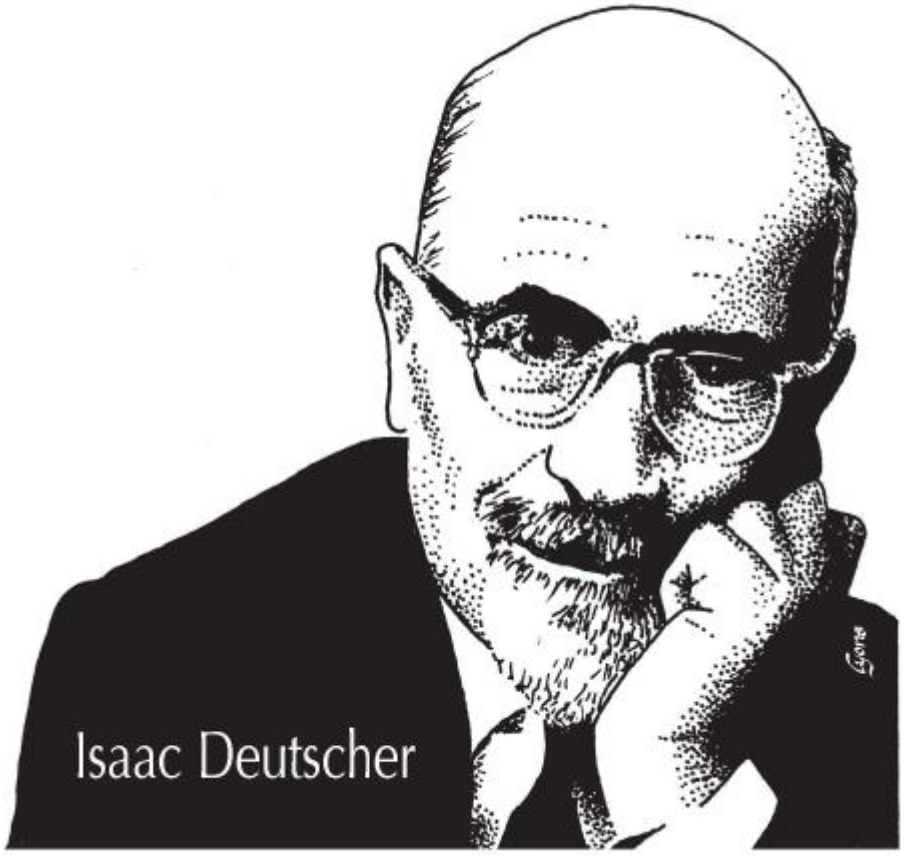
Deutscher and the Jews

written by Samuel Farber | February 2, 2014

Isaac Deutscher's concept of the "The Non-Jewish Jew"[1] has been adopted by many secular leftist Jewish intellectuals as a badge of identity. Defined by a universal and humanist outlook that is rooted in Jewish thought, his is a construct that draws inspiration from Jewish thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx,[2] Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud, and Leon Trotsky whom he sees as revolutionaries of modern thought who went beyond the boundaries of their Jewish background. In what perhaps is the most lucid passage of his provocative essay, Deutscher attributes their exceptional breadth to the fact that, as Jews, they lived in the boundaries of various civilizations, religions, and national cultures and were born and grew up on the boundaries of various epochs. Their minds matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilized each other, and they lived in the nooks and crannies of their respective nations, living in society but not being part of it. This was, Deutscher avers, what enabled them to lift their gaze above their own community and nation, beyond their times and generations, and to strike mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future (27).

Although an apt description of the real, historical phenomenon of Jews that revolutionized thought and society, Deutscher's "Non-Jewish Jew" also includes him and as such it reveals his subtle but clear sense of disassociation, of his attempt to put a distance between the Jew and the Jewish world he left behind. For the secular, universalistic Jew, that may be understandable in the context of the world in which Spinoza, Heine, Marx, and Luxemburg lived, but much less so in 1958, the year when Deutscher wrote this essay, only thirteen years after the end of the Holocaust and World War II. This disassociation became all the more conspicuous against the background of a Freud[3] and a Trotsky, who having witnessed the rise and consolidation of the German anti-Semitic regime (they died in 1939 and 1940 respectively) expressed their unequivocal solidarity with the persecuted Jews.



In a later 1966 essay/interview entitled “Who is a Jew?” included in the same volume (42-59), Deutscher abandoned that sense of setting himself apart by stating unambiguously that he considered himself a Jew and that he did so out of his unconditional sense of solidarity with the persecuted and exterminated, because he felt the pulse of Jewish history and the Jewish tragedy as his own, and because “I should like to do all I can to assure the real, not spurious, security and self-respect of the Jews” (51).

However, it is that sense of disassociation that pervades his broader interpretation of Jewish history and of the Jewish condition of his times throughout the corpus of his work on Jewish issues assembled by his widow Tamara Deutscher in *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*. This comes through, for example, in his views in favor of the assimilation of the Jews. Although clearly opposed to the use of force, he supports the active dissolution of the Jews into the larger society. In “Remnants of a Race” (84-90), published in *The Economist* on January 12, 1946, not only does he celebrate the first declaration of equal rights for Jews by Jacobin France in 1791, but he also brings in Napoleon’s “enlightened maxim” of “let the Jews look for their Jerusalem in France,” and argues that Napoleon’s purpose of

disaccustoming the Jews from usury and illicit trade, of breaking down their separation and making them submerge themselves in the gentile population was certainly sound; and—who knows?—if it had been consistently carried into effect all over Europe, the Jewish problem might have been forgotten long ago; and our generation would perhaps have been spared the indelible shame of witnessing the deliberate murder of six million human beings in concentration camps and gas chambers (86-87).

Although he acknowledges Napoleon’s “tyrant’s touch” towards the Jews, as in the emperor’s

proposal to compel every third Jewish man and woman to marry a Christian, his overall treatment of Napoleon's policies towards the Jews is indicative of an extreme assimilationism that borders on the perverse: had the Jews disappeared, due to their own actions and inactions, there would have been no Jews left for Hitler to kill.

Deutscher's admiration of Napoleon's strongly assimilationist attitude to French Jews bears a strong parallel with his apologetic view of Stalin, whom he saw as a Thermidorean figure similar to Napoleon. Deutscher saw both Napoleon and Stalin as pursuing worthy goals even though he might, in a subordinate note, regret their methods. It was this apologetic approach that led the Russian socialist historian Roy Medvedev to object to the way in which Deutscher, in telling the story of industrialization and collectivization, argued that Stalin could be considered one of the greatest reformers of all times because he had put the ideas of the October Revolution and socialism into practice. That the price was very high—the Gulag, the purges, and the deliberate creation of famines resulting in the death of millions of people—only proved to Deutscher the difficulty of the task.[4] Stalin to him was primarily a reformer, not a mass murderer. As in the case of Stalin and his legacy, Deutscher adopts an "objectivist" analysis of Napoleon's wishes for the French Jews, pretending to stand outside of history and lacking in empathy for the choices actually faced by its living actors, except, perhaps, for the "problems" faced by leaders promoting change from above.[5]

For the Jews, assimilation, in the sense of disappearing rather than just acculturating to various host societies, has historically been and continues to be an extremely important and complex issue.[6] Deutscher is so disassociated from those concerns that he does not even mention them. For Jewish communities throughout the centuries, assimilation has on one hand been associated with forced conversion, a historic source of tremendous suffering and even martyrdom. But on the other hand, it has also been a veritable bugaboo, because of the deeply ingrown failure to clearly distinguish forced conversion from the social traffic that is bound to occur among human groups that lead to an entirely voluntary "assimilation." The obsessive if not pathological fear of voluntary assimilation can lead to a very distorted understanding and perception of the world. Thus, growing up under the very dark shadows cast by the Holocaust, I repeatedly heard from many members of the small (approximately 10,000 people) Ashkenazi community of Polish and other Eastern European Jews in Cuba[7] that anti-Semitic genocidal Hitlerism had developed in Germany *because* of the high degree of assimilation among German Jews. It is very hard to see how this kind of logic, or rather illogic, could explain how a high degree of assimilation would lead to the Nazi Holocaust, but the low degree of assimilation of Polish and other East European Jews would "only" lead to blood libels, pogroms, and widespread and deeply entrenched anti-Semitic discrimination and prejudice.

A closer look at the traditional Jewish obsession with peaceful voluntary assimilation will show its close kinship with the attitudes common among practically all nationalisms not only to protect themselves against outside coercion but going well beyond that legitimate goal, to seek if not demand a *guarantee* not only for the perpetual existence of their particular nation, but even for its current cultural configuration against any conceivable change. Such a guarantee could of course only be obtained through the erection of strongly xenophobic barriers against any kind of foreign cultural influences, including the immigration or even close contact with people of different races, religions, and cultures.

Deutscher's treatment of assimilation was clearly informed by classical Marxism. As extensively documented by the Marxist scholar Enzo Traverso in his excellent study *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*,[8] classical Marxism as a whole had a highly schematic—as opposed to historically specific—view of Jews and the Jewish question. Put in its simplest terms, it held that Jews had played a certain role in pre-capitalist trade as moneylenders and usurers, particularly in the European

Middle Ages. When trade would disappear, the Jews would have no other special role to play in society and therefore they would end up assimilating. As Traverso explains,

the fundamental limitation of this approach lies in its incapacity to consider the Jews as a community with a specific cultural and ethnic physiognomy, capable of transforming itself, but also of conserving itself, beyond and through changes of social and economic structure (one could say by, with, and in history).[9]

Deutscher adopts this kind of schematic Marxism when he, in "The Non-Jewish Jew," reduces the reasons for the survival of the Jews as such to their having "represented the market economy amidst people living in a natural economy" (39). While it is true that, after the eleventh century, most European Jews began to assume a particular economic role accompanied by exclusion and discrimination, the schematic Marxist interpretation could not explain the existence and survival of Jews in the pagan Hellenic world, in the Roman empire before and after Christianity, or in the Islamic world where the Jews were a minority distinguished, on the whole, neither by language nor by economic role, but solely by religion.[10]

Deutscher's historical schematism also expressed itself in his peculiar claim that it was a Jewish tragedy that the world has driven the Jew to seek safety in the nation-state—Israel—in the middle of the twentieth century when "the nation state is falling into decay" (113). There are of course lots of powerful and convincing arguments against Zionism but this one, rooted perhaps in a schematic philosophy of history that does not meet the test of empirical reality, is a remarkably weak one. At the very moment that Deutscher was writing those lines the Colonial Revolution was in full swing and in the process of creating dozens of new states in Africa and Asia. At the same time, the United States and other Western imperialist powers were in the middle of the greatest economic boom they had ever experienced while arming themselves to the teeth with nuclear weapons to confront the USSR, the rival nuclear imperialist power, which was also reaching the peak of its own state power that would very soon allow it to launch the first satellite—Sputnik—into orbit in 1957.

It is true that Deutscher expressed a certain skepticism towards schematic Marxism, although without attempting to provide an alternative. Thus, for example, in "Who is a Jew?" (42-59), while describing with great pride the role he played in the Jewish labor movement in Poland, he notes that "as Marxists we tried theoretically to deny that the Jewish labor movement had an identity of its own, but it had it all the same" (45). In this instance, he also oversimplifies the position of East European Marxism towards the Jewish labor movement. The issue was not whether that movement had its own identity, which was never in question, but whether and the degree to which it should be autonomous and independent from the larger socialist movement before and after the fall of the Czarist empire.

It is important to clarify that the long-term Marxist assimilationist view of Judaism could coexist with the most vigorous and militant stance against anti-Semitism, as was the case with V.I. Lenin's views and practical political record, and an enlightened cultural policy towards the Jews as was the case in the Soviet Union of the twenties. It is also usually ignored, sometimes maliciously, that Marx's original essay on the Jewish question, commonly attacked as anti-Semitic, was an argument *for* Jewish political emancipation.[11] However, it is true that the classical Marxist tradition has shown a certain degree of historical insensitivity towards Jews. This can be seen, for example, in the Russian Social Democratic polemics—Bolshevik or Menshevik—against the Jewish Bund on occasions such as the 1903 Congress of Russian Social Democracy. The Bund may have made unjustifiable demands, such as insisting on being declared the exclusive representation of all Jewish workers no matter where they lived inside or outside the Pale of Settlement. But Social Democracy was insensitive and historically obtuse when, influenced by its expectations of Jewish assimilation, it refused to treat the Jews like any other *national* group within the Czarist empire, as the Jews were, at least within the

Yiddish-speaking Pale of Settlement.

If nothing else, history demonstrated, with extreme and horrific cruelty, the lack of validity of the assimilationist perspective of Russian Social Democracy, and by extension, of Deutscher's. East European Jews were exterminated by the Nazis before any major assimilationist trends similar to those in Western Europe and the U.S. became evident in Poland, Lithuania, and other parts of Eastern Europe where the bulk of the Jews lived. It is interesting to note that the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany led Leon Trotsky to abandon his earlier assimilationist assumptions. In 1937, while ruling out the possibility of a "forced assimilation" inside a socialist democracy, he left open the question of whether the Jews would assimilate naturally or if, on the contrary, they would opt for the creation of what he called an "independent republic." But he clearly affirmed the existence of a modern Jewish nation maintained through the development of the Yiddish language as an instrument adapted to modern culture, and although he unambiguously rejected Zionism, he affirmed the necessity of a territorial option that socialism should offer to the Jewish people.[12]

In 1908, Bundist leader Vladimir Medem refused to make a forecast about the future of the Jews (nation or assimilation) and argued that "we are neutral…we are not against assimilation, we are against assimilationism, against assimilation as a goal."[13] Many years later, Belgian Trotskyist Abram Leon, who later became a victim of Nazism, echoed Medem and argued that "Socialism must give the Jews, as it will to all peoples, the possibility of assimilation as well as the possibility of having a special national life" and added that socialism would confine itself, in this area, to "letting nature take its course."[14] That may well be the most pertinent democratic and socialist position on the issue of Jewish assimilation: while it does not "guarantee" the existence of Jews for eternity, it does provide them with the favorable conditions to remain Jews as long as they so wish.

While Deutscher's "Non-Jewish Jew" focuses on the Jewish intellectual, it also assumes the existence of a Jewish world from which this intellectual has come and which has given her a distinctive gaze. It is when going into that Jewish world, what and who Jews are, that Deutscher is at his weakest. In contrast with the painstaking historical scholarship he is known for in his work on Trotsky, his treatment of the Jewish component of his intellectual Jew is unsupported by history. Yet, if nothing else, Deutscher's prominence as a Marxist historian and as the proponent of the notion of the "Non-Jewish Jew" makes his ideas influential, including those about Jewish existence.

It is not clear whether Deutscher thought of the Jews as a people, or as a religious, cultural, or ethnic group. His discussion of Spinoza and Heine (27-30) suggests a possible emphasis on Judaism as a religion. This emphasis might be due to the weight that religion had in defining Judaism in Spinoza's times. But it also may stem from Deutscher's own upbringing as an orthodox Jew. It is clear, however, that he rejected the notion of a Jewish community, of Jews being linked with each other by ties beyond religious ritual and practice. He argued that to speak of the "Jewish community" as if it were an all-embracing entity was meaningless, especially for a Marxist who saw all societies primarily from the point of view of their class divisions and for whom it was clear that the Jewish "community" contained antagonistic social classes (52). Taking this argument seriously would lead Marxists to deny the very notion of society and community, since what Deutscher saw as an exclusive characteristic of Jewish life is true of all societies and communities: all are divided into classes. By way of contrast, American Marxists have for a very long time spoken about Black and other minority communities in the U.S. without implying or assuming that they have no internal class divisions.

In his "Who is a Jew?" Deutscher states that Jews would not have survived as a "distinctive community" if it had not been for anti-Semitism. It is important to underline that he does not simply

say that it is only Zionism, or more broadly, Jewish nationalism, that is a product of anti-Semitism, but that it is the existence of the Jews itself that is entirely a function of anti-Semitism (47).[15] Thus, to him there is nothing intrinsic to the Jews that binds them together (except for the religious bond); they are some sort of artificial group. Curiously, the fact that, in the years he wrote that essay, there were Jewish communities flourishing as such in many Western countries with a relatively low degree of anti-Semitism, did not change in any way his position.

For Deutscher, the idea of a Jewish community was also belied by the geographical differences among Jews. He claimed that the different native cultural traditions of which "the Jews were a minority, affected them differently and left a different imprint on their mental outlook." (52) This is not only true about the differences between German and East European Jews, which were the examples he cited, but even more so about the differences between both of those groups and Sephardic and Oriental Jews. And it is worth noting that while Jews of these diverse geographical areas shared a religious persuasion, they were not part of the same nation. But there are two major exceptions to this claim: the Jews who lived within the Pale of Settlement and shared the Yiddish language and were in most respects culturally homogeneous and the Jews who emigrated to Israel and became forged into a Jewish Israeli nation by a cohesion and national consciousness achieved through common education and the universal use of a modernized Hebrew language, service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and a nationalist ideology, all of which have become consolidated by their contempt for the ethnically cleansed Palestinian people.[16]

One could argue that because he was focused on the "non-Jewish Jews," the philosophers and revolutionaries of Jewish origin, and not on rank-and-file Jews, Deutscher had no interest in analyzing the complexities of Jewish social life, even though his views on the "non-Jewish Jews" at least implicitly required some understanding of the nature of it. That might be why much of the Jewish social world that comes through in his work is presented, at least implicitly, in terms of a polarity between, on the one hand, a traditional Jewish religious group and, on the other hand, a group of left-wing emancipated intellectuals who have left behind the particularism of that religious community but who still maintain what could be called a Jewish style of thought created and reinforced by their continual social marginality. Regardless of the reasons that might have led Deutscher to adopt this perspective, it was not an accurate characterization of the trends that existed in the Jewish communities in the West at the time he wrote his essay in the middle of the twentieth century. By the fifties and sixties, Jewish society in the West, and even more so in the USSR,[17] had developed large secularized majorities who retained a Jewish identity. In the U.S. of that period, the overwhelming majority of Jews were either secular or belonged to Reform or Conservative synagogues. Most members of these synagogues related to them not as their grandparents related to the "shul" in the old country, but as the occasional place to go for the High Holidays and major life-cycle related occasions. So why did Deutscher, a profoundly political writer, gloss over this new Jewish majority of the mid-twentieth century?[18]

Part of the reason was Deutscher's political distaste for much of Western Jewry based on his perception, clearly shown in this volume, of their style of life and their politics. While Deutscher in "Who is a Jew?" (42-59) strongly praises the political and intellectual achievements of the Jewish labor movement, of which he was part in Poland, it is revealing that all he has to say about Western Jewry is "how repellent" some of their milieus are where "there is nothing but a few taboos and a lot of money…We [the Jewish labor movement in Poland] had a thorough contempt for the *Yahudim* of the West. Our comrades were made of different stuff" (45). Later on, in the same essay, he blasts the record of Western Jewish intellectuals for "their extraordinary conformism, political, ideological, and social. In the cold war which has dominated our lives for more than thirteen years, the Jews have

been most prominent." (59) He did not consider, however, that, compared to other ethnic and religious communities, Jews were more likely to question, at least in the United States, the premises of the Cold War even though, like all the other ethnic and religious groups in North America, they overwhelmingly supported the U.S. side in that conflict.

With a touch of ethnic and intellectual elitism, Deutscher seems to uncritically accept, in his 1954 essay "Israel's Spiritual Climate" (91-117), the idealized stereotype of Ashkenazi Jews as a "higher civilization" than Oriental Jews (107-108), and as *Am Hassefer*—the "People of the Book" for whom "the book is a first necessity." That's why, according to Deutscher, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem seemed to have "as many bookshops and lending libraries as there are grocery and greengrocery stores," and that farming settlements possessed rich libraries you would hardly find in any other countryside. That Deutscher accepts the conception of the "People of the Book" is ironic: on the one hand, he points to the existence of class divisions among Jews; on the other hand, class divisions disappear when talking about the intellectuality of the Jews.

The supposed love of learning that is commonly attributed to the East European Jews of the *shtetl* has been seriously questioned by the anthropologist Mariam K. Slater who branded it as the myth of intellectuality.[19] The average Jewish man in the *shtetl,* Slater shows, attended only the *kheyder* or *Talmud Torah* until adolescence. His education there consisted in memorizing the commandments for twelve hours a day.[20] That kind of learning, Slater observed, rather than being rational and scientific, was actually an obstacle to the development of the modern intellectual spirit since it was based on factual ignorance of the developments in the outside world, the cultivation of memory instead of critical thinking, and an arid disputatious scholasticism ritualistically preoccupied with Talmudic legalisms.[21] Citing another scholar's work,[22] she notes that very few of the Jewish males in the *shtetl* were directly exposed to Talmudic scholarship. Moreover, the religious authorities had a very hostile attitude to non-religious learning. The historian Antony Polonsky cites the case of a rabbi in the town of Liozno in the Lithuania of the 1880s who ordered a search of all homes. All books, except religious ones, were to be brought to the synagogue courtyard for burning so evil could be purged from the town.[23]

The Ashkenazi Jews of the *shtetl* and cities were certainly more literate than the surrounding non-Jewish population. According to the 1897 Russian census, the rate of literacy in Russia for those over ten years of age was 50 percent for Jews and 28 percent for non-Jews. Among men, the literacy rate was 65 percent for Jews and 39 percent for non-Jews. Sociologist Stephen Steinberg questions the explanation of this difference based on a distinctive religious factor and suggests that had the Russian census compared Jews with non-Jews who were engaged in urban occupations the difference would have been less striking.[24] But even accepting the higher rate of Jewish literacy, historian Tony Michels points out that most of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants arriving in New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced considerable difficulty in becoming readers of the Yiddish newspapers published in the city. Most individuals had to learn how to read before they could just simply pick up a Yiddish newspaper. Even if literate, most of them possessed only rudimentary reading and writing skills since the *kheyder* in the old country taught little more than the Hebrew alphabet, prayers, and the Bible to boys. Jewish girls received an even more inadequate education.[25]

Not only were Ashkenazi East European Jews overwhelmingly urban in background—whether coming from villages or cities located within the Pale of Settlement—they were also more likely to be skilled in artisanal occupations such as tailoring and shoemaking. Thus, while 67 percent of Jews entering the United States between 1899 and 1910 were skilled workers, that was only true for 20

percent of all immigrants.[26] In light of this background, it is not surprising that once they became involved in the rising trade union and socialist movement centered in the lower East Side of New York of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were much more likely than workers who came from peasant backgrounds in Europe or rural backgrounds in the United States to participate in a more intellectual fashion. According to a 1913 Columbia University study cited by Michels, almost 32 percent of Russian Jewish men between the ages of 17 and 25 attended at least one public lecture per week in New York City; Russian Jewish men between 25 and 35 followed close behind; and single Russian Jewish men frequented lectures twice as often as their married counterparts suggesting that these lectures were social as well as political-intellectual events. Among the topics covered were: "Socialism and Religion," "The Development of Private Property," "The Necessity of Education," "Socialism from A to Z," "The Origins of Rights," "History as Science," and "What is Trade Unionism?"[27]

My own personal experience is closer to Slater's analysis than to Deutscher's notion about Jewish intellectuality. A very small proportion of the Jewish immigrants from Poland and Eastern Europe in Cuba were intellectuals or intellectually inclined; the great majority were shopkeepers and small wholesalers and manufacturers in the garment and related trades who, although literate, did not take intellectual endeavors seriously and were sometimes contemptuous of them. University titles and professional certifications and accomplishments were held in higher regard, although not as much as material success, a phenomenon that Slater also found in her review of the literature about Jews in the United States.[28] But exclusive intellectual endeavors with no prospect for material gain, whether artistic or political, were regarded with condescension as belonging to the impractical realm of dreamers, of irresponsible people who did not have their feet solidly on the ground. Thus, for example, Albert Einstein was regarded by most Cuban Ashkenazi Jews as a successful, universally famous figure who was a huge credit to Jews everywhere. Cuban Jews also appreciated that he had taken the trouble to visit Cuba and its Jewish community in the twenties. However, his slovenliness and his socialist leanings were proof positive that people like him—intellectuals and pure scientists—did not have their feet on the ground and were thus not reliable people. It is true that Jewish Bundists, Communists, and left-wing Zionists in Cuba did not share this outlook but, having been an important minority of the community in the twenties and thirties, they had, with the possible exception of the left-wing Zionists, significantly declined by the late forties.

It is intriguing that, although not at all "intellectual," the immigrant generation of Ashkenazi Jews in Cuba did import from their original *shtetlach,* a particular quality and strength not mentioned by Deutscher and many other observers when discussing Jewish traits: a "Tocquevillian" proclivity for and success in forming voluntary organizations, probably rooted on the tradition of communal ("kehillah") self-government. In fact, one could make the case that traditional Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement was as much about community as about religion. My parents, as was true of most Ashkenazi Jews in the Havana metropolitan area, were members and supporters of a number of organizations that had been formed for a wide variety of purposes. These included community health (anti-tuberculosis committee); occupational training (ORT) which existed and enjoyed the financial support of U.S. Jews; general social assistance (Froyen Farein or Women's Association); and of course political organizations like the Unión Sionista de Cuba (Cuban Zionist Union). More informal, but no less important, were the financial subsidies to the significant number of poor students that were quietly provided in the Spanish/Yiddish elementary school I attended from 1945 to 1951 (I was born in 1939) following the norm that inability to pay should not be allowed to deprive a Jewish child of a Jewish education. These organizations and funds were financed by the members of the Jewish community on the basis of their ability to pay as assessed by the (sometimes elected) community leaders. These community leaders often resorted to the mechanism of shame as a way of getting people to contribute their share. The failure to comply with these informal but strongly enforced assessments put individual Jewish men, and by extension their families, at the risk of acquiring a bad

reputation as *schnorrers* (literally beggars, but with the broader connotation of social parasites) with important consequences, such as diminishing the prospects that their children would find a "good" Jewish boy or girl to marry.

Assimilation and the Future of Jewry

In light of Deutscher's strongly assimilationist perspective, it is worth considering the current trends relevant to that issue. It is unclear whether the number of Jews in the United States—being the other major center of Jewish population besides Israel—is currently increasing or decreasing. This has been an elusive figure for at least two decades. The U.S. Census cannot obtain and provide data based on religious affiliation. The estimate of approximately 6.5 million Jews in 2011 made by the Berman Institute of the University of Connecticut is about 20 percent higher than the previous estimate of 5.2 million provided by the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, but the lower figure was based on a study that was criticized as flawed, a view that was eventually accepted by the survey's sponsor.[29] What is clear, however, is that the proportion of religious orthodox Jews is increasing substantially while the adherents of milder forms of Judaism such as the Conservative and Reform movements, is declining. The study of the Jewish community in New York City published in 2012 by Steven M. Cohen and Jacob B. Ukeles shows that the Jewish population in that city—the largest in the United States—grew to nearly 1.1 million people between 2002 and 2011 after decades of decline, due to an "explosive" growth of the Hasidic and other Orthodox groups. These groups now amount to 40 percent of Jews in the city compared to 33 percent in 2002. During the same period, the Reform and Conservative movements each lost about 40, 000 members in New York City. Even more revealing of current and future trends is that 74 percent of all Jewish children in the city are Orthodox. The same study also found that while the rate of intermarriage remains at roughly 22 percent for all Jewish couples in New York City, it is growing among the non-Orthodox. Between 2006 and 2011, one out of two marriages in which one partner was a non-Orthodox Jew was to a person who was not Jewish and did not convert to Judaism.

At the other end of the spectrum from the Orthodox Jews, nearly a third of the respondents who identified themselves as Jews did not belong to a particular denomination or claimed not to observe or follow any religion. Jacob B. Ukeles, one of the authors of the study, stated that "there are more deeply engaged Jews and there are more unengaged Jews…. These two wings are growing at the expense of the middle. That's the reality of our community."[30]

A national survey of Jews conducted by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project in 2013 found that the intermarriage rate was very similar to that of New York and had reached a high of 58 percent for all Jews, and 71 percent for non-Orthodox Jews. Surprisingly, the study also found that the percentage of Orthodox in the country as a whole was only 10 percent, while Reform Judaism remained the largest religious tendency at 35 percent and Conservative Jews at 18 percent.[31] But, just like in New York, 30 percent of Jews did not identify with any denomination. In spite of the decline in religious identity and participation, the national survey also showed that American Jews had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people and felt proud to be Jewish.[32]

The prevailing situation in New York would confirm one of Deutscher's implicit assumptions about the significance of religious orthodoxy in defining Judaism. While that assumption was incorrect when Deutscher was writing about Jews from the forties to the sixties, it has acquired greater validity in the early twenty-first century, although in part for reasons that Deutscher did not anticipate, since it would be mistaken to attribute changes such as these only to the internal dynamics of the Jewish community and its relationship to the outside world. Major changes in American society have created parallel developments in Protestantism, with the mainstream denominations such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists, who are roughly comparable to Reform and Conservative Judaism,[33] having substantially declined while the size of fundamentalist

Christianity, which is comparable to Orthodox Judaism, has substantially increased. At the same time, and paralleling what Jacob B. Ukeles pointed out about engaged and unengaged American Jews, the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. A survey conducted in 2012, by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, found that one fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentage ever in Pew Research Center polling. The poll found that between 2007 and 2012 the unaffiliated increased from just over 15 percent to just under 20 percent of all U.S. adults.[34] Similar "secularizing" trends have been noticed in Western Europe for quite some time; even countries with a profound Catholic history, such as Spain, have legalized gay marriage and effectively limited the influence of the Catholic Church.

Support for Israel has also played an important role in maintaining the cohesion and limiting the assimilation of American Jews. However, a 2007 study by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman showed that younger American Jews are less connected to Israel than older American Jews. The report noted that while the majority of younger Jews remain attached to Israel, that country is less salient to the less connected, non-Orthodox, and increasingly intermarried Jews, with instances of genuine alienation as many more Jews, especially young people, profess a near-total absence of any positive feelings towards Israel.[35] An influential and controversial article by Peter Beinart brought this development to the attention of a broader public, and claimed that the erosion of American Jewish support for Israeli policies was related to what he saw as the contradiction between American Jewish liberalism and the illiberalism of Israeli policies. Whatever degree of truth there might be to that claim, it is evident that the American Orthodox Jews, the least liberal sector of American Judaism, are much more likely to uncritically support Israel and its policies. As Beinart points out, "in their yeshivas they learn devotion to Israel from an early age; they generally spend a year of religious study there after high school, and often know friends or relatives who have immigrated to Israel." The same American Jewish Committee 2006 survey found that while only 16 percent of non-Orthodox adult Jews under the age of forty feel "very close to Israel," among the Orthodox the figure is 79 percent.[36]

One can draw the conclusion that, contrary to Deutscher's expectations, a relatively low degree of anti-Semitism has not led to the disappearance of the principal Jewish community in its principal place of residence outside of Israel. But these trends also pose the question of whether the demographic and social base from which the secular Jewish left-wing intellectuals and activists, Deutscher's "non-Jewish Jews," emerged in the past is declining. It is doubtful, for a variety of reasons, that the growing proportion of "unengaged Jews" can play a similar role in the development of leftist Jewish activists and intellectuals as was once the case with the Jewish labor and socialist movements. As far as Jewish liberalism is concerned, if one measures it by the metric of voting for Democratic Party candidates, it remains alive. This measurement, however, is very flawed and does not take into account considerations such as the likely rightward drift of Jewish liberalism, let alone the extent to which Democratic candidates may not themselves be liberals. Aside from Jewish liberalism, it is likely that the proportion of people of Jewish background in the U.S. radical left has declined, an issue that remains to be investigated.

A Personal Reflection

Having been reproached by my late older sister, a strong but somewhat disillusioned Zionist, for being concerned about the fate of every group and nationality "except the Jews," I have often thought about the response that Rosa Luxemburg gave to a friend while sitting in prison in February 1917: "Why do you want to come to me with the special sufferings of the Jews? For me, the unhappy victims of the hevea plantations of the Putumayo region, the Negroes of Africa whose bodies the Europeans kick about as if playing with a ball, affect me as much." And she added "I sense myself at

home in the wide world everywhere there are clouds, birds and tears."[37] Luxemburg was a forthright and vigorous opponent of anti-Semitism, but her statement here is problematic to me. Regardless of how she defined herself, she was treated by the world at large, and particularly by anti-Semites, as a Jew. Her disassociating herself from her Jewish background in those circumstances was tantamount to a withdrawal of solidarity from the other Jews that were also the victims of anti-Semitism. She seems to have assumed that an internationalist *politics* required an internationalist *identity*, that the revolutionaries who felt themselves part of an "imagined community" of internationalists, could not, unlike the nationalists discussed by Benedict Anderson, identify with any particular country or nationality.

In fairness to Luxemburg, taking distance from one's Jewish origins was very widespread among Jews in the socialist movement. Thus, in the 1890s, even socialists who were building an all-Jewish, Yiddish speaking movement in New York City favored the eventual dissolution of the Jewish labor movement and even of the entire Jewish culture, community, and identity and saw assimilation as inevitable, especially in democratic and industrial countries like the United States. For them, assimilation would accelerate with the revolution they saw approaching.[38] The problem with this perspective is that it weakened politically these Yiddish socialists when they were confronted with major Jewish disasters such as the Kishinev pogrom of April 1903. As historian Tony Michels has pointed out, their socialist belief in Jewish assimilation—which they saw as part of their internationalism—now struck many individuals as naïve, even indecent. He describes previously staunch internationalists questioning, after Kishinev, whether their commitment to the workers of the world conflicted with their loyalty to the Jewish people.[39] Not surprisingly, Jewish nationalism emerged strengthened from these events. While the growth of Jewish nationalism might have been inevitable as a result of those anti-Semitic attacks, it was clearly reinforced by the socialist ambivalence about defending Jews as Jews rather than as just workers,[40] as well as by its active pro-assimilationist perspective.

As a Cuban-Jewish Marxist, I find Deutscher's "Non-Jewish Jew" a questionable notion because of its disassociation from the Jewish condition and because of the lack of solidarity it evinces towards what has historically been an oppressed, persecuted group even though anti-Semitism may have declined in countries such as the United States. As an alternative, I am proposing the notion of the Internationalist Jew. Most Marxists nowadays do not make an internationalist identity into a condition of internationalist politics. The fact that as a Cuban Jew, I am not "affected as much," to use Luxemburg's terminology, by what happens to people who are neither Jewish nor Cuban does not mean that I am indifferent to their oppression by others. The essence of internationalist politics seems to me, then, to refuse to place the interests of Cubans or Jews above the interests of other people and to support those people when they are oppressed by fellow Jews or Cubans. In the early fifties, long before my having become a Marxist, a Cuban friend tested my Cuban nationalist credentials by asking me which side I would take if there were a war between Cuba and the recently established state of Israel—a question faced, by the way, by many other Jews of my generation.[41] After briefly hesitating, I answered that would depend on who the aggressor was. Many years later, I concluded that even though I was at the time affected by sentiments of "dual loyalty," it was nevertheless an apt answer because it centered on the substantive issues at stake rather than on an unconditional loyalty to one country or another (my country right or wrong). In retrospect, I realize that it was the Jewish marginality that Deutscher so acutely analyzed that allowed me to think like that. Nowadays, for me, being an internationalist Jew means recognizing, that it is the Palestinians, and not the oppressive actions of the state of Israel, that deserve solidarity rather than the critical ambivalence of Deutscher. It also means refusing to remain silent when confronted by anti-Semitic statements and actions. It means acknowledging my profound sense of solidarity with the victims of the Holocaust and of anti-Semitism. I identify with the solidarity expressed by a number of Jews including Marc Bloch, the great French historian and anti-Nazi resistance fighter, who were for

“flaunting” their Judaism in only one instance: when encountering an anti-Semite.

Although this stance might reflect a negative kind of Judaism—proclaiming one’s Jewishness only when confronting anti-Semitism—it is an in-your-face attitude of resistance (and it is not premised on the Zionist notion, deeply rooted in East European Jewish culture, that anti-Semitism is both inevitable and incurable). It also shuns a sentimental view of Jews when they are victimized and an uncritical view of Jews when they are the victimizers. Primo Levi’s searing objectivity analyzing and resisting the temptation to prettify the brutalizing effects that extreme oppression such as that of the concentrations camps can have on people, and his refusal to be an apologist for Jews or for Israel, shines very bright in my mind.

Footnotes

1. Isaac Deutscher, “The Non-Jewish Jew” in The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays, Tamara Deutscher, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang and Oxford University Press, 1968), 25-41. Subsequent parenthetical page numbers in the text are from this volume.
2. Rather than making a case for the “Jewishness” of Karl Marx, Deutscher just assumes it. Marx’s father had converted to Christianity so one may wonder about what made Marx “Jewish.” I want to thank David Finkel for calling my attention to this matter. Personal communication of March 27, 2013.
3. Freud had a more active association with organized Jewry than was the case for several of the other major “non-Jewish Jews” identified by Deutscher, although he was nevertheless ambivalent toward his own Jewish background. See Peter Loewenberg, “Sigmund Freud as a Jew: A Study in Ambivalence and Courage,” Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, No. 7 (1971), 363-369.
4. Roy Medvedev, Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism, ed. and trans. George Shriver, revised and expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 869.
5. Of course, my purpose here is not to evaluate Napoleon’s policies and actions towards the Jews (he emancipated them everywhere he ruled) but rather Deutscher’s vision of the French emperor.
6. The historian Ezra Mendelsohn makes an important distinction between assimilation and acculturation. Thus, during the in terwar period there was significant acculturation of Polish Jews to the Polish language and culture but very little assimilation. Ezra Mendelsohn, “A Note on Jewish Assimilation in the Polish lands,” in Vela Vago, ed., Jewish Assimilation in Modern Times (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 145-146. In this context, it is revealing and significant that historians of the Jews such as Simon Dubnov and Raphael Mahler thought that the replacement of Hebrew and Yiddish by modern European languages would carry the Jewish people towards its complete assimilation and self-destruction. Jonathan Frankel, “Assimilation and the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe: towards a new historiography?” in Jonathan Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21.
7. There were also some 4,000 Sephardic Jews of Turkish origin and several hundred North American Jews on the island. However, my family and most Ashkenazi Jews had little contact with the members of these two other communities. Intercommunal contacts began to gradually increase after the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948.
8. Enzo Traverso, The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843-1943, translated by Bernard Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994).
9. Traverso, 21.
10. Traverso, 217.
11. Hal Draper, “Marx and the Economic-Jew Stereotype,” Special Note A, in Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution: Part I State and Bureaucracy (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 591-608.
12. Traverso, 227-28. For a more extended discussion, although from a Zionist point of view, of the evolution of Trotsky’s thinking about the fate of the Jews in the 1930s see Joseph Nedava, Trotsky

and the Jews (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), 202-210.
13. Traverso, 104. Medem's view remained his own since it was not officially adopted by the Bund.
14. Cited by Traverso, 228.
15. Many prominent, educated, elite Jews such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau also felt that "only anti-Semitism had made Jews of us." Cited by Steven Zipperstein, who describes the comment as "half-frivolous, but also deadly earnest" in "Ahad Ha'am and the politics of assimilation," in Jonathan Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein (eds.), Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 344.
16. For a different approach, see Moshe Machover, "Zionist myths: Hebrew versus Jewish identity," Weekly Worker, 962, May 16, 2013.
17. For a brief discussion of Soviet Jewry, which underlines how anti-Semitic discrimination helped to prevent assimilation, see Yaacov Ro'i, "The Dilemma of Soviet Jewry's Assimilation After 1948," in Vago, ed., Jewish Assimilation in Modern Times, 165-170.
18. It is perhaps ironic that Deutscher's essay "The Non-Jewish Jew" was based on a lecture delivered during Jewish Book Week to the World Jewish Congress, in February 1958.
19. Mariam K. Slater, "My Son the Doctor: Aspects of Mobility Among American Jews," American Sociological Review, Vol. 34, No. 3 (June 1969): 359-373. Stephen Steinberg has pointed out that sociologists have argued not that Jewish intellectual traditions were in themselves important but rather that they fostered a positive orientation toward learning that was easily adapted to secular education. However, that was not Deutscher's view about Jewish intellectuality. Stephen Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 132-133.
20. Slater, 365.
21. Slater, 365-366. Interestingly, in her introduction to this volume, Tamara Deutscher cites her late husband to the effect that his religious training provided a "pseudo-knowledge" that "cluttered and strained my memory, took me away from real life, from real learning, from real knowledge of the world around me. It stunted my physical and mental development" (7).
22. Slater, 366. Slater is quoting here Louis Wirth, "Education for Survival: the Jews," in Charles S. Johnson, ed., Education and the Cultural Process, reprinted from the American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 48, No. 6 (May 1943).
23. Antony Polonsky, "Introduction. The Shtetl: Myth and Reality," in Antony Polonsky, ed., The Shtetl: Myth and Reality, Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume Seventeen (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 18.
24. Steinberg, 101-102.
25. Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 109-110.
26. Steinberg, 98.
27. Michels, 77.
28. Slater, 371.
29. Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, Jewish Population in the United States, 2011, Number 4, 2011, Berman Institute—North American Jewish Data Bank, University of Connecticut; and Naomi Zeveloff, "U.S. Population Pegged at 6 Million," Forward.Com, published Jan. 17, 2012 issue of Jan. 20, 2012.
30. Joseph Berger, "With Orthodox Growth, City's Jewish Population is Climbing Again," The New York Times, June 12, 2012, A18.
31. I would have expected a lower proportion of Orthodox Jews outside of New York but not such a large difference (40 percent of Jews in New York compared to 10 percent in the U.S. as a whole).
32. Laurie Goodstein, "Poll Shows Major Shift in Identity of U.S. Jews," The New York Times, Oct. 1, 2013; and Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, A Portrait of Jewish Americans, Oct. 1, 2013.
33. It is worth noting, however, that perhaps in response to their relative decline and the gradual move to the right of the Jewish community, the Conservative and even the Reform wings of American Judaism are moving closer to Orthodox religious practices.

34. “Nones” on the Rise. One-in-Five Adults Have no Religious Affiliation. Poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Oct. 9, 2012.
35. 2007 Survey of American Jews—[North American Jewish Data Bank].
36. Peter Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” The New York Review of Books, June 10, 2010.
37. Cited by Traverso, 49.
38. Michels, 123.
39. Michels, 126.
40. It is worth noting the similarity between this Jewish socialist stance and the reluctance of the American socialist leader Eugene Debs to go beyond the defense of Black workers as workers and develop a political program specifically addressed to the problems and oppression that Black people faced as Blacks.
41. A military clash between Cuba and Israel could have potentially taken place when the Cuban Army sent a tank brigade to reinforce Syria’s border with Israel near the Golan Heights after the “Yom Kippur” war of 1973. Ignacio Ramonet, Fidel Castro. Biografía a Dos Voces (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, S.A., 2006), 529.