

Review: Philip Mendes, *Jews and the Left The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2014). pp. xii, 352pp. Cloth \$134.95, Kindle, \$81.15.

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This volume attempts to provide a “systematic historical and political overview of the relationship of the relationship between the Jews and the Left”. Regrettably, because of its vast and uncontrolled panoptical scope, the book is quite uneven, because, there are problems with the book’s evidentiary methodology, including lack of familiarity with the languages of Jewish scholarship (particularly Yiddish and Hebrew), that put in doubt its competency as a work of original scholarship.

The book’s core thesis is that activist Jews, since the emergence of social democratic parties in the nineteenth century have tended to have an attenuated identity, one more concerned with universalist values and goals than particular Jewish concerns. The reason for this that there was a more common cause with social democratic parties who were mostly, but not always, in favour of Jewish rights, when Jews were poor. Many Jews were attracted to the liberating possibilities offered by modernity. Thus, there was a kind of an informal alliance, with many Jews involved in social democratic parties or trade unions, and a minority were communists. However, despite early sympathy for the state of Israel after 1948, since 1967, this alliance has fallen apart because Left criticism of Israel has gone beyond what the author regards as acceptable boundaries. In addition, the increased affluence of Jews (at least in the West), has led to fewer ties to Left parties, though Jews still tend to be socially liberal rather than conservative. Usefully, the book also brings in many examples of Australian Jews’ engagement on the Left, showing that they are part of the common experience of Jews and modernity.

However, it is the theory and the evidence trail used to attack the Left that becomes problematic in this book. How reliable is it as a work of scholarship? The author focuses on the more extreme manifestations of anti-Zionism amongst some Jews and the Left in order to support his hypothesis that there is a lack of empathy for Israel (and thus Jews) on the Left. Thus, he states that “recent manifestations of anti-Zionism negatively stereotype Jews as a powerful group involved in oppressing the Palestinians” (p. 96). He outlines a scenario in which “anti-Zionist fundamentalists construct a subjective fantasy world in which Israel is detached from its specifically Jewish roots, and then miraculously destroyed by remote control free of any violence or bloodshed under the banner of anti-racism” (p. 127). In other publications, he has also accused the anti-Zionist Left and some Jews of also supporting what he refers to as an Islamic Arab-dominated State of Palestine.

The problem with this form of analysis is that it is Manichaeian and at times, a-historical, bound by its own essentialist categories, including lack of qualification or quantification to conclusions drawn and he pulls in examples to prove his point more often than not from Australia (which while useful for a local audience, cannot be considered a centre-point of Jewish experience). The author also follows a particularly severe political line with respect to the Israel/Palestine conflict, concluding that the Left “no longer supports objective Jewish interests” (p. 265), as if there is such a thing. Mendes falls for a kind of historical determinism, believing that what he calls contemporary Jewish anti-Zionism can be compared with earlier Soviet anti-Zionism “displaying an especially vehement distaste for Jews and Jewish concerns” (p. 283). Nor is a more critical view of the Israel-

Palestine conflict given much credence. Everything outside narrow goal-posts is vacuumed up into the “anti-Israel” basket.

The author does not appear to have contemplated that as an alternative to his pro-Zionist or aberrant anti-Zionist categories. There are also deeply concerned non- and post-Zionists (including Israelis), who have a very different idea of what it is to be a Jewish Israeli (such as binational, federated solutions with Palestinians), or just a Jewish Australian, American or just Jewish without a national label.

Weakening his argument, information has been summarily harvested for the book in an uncritical fashion. For example, the author claims that that 1000 Jews were killed and 5000 others injured in a pogrom in Buenos Aires in 1919 (p. 9 and p. 232). This struck me as an unusual statement. Pogroms and massacres are significant and terrible events in Jewish history, and this event was unknown to me. A quick review of scholarly literature easily locatable online shows that nobody knows the correct number of people killed on this occasion, and many non-Jews were also victims of attacks during so-called anti-Bolshevik riots. Even the labelling of the riots as a pogrom is disputed, but Mendes does not appear to have had any hesitation in attaching the label. The number of Jews killed varies in estimates from 65 to 500 with lower numbers. Non-Jews were killed and injured as well. Nobody really knows the full story. The question must then arise, how accurate are the author’s synopses of events on new or unfamiliar turf, ranging from Latin America to the Arab world, the US or throughout Europe and into the Middle East? Has he rigorously compiled data and derived his opinions first, second, or third hand? An exasperating problem thus arises for any reader of the book -- its narrative may be quite unreliable, but no reader can be expected to research the accuracy of every page. What can be trusted?

As an example of a tendency to make freewheeling unqualified statements, the book argues that that “some” Left Jews were pushed and bullied into taking anti-Zionist views in far-Left organisations, though no direct evidence for this assertion is provided (p. 274)? Which organisations? Where? This criticism equally applies to his frequent use of the strong qualifier “most” when making an assertion. Numbers please.

As another and local example of inadequate historical method, the author judges the “political expedience” of the group called *Jews Against Zionism and Racism* (JAZA) in Melbourne in 1976. The author speaks of “good Jews” (akin to being apologists) who were willing to “place the class struggle ahead of national solidarity (sic) and support the Palestinians” (p. 275). A phone call by me to a surviving member of that group quickly revealed a different interpretation of events to that posed by Mendes. The question then arises: why didn’t Mendes conduct interview-based research about such contentious events, instead of uncritically relying on contestable documentary evidence? In addition, he references his own articles on this issue, though also he referred to an article about JAZA by the recently deceased Steve Brook in a Jewish Left journal in 1979. In fact, I checked the original source. The article—which is highly polemical (and I think in fact partly satirical)—was not authored by Steve Brook but by a Sally Black. Any decent historian would not substitute the pseudonym or at least note both names and perhaps explain the circumstances for using a pseudonym (thus Mendes may have had older, private knowledge from Brook, but this should be noted). This seminal event in Melbourne Left and Jewish history certainly deserves a more scholarly airing than that presented here.

Likewise, in his account of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in the feminist movement, the author appears to have misconstrued his own research. On p. 95, he makes the claim that in Australia “some leading feminist activists stereotyped all Jews as rich and middle class”, with further

disturbing assertions about Jewish power, citing himself as the authority for this statement. In fact, his original article (which I tracked down) has *one* author saying that Jews were stereotyped as rich and middle class. One author has become “some leading feminist activists” in the book. This is erroneous multiplication, unless there is other evidence, but it is not put forward in the current volume. Not good enough.

In any case, why be stuck in debates from 30 years ago and provide a supposed opinion from that time? Why not discuss Judith Butler’s extensive writings on feminism, rather than quoting Betty Freidan (p. 259)? What of younger Jewish feminists, LGBT activists, or theologians who easily accessible and published?

Amazingly, except for comments about the anti-Zionist organisation Israeli Matzpen, the book ignores the vicissitudes of the many Left groups in Israeli politics. Misinterpreting the work of an Israeli author with whom I made contact for this review, the author mischaracterizes the highly significant though small political group Matzpen as “an obscure Trotskyist sect” (p. 117) and makes other factual errors. Left historians cannot make errors like this. It was anti-authoritarian, definitely not a Trotskyite organisation and was not based in Jerusalem, except for one later faction, as the author claims (see Ran Greenstein, *Zionism and its Discontents*). Nor, from a less radical perspective, does the book take up the issue of the challenge of modernity or universalism and particularism as seen through a specifically Jewish intellectual lens, seen for example, in the work of Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman in *The Transformation of the Jews* or Arnold Eisen’s *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology*.

Indeed, such is the book’s isolation from centres of (secular) Jewish scholarship today that no contemporary Hebrew language sources or debates in the current Israeli left are cited in the work. “Israel” is not even mentioned in the index (or “Palestine” for that matter). Yet among anti- and non-Zionist Jews, there are strong Israeli connections, increasingly including some competency in Hebrew or experience of living in Israel. Nor does the book pay real attention or account for the explosion in alternative Jewish opinion in social media. All these are extraordinary and unconscionable omissions in a study of a global ethnic-religious community. The author’s frame is far too narrow.

To further test research accuracy, I decided to check references to non-English works and a peculiar pattern emerged. Karl Kautsky is cited with the remark that “Zionism was a spoke in the wheel of progress” (p. 97). Mendes references this important quotation (in English) to a particular page in the first 1914 German *Fraktur* edition of the book *Rasse und Judentum*. There is no such page in the original. The statement only emerged in an English translation in 1926 from the 1921 edition. Where did the author get his English quotation from, and why is that not cited?

As another example, a very rare Hebrew-language anti-Soviet pamphlet by the very obscure Tsentsiper is quoted, and cited in the bibliography as if it appeared in an English translation (p.99). In fact, only 24 exemplars are known to exist (all in Hebrew). As far as I know none is in Australia. And why has such an obscure person been cited and in fact, from which source? Other original language resources (Russian for Stalin and Trotsky) are referenced (in English at times, with page numbers), but were they actually read? To claim more is slipshod and to claim false originality. I fear that there numerous other factual, interpretive and citation slips that will be visible to area specialists. In fact, I am surprised that the publisher was not more discriminating at the review stage.

The book should also have had an accurate glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms for all readers. The Mishnaic Hebrew word *tamchui* (תמחוי) should be more accurately translated as soup-kitchen, rather than “cup” (p.12).

The work could satisfy scholarly or non-critical readers who have a particular ideological grudge and few concerns about research competency. However, for dispassionate scholars whether on the left or right, a work like this should be usable on its own merits and be able to defend its ideological leanings. Were it a PhD thesis, it would be returned for required and complete revision to produce original theory and accurate data based on the correct sources to back up its argument.

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