A History of Jews and Social Justice in the United States

Judaic Studies 417, Section 002 / Social Work 513 Section 001/ History 498, Section 001

Monday, 4-7 p.m., 1155 NQ, Winter 2012

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 flouts conventional explanations tying the political behavior of American ethnic, religious, and racial groups to certain definitions of economic self-interest.

How should we understand the legacy of American Jewish social and political activism and their puzzling contemporary political profile? As we consider twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Jewish historical experience, we shall examine the various explanations used to make sense of Jewish political behavior. Does it reflect Jewish teachings or values, historical experience, false consciousness, self-interest, or some combination of these and other factors? What might the study of the American Jewish engagement with social justice and American Jewish political behavior 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. Connect thought about how societal constructs have inflected American Jewish identity into 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 a longer final paper or one designed to address their particular academic or professional interests 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.
I Introduction:

   - Texts: Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; *Pirkei Avot*; Passover Haggadah, Isaiah 58; etc.
   - Barack Obama, Speech at Union for Reform Judaism,
   - Marshall Sklare, table on Jewish identity from “Image of the Lakeville Jew”
   - Presidential election numbers and articles on the “Jewish vote”, 2012

   **January 16: no class, Martin Luther King Day.** Take advantage of today’s incredible U-Michigan MLK Day offerings on social justice: [note opportunity for MLK Day extra-credit assignment]: [http://mlksymposium.umich.edu/?m=20120116&cat=3](http://mlksymposium.umich.edu/?m=20120116&cat=3).

II Immigrant Radicalism and the Creation of American Jewish Community, 1880-1940

2. **January 23: Immigrant Radicals and the Labor Movement**
   - Optional: Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers* “Jewish Labor, Jewish Socialism, 287-325

3. **January 30: If We are Only for Ourselves: Immigration Aid and Beyond**
   - Boris Bogen, *Jewish Philanthropy*, pp. 1-26; 244-294.

4. **February 6: Settling In: Progressivism, Zionism, and Depression**
   - 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.
III. Acceptance and Insecurity, 1940-1985

5. **February 13: 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
   
   

6. **February 20: 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)

   **February 27: no class, winter break**

7. **March 5: Neo-Conservatism, a “Broken Alliance,” and Counter-Culture: 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

8. **March 12: 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*
   
   
9. March 19: Israel: Dream or Nightmare
Michael Staub, *Torn at the Root* pp. 194-240; 280-308
Current sources on American Jews and Israel, J-Street etc.

IV The Era of Tikkun Olam: the Struggle for the American Jewish Soul (cont’d), 1985-2012

10. March 26: The Continuity Crisis and the Emergence of Tikkun Olam
Sources on American Jewish World Service, Mazon, Jewish Funds for Justice (all founded 1985/96).

11. April 2 Foundations for Justice and Community: Text or History?
12. April 9: If Not Now?:
Jill Jacobs, Where Justice Dwells.
Examine websites for a contemporary Jewish social justice organization, e.g. American Jewish World Service; Hazon; Jewish Council for Urban Affairs; Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps; Repair the World; Jewish Funds for Justice; Jewish Community Relations Council, Boston; Jewish Community Action; or a different one. What frameworks do they offer for Jewish identity and community? What relationships do they suggest exist between
Student presentations on final papers

13. April 16: The Jewish Vote, 2012 and beyond
TBD
Student Presentations on Final Papers

**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** (1-2%): Students are encouraged to attend Martin Luther King Day events on January 16 and the Jewish Communal Leadership Program symposium on the Jewish Community and the city of Detroit on April 1. Those able to attend can receive extra credit upon submitting their reflections on the relation of themes discussed during these public presentations to themes discussed in class or their application to understanding American Jewish social and political identities.
Weekly Response Papers (15%)

You should keep a running “journal” of responses to the assigned readings. For the 12 weeks in which readings are assigned, you must submit 8 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 other, and /or to say whatever you like about what you have read. Generally, the response paper should address more than one of the readings assigned in a given week.

An updated reading list and discussion questions will be provided for each week’s assignment. 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 operate and evolve within the American context?

Paper Assignments:

“Current Events”: (5%), 3-5 pages, due: any time before February 10 (students will have option to resubmit this paper)

Examine a news/blog/media report that appears in 2012 that makes an argument about the proper direction of the efforts of the organized Jewish community, the American Jewish relationship to Israel, or prospects for the “Jewish vote” in the 2012 elections. Use questions and approaches introduced in class to identify and assess assumptions, facts, ideology, rhetoric and conclusions included in the piece under consideration. Include a copy of the article or a link to the item on-line along with your assignment.
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%)

Irving Howe, “A Time for Compassion and Commitment”
Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Jews”
Norman Podhoretz, Why are Jews Liberals? (2009)
2. **Final Paper** (40%, 10-15 pages, due April 20 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. Graduate students will be required to submit a longer final paper or one designed to address their particular academic or professional interests in consultation with the instructor. All students will offer brief reports on their work on their final papers during the last few weeks of class.

   **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 recent and current 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?

   Examine rhetoric of presidential candidates related to Israel to identify embedded assumptions and understandings of American Jewish identity.

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

   Examine Jewish communal reactions to and coverage of the Gaza conflict in January, 2009 or to other Israel-related news (e.g. Flotilla incident, release of Gilad Shalit, terrorist incidents, etc.). What does the communal response reveal about unity and tensions in regard to the direction of Jewish community and identity?
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 describe as Jewish about their efforts. How central is their Jewish identity to their work? 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 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?