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Segal, L. (2002) Jews in the culture wars. *Radical Philosophy* 116 (Nov-Dec) (page numbers not known)

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Citation for this version:

Segal, L. (2002) Jews in the culture wars. *London: Birkbeck ePrints*. Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/archive/00000234>

Citation for the publisher's version:

Segal, L. (2002) Jews in the culture wars. *Radical Philosophy* 116 (Nov-Dec) (page numbers not known)

This article first appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, volume 116 (Nov-Dec 2002), and is reproduced here with permission from the publisher.

Jews in the Culture Wars

Lynne Segal

What does it take to unite the intellectual Left? After decades of internal strife, the moral dilemmas faced by some Jewish academics have thrown up a few unexpected alliances. The 1980s and 1990s were particularly embattled decades in the academy, especially in North America. These were the decades in which women, ethnic minorities and other dissident voices hitherto largely excluded from elite institutions of knowledge began to clamber into university jobs in the wake of the new social movements of the previous decade. They challenged traditional canons, insisting upon their own distinctive cultural and research agendas, beyond the contours of existing disciplines. In the beginning the battles were waged between those defending traditional perspectives and new recruits eager for change, but they soon widened.

The growth of Women's Studies, for example, with its ever more sophisticated analytics of gender, was quickly embattled from both without and within. Fights between feminists came to a head at the 'Politics of Sexuality' conference in New York at Barnard College in 1982, inaugurating the so-called 'Sex Wars', with women against pornography confronting other feminists (such as the conference organizers) who criticized their tactics of censoring 'degrading' sexual images. The organizers were denounced, their employers were contacted and in some cases their academic careers were put in jeopardy. The saddest spectacle here was that the metaphorical terrain was, vividly, the body of feminism itself and, not coincidentally, just when the Reagan ascendancy had begun the long assault on so many of feminism's initial gains, especially for poorer women - from state-funded abortion to the derailing of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the dismantling of welfare.

But disagreements in and around feminism provided only one strand of what soon became known as the Culture Wars, with conservative scholars and media voices denouncing the new radicals for all manner of social harms: undermining the prestige and privileges of traditional domestic arrangements, encouraging the 'dependency' cultures of welfare, offering false dreams of equality and prosperity for all. In the 1990s a new row came to the fore around the authority of science. Seen as the motor of a 'knowledge-driven economy', more money than ever was pouring into scientific research from governments and industry. Yet some of its leading spokesmen insisted that science was not being treated with proper respect - due to a self-serving, anti-Enlightenment cultural elite said to be dominating the universities.

However, like the Sex Wars a decade earlier, the Science Wars also divided Leftists and other movement radicals in a very public and little

understood battle over the nature of science, the importance of culture and the role of the Left. A member of the 'old' Marxist New Left, physicist Alan Sokal decided to expose the errors and obscurantism of a trendy new cultural Left which he saw as undermining the strength of an older class-based Left, more respectful of science. He was assisted by two feminist scholars, Barbara Epstein and Ruth Rosen, angry at the glamour surrounding feminist cultural theorists within the academy and the neglect of women's activism outside it. Sokal placed a hoax article in the Left cultural journal *Social Text* in their special edition on the "Science Wars", edited by two of his New York colleagues, Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross. The next day, this academic turf war exploded into the mainstream media, which Sokal used to expose his parody, subsequently going onto the Internet to keep it alive. (See Peter Osborne, 'Friendly Fire', *Radical Philosophy*, January-February 1997).

Sokal clearly had a serious agenda for his skilful, if painstaking, staging of a full-on feud *within* the Left - supposedly to reform and strengthen it against those who were substituting their arcane activities within the academy for more useful politics. Yet Sokal chose the wrong target and the wrong issue for parodying the exasperating opacity and conceit of some putative postmodern prose. In my view, it is both analytically and strategically unwise to play off class against cultural identifications, or to try to evade the problematic nature of notions of truth and certainty. The other essays in the controversial issue of *Social Text* actually took the domain of science very seriously, attempting to build complex alliances for debating the nature, hopes and hazards of scientific research.

The worst aspect of the affair was that it delighted the conservative media to see the Left at odds with itself: unable to find issues around which to unify despite decades of defeat with the ascendancy of a corporate Right now in control of the most economically globalized, awesomely militarized, imperial power the world has ever known. But that failure is not something primarily, or even tangentially, generated from inside the academy. It has everything to do with the collapse of progressive radical movements on the outside, whether class-based or not. In such threatening times as these, confronting global warfare and rising religious, ethnic and market-driven fundamentalisms, any forms of progressive alliance need to be fostered.

Jews Make Friends

† 'Are you sure it's not a hoax?', friends teased Bruce Robbins when, to his surprise, he was asked by Alan Sokal to co-sponsor an appeal by American Jews for peace in the Middle East. Sokal and Robbins have re-entered the mainstream media together. They have again achieved remarkable success, but this time as allies, finding an issue to unite them and a positive goal. The physicist and the literary scholar have bonded, as Jewish Leftists, to work for peace in the Middle East. They have sprung into action to build opposition to

the near-daily military invasions, massive devastation, deprivations and humiliations visited on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza - almost 80% of whom are living in severe poverty, lacking the resources for even the most basic amenities. Justified in the name of resisting terrorism and the brutal horror of the atavistic resort to the suicide bombing of civilians by Palestinian fighters, Israel's current military aggression has met little criticism in the USA, its paramount backer. This is despite the ever more rapid expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza (now over 400,000 settlers), in deliberate defiance of Oslo and other accords.

Sokal and Robbins began collecting signatures from American Jews to demand an end to US support for Israel which, in direct grants and tax exemptions, is equivalent to 30% of the US Foreign Aid Budget. A full page 'Open Letter from American Jews' in the *New York Times* on 17 July 2002, carrying 965 signatures, urged that US support for Israel be made conditional on its acceptance of a two-state solution, with Israel returning to its pre-1967 borders and the evacuation of all Jewish settlements in the occupied region. The letter received favourable coverage on CNN, signatories quickly jumped to over 3,000, groups elsewhere sponsored publication in their local newspapers.

No longer self-destructing in a hail of friendly fire, Sokal and Robbins now confront foes as indubitable as they are formidable – Western and Israeli military hawks. The Palestinian issue is uniting old feminist antagonists as well. One of the handful who helped to edit Sokal's open letter was another favourite target in academic turf wars, the doyen of feminist and queer scholarship, Judith Butler. Mimicking Sokal, Martha Nussbaum had laid into the 'The hip defeatism of Judith Butler: Professor of Parody', to defend a supposedly 'real' Left against a phoney 'cultural' Left in 1999, on the conservative platform offered by the *New Republic*. A convert to Judaism via marriage, and having recently visited Israel, Nussbaum signed up to the letter her adversary helped to draft. Elsewhere, Butler has written recently of the need to find a basis for building a community of resistance to violence on the international stage, suggesting that this might begin from acceptance of our shared bodily vulnerabilities and our awareness that, from the beginning, any form of psychic identity or subjectivity is dependent upon the recognition of others.

In the UK as well, old academic antagonists have united in condemnation of Sharon's policies. Some months ago, well-known biologists fiercely critical of each other over Darwinian legacies, Stephen Rose, Richard Dawkins and Colin Blakemore, signed a letter in *The Guardian* urging a moratorium on all European funds to Israeli academic institutions until Israel begins serious peace initiatives. Signed by Jewish and non-Jewish academics, the letter received much critical fire from other, predominantly Jewish, academics.

Contingent Identities

Indeed, it has been raining Jews, as many of us in academia, in the USA and elsewhere, discovered almost for the first time that we had a strategic cultural identity to propel us into a more activist political role. It was one which some, such as myself, had previously not seen as a particularly vital part of our sense of self. (To the surprise of many, another early signatory of the ‘Open Letter’ from American Jews was the other leading target of Sokal’s hoax, Andrew Ross. Renowned for his Burns’ night perorations, and thought of as vigorously Scottish, Ross now materialized as ‘half Jewish’.) It is indicative of the flaw of posing economic and material interests against the ‘merely cultural’ when proclaiming political priorities that Left academic antagonists in the USA have made peace with each other and been spurred into important political work through bonding around an identity. However, the politics attaching to identities depend upon what are usually quite independent political agendas.

There is, of course, the very best of reasons for Jews to invoke a group identity when affirming opposition to the policies of Israel.† After all, it is in ‘our’ name that Israel allows, indeed encourages, Jews to leave their homes elsewhere and emigrate to Israel. It is we who may move to Israel (*aliyah*), even as that state denies the right of return to the tens of thousands of Palestinians and their children forced out of the only homes they had ever possessed with its foundation in 1948, while withholding equal citizenship from those who remain within Israel. It has to date prevented Palestinians from forming a state of their own in their small residual base in Gaza and the West Bank. This denies them the kind of institutional foundations and legitimacy that could foster alternative forms of political struggle, even combat, which would not automatically be deemed ‘terrorist’ and which would have the authority to thwart the appalling suicide bombing of Israeli civilians now pursued by some militant Palestinian factions.

But the clear strategic point of adopting a Jewish identity to call for Justice for Palestinians does not eliminate the usual paradoxes attending identity claims. Paramount is the overwhelming pressure present to essentialise identity, downplay differences and proclaim ineluctably shared individual interests, attachments and belongings. Indeed, overall, Jews have never before been so identified with support for the state of Israel as they are today, when tens of thousands have rallied, as in Washington and London, to assert the merging of Jewishness with Zionism. Those of us currently using a Jewish identity to oppose the military might of Israel and the injustices it has for so many years inflicted upon Palestinians are immediately declared anti-Semitic, along with other anti-Zionists, and derided as ‘self-hating’ Jews.

Yet, the Jewish Diaspora has never been united in relation to Israel. From the foundation of Theodor Herzl’s World Zionist Organization in the late 19th century, devoted to the resettlement of Jews in a Jewish state in their

ancestral homeland, many Jews opposed it. Some were actively anti-Zionist, worried about the fate of the Arab Palestinians, while Zionism itself had differing strands. Alongside Herzl's dream (seen primarily as a solution to the problem of anti-semitism, especially in Eastern Europe) were other strands, like that promoted by Ahad Haam, critical of a *political* Zionism, but wanting to preserve Jewish culture and foster the revival of the Hebrew language (both in the Diaspora and in Palestine) as part a secular national culture (*Jews in the Modern World*, Mendes eds Flohr and Reinhartz, 1995). Still others were left political Zionists, committed to offering equal rights to Palestinians. After the U.N. ratified the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine in 1947, Jewish anti-Zionism subsided. However, while in principle supporting Israel, in actuality many Jews gave it little thought. (The main dispersal of Jews from Israel began almost 3,000 years ago, with the bulk of Jewish people living outside its locality for over 2000 years.) For some Jews, both liberal and orthodox, the Diaspora could not end with the creation of Israel, but only after all the problems of the world had been healed, expressed in Hebrew as '*tikkun olam*'. Despite its strategic function, it is thus paradoxical for Jews who have always objected to the equation of Jewishness with Zionism (and indeed questioned the existence of any specific 'Jewish' identity) to find ourselves now objecting 'as Jews' to Ariel Sharon's military manoeuvres of vengeance and expansionism. Without intending it, we are ensnared in a new cultural war over the nature of Jewish identity. We assert a Jewish identity only to find ourselves accused by other Jews of having already 'lost' it; indeed, of failing to acknowledge or respect our Jewish heritage of exile, discrimination and the long historical persecution and attempted annihilation of our "race".

I cannot hope to encompass the complexity of that heritage here. But let me briefly say something about the history of Jews in Australia. Today the Zionist Movement plays a dominant role in Jewish culture and identity in Australia. Historically, however, those who were indentified as Anglo-Jewry were overwhelmingly anti-Zionist. One of its leading voices, all but erased in contemporary memory, came from my own grandfather, Alfred Harris, the founder of the Australian *Hebrew Standard*, and its editor for nearly 40 years between 1895 and his death in 1944. A dedicated idealist and humanist, he turned one of only two Jewish papers in New South Wales into an anti-Zionist platform, consistently opposing the creation of the state of Israel as undemocratic. Yet his paper was working: 'To perpetuate Judaism. To hasten the brotherhood of man by developing a better understanding, goodwill and friendship between people of all creeds ...to banish bigotry, ignorance and intolerance'. His sentiments were echoed by his friend and mentor, the most prominent Jew in Australia, the Governor General, Sir Isaac Isaacs, who (despite his appallingly racist views in support of a 'white' Australia) worried that Arabs in Palestine would not be treated fairly under 'political Zionism', which he saw as 'undemocratic, unjust and dangerous'.

Views such as these form part of the Jewish heritage. As Naomi Scheman has recently recalled from her childhood in the USA: '[we] were raised with a strong cultural identification with Jewishness, which in our family centered on commitment to fighting so that others might be liberated, as Jews had been, from the various tyrannies that had enslaved us and continued to enslave others.' She writes of how natural it seemed over a generation ago for Jews to participate - indeed to risk their lives - in the civil rights movement in solidarity with Black Americans (Scheman in *Jewish Location*, eds. Lisa Tessman and Bat-Ami Bar On). Such commitment provides a stark contrast with one prominent expression of Jewish identity today. No longer identifying with those who are most oppressed, or seeking to confront the powerful, there has emerged a new model of the 'tough Jew', which still insists upon its own overriding status as universal 'victim'. The military success of Israel, so firmly backed by the US government (and the Christian Right within it) hones the image.

In their long history Jews have often been victims, some have tried to be saviours, and many, at least till recently, have attempted to be allies of those most in need of compassion and justice. But we have no unique claims on any of these identities. Oddly, to mobilize for peace and justice for both Jews and Palestinians, as Jews, might seem to justify the worst of the fears expressed by traditional Leftists (such as Sokal), that it is no longer possible to agitate and organize on behalf of universal calls for justice, but only to do so as an expression of our particular interests and attachments. I think we can do both. Sensitive to the historical weight and contradictions of our own 'fictitious unities', we can learn to explore and live with the paradoxes we encounter. This is what feminism, at its most vibrant, did in relation to gender, observing the ambiguities of our identities and attachments as women, especially if and when we dare to use them to forge visions of a fairer world.

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[www.Jjfp.Org/campaigns.htm]*