

The End of Modern Jewish History

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The Establishment

In pre-modern times, European Jews lived in distinct communities, governed by their religious authorities and subject to gentile restrictions and regulation. The Enlightenment and growth of liberal rights and freedoms led to the dissolution of the traditional community and gradual admittance of Jews to the rights and responsibilities of secular citizenship. Nor did anti-Semitism qualify the liberal prospect unduly. “The contours of European opinion between 1890 and 1914 do not do not comfortably fit into the metaphor of a ‘storm’ or ‘tide’” of rising anti-Semitism.¹ Jacob Schiff, a co-founder of the American Jewish Committee, the flagship American Jewish organization, stated in 1907: “I cannot conceive that one can be at the same time a true American and an honest adherent of the Zionist movement.”² During the interwar period the AJC had a “non-Zionist” rather than anti-Zionist view, and supported partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states in 1948 only after Zionist politicking had precluded other options. Yet the Committee remained basically liberal, concerned with Jewish civil rights and integration.

By the early 1960s the successes of liberalism, such as intermarriage and secularism came to be seen as “threats” to “Jewish continuity” and “survival.” This *völkisch* turn was fatally supercharged by Israel’s dramatic victory in the June, 1967 war. Organized US Jewry, led by the AJC, became and remains fanatically chauvinist and pro-Israel. “The Holocaust,” including Zionist dogma about permanent, murderous anti-Semitism, became an institution and central prop of “Jewish identity,” unlike before 1967. The AJC once criticized Jewish education as separatist and chauvinist but not promotes it precisely for those reasons.

After 1967 the AJC and its magazine *Commentary* became the incubator of the neoconservatives, former liberals and leftists who decided that liberalism was “bad for the Jews” and above all for Israel. The neoconservatives allied with Reagan and the GOP right against Nixon, Ford and Rockefeller, and entered the Reagan Administration in 1981. The neocons essentially took over the American right, as several writers have attested, including GOP foreign policy. This culminated a Jewish ascendancy dating from the 1940s, when the nascent Israel lobby secured US support for partition of Palestine and a Jewish state, against the overwhelming opposition of the military and diplomatic establishments.

The Israel lobby, including the neoconservatives has perhaps been the chief driver of US militarism since the end of the Cold War, beginning with the Gulf War in 1991, following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The neoconservative punditocracy promoted the war heavily in the media; the congressional vote was the closest since the War of 1812, and AIPAC may well have made the difference. With Iraq defeated, there was interest in repairing relations with Iran, which needed reconstruction after its war with Iraq and which had been a major export market before the Iranian revolution. The Israel lobby succeeded in imposing "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq, over substantial business opposition. The neocons, out of power, plotted the final destruction of Iraq with the Israeli government. The "notion of payback for injustices suffered by Palestinians is perhaps the most powerfully recurrent in bin Laden's speeches."³ The neocons, back in power, seized on the 9/11 attacks to advocate the US conquest of Iraq, which effectively destroyed it as a unitary state, and "destroyed the balance of power in the Gulf and improved Iran's geopolitical position."⁴ This deepened the antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia, leading to the present dissolution of Syria and Iraq and the rise of a self-proclaimed radical Islamic caliphate.

This world-historical catastrophe, including the campaign for war against Iran, and the prolonged destruction of Palestine, has not produced a liberal epiphany in the organized Jewish establishment, but at most a loyal opposition. Figures like Peter Beinart and groups such as J Street share an underlying commitment to the *Zionist Jewish people*, the US-Israel relationship, and its concomitants. The modern period of Jewish history has turned out to be brief and unrepresentative, lasting symbolically from 1789 to 1967; the *Jewish people* has replaced liberalism as the Jewish social principle.

The Jewish Left

The classical left critique viewed the Zionist "Jewish people" idea as atavistic and reactionary, and Zionist settlement in Palestine as colonialist. Marxist internationalism supported the struggles of colonized peoples against the imperial powers, including Zionism. Jews were foremost in this outlook, including Rosa Luxemburg, who famously stated, "I have no special corner of my heart for the ghetto; I am at home wherever in the world there are clouds, bird and human tears."

The Jewish element of the American New Left, which arose from the late 1950s to the early 1960s,

shared this universalism. Like “their cosmopolitan Jewish predecessors in the pre-World War I Socialist party and in the student movement of the 1930s, the Jewish New Leftists did not desire to be tied to particularistic primordial groups and identities. They wanted instead to be part of a universalistic movement.”⁵

The New Left fractured in the late 1960s, on lines of liberal humanism vs. Marxist rhetoric and analysis, violent resistance vs. non-violent, liberal civil rights politics vs. black power activism, and Israel vs. what was called the Third World, after the June, 1967 war. A “Jewish left” arose, which typically described Zionism as the “national liberation movement of the Jewish people,” while criticizing to a degree Israel’s occupation of the territories it conquered, and advocating other social justice views.

The “Jewish radicalism” movement was followed by a series of groups from Breira in the 1970s to Jewish Voice for Peace today. For fifty years Jewish identity politics has imposed on the left, such as it is, a truncated discourse of “anti-occupation”; ahistorical “international law and human rights”; “solutions” to the “conflict”; Israel as US “strategic asset”; and “anti-anti-Semitism.” As opposed to a critique of Zionism as Jewish radical, racist nationalism, comparable to Nazism; as colonial conquest and dispossession; as a quasi-sovereign, radicalizing force in US foreign policy; as Jewish chauvinism and separatism outside Israel. The left, no less than the mainstream, has abandoned the classical left and liberal traditions that rejected Zionism.

Naturally, people are interested in their ancestry and backgrounds, and are perfectly free to attribute values to and derive inspiration from them, on an individual basis. The problem is not individuals thinking that “I’m Jewish and I oppose. . .” The problem is organizing as *the Jewish people*, which turns “Jewish identity” into a universal category, a substitute for secularism.

The radical labor activist turned historian Noel Ignatiev recounted that

a friend was joshing me about being Jewish in some of my tastes and habits. I have never denied it, I replied (though I would prefer the term Yiddish), but that is not all I am: my musical preferences range from Mozart to Miles to the Rolling Stones; my sports heroes are Willie Mays, John McEnroe and Michael Jordan; my reading taste runs to Mark Twain and B. Traven. . . you get the idea. Like any person living in America, I am, according to Albert Murray (*The Omni-Americans*) ‘part Yankee, part Indian and part Negro,’ with a pinch of ethnic salt. Or as blues artist Josh White sang, I am African and Indian, Mexican, Mongolian,

Tyrolean and Tartar—and that’s the news, yes that’s the news—that’s the free and equal blues.⁶

People in the Jewish left cannot arrive at this democratic appreciation, but insist on privileging one aspect of their being—and expect the world to privilege it also. Shlomo Sand has written three critiques of Zionism, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, *The Invention of the Land of Israel* and “How and when I stopped being Jewish,” not yet published in English.⁷ In the first Sand rejected the historical basis for a “Jewish people,” and in the second the “historical attachment” to the “land of Israel.” In the third Sand argued “that if there is no such thing as a Jewish people, then secular individuals cannot, by definition, be Jewish. Step by step, he undermines, weakens and deconstructs the identity of secular Jews.”⁸ This applies no less to North America, in different terms. Merely posing the question sets off a fanatical *Kulturkampf*, including on the “left.”

Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky’s intellectual and political reputations were high when he first began writing about Palestine, in the late 1960s, and have only grown since. In 1997 he was described as “one of the century’s most important figures. . . who will be for future generations what Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Picasso or Mozart have been for ours.” On Palestine and US Middle East policy, this is overstated at least by half. Chomsky’s early writings on Palestine were recycled directly from his teenage days as Zionist youth leader, and philo-semitic sentimentality is still the foundation of his views. In the late 1960s several other figures of Chomsky’s stature, adherents of the classical left traditions, were also writing, including Isaac Deutscher, the Polish Marxist literary and political writer, who died in August, 1967; Maxime Rodinson, the French Marxist scholar, who passed in 2004; and the Israeli Matzpen, the Israeli Socialist Organization, which was founded in 1962 and whose surviving members are still active. I will contrast passages by Chomsky and these universalist sources.

Chomsky defined a *Jewish national right* to settle Palestine.

The Zionist case relies on the aspirations of a people who suffered two millenia of exile and savage persecution culminating in the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human

history, on the natural belief that a normal human existence will be possible only in a national home to which they had never lost their ties, and on the extraordinary creativity and courage of those who made the desert bloom.⁹

Rodinson:

It is only in order to refresh memories that I will mention the historical rights to the land of Palestine that are said to have been bequeathed to all Jews, since I would not insult my readers by believing they could be impressed by this argument.¹⁰

In the early 1950s Chomsky “spent several very happy months working in a Kibbutz and for several years thought very seriously about returning permanently.”¹¹ He called the kibbutz “the most advanced socialist forms in existence, the germs of a just and egalitarian society.”¹² Deutscher visited Israel at the same time as Chomsky, and found the kibbutz past its prime as a social force, and notable mainly for its military role. “It is still the chief bulwark of Israel’s defence. It bore the brunt of the war of independence. . . The structure of its organization makes of the kibbutz an ideal military colony and militia. . . The bastions of Israel’s Utopian socialism bristle with Sten-guns.”¹³ Matzpen found that the kibbutz’s “elements of ‘free socialism’ have fascinated many intellectuals and socialists in the West” but also noted its historical importance for Zionist colonization, its ideological conformity, and its capitalist practices and decline.¹⁴

Chomsky echoed Zionist claims that Jewish settlement was a social revolution on behalf of the Arab and Jewish masses, against the British Empire and the Arab ruling classes.

A social revolution that would be democratic and socialist, that would move both Arab and Jewish society in these directions, would serve the vital interest of the great majority of people in Palestine, as elsewhere. At least, this is my personal belief, and a belief that was surely a driving force behind the Jewish settlement of Palestine in the first place.¹⁵

Rodinson: The

Palestine War [1948] was not seen by anyone in the Arab lands as a war of liberation led by anti-British, and hence anti-colonialist, Jewish revolutionaries against pleasure-seeking feudal lords who pushed stupefied and mule-like peasants in front of them to safeguard their own class interests—as the version widely accepted by the European left would have it (a version I challenged thirteen years ago, thereby winning insults in *Les Temps Modernes*).¹⁶

Chomsky has since acknowledged the colonial practices of the kibbutz, and its ideological conformity, but still defends it as anarchist and socialist. Its radicalism is not social, but racial, as an instrument of pure Jewish settlement, as critical scholarship, ignored by Chomsky, has attested. Chomsky found it “characteristic of American ethnic minorities that they tend to support the right-wing forces in the national societies to which they often retain a cultural or economic connection. The American Jewish community is no exception.”¹⁷ Nor are Chomsky and the Jewish left, who in their own way have abandoned the classical heritage of the Enlightenment and emancipation, for their truncated critique of “anti-occupation” etc.

A universalist critique would oppose Zionism, not “the occupation.” It would recognize Zionism not simply as settler colonialism in Palestine, but as Jewish racialism, opposing Jew and gentile everywhere. It would acknowledge Zionism as the major source of genocide and destruction in western Asia, and the source of Jewish chauvinism and separatism outside Israel. It would reject the Zionist idea of *the Jewish people* in whose name the state of Israel and organized Jewry act. It would not fetishize “solutions” in maps and treaties in Palestine but focus on overcoming US support for Zionism. It would condemn the role of US organized Jewry as a quasi-sovereign, radicalizing force in US Middle East policy. It would defend a secular realm in which we think and act together. It would do this in the name of the people of Jewish background who contributed so much to modernity, from Spinoza onward, whose legacy towers over Zionism.

Instead the Chomskyite left has spun, chopped and haggled down its obligations for nearly fifty years, and won its great victory. Palestine is destroyed; Israel’s opponents are co-opted, in ruins, or under mortal threat; the US is fast becoming a police state; and criticism of Zionism’s central role is still marginal in the US. This has been a catastrophic failure, comparable to the German Communist Party’s disastrous misreading of Hitler and Nazism, which weakened the left and assisted their rise to power, and all that followed.

That’s the end of the article. But discussion along these lines is growing, like Israel’s atrocities. Enzo Traverso, a European Marxist humanities scholar at Cornell, wrote *The End of Jewish Modernity* in

French, last year. Judaic Studies at Brown offers a course, “The End of Modern Jewish History.”

As Israel’s current Judeo-Nazi rampage began, Noam Chomsky published an attack on the boycott/divestment/sanctions movement in *The Nation*. Well known activist journalists, including Frank Barat, Max Blumenthal and Tom Suarez criticized Chomsky. Chomsky has followed his attack on BDS with an analysis of the dissolution of the Middle East that does not once mention Israel and its US supporters. This is no more tenable than his views on BDS.

All these references are collected at <http://questionofpalestine.net>

Whether the downfall of left Zionism offers any relief to the peoples of the Middle East is up to us.

Notes

¹Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused. Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank) 1894-1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 33

²Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 249

³Max Rodenbeck, "Their Master's Voice," *New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2006

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/mar/09/their-masters-voice/> (December 21, 2003)

⁴Stephen M. Walt, "When did the American empire start to decline?"

⁵Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, p. 561.

⁶Noel Ignatiev, "Memoir of an Ex-Jew 6,"

<http://www.pmpress.org/content/article.php/201011020239521>

⁷Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (New York: Verso, 2009); Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Land of Israel* (New York: Verso, 2012)

⁸Ofer Aderet, "The Gospel according to Sand: We are not Jews," *Haaretz*, May 19, 2013

<http://www.haaretz.com/culture/books/the-gospel-according-to-sand-we-are-not-jews.premium-1.524748>

⁹Chomsky, *Middle East Illusions*, p. 46.

¹⁰Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* p. 79.

¹¹Chomsky, *Middle East Illusions*, p. 40.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 62

¹³Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, p. 106.

¹⁴Bober, ed., *The Other Israel*, pp. 106-8.

¹⁵Chomsky, *Middle East Illusions*, pp. 60-1.

¹⁶Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, p. 70.

¹⁷Chomsky, *Middle East Illusions*, p. 42.