In this book, Tony Michels enters into dialogue first and foremost with American Jewish historians. He disagrees with the prevailing trend among them to bypass the Jewish Workers Movement, which they regard as a mere way-station to the successful integration of immigrant Jews into the American mainstream. He argues, by contrast, that the period between the early 1880s and the early 1920s, the years of the growth of the Jewish Socialist movement, left a permanent imprint on American Jewry. He claims that the radicalism of the 1960s was in some ways its successor and that the neo-conservative movement that followed can be understood as a reaction to this period as well. Beyond giving the Yiddish socialists their due, Michels also wants to complicate the story of the American Jewish experience as a whole. Contemporary historians deem it a success. According to them, Jews have integrated into the American mainstream without having to give up Jewish identity, which they continue to redefine, attesting to the creativity engendered by the American context. Michels argues, rather, that the Yiddish socialists represented a radical element, far from the American mainstream, subject to attack at various points of their history. He wants to challenge the model of an easy synthesis between Jews and American culture by pointing out that in the early days of the Jewish Workers’ Movement, and as a continuing strain afterward as well, the big question was not how to retain Jewish particularity while adapting to America, but how to dissolve Jewish particularity into an international order of workers. For these reasons, the movement he treats, in the forty-year period under question, does not fit the model of a Jewish identity merging gradually into the American milieu.

The second set of interlocutors, most prominently addressed in the first chapter of the book, are historians who dismiss American Jewish history as derivative, merely reflecting European preoccupations, and in the case of the Jewish Workers Movement, Eastern European preoccupations. On the contrary, he claims, up to the First World War, New York was the unofficial center of the Jewish Workers’ Movement, influencing Europe, and deriving
its inspiration not from its counterparts in Russia, but from the German immigrant enclave on the Lower East Side. It was the Germans, with a powerful Socialist movement in their midst, who influenced the Russian Jewish intellectuals to organize Jewish workers, teaching them about the American political process and making them adopt a new way of combating capitalism in their new environment.

Not being a historian of American Jewry, I leave it to those interlocutors to debate the full merit of these points. It seems to me, however, basing myself on Michels’ description, that it is difficult to distinguish what is American and what is not American in the history of the Jewish Workers Movement in New York. If Russian Jews in America innovated in the realm of political organizations and established a workers movement there before it grew to similar proportions elsewhere, that does need to be signaled. But to what degree are the founding ideas of the movement “American” rather than European, since even the Germans who influenced the Russian Jews were reading European authors? The same kind of blurry line is visible when reporting on certain cultural institutions that first took on their full dimensions in the United States—a very wide proliferation of Yiddish newspapers and journals. Chaim Zhitlowsky, for example, founded his Yiddish journal Dos Naye Lebn, in New York, but it seems to be based on the model of the tolstii zhurnal, a Russian periodical mixing culture and politics. The same could be said about Zhitlowsky’s educational ideas. To what degree did they reflect the thought about secular Jewish culture that the great Polish Yiddish writer and activist I.L. Peretz was also propagating around the same time? On another front, it seems difficult to minimize the role that Socialism played in integrating Jews into the American process. Precisely by learning to organize in a way attuned to American political realities, would not Russian Jews have become more attuned to the issues affecting the United States as a whole, more familiar with the workings of American democracy, and more prone to collaborating with non-Jewish workers? Had Jews remained radicals in great numbers after the Second World War, Michels’ arguments that Socialism represented a departure from the mainstream would have more punch. But when there was a legal Socialist Party with many ethnic subgroups based on language, can one make the same claim?

Yet the greatest contribution of A Fire in their Hearts is not its arguments about American Jewish history but in its detailed descriptions of the rich institutional life to which Yiddish Socialism in the United States gave rise. These descriptions evoke the intensity behind what may now seem like a neutral characterization—secular Jewish culture—Yidishe kultur—was anything but neutral; it was an ardent battle for what was felt to be the empty space left behind after what some perceived as the eclipse of rabbinic culture. What was to fill it? Even though a strain within the Jewish Socialist