

The SLA And WASPs

Since Jews have usually contributed a bit more than their share to radical movements in general, it is notable that Jews have not been involved in the Symbionese Liberation Army. That is surely no accident.

There is nothing surprising or sinister about the fact that Jews have been disproportionately represented in various radical groups. Such groups, especially in leadership, have always been disproportionately made up of people who were both marginal and middle class. Jews have always disproportionately fit that double category.

In the 1920's, about 10 to 15 percent of the membership of the American Communist Party (then known as the Workers Party) was Jewish. (That involved only a couple of thousand Jews, or less than one thousandth of the Jewish population in America.) The numbers grew somewhat in the 1930's, as the Jews became more middle class, without, in some respects, becoming less marginal. (It was not a decade in which many Jews could easily lose their sense of marginality.)



Raab

But, in both decades, there were more Jews related to anti-Communist radical movements. Why? While some may have belatedly discovered the "plight of Soviet Jewry" in the 1950's or 1960's, politically knowledgeable Jews always knew about Soviet anti-Jewish bias, even before the explicit persecutions and slaughter of Jewish artists and writers in the 1930's. For example, when the Arab massacre of Jews took place in Palestine in the late 1920's, the Yiddish *Freiheit* made the mistake of referring to the massacres as a "pogrom." The American Communist Party savagely attacked the newspaper for not seeing the Arab action as a "class war against British imperialism and their Zionist agents."

The Jews who stayed in the American Communist Party through these various travesties (some stayed in even after the Soviet-Nazi pact!) tended to be marginal in their Jewishness, as well as otherwise. But there was a larger issue: more Jews than not had some instinct about the dangers of totalitarianism, even before Hitler. That is why there have always been more Jews related to the democratic socialist movements.

Against that background, Jewish names have been generally prominent in protest and radical movements. Of course, one of the additional reasons is that the leadership of many of these movements has come disproportionately from college youth. This is, after all, the section of the population which is notably both middle class and marginal (at least in the temporary sense of being most poised between the evils of the past and the needs of the future). And the Jews have always been disproportionate, to a very heavy degree, in the college population.

But, withal, Jewish radicals have tended to participate in socialist movements, which were spinning social blueprints for the future—rather than in nihilistically anarchist movements which were only spending hatred on the present. At least, that's a proposition; and it might help to explain the essentially WASP character of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

There may be another way to put it. It is often said (without much basis) that the reason there are so few Jewish drunkards is that the Jewish youth becomes acculturated early to the fruits of the vine. More soundly, perhaps, it might be said that Jewish youth is more accustomed to the normalcy of change, to marginality, and to political thought. Where the upperclass WASP becomes alienated in college years, it is often more of a total shock, there is less of an anchor to reality—and the excesses that ensue may be more personal than political, even if clothed in political-sounding rhetoric.