentored students much younger in age. In his mid-forties at the time, Herberg hosted salons known for their intensity of discussion. “The sheer power of Herberg’s intellect and dialectic skill overwhelmed us...,” a participant remembered. “We emerged from these encounters exhilarated but exhausted.”

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future chancellor, credited Herberg with exerting an “enormous influence on a group of us.” Cohen had one particularly fateful conversation with Herberg shortly after his arrival on the scene. At the time, Cohen was experiencing “the typical religious rabbinical crisis” and was “really suffering very grave doubts” about his faith. Fascinated by this encounter with “an unbelieving rabbi,” Herberg introduced Cohen to Niebuhr’s works, which, in turn, led him to Paul Tillich and other Christian theologians. Several decades later, Cohen recounted, “More important than any individual was this: that the Niebuhrarian reinterpretation of Christianity exposed a new perception of Judaism, and Tillich’s redefinition of faith made me examine afresh certain potential elements in Judaism, not of course from a Christological aspect. But as he examined Christianity, I began to explore Judaism.” Herberg thrived at JTS. For the first time since the self-liquidation of the ILLA, in 1940, Herberg’s life “acquired a center and meaning.”

Herberg embarked on the study of Judaism, but continued to draw inspiration from Christian theology. Not only did he perceive a “fundamental spiritual kinship” between the two monotheistic faiths, Herberg was convinced that Christianity, properly understood, could enhance Judaism. Many “crucial Jewish insights,” he believed, “are illuminated rather than obscured when viewed in the light of the development they have undergone in Christian doctrine.” The personalist current within Christianity especially fascinated Herberg. Christian personalism, as he defined it, held that “[p]ersons alone are ends-in-themselves; all else—social institutions, society, the

state—have being and significance derivatively, only as means.” In a 1945 article, published in *politics*, the radical monthly edited by Dwight Macdonald, Herberg argued that Christianity’s supreme regard for personhood offered the only viable foundation for a rehabilitated, democratic socialism. Entitled “Personalism against Totalitarianism,” Herberg’s essay inaugurated a series dedicated to the reconsideration of Marxism. “The object of the series,” Macdonald wrote in his introduction, “is to criticize the dominant ideology on the left today—which is roughly Marxian—in the light of recent experience, and to suggest and speculate on new approaches to the central problem: how to advance towards a society which shall be humanly satisfying.” Macdonald, another former member of the Workers Party, had, in recent years, moved towards anarchism. His much-discussed essay, “The Root Is Man,” proposed a society based on “direct personal relationships” and “small economic units.” “If automobiles cannot be made efficiently by small factories, then let’s make them inefficiently,” Macdonald recommended rather fancifully. “If scientific research would be hampered in a small-unit society, then let us by all means hamper it.” Herberg shared Macdonald’s concern for the individual but harbored no desire to revert to an era of artisanal workshops. He remained enough of a Marxist to perceive in industrial production the material foundation of a future socialist order characterized by abundance. A book by Lewis Corey, a founder of the Communist Party turned proponent of “pluralistic socialism,” furnished something of a blueprint. His 1942 opus, *The Unfinished Task: Economic*

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Reconstruction for Society, proposed a mixed economy of public, quasi-public, cooperative, and private enterprises, operating under democratic control.\(^49\) Herberg pointed to The Unfinished Task as a realistic model, but he himself devoted little attention to issues of economic organization. What commanded Herberg’s attention was the danger of totalitarianism. Personalism gave him a “radically opposed principle” to the totalitarian state’s drive for complete control over society and its members. At the same time, personalism’s regard for the individual offered a powerful critique of capitalist exploitation. Herberg marshalled quotations from Niebuhr, Jacques Maritain, and Nikolai Berdayev (representing Protestantism, Catholicism, and Russian Orthodoxy respectively) to demonstrate the Christian personalist opposition to reification. Like Marx, these theologians sought “to liberate man and permit him to develop to the full powers and capacities of his personality.” However, personalist theology, rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, was endowed with “spiritual resources” superior to Marxism, which tended to valorize power. Respect for personhood, rooted in the Hebrew Bible, had reached “full expression in Christian spirituality.” Marxism, for all its achievements, was dangerous without a Judeo-Christian foundation.\(^50\) \(^51\) \(^52\)

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\(^49\) Cite book. In 1919, Corey still went by his given name Louis Fraina. Viewers of the 1981 film, Reds, may remember Fraina’s character played by Paul Sorvino.


\(^52\) Herberg, “Personalism against Totalitarianism,” p. 369.
Herberg neglected crucial questions. What role should religion play in a society organized on theological principles? Should matters of faith and spirituality be restricted to the private sphere or infuse public life? Critics had, in fact, already raised such questions. In a dissection of Maritain’s political philosophy, Hook accused the Catholic thinker of playing a double game, in which he purported to favor separation of church and state, but ultimately insisted on the church’s “commanding influence on the life and morals of the community.” In Maritain’s ideal state, according to Hook, heretical Catholics and non-Catholics would be merely tolerated as a lesser evil “suffered by the true believers until they become strong enough to save the false believers from themselves...” Herberg was most certainly aware of Hook’s critique, but he ignored it for the purpose of asserting a simple message: only belief in God could ensure socialism’s democratic potential.53

Almost a year after “Personalism against Totalitarianism” appeared in print, Herberg composed a more thoughtful essay entitled “From Marxism to Judaism: Jewish Belief as a Dynamic of Social Action.” First delivered as a lecture at JTS in the fall of 1946, it came out shortly thereafter in Commentary, the monthly magazine published by the American Jewish Committee. Herberg began with a summary of his intellectual journey. He no longer identified himself as a Marxist but reiterated his appreciation of Marxian thought.

In short, I came to the conclusion that by abandoning the Marxist metaphysic in favor of a positive religious affirmation, I was becoming a better socialist, and, if I may venture the paradox, even a better Marxist, taking Marxism in terms of its

53 On Herberg’s close, sometimes polemical, engagement with Hook’s writings, see Diggins, Up from Communism, p. .
best insight and ultimate ideals. For the great contributions of Marxism were, it seemed to me, in the fields of economic understanding, social thought, and political action. And these could best be conserved, I now saw, within the framework, not of a shallow materialism, but of a profound religion that would give full recognition to the transcendent aspects of man’s nature and destiny.

The remainder of “From Marxism to Judaism” articulated Herberg’s “positive religious affirmation.” The essay was peculiar in certain respects. Herberg spoke of Judaism without citing Jewish law or a single rabbinical text. He based his interpretation on the Hebrew Bible yet quoted few passages from it. Instead, Herberg advanced several claims about the relationship between God, man, and society derived from Niebuhr and reflective of his own concerns about totalitarianism.

Herberg upheld equality as the supreme value of Judaism, as grounded in the Biblical passage stating that God created humans in his own image. Humans, whatever their differences in attributes, are equal in “spiritual essence, in the infinite worth of their individual souls, in their relation to God.” Thus, to exercise power over others is “intrinsically evil” because this violates “their God-given personal autonomy” and “eminent dignity.” This theological principle, if it were to have meaning in real life, must find concrete expression in an egalitarian social order. Yet the ambivalence of human nature, man’s inclination toward good and evil, poses a problem. Man’s egotism constantly undermines efforts toward social equality. For this reason, society requires a countervailing power, in the form of democratically elected government, to protect individuals from others who may cause harm. But this raises another problem. All states, even when democratically constituted, tend to amass and abuse power. Individuals need protection not only by the state, but from the state. Such protection is
ultimately derived from God or, in Herberg’s words, an “unconditional obedience to a universal and transcendent God.” By “obedience,” Herberg did not mean unthinking submission to a supernatural authority, for humans are endowed by God with the capacity to think for themselves, govern themselves, and make moral choices. Herberg meant that God stands as an authority higher than any government, political party, or leader. Proper worship of God thus “precludes the possibility of total and absolute subjection to any earthly power.” Jews must always be prepared to reject any earthly authority lest they betray God. Loyalty to any government “must be partial, tentative, and provisional at best.” For that reason, Herberg considered Judaism “the sworn foe of the totalitarian state in its claim to absolute control over the individual and all his activities.”

Herberg’s theology was structured by interlocking tensions: between man’s inherent dignity and his inclination toward evil; between the Biblical “passion for social justice” and the impossibility of social perfection; between the necessity of government and suspicion of it. These inescapable tensions made possible “a mature and effective social radicalism” that avoided both “sentimental optimism as to the goodness of human nature” and a “hard-boiled, amoral cult of power at any price.”

Herberg concluded:

The profound insights of Scriptural religion reveal a logic of social action that escapes the pitfalls alike of power-made cynicism, secular utopianism, and other-worldly quietism. As against the cynicism that recognizes no rule but power, Judaism vindicates the validity and relevance of the moral law, however impossible it may be to live up to it fully in any given situation. As against other-

worldly quietism, it raises the witness of the Prophets and the duty to one’s neighbor. As against the secular utopianism, whether liberal of Marxist, which hopes to achieve perfection within history, it stresses the inescapable relativities of this world and places the grand consummation to come at the end of time rather than within it.

Herberg thus formulated a restrained socialism, a socialism of limits, at once radical in its ultimate aspirations yet cautious in its expectations at any given time.

There was a certain hubris in Herberg’s conviction that he expressed Judaism’s true essence, regardless of whether rabbis agreed. Not only did he ignore their views, but, toward the end of the essay, he took American rabbis (apparently he had Reform and Conservative ones in mind) to task for neglecting theology in favor of psychological and sociological approaches to Judaism. Herberg warned against the reduction of Judaism to either “a kind of inexpert psychotherapy or else as an auxiliary social reform agency,” accompanied by “routine observances.” He urged Jews to embark on a “great theological reconstruction” of Judaism along the lines undertaken by Niebuhr and his associates.

“For Marx to Judaism” met with praise and strong criticism. Rabbi Isidore Hoffman of Columbia University’s Hillel Foundation found “For Marx to Judaism” thought-provoking, but urged Herberg to reconsider his belief in the “inevitably tragic nature of man,” which seemed predicated on the Christian notion of original sin. A rabbi in Omaha was shocked by Herberg’s “insistence on dogma and a neo-orthodoxy as the crying needs within Judaism.” Others were discomfited by Herberg’s conception of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” that seemed to posit too close a kinship between the two
faiths. As the prominent Conservative rabbi, Robert Gordis, recollected, “Many Jewish readers of Herberg’s writings saw in his approach a Jewish version of Christian theology.” Just how authentic was Herberg’s “essential Judaism?”

Secularists also expressed dismay. A former comrade in the ILLA lamented Herberg’s “flight from reason” and warned against the divisiveness religion would bring to the socialist movement if Herberg were to have his way. In Labor Action, newspaper of the Workers Party, Irving Howe blasted “From Marxism to Judaism” as a “truly pitiful” performance that should “provide a sobering check for those intellectuals toying, in one way or another, with religious conceptions.” The art critic, Harold Rosenberg, accused Herberg of distorting Judaism to fit his psychological and emotional needs. “[W]hat you are doing,” chided Rosenberg in Commentary, “amounts to saying to the Jewish religion: See here, make me up a theology that will fit these specifications of freedom, justice, and brotherhood.”

Criticism notwithstanding, “From Marxism to Judaism” gained much attention from Jews reeling from the disasters of the decade. The terrifying realities of totalitarianism, genocide, and nuclear destruction had produced a “crisis of man” that Herberg addressed head on. He soon became a popular expositor of Judaism at

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universities and in Jewish communal venues around the country. Herberg offered a powerful justification for faith in God at a time when many Americans, Jews included, had their confidence in human progress shaken. Evidence of man’s capacity for evil seemed overwhelming. “The events of the past generation have brought mankind to the brink of the abyss,” Herberg wrote in Judaism and Modern Man (1951), his first, full-length interpretation of Judaism. “But the horrors we glimpse are not merely the horrors of hell without; they are also—and primarily—the horrors of the hell within, the chaos and evil in the heart of man.” How can one overcome despair and step back from the abyss? To function in the world, to commit to improving society, maybe even transforming it, one must take a “leap of faith.” One had to believe in a higher power through which humanity could move toward some goal of social justice without succumbing to the twin dangers of utopianism and messianism. There was but one true God and He, unlike the pretender in Moscow, had not failed.

Up from Alienation

By the time Herberg published “From Marxism to Judaism,” in early 1947, serious discussion of Jews was underway in magazines, left-wing political parties, and on college campuses. An important forum of discussion was the Workers Party, albeit for reasons that had nothing to do with its size. The WP never managed to recruit more

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than 500 members, most of whom happened to be Jews, but it made its presence felt.
The WP’s conception of the Soviet Union as a bureaucratic collectivist state—neither socialist nor capitalist—showed theoretical daring and gave the party a distinctive identity on the American left. The party also exerted some influence among auto workers in Detroit, in the shipyards of San Pedro, and several other precincts of the labor movement. Finally, the WP’s members and sympathizers included, for varying lengths of time, an impressive number of cultural critics, political essayists, editors, and scholars. Burnham, Selznick, MacDonald, Howe, the novelists Isaac Rosenfeld, James Farrell, and Harvey Swados, the sociologist C. Wright Mills [double check], the historian and theoretician C. L. R. James and his collaborator Raya Dunayevskaya could be counted among them. What the WP lacked in organizational strength it possessed in intellectual heft.

From the end of the Second World War to the establishment of the state of Israel, the WP devoted attention to “the Jewish question”: the bundle of issues having to do with anti-semitism, the plight of Jewish refugees, and the prospect of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Party members debated those issues with urgency and open-minds. Aligned with no government, beholden to no master theoretician (even Trotsky came in for criticism), the WP refused to rely on authoritative texts and pre-formulated positions. Marxism set the parameters, to be sure, but it did not determine the outcome.

61 Eric Chester, Socialists and the Ballot Box ( ), pp. 106-112.
62 It should be noted that James and Dunayevskaya rejected Shachtman’s bureaucratic collectivist theory and developed his own analysis of Soviet Russia as “state capitalist” in character.
The November 1946 issue of *The New International* signaled a turning point.\(^{63}\) In the preface to a resolution passed by the WP’s National Committee earlier in the year, the magazine’s editors stated frankly that much of what Marxists had previously written about Jews “no longer applies.”\(^{64}\) Marxists had historically regarded prejudice, discrimination, and violence against Jews as medieval vestiges, exploited by ruling classes for their own benefit, rather than endemic problems demanding special attention. The forward march of the proletariat was expected to overcome antisemitism and pave the way for full assimilation of Jews into societies in which they lived. The annihilation of European Jewry, however, revealed how terribly mistaken Marxists had been. “The barbarous depths to which decaying capitalism can drag civilization finds its extreme example to date in the physical destruction of some six million Jews at the hands of Nazis, i.e., all but the total extermination of European Jewry,” the WP’s National Committee stated. Capitalism, now in an advanced stage of decay, would continue to produce the “rotten soil” from which deadly anti-semitism would grow, even after the defeat of Nazism.\(^{65}\) Hatred of the Jews was not a mere holdover or an epiphenomenon, but an essential feature of a global economic system on the verge of collapse. The WP thus pledged to act “in defense of the Jewish people, of their full economic, political and social equality and against all forms of anti-

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\(^{63}\) According to the Business Manager, *The New International* “prints and circulates 3,000 copies to subscribers and readers.” He added, “This compares unfavorably to its pre-war circulation.”

\(^{64}\) Editors, “Marxism and the Jewish Question,” *The New International* (Nov. 1946), p. 264. The Editorial Board at the time consisted of Ernest Erber, Albert Gates (Glotzer), Albert Goldman, J. R. Johnson (C. L. R. James), and Max Shachtman. No editor-in-chief is identified.

Semitism” as an “integral part of the struggle in defense of democracy and civilization.”\textsuperscript{66}

Based on the above analysis, the WP concluded that Marxism’s traditional assimilationism and anti-Zionism had been rendered “invalid.” The WP formulated what might be labeled a post-anti-Zionist position on the two major international issues that directly applied to Jews: immigration and the future of Palestine. While the WP continued to criticize Zionism, it called for free immigration to Palestine, recognition of Jewish national rights there, and, ultimately, the establishment of a Jewish state when no alternative seemed viable.

The first issue of concern was the resettlement of Jewish refugees. Virtually alone among socialist organizations—indeed, any American political party, large or small—the WP demanded the right of unrestricted immigration to whichever country refugees wished to go. Furthermore, the WP endorsed “Jewish national aspirations” in Palestine as “the legitimate, democratic yearnings of a people long subjected to oppression and discrimination.” Marxists ought to recognize “the tremendous desire that exists among Europe’s Jews to settle in Palestine and take part in the building up of a Jewish community life which will afford them an economic existence and also shield them from the barbarous anti-Semitism to which they have been subjected.”\textsuperscript{67} In 1946, the WP still rejected Jewish statehood, but changed its position after the United Nations...
recommended, in November 1947, to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Over the following six months leading up to Israel’s declaration of independence, party members registered approval for partition as the only alternative to “unending violence and bloodshed.” As Albert Goldman, Trotsky’s former attorney, stated in Labor Action, “The basic fact in the Palestinian situation is that approximately seven hundred thousand Jews constituting a nation are threatened with expulsion from their homeland and even with possible extermination.” In the end, the WP supported Jewish independence and condemned the Arab invasion of Israel, even as it expressed hope that Jewish statehood would prove transitional. A regional confederation of socialist states, fully inclusive of Arabs and Jews, was viewed as the ideal arrangement.

The Socialist Workers Party, from which the WP arose in 1940, also addressed the Jewish Question, but reached a different conclusion. Relying on the arguments of European Trotskyists, the SWP’s national leadership staunchly opposed Jewish immigration to Palestine and any form of Jewish homeland. According to the SWP’s weekly organ, The Militant, the UN’s partition plan had run “roughshod over the clearly expressed desire of the Arab majority in Palestine and over the unremitting protests and even threats of war by the entire Arab Middle East.” Jews “cannot carve out a state at the expense of the national rights of the Arab peoples.” The Militant’s position did not, however, reflect the opinions of all SWP members. Letters to the editor revealed

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considerable support for the goal of Jewish independence. One reader wanted to see the “gates of Palestine...opened to unlimited Jewish immigration” within the framework of an Arab-Jewish bi-national state, a perspective nearly identical to that of Hashomer Hatzair, a socialist-Zionist youth organization. An SWP member in Los Angeles rejected anti-imperialism as the sole measure by which to evaluate the question of Jewish statehood, proposing instead a humanitarian consideration. “The crucial and only important issue at stake in Palestine today is how many lives can be saved from the jaws of death for the Displaced Persons,” the comrade in L. A. argued. Out of respect for “the memory of the ‘old man’ [Trotsky] himself,” he begged anti-Zionists not to “exploit the miseries of a persecuted people for political advantage.” Still other party members mounted an anti-imperialist case for Jewish statehood. In the SWP’s internal discussion bulletin, several party members contended it was the SWP’s “revolutionary duty to critically support” the struggle for Jewish “national freedom” against Great Britain. If “directed along correct lines,” they wrote, Zionism could be “a significant part of the struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society.” It is impossible to know whether the opponents of Zionism or its sympathizers had greater support within the SWP because a referendum was never held. The party leadership, as represented by the The Militant’s editors, plainly opposed immigration to Palestine and Jewish national self-determination, but a minority, perhaps even a majority, favored the establishment of some sort of Jewish political entity in Palestine.

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71 Leo Lyons, “A Revolutionary Program for Jews,” ibid., pp. The letter was written in March, that is, seven months before it appeared in the Internal Bulletin.
Beyond the ranks of Trotskyist parties, a different sort of conversation about Jews took place, one that was broader in scope, personal in tone, and often inconclusive. It covered Jewish literature, history, and religious thought. The leading individuals involved, most of whom (although not all) were Marxists or former Marxists, had grown cognizant of their Jewish feelings in recent years but without a satisfactory sense of identity in their own minds. Against the urgings of Jewish communal spokesmen, these self-described “rootless,” “marginal,” and “alienated” intellectuals insisted on their independence from Jewish organizations, not out of callousness or indifference, but because they considered themselves cosmopolitans whose Jewishness formed only one part of their multi-faceted identities. If such intellectuals wished to stay true to themselves, they could not proclaim to be who they were not. Then again, who exactly were they? Did Jewishness really play minor roles in their lives? Lacking stable Jewish identities, the intellectuals found themselves in a quandary, pulled between cosmopolitan aspirations and unformed, but still powerful, Jewish feelings.

Irving Howe proved to be among the most eloquent and influential writers on Jewish themes. In 1946, at the age of twenty-six, Howe was a staff member of Labor Action and a professed revolutionary Marxist. His position on the Jewish refugee crisis and the question of Palestine reflected that the Workers Party as a whole. With manifest emotion Howe declared, “No one who still functions on the level of humanity, no one who still responds as human beings rather than a robot can fail to urge, with the WP, that the doors of the United States, Palestine and whichever other country they wish to go to, be opened to the Jews of Europe.” He likened the quest of “hunted Jews”
to reach Palestine to the Biblical Exodus and the Underground Railroad of antebellum America. Howe went so far as to praise members of the Irgun, the radical Zionist militia, for their “revolutionary defiance” of British colonial rule, even as he deplored their terroristic methods and extreme nationalism. American anti-semitism provoked a similarly militant response from Howe. Contrary to Jewish leaders who counseled silence as the prudent response to American Nazis, Howe favored demonstrations, protests, and other forms of “mass action.” Jews and all democratically minded individuals needed to fight against fascism lest it grow undetected.  

While Howe felt a strong sense of solidarity with Europe’s surviving Jews and resolutely opposed anti-semitism on the home-front, his personal identity as a Jew troubled him. In an essay entitled “The Lost Young Intellectual: A Marginal Man, Twice Alienated,” published in the October 1946 issue of *Commentary*, Howe sketched “a new social type”: the American-born, Jewish intellectual (depicted as male) who dwells in a gray zone between his parents’ immigrant household and the surrounding society. Prompted by Isaac Rosenfeld’s coming of age novel, *Passage from Home*, Howe drew a semi-autobiographical portrait of a Jewish intellectual who “teeters between an origin he can no longer accept and a desired status he cannot attain.” This type feels not so much hostility toward Judaism as an “ambiguous compound of rejection and nostalgia.” He notices within himself inherited Jewish cultural traits, but his awareness only

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reminds him of how distant from his origins he has travelled. The intellectual’s “restlessness” and “agonizing rootlessness” ironically reflect the historical experience of the very people from which he is now estranged:

He feels in his flesh the brand of his people; echoes of the endless trek of a people that could never find a home ring in his ears; the tradition of a people always ‘living on its wits’ and on the precipice of disaster, he finds fulfilled in his own life; the highly literary quality of his religious tradition, with its semantic nuances that produce a thinned-out verbal refinement, he finds characteristic of his own literary activity; and the traditional mock-hero of Jewish life, the luftmensh, of whom no one knows how he lives, our intellectual finds recreated in his own being. This very awareness of an inheritance makes for him inexpressibly poignant the double sense of being tied to, and having broken from, the past. *He has inherited the agony of his people; its joy he knows only second-hand.*

This double marginality, acted out internally within the family and externally within a society not altogether welcoming of Jews, produces a host of psychological and emotional maladies: “excessive verbalism,” lack of spontaneity, “obsessive need to control,” loneliness, angst, a paralyzing sense of futility, and lack of literary and artistic productivity. Howe foresaw no short-term solution to the predicament. Psychotherapy might provide some alleviation, but the basic problem was unsolvable, at least under capitalism, which had failed to offer “integration, security, and acceptance” to the Jews. For the indefinite future, the lost young intellectual would have to remain “the rootless son of a rootless people.”

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Alienation and rootlessness were much-discussed themes during the 1940s and 1950s, often in connection with Jews.\textsuperscript{75} No more than a month after Howe’s essay appeared, the journalist and budding sociologist, Daniel Bell (a social democrat who had always rejected Leninist varieties of Marxism) published a similar rumination in \textit{Jewish Frontier}. Bell argued that Jews symbolized an overall anxiety about bureaucratization and depersonalization in modern capitalist societies that found expression in a psychological need among gentiles to differentiate themselves from Jews. The more gentiles became like Jews sociologically, the more they viewed Jews as “the other.” This phenomenon formed the latest chapter of an old story. In the Middle Ages, Jews were despised for disrupting the organic wholeness of Christian society; in the modern period, Jews represented atomization and the erosion of community. Bell, thus, reached the unhappy conclusion that the “Jew of alienation” had become “the image of the world’s destiny.” The Jew was “suspect for what he is and also feared for what he symbolizes.”

Unlike Howe, Bell derived some positive meaning from alienation, in as much as the condition endowed Jews with heightened powers of social perception. The Jewish intellectual “utilizes his alienation to see, as if with a double set of glasses, each blending their perspective into one, the nature of the tragedy of our time.” Equipped with a double consciousness, the Jewish intellectual could not help but reject “the basic values of American society as they stand.” Bell explained:

The increasing centralization of decision, the narrowing of the area of free moral choice, the extension into all domains, particularly the cultural, of the rationalized, stilted forms of mass organization and bureaucracy, the rising sense of nationalism as a product of the war, all of these heighten the awareness that the way of life resulting from these pressures—the rawness, vulgarity, mass sadism and senseless sybaritism, the money lust and barbaric extravagances—can only stifle creativity and free living.

Bell offered no immediate solution to Jews caught up in this general problem. Socialism, although desirable, seemed a distant prospect and the project of building a Jewish national home in Palestine, while necessary, lacked “emotional appeal” to someone raised in the “peculiar radical ghetto soil” of the Lower East Side, once teeming with universalistic ideas.76 “The plight—and glory—of the alienated Jewish intellectual is that his role is to point to the need of brotherhood, but as he has been bred, he cannot today accept any embodiment of community as final.” He belongs to “the whole world” even while he cannot feel at home in it. It is the fate of the alienated Jew to live “in permanent tension and as a permanent critic.”77

The notion that social marginality produces deep insight, indeed, brilliance, did not originate with Bell, of course. Thorstein Veblen’s “The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe” aired this idea as far back as 1919. If not new, the theme of Jewish genius gained purchase after the war.78 The most famous articulation came from the journalist and historian Isaac Deutscher, who, in February 1958, delivered a lecture

78 Thorstein Veblen, “The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1919): 33-42. The essay was reprinted in Contemporary Jewish Record, the forerunner of Commentary, in 1944(?).
entitled “The Non-Jewish Jew in Modern European Thought” during London’s Jewish
Book Week. It was first published in *Universities and Left Review*, republished in
*Partisan Review* and *The American Socialist*, and again in a collection of Deutscher’s
essays that remains in print to this day.79 A Polish-born Jew who had traded rabbinical
study for revolutionary Marxism, Deutscher posited a lineage of iconoclastic thinkers
from Spinoza to Marx to Trotsky. He considered such Jews “a priori exceptional”
because they “dwelt on the borderlines of various civilizations, religions, and national
cultures.” Deutscher wrote:

> They were born and brought up on the borderlines of various epochs. Their
> mind matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilized
> each other. They lived on the margins or in the nooks and crannies of their
> respective nations. Each of them was in society and yet not in it, of it and yet
> not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies,
> above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out
> mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.”80

These “rootless” Jews shared similar ways of thinking. They possessed an ingrained
comparative perspective, rejected moral absolutes, and eschewed Jewish group
belonging in favor of “the ultimate solidarity of man.” This latter characteristic was of
utmost importance to Deutscher. The main purpose of his essay was to uphold the non-
Jewish Jew’s universalism at an historical moment when this outlook seemed tragically
misguided to many Jews. “Can we still share faith in the future of civilization?” he
asked. Deutscher gave two answers, the second overriding the first. From “an

Deutscher, “The Wandering Jew as Thinker and Revolutionary,” *Partisan Review* 4 (Fall 1958), pp. 555-
567. Although the above titles differ, the texts are identical.
80 Isaac Deutscher, “The Non-Jewish Jew,” p. 27.
exclusively Jewish standpoint,” he found it “hard perhaps impossible” to hold aloft the
banner of “universal human emancipation.” The Nazi genocide shook Deutscher, so
much so that he reconciled himself to Jewish nationalism. “I have, of course, long since
abandoned my anti-Zionism, which was based on a confidence in the European labor
movement, or, more broadly, in European society and civilization, which that society
and civilization have not justified,” he reported after a trip to Israel in 1954. “If instead
of arguing against Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s I had urged European Jews to go to
Palestine, I might have helped to save some of the lives that were later extinguished in
Hitler’s gas chambers.”81 Still, if Deutscher no longer opposed Zionism, he could not
bring himself to embrace it. It struck him as tragic that Jews had established their own
country at a point in time when nation-states were seemingly becoming obsolete. In
the end, Deutscher celebrated those who rejected nationalism in favor of “the solidarity
of man.” Deutscher hoped that “the Jews will ultimately become aware—or regain the
awareness—of the inadequacy of the nation-state and that they will find their way back
to the moral and political heritage that the genius of the Jews who have gone beyond
Jewry has left us—the message of universal human emancipation."

The logic of Deutscher’s argument was circular. Deutscher had asked whether
the non-Jewish Jew’s universalism was “justified” after Nazism and answered positively.
He based his response not on historical evidence, but on the political goal he set.
Socialism required human solidarity, so belief in it was justified, for without that belief

81 Isaac Deutscher, “Israel’s Spiritual Climate” in Isaac Deutscher, The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays,
socialism could not be realized. The desired future, rather than the verifiable past, justified the non-Jewish Jew.

Still, Deutscher was no utopian. As a Marxist, he could not merely project his own wishes onto the future without grounding them in socio-economic processes. Upon closer inspection, one can see that Deutscher did, in fact, identify a material basis for belief in human emancipation, but to discern this, one must turn from his famous essay on Jewish identity to his novel interpretation of the Russian Revolution. In his 1949 biography of Josef Stalin, Deutscher revised Trotsky’s degenerated workers’ state theory in a way that bore on his thinking about Jews. Trotsky held that Soviet Russia remained a workers’ state, despite its totalitarian political system, because private capital had been expropriated in the name of the working class. But he considered Stalin’s regime temporary. According to Trotsky, the Russian proletariat would, during the course of the war, overthrow the state bureaucracy and fulfill the Bolshevik legacy. If it failed to do so, Trotsky conceded shortly before his murder at the hands of a Soviet agent, then he would need to reevaluate his position along the lines of the one advanced by Max Shachtman, who argued that the Soviet Union formed a new kind of exploitive class society.\textsuperscript{82} Deutscher diverged from Trotsky in crucial respects. Whereas Trotsky accused Stalin of betraying the revolution, Deutscher regarded the Soviet dictator as a complex, paradoxical leader, cruel in his methods yet great in his accomplishments.\textsuperscript{83} Stalin had ruthlessly suppressed the “revolution from below” but,

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according to Deutscher, he had also executed a second revolution, one “from above,” that succeeded in raising the masses up from “barbarism.” Trotsky, blinded by his “unlimited...bitterness” towards Stalin, failed to see this. Under Stalin’s iron rule, the Soviet Union had developed into a major industrial power that registered impressive achievements in the areas of education and culture. Deutscher concluded:

The whole nation has been sent to school. Its mind has been so awakened that it can hardly be put back to sleep again. Its avidity for knowledge, for the sciences and the arts, has been stimulated by Stalin’s government to the point where it has become insatiable and embarrassing...Perhaps in no country have the young been imbued with so great a respect and love for the classical literature and art of other nations as in Russia.

Deutscher believed that the “many positive, valuable elements” of Stalin’s revolution from above would in the long run “turn against its worse features.” Soviet Russia’s deformities would eventually be corrected and an improved version of socialism would emerge. The October Revolution lived on, not despite Stalin, but through him. His dead millions paved the way for a socialist society. Having reached that conclusion, Deutscher could assert that the Holocaust, horrific though it was, required no change of political philosophy. The hard road to equality and brotherhood continued to run, as it always had, through proletarian dictatorship, no matter the human toll. Deutscher thus pinned his non-Jewish Jew onto a sophisticated capitulation to Joseph Stalin, the brutal guardian of universal human emancipation.

Howe saw nothing progressive or genuinely socialist in Stalinism. Deutscher’s “Industrialization Mystique” struck him as “pretty sickening,” as he wrote to Harold Rosenberg in 1957.\textsuperscript{85} By then, Howe had long ceased to subscribe to Marxism. As far back as 1946, he had begun to raise uncomfortable questions about the October Revolution. Did its success really depend on the suppression of rival political parties? Was not Trotsky himself somewhat culpable for the destruction of early Soviet democracy?\textsuperscript{86} As the decade drew to a close, it became clear to Howe that none of the Workers Party’s predictions had come to pass. The Russian working class had not risen up to overthrow Stalin; on the contrary, Soviet power had expanded into eastern Europe with the establishment of the new “people’s democracies” in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere. In the United States, capitalism had entered a period of unprecedented growth, contrary to expectations of an impending breakdown. America’s organized labor movement was larger and stronger than ever, but it did not constitute a revolutionary force. Nowhere in the world had an anti-Stalinist workers’ movement assumed power. And what about Robert Michels’ iron law of oligarchy? What if bureaucracy really did present an inescapable threat to socialism?\textsuperscript{87} Convinced of Marxism’s inability to explain the post-war world, Howe quit organized politics for the first time since his youth. In 1952, at the age of 32, he

\textsuperscript{85} Irving Howe to Harold Rosenberg, Nov. 4, 1957. (Box 1, Folder 18, Harold Rosenberg Papers, Getty Museum).


\textsuperscript{87} Howe, A Margin of Hope, p. 51. [is this my first citation of book]
resigned from the Independent Socialist League, successor to the WP, and found himself politically homeless.

Even so, Howe refused to surrender to the status quo. He remained a staunch socialist albeit without quite knowing what the term meant anymore. Like other ex-Marxists before him, Howe decided to start a magazine dedicated to the renewal of socialist thought. In 1954, in the middle of the first Republican presidential administration since Herbert Hoover, at the height of the Cold War, with McCarthyism entrenched in American society, Howe and several dozen likeminded individuals, founded *Dissent*. At that inopportune moment, the new quarterly promised to challenge “the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the United States.” Sounding major themes of the 1940s, *Dissent* championed humanistic, democratic, and ethical socialist values. “We share a belief in the dignity of the individual,” stated the debut editorial, “we share a refusal to countenance one man’s gain at the expense of his brother, and we share an intellectual conviction that man can substantially control his condition if he understands it and wills to.” In opposition to the “curdled realism” of the day, Howe and his colleague Lewis Coser asserted a “utopian image” of socialism based on the philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s definition. Quoting Cassirer, they wrote:

> A Utopia is not a portrait of the real world, or the actual political or social order. It exists at no moment of time and at no point in space; it is a “nowhere.” But just such a conception of a nowhere has stood the test and proved its strength in the development of the modern world. It follows from the nature and character

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88 Henry Judd [Stanley Plastrik] and Irving Howe to “Dear Comrades,” Oct. 12, 1952. (Max Shachtman, Box 15, Folder 8, Microfilm Reel 27, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

of ethical thought that it can never condescend to accept the “given.” The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making. The great political and social reformers are indeed constantly under the necessity of treating the impossible as though it were possible.

Cassirer rejected any notion of a perfectly harmonious society based on some pre-formulated blueprint. He permitted doubt and flux. Likewise, Howe and Coser abjured a fixed definition of socialism in favor of an open-ended perspective that encouraged radical critique of “the given world” unencumbered by a definite political program.

What is socialism? Howe and Coser could no longer answer that question confidently. Socialism required “a constant struggle for definition, almost an act of pain.” It had to be upheld as an ideal, an aspiration that might lead to a better reality. “Socialism,” they declared, “is the name of our desire.” It was a pronouncement as liberating as it was uncertain.90

Howe’s evolution from Marxism toward a loosely defined, if still radical, ethical socialism developed alongside his self-described “confrontation” with Jewish identity. As already discussed, Howe had begun to grapple with his “troubled sense of Jewishness” in “The Lost Young Intellectual.” Still, a number of years passed before his internal struggle found anything resembling a resolution. Howe’s Jewish evolution was informed most directly by Harold Rosenberg, who, after the war, published a number of nuanced considerations of Jewish topics in Commentary. His 1950 essay, “Jewish Identity in a Free Society,” first delivered as a lecture to a group of Jewish graduate students.

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students at Columbia, represented the culmination of Rosenberg’s thinking. The essay contained two divergent thrusts. On the one hand, Rosenberg argued against those who chastised intellectuals for their refusal to place themselves at the service of the Jewish community. Such “ideologists of positive Judaism” treated intellectuals as “defeatist and destructive people who need to be called to order.” On the other hand, Rosenberg affirmed the vitality of Jewish identity in response to those who opted for assimilation. As an alternative to the alienated or rootless Jew, Rosenberg proposed a different type, “the semi-outsider,” who chooses to identify with the Jewish people on his own terms, to whatever extent he sees fit.

Rosenberg defined modern Jewish identity as a consciousness shaped by two contradictions: universalistic ideals versus particularistic feelings and historical forces versus freely decided choices. In the modern era, posited Rosenberg, individuals “possess a kind of freedom never known before,” that of self-definition. “In this ability to choose who we shall be…we replace nature and tradition and, like the First Maker, create a man in the image we desire.” One did not have to be a Jew simply because of an accident of birth:

Being born a Jew does not save us from—or, if you prefer, deprive us of—the modern condition of freedom to make ourselves according to an image we choose. Jewish birth may confer an identity upon us that is quite empty of content, a mere external title applied by others. Perhaps American Jews, to the discomfiture of assimilationists, are born with less group anonymity than most other Americans. Still it must be granted that they tend to be born with at least as much anonymity as Jewishness. And this anonymity goes along with them as a constant possibility of ceasing to be Jewish to a greater or lesser degree.

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Rosenberg’s observation that Jewish identity “may” lack content and function merely as a “title” imposed by others echoed Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, a book that provoked much debate among American Jewish intellectuals when it appeared in English translations between 1947 and 1948. Rosenberg, however, added an important dimension that distinguished his perspective from Sartre’s. Sartre believed that Jews existed because of hostility toward them. “It is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew,” he contended. The Jew is merely “one whom other men consider a Jew.” In response, Rosenberg insisted on the independent reality of Jewish identity, grounded historically in everyday rituals and beliefs that have, since antiquity, connected generations. “The Jews have shown,” Rosenberg wrote in his critique of Sartre, “that without being a race, a nation, or a religion, it is possible for people to remain together in a net of memory and expectation.” Sartre claimed Jews lacked an inner history; Rosenberg maintained otherwise. Rosenberg did not deny that prejudice, discrimination, and persecution constrained the ability of Jews to define themselves in relation to others. Jews never enjoyed full freedom, not even in the United States, but made do with “partial freedom” in societies of “partial enlightenment.” What Rosenberg objected to was Sartre’s conception of the Jews as a people constituted entirely by its enemies.

Rosenberg argued on two fronts. He defended those who refused “to make being a Jew the central fact of their lives,” even as he challenged those who would deny

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Jews a future. His notion of the semi-outsider differed from the type Deutscher later termed the non-Jewish Jew. Deutscher presumed that “Jewish” and “universal” constituted irreconcilable categories. That an individual might somehow combine the two identities or hold them in tension with one another (or that claims of universality might disguise ethnocentric biases) were possibilities Deutscher failed to consider. His non-Jewish Jew was someone who had transcended the Jewish people in favor of an uncompromising commitment to universalism. Rosenberg’s semi-outsider was a more complex figure who neither attempts to abandon Jewishness nor conjure it into being so as to satisfy external expectations. The semi-outsider recognizes Jewishness as an aspect—perhaps significant, perhaps minor—of a multi-faceted identity. He is “only a Jew in whatever respect and to whatever depth he finds that he is a Jew.” Those words were not intended to justify complacency. A shift from rootlessness to a partial acceptance of Jewishness required difficult self-examination. One had to be willing to investigate submerged emotions that might tug at fundamental principles. A thinking person had to struggle with “confusions and negations” and assume the “risk” of discovering the “hidden content” of Jewish identity. As Rosenberg wrote in 1947, “the revival of Jewish culture in terms of our own lives requires, besides scholarship and devotion, the keenest and most sensitive acts of criticism as well as self-analysis, and the utmost intellectual daring of which we are capable.”

The most difficult question was this: why had individuals who “despised nationalist values” suddenly turned “toward Palestine” after the war? The destruction

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of European Jewry was a major factor, but this catastrophe alone could not have caused the “surge of identification” with the Land of Israel, for the Holocaust could and did elicit any number of responses. Rosenberg offered a historical-psychological explanation. Emotions stirred by the persecution of European Jews and the birth of the Jewish state were the latest manifestations of an ancient historical dynamic. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews had lived “within a cycle of repetition that time after time brought Jews to re-enact, individually and collectively, certain characteristic events of their history, such as the return to the Land of the Fathers.” Not all Jews felt this “sense of collective repetition” in equal measure. For some it became a “passion for the past that completely dominated their lives,” for others it was little more than a faint echo. Nonetheless, this historical consciousness always remained embedded in the Jewish collective psyche until activated by some upheaval or cataclysm. Rosenberg did not convert to Zionism. He wished, rather, to understand “the presence of the Jewish past within him,” a past Rosenberg previously believed he had escaped, but came to realize the claim it made on him.

While Rosenberg made no specific recommendation for Jewish activity, he believed the semi-outsider could play an important role in Jewish life. An exponent of modern art with an abiding respect for Marxism, Rosenberg grasped the potential of an avant-garde. “The Jew whom the Jewish past has ceased to stir, whom every collective anguish or battle for salvation passes by, may tomorrow find himself in the very center of the movement toward the future,” Rosenberg concluded. The unpredictability of Jewish consciousness, its capacity to arise unexpectedly among the disaffected, had a
way of yielding surprising results. Ideas, programs, and movements of one kind or another might arouse communal disapproval but might also prove invigorating. Had not Theodor Herzl exemplified this truth five decades ago?

Rosenberg’s exploration of modern Jewish consciousness (defined as an identity shaped by history yet chosen voluntarily amid crisis) bore a strong resemblance to his understanding of working-class consciousness. Rosenberg was particularly interested in Marx’s conception of the proletariat and its role in history. In “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” published in *The Kenyon Review*, in 1949, reprinted shortly thereafter in *Les Temps modernes*, and anthologized in Howe’s *Essential Works of Socialism* (1970), Rosenberg observed that Marx had considered the proletariat the first thoroughly modern human community.94 Workers had existed in previous epochs, of course, but industrial capitalism had brought into existence the proletariat as a transnational social class bearing a revolutionary consciousness. Characterized by relentless technological innovation and expansion of trade, capitalism overhauled social relationships and dissolved traditional values, thus enabling a new consciousness to take shape based on class solidarity. Rosenberg quoted a vivid passage from *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

94 Harold Rosenberg to Philip Blair Rice, June 13, 1950. (Box 1, Folder 6, Rosenberg Papers, Getty.).
Within capitalism’s social cauldron, the proletariat attained freedom from the past resulting in their self-definition as historical actors. “[C]ompelled to face with sober senses” the reality of their exploitation, workers would sooner or later seek to emancipate themselves from capitalism, according to Marx. By the time Rosenberg published “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” he no longer subscribed to Marxism’s teleology but still believed in the possibility of the proletariat’s return to history as a revolutionary force at some future point. Rosenberg’s conditional faith in the proletariat ran parallel to and was perhaps sustained by his newfound, if partial, identification with the Jewish people. Most Marxists had, since the nineteenth century, relegated the Jews—that supposedly moribund holdover—to the dustbin of history, but the Jews persisted and underwent a national rebirth in Palestine. By contrast, the proletariat—that quintessentially modern human creation—had yet to fulfill its designated mission and was nowhere close to doing so. The irony of it all could not have escaped Rosenberg. Jewish history had something to teach, after all. It taught, by example, that the working class should not be written off, that it could rise again.

Without mentioning Marx by name Rosenberg applied to the Jews his insight into capitalism’s creative-destructive powers. “Jewish Identity in a Free Society” thus closes:

[The past is a varying and oscillating presence, sometimes occupying a man entirely and becoming his veritable self-consciousness, sometimes diminishing to a vague sentiment or receding from his awareness altogether. For the modern individual his history is not a solid continuous plane upon which he firmly stands but a moving mass full of holes and vacuums which may envelope and carry him forward or veer away and let him fall.]
Rosenberg’s vision of modern history was unsettling, but not bleak. It was scary in its emphasis on perpetual instability yet somewhat hopeful in its allowance for free thought and effective action. It contained dangers and possibilities, but not in equilibrium. Modernity had upended traditional forms of Jewish community and knowledge, opened possibilities for creative expression, sparked Jewish national revival, and unleashed a systematic drive to eliminate the Jews altogether. Modernity offered no security to the Jewish people, the proletariat, or any human community. What it granted was freedom, in varying measures, with all its attendant hazards and opportunities.

Rosenberg demonstrated a way to think about Jewish identity with critical affirmation. His approach to Jewishness was one of “question and risk,” as Howe later recalled. Howe appreciated the fact that Rosenberg “wrote from neither a religious nor a theological premise,” but as a “spokesman for ‘the partial Jew’,” who acknowledges “links with the Jewish past” yet also forms himself “through a multiplicity of identities.”95 Rosenberg’s influence on Howe was akin to Cassirer’s. The latter’s definition of utopia helped Howe to accept the idea of socialism as a subjective desire rather than a scientific inevitability. Rosenberg’s inquiry into the “possibilities” of Jewishness, freed from predetermined meanings, encouraged Howe to release his own “blocked emotions,” while he moved toward reconsideration of Marxism. Jewishness, like socialism, had to be examined and reexamined in an ongoing process that could be as fruitful as it was painful.

95 Howe, Margin of Hope, p. 256.
Howe found an outlet for his inchoate Jewish feelings through Yiddish literature. The post-war period witnessed an outpouring of attention to Yiddish-speaking Jewry, now decimated, and its culture in the broad sense. Books such as *The Vanished World* (1947), edited by Raphael Abramovitch, Nathan Ausubel’s *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (1948), and Mark Zabrowski and Elizabeth Herzog’s *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (1952) found large audiences. Howe’s discovery of Yiddish literature reflected the general phenomenon.

Howe’s first writing on Yiddish was a review of *The Old Country*, a collection of short stories by Sholem Aleichem, published in 1946. A commercial success, the book went through four printings within four months and appeared on several best-seller lists. Its translators, Julius and Frances Butwin, expressed a frankly sentimental purpose. They wished to illuminate “a corner of that vast and wonderful country of the heart we call The Old Country” for those whom Eastern Europe “represents a whole complex of emotions, of words and pictures, of smells and sounds, for which they have no common frame of reference.” Howe resisted such sentimentality by treating Sholem Aleichem with the same analytical seriousness he would any literary artist. In that regard, Howe differentiated himself, not only from sentimentalists, but also high-brow readers who typically ignored or underappreciated Yiddish. Notable exceptions included Marie Syrkin, a leading socialist Zionist intellectual, who had written exacting criticism of Yiddish poetry as far back as the 1920s, and Isaac Rosenfeld, who meditated brilliantly on the difficulties of translation in his review of *The Old Country* that appeared in *The
Howe possessed neither their mastery of the Yiddish language nor comparable knowledge of its literature. Rosenfeld had graduated from a Yiddish-language school in Chicago and published works of fiction in Yiddish magazines. Syrkin, European-born and fluent in five languages, was an experienced translator. Yet if Howe lacked their expertise he arguably surpassed their critical acumen. In his review of *The Old Country*, published in *Partisan Review*, Howe combined history, sociology, and literary analysis to explain the emergence of modern Yiddish fiction in nineteenth-century Russia, Sholem Aleichem’s intimate relationship with his readers, and his artistic accomplishments, as well as his shortcomings. The greatness of Sholem Aleichem, in Howe’s eyes, was his ability to serve as both “protector” and “judge” of the Jewish people. He “wrote with love and warmth of the communal tradition,” defended its ethos, and “constantly underlined its passionate urge to dignity.” At the same time, Sholem Aleichem “ridiculed” the Jewish community’s pretentions, “punctured its pride,” and, “as a highly conscious artist, he constantly reiterated the central dilemma, that simultaneous tragedy and joke, of its existence—its consummately ironic position of self-pride in clinging to the myth of the Chosen People, in fact the consummate irony of its existence at all.” Howe’s review of *The Old Country* was a compact tour de force. Rarely, if ever, had Yiddish literature received such perceptive examination in English.

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Howe returned to Sholem Aleichem, in 1952, with a review of Wandering Stars, the fourth book by the beloved klasiker to appear in English translation over the previous six years. Popular interest in Yiddish fiction was then growing, but scholarly attention lagged. Few, if any, professors taught works by Yiddish authors and most literary journals ignored them. Why was there no Portable Yiddish Reader or Modern Library of Yiddish Stories, Howe pointedly asked? He attributed the dearth of critical appreciation to a disjuncture between Yiddish literature’s essential character and the expectations of sophisticated readers. Howe began his 1952 essay with an eloquent criticism of his contemporaries. “We live in a time when the literature most valued by serious people is likely to be intense, recalcitrant, and extreme; when the novel is periodically combed for images of catastrophe; and the possibilities of life seem available only through ultimates, prophecies, and final judgments…” It would be good, Howe continued, if readers revised their attitudes so they might appreciate literary works that do “not confront the harsh finalities of experience, or strip each act to its bare motive, or flood us with anguish over the irrevocability of death.” Howe grouped Sholem Aleichem with the likes of Turgeniev, Chekhov, Ignazio Silone, and Sherwood Anderson “at his rare best,” writers who exhibited a “mature restraint from the extremes of vision, a readiness to value those milder virtues which can only cause impatience in many modern minds.” Howe’s tribute to Sholem Aleichem and other Yiddish masters is best quoted at length:

These writers—let me call them the writers of sweetness—do not assume evil to be the last word about man, and they seem to add: even if it is the last word, there are others to be declared before we reach it. They do not condescend before the ordinary, or scorn the domestic affections, or suppose friendliness to
be mere bourgeois cant; and perhaps because of these very virtues, they seldom strike us among the most tolerable: one can live with Chekhov in a way that is difficult with Dostoevsky, and one can love Silone with a warmth impossible to feel for D. H. Lawrence.

Sweetness is a quality our age suspects; and “sweetness and light” now seems a phrase of faint ridicule, calling to mind a genteel academicism, a cultivated futility. But when Matthew Arnold used the phrase he was hardly seeking a warrant for complacence; he knew that the quality of sweetness need not preclude the most stringent moral and social realism.

The little I know about Yiddish literature strengthens my confidence in these remarks. Here is a literature which explored poverty as few others have, which studied the misery of this life as intensely as the French have studied love—many a Yiddish writer could speak as an expert on the subject of hunger. But while I do not wish to suggest that Yiddish literature has been without its voices of desperation and violence, I find myself repeatedly moved by the tone of love—a tonic that is the most certain register of moral poise—with which such masters as Peretz and Sholom Aleichem faced the grimmest facts about ghetto life. Blinking nothing, they could accept everything.

Why should this be so? Not, I think, because of any special virtues in Jewish life or character; nor even because of the distinctive religious cast of the ghetto...The ghetto Jews could be as greedy as any other human beings, and as unscrupulous in their pursuit of parnosseh (livelihood); but they were cut off from the world at an all too visible point, the limits of their social movement were pathetically clear...

Who in the ghetto world was not finally a luftmensh, a Menachem Mendel trading nothing for nothing and living off the profits? This precarious position made history itself seem a little ridiculous—a response almost impossible to those who are in history; it made the ironic shrug a symbolic national gesture; it made the feeling of fraternity with the poor a foundation of Peretz’s delicate studies in character and Sholom Aleichem’s marvelous flights into surrealism. This feeling had nothing in common with the populist sentimentality we have come to suspect in Saroyan and Steinbeck; no one could have been more caustic than Mendele or Sholom Aleichem in the criticism of Jewish life. What it signified was that, in the end, the best Jewish writers knew to whom their sympathies were pledged, and never doubted their ties to even to the most miserable little shnorer [beggar]. They wrote from a firm sense of identification, an identification that was simultaneously inheritance and choice; and this was the source of their moral security...
None of this, to my mind, has anything to do with shtetl-nostalgia; nor is it uniquely Jewish; the sense of fraternity with the poor is as fine in Silone as in Sholom Aleichem. It was only that the Jews, with God’s help, had more occasion than most peoples to look into the matter.98

The Yiddish writer loved his people, but without indulgence. He could be highly critical, even scathing, but not at the expense of his “moral poise.” He combined artistic genius with the highest of Jewish folk values, expressed in an almost instinctive identification with the poor. Howe’s comments captured Yiddish literature’s appeal to a rootless intellectual in search of his Jewish roots. In 1946, Howe had lamented his marginality, the fact that he had “inherited the agony of his people” without knowing its joys first-hand. Sholem Aleichem had enabled Howe to narrow that gap.

Howe’s 1952 essay on Sholem Aleichem caught the attention of Eliezer Greenberg, a well-regarded Yiddish poet and editor. Impressed, Greenberg introduced himself to Howe with an offer to collaborate on an anthology of Yiddish stories. “Let’s be partners,” Greenberg proposed.99 By that time, Howe had established himself as a literary critic, author of two books on Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner, and would soon secure a position in Brandeis University’s English Department, where Syrkin was already on faculty. Howe’s rising career did not prevent him from accepting Greenberg’s invitation. “We became partners in the editing-and-translating-Yiddish business,” Howe recalls in his autobiography. “It was not exactly the road to riches, but it brought me an unsystematic education such as few other American critics have

The pair met every week to read from “crumbling old books” and puzzle over questions of translation. Greenberg leaned toward faithfulness to the original while Howe sought to make Yiddish accessible to English readers. Their venture reached an apex when Greenberg introduced Howe to Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool,” a story about a hopelessly gullible man tricked into marrying the town prostitute and led eventually to believe that the six children she bears are his. Greenberg described the plot as “very Yiddish, but it’s still not Yiddish.” “Sit still, be quiet, don’t interrupt,” he instructed. For Howe, this was a “transformative moment,” a rare discovery of a major talent, unknown to the English-speaking world. Saul Bellow was recruited to do the translation. “Lazer [Eliezer] read out the Yiddish sentence by sentence, Saul occasionally asked about refinements of meaning, and I watched in a state of high enchantment,” Howe recounts. “Three or four hours, and it was done. Saul took another half hour to go over the translation and then, excited, read aloud the version that has since become famous. It was a feat of virtuosity, and we drank a schnapps to celebrate.” Howe sent the translation to Partisan Review, whose editor, Philip Rahv, “immediately grasped the canny mixture of folk pathos and sophisticated overlay that made ‘Gimpel’ so brilliant a story and thus became the fourth man in this chain of discovery.” Two and a half decades later, Singer won the Nobel Prize for literature.¹⁰¹

*A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954) was the result of Howe’s collaboration with Greenberg. The most accomplished collection of its kind, the book included twenty-

three authors, translations by Syrkin, Rosenfeld, Bellow, Alfred Kazin, among others, drawings by Ben Shahn, and an extraordinary, seventy-one-page introduction by Howe.102 The novelist, Ludwig Lewisohn, hailed *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* as “an event and a deed of the first order of importance.” Norman Podhoretz, *Commentary*’s future editor, praised the anthology as “an event of peculiar significance in American Jewish life.” “This is no mere hodgepodge collection thrown together to provide a suitable gift for Chanukah or Bar Mitzvah, *nor* is it the usual work of mawkish Jewish apologetics.” In the *New York Times*, the Yiddish linguist, Uriel Weinreich, praised Howe’s introduction as “one of the most intelligent essays on Yiddish belles-lettres available in English.” The dean of Yiddish literary critics, Shmuel Niger, informed readers of *Der tog* they could learn much from the introduction’s “stimulating thoughts and observations.”103

Howe regarded his partnership with Greenberg a “sustaining” and “central intellectual experience.” Over the two decades following *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Howe and Greenberg edited four subsequent anthologies of Yiddish prose and poetry. After Greenberg’s death, in 1977, Howe published a volume of Sholem Aleichem’s stories and an anthology of Yiddish verse with Professor Ruth Wisse. By then, Yiddish literature had attained recognition from the academy and the literary establishment. As

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102 Greenberg might have assisted in the writing of the introduction, but the character of the prose and the fact that a number of paragraphs originated in previously published essays indicate that Howe was the primary author.

the scholar, David Roskies, wrote in 1983, “No one can doubt that the growing legitimization and popularity of Yiddish in America and throughout the English-speaking world owe much to the efforts of Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg...”\(^{104}\)

It was appropriate that Howe and Greenberg’s anthology should come out in the same year as *Dissent*. Each stemmed from an intense reevaluation of personal identity and political commitment. *Dissent* reflected Howe’s evolution from revolutionary Marxism to a qualified utopianism; *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* followed a parallel shift from alienation to Jewish self-discovery. *Dissent* championed radical, democratic values against the prevailing conservativism of 1950s America; *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* upheld Yiddish literature’s “tone of love” as a “tonic” to the modern sensibility. *Dissent* reacted with horror to the death of millions of Soviet citizens in the name of social progress; Greenberg and Howe dedicated their volume “to the six million.” Two paths of a single exploration converged in 1954.

**Conclusion**
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