

Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 386 pp. Illus.

Recent surveys of American Jews' political leanings have suggested that it finally might be time to retire Milton Himmelfarb's often-cited quip, "Jews earn like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans." A poll of American Jews reported in the *Forward* in January 2003, for example, noted that "American Jews may be poised on the edge of a historic shift to the right in their political views."<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of Jews still lined up in the Democratic ranks, noted the survey's author Steven M. Cohen, but among younger Jews, Jewish men, and Jews in the highest income brackets, Republican sentiments and loyalties were increasing. The age gap, more than the other demographic factors cited, suggested to observers that more Jews might lean to the Right politically over time. A *Forward* editorialist lamented the development, portraying the turn to the Right as unprecedented: "It's harder for them [younger Jews] to see liberal struggles for minority rights as their own business."<sup>2</sup> The implication, of course, was that their parents' generation, now approaching retirement age or beyond, all had championed liberal causes in one unified voice.

Michael E. Staub attacks this commonly held assumption about Jews as a liberal and unified American ethnic group, even in the immediate post-World War II period, in *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*. Staub's convincing reinterpretation of American Jewish liberalism provides historical perspective for some important episodes of ideological conflict within American Jewish communities. He successfully calls into question the conventional wisdom that, even as they enjoyed unprecedented prosperity as compared to other American ethnic groups, nearly all Jews continued to retain strong liberal ties politically. He makes this case very well by shifting our focus of inquiry—where many existing studies of Jews' political tendencies have compared Jews to other American religious or ethnic groups (as does Himmelfarb's quip), Staub highlights "intra-Jewish conflict" in order to reexamine the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and politics in postwar America. By focusing on intragroup relations, Staub is able to assert

that his “is a book about the importance of ideology and the necessity of taking into account splits within ethnic communities rather than assuming that there is any self-evident link between someone’s ethnic position and their political views.” (18) Focusing on the years from 1945 to 1975, Staub demonstrates that American Jews passionately, continually, and without unity debated issues related to American anti-communism, civil rights, Middle Eastern politics, the Vietnam War, religious observance, feminism, and gay rights.

Staub explores intra-Jewish conflict for this catalogue of controversial topics in successive chapters of *Torn at the Roots*. In the first chapter Staub investigates the relationship between Jews and the civil rights movement, with a specific focus on the relationship between American Jewish liberalism and the consolidation of anti-communism. As Staub explains, “As leftists were increasingly demonized, their ability to speak for, or even consider themselves as belonging to, the Jewish and black communities was called into sharp question.” (22) The second chapter continues to question Black-Jewish relations in the United States, with some added components, including debates about prophetic Judaism and anti-racist Zionists. Staub here disputes the common claim that the Six-Day War of 1967 marked a rupture in American Jewry’s political leanings. Instead, for Staub, 1967 represents “a boiling over of circumstances that had been in the making for several years.” (75) This contribution to American Jewish history is one of Staub’s most insightful; he has aptly demonstrated that Jewish liberalism was being challenged and redefined well before the 1967 war.

Staub’s third chapter examines anxieties from within the Jewish community that Jewish liberalism would presage the demise of Jewish particularity. The next five chapters are either issue-oriented or case studies that serve to reinforce Staub’s argument, which, by this point in the book, has been clearly developed and rearticulated a number of times. He tackles intra-Jewish conflict over the war in Vietnam, radical Zionism, and the sexual revolution. Two case study chapters — one about the Jews for Urban Justice and one about Breira, an organization that supported a two-state solution and eventually experienced a painful backlash when it was labeled as a “PLO front working for Israel’s ultimate destruction” (304) — reinforce the book’s main

themes. Staub notes that these groups have been written out of almost all existing narratives of American Jewish history, which has helped to perpetuate the myth of unified Jewish liberalism. His recovery work is impressive, in terms both of research and of arguing for the importance of these previously ignored or forgotten episodes in American Jewish history.

One of the most insightful threads running throughout Staub's narrative is his analysis of the way that the Nazi genocide of European Jewry was invoked by those on the Right and the Left for a wide array of political purposes and often was used in ways to support conflicting opinions on a single issue. Staub also challenges previous assumptions, put forward by Peter Novick among others, that the Holocaust was not often discussed in the years immediately following the atrocities associated with WWII. Even before the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann and long before the Six-Day War, Staub demonstrates, it became common in debates about a variety of issues concerning American Jewry to refer to the purported "lessons" of the Holocaust. Despite disagreeing with Novick about when the Holocaust began to occupy such a central place in American Jews' collective consciousness, Staub's book does fit well with other ideas central to Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*, specifically that the purported "lessons" of the Holocaust are a matter of much debate and that the Holocaust became a "moral reference point" (Novick, 13) on a variety of issues of concern to Jews, including civil rights, Middle Eastern politics, and Jewish continuity.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Staub also has made an important contribution to the growing historiography on Holocaust memory in the United States.

One of the strengths of this book, the diversity of topics covered in its individual chapters, is perhaps also its weakness. Many of the chapters—especially the case studies—could easily stand alone. The book might have been made more seamless had Staub included either a conclusion or short epilogue to tie these many stories together and reinforce his important argument. Although his study ends in the mid-1970s, perhaps an epilogue about the growing pervasiveness of Jewish conservatism, or even of the important phenomenon of Jewish Reagan Democrats, for example, would have provided an illuminating cap to this fine book.

As it stands, though, Staub's book is an entertaining, well-argued, and important corrective that would prove useful reading for scholars in many fields, including American Jewish history, American ethnic history, and American political history.

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### *Notes*

1. Steven M. Cohen, "Survey Sees Historic Shift to the Right," *Forward* (January 17, 2003).
2. "Moving Right," *Forward* (January 17, 2003).
3. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).