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The Jews and the Left

By Batya Ungar-Sargon

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By Abe Silberstein

When I learned that Batya Ungar-Sargon was completing a book about the Jews and the Left, I was not sure which person would be writing. Would it be Ungar-Sargon the former opinion editor at the Jewish *Forward*, who toward the end of her time there became a critic of what she saw as growing antisemitism among progressives? Or would it be the cable news personality Ungar-Sargon who, since 2021, has been a vocal supporter of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, one who has repeatedly sought to make hay of the supposed moneyed elitism of the Left in contrast to the genuine working-class populism of the contemporary Republican Party? (Full disclosure: I was a regular contributor to the *Forward's* opinion page during Ungar-Sargon's tenure.)

The Jews and the Left, in fact, is a synthesis of both these personalities, which contributes to its incoherence. The author is trying to argue that the Left—and “[t]he Democratic Party is now a party led by the Left”—has turned on the Jews, a process that began in the 1960s with the embrace of an ideology which “insists that all moral authority be ceded to the oppressed.” After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, so the story goes, Israel and by extension the Jews were cast in the role of oppressors. For decades, American Jews managed to thread the needle, but October 7 has, or should have, made that impossible. But Ungar-Sargon is also suggesting a betrayal on the part of American Jews who have remained Democrats, liberals and leftists—that they have sided with highly educated antisemitic elites over the authentic working Americans who have seen their lives upended by globalization favored by those same elites. Even if one accepts this flawed and Manichean view of US society, the argument never quite comes together in the book.

The question of why American Jews are still overwhelmingly liberal Democrats is by now a somewhat hackneyed topic. As Ungar-Sargon correctly points out, it is no longer a socioeconomic puzzle: highly-educated and affluent non-Jewish Americans are now voting for the Democratic Party in increasing numbers as well. “The stereotype of the upper-middle-class, overeducated White progressive is now commonplace,” she writes. “Liberal Jews were simply ahead of their time.” *The Jews and the Left* is a prayer for a new paradox: that Jews now abandon the middle-class progressivism of their neighbors and embrace Trumpian populism, powered by a white working class that is “a bastion of philosemitism.” In what amounts to a succinct appeal to the wavering liberal American Jewish reader, Ungar-Sargon writes: “After October 7, Jews were exposed to what White Americans, conservative Americans, and working-class Americans have been subjected to for decades: the contempt the elites have had for people they view as on the side of power, ironically from their own heights of institutional power and immense wealth and privilege.”

The twinned objectives of *The Jews and the Left* are sometimes in awkward tension in the early historical chapters of the book. Relying on mostly well-regarded secondary literature, such as

Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* and Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism*, Ungar-Sargon in the first part of the book seeks to account for why Jews have been attracted to liberalism. This empathetic mode, however, quickly comes into conflict with her desire to integrate Jews into the MAGA movement, which requires some impressive historical gymnastics. So we are told that the Jewish working class, understandably left-leaning given the wretched conditions in which they often operated, soon disappeared because mysteriously "at some point, the Jews stopped coming" from Eastern Europe. The reason for this sudden halt in the two decades before the Holocaust was the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration restrictions, which largely cut off immigration from countries with populations deemed inferior by the prevailing racial pseudoscience of the day. This fact is presumably too uncomfortable for Ungar-Sargon to mention. After all, if you want American Jews to embrace a xenophobic political movement today, it is best not to remind them of this history. When Ungar-Sargon turns her attention to European Jews being denied refuge in the United States during World War II, elite antisemitism in the State Department and timidity on the part of FDR are duly blamed. Immigration restrictions imposed at least in part to placate populist nativism go unmentioned.

In its second half, *The Jews and the Left* situates the leftist "betrayal" of the Jews in the mid-to-late 1960s. Ungar-Sargon, who holds a PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley, is eager to highlight the emergence of "theory" in the humanities as an accelerant of the Left's betrayal of the Jews. Unfortunately, the chapter dealing with this ("Worship of Weakness") reads as a hyperpartisan polemic with little subtlety. With the odd exception of Michel Foucault, who Ungar-Sargon is at pains to demonstrate has been misunderstood, *The Jews and the Left* issues a sweeping indictment of the academic left familiar to anyone who has read the back pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. It is also scarcely more rigorous.

Postcolonial theory and postmodernism come in for a particular drubbing. For instance, we learn that Edward Said argued "that no scholarship existed outside the political will of White people to control people of color." No citation is given for this extraordinary paraphrase. The claim that "academics who ventured to critique Said were derided as hopelessly backward in the best of cases and hopelessly racist in the worst of them" is treated as commonsensical and with no need for support. That Said's *Orientalism* has actually been the subject of intense academic debate and critique since its publication, especially from Marxists, will be unknown to the reader of *The Jews and the Left*. Almost in total, Ungar-Sargon's portrayal of the academy could have been cribbed from almost any one of the culture war classics of the 1990s, obsessed as they were with the "moral relativism" promoted by pointy-headed intellectuals. "The idea that there is no significance to the difference between right versus wrong—no such thing as absolute truth, or facts outside the use and abuse of power by powerful oppressors against powerless minorities—was becoming the bedrock principle of the Left," Ungar-Sargon writes.

Where Ungar-Sargon gets mixed up is with her dual commitment to a putative working-class political project alongside that of ushering Jews out of the liberal Left. There have been class-based leftist critiques of academic radicalism, and Ungar-Sargon attempts to use one of them—Todd Gitlin's *Twilight of Common Dreams*—to make her point. The sheer sloppiness of this effort suggests a lesser commitment to class politics. In attempting to draw a hard line between the canonical civil rights movement (whose achievements are now under demolition by a Republican-stacked Supreme Court) and the excesses of "woke identity politics," Ungar-Sargon

sees the Left's retreat to the academy at the end of the '60s as a key turning point. She quotes Gitlin at length:

"The new social history of the 1960s was taken to heart by a new generation of scholars," writes Gitlin. "Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and literary scholars of women, as of blacks and other groups, fleshed out the distinct worlds they had to win—establishing that a population had been suppressed and silenced; exhuming buried work and exploring the humanity and resistance of the oppressed; trying to rethink society, history, and culture from the vantage point of the silenced, and showing that the 'flaws' in American freedom were, in fact, at its core."

One does not have to agree with the overall assessment of the '60s offered by Gitlin, who passed away four years ago and cannot protest how his work is being used to promote an agenda he would have furiously rejected, to see the obvious problem for Ungar-Sargon here. The new social history of that decade was primarily an effort to foreground the experiences of working-class people subjected to what historian E.P. Thompson famously called "the enormous condescension of posterity." Given Ungar-Sargon's breathless paeans to Trump-voting workers viewed with contempt by affluent liberals, one might think she would look favorably upon historians restoring agency and dignity of the proletariat. But doing so risks widening the aperture further to see groups and individuals who were marginalized from and within the historical American working class. It is true Gitlin is critical of the later turn to "separatist" identity politics but read in context he is clearly not endorsing the right-wing reaction against post-1960s scholarship that Ungar-Sargon has repackaged for a new audience and era. "From their endeavors flowed—and continue to flow—splendid achievements," Gitlin writes of his generation of academic radicals, in the paragraph directly following the one Ungar-Sargon excerpts.

Treating complex developments with attention to detail would not easily allow for the combination of Ungar-Sargon's narratives. For there is an elephant-sized problem in this neat portrayal of the rise of a university-powered cultural Left that hates Israel alongside that of a neoliberalism that decimated the working class: neoliberalism has also laid waste to the academy with almost-precision focus on the humanities programs that conservatives believe have been so morally baleful. Additionally, the Democrats who oversaw the neoliberal turn were almost to a man and woman staunch supporters of Israel. Ungar-Sargon is forced to acknowledge this incongruity (the neoliberal Democrats "consciously rejected the extremes of the Left") but does not contend with its effects on her argument. Nor does she address the fact that it's the explicitly socialist anti-neoliberal Democrats who have led the way in pushing the party to the left on Israel/Palestine. In a crude analysis where being educated at a selective university makes one an "elite," there is little incentive to notice the downward mobility and proletarianization of large numbers of graduates, [as recently documented](#) by the labor journalist Noam Scheiber in his book *Mutiny*. That way, it is also much easier to dismiss New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's coalition as consisting of "college-educated urbanites and a host of immigrants from countries where antisemitic views are the norm," as Ungar-Sargon does. Naturalized immigrants and degree-holders are written out of the working class by fiat.

In a sense, *The Jews and the Left* arrived too late and early. Too late because the immediate shock of the October 7, 2023, attacks has passed. The righteous fury with which Ungar-Sargon castigates an undifferentiated mass called the Left was present in many quarters of the American Jewish community after the attack (I was certainly not immune to it) but has largely subsided as the Left's analysis of Israel's intentions in Gaza has proved prescient. If one was only informed by Ungar-Sargon's narrative, they would be completely perplexed as to why anyone could be angry at Israel. At one point, she writes: "Every study done so far shows that, despite fighting an intense urban-warfare campaign against a guerrilla army that relishes every child of its own side that dies as recruitment propaganda, Israel kept the percentage of civilian deaths historically low, by any standard." The footnote to this astonishingly implausible claim is a single 2025 report by the neoconservative Henry Jackson Society.

Throughout the text, Ungar-Sargon shows awareness that *The Jews and the Left* will not have the effect for which she might have hoped at the outset. American Jews remain recalcitrantly liberal, even progressive. She confidently places her hope in the future, when the growing Orthodox Jewish community will be the new face of American Jewry. "Even before October 7 revealed to many Jews that their attachment to each other and to Israel was a liability on the left, the community was in flux; in two or three more generations, there will be many fewer Jews who are Democrats, if not a solid majority who are Republicans." Such predictions, based on back-of-the-envelope calculations of birth and intermarriage rates, have been made many times before. Regardless of whether Ungar-Sargon is proved right in the long term, she is evidently frustrated with most American Jews. Like [Norman Podhoretz](#) and [Irving Kristol](#) before her, she cannot understand why American Jews today on the whole remain liberals and leftists other than to embrace a "victim mentality" or fill the gap once occupied by religious practice. A historical narrative that was more honest and critical about the [illiberal history of the United States](#) and the American Jewish experience might have helped explain the continued appeal of liberal and leftist politics for Jews, despite the "betrayal" some felt after October 7.

So might have autobiography. Batya Ungar-Sargon was once a writer and journalist associated with the Jewish Left, an experience which she only very briefly touches on. Far from being the uncompromising defender of Israel she is today, Ungar-Sargon contributed original reporting from the occupied territories—including for the *New York Review of Books*. She vigorously championed Palestinian voices like Issa Amro and Muhammed Shehada. She was never a Jewish anti-Zionist, as far as I know, but she initially opened up the pages of the Forward to them, angering many older and more conservative readers. (In 2019, she alienated progressive Jewish writers, [particularly Jews of color](#), after [precipitating a public controversy](#) over Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's tweets about AIPAC.) If anyone is able to enter the mind of a Jewish leftist in the twenty-first century, it is Ungar-Sargon. It would be deeply unkind to say that Ungar-Sargon spent many years of her life as a Jewish leftist because she envied victimhood and was looking to fill the gaping hole in her psyche where the religion of her ancestors should have been. Unfortunately, armed only with the explanatory apparatus of *The Jews and the Left*, we would be forced to conclude exactly this.

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