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Philip MENDES

Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance

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Jews and the Left is an ambitious book, in that it attempts to provide an historical and global overview of a complex, changing relationship over a period of more than two centuries. The book is not only about the relationship of Jews to Left-wing politics, but also about the Left's relationship with Jews. At present, that relationship is, perhaps, at its most fraught, but Mendes' account suggests the possibility that it may, as in the past, improve once more. It is the ebb and flow of the relationship that sits at the heart of the book, and the historical account provides a story in four parts. Revolutionary and Enlightenment Europe enabled Jewish engagement with new politics and movements on the Left from 1789 to 1848, a move that was further enhanced by the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*. In the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848, Jews became more firmly embedded in socialist politics, while the centrality of the Jewish contribution helped overcome residual anti-Semitism on the Left in that period. The Bolshevik Revolution and the creation of communist parties across the world marked another phase of the relationship, one that was to last until the late 1940s. However, the foundation of the State of Israel, the Holocaust, and revelations of Soviet anti-Semitism, combined to change the way many Jews viewed the Left. The fourth phase was marked by the Six Day War, continues to the present, and (with the partial exception of Jewish involvement in the New Left) is characterised by increasing estrangement between the two parties. Intertwined through this history is the related tale of the emergence and rise of Zionism, which was mirrored by the decline of the Jewish alliance with the Left.

In telling this complex story, Mendes successfully handles and synthesizes a large body of secondary literature in English to lead the reader through the maze that is Left-wing politics, large and small, notable and obscure, from the late 18th century until the 21st. In doing so, he has produced an invaluable guide to an important current of socialist and modern Jewish history. *Jews and the Left* is also an exploration of what it means to be Jewish, and, indeed, what constitutes 'the Left'. The central question for Jews engaged with Left-wing politics was the degree to which their identity was predicated on universalist values, and the extent to which those values, and associated politics, compromised their Jewish identity. Although, as Mendes explains, Jewish engagement with the Left was largely enabled by issues of poverty and class oppression, ethnic oppression, Jewish cultural values, and Left-wing support for Jewish equality, the 'Jewish question' for much of the 19th and early 20th century was addressed on the Left by an assimilationist and utopian vision. For many Left-wing Jews, embracing socialist politics meant rejecting a sense of Jewish religion, culture and nationality, and replacing that heritage with an internationalist outlook that envisaged a future classless society built upon proletarian culture. For much of the 19th century, the Left also harboured a 'traditional socialist antipathy to any form of distinctive Jewish group identity whether nationalist or religious' (p.47). However, by the end of the century, the increasing predominance of Marxist thought on the Left led to a rejection of anti-Semitism as a tool for fomenting revolution, while maintaining a universalist and secular agenda for Jews as for other national communities.

Mendes shows that not all Jews committed to the Left abandoned their sense of Jewishness, and the Jewish Labour Bund struck a powerful contrary note as it developed a socialist agenda which also envisaged the revitalising of Jewish identity. Further, many Jews who embraced the universalist and assimilationist norms of revolutionary socialism ironically found that they had been joined by so many other

Jews that, in effect, they had exchanged one form of Jewishness for another. Mendes' account makes the case for seeing Jewish radicals as having been 'uniquely internationalist [...] concerned to integrate what was good for the Jews with what was good for mankind' (p.287). The impact of oppression and persecution in Tsarist Russia, and the resulting emigration of large numbers of Jews to the West, created a worldwide international of radical, Yiddish-speaking, political activists whose communal and personal interests aligned with many of the concerns of the socialist movement. At a personal level, this meant that Jews seeking to build a socialist utopia often found themselves in the company of other Jews, creating new Jewish communities in microcosm. For example, the present writer's work has shown that even as late as the 1930s and 1940s in East London, second and third generation British Jews, who spoke little if any Yiddish, sought to establish a new, socialist, secular and British identity for themselves, only to find that attempting to do this via the Communist Party meant that, once again, in places like Stepney, they were in the company of fellow Jews.

Mendes shows that at times Jewish activists provided significant numbers, and, importantly, high levels of commitment, to socialist parties, and were frequently represented on the Left in disproportionate numbers. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, although Jews only made up about five per cent of Communist Party membership, compared with around two per cent of the population, the Jewish contribution to party leadership was much more significant: 'for example, Jews retained about one-fifth of leading positions in the Ukraine, about 12 and 10 per cent respectively of state positions in Moscow and Leningrad, and 8-6 per cent of general government service positions' (p.132). In the United States, Jews made up about a third of the party's Central Committee from 1921 to 1961; while in pre-war Czechoslovakia, perhaps as much as 50 per cent of the communist party was Jewish. It was, of course, figures like these which, usually much inflated, enabled

anti-Semites to claim that 'Bolshevism is Jewish', a myth that Mendes addresses in a short chapter which highlights how that myth still has purchase, most recently in Hamas' 1988 Constitution. What the over-representation of Jews in Left politics, and, particularly in revolutionary politics, obscures is that at all times, and everywhere, Jews committed to socialism have formed a minority of their communities. For example, in the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly in 1917 and 1918, 'a significant majority' of Jewish voters supported non-socialist Zionist or religious parties (p.133). The more typical, majority, Jewish allegiance has been to religious, community and national identity. Indeed, if Jews were over-represented in revolutionary politics, they were also frequently over-represented among the victims of that politics. For instance, during the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939-41, 'thirty per cent of the Polish citizens forcibly deported to the Soviet interior were Jewish, which was three times their proportion of the total population' (p.22). Similarly, although Jews were over-represented in the immediate post-war creation of the 'People's Republics', these so-called 'Muscovites' (communist émigrés who had spent years in the Soviet Union and had little sympathy with Jewish concerns) largely fell victim to the anti-Semitic purges that came in the wake of the so-called 'Doctors' Plot'.

The Second World War and its immediate aftermath seemed to mark another positive stage in the relationship between Jews and the Left. The central role of the Red Army in defeating Nazism, the realisation of the full extent of the Holocaust, and Left support for the founding of Israel all appeared to favour continuing Jewish engagement with the Left. For the communist Left, Gromyko's surprise pro-Israel speech of May, 1947, along with the USSR's vote in favour of UN Resolution 181, calling for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, helped further boost communist standing among Jews. Similarly, social democratic and non-communist parties were also strongly pro-Israel, reacting not only to Zionist claims in

the wake of the Holocaust, but also to the widespread perception that Israel was a model social democratic state, something that lasted throughout the Israeli Labour Party's long dominance of Israeli politics. But, for the communist Left, this was to be the swan song of the relationship. Revelations of anti-Semitism in the Eastern bloc, Cold War Soviet support for Israel's enemies, combined with a major shift towards Zionism on the part of Jews worldwide helped weaken the links between Jews and communism. The Jewish relationship with western social democratic parties was more robust. For example, in the UK, leading Labour Party politicians, like Harold Wilson, Michael Foot, and Richard Crossman were passionately pro-Zionist, while the rapid social advance of many Jews in post-war Britain propelled them into support for an increasingly technocratic, welfarist and modernising Labour Party. This period, from the founding of the State of Israel until the Six Day War, was to mark the high tide of the relationship between western social democratic parties and Jews.

If Jewish support for the revolutionary Left in its communist form declined from the early 1950s onwards, there was, nonetheless, a 'last hurrah' for a minority of Jews in relation to revolutionary Left politics. The emergence of the 'New Left', and the associated struggle for civil rights and the anti-Vietnam War movement marked what may prove to be the last period in which there was any notable Jewish engagement with the revolutionary Left. This was particularly the case in the USA, where 'it has been estimated that about one-third to one-half of committed New Left activists [...] were Jewish' (p.249). But despite this leading role, Mendes is clear that there was little in the way of a permanent impact upon either Jews or the revolutionary Left, 'because there was arguably no specific Jewish political context to their involvement in this universalist movement. In contrast to the Old Left, there was no alignment between the New Left activities and Jewish interest' (p.257). Quite simply, Jews had moved on, divorced from the revolutionary Left, and, increasingly, the social democratic Left, by the middle-classing of Jews worldwide, and the dominant

perception that Israel was a key element in Jewish identity for Jews both in and outside the territory of Israel. Further, that latter shift in the politics of identity was matched by a shift in Left-wing attitudes to Israel that escalated the divorce between most Jews and the Left worldwide.

A number of key events in the decline of the Left-Jewish relationship have marked the long process of estrangement (partial as it is in some respects) between the former partners. Israel's victory in 1967 and its occupation of disputed territory, the decline of the Labour Party and, in particular, Likud's election victory in 1977, the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the first Intifada were all way markers to the current position where much of the Left exhibits some degree of hostility to Israel and its supporters. Mendes addresses these issues and argues that there exists an overarching conceptual reason why many on the Left have become hostile to Israel. His case is that historical perspectives have been lost, partly as a result of generational change, and that, as a result, Jews no longer have a place in the areas of concern that motivate Left politics. Mendes explains: 'Today, many Left groups are primarily concerned with oppression of workers and welfare recipients, third-world peoples including the Palestinians, people of colour, homosexuals and other victims of structural disadvantage. Jews do not rate highly in this hierarchy of oppression' (p.80). Furthermore, it can be argued that the decline of older socio-economic groups, such as the industrial, unionised working class in the West, has eroded traditional support and voting blocs that the Left had become accustomed to drawing upon. In the more varied and fluid political landscapes of Western Europe for example, anti-Israeli and anti-Western sentiment has the potential to play well with growing Muslim electorates. As the Left has shifted its ground on Israel and Jewish communities so, too, have Jews in Left groups found themselves facing what, in another UK context, has been termed 'the cricket test' in respect of their identity and politics – 'the demand by many Left groups that Jews pass a political test regarding

their position on Zionism and Israel in order to gain acceptance' (p.81). It is this fundamental shift in the view from the Left, perhaps typified by Left support for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Movement, that has led to some on the Left to adopt a position that enables them to avoid the reality that 'Israel could only be destroyed by a war of partial or total genocide which would inevitably produce millions of Israeli Jewish refugees, and have a catastrophically traumatic effect on almost all Jews outside Israel' (p.126). That reversal of the Left's long-standing, self-declared aim of opposing racism is enabled by Leftists who deny the core role of Israel in the identity of almost all Jews. By framing their stance as one of 'anti-Zionism', they detach 'Israel from its specifically Jewish roots, and [imagine it] miraculously destroyed by remote control free of any violence or bloodshed under the banner of anti-racism' (p.126).

Jews and the Left is an important contribution to a subject that is only slowly coming to receive the widespread attention it deserves. Pioneering studies of the relationship between Jews and the Left, by authorities such as Henry Srebrnik, Elaine Rosa Smith, and Jason Heppell, have been joined more recently by work from Stephan Wendehorst and further contributions from Srebrnik. Mendes has with this book made a notable addition to his own efforts in the field. There is a strong case now for greater university level study of the relationship between Jews and the Left. That study that should combine historical and contemporary analysis, mapping not only the long history of the relationship, but also seeking to understand the current tensions that beset what was once a significant alliance.

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