The riddle of Jewish radicalism*

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In modern times radical Jews caught the attention of the world. Men and women of Jewish descent were in such a disproportionate number among the theoreticians, leaders and rank and file of the leftist movements that, depending upon one's point of view, Jews were prized or cursed for their alleged radicalism. Thus, after having uttered several anti-Jewish remarks in his early years but now deeply impressed by the role played by Jews in the Socialist movement and the radicalization of the Jewish proletariat in the Russian Empire, London and New York, Engels wrote in 1890: "To say nothing of Heine and Börne, Marx was of purest Jewish blood; Lassalle was a Jew. Many of our best people are Jews. My friend Victor Adler ..., Eduard Bernstein ..., Paul Singer...— people of whose friendship I am proud, are all Jews! Have I not been turned into a Jew myself by the 'Gartenlaube'?".[1] In a lecture in Geneva in 1905 Lenin said: "The hatred of the tsars was particularly directed against the Jews. The Jews provided an extremely high percentage (compared to the total of the Jewish population) of leaders of the revolutionary movement. In passing, it should be said to their credit that today the Jews provide a relatively high percentage of representatives of internationalism compared with other nations."[2] On the other hand, King Frederick William IV of Prussia lamented "the disgrace which the circumcised ringleaders among the revolutionaries had brought upon Germany." A report written by the Prussian police in 1879 about the connection between Jews and the Social Democratic party stated that Jews support socialist ideas financially and by advocating them in the press, and concluded that "if we add the fact that the most prominent leaders of the revolutionary parties in the various countries are Jews, such as Karl Hirsch in Bruxelles, Karl Marx in London, Leo Fraenkel in Budapest and that the large party of Russian nihilists ...consists mostly of Jews, there is reason to justify the claim that Jewry is by nature a revolutionary movement."[3] The Russian czar Nicholas II complained to his wife that "nine-tenths of the troublemakers are Jews." The Russian Minister of Interior Plehve noted that 70 % of all political dissidents known by the police were Jews,[4] while Count Witte conveyed to Theodor Herzl in 1903 that in his opinion the proportion of Jews among Russian revolutionaries is fifty percent.[5] Incidentally, sixty five years later President Nixon wondered, upon learning of the riots at the 1968 Democratic National convention in Chicago: "whether all the indicted conspirators are Jews, or whether ...only about half are."[6]

Rooted in different perspectives—in curiosity, prejudice, pride, fear or shame—the question of Jewish radicalism continues to be highly explosive even in our days. Being the sensitive object of passionate debate or deliberate silence, it continues to produce and reproduce powerful stereotypes and taboos that in themselves deserve a separate investigation.

Theories of Jewish radicalism

In discussing the subject of Jewish radicalism—or, as some prefer to say, Jewish radicals—it is important to keep in mind that in modern times extreme radicals formed but a tiny minority among Jews as a whole. Theories equating Jews with radicalism have, simply, no substance and are either a product of incompetence or prejudice. On the other hand, the disproportionate participation of Jews in leftist parties and movements has historically been highly significant (and highly visible). In other words, although there have been few radicals among Jews, there have been many Jews among radicals.

Much ink has been used (and not a little wasted) in trying to solve the riddle of Jewish radicalism. Let us take a look at a couple of typical examples.[7] If intellectuals as such form a "relatively classless stratum which is not too firmly situated in the social order",[8] Jewish intellectuals falling in between Jewish and non-Jewish segments of society must be even more so. Thus, one can find theories attributing Jewish intellectual radicalism to their positively interpreted cosmopolitism and secular, messianic universalism, which is said to allow Jews to become true internationalists and to formulate ideas about how to reform society. This is expressed most prominently and affirmatively by Isaac Deutscher who sees the revolutionary "non-Jewish Jew" as one who continues a specifically Jewish tradition of "transcending" the borders of Judaism when they are "too narrow, too archaic, and too restricting" in order to strive "for the universal, as against the particularist, and for the internationalist, as against the nationalist solutions to the problems of their time" (1968, 33). Similar theories attribute Jewish radicalism to a marginal, isolated position in the middle class, which is said to transform Jews into radicals fighting for ideas and making them, in Robert Michels' words "apt to find a shorter road to socialism than the Gentile" (1962, 247–248). There are other theories which oppose marginality and the corresponding idea of classlessness as causes of radicalism, proposing instead to look to structural determinants of embeddedness in certain social strata.[9] Still others see structural reasons as a general background and randomness or coincidence as the factor which explains why concrete persons become involved with different political ideologies and movements.[10] Another group of theories seeks to explain the phenomenon of Jewish radicalism by referring to Jewish cultural heritage in which messianism is said to have special appeal. This position is best expressed by Nicolas Berdyaev, in whose view "the most important aspect of Marx's teaching" can be explained by the fact that "the messianic expectations of Israel" remained in his subconsciousness, and that, therefore, the proletariat was for him "the new Israel, God's chosen people, the liberator and the builder of an earthly kingdom that is to come." Communism is for Berdyaev "a secularized form of the ancient Jewish chiliasm," because "a messianic consciousness is surely always of ancient Hebrew origin" (1961, 69–70).[11] Similar modern theories are exemplified by Lawrence Fuchs (1956) whose theory, although it was conceived of as an explanation of American Jewish liberalism, can be adapted to explain Jewish radicalism as well. Fuchs attributes a supposed Jewish yearning for justice to the effect of the Jewish religious imperative of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), the prophetic traditions, the love for learning and disinterest for ascetism, which direct activity into the concrete world of economy and politics. Referring to some observations made by Fuchs and also by Nathan Glazer (1970a), Stephen Whitfield proposes to pay attention to yet another possible explanation, namely, Jewish intellectuality as the chief factor. "If Jews have been disproportionately radicals, it may be because they have been disproportionately intellectuals." Thus, intellectuality would cause Jews to question the dogmas and practices of the world, for which "revolutionary politics was a natural outlet" (1985, 39–40).

Other theories point out deprivation and anti-Semitism as the main causes of Jewish radicalism. Thus, Hugo Valentin, arguing primarily against racist doctrines (but also against those who attribute Jewish political radicalism to cultural heritage), states simply that the

only explanation for the participation of Jews in the Communist movements of Eastern Europe was their hopeless predicament of misery, prosecution and anti-Semitism. He supports his point by saying: "...in America, Italy, Western Europe, Scandinavia," where Jews were treated as equals, they "should not be on average more radical than the non-Jewish members of the social classes to which they came to belong" (1935, 219). Similarly, Michels points out that "the legal emancipation of the Jews has not ...been followed by their social and moral emancipation" (1962, 247), and that this deprivation together with a traditional yearning for justice explains political radicalism among Jews. In the context of the deprivation approach, Whitfield points out that in order to avoid simplification the term should be understood in a broad sense: "The discrepancy between the exalted religious and historical status and a low civic and economic state, and between their own ethical sensitivities and the cruelty which their neighbors often exhibited ...might also trigger the need to remedy gross unfairness through pursuit of revolution" (1983, 146). W.D. Rubinstein (1982) explains an alleged inclination of Jews toward leftist radicalism by the social-political circumstances in Europe after Jewish emancipation. Turning toward the right was then unthinkable because of its anti-Semitism and conservatism, while the left was striving for universal equality. In other words, involvement with the left is here thought to be in line with Jewish self-interest.

There is also a relatively rich flora of psychological or psychologizing theories on this subject. Lewis Feuer (1969) attributes a radical "conflict of generations" to the workings of the Oedipus complex, which, in principle, could also be applied in the case of young Jewish radicals. Disputing theories that attribute the leftist radicalism of revolutionary Jews to a secularized cultural heritage of messianism, Robert Wistrich seeks a general explanation in their self-hatred, their "Jewish anti-Semitism" or their "ethnic death-wish" caused by "the marginality of the assimilated (or semi-assimilated) Jewish intellectual, whose radicalism made him a heretical figure with regard to his minority community and the Gentile world" (1976, 8), and caused him to accept the anti-Jewish heritage and stereotypes of Christianity and the Enlightenment. Similarily, Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin locate Jewish radicalism in the results of a double-marginality of individuals who "do not feel rooted in either the Gentile religion or nation or the Jews' religion or nation." As a result, they "have become revolutionaries in many instances precisely in order to overcome this rootlessness or alienation" and therefore "seek to have the non-Jews become like them, alienated from traditional religious and national values. Only then will these revolutionaries cease to feel alienated" (1983, 60–61). John M. Cuddihy (1974) finds an explanation of Jewish radicalism in the confrontation between the uncivil, premodern shtetl and the civil, modern Christian society (or a struggle between vulgarity and refinement in which the Jews resist the process of modernization).

Thus, the range of theories and explanations of Jewish radicalism covers almost all possible grounds. Roughly speaking, one can divide them into those which seek explanation in psychological factors, in cultural predicament or in social situation. Most of these theories tend to be monistic, i.e., they tend to select one factor, or one group of factors, to explain the phenomenon. Some of them are consciously ahistorical; others—as those dealing with Jewish participation in the American New Left—seek a time-bound explanation that cannot be applied to other periods (as Glazer's empirical observation of the nurtured atmosphere of an earlier political dissidency in the families from which the New Left Jewish members grew up, or their apparent intellectuality).

Theories which attribute Jewish radicalism solely or mainly to Jewish cultural heritage prove insufficient by the very facts of life. Those most knowledgeable in the principles of Judaism and who practiced it in their everyday life, i.e. the observant Jews, were far from from social and political radicalism. Also, radicals have always been a minority among the Jews. Moreover, as Charles Liebman (1973) points out in his criticism of Fuchs' view that traditional Jewish values are the source of Jewish liberalism, it is not enough to show that

some values promote liberalism (or radicalism); in order to prove such a connection it is also necessary to show the absence of values which would encourage conservatism. If not, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that Jews are selective in chosing the values they are influenced by.

On the other hand, the impact of some traditional Jewish values, such as love for learning, intellectuality and messianic longings cannot be denied. It is, for instance, apparent that among the different dimensions of the dynamic structure of Judaism there always was a rebellious and universalist one, and that the kind of intellectuality represented by radical Jews differed in a characteristic manner from that of their non-Jewish comrades. Against the criticism of Wistrich (1976)—that Marxism broke completely with the Judeo-Christian tradition, that revolutionary Jews expressly denied Judaism and that most of them were ignorant of it—it can be said that cultural traditions can be transmitted in several indirect, elusive and hardly discernible ways, and even, as Gershom Sholem (1971) proves, through denial.

Thus, the notion that sees the cultural impact of some traditional Jewish values as the sole or main explanation of Jewish radicalism is insufficient. However, if such an impact did not exist the phenomenon would undoubtedly not have been what it is.

I must admit to a bias against psychological theories as often applied in this context. Cuddihy's view represents an example of an ignorance of Jewish history, sweeping generalizations and over-simplifications. Moreover, his analysis smacks of prejudice. Feuer's psychoanalytical theory of an Oedipus complex cannot account for those Jewish radicals who had excellent relations with their parents and those non-Jewish ones who did not. Wistrich's (or Prager's and Telushkin's) approach seems to be highly ascriptive and, although individualistic, lacking in any attempt at empathic understanding. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the concept of self-hatred applied in this way really explains anything. It seems to ascribe psychological motives to acting indivuduals in a circular manner. Suppose that we say: "These persons were self-haters." How do we know that? "Because they acted in this way." Why did they act in this way? "Because they were self-haters." The circular reasoning implied is typical for the ascription of motives in general. From overt action, one derives certain motives, which, in turn, are used as causal factors in explaining actions. Furthermore, the concept of self-hatred appears to be dependent on both the researcher's own affirmative attitude towards the values said to be held in contempt by the objects of analysis, and on his or her knowledge of the ultimate outcome of the historical process being described. Also, it should be kept in mind that ethnic self-hatred cannot possibly be an either-or category, but rather a continuum ranging from self-affirmation to self-hatred. On the whole, it appears that the concept of self-hatred might be of some descriptive, but only a limited explanatory value. In general terms, although they might contain insightful observations, the psychological approaches tend to reduce complex social, cultural and political variables to individualistic psychological phenomena for which they cannot account.

Accounts attributing Jewish radicalism solely or mainly to the Jewish predicament (anti-Semitism, deprivation) do not suffice as explanation. If all or most of the Jews in certain countries and in certain periods were subjected to anti-Semitism and deprivation, why did they not all, or most, rebel? Suffering and misery in themselves are not sufficient causes for rebellion or radicalism.[12] And if it was in the self-interest of Jews to join the revolution, why did most of them reject it? In the ghettos of Eastern Europe of which Valentin writes, radicalism was seen as a dangerous deviancy,[13] and Moscow's chief rabbi is reported to have said to Trotsky (whose original name was Bronstein) that "the Trotskys make the revolution and the Bronsteins pay the price."[14] If anti-Semitism, misery and the principal hostility of the right were the sole reason for Jewish leftist involvment, how could we account for the disproportionate number of Jews involved in the New Left in USA?[15]

On the other hand, accounts attributing Jewish radicalism to social predicament cannot be altogether dismissed. As demonstrated also

by the case of Polish-Jewish 1910-generation, anti-Semitism and misery have been among the most influential factors which produced radicals striving for Jewish and/or global emancipation. Thus, if applied in an exclusive manner, this group of accounts is apparently insufficient as explanation; however, they contain points of crucial importance that cannot be omitted.

Brym's view of individual embedding in concrete social strata as decisive for becoming a Jewish radical of a particular color is undoubtedly tempting. However, it cannot account for several cases, in fact so many that they almost are typical, of brothers, sisters and peers who began from identical positions and yet ended up on opposite sides of the barricades.

Jewish radicalism or radical Jews?

All these theories (and many others, including several vulgarly anti-Semitic explanations) attempt to solve the riddle of Jewish radicalism. However, is not Jewish radicalism a case of mistaken identity? Is there a particular "Jewish radicalism" or are they only radical Jews?

To begin with, it is necessary to clearly state what is meant by "radicalism" and "radical." Being radical means to go against an established view of society, its order, social institutions and conditions of human existence. It means to provide a counter vision and, in the company of like-minded, to commit oneself to the struggle for its realization through fundamental sociopolitical change and reconstruction. In other words, it means to have the determination, courage and strength to fight to replace the prevailing social, political and moral paradigm with a new and essentially different one.

Political radicalism is frequently based on demands for social justice. However, these two concepts should not be confused: the former is an identity and praxis that aim at a deep social change, while the latter may be its goal or spirit. In regard to an existing reality radicalism implies its rejection and the will to change. Whether from the left or the right, by the definition all radicals are extremists and all extremists radical.

The question of "Jewish radicalism" and/or "Jewish radicals" arose in response to the empirical fact of the large presence of Jews among revolutionaries and rebels. As previously hinted at, this question often has been mistreated. The most flagrant cases mystify the phenomenon by attributing some inherent radicalism to Judaism, or finding some inherently Jewish traits in radicalism. Moreover, this question is often treated in a reductionist or circular manner. In addition, the concepts of "Jewish radicalism" and "Jewish radicals" are frequently used in a way that implies an interchangeability, which results in an even greater confusion.

Focusing on its traits and causes, discussions of "Jewish radicalism" seem to presuppose the existence of this particular kind of "ism", as a distinct and discernible entity. But, does it really exist? Do we not take for granted something that should be shown and proven before its characteristics and causes can be debated?

In fact, on closer examination it appears that there is no particular "Jewish radicalism" in the sense of a special ideology or inclination, just as there is no particular Dutch, Russian or American radicalism. Instead of these alleged national "isms", there exist radical ideologies rooted in, stimulated by, applied to or perceived through, the particular sets of conditions and traditions of these societies and cultures. Thus, there might be as many "Jewish radicalisms" as there are possibilities to mix the essential traits of Jewish culture, of particular Jewish predicaments and radical ideologies.

Similarly, there are no "Jewish radicals", if by this is meant a homogeneous category of individuals who are similar to all other radical Jews and different from all other radical Gentiles. If such a category existed, it would have to comprise all Jews who are radical and all radicals who are Jewish: Trotsky, Ben Gurion, Jabotinsky and Meir Kahane (not to speak of Moses, the prophets and Jesus). Thus, if used

in such wrongly phrased or dimly thought through manner, the concepts of "Jewish radicalism" and of "Jewish radicals" appear ahistorical, reductionist and, simply, empty of content.

Radical Jews—becoming and being

What seems to be hidden behind these concepts are (1) different radical, specifically Jewish ideologies (i.e., ideologies concerned with a radical social change seen in the perspective of distinctly Jewish predicaments, problems and prospects), and (2) different categories of Jews inspired by and united in identical—particularistic or global—radical ideologies and corresponding political objectives. The former are not the subject of our present concern. As for the latter, the issue of radical Jews (as of radical Frenchmen, Poles, Americans or Germans) always forms a question of concrete people involved in the concrete, complex and changing circumstances of their time and society. Acting in these circumstances, they are empowered by the heritage of their past, by the problems of the present and by visions of the future. Thus, the question of radical Jews should be viewed as one of becoming and one of being.

The question of becoming a radical Jew is fundamentally one of the general mechanisms of formation, functioning through and in the fabric of a specific, culturally encased social situation. This finds the best illustration in the case of Polish-Jewish Communists,[16] the most radical Jewish radicals of interwar Poland.

The rejection of the world as it was formed the common denominator for all the young radical Jews in interwar Poland. However, only some became Communists, while others affiliated with the Zionist and Bundist movements. All those brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors and workmates, whether they ended up on opposing sides or as party comrades, started off from the same historically, culturally and socially shaped settings. These settings, the starting points, constituted a set of social conditions common to all. Within the field outlined by these conditions, there existed a spectrum of options and choices leading along different paths. In this perspective, their individual ideological formation and political involvement meant the beginnings of a splintering of the peer generation into different political generations.

Joining the Communist (or the Zionist, or the Bundist) movement was a process in which social conditions and social contingencies seem to play different, but equally important roles. This process can be seen as conditioned by structural factors—such as class, occupation, membership in different organizations—and, at the same time, as governed by contingencies. Their ideological development and organizational affiliation could have been different had they or their peers not migrated, but rather stayed in their hometowns, had they not met particular ideological mentors, had they been exposed to a different ideological influence at a decisive point of time and so on. This is exactly what happened to most of their friends; the very fact that most of those who started from exactly the same structural position and were exposed to exactly the same structural factors did not become Communists, gives witness to the role of contingency and to the conditioned but not totally determined character of the process of becoming.

Contingencies which led these peers into the Communist movement—often in form of seemingly accidental meetings with future intellectual mentors and ideological significant others—must not, however, be seen as items of pure coincidence. In almost every single case, the process of becoming a Communist was typified by a similar combination of factors and stages: it was not predetermined in any definite way by, for instance, ones class background, but neither was it coincidential. These structural, "objective" circumstances created a category of people who were likely to become Communists, while the specific contingencies separated those who actually became Communists from those who did not.

In this perspective, the dialectical relationship between individual and collective becoming is apparent. Once these people joined the Communist movement and became its part

—in the course of which their generation was born—the field of available, coherent choices was narrowed to the ones defined by his or her being a Communist. Hence, the probability that the future life career of these men and women would continue on this specific road rose significantly; or, in other words, the probability of reverses from their seemingly determined path decreased to a minimum. Although dramatic historical events were going to hit them all, as the result of the strength of the formative process only a few were prepared to draw the utmost conclusions from their experience and voluntarily reverse the future course of their lives.

Thus, some members of the interwar Polish-Jewish radical generation became and stayed Communists through (1) the combined impact of their specific cultural heritage and social situation, which jointly produced a radical potential among peers and a scope of alternative options for identity and action; (2) through the mixture of conditions and decisive, non-coincidental contingencies which determined their initial choices of ideological identification and political affiliation (and which to a lessening degree continued to influence their choices all along the way); and (3) through the reciprocative character of individual and collective formation, as well as through the consequential nature of the steps and stages within the process of becoming which, diminishing the role of contingency and increasing the role of consequential determinants, restricted the field of available "obvious" options within the path along which their social and moral career developed.

The mechanisms that formed these people were general: they apply to and have formed other individuals and other ethnopolitical generations as well. What made them and their generation distinctly characteristic was the impact of the particular content through and in the fabric of which these general mechanisms functioned: the concrete elements of their cultural heritage which they assimilated in a specific way, the particular traits of their social situation, their specific socially and culturally shaped inclinations and perspectives, the particular sociopolitical events and processes in which they participated, the special conditions and contingencies decisive to their initial choices, perceptions and actions.

Once these people became committed Communists (or Zionists and Bundists) of their specific kind and time, they did not cease to evolve. However, although becoming is a continuous process, we speak also of being. We say "they are", "they were" or "they have been" by which we mean a seemingly unchangeable location and continuity of individuals or collectives within a slice of time. Although being is a segment of becoming, an action and/or a state of mind frozen in a slice of time and as such merely an analytical abstraction, it is indispensable for our communication. It describes discernible, prolonged stages in an ongoing process, periods during which an object does not go through dramatic, fundamental change, but rather retains its essential core. In this sense we speak of being radical Jews.

Being a radical is the result of having become one, i.e., of having assimilated a radical ideology and demonstrating this through radical political action. The term "radical Jews" denotes those radicals who had grown through, from and were influenced by a particular Jewish situation and culture. Thus, in the case of Polish-Jewish Communists the particular circumstances of their becoming deeply influenced their being, coloring their political culture, way of thinking, feeling and acting in ways that made them in several respects similar to each other and different from their non-Jewish comrades. This quality of particularity and sameness was initially produced by the specific factors of their cultural and social background. In the course of their lives this particularity was counteracted by the uniform character of their ideological vision and political action, and by their desire to lessen or erase what distinguished them from others. At the same time, this was reinforced by the perception and action of those others who ascribed to them varying kinds of actual or imagined distinguishing traits, and by their own life experience which—due to all these factors—was in several respects different from that of others. Thus, they were like all other Communists, but also different from them: they were moved by additional

dreams, perspectives, inclinations, anxieties and concerns.

In this sense of the mechanisms and content of becoming and being they exemplify not only the issue of political and ethnopolitical generations but also of radical Jews.

Thus, there is no riddle of Jewish radicalism: there exists no particular "Jewish radicalism", and a category of "Jewish radicals", which it implies, is a chimera. Instead, there are radical Jews and the question of their formation; or, in other words, there are the general mechanisms of becoming that, acting in certain particular, culturally encased social situations, have produced and will continue to produce radical Jews as well as all the others.

NOTES

*. Based on a lecture given at the *Fourth Scandinavian Congress on Jewish Studies* in Tronheim, Norway, May 7–9, 1990.

1. Quoted in Wistrich 1982, 34–35.

2. Quoted in Abramsky 1978, 65.

3. Talmon 1980, 189.201.

4. Miller 1978, 47.

5. Shapiro 1978, 3.

6. Whitfield 1983, 143.

7. For a presentation and discussion of some of the theories of Jewish radicalism even in regard to the United States, see, for instance, Whitefield 1983; 1985; Porter 1981. There are several studies on modern American-Jewish radicalism and the New Left, see, for instance, Glazer 1970; Lipset 1970; Unger 1974; Liebman 1979; Rothman and Lichter 1982.

8. Mannheim 1952, 154.

9. Cf. Brym 1978.

10. Cf. Hoffer 1951.

11. See also Laqueur 1971, 478; Mosse 1970, 206.

12. Cf. Gurr 1971; Moore 1978.

13. Cf. Heller 1954.

14. Quoted in Prager & Telushkin 1983, 63.

15. Cf. Rothman & Lichter 1982.

16. Schatz 1989.

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