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Office Hours by Appointment

A History of Jews and Social Justice in the United States

Judaic Studies 417, Section 003 / Social Work 513 Section 001/ History 498, Section 002
Monday, 4-7 p.m., 1794 SSWB, Winter 2011

Course Description:

American Jews have played vital roles in shaping the critical reform movements that have defined twentieth- and twenty-first-century American society. This course will explore the striking profile of Jewish engagement in broad social movements including labor, civil rights, and feminism. In addition, it will examine how efforts initially intended to address particular Jewish communal interests propelled Jews into the forefront of American municipal reform, social welfare efforts, and civil rights efforts.

Even as conflicts over civil rights and support for Israel in recent decades have called American Jewish progressivism into question, Jews continue to display a liberalism that undermines conventional explanations for the political behavior of all comparable groups. How should we understand this legacy of American Jewish social and political activism? Is it a meaningful reflection of Jewish teachings and historical experience? What might it teach about the complex political, religious, class, social, and racial dynamics that have shaped the contours of varied American identities?

Course Objectives:

Completion of this course will result in the ability of students to:

1. Understand American Jewish engagement in the major social change movements of the twentieth century including labor, civil rights and feminism.
2. Describe American Jewish communal and individual political and social trends in relation to various influences of religious tradition, historical experience, American
frameworks for Jewish identity (as related to race, class, gender, and politics), and contemporaneous international developments (e.g. pogroms, the Holocaust, the creation and history of the State of Israel).

3. Critically assess the place of progressive activism and liberal political identity within the overall continuum of American Jewish identities.

4. Follow the evolving relationship between Jewish communal and institutional efforts and American reform and progressive movements.

5. Apply their understanding of the way that societal constructs have inflected American Jewish identity to thinking about how differing social positions have shaped the experience of other ethnic, national, and racial groups.

6. Write and think critically about the political directions and communal challenges and possibilities shaping American Jewish experience today.

**Required Texts, available for purchase:**


This course will be conducted as a seminar and will require active student participation. Students should come prepared to ask questions, share insight, listen to the instructor and fellow students with full attention, and provide leadership in the classroom, within large and small groups. Specific reading assignments may shift to accommodate the needs and interests of the class. Graduate students will be required to submit one additional project or paper in consultation with the instructor. If there are any special circumstances that I and/or the class should know to allow you to participate fully, please consult with me about them so that we can make appropriate adaptations.

**Syllabus**

1. **January 10: Traditional and Contemporary Sources on American Jews, Justice, and Politics**
   
   Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; *Pirkei Avot*; Passover Haggadah, Isaiah 58; etc.
   M.J. Raphall and David Einhorn on Slavery
   Marshall Sklare, table on Jewish identity from “Image of the Lakeville Jew”
   Exit poll numbers and sources on for the “Jewish vote”, 2008, 2010
January 17: no class, Martin Luther King Day. Take advantage of incredible U-Michigan MLK Day offerings on social justice: http://mlksymposium.umich.edu/

   Elliot N. Dorff, The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World), pp.7-20.
   Optional:

   Excerpts of sermons by Morris Raphall and David Einhorn on the Bible and slavery, 1861
   Optional: Irving Howe, World of our Fathers “Jewish Labor, Jewish Socialism, 287-325

4. February 7: If We are Only for Ourselves: Immigrant Aid and Beyond
   Boris Bogen, Jewish Philanthropy, pp. 1-26; 244-294.
   Lillian Wald, The House on Henry Street, pp. 1-96.

5. February 14: Settling In: Progressivism, Zionism, and Depression
   Annelise Orleck, Common Sense and a Little Fire, pp. 121-168; 215-249.
Marc Dollinger, “What Do We Owe to Peter Stuyvesant?” *The New Deal in the Jewish Community*, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America*, pp. 19-40.

6. **February 21: Destruction, Acceptance, Insecurity: WWII and the 1950s**
   - Cheryl Greenberg, “And Why Not Every Man?” *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*, 114-168

   **February 28:** no class, winter break

7. **March 7: Let My People Go: Jews and the American Civil Rights Movement**
   - Jewish Women’s Archive, *Living the Legacy* exhibit
   - Video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOJNC2EuJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOJNC2EuJw)

8. **March 14: Neo-Conservatism, a “Broken Alliance,” and the Direction of Jewish Community**
   - Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 234-255
   - Bayard Rustin, “The Civil Rights Struggle,” 1965
   - Barbara Smith, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Relationships Between Black and Jewish Women,” 1988

9. **March 21: Feminism and Gender Politics**
   - Michael Staub, *Torn at the Root*, chapter 7, pp. 241-279
   - Jewish Women’s Archive, *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*

March 28: Israel: Dream or Nightmare

Michael Staub, Torn at the Root pp. 194-240; 280-308


10. April 4: Radical/Suburban/Political? Jews

Alan Dershowitz, The Vanishing American Jew, 1997, pp. 256-287
Websites for local Jewish federation (for example, Jewish Federation of Greater Ann Arbor, Jewish Federation of Metro Detroit).

11. April 11: If Not Now?: 2011 and beyond

Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Margie Klein, eds., Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice, assigned selection
Jill Jacobs, There Shall Be No Needy, selections

April 18, Passover, no class.

**Student Responsibilities and Assignments:**

All students are responsible for the highest level of academic integrity. Students must submit only their own work and cite all sources of ideas and information taken from other sources. Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

**Class Participation** (15%) The course will depend upon active participation from all students. This includes regular, prompt attendance. Please let me know if you must miss a class – more than three absences may result in a failing grade. Active participants offer informed, thoughtful contributions; listen carefully and respectfully; and ask probing, challenging questions of the instructor and each other. Students may be asked, individually or in small groups, to present material from assigned or optional reading assignments and to speak about completed or prospective written assignments. All participants should be on the lookout for historical or contemporary sources that speak to Jewish connections to issues of social justice and bring them to share with other members of the class.

**Extra credit:** Students are encouraged to attend Martin Luther King Day events and the Jewish Communal Leadership Program series, “Communal Conversations on Jewish Community and Identity: Education, Practice, Transformation,” March 9, 16, 23, and 30. Those able to attend can receive extra credit (1% for each submission can replace 1% of lowest grade) upon submitting their reflections on the relation of themes discussed during these public presentations our class considerations.

**Weekly Response Papers** (20%)

You should keep a running “journal” of responses to the assigned readings. For the 11 weeks in which readings are assigned, you must submit 9 journal entries. Entries of 2 to 3 pages should be submitted on the course c-tools site by 10 a.m. on the day of class. These entries are not meant to be polished works of prose. They are meant to encourage you to give some structured thought to the week’s reading assignment before class meets and to connect the week’s readings to each other. I will provide a few specific questions each week that you might want to address, but you should use these papers to consider questions that particularly interest or
challenge you, to connect individual readings to the larger themes of the course, connect a
given week's articles to each others, and /or to say whatever you like about what you have
read.

General questions you might consider for these short submissions:

1. In what way do these readings challenge or add to your prior understandings of
   American Jewish identity and social and political behavior.

2. Are there particular social concerns or ideological positions that inform the analysis
   presented in the readings? Are the readings reflective of a particular historical
   moment?

3. How do the issues that arise in one week’s readings relate to themes that have emerged
   in assignments and discussion from previous weeks?

4. What do the readings suggest about how the broad categories of racial, religious, and
   ethnic identity within the American context?

**Paper Assignments:**

**American Jews and Liberalism (25%, 5-10 pages, due: March 18)**

Many authors have attempted to provide explanations for the persistence of American Jewish
liberalism, often as either advocates or opponents of this persistence. Read at least three of the
following articles (you may also propose other articles or chapters for this purpose, other than
the ones offered here) and consider them in relationship to each other and to the perspectives
you have gained from your study in this class. Choose the articles carefully so that they provide
intriguing counterpoints to each other. What kinds of interests seem to shape the explanations
that are provided for American Jewish identity, activism and political behavior? What do these
articles add to your understanding of the topics in this course? Your paper should reflect an
understanding of the themes we have read about and discussed in class. (5-10 pages) (25%)

  159.
- Seymour Martin Lipset, “A Unique People in an Exceptional Country,” in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed.,
  *American Pluralism and the Jewish Community*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers,
  1990), pp. 3-29.
- Stephen Steinberg, “the Myth of Ethnic Success: The Jewish Horatio Alger Story,” in *The Ethnic Myth,


Irving Howe, “A Time for Compassion and Commitment”

Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Jews”


2. **Final Paper (40%, 10-15 pages, due April 22 at 5 pm)**

This assignment will require students to develop broader understandings of a particular movement or event in American Jewish experience or of the experience of another American ethnic, racial, or national group in relation to what we have learned about American Jews. Paper topics and bibliographic sources should be identified in consultation with the instructor. Students are encouraged to propose subjects other than those identified below.

Possible Topics:

1. Read at least one general history of one of America’s major social change movements. To what extent are Jewish contributions and experiences reflected in this narrative? How does the story that gets told here align or differ from a narrative that keeps a focus on the role of Jews in shaping and forwarding this movement?

2. Choose a contemporary issue related to Jewish political identities and examine it in relation to the themes of the course.

Examples:

Examine coverage of the “Jewish vote” in the 2008 and 2010 elections. What understandings of the place of Jews in American society are reflected in this coverage? Is it presented differently in different media sources? How would you
explain the Jewish vote and coverage of the Jewish vote within the context of what we have studied in this course?

The emergence of J-Street as a critical American voice in relationship to Israel over the last two years.


Take a closer look at one of the current social activist initiatives being put forward within the Jewish community (such as those related to environment, poverty, labor, immigration, war etc.). What do its leaders see as Jewish about their efforts. Where does this movement fit in the narrative of Jewish communal history?

3. Explore the history of a local or national Jewish organization or institution? What tensions does its history reveal about the way in which its “Jewish” identity relates to its “American” identity?

4. Examine a meaningful historical interaction in the relationship between American Jews and another American “minority” group. What does this interaction reveal about how one or both groups defined their interests and identities at that particular historical moment?

5. Examine the biographical work on and/or autobiography of American Jewish individuals who have been extensively involved in work for social change, locally, nationally, or internationally. What does study of this individual contribute to your understanding of the political activism of American Jews? How does the autobiographical or biographical author understand the place of Jewish identity in their subject’s activism?