

# **Jews and the Left: Between History and Memory**

## **An International Workshop**

### ***Abstracts***

**November 20, 2019**

#### **Historical Approaches**

**Alex Valdman**, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev & Bar-Ilan University

#### ***The Pupils' Will? Jewish Secondary Students and the Question of Political Radicalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia***

Radicalism among East European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a well-known and extensively researched issue. Apparently, adoption of radical ideologies and engagement in political activism was especially widespread among young Jewish men and women. Radical ideologies provided a timely alternative to the waning traditional modes of Jewish self-identification; they allowed young Jews to reframe their social alignment in modern and modernist terms – either as contributors to a Jewish nationalist endeavor, or as members of an inclusive socialist or liberal project.

At the same time, it is quite clear that only a small fraction of young Jewish people took part in radical – or, indeed, in any organized political – activity. In my presentation I will address the gap between the place Jewish radicalism in historical representation, and the actual influence it had on young Jewish men and women in the late nineteenth century Pale of Settlement. I will focus on the presence and influence of radical ideas among Jewish students of secondary schools, that functioned in different localities throughout the Pale.

Drawing on primary materials from several East European archives, I will provide a contextualized perspective on the Jewish students' involvement in radical activism. I will show how radical ideologies and activities were only one part of broader, underexplored social background, that included engagement in the secondary students' subculture, and internalization of ideas of social activism and communal commitment, typical to the contemporary Russian critical public discourse. I will claim that these general factors – rather than refined ideological formulas or well-organized political cells – played the pivotal role in Jewish students' socialization as modern, activist, political subjects.

**Katarzyna Czerwonogóra**, Tel Aviv University

#### ***Jewish Women and the Left: Men, Nation and Revolution in the Lives of Rosa Luxemburg, Puah Rakovsky and Rahel Katznelson-Shazar***

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), Puah Rakovsky (1865-1955) and Rahel Katznelson-Shazar (1885-1975) were three modern Jewish women who at the turn of the twentieth century joined different movements on the Left. Concerned with the questions of national belonging, and interested in radical social change, all three developed various political affiliations. Luxemburg never denied her Jewish background but declared solidarity with all oppressed people on earth and became an important figure in the world socialist movement. Rakovsky combined a commitment to socialism with a support for Jewish national determination. However, disappointed with how the Zionist idea was put into practice in

British Mandate Palestine, she later developed an interest in communism. Rahel Katznelson emigrated from Russia to Palestine and worked there in the local Jewish labor movement. After the state of Israel was established, she remained a left-oriented Israeli politician.

What can the lives of the three women tell us about the Jewish women's relations to the Left?

In that presentation I will explore family background, education and intimate relationships with politically involved men as factors shaping the three women's negotiations of their political identifications.

**David Juenger**, University of Sussex

### ***Holocaust Memory, Civil Rights and Jewish Survival: The Case of Rabbi Joachim Prinz***

My paper explores the involvement of the German-American Rabbi Joachim Prinz (1902–1988) in the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I will argue that Prinz's experience with Nazi oppression deeply shaped his personality and crucially influenced his political activism in postwar America and his quest for a renewal of American Jewry. Prinz's involvement in the Civil Rights struggle was part and parcel of his overall thinking on the ramifications of the Holocaust for American Jewry and his understanding of Zionism after the founding of Israel.

## **Philosophical Questions**

**Gilad Sharvit**, Towson University, Maryland

### ***Jews as a Diasporic Minority: Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Judith Butler and the Return of the "Jewish Question"***

The left's ideological conversation in the current (mostly) post-Marxist framework tends to focus on the nation-state as a critical place-holder for critique of nationalism and militarism, state control and domination, economic exploitation, and processes of hegemonization. In this context, the relations, indeed the disparity, between Israel—as the Jewish nation-state—and the Jewish exile—a special form of communal and political organization which offers actual alternative to the Jewish nation State, became a test case for radical thought. Specifically, thinkers such as Daniel Boyarin and Amnon Raz Krakortzkin famously offer to see in the Jewish exile a model for a radical form of political organization that averts the inherent afflictions of the modern nation state.

This presentation aims to elaborate on this conversation by focusing on the place of notions of Jewish minority. I am especially interested to explore how minorization, i.e. the process of becoming a minority, which build on the Jewish experience, structure new paradigms of left ideology. The presentation will focus first on the works of German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig and then on those of the Jewish American philosopher Judith Butler.

**Gilad Shenhav**, Tel Aviv University & Goethe University, Frankfurt

### ***Messianic Remembrance and "the Case for Reparations"***

In 2014, the American author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates published in the Atlantic magazine a long and detailed piece entitled "The Case for Reparations." In the article which still provokes intellectual debates, Coates documents

stories of African American families who suffer to this day from the aftermaths of slavery and white oppression. Based on these particular and detailed stories, Coates argues that the American government should consider compensating the black community for the sufferings and damages caused to them by the white man throughout the generations.

Seemingly, Coates' argument is anti-messianic, he anticipates no full reconciliation in American society, and offers instead of a redemptive horizon, a careful calculation of damages and compensations in our concrete present. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that reading Coates' seminal article together with specific messianic narratives reveals a different picture. Informed by similar ideas in the Babylonian Talmud, Walter Benjamin offers in his *Theses On the Concept of History*, to redeem the past by uncovering the stories of those who were defeated and silenced by oppressors throughout history. Benjamin depicts a redeemed era, as a world in which everything is documented, and no historic event is forgotten. My paper will demonstrate how by calling for reparations through careful documentation of particular injustices, Coates takes part in the "Benjaminian messianic task"; Without asking for a radical eschatological rupture, Coates' demand and methodology participate in revealing the fully-documented messianic era. By reading Coates with Benjamin, this paper hopes to offer a new perspective for thinking about current challenges of the left alongside with non-eschatological narratives in Jewish messianic philosophy.

## **Literary Encounters**

**Yarden Ben Zur**, Tel Aviv University

### ***Reading Shakespeare in Postwar Munich: Gustav Landauer and the Bavarian Revolution, 1918-1919***

The Bavarian Revolution in Munich, was next to Berlin, the most important site of political leftist resistance in the aftermath of the First World War. The revolution, which was brutally oppressed by the freikorps, who was sent by the central social democrat government in Berlin, can be seen as archetypic for the ongoing failure of revolutionary attempts in Germany since 1848. In my lecture I will examine the role of Gustav Landauer and his literary perceptions, mostly his original reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* in the political events of the time. Landauer was one of many Jewish writers who took part in the revolution as political leaders, among them also Kurt Eisner, Ernst Toller, Erich Mühsam and Eugen Levine.

**Mia Spiro**, University of Glasgow

### ***Antifascism and the Jews in 1930s British Literature***

This paper will examine the key role Jews played in the literary antifascist movement in Britain in the 1930s. Arguably, no other period in British history has galvanized intellectuals and literature figures to become politically active as did the 1930s. Indeed, rarely has the belief that artists and writers *could* influence politics been stronger than in the interwar years. As I will demonstrate, throughout the decade Jews played decisive roles in the fight against fascism as both symbolic figures within antifascist literature (with the problematic stereotypes associated with this), and as 'actual' key players in literary culture as writers, publishers, and activists in organizations spanning a wide range of political platforms on the Left, such as Communist Party (CPGB) affiliated organizations like the Left Book Club, Writer's International, and more conventional liberal organizations like PEN International. By outlining the way Jews influenced antifascist writing, we can better understand 1930s literary culture and its close ties to international politics as the

political and social theories of a cultural revolution that, at least for a short while, writers believed could solve the political turmoil.

**Noam Gil**, Tel Aviv University

### ***Occupying Jewishness: Reclaiming the Postcolonial in Twenty-First Century Jewish Literature***

In my talk, I intend to reformulate the Jewish American critique on Israel in recent years in literary terms, namely, how postcolonial perspectives regarding Zionism are utilized in literature towards the emergence of a new sensibility in 21st century Jewish American Literature.

By discussing Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016), I will argue that the state of Israel provides an opportunity for Jewish writers to identify themselves in terms that are distinctly antithetical to Zionism, to be once more a part of the postcolonial club from which they were excluded in literary studies.

## **Contemporary Concerns**

**Moshe Naor**, University of Haifa

### ***The Left and Mizrahi Jews: The Sephardi Problem and the Arab Question in Mandate Palestine***

The “ethnic problem” in Israel, as a social phenomenon and the subject of research, relates among other aspects to an examination of the status of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in Israel and the absorption of Jews from the Middle Eastern countries in Israeli society. The roots of this issue lie in the history of the Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews prior to the processes of uprooting and crisis that were created across the Middle East during the 1948 War. During the Mandate period itself, public discourse on what was already referred to as the “Sephardi problem” included such aspects as the educational and cultural condition of the Sephardim and Mizrahim; the social and economic realities that faced the residents of poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of the cities and in the peripheral areas of the Yishuv; and the extent to which the Mizrahi public identified with the Zionist movement and was familiar with the Zionist ideal.

In this lecture we will examine the affinity between the “Sephardi question” and the “Arab question” during the British Mandate period and discuss various areas in which this was manifested. This affinity included discussion of the hybrid Jewish-Arab identity of the Mizrahim, their attitude toward the Zionist movement, their identification with the Zionist ideal, and their self-perception as those best placed to manage relations between Jews and Arabs and to mediate between the two nations. The lecture will examine the question of the changing status of Mizrahi Jews during the Mandate period and the attitude of their leadership to the Arab question. This examination will include attention to the approach of the Mizrahi elite toward the solutions proposed by the left for the Arab question and toward Socialist-Zionism and the labor movement in general.

**Johannes Becke**, Heidelberg Center for Jewish Studies

***Philozionism in the Radical German Left***

Since the 1990s, parts of the radical German Left have shifted towards a vicarious identification with the Zionist project. While the movement of the "Antideutsche" (Anti-Germans) has raised eyebrows, not least in Israel, the phenomenon has not been researched systematically or from a comparative perspective. The paper will sketch the contours of this research agenda by integrating Philozionism in the radical German Left into the broader history of post-Maoism.

**Yifat Gutman**, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

***The Suffering of the Other: Nakba Memory Activism in Contemporary Israel***

The forceful transfers of ethnic minorities by nation-states have been remembered not only by the uprooted and their decedents but also by the majority that initiated and executed the displacement. Both sides' efforts have been framed by a global paradigm of reconciliation that views addressing violent pasts as a prerequisite to any sustainable peace. This paradigm has developed since the 1980s into a multi-layer paradigm where officials, scholars, civil society organizations and activists, take part. It deepened the tension between nationalist governments and liberal civil society groups. The international legitimacy and authority to liberal efforts to remember the suffering of the other as human rights violations clashed with domestic nationalist discourse that views such endeavors, as well as airing past violence in general, as "damaging the good name of the nation," and therefore betraying the national majority. Jewish-Israeli memory activists who have been remembering the Palestinian displacement in the 1948 war serves as a pertinent case to examine this clash in Israel since 2000.