

THE JEWISH MIDDLE CLASS IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Dr. Nancy Sinkoff

Professor of Jewish Studies and History

Academic Director

The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life

Rutgers University

nsinkoff@rutgers.edu

Purchase Dr. Sinkoff's book, *From Left to Right: Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of Jewish History*, winner of the 2020 National Jewish Book Award in the category of biography and the Natan Notable Book for fall 2020 [here](#). Use discount code **LD21** for 30% off.

Questions

- What are the obstacles, if there are any, for Jews to be part of the current progressive moment in American politics?
- If the Jewish community, speaking broadly, views the middle class as a bulwark of civic stability, what roles can it play in movements to redress socio-economic inequality?
- Can the Jewish community reconfigure its own values of upward socio-economic mobility to be more in sync with “progressive” social groups? Should it?
- In other words, can the Jewish community be an ally in the social justice agenda for the redistribution of wealth?
- What is the modern Jewish history that informs these questions?

Centralizing Absolutism (late 18th century) and the problem of “Jewish” economic life

(Utility, paternalism, uniformity, duty, economic productivity in the context of a well-ordered state could produce civil happiness: these were the watchwords of centralizing absolutist politics)

- **Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (Prussia, 1782):** “The hard and oppressive conditions under which the Jews live almost everywhere would explain, although not justify, an even worse corruption than they actually can be accused of. It is very natural that these conditions cause the spirit of the Jew to lose the habit of noble feelings, to be submerged in the base routine of earning a precarious livelihood. The varied oppression and contempt he experiences are bound to debase him in his activities, to choke every sense of honor in his heart. As there are almost no honest means of earning a living left to him it is natural that he falls into criminal practices and fraud, especially since commerce more than other trades seduces people to such practices. . . . [Thus,] no humiliating discrimination should be tolerated, no way of earning a living should be closed to them, none other than the regular taxes demanded from them.”

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Joseph II (Austria, *Toleranzpatent* for Galicia, 1789): “[31:] Permission is given to the Jews to work at any occupation and administrative business allowed by law. From now on all restrictions that existed until now and were imposed only on the Jews will be completely abolished. [32]: The Jews will be forbidden to lease more than what encourages that diligence that the state means to instill in the Jews, beyond that which only increases idleness, and until activity and diligence in other occupations has become widespread among them. . . . [35:] In addition to manual labor, inherited occupations and leases are allowed to Galician Jews in all trades and all manner of goods, as long as they keep the general laws of commerce and manage their register book according to the directives and in the language of the state.”

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Alexander I (Russia), Edicts of 1804:

“II. THE STATUS, OCCUPATIONS AND RIGHTS OF THE JEWS

11. All the Jews are divided into four classes: (a) farmers, (b) manufacturers and craftsmen, (c) merchants and (d) city dwellers 13. Jews who are farmers, as well as those who are manufacturers, craftsmen, merchants and city dwellers, are allowed to purchase and own property in the unpopulated areas of the provinces of Lithuania, Belorussia (White Russia), Little Russia, Kiev, Minsk, Volhynia, Podolia, Astrakhan, Caucasus, Ekaterinoslav, Kherson and Tsabaria. They may sell the land, lease it, bequeath it or bestow it as a gift. 18. No Jew will be compelled to engage in agriculture in the aforementioned provinces, but those who do, shall be exempt from payment of taxes for a period of ten years.”

Enlightened Jews (*Maskilim*) and the Problem of Jewish Education and Economy

Naftali Herz Wessely (1725-1805)

From his 1782 *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet*, in support of Joseph II's edicts:

“[Joseph II] has not forgotten a poor people, long abused [the Jews]. He gave us many good and consoling commands He has unshackled the disabling bonds by permitting the Jews to engage in all forms of cultivation of the land, to work in all crafts and trade to trade in all merchandise. . . . Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, history and geography. . . are to be studied from existing books used by the children of the kingdom, for these sciences do not impinge upon faith. . . Knowledge of these subjects can only strengthen the House of Israel and mend the breaches made by the preceding rulers. . . . And thus, the children of Israel will also be men who accomplish worthy things, assisting the king's country in their actions, labor and wisdom.”

Enlightened Jews and the Problem of Jewish Work

Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788-1869) and Judah Leib Gordon (1831-1892)

As reported by the *maskil* Abraham Baer Gottlober: “[Levinsohn’s 1828 *Testimony in Israel*’s purpose was to explain how important education was, that besides learning Hebrew systematically, one should learn other languages, especially the language of the country. . . . Not content with stimulating the young people to seek knowledge, he also petitioned the government to establish Russian-language schools for Jews and to teach them skills necessary to till the soil.”

Gordon: “Wake Up, My People!” (1866):

“Raise your head high, straighten your back,/And gaze with loving eyes upon them,/Open your heart to wisdom and knowledge,

Become an enlightened people, and speak their language./Every man of understanding should try to gain knowledge;

Let others learn all manner of arts and crafts;/Those who are brave should serve in the army;/The farmers should buy ploughs and fields.”

Marx's Critiques of "Jewish" Commerce (*On the Jewish Question*, 1844)

“If you Jews want to be emancipated politically without emancipating yourselves as men, the incompleteness and contradiction is not only to you, it is in the nature and category of political emancipation. . . . What is the worldly basis of Judaism? Practical necessity, selfishness. What is the world culture of Jewry? Commerce. The emancipation from commerce and from money, from the practical real Judaism, would be the self-emancipation of our age. . . . Money debases all gods of men—and transforms them into commodities. Money is the common value of all things constituted for itself. So it robbed the whole universe, the world of men, of nature, of their specific values. Money is the essence of man's labor and existence, alienated from man, and this alien being rules him and he adores it.?”

Jewish Socialist and Communist Embrace of the Working Class

The Jewish secular socialist movements created children's schools in interwar Poland and in the United States. The Workmen's Circle adopted these goals in 1918-1920: [To acquaint the children]: “With the life of the worker and of the broad Jewish masses in America and other countries. . . , with the episodes in general history of the struggle for freedom [to] develop within them the feeling of justice, love for the oppressed, love of freedom and respect for fighters for freedom. . . [to] develop within them idealism and the striving to perform noble acts. . . necessary for every child of the oppressed class in making his way through life towards a better order.”

(“All Power to the Working Class”)

William Gropper, *Der groyser kundes, The Big Stick*, 1930s



The Zionist Critique of the Jewish Middle Class and the Allure of Physical Work (agriculture)

Hashomer Hatzair (“The Young Guard” founded in 1913) adopted a Marxist-Zionist ideology and stressed the need for the Jewish people to normalize their lives by changing their economic structure (as merchants) and to become workers and farmers, who would settle in the Land of Israel and work the land as “*chalutzim*” (pioneers). They were influenced, as well, by the burgeoning socialist movement, and they dreamt of creating in their new homeland a society based on social justice and equality.



Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, 1946-47. Collection: US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915-1990)

From Immigrant Working-Class, Leftist Daughter to Middle-Class Independent Neoconservative

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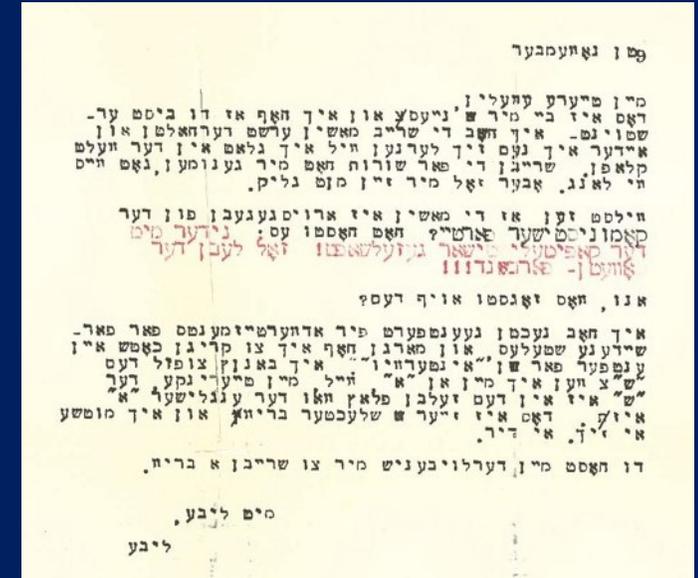
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NOVEMBER, 1935

HUNTER COLLEGE QUARTERLY

“Art, in order to flourish, must focus on and reveal the flux and flow of the lives of the masses of people. . . . Now we are threatened by war and the imminence of fascism. The artist, who creates culture, who cherishes and absorbs for his material the living pulse of the masses, must act against the obvious destruction and reaction that is bred by war and fascism. He must take sides not only for his own self-preservation, but for the enlightenment and redemption of all of society. There is no other intelligent position: either the artist is for war and fascism and the destruction of both thought and life, or he is for a society based on civil liberty and personal freedom. . . . It is the responsibility of the artist to destroy the myths which foster the war spirit; to reveal the paradox in our society of starvation amid abundance; and finally to clarify to the broad groups of workers, farmers, and intellectuals the organic relationship between war and fascism.”



“Do you see that the typewriter comes from the Communist Party?”

[In red ribbon]: ‘Down with the capitalist system! Long live the Soviet Union!’”

Making Peace with Capitalism

Upheavals of the 1960s/early 1970s, erosion of the civic center:

- Anti-war movement/Vietnam and Anti-Americanism
- Militance of Civil Rights Movement
- Jewish mobility as an obstacle to the mobility of Americans of color
- Suburbanization and flight from the urban center
- Fallout from the Six-Day-War: Zionism as Racism (1973 Mexico City; radicalization of the United Nations, 1975))
- *Commentary* magazine symposium, 1978: “Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy” The editors posited “an inescapable connection between capitalism and democracy,” as well as a “totalitarian temptation . . . intrinsic to socialism,” and then invited a group of prominent economists, philosophers, social scientists, historians, journalists, and other public figures to weigh in.

“Productivization” and the Distrust of Radicalism on the part of Young Jews and Their Role in Civil Rights

“I would be most interested in a history of the idea of “productivization,” its origins and applications. I am convinced that it originated as an anti-Jewish concept, was introduced by the early maskilim into Jewish thought and later widely disseminated by the radical Jewish and non-Jewish movements.”

Dawidowicz to Max Weinreich, November 1965

“They share the Marxist-cum-populist distrust of the merchant and the middleman. Most, escaping from the bourgeois comforts of home, shout their contempt for the Jewish community, which for them is merely momma and poppa. They have disdain for Judaism and its institutions. To what extent have these Jews influenced Negroes, reinforcing Negro feelings of hostility and providing Negroes with ideological rationalization and psychological justifications of antisemitism?”

Dawidowicz to the AJC leadership, March 1966

“At what point does legitimate business and [sic] ‘exploitation’ begin?”

Dawidowicz, “Draft Proposal for a Study of Negro-White Customer-Merchant Relations,” on October 9, 1967, and “Proposal for a Study of Negro-white Customer-merchant Relations” on January 31, 1968.

“‘Exploitation’” is here being used in a pejorative sense—a usage becoming increasingly common. When used to describe Negro-white customer-merchant relations, the words suggests that the merchant is basely, illegitimately, and unethically taking advantage of his customer. It evokes the Marxist definition of exploitation, in the image of the bloodsucker, making profit from the labor of others.” [To counter these charges and the increased use of the term, research had to be conducted. The most basic question, she suggested, was] “At what point does legitimate business and ‘exploitation’ begin?”

Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915-1990)

From Immigrant Working-Class, Leftist Daughter to Middle-Class Independent Neoconservative



“I want to know how Jews in America made a living from 1789 until 1967, the *terminus ad quem* which I have set for my history.”

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THE BUSINESS OF AMERICAN JEWS

(NOTES ON WORK IN PROGRESS)

In 1928 the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow published an article, “Vos felt in undzer ekonomisher geshikhte” (What Is Missing in Our Economic History), in the first volume of YIVO’s *Ekonomishe Shriftn*. The title signals the gist of Dubnow’s complaint concerning the undeveloped status of Jewish economic history. Three years later, Julius Brutzkus, another chronicler of Russian Jewry, characterized economic history as the stepchild of Jewish historiography. Nearly three decades later, Cecil Roth, in a bibliographical essay on the economic history of the Jews, described the field as “largely a matter of hit-and-miss.” More recently, Lawrence Schofer, in the 1979 *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, characterized it as “something episodic, anecdotal, and ill-organized.”

All these historians were lamenting the backward state of Jewish economic history in Europe. What shall we say, then, of the economic history of American Jewry?

For some years now I have been engaged in research in preparation for writing a broad-gauged history of American Jews. What I have learned has led me to conclude that economic history is an essential and indispensable element in American Jewish historiography—more so than in the history of the Jews in other places. Indeed, in the United States the history of Jews, as I see it, has been for the most part a history of their social and economic evolution.

Defending the Jewish Middle Class

“I would like to restore to the merchant and businessman the recognition of their social usefulness and the moral dignity of which they were stripped first by the French Enlightenment, then by the German Marxists, and finally by the East European revolutionaries. . . . All of us are, by the force of Jewish tradition, heirs to those ideas which for generations have denigrated trade and commerce, and which have romanticized the peasant and the proletariat.”

Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “The Business of American Jews”

Questions

- Do you think being middle-class, which has afforded American Jews an unprecedented level of integration and security into this society, is a value that should be celebrated—as did Lucy S. Dawidowicz? Or do you think that the predominance of Jews in the middle class puts them on the wrong side of the “social justice” critique today?
- Is there a way to reconcile the socio-economic status of the Jews with a commitment to the progressive causes championed on the left, and among young Jews?
- What are the obstacles, if there are any, for Jews to be part of the current progressive moment in American politics?
- If the Jewish community, speaking broadly, views the middle class as a bulwark of civic stability, what roles can it play in movements to redress socio-economic inequality?
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