

Dedicated to all of my “radical” teachers, especially
Morris U. Schappes, long-time editor of *Jewish Currents*,
who nurtured and mentored me over the years.

Where there is no vision, the people perish.
— Biblical proverb

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Preface

In June 1962, the newly formed Students for a Democratic Society completed the Port Huron Statement that launched what became known as the New Left, a broad-based movement mostly of young Americans who subjected America to a systemic critique of politics, economics, racial, social, and military practices. The year 1962 was an auspicious year in that it preceded major Civil Rights legislation and the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam by only a year or two and followed only two years after the FDA approved the birth control pill in June 1960.

The New Left was in part a break from the old left, or Roosevelt's liberalism, arguing that the inequities, injustices, and military imperialism of America in the Cold War era ran counter to America's principles of freedom and equality. In a way, it was a movement to save America by undermining it. This gave birth to the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley during the 1964-65 academic year, the rise of Black Nationalism in 1966, and the students protests and riots in 1968. By the end of the 1960s, early Baby Boomers were making their voices heard in an America that was becoming increasingly unsettled and unstable.

In those tumultuous years, the term "radical" was often worn as a badge of honor, a statement of conviction and a belief that there were no good incremental solutions to systemic problems. To be a radical meant to stand on the forefront of a progressive critique of American liberalism, as conservatism, emerging with Barry Goldwater's failed 1965 run against Lyndon Johnson, had not yet become a political force to be reckoned with at least until the end of the 1960s with the election of Richard Nixon and the rise of the Moral Majority.

American Jews were disproportionately represented in the New Left. Some were "red diaper babies," children of socialists or communists from

a pre-war era, some were radicalized through a variety of political and cultural portals, from the Beat's literary movement of the 1950s, to civil rights, to rock and roll and LSD. But something happened to many New Left Jews around 1966. Stokley Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), one of the leaders of SNCC, gave a speech on June 16, 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi, that launched the Black Nationalist movement. In that speech he argued that the movement needed to be by blacks and for blacks and essentially marginalized the many whites who risked their lives for the cause of civil rights, from the Freedom Riders of 1961 to those who marched in Selma in 1965. And it included many Jews who played leadership roles in organizations like the NAACP.

Carmichael's speech in 1966 was followed the next year with the Six-Day War in Israel in June 1967. That September, at the New Politics Conference in Chicago, the conference members adopted a position opposing "Zionist colonialism" in response to the war and its consequences, what would become known as "the occupation." Black Nationalists had adopted that they called "Third-Worldism," a doctrine that viewed oppression of people of color worldwide as part of their agenda of black liberation. Palestinians were included in that agenda.

This move alienated many Jews from the New Left who viewed this anti-Israel proposal as unfair, unjustified, and immoral. Over the course of the next few years many young Jews, radicalized by New Left politics, abandoned the movement and began to re-think their own Jewish identities. Many were also critical of Israel's politics, many were not, and Israel was not really the center of their new-found identity but rather the occasion for a re-assessment of Judaism in a radicalized frame.

The result was the rise of a plethora of new Jewish publications, student newspapers, organizations such as "The Jewish Liberation Project" "The Radical Zionist Agenda," "The Brooklyn Bridge Coalition," "Havurat Shalom" and the "Radical Jewish Student Union." Journals such as *Genesis 2*, (Boston) *The Jewish Radical* (Berkeley), *Response* (Boston), *Voice of Micha* (Washington, DC) *Hashofar* (Cleveland), and *Columbia Jewish Free Press* (NYC) disseminated radical political essays, poetry, literature, and artwork. These Jews were moving from "Jewish radicals to radical Jews," a phrase coined by Arthur Waskow in his 1971 book *The Bush is Burning: Radical Judaism Faces the Pharaohs of the Super State*. Alienated from the New Left but committed to radical politics, many of these young Jews, called "New Jews" (the title of a 1971 book edited by James Sleeper and Alan Mintz),

began to make inroads into American Jewry by attacking the complacency and materialism of the American Jewish establishment of the 1960s. Jewish Federations, large suburban synagogues, and quiescent responses to the war and issues such as Soviet Jewry, became subject to verbal and sometimes even physical attack by this new generation of New Jews.

By 1973 this movement had gained considerable notoriety in the American Jewish landscape. Communities such as Havurat Shalom in Somerville, MA, The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, The Manhattan Havurah in NYC, and Fabrengen in Washington DC were lay-led Jewish experimental communities founded on the principles of New Leftism. In that year Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier published an anthology entitled *Jewish Radicalism*. A volume whose cover had the stenciled fist used by the Black Panthers and later The Jewish Defense League, with a Jewish Star enshrined inside the fist.

Published by Grove Press, the volume was typical of its time. The paperback costs \$2.75 (the hardcover slightly more). The volume was dedicated to “The men and women of the radical movement, both here in the United States and abroad,” with the famous saying of Hillel the Elder, “If I am not for myself who will be for me?”

Jewish Radicalism was one of the first, and arguably the best anthology of Jewish radical thought of that period. Nusan Porter continued to publish essays and books subsequent to his editing *Jewish Radicalism*. In this volume, *The Radical Writings of Jack Nusan Porter*, we present a collection of Nusan Porter’s writings spanning over three decades. It addresses the major issues that exercised radical Jews from the 1960s to the present. Nusan Porter writes about Zionism and its discontent, radicalism, race relations, activism, and even his secret affiliation with the JDL while he was a progressive radical Jew.

We are more than half a century past that intense and creative moment in American Jewish history. Much has happened. And yet in some way much stays the same. Racism still exists, the Israeli occupation still exists, sexism still exists, classism still exists, the battle between Jewish liberalism and Jewish progressivism still exists, and now a more recent Jewish (neo)conservatism has become part of the American Jewish landscape. The Occupy Wall Street movement was a brief moment whose after-shocks are beginning to be felt in the rise of Bernie Sanders, the rise of a new Jewish socialism in the revival of *Jewish Currents* magazine, and the rise of Jewish Social Justice movements. A new generation of Jewish millennials and Gen

Zers have pushed through the decades fed by the Reagan era to flex their newly found radical muscle in a variety of new agendas, projects, and programs. Gender, which was not at the forefront of the earlier Jewish radicals, at least until the early to mid-1970s, is now front and center, accompanied by a broader conversation about gender identity that extends far beyond questions of rights and equality.

It is for this reason that *The Radical Writings of Jack Nusan Porter* is appropriate for our time. While for some readers the essays may seem dated, in some way they remain very relevant. In post-Reagan America “radicalism” has become a pejorative term, a way to discredit an interlocutor. I hope *The Radical Writings of Jack Nusan Porter* will help change that. May a new generation of aspiring radicals be inspired by the old guard to find their own way. And may you succeed.

Shaul Magid
May 22, 2020
Thetford Center, Vermont

Introduction: The Roots of Jewish Radicalism

The Rationale

Why are Jews radicals? Why do they work against their class interests? This has nonplussed Republican experts for decades. The percentages may vary from 60-90%, but Jews are always way over 50% for Democrats and progressives. The reasons are many and go back to Jewish history. I summarize them below, based on the late historian Robert S. Wistrich in his masterful book, *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky*, in his opening chapter, “Jews and Socialism”:

1. Jews are outsiders;
2. Jews have the prophetic tradition;
3. Jews care about the oppressed, the disabled, the widowed, and the orphaned;
4. Jews go against their class interests; in Marxian terms, they live like capitalists yet vote like proletarians.

The History: 1881-1914

The grandparents and great-grandparents of today's radicals came to America from Russia and Poland for the most part. True, there were smaller numbers of German and Sephardic Jews, but the vast majority of American (and world Jewry) came from Eastern Europe and brought with them a variety of radical ideologies (Marxism, Socialism, Communism, Bundism, Labor Zionism), as did many other Europeans (Italians such as Sacco and Vanzetti, Greeks, Scandinavians, Germans).

They came to the impoverished urban centers—Jews are urban people; they did not go to the mines and forests of Maine or Pennsylvania or to the wild west of Colorado or Wyoming or Texas, but to urban centers like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee—the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the West End of Boston, the South Side of Chicago, the “Inner City” of Milwaukee.

Their language was Yiddish, not Hebrew or German, and they began to “organize.” In 1907, the United Hebrew Trades comprised 74 affiliated unions and 50,000 members. By 1914, it had soared to 104 unions and over 250,000 members. The Jewish unions were the backbone of the Socialist Party of America, which had its own Yiddish-speaking wing.

The radical Yiddish press—communist, anarchist, socialist, Zionist, anti-Zionist, Bundist, religious or secular—was all widely read and influential. The largest publication was Abraham Cahan’s *The Jewish Daily Forward*, which reached over 200,000 readers in 1916.

Yiddish writers such as Shalom Asch, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Shalom Aleichem were widely read. Yiddish theater flourished. Today there is an English-language newspaper, *The Forward*, and a small Yiddish *Forward*. Only Orthodox Jews have larger Yiddish-speaking readers and press.

Socialist mayors were elected in Milwaukee as early as 1916 and as late as 1951 (Frank Zeidler). They were called “sewer socialists,” more interested in fixing the roads and bridges than engaging in “permanent revolution,” and they were beloved. Madison, Wisconsin, has a socialist (and Jewish) mayor to this day, Paul Soglin.

After the Russian Revolution: 1917-1939

After the successful revolt by Communists in the Soviet Union, communism grew all over the world, and with it, Jewish participation. In fact, many of the early Communist leaders—Leon Trotsky, Lazar Kaganovich, and even Vyacheslav Molotov’s wife—were renegade Jews. In fact, Marxism became known as a substitute religion for secular Jews and non-Jews, with Marx as God and Lenin as Moses the Prophet.

Sociologist Nathan Glazer estimated that fully one-third of the American Communist Party was Jewish—or about 15,000; and if you added “fellow travelers”—admirers, spouses and friends—easily ten times that. Communists were active in all aspects of American life and especially in trade unions, from teachers to longshoremen.

Communism was also very attractive to intellectuals, both literary and cinematic. New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles had large numbers of Communist members, especially in the movie industry. Walt Disney was shocked when his illustrators of Minnie and Mickey and Donald Duck walked out on strike, desiring higher wages and better health benefits.

The Decline of the Old Left: 1939-1959

Several events traumatized and confused the Old Left:

1. *The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.* The so-called Hitler-Stalin Pact was a tremendous blow to the morale of the Communist and Socialist parties. How could Stalin make “peace” with this fascist?
2. *The Establishment of the State of Israel.* While the Soviet Union did recognize the nascent state in 1948-1949, the honeymoon was short-lived as they moved onto support for the Arab League. This left the Old Left fumbling for a rationale. Should they be Zionists and supporters of Israel or toe the party line against Israel? Many compromised by supporting Israel but rejecting Zionism as defined as Israel being the center of Jewish life. America, England, or whatever diaspora country they were in would be the center of their lives, but they would support Israel financially, politically, and emotionally.
3. *The Hard Line of the Communist Party.* This was the famous struggle between the Stalinist Left that hewed to a tough Communist line and the Trotskyite and other offshoots that desired a softer, more flexible line. In many ways it was the difference between a strict religious cult (Stalinism) and a more flexible approach to life.
4. *A Powerful Anti-Left Suppression.* This included Communists and Socialists losing their jobs, being blackballed, jailed, and even murdered. This movement was called McCarthyism, named after Senator Joe McCarthy, ironically from the progressive state of Wisconsin.

The Silent Years: The 1950s

Best epitomized by such movies as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the 1950s were a time of defensiveness, caution,

isolationism and conformity and were filled with anti-Communist jingoism. Red-baiting, homophobia, racism, fear of the atomic bomb, and anti-Semitism all merged together, and at times led by such hypocrites and self-loathing men as Roy Cohn, who was both Jewish and gay. Cohn, who ironically bridged the generation to Donald Trump, led the charge against “commie Jews” and “fags.” People wanted “normalcy” and quiet. With increased affluence, people left the ghettos of the inner cities and moved to the suburbs. People tried to keep a low profile.

Yet the 1950s teemed with resentment—African-Americans, rebels, hipsters, rock-and-roll. Things were going to burst.

The Radical Years: 1963-1971

It took a while, and it came as a surprise, but after John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, the ghettos exploded and, soon after, the campuses exploded into riot and protest.

What was the difference between the Old Left and the New Left?

What were the divisions within the New Left between hippies, Yippies (Youth International Party members), and radicals? Between blacks and whites? Women and men? Gays and straights?

Why were there so many Jews in the radical movements?

All of these questions I have tried to answer in this book, through my essays from the '60s and '70s.

Post-1967: The Rise of Jewish Radical Movements

Why did specifically Jewish radical movements arise in 1967, after the Israeli-Arab Six-Day War? That was the crucial year. They arose as a reaction to the growing anti-Israel and anti-Semitic sentiments of black and white radical groups such as the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I collected the writings of such newborn Jewish radical groups in my classic book *Jewish Radicalism*, which came out in 1973.

What exactly did these radical Jewish movements do?

Freedom Seders, Soviet Jewish Rallies, Trees for Vietnam, the rise of Jewish studies, collectives, *chavurot*, new forms of prayer and traditions, more democracy in the Jewish community, new roles for women and

gays—all of these were examples of the new times. Basically, these Jewish groups were transforming the Jewish community just as their non-Jewish counterparts were transforming the rest of the nation.

The Conservative Reaction: Post-1967

There is an old Yiddish expression: *Az es Christlitzich, iz Yiddlezich*. Roughly it means, “As the Christians do, so too will the Jews.” That is, as non-Jews respond to events, eventually Jews would do the same, and often in the same manner.

Just as the “hard-hat” working-class Americans, the so-called “Silent Majority,” arose in the late ’60s in reaction to the rise of radical movements, so too did right-wing Zionist and neo-conservative Jews arise. They quietly did their thing, and while it took a decade or two they eventually showed their strength with the election of Ronald Reagan, and then, thirty-six years later, of Donald Trump. Liberals and the radicals were asleep at the wheel and were caught by surprise by this conservative reaction.

Just as the radical Left arose in the post-June 1967 period, after the victory in Israel, with strong opposition to Israel’s “arrogance” and “colonization” of the West Bank, Golan Heights, Sinai, and Gaza, so too did a radical Right arise in Israel (*Likkud*) and in the United States (Jewish Republicans) to oppose the general Left and the Jewish Left. While most Jews saw Israel’s 1967 victory as a great event that “saved” Israel from destruction by Arab armies, some saw the opposite—the beginning of the occupation of the West Bank and the “oppression” of the Palestinian people.

Three things happened to me on June 5, 1967, that had a profound effect on my life.

One, I had graduated with a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and was accepted to the sociology Ph.D. program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. I became a radical sociologist.

Two, I took my first and only “acid trip” at a graduation party on the East Side of Milwaukee. It had a profound effect on my mind, so profound that I told myself it would be my last “trip”—it was simply too powerful. I’m glad I did, or else I would not be here to write these memoirs. I would have been dead or strung out.

Three, the Israeli-Arab Six-Day War began June 5 with Israel’s surprise attack to the Arabs, the destruction of their airfields, and their surge across the “green line” into Sinai and the West Bank. Never had there been so

much jubilation and so few deaths. I remember my father and others wanting to send their sons and daughters to Israel to fight. Never had so much money been collected for Israel. It was a heady time.

But, as noted, there was an almost immediate reaction from the radical Left condemning Israel. This was the beginning of anti-Zionism and anti-Israel sentiment on campuses. It was at the time of the 1967 Six-Day War that I and a few others at Northwestern University founded the Jewish Student Movement, a radical Jewish movement that was progressive—we supported the black civil rights movement, we opposed the war in Vietnam, and we fought against poverty and wild capitalism, but we also supported Israel's right to exist.

This middle way was often difficult and set us up against other radicals who happened to be Jewish. Out of this tension came my book *Jewish Radicalism* and my many other articles on Jewish student activism, racism, and the war in Vietnam (several of them found in this book).

But disaffection with the Left had begun. Norman Podhoretz, in his many books including *Doings and Undoings*, *Breaking Rank*, and my favorite, *Ex-Friends*, showed how the “Old Left” split into two camps—Stalinists who supported Stalin despite his pact with Hitler in 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) and his anti-Semitism (the Doctor's Plot, the killing of Jewish intellectuals, etc.), and Trotskyites who opposed Stalin and wanted continuous revolution.

This was the first major split within the Communist Party. The second split came when Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and to some extent Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, Martin Peretz, and others opposed the New Left and their literary “fellow travelers” (Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs).

In so doing they also opposed the Jewish Left such as our group. This opposition was carried out in the pages of *Commentary* magazine but also in *The New Republic* under Martin Peretz and Leon Wieseltier. The opposition to the Left and the Jewish Left has become more sophisticated and continues to this day. One of the best examples of this neo-con critique is Jonathan Neumann's 2018 book *To Heal the World? How the Jewish Left Corrupts Judaism and Endangers Israel*.

This is a brilliant book in many ways, one of the few that dares attack and criticizes in a cogent and disciplined way, using traditional Jewish sources, Jewish Left thinkers such as Michael Lerner and Art Green, as well as groups like Breira, New Jewish Agenda, and Jewish Voice for Peace.

The title of the book is important. The question mark in the title says that “healing the world”—in Hebrew, *tikkun olam*—is actually *not* emphasized in the Bible. Neumann uses religious and political history as well as Biblical exegesis to debunk this idea and shows how the Bible was twisted by Jewish radicals and liberals to support a left-wing agenda.

Moreover, he believes Judaism based solely on *tikkun olam*, on social justice projects, leads to assimilation. It is not a firm basis for Jewish continuity. Example: despite all of the social justice projects in synagogues across the country, the intermarriage rate continues to soar. It is now over 70%. In short, all of these liberal projects, from climate control to helping immigrants, do nothing to stop the slow road to Jewish extinction as a people, according to Neumann.

Furthermore, *tikkun olam* also endangers Israel. Our first priority, Neumann says, must be a concern for the safety, security, welfare, and survival of the Jewish community here in the West and in Israel, not Native Americans, Darfurians, transgender people, Palestinians, and other “oppressed.” This is the old Jewish struggle between particularism and universalism. Who should I be for?

It is at the heart of Hillel the Elder’s famous injunction: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” (*Ethics of the Fathers*, I, 14). It is a never-ending struggle to balance one’s needs with those of others.

Today’s Radicals

My generation, with few exceptions (David Horowitz, for example), has continued to promote progressive causes. Though confused and battered by Israel’s and this country’s turn to the Right, we have not sold out. But what about the younger generation of Jews, the so-called millennials, those born since 1980 or even 2000? Are they still radical?

Neo-con Norman Podhoretz was confused, frustrated, and mystified that so few Jews followed him. In fact, he wrote a book called *Why Are Jews Liberal?* And we now have a Jewish guy named Bernie Sanders, an outspoken socialist and Jew, running for President and reaching crowds of 25,000 or more in the year 2020. The majority of Jews will always be progressive, liberal and radical. The numbers may fluctuate, but it will always be that way. We may even have a Jewish socialist President of the United States. Who could have imagined it?

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