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

Thursday, 4-7 p.m., 130 Tappan, Fall 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 recent tensions over civil rights and Israel 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 the puzzling contemporary political profile of American Jews? As we consider twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Jewish historical experience and as we explore and experience the 2012 presidential election season, we shall examine the various explanations used to make sense of Jewish political behavior and historical overrepresentation in social activist movements.

We will use written and audio-visual primary sources, contemporary and historical analyses, and the practice of oral history to examine multiple potential sources of American Jewish social activism and evaluate the role and intersections of Jewish teachings or values, historical experience, false consciousness, self-interest, assimilation and particularism have played in shaping American Jewish identities. We will also use class time to develop familiarity and skills in the conduct of oral history which will be used to complete oral history conducted with individuals who fit into the historical narrative of explored within the course.

All along the way, we will ask what the study of American Jewish engagement with social justice and American Jewish political behavior can 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.
7. Examine the intersection of public and private identities and contribute to the preservation of communal memory and narrative through the practice of oral history.

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:

1. **September 6: The Puzzling Political Behavior of American Jews: Numbers, Texts, and Explanations**
   
   Texts:
   
   Barack Obama and Mitt Romney: Speeches at Union for Reform Judaism and AIPAC Presidential election numbers and articles on the “Jewish vote”, 2012

   **September 13: no class:** begin oral history practice, using *In Our Own Voices: Jewish Women’s Archive Guide to Oral History*, [http://jwa.org/mediaobject/In-Our-Own-Voices-PDF](http://jwa.org/mediaobject/In-Our-Own-Voices-PDF). See assignment description.

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

2. **September 20: Immigrant Radicals and the Labor Movement**


   Optional: Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers* “Jewish Labor, Jewish Socialism, 287-325

3. **September 27: If We are Only for Ourselves: Immigrant Aid and Beyond**

   Boris Bogen, *Jewish Philanthropy*, pp. 1-26; 244-294.


4. **October 4: 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. **October 11: 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. **October 18: Let My People Go: Jews and the American Civil Rights Movement**
   - Jewish Women’s Archive, [Living the Legacy](http://www.jewishwomen.org/livingthelegacy) exhibit
   - Video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOJNC2EuJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOJNC2EuJw).

7. **October 25: 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. **November 1: 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. November 8: Election 2012 and Israel’s role in Jewish communal and American Politics

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. November 15: 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. November 29: Foundations for Justice and Community: Text or History?


**Optional:** Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 3-26.

---

12. **December 5: If Not Now?:**


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 Jewish identity and social/political activism?

---

**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.

**Weekly Response Papers** (15%)

You should keep a running “journal” of responses to the assigned readings. For the 11 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. Do not just summarize. Take advantage of the response questions, or relate material to class discussions, or compare different readings to develop thoughtful responses to the assigned texts.

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?

Assignments:

“Mini Oral History” (5%, due: September 24)
Students will conduct an audio mini-oral history, and submit the final products of such an interview, audio or video recording, transcript, release form, and interview log (as described in “In Our Own Voices”), as well as a one-page narrative summary of the oral history. Refer to In Our Own Voices: A Guide to Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women from the Jewish Women’s Archive website: http://jwa.org/mediaobject/In-Our-Own-Voices-PDF. Read Chapter 1 on “Conducting a Life History Interview,” and download and adapt forms in appendix (pp. 87-96). Choose someone of your acquaintance (family, friend, colleague, professor, clergy member, mentor, etc.) with whom you will conduct a 15-20 minute oral history interview. Your interview should focus on a particular theme or question in the
narrator’s life and experience. You could ask them to focus on some aspect of public activism, community involvement, or political or religious identity, for example.

**American Jews and Liberalism** (25%, 5-10 pages, due: November 9)

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”


2. **Oral History Project and Final Paper** (40%, transcripts, documentation, and 10-20 page paper, due December 11 at 5 pm)

   This assignment will require students to develop broader understandings of a particular movement or event in American Jewish experience and to examine the intersection between individual identity and public activism. Each student will identify one individual selected from a list provided to explore the history, sources, and legacy of their activism. Students may identify their own oral history subjects, but the area of interest and narrator must be approved in consultation with the instructor. *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 during the last few weeks of class. Oral history transcripts and recordings will become part of an appropriate local or national oral history collection or historical archive. Where appropriate, they will be added to the Jewish Counter Culture collection at the American Jewish Historical Society.

   Students will be responsible for studying the background of relevant movements, reaching out to potential oral history narrators, creating a pre-interview questionnaire, conducting an oral history lasting from one one-half to three hours, and creating a transcript and interview log, securing relevant permissions, and documenting their work for preservation purposes. Interviews will focus on the narrator’s experience within a particular movement and examine the range of motivations for their activism. One central focus for questioning should be the relationship between the subject’s activism and their Jewish identity.

   We will use the videography resources of the U-M Center for Media for recording the interviews.

   We will spend class time developing the tools of oral history, thinking about its limitations and strengths in the capturing of historical experience, and share the results of our interviews. Final products will include a transcript of the interview and a written report (10-20 pages) that provides a narrative of your subject’s activist history, contextualizes it within the history of the relevant social movement of which he or she was a part, and identifies the relationship of the individual’s Jewish identity to their activism, as reflected in motivation, saliency in their activism, and whatever retrospective associations they make between identity and activism.