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THE JEWISH QUESTION

AND THE LEFT —

OLD AND NEW

A Challenge to the

New Left

by
Morris U. Schappes

A Jewish Currents Reprint

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MORRIS U. SCHAPPES is a distinguished American Jewish historian, literary critic and teacher, and has since 1958 been Editor of *JEWISH CURRENTS*. His published works include:

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He has also contributed articles and reviews to the *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, *New York History*, *Minnesota History*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, *Jewish Life*, *Mainstream*, *Chicago Jewish Forum*, *Jewish Social Studies* and other periodicals.

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The Jewish Question and the Left—Old and New

A challenge to the New Left

By **MORRIS U. SCHAPPES**

DO we live in a period when nations, nation-states or peoples are decreasing in number, are disappearing, disintegrating, dying away, losing their identity, abandoning their languages, assimilating one with another (which into which), amalgamating one with another (which with which)?

Or are we living in an epoch in which not nations but imperialism is disintegrating, in which imperialism, under the power-thrusts of movements for independence and liberation, is forced to loosen its grip on oppressed nations and peoples, and in which, therefore, the number of new nations and states is multiplying at a rate unprecedented in history?

Isaac Deutscher is an honored Marxist in these Socialist Scholars Conferences—and there is much for which he may be honored. But least of them, perhaps, are his casual *obiter dicta* on the national question and the Jewish question published posthumously last year under the aptly provoking title, *The Non-Jewish Jew and other essays*. In the title paper, "The Non-Jewish Jew," first delivered in 1958, Deutscher told his audience of the World Jewish Congress, that "we live

This is the text of a paper presented at the Socialist Scholars Conference, at Hofstra University, Sept. 5, 1969.

in an age when the nation-state is fast becoming an anachronism, and an archaism," and that "technology renders the nation-state as ridiculous and outlived as little medieval princedoms were in the age of the steam-engine." But if states are technologically passé, why are they clamoring, rebelling, fighting to be born? Is it that they do not know any better? Was it in ignorance, or defiance, of such advanced thinking as Deutscher's that 69 new-born states have been admitted to the United Nations since 1948? Perhaps the advanced thinkers should have, in time, alerted the peoples struggling to achieve independence and statehood to the view that they would be born archaic and anachronistic and that they should better cease and desist from their anti-imperialist clamor to be born?

Now is this parody? Perhaps, but perhaps there is more point to such parody than to Deutscher's verbal paradox passé parading as dialectical historical insight. Yet Deutscher is a Marxist and therefore does have some insight into a long-range historical trend, a deep-going historical process that is rendering certain national antagonisms superfluous, needless and harmful.

Thus Engels foresaw or forecast a

time—to be sure a distant time—when in one world there would be one humanity, nationless and stateless and even with one common language, the name or nature of which he did not foresee or chose, wisely, not to foretell. But this prophetic vision—even if it not be considered visionary—is hardly a guide to present practice and the vision can become even a hindrance to its own ultimate realization if what it foresees as distant is taken in fact to be under foot, or can be made to seem under foot if we use the proper incantations, imprecations or excommunications of “nationalism” by the mere or sheer vision of “internationalism.”

Lenin, who tried seriously to relate a vision of the future to the realities of the slow process of physical and social time, stated in 1920: “. . . As long as national and state differences exist among peoples and countries—and these differences will continue to exist for a very long time, even after the dictatorship of the proletariat has been established on a world scale—the unity of international tactics of the Communist working class movement of all countries demands, not the elimination of variety, not the abolition of national differences (this is a foolish dream at the present moment), but such an application of the *fundamental* principles of Communism (Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat) as will *correctly modify* these principles in certain *particulars*, will properly apply them to the national and national-state differences. . . .” (V. I. Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, International Publishers, N.Y., 1934, pages 71-72.)

Notice that Lenin realistically expected national differences, state differences, and differences among peoples and countries to exist for a very

long time even after *world* socialism has been achieved—and notice that he characterized as “a foolish dream” any search for international unity through “the abolition of national differences.”

Yet how many followers of Lenin have committed just such follies through underestimating, ignoring or even trying to repress national differences, branding such mere differences as reactionary, even as obstacles to social progress? The necessary struggle against national hostility, national antagonisms, national conflict, has been replaced too often by a vain railing against the existence of such differences, by a rancorous, wrathful and condescending or patronizing denunciation of such deep-rooted differences, as if the differences themselves were the cause of national hostility, antagonism and conflict. In the name of such a misunderstood vision of internationalism, the necessary struggle against chauvinism—which is the manipulation by imperialists of existing national differences to breed hostility, antagonism, conflict and aggression—this struggle was too often distorted in an inevitably fruitless struggle against existing national identity, legitimate national pride and progressive national aspirations.

Such an erroneous course was not only fruitless—at times it led to disaster, to catastrophe. In Germany between the two World Wars, such a primitive internationalism dominated the German left and the German Communists. By underestimating, ignoring or flouting the national sentiments and legitimate national aspirations of the German people, the German left played directly into the hands of the Nazi demagoguery, the *national* socialist demagoguery, which exploited these German national sentiments and aspira-

tions for fascist-imperialist ends—with consequences to the world that we all know.

Yet the entire international left, the entire Comintern, pursued the same primitive internationalism, failing to develop a truly internationalist approach to the national question in Germany in the struggle against fascism. No amount of communist and proletarian heroism in the struggle against Nazism could compensate for this political error. But it was not until four years after Hitler came to power that the Bulgarian internationalist Georgi Dimitrov led the Comintern to a recognition that this policy of the German communists had contributed significantly to Hitler's victory. National nihilism, Dimitrov pointed out at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, as practiced in fact by the German Communist party in the name of internationalism, was a distortion of the meaning of proletarian internationalism—a distortion widespread until then in the international left—and still too much with us to this day.

In my view, the internationalism of the New Left in our country is too often tainted with and therefore distorted by this national nihilism both with regard to the American nation and particularly with regard to our ethnic minorities—with the exception mainly of the black or Negro national question. The title that was given to this panel is “American Ethnicity and Class Consciousness,” yet I know that the predisposition of most of those that finally agreed, after four Socialist Scholars Conferences, to schedule such a panel for the first time was to assume that the proper radical stance could better be expressed in the title, “American Ethnicity versus Class Consciousness.”

It is also known that the very large number of young Jews in the New Left are, for the most part, indifferent to their Jewish identity and generally alienated from organized Jewish life. This negative attitude to ethnic identity is also assumed to be proper to the internationalism of the New Left, on the assumption that a positive attitude to ethnic identity and ethnic life would somehow interfere with an internationalist outlook or program.

To be sure, this erroneous assumption has deep roots in radical and socialist thinking both in our country and, as we have noted, in the international left. Those who believe that their rejection of ethnicity is part of their rejection of the American Old Left are making another mistake, for that Old Left itself, despite some efforts in that direction, had not and has not succeeded in disengaging itself from the traps of the Old Left, of the old Socialist Party and Socialist Labor Party.

The American Socialist Party, like the entire Second International, had a very simplistic view of the national question. The Socialist Party never really recognized even the Negro question as a special question, a national question—and of course the Socialist Party paid no attention to the Jewish question or to the question of other ethnic groups of immigrant origin. To the Socialist Party the class question was not only primary but it was exclusive—there was no other social question. All questions, the old Socialists thought, would be solved as a *by-product* of the class question and the class revolution. The black question, the Jewish question, the woman question, the agrarian question, the colonial question—each and all of these, it was assumed loftily by the old Socialists, would be solved as a *by-product* of the class struggle, without

any particular or specific attention to each question in its own terms, in its own needs.

That you might not be able to achieve a socialist revolution without proper and specific attention to something as vital as the national question, something as central in our country as the Negro question, was not perceived by the old Socialist Party and Socialist Labor Party. That a simplistic class approach that ignored the national and ethnic question might even hinder the efforts to organize the workers in these groups was overlooked.

Thus in 1888 in New York, when Jewish workers, fresh from a study of a Yiddish translation of Marx's *Wage-Labor and Capital*, founded the United Hebrew Trades, Samuel Gompers opposed this organization (although he later claimed to have had a hand in forming it) because he, although Jewish himself, knew so little about the theory of the Jewish question as to assume that the socialists and anarchists who founded the United Hebrew Trades—atheists all of them—were organizing along religious lines. And even when Gompers came around to understanding why the Jewish workers had organized their own unions as a distinct detachment of the general American labor movement, his understanding was limited to the language aspect—that workers who spoke only Yiddish could be organized only or mainly by Yiddish-speaking organizers into Yiddish-speaking unions.

This national nihilism is, incidentally, coupled in Gompers' thinking at that period with a shallow internationalism that is really cosmopolitanism. Thus in 1895, speaking at a meeting of the Central Labor Union in New York called to express labor's opposition to a possible United States war

against Great Britain over the Venezuela Boundary Dispute, he was on sound internationalist ground when he declared that "The interests of the working people of England and the United States are common. They are fighting the same enemy. They are battling to emancipate themselves from conditions common to both countries." But then Gompers went on, in the very same breath, to the widespread cosmopolitan error in internationalist thinking, when he added: "The working people know no country. They are citizens of the world . . ."

Now to work for that One World in which all people will, in time, be Citizens of that World is a noble internationalist ideal—but to assume that in 1895 or in 1969 any of us is in fact a citizen of the world is to parody political reality and, what is just as important, is to delay the coming of that One World and that world citizenship. It is political sickness—call it infantilism, call it juvenilia—to act today as if you are living in the world of tomorrow. This is not political far-sightedness, except perhaps in the medical sense of hyperopia, which is the *disease* of the eye we call far-sightedness. But hyperopia is that disease which prevents you from seeing clearly what is near at hand and therefore incidentally makes it harder for you to get to the distant points you do see clearly. Medically sound vision tries to correct both near-sightedness and far-sightedness so as to facilitate the process of relating the near-at-hand to the far away. In the political and social struggle, cosmopolitanism, a variety of pseudo-internationalism, by keeping you from seeing clearly the real conditions close at hand, hinders the process of changing these conditions to meet the desires of a true internationalism.

Yet the old socialist movement was

riddled by this combination of cosmopolitanism and national nihilism. One consequence was that some immigrants who became socialist cosmopolitans here took their cosmopolitanism so literally as to refuse to apply for naturalization as U.S. citizens on the ground that they were, forsooth, citizens of the world. One can surmise what effect such manifestations, remnants of which persisted into the 'thirties, had on the electoral aspects of the political struggle.

Let me cite an example or two from the early history of the American Jewish labor movement to show how socialist theory, in its cosmopolitanism, ignored the Jewish question. Thus in the spring and summer of 1890, some 4,000 Jewish cloakmakers in New York, locked out by their employers—Jewish employers—launched a militant strike for higher wages, better working conditions, union recognition and a closed shop. After a 10-week battle against police, courts, scabs and hunger, the workers won. In a characteristically brilliant and flaming editorial, the meaning of this victory was analyzed on the front page of *Die Arbeiter Zeitung*, weekly Yiddish organ of the United Hebrew Trades and the Socialist Labor Party.

Among the lessons drawn was this: "This great triumph will become a new source of courage and strength for the Jewish labor movement. It offers the best proof that the Jews of America have understood their position and have correctly gauged their duty in their new homeland. They do not consider themselves God's chosen people; they come forward as workers, as members and allies of the American working class. *Therein lies the solution of the entire Jewish question in America.* This struggle of the cloakmakers will shut the mouths of

more anti-Semites and accomplish more toward enhancing the name of 'Jew' than all the charities of philanthropic bankers and all the fawning of Jewish patriots who sing of the piety, orderliness and subservience of the Jewish people" (emphasis added).

Disengaging ourselves from the spell of this rhetoric, we may agree that Jewish philanthropy, patriotism and piety are no barrier to anti-Semitism. Yet we have also learned that Jewish proletarian exemplary militancy is also not enough—that anti-Semitism needs to be faced by the working class as a specific and peculiarly effective weapon that can divide, divert and subvert the necessary unity of the working class and its allies in the social struggle. Incidentally, we have also learned that the question of anti-Semitism does not exhaust the Jewish question, as some left-wingers seem to think to this day. And many in the New Left in 1969 are, whether they know this antecedent or not, still in the outdated position of the Socialist Labor Party and the Jews who followed it in the simplistic view that the Jewish question in the USA or anywhere else will be solved in passing as a by-product of the class question in its triumph.

Another example from the 1890's is even more instructive, showing that American Jewish socialist cosmopolitans or nihilists tried to influence Jewish socialists abroad in the same direction. When the General League (Bund) of Jewish Workingmen of Russia and Poland was founded in Vilna in Sept., 1897, it perforce made some attempt to relate the class question to the Jewish question (the merits or quality of this attempt are not here at issue). This development was of course followed with great in-

terest by American Jewish socialists, particularly by those who came from East Europe. At a national conference of such Yiddish-speaking socialists held in New York beginning Dec. 24, 1897, a resolution was adopted greeting the Bund and also imparting to it some of the conclusions American Jewish socialists had drawn from their American experience. The resolution noted pointedly that "wherever capitalism develops, class differentiations and class conflicts come to the fore and push into the background all racial differentiations and racial conflicts." Jewish capitalists and Jewish workers are involved in a class struggle. It is further declared that "bourgeois equal rights for Jews" are not enough and that "we still have to fight against the greatest of tyrants, capitalism."

But then the American Jewish socialists go on to advise their class and ideological brethren under the Tsar, where the Bund, incidentally, was an illegal organization, not to "waste any energies in a separate Jewish struggle for Jewish rights against oppression." Now this was not the doctrine that the class struggle was to be in the foreground and that the struggles for national and ethnic rights of oppressed peoples were to be related to the class struggle, but rather that the class struggle was all and the national or ethnic struggle nothing. (See Schappes, "Socialist Traditions of Jewish Labor," *Jewish Life*, New York, May, 1950, p. 23.)

With the American socialists, including Jewish socialists, having such a nihilistic attitude to the national question in general and the Jewish question in particular, it is perhaps easier to understand the astounding fact that even in as notorious a case of anti-Semitism as the Dreyfus Case,

Jewish socialists in the USA were for the first three years generally indifferent and became only mildly concerned when, in France, a *minority* of the socialists, led by Jean Jaures, entered the fray for a retrial of Dreyfus. As late as July 23, 1898 (six months after Zola's *L'Accuse* of Jan. 13, 1898), *Die Abend Blatt*, Yiddish daily organ of the Socialist Labor Party, had an editorial entitled, "Are the French Socialists Dealing Correctly in the Dreyfus Question?" The editorial notes three attitudes on Dreyfus among the French socialists: some, like Jaures, agitate for a new trial; others want to remain indifferent to the entire case (on the ground that Dreyfus is simply a reactionary Jewish militarist and that this is a case in which reactionary militarists are fighting each other); still others follow the government line that Dreyfus is guilty. As for itself, the *Abend Blatt* would commit itself only to the view that, even if one agrees with Jaures, one should respect the opinion of the other French socialists!

In this connection it may be worth noting that George Lichtheim ("Socialism and the Jews," *Dissent*, July-Aug., 1968, pages 325-26) concludes that even for Jaures ". . . the Jewish aspect of the *Affaire* was irrelevant. What was at stake was justice . . . The Guesdists (with individual exceptions) adopted what they considered a Marxist position and what was in effect a sectarian one: namely that while Dreyfus was probably innocent, and racial anti-Semitism was rubbish, the whole affair was of no concern to the proletariat. . . . Let intellectuals like Jaures—with his following of university professors, school teachers and students—fight for 'abstract justice': the workers had more important matters to think about. Although decked out with Marxist slo-

gans, this was really a revival of the traditional disdain for anything not directly concerned with the 'class struggle' in its narrowest sense. No wonder Lafargue [son-in-law of Marx and a stalwart against anti-Semitism] thought his colleagues had taken leave of their senses."

From these examples of the cosmopolitan as distinct from internationalist approach of the Old Old Left to the national question, ethnicity and the Jewish question, another point emerges: the class composition of the Jewish community has little to do with the nihilism of the old socialists. At present, many in the New Left, Jewish and non-Jewish, have a negative, even contemptuous attitude to the American Jewish community, presumably because, in the New Left view, the American Jews are mainly or all middle class, or affluent or near-affluent, or part of the Establishment, and so on.

But in the 1890's certainly the majority of the American Jews were proletarians, sweated workers, and how! Yet the old socialists, including Jewish socialists, including Jewish socialists writing in Yiddish, held this cosmopolitan attitude toward the Jewish question. And in France, among the 100,000 Jews there at the time of the Dreyfus Case, there were a thousand proletarian Jewish immigrants from Poland for every Rothschild. So the character of the Jews is no more to blame for the old socialist cosmopolitanism than it is for anti-Semitism—although anti-Semites of course blame the Jews for anti-Semitism. Therefore if the New Left current attitudes are not based on the present scene, or are a misinterpretation of the present scene, perhaps the evidence that New Left nihilism with regard to ethnicity is, in terms of in-

tellectual history, a throwback to the Old Old Left may be meaningful.

There is also, however, an ideological foundation for this cosmopolitan trend in old socialist thought, and that is, its theory of assimilation. Against the background of the ultimate amalgamation of all peoples and nations in the distant future, this theory foresaw, for the Jews and for other ethnic groups that had no territorial base, a rapid assimilation in the very foreground of the current period. The emancipation of the Jews from legal disabilities by the bourgeois revolution and bourgeois democracy would speedily lead to their utter dissolution and disappearance under socialist democracy, or even sooner.

All democrats and certainly all socialists would oppose any use of *force* or *compulsion* to make the Jews assimilate, dissolve and disappear—as the anti-Semites would advocate. But then, this theory declared, force and compulsion were really unnecessary to achieve this wished-for assimilation of the Jews, since objective historical developments, based on technological change, would bring about the social conditions that would make it impossible for the Jews to do anything but dissolve and disappear. And as a sign of their mastery of social science, history and the class struggle, Jewish socialists were expected to—and many of them did so with enthusiasm—recognize assimilation as their destiny, as imminent, as desirable, and therefore as something to be worked for programmatically, the sooner achieved the better, and begin with yourself.

Socialists everywhere and of all nationalities and peoples accepted this view. In the only *book* on the Jewish question written by one of the Marxist classics, the theory is argued, "demonstrated" and "proved"—the

book is Karl Kautsky's *Rasse und Judentum* (Race and Jewry), first issued in Germany in 1914, updated in 1921 and still further updated for the 1926 English edition published here by International Publishers under the title, *Are the Jews a Race?* Once the Jews are out of the compulsory ghettos and obtain bourgeois equal rights, there begins "the Jew's adaptation to non-Jewish society, his *assimilation*" (p. 151, emphasis in original). Thus the Jews "will *dis-solve*, unite with their environment and *disappear*, where the Jew is regarded and treated as a free man and as an equal" (p. 156), emphasis added).

In his final pages, Kautsky becomes historical-philosophical-lyrical-elegiac about this much-wished-for assimilation of the Jews and Judaism, which he sees simply and exclusively as "a reactionary factor." Judaism, he says, "is like a weight of lead attached to the feet of the Jews who eagerly seek to progress, one of the last remnants of the feudal Middle Ages, a social ghetto still maintaining its existence in the consciousness, after the tangible, physical ghetto has disappeared. We cannot say we have completely emerged from the Middle Ages as long as Judaism still exists among us."

Isn't that an insightful historical evaluation to be uttered in 1926 by an advanced thinker? Here we are, all but out of the Middle Ages, and it is not the Christian Establishment or much of anything else that is keeping us in this medieval darkness, but Judaism! Obviously, therefore, away with Judaism. Kautsky adds, reassuringly: "The sooner it disappears, the better it will be, not only for society, but also for the Jews themselves."

His reassurance continues, but in another vein: "The disappearance of the Jews will not involve a tragic process like the disappearance of the American Indians or the Tasmanians." For this happy disappearance will mean "the creation of a new and higher type of man. Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, will at last have found a haven of rest. He will continue to live in the memory of man as man's greatest sufferer, as he who has been dealt with most severely by mankind, to whom he has given most" (work cited, pages 246-247). Well—the Jews are thus assured both of assimilation and of immortality in the memory of the remainder of mankind . . .

This view of the "objective" necessity, social desirability and relative imminence of the assimilation of the Jews was the dominant socialist view among all trends, including the writings of Lenin, although the latter's practice after the October Revolution introduced pragmatic changes without, however, explicitly abandoning or modifying the theory. The weight of this theory upon the American radical movement has been continuous and more or less heavy, depending on varying circumstances, and is certainly prevalent in the New Left.

Yet the theory has run counter to reality in three basic respects, the timing, the content and the voluntarism of this assimilation.

As to the timing: more than a half century after Lenin in 1913 predicted the rapid assimilation of the Jews in the United States they are more conspicuous now than at the time he wrote. There has been no dissolution or disappearance of the Jews of the United States. In 1969, the Jewish population in our country—the largest in the world, including Israel—is

more extensively organized than were the Jews of 1919, in 1869 or in 1819; that is to say, more Jews voluntarily have affiliated with one or another Jewish organization than at any time in the past, absolutely or proportionately.

Since consciousness of Jewish identity is reenforced by these associational and organizational ties, there are, furthermore, no significant signs of the dissolution or disappearance of the American Jewish population or what we call the organized American Jewish community, which means simply the total of Jewish organizations and institutions. No matter how this stability is explained, or explained away, it is a fact that requires substantial modification of the theory of assimilation as defined.

As to the content of the concept of assimilation: here there was also a tremendous misjudgment. It was assumed in the classic concept of assimilation that assimilation by the Jews of the language of the country in which they lived, adoption of the environmental manners, style of dress, food habits, even style of religious decorum would lead to the dissolution and disappearance of the Jews. Here too practice confounded theory. For the American Jews have assimilated the English language, have adopted the environmental manners, styles, habits and so on, have generally entered the mainstream of the economic, cultural and political life of the country, but—unexpectedly, according to the old theory—have not dissolved and disappeared. Obviously, Jewish integration into American linguistic, educational, cultural, economic and political life—although anti-Semitic pressure has kept some of this from being complete—is at a very high level, but this personal integra-

tion of the Jew into American life has *not* led to the disintegration of Jewish communal or organizational life.

As to the voluntarism of assimilation of the Jews, as envisioned by classic socialist doctrine, the fact is that whatever assimilation has taken place has been *forced* assimilation. There has been no experience with *unforced* or really voluntary assimilation anywhere in the world: even in the Soviet Union, we have it on the authority of no less a person than the editor of the Soviet Yiddish literary monthly, *Sovetish Heimland*, Aron Vergelis, who admitted as much in a public address on a visit in New York in 1963. Compulsory or forced assimilation, which all democrats and socialists are in theory pledged to oppose, does not require the use of physical violence only or mainly (although the pogrom or the threat or fear of the pogrom has always been an argument or reason for assimilation). Compulsion can be exerted in many ways, by pressures social, cultural or aesthetic. Changes of name, nose or other personal traits (of which anti-Semites make such ill-humored, or is it good-humored, fun) are effected not by voluntary choice but to avoid, or at least try to avoid, the unpleasant consequences in economic opportunity, status, or social availability or mobility. So long as Jews are made to feel or believe that there is some, any, advantage to be gained or any handicap to be shed, by assimilation there can be no talk of voluntary assimilation. Nor can assimilation be said to be partially voluntary and partially forced, for the existence of compulsion in any aspect of assimilation renders suspect the voluntariness of any other aspect. This conclusion at least must be drawn not only from the American experience but from the Jewish ex-

perience in socialist states in Eastern Europe.

The fact that the socialist view of assimilation has foundered in relation to its timing, its content, and its voluntarism also needs to be seen in connection with another fact: that in the United States the assimilationist ideal of the socialists was, strangely, also the ideal of the cultural-imperialists who tried to force all immigrants and immigrant cultures into "the melting pot." The Americanization programs that were widespread in the early decades of this century had their reactionary, and compulsory, basis. In 1912 Teddy Roosevelt in his presidential campaign raised the slogan, "Take the hyphen out of Americanism," that is, he wanted no hyphenated Americans, no Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans, Irish-Americans, Jewish-Americans, German-Americans, and so on.

In 1918, the New York City Superintendent of Schools, at a time when 40 per cent of the general school population consisted of Jewish children, defined "Americanization" not only as "an appreciation of the institutions of this country," which would be unexceptionable, but also as "absolute forgetfulness of all obligations or connections with other countries because of descent or birth," which was nothing but an attempt to impose a kind of cultural amnesia upon immigrant groups and their children.

Not acculturation but *deculturation* was the thrust of this form of cultural imperialism. The dominant cultural media heaped contempt, mockery and humiliation on the immigrant groups and their cultures. It was impressed upon them in innumerable ways that any manifestation of adherence to these cultures, anything but total amnesia, would be a hindrance to the immigrant's or his

children's economic, cultural or social opportunity.

This cultural nativism inflicted fierce pressures on immigrant institutions and families, transforming the ordinary generational gap into cultural, linguistic and psychological conflicts, stimulating feelings of inferiority and desires to escape from the ethnic group, to obliterate the cursed, handicapping or crippling hyphen. Eagerness to accommodate to this nativist "Anglo-Saxonism" was most readily found among the upper crusts of the ethnic groups. The fawning upon this WASP culture in the hope of being admitted into it came to be seen and scored as bourgeois assimilationism among the ethnic masses, among whom there was almost instinctive resistance to it, although a theoretical challenge to it was slow to develop.

*In fact the theoretical counter-attack on the dominant melting-pot pressures emerged first among middle-class anti-imperialist radicals in the first years of World War I. It was in *The Nation* in Feb., 1915 that Horace M. Kallen opened up with a couple of seminal articles entitled significantly, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot." Kallen, though never a Marxist, was then obviously under the influence of Marxian economic analysis. To the imperialist theory of the melting pot Kallen counterposed the democratic concept of cultural pluralism, "a co-operation of cultural diversities" in the United States, or "a commonwealth of national cultures" among the ethnic groups.*

He perceived that the struggle for cultural pluralism would be a part of the class struggle as the struggle for democracy was a part of the class struggle. "Do the dominant classes in

COMMENT INVITED ON THIS ARTICLE

America want such a society" in which ethnic group cultures are encouraged, he asked, or will these dominant classes turn "the promise of freedom into the fact of tyranny?"

Inspired by Kallen's articles, the radical Randolph S. Bourne picked up the theme in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in July, 1916 entitled "Trans-National America." Rejecting what he called "narrow 'Americanism' or forced chauvinism," Bourne noted "the failure of the melting pot" and affirmed a "strong and virile insistence that America shall be what the immigrant will have a hand in making it, and not what a ruling class, descendant of those British stocks which were the first permanent immigrants, decide that America shall be made." Branding "the Anglo-Saxon element" as "guilty" of "the imposition of its own culture upon the minority peoples," Bourne scorned an America "which is integrated only for domestic economic exploitation of the workers or for predatory economic imperialism among the weaker peoples." He urged, on the contrary, that "the most effective integration will be one which coordinates the diverse elements" in our country without suppressing or obliterating them.

Later the same year, on Nov. 8, 1916, Bourne restated his views in their application to the Jews in an address before the Menorah Society of Harvard, entitled "The Jew and Trans-National America." There he pointed out that "To the intelligent and enthusiastic emigre from the Teuton or Slavic or Latin lands, it seems no more desirable that his cultural soul should be washed out of him than it seems to the Jew."

Now this theory of cultural plural-

ism was explicitly a challenge to the cultural imperialism of the ruling class, but also implicitly a challenge to the cosmopolitan socialist theory of rapid assimilation. Cultural pluralism sought to confer upon ethnic groups certain group rights, including the right to continuity. In that sense, cultural pluralism was an extension of the meaning of democracy not only to the individual but to his ethnic group. Individual equality which denied ethnic equality was, in this sense, an invasion of individual rights. (Analogously, the concept of democracy was extended for the worker when he advanced from the "right" of individual bargaining with his employer to the right of collective bargaining.)

American radical and socialist theory, however, lagged behind this development. It is true that when the Communist International replaced the Socialist (Second) International as an influential force on American radicalism, there took place a profound change in the theory of the proletarian internationalist approach to the national and colonial question. This change, however, had its most important and best results in regard to the Negro question, which was seen for the first time in American radical history as a special question of an oppressed nation. Concentrated attention to the Negro question led to extensive development, much of it still sound, of the theory of the Negro question.

There was no such attention to the theory of the Jewish question in the U.S.A. or to the theory of ethnic group rights. Since these groups were not nations, it was argued, and correctly, they were not really important or worth considering, which was obviously wrong. The assumption that all the immigrant-originated ethnic

groups would rapidly assimilate contributed to the neglect both of theory and practice on this question.

Pragmatically, it is true, the Communist Party paid some attention to what it called "national group work," which meant work among the national groups to integrate them into general party activity. There was *ad hoc* toleration of progressive organization and activity in the ethnic field, and a certain formal and routine approval of this work as it expressed itself in the communist ethnic press, communist-led or influenced cultural and educational activities, fraternal movements and so on. This pragmatic, *tactical* approach existed side by side with the still dominant theory of the desirability of rapid assimilation of all these ethnic groups.

The failure of change of practice to lead to a necessary and constructive change in theory to include the new facts of reality was due to the orientation on the Soviet Union as the fount of theory. Since there had been no theoretical development on the Jewish question since certain classic writings by Lenin and Stalin in 1913, those changes that did take place were either unexplained theoretically or were "explained" on the Procrustean bed of the existing theory with its thrust on assimilation. How useful such reliance on Soviet theory was, and how usable it could be in a desperate pinch, can be seen from the fact that when, after World War II, Soviet Jewish culture in Yiddish was virtually and systematically destroyed, American Jewish Marxists—yours truly among them—tried pathetically to understand and interpret this phenomenon as a product of the objective process of assimilation in accordance with Marxist-Leninist theory. Only Khrushchev's 1956 revelations jolted the blinders off some of these American radical eyes. Yet to

this day very little attention has been paid to the theoretical implications of developments in the past few decades.

Not that there was not some effort made to bring the basic theory on the Jewish question into accord with new developments. One such attempt was made at a special national conference in New York convened by the American Communist Party Nov. 29, 1946, with Alexander Bittelman, then a member of the national committee, delivering a report which was soon issued under the title, *Program for Survival: The Communist Position on the Jewish Question*, by the Party's New Century Publishers. The very title signaled the new theoretical departure: for the first time in international communist history did a party come out with a program that advocated Jewish survival.

Of course the slaughter of 6,000,000 Jews by Hitlerism and its allies, which constituted two-thirds of the entire European Jewish population at the time, had made the destruction of the Jews emotionally intolerable to thinking and feeling people, and the surviving and remaining Jewish people all over the world were in no mood to think "historically" about their forecast dissolution and disappearance—and this attitude influenced Jewish communists and others to the extent that they challenged, as many had privately questioned, the predicted rapid assimilation.

This new approach implicitly foreswore the traditional *tactical* approach to work among the Jewish people merely for the purpose of fighting bourgeois influence in that community with the implicit understanding that under socialism, under communist theoretical and practical leadership, the Jewish community would be led to dissolution and disappearance. The

advocacy of Jewish survival, with the implication that Jewish group life would continue under socialism, lent theoretical stability, at least for generations to come, to this approach to the Jewish people. The existence and persistence of ethnic groups in American life were seen as progressive phenomena expressive of a democratic resistance to ruling class assimilationism and national nihilism.

Unfortunately, this advocacy of Jewish survival did not get the full sanction or backing of the general American Communist Party leadership. What was needed to make the concept prevail in the ranks, to re-educate the party membership and the left influenced by the party, was a systematic ideological struggle against ingrained national nihilist habits developed in previous decades since the days of the old socialist movement. No such struggle was waged.

Except in the organized Jewish left, the line of advocacy of Jewish survival took little root. Furthermore, the attempt by the left, including the Jewish left, to interpret the virtual extinction of Yiddish cultural leadership, life and institutions in Stalin's last years as a product of normal assimilation also tended to undermine the advocacy of Jewish survival in the United States. The term therefore did not come into general usage in the American left. Nevertheless, both inside and outside the Communist Party, some Marxists have adhered to the concept, notably Paul Novick, editor of the Yiddish left-wing daily *Morgen Freiheit* and some of us in *JEWISH CURRENTS*. (Bittelman, by the way, was expelled from the party as a "revisionist" a few years after the Khrushchev revelations, but by that time he had been out of "Jewish work" for some time and his views on the Jewish question were

not then an issue in his expulsion.)

Apart from the appearance of the advocacy of Jewish survival in at least some Marxist thinking there were other reactions on a pragmatic if not a theoretical level. If these have not resulted in the drawing of any theoretical conclusions, they did affect the practice of the left on the Jewish question. Most important of these reactions was the decision taken by the Soviet Communist Party and government in 1947 on the Palestinian question. Without abandoning or modifying its anti-Zionist principles, practices or propaganda, the Soviet leaders took stock of the post-war situation of the Jews of Europe and announced a position that changed the course of Jewish history and modified the course of world history. As expressed by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in a memorable address at the General Assembly of the United Nations May 14, 1947 (reprinted in full, *JEWISH CURRENTS*, May, 1967), the recent history of the Jews led the Soviet government to such conclusions as these:

"The experience of the past, particularly during the time of the Second World War, has shown that not one state of Western Europe has been in a position to give proper help to the Jewish people and to defend its interests, or even its existence, against the violence that was directed against it from the Hitlerites and their allies. . . .

"The fact that not a single Western European state has been in a position to guarantee the defense of the elementary rights of the Jewish people or compensate them for the violence they have suffered at the hands of the Fascist hangmen explains the aspiration of the Jews for the creation of a state of their own. It would be unjust not to take this into account and to deny the right of the Jewish

people to the realization of such an aspiration" (emphasis added).

Then Gromyko, pointing to "the incontestable fact that the population of Palestine consists of two peoples, Arabs and Jews" and that "Each of these has its historical roots in Palestine," proposed that the UN solve the problem, if possible, by helping establish "one dual, democratic Arab-Jewish state," that is, a bi-national state, or, if Arab-Jewish relations are "so bad" that this is impossible, that there be established an independent Arab state and an independent Jewish state.

This address affected the conduct of the entire international left and undoubtedly had a decisive effect on the outcome. Anti-Zionist Marxists therefore worked to help achieve the birth of Israel and have continually affirmed its right to exist as an internationally-sanctioned legitimate Jewish state. While doing so, of course, Marxists inside and outside Israel freely criticized Israeli policies, foreign and domestic.

Other Marxists, who perhaps have more influence now upon the New Left than does Gromyko, have also drawn pragmatic conclusions from the Jewish Holocaust. Thus Isaac Deutscher, the Marxist Trotskyist, in the book already cited, has an article he wrote in 1954 after a visit to Israel. Although he reaffirms that he is "not a Zionist" (but who could have thought he was?), he found the candor and the courage to declare (pages 111-112): "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. 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.

"For the remnants of European Jewry — is it only for them? — the Jewish state has become an historic necessity. It is also a living reality. . . . [The Jews of Israel] also have the feeling—how well justified—that the 'civilized world,' which in one way or another has the fate of European Jewry on its conscience, has no moral ground to stand on when it tries to sermonize or threaten Israel for any real or imaginary breaches of international commitments."

Deutscher of course goes beyond Gromyko and admits to an error in his judgment based on his misplaced confidence in the European labor movement, and so on. Deutscher has not explored—except perhaps in unpublished letters—what led him, and others, to this misplaced confidence. Could the prevailing theory of Jewish assimilation have had a part in this error in judgment? Elsewhere in the book, in a lecture given in Oct., 1964, Deutscher refers to Rosa Luxemburg, "that great woman revolutionary of Jewish origin," and who, he notes, "was even more bent on the assimilation of the Jews than either Lenin or Martov" (page 66).

Now Rosa Luxemburg's attitude to the Jewish people and the Jewish question is exemplified tellingly in a letter she wrote Feb. 16, 1917 from the Wronke prison to a Jewish correspondent and friend, Mrs. Mathilde Wurm, who had sent Rosa a novel about Spinoza, which the latter dismissed as *kitsch* and then added:

"What do you want with your special Jewish sorrows? For me the poor victim of the rubber plantations in Putamayo, the Negroes in Africa, with whose bodies the Europeans play ball,

are just as close (so much closer?—*ebenso neher* in original). . . . Oh, this 'lofty silence of the eternal,' in which so many cries have echoed away unheard, this silence resounds in me so strongly that I cannot find a special corner in my heart for the ghetto; I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears." (*Briefe an Freunde*, ed. by Benedikt Kautsky, Hamburg, 1950; cited in a different translation by J. T. Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg*, London, 1966, Vol. 2, p. 860, (emphasis added).

Rosa Luxemburg was, together with Karl Liebknecht, murdered in 1919 by German soldiers who arrested them in the Spartacist Uprising, and therefore could have no such second thoughts as Deutscher recorded in 1954. Yet only some 25 years after Rosa Luxemburg wrote the letter just quoted, the Nazis had slaughtered some 4,000-5,000 Jews in her birthplace in the largely Jewish town of Zamoszcz, Poland. Had she been attentive to the "human tears" in Zamoszcz, not more than but at least as much as to those in Putamayo, had she not turned her back on the ghetto and scorned "Jewish sorrows," which were at least specific if not special, she would have been no less the internationalist, no less the revolutionary, no less the woman of great heart—and perhaps even more effective in the struggle against international reaction and imperialism. That is why it is so distressing to find her cosmopolitanism still resounding in New Left circles.

In addition to Deutscher, there is another New Left guru who has not been indifferent to the impact of the Holocaust upon Jews. In a little noted statement, Herbert Marcuse, in a debate with Rudi Dutschke in Berlin in

July, 1967 departed from the main course of the discussion to call attention to the Middle East and to note that "there exists, indeed, amidst the progressive forces a very strong and understandable trend towards identification with Israel." He went on to explain that "I feel in solidarity and identify myself with Israel for personal reasons—but not solely for these reasons . . . I am compelled to see in this solidarity more than a mere personal prejudice.

"I cannot forget that during centuries, Jews were persecuted and oppressed and that not so long ago six million of them were annihilated. This is an objective fact.

"The Jews finally found a land where they must no longer fear persecution and oppression and I identify myself with the aim reached by them. I am happy to be able to be in agreement, in this case also, with Jean-Paul Sartre who said: 'The only thing that we must prevent at any cost is a new war of extermination against Israel.' . . ."

Although critical of Israel on various grounds, Marcuse concluded by describing the "context in which the preventive war (for this was in fact the character of the war waged against Egypt, Jordan and Syria) can and must be understood and justified." (*Israel Horizons*, New York, Aug.-Sept., 1968.) In this understanding and justification, apparently, Marcuse has been a prophet without honor among his own most enthusiastic New Left disciples—thereby suffering the traditional fate of Jewish vanguard prophets.

At that, it may be heartening to record here the emergence within the past two-three years of the first groups that combine a progressive Jewish consciousness with general New Left orientation and life-style. The oldest of

these—and a lusty three-year-old it is—is the group called Jews for Urban Justice, in Washington, D.C., which has already made itself felt in the Washington Jewish community and has begun to stimulate the birth of similar groups in other cities. Another is the Jewish Liberation Project in New York. Jewish religious radicals have also organized in Boston, Philadelphia and New York. They are heterogeneous in outlook, program and style, but they have one important thing in common: with their feet in some aspect of the radical movement, these New Left conscious Jews try to function as Jewish radicals in the Jewish community.

Implicitly all such groups reject the national nihilism that characterizes most Jews in the New Left and too many of them in the Old Left. National nihilism, if it needs definition, is an approach that reduces the group, the people, the nation, to *nihil*, to nothing. It down-grades and degrades the nation and the people to a thing of no value. National nihilism expresses itself in indifference to or contempt for the history of a people, including its history of class and social struggle; to the traditions, including the progressive traditions and values, of a people; to the customs and culture, including the progressive culture, of a people. Such indifference to the past and the culture of a people feeds and breeds indifference to its future.

Tactically, national nihilism on the part of radicals, which alienates them from the group, leaves that group to the unchallenged leadership of and dominance by conservative and chauvinist elements in that group. National nihilism thus leads to an abandonment of the class and social struggle within the entire ethnic groups themselves, all of which have their own class

structures and internal class relations and conflicts. To seek to justify such national nihilism in terms of “internationalism” does not change the reactionary character of national nihilism.

Bebel, to head off the inroads of anti-Semitism among German workers and Social-Democrats, once defined anti-Semitism as “the socialism of fools.” National nihilism may be said to be the internationalism of fools. National nihilism before Hitlerism and its demagogic exploitation of national sentiments was bad enough, harmful enough. National nihilism after Hitlerism signifies a tragic refusal to learn from even the most horrible mistakes of the past. Are we doomed to repeat them, Santayana-style? I hope not, because socialists are not fatalists.

American ethnicity, ethnic groups, national groups, are here to stay, at least for some generations. The latest sociological study of the field, Milton M. Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life, The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (Oxford U. Press, N. Y., 1964), concludes that while “acculturation or cultural assimilation” has reached high levels among all ethnic groups, structural pluralism and cultural pluralism emerge “as the dominant sociological condition” (p. 235).

If ethnic groups are here to stay, socialists dare not be indifferent to them, theoretically, programmatically or tactically. Recently we have become aware of a mounting white backlash against the Negro people's movement in some ethnic groups, Polish, Italian, Irish, Jewish, Slavic. To consider this problem, and to develop a strategy to combat the backlash, the American Jewish Committee convened two conferences in June, 1968, one at Fordham University called a National Consultation on Ethnic America and one at

the University of Pennsylvania on the Problems of White Ethnic America.

At one of these conferences, incidentally, Prof. Gordon reaffirmed his finding: “Primary group relationships in intimate face-to-face situations, based on the sense of common ethnic identification, have remained in spite of the fact that we now live in areas which are widely separated on an ethnic basis and in spite of the fact that we have extremely mobile transportation and communication. Ethnicity remains as a focus of social identification and community life; so that we live in America not just as members of the entire American social structure, we live within ethnic sub-societies criss-crossed by social class.”

One product of these conferences

was a booklet by Dr. Andrew M. Greeley, program director of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago entitled *Why Can't They Be Like Us? Facts and Fallacies about Ethnic Differences and Group Conflicts in America* (Institute of Human Relations Press, N.Y., 76 pages, \$1). Father Greeley regards it as “essential for political leaders, social planners and influential figures in the ethnic communities to abandon the rather foolish controversy of whether ethnicity is a good thing or a bad thing—particularly since it clearly has both good and bad effects—and settle down to a better understanding of what it means and how we may live with it, not merely tolerably, but fruitfully.” He points out that “intensive study of American ethnic groups is long overdue,” and I may add that I hope socialist scholars will take part in this study and not abandon the field to non-socialist and anti-socialist scholars.

“America's ethnic groups,” he notes with insight, “are rooted only very

partially in the European pre-immigrant experience, and have been shaped to a very great extent, however differentially for different groups, by the American experience ethnic groups in this country have taken on a life of their own, more or less independent of the national cultures and societies where their roots lie” And he finds “no reason to think they will not continue to play an important role, at least for the rest of this century.” (Pages 62, 11, 10, 57, 56.)

Ruling class and dominant cultural exclusionary practices have of course been a factor in creating one of the bases of continuing ethnicity. Anti-alienism and anti-Semitism have been continually operative, as Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau recognize in an article on the subject in *The Center Magazine*, March, 1969, entitled “To Serve the Devil.” Sketching American bigotry from 1630 on, they remark that “Americans cling precariously to the idea that their country is truly a melting pot, even though, from its very beginnings, what has been indissoluble is America's prejudice.” They also conclude: “What America is witnessing is a new kind of clustering together of ethnic groups, who are perhaps frightened of being isolated from that which is familiar and reassuring. In a society that seems to be spinning apart, one's own special identity becomes essential to survival.”

One of the firmest ethnic groups is the Jewish. As Father Greeley indicated, “while Jews are one of the most thoroughly acculturated groups in American society, they are also extremely conscious of their origins and history, and even in the third and fourth generation they make greater efforts to preserve their own culture than any other major immigrant group.”

One reason is the pressure of anti-Semitism, subtle and unsubtle. Tell-tale in this respect is the very title of a booklet in the same series as Father Greeley's, *Not Quite at Home*, How an American Jewish Community Lives with Itself and its Neighbors, by Professors Marshall Sklare, Joseph Greenblum and Benjamin B. Ringer (85 pages, \$1). In this popularization of the two-volume *Lakeville Studies* published in 1967, which described the situation of the 8,000 Jews in Lakeville, a mid-West suburb of 25,000 people, the authors point to the central fact that "Lakeville . . . accepts [Jews] as individuals only if . . . they conform to gentile standards. . . . This is . . . not pluralism, or respect for the diversity that actually exists. . . . And until their distinctiveness is respected, until their specific character and heritage are recognized, there will always be an undercurrent of malaise between Jews and gentiles in the community." And at that, the authors found that "gentile hostility was more underrated than overrated" by these suburban Jews. (Pages 79, 51.)

Nor are the Jews in our country so affluent and so highly placed as to be indifferent to hostility. The same booklet reports the findings of recent nationwide surveys at the Universities of Michigan and Chicago showing that while 69 per cent of American Jews are American-born and 33 per cent have had some college education, 67 per cent earned less than \$7,500 annually. Class composition revealed in these studies indicates that 21 per cent are craftsmen, skilled workers or non-farm laborers, while 18 per cent are professional or technical workers. And since there is a "national trend under which more and more workers—professionals, technicians, managers, officials—work for enterprises they do not own," it is obvious that the work-

ing class—new or old—among the Jewish population is larger, much larger, than the bourgeois stereotype jargon of "middle class" would assume. I may add parenthetically a fact that you will be pleased to know, that there are many more Jewish workers than there are Jewish landlords in slum areas . . .

To conclude: last year, at this Socialist Scholars Conference, James Weinstein at the final plenary session proposed that socialist intellectuals need to work out a new "model" or "vision" of what socialism in the USA would be like. When I inquired from the floor whether this new "model" would include a place for continued ethnic group life and culture, he answered laconically, "I assume so." Whether he spoke from principle and conviction, or to brush off a questioner he took to be "irrelevant," I could not tell.

In any event, the burden of the present paper has been to argue the necessity for socialists to affirm unmistakably that a socialist future in our country includes not only the individual rights of Jews but the rights of the Jews as an ethnic group. And in all the preparatory stages of the struggle for socialism, as well as in relations with socialist movements abroad, it needs to be stressed that to advocate internationalism means not only to combat chauvinism but also to reject the old cosmopolitanism and the old national nihilism that have too often encrusted themselves on the concept of internationalism, to its detriment.

Continuing American ethnicity, in this light, can no longer be regarded as an obstreperous anachronism that refuses nostalgically to bow to objective Marxist "laws" of rapid assimilation but has to be accepted as a given

fact, essentially democratic in its resistance to ruling class melting-pot programs. American ethnicity can neither be ignored, flouted nor left to reaction if socialists are serious about winning the American working class and its allies for socialism. Socialists

therefore should strive to harness ethnicity to the struggle against imperialism, racism, anti-Semitism and poverty, and for a socialist perspective. And socialist scholars need to study American ethnicity from this affirmative point of view.



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