The postwar decline of the Jewish–Left alliance: From the international to the national solution

Since World War Two, Jewish engagement with the political Left has progressively declined. Mass Jewish labour and socialist movements no longer exist, and there is no major Jewish presence in broader Left movements and parties. Most Jews have lost their faith in universalistic causes because they do not perceive the Left as supportive of Jewish interests, and have turned instead to nationalist solutions.

1 The impact of four key historical events

The first key event to undermine Jewish faith in universalistic solutions was the Holocaust, the murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany. The Holocaust destroyed the Jewish Left constituency, the large masses of European Jews who were affiliated with the various progressive groupings, whether communist, Bundist, social democratic or Socialist Zionist. Specifically, the Holocaust decimated the Bundist social, cultural and political Yiddish-speaking infrastructure in Poland which had acted as the cradle and breeding ground of Jewish socialism (Slucki, 2012). The mass Jewish labour movement which promoted a class and ethnic loyalty to socialism was no more.

In addition, the lesson that most Jews worldwide (even radical Jews) drew from the Holocaust was that the great working-class movements of Europe had failed to defend the Jews from genocide, and that any future defence strategy would have to be based primarily on the Jews’ own resources (Mendelsohn, 1997; Shindler, 2012). This disillusionment was encapsulated in the Marxist intellectual Isaac Deutscher’s famous
statement that his ‘confidence in the European labor movement, or more broadly, in European society and civilization…had not (been) justified’ (1968, pp. 111–112). Both Deutscher and the former leader of pre-war Polish Trotskyism, Hersh Mendel, abandoned their earlier opposition to Zionism. Mendel even migrated to Palestine, and became a ‘proletarian Zionist’ (Mendel, 1989, p. 327).

Jewish despondency concerning the value of internationalist solutions was matched by the failure of postwar Marxists to provide a serious explanation of the Nazi genocide (and the earlier failure of the Left to take Nazi threats against Jews seriously) that might have provided a new political signpost for left-wing Jews. The few that tried (for example the leading Jewish Trotskyist Ernest Mandel) seemed unable to comprehend the singular and unique nature of the Holocaust, the centrality of ideological racism, and the relative absence of economic or other rational grounds such as capitalism or imperialism. The concern to highlight the universalistic implications of the Holocaust precluded an understanding of the particular consequences of anti-Semitism. In short, the specific and ongoing victimization of Jews by far-Right groups and its implications for Marxist theory on Jews as a collective group was never adequately conceptualized (Geras, 1997; Spencer, 2004, 2012; Traverso, 1999; Wistrich, 2012).

The second major event was the creation of the Jewish State of Israel in 1948. The emergence of a national Jewish entity with a strong and powerful army meant that Jews all over the world could look to that national state for protection, rather than depending on internationalist movements and ideologies (e.g. communism and the Soviet Union) which had often proven to be false or unreliable allies. The Jews were no longer a stateless people desperately seeking refuge and asylum in whatever country would accept them. Rather, the State of Israel provided a guaranteed refuge via the Law of Return for persecuted Jews from all over the world. More generally, Israel provided Jews everywhere, including particularly the growing number of secular Jews who had lost faith in God and religion, with a renewed sense of hope and pride in the terrible wake of the Holocaust (Cimet, 1997; Cohen, 1980).

Even many left-wing Jews, who might have been anti-Zionist prior to World War Two, were positively affected by the birth of Israel. For example, the long-time Austrian Jewish leftist Jean Amery commented in 1976:

There is a very deep tie and existential bond between every Jew and the State of Israel…Jews feel bound to the fortunes and misfortunes