

# Marx's Mixed Legacy: Anti-Semitism and Socialism

June 24, 2009

HOW HAVE MARXIST THEORISTS and activists, Socialist parties and Communist States understood Anti-Semitism? How did they confront the rise of fascism in Germany? Spanning the period between *The Communist Manifesto* and the fall of the Berlin Wall, German historian Mario Kessler's *On Anti-Semitism and Socialism* examines the relationship to Jews, and to anti-Semitism, of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Leon Trotsky, other individual Marxists, and various political parties in Germany and the Soviet Union. He traces on theoretical, personal, and political levels, how they have misunderstood fascist and radical right movements from Nazi Germany to the racist violence of the present. His analysis attacks Stalinism, and attempts to assess the implications of this compromised past for the future of Marxist thought. The book has important implications for understanding racism, anti-Semitism, and Marxist theory. The strength of Marxist analysis (and socialist ideology) has always been its vision of social equality, of the abolition of oppression, of a better future. It is largely this vision that has drawn so many Jews to Leftist movements. But in these twelve "Selected Essays," Kessler, a non-Jewish German historian born and raised in East Germany, shows that certain flaws in the ways that Marx and the Marxists who followed him analyzed Jews, nationalism, and the process of history itself, disabled many of them from predicting the rise of fascism or effectively combating it. Furthermore, he analyzes Socialist and Communist practice, in the Soviet Union and in Germany, both in opposing anti-Semitism, and in promoting it.

## Marx "On the Jewish Question"

BEGINNING WITH "KARL MARX: AN EXAMPLE of Anti-Semitism?" Kessler examines Marx's relationship to Jews and Jewishness on personal, private, political, and theoretical levels. According to Kessler, the young Marx's 1843 essay, "On the Jewish Question," his only explicit treatment of the subject, lacks the sophistication, wit, and brilliance of his later works. Intoxicated with Hegelian dialectics, competing with other "Young Hegelians," Marx was concerned with not the Jews *per se*, but with using the case of the Jews to score points against Bruno Bauer on the nature of the relationship between the State and religion. Marx stereotyped Jews, identifying them with finance, money, Capital. Drawing on several Marxist critics, Kessler says that in linking "'true Judaism' with the conditions and form of capitalism," Marx's analysis was "still caught within the framework of then-contemporary misconceptions and prejudices." Moreover he ignored "the well-established fact that the majority of Jews, even in nineteenth-century Germany, were not engaged in money lending or any money accumulating activities . . . ." (p.15) How can we understand Marx's utter failure to comprehend "the Jewish question" and its larger implications? According to Kessler, Marx believed that (1) The immanent demise of capitalism would end all exploitation and repression. Therefore (2) "the Jewish question" would disappear because Jews would disappear through assimilation. (3) Marx failed to comprehend the actual class differentiation of Jews, and their material reality. Kessler notes "Marx's seeming indifference to the beginnings of the Jewish working-class movement, which is particularly curious in light of the fact that Marx otherwise noted the emergence of even the most obscure socialist groups with great interest, commenting on them extensively" (p18). (4) Marx's personal biography predisposed him to anti-Semitism. Kessler is to be credited for seeing the ways in which the personal was political for Marx and his followers. An examination of how and why Marx and some of those who followed him were anti-Semitic is crucial beyond the question of Jews; it is crucial for understanding some of the underlying problems in Marxism's treatment of race, nationality and religion.

## The Personal is Political: The Ardor of the Convert

KESSLER NOTES THAT MARX'S FATHER, Heinrich, converted from Judaism to Protestantism just after Karl's birth, and he had Karl baptized in 1824. (There is no mention of Karl's mother.) We don't know what it meant to little Karl to be baptized at six-years-old, but Kessler tells us that "[g]rowing up in a milieu of recent converts, Marx's formative years were barren of any Jewish acculturation and were directly exposed to anti-Semitic undercurrents then typical of Central European Christianity (p.13)." Kessler notes that Marx's published writing about the Jews was contradictory, but his private correspondence is gratuitously hostile. In published works he used Jews as metaphors (e.g. for money, for exchange-value in *Das Kapital*), but he also occasionally defended them. But in his unpublished texts and in private correspondence with Engels, Marx "frequently derided his political foes' and his friends' Jewish backgrounds, even when the specific context of the exchanges did not deal with Jewish issues" (Kessler, p.13.) Kessler reveals extensive irrelevant ethnic slurs in their letters. Marx's absorption of anti-Semitism, and his sensitivity about being a convert, may have contributed to an apparent willful ignorance about the Jewish working class, which had further implications for his theoretical treatment of Jews and "the Jewish question." According to Kessler, "thus far, no one has managed to locate even the briefest comment by Marx on the beginnings of the Jewish socialist movement in Eastern Europe, although Russian-Jewish socialists were among the first to seriously read Marx's main work, *Das Kapital*." (p.21) . . . He did not even protest against the large and unprecedented wave of pogroms (1881-1882) in Imperial Russia, despite his usual habit of condemning the persecution and exploitation of the weak." (p. 22.) Kessler suggests that Marx's "almost hostile silence" can be explained by his not "want[ing] to be reminded of his Jewish heritage." (p. 22). And indeed his foes sometimes cruelly did just that.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that in suggesting that "the Jewish question" be solved by assimilation, Marx was recommending that *all* Jews follow the path of his own family, his own life. Kessler points out that the one key idea that linked Marxism and Liberalism [and] was present in . . . most publications of socialists all the way up to Hitler's rise to power was the assumption that Jewish emancipation had to happen through *assimilation* or giving up of a discernable Jewish identity. . . . Liberals wanted Jews to assimilate fully into bourgeois society, while Marxists advocated Jewish assimilation into the general revolutionary movement, which would eventually achieve a future socialist state and thereby quasi-automatically solve the "Jewish Question" as well (pp. 17-18). On a practical level, assimilation failed the test in both worlds. Even Marx, the convert son of a convert, was attacked as a Jew, as he attacked other converts for having been (by definition) *formerly* Jews. Is there an assimilation more extreme, more devoted, more abject, than conversion? For bourgeois states, the rise of Hitler finally put the lie to assimilation as salvation.

### The Immanent Demise of Capitalism; The Shock of Fascism

KESSLER LOCATES MARX and each of the succeeding Marxist theorists in history, and shows how their perceptions were formed and limited by the times in which they lived. Marx's belief in the inevitable progress of history prevented him from seeing how contradictions in capitalist development within Europe could produce as retrograde (and murderous) a system as fascism. Engels, outliving Marx, could see developments that Marx missed. In the 1890s Engels began to notice both Jewish socialist activities (he even wrote an introduction for a Yiddish version of *The Communist Manifesto!*), and the tie between the increasingly virulent anti-Semitic and anti-worker movements. Tracing Engels' evolution from the Jew-hating remarks he shared with Marx to a public opponent of anti-Semitism, Kessler concludes:

Friedrich Engels played a decisive part in the mobilization of the socialist movement against anti-Semitism. He presented in his analysis the potential, barbaric consequences

of imperialist national policies. But he also believed in the timely transformation of capitalist society into a socialist one. The growth of racist anti-Semitism under conditions of modern barbarism, and in the name of the continuation of the old order, could not be imagined by him — or by any other socialist (p. 46).

And yet even some later Marxists were prevented by theory from understanding their own times. "Otto Heller, . . . a highly respected Communist authority on Jewish matters. wrote, shortly before Hitler's rise to power, that 'a genuine Jewish Question exists only in Eastern and Southern Europe, in those areas with a backward social development.' " Heller soon fell victim to Germany's advanced technological murder machine. "His friend, Bruno Frei wrote . . . that 'seldom has a historical misconception been so tragically refuted (p. 23).'"<sup>2</sup>

## **The Russian Revolution and the Jewish Workers' Movement**

CREATING THE FIRST SOCIALIST REPUBLIC, the Russian revolution put the Marxist solution to the test. In an chapter called "The Russian Revolution and the Jewish Workers Movement," and in several other essays, Kessler examines the contradictory nature of the Soviet Union. Lenin was resolutely opposed to anti-Semitism, and put into effect policies which won over those Jews who had formerly opposed the Bolsheviks. "One of the very first measures adopted by the Provisional government was the suppression of the anti- Semitic legislation in force under the old regime: a total of 650 laws limiting the civic rights of the Jewish population were abolished (p. 48)." The new government initially granted Jews "and all other national minorities" legal equality and required all governmental organs to combat anti-Semitism (p. 50). When counter-revolutionary anti-Semitic forces in the Ukraine caused over 2000 pogroms resulting in the death of 50,000 -150,000 Jews, the Red Army fought back, winning the support of many Russian Jews. (My father recalled his childhood, when his mother hid "from the Cossacks" in a haystack, followed by the family's joy when the Red Army came through. It turned him and his six siblings into life-long Communists.) But while Lenin resolutely opposed discrimination and violence against Jews, he equally opposed their cultural autonomy as demanded by The Jewish Workers' Bund [Organization] of Russia, Poland and Lithuania, known as "The Bund." Kessler points out that there were several organized political tendencies among Jews at the time of the Russian Revolution: (1) bourgeois Zionist parties, and Social Democrats, divided into (2) Socialist Zionist groups, and (3) the anti- Zionist Socialist Bund.<sup>3</sup> "One purpose of the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, was to weaken the Marxist elements among the Russian Jews by strengthening Zionist tendencies." (p. 59) The Bund, founded in 1897, put forth an alternative solution to assimilation: independent Jewish cultural identity within a socialist political framework. Lenin fought any notion of Jewish autonomy. Kessler says (correctly) that it was a struggle for political control. "During the first 10 or 11 years of the Soviet regime, 'in certain respects the Bolsheviks took over the former Bundist policy of cultural- national autonomy while outlawing the Bund and other Jewish socialist parties as obsolete remnants of the ancient regime.'"<sup>4</sup> That is, Jews could have "autonomy" as long as non-Jews controlled it! But underlying that struggle over control (as well as assimilation) were two fundamental underlying assumptions: (1) that (non-Jewish) Russians were universal, while Jews were particular, or (2) that (non-Jewish) Russians were superior to Jewish Russians. Later, Stalinists asserted that the people in the anti-Stalinist opposition (many of whose leaders were Jews) were "rootless cosmopolitans," not "native sons of Mother Russia." That is, Jewish Russians were not real Russians. Kessler calls this "Great Russian chauvinism with a pseudo-socialist face" (p. 56). But beyond active discrimination, Russian chauvinism also underlay the demand for assimilation as a solution for "The Jewish Question," as I shall discuss below. The Bund was fundamentally opposed to both assimilation and Zionism. Henryk Erlich argued that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine "would mean that the Arab

majority there would fall under the domination of a handful of Jewish chauvinists, [while the establishment of a Jewish state] would endanger the Jewish struggle for equal civil rights in Europe.” (pp. 69-70) The Bund believed that Jews should not emigrate; rather they should remain in Russia — and wherever else they lived — and fight for their national rights within Socialism. They called this concept *dawikeit* (here-ness.) In destroying the Bund Lenin destroyed the greatest counterweight to the Balfour declaration. I should note that the destruction of the Bund, combined, later on, with Stalinist anti-Semitism and the holocaust, made many Jews throughout the world feel that they had little alternative to Zionism. The Bund and its concept of *dawikeit* was the alternative. Now, in the 21st Century in the US, as young leftist Jews come to question Israeli government policies, some have begun to refer positively to the Bund as a model for a consciously Jewish politics.

### Trotsky and The Failure of Communist Assimilation

LEON TROTSKY WAS THE VERY MODEL of socialist assimilation. Kessler begins his fascinating chapter on Trotsky with an apt and poignant epigraph: “You consider yourself, I suppose, either a Russian or a Jew? No, Trotsky responded . . . I am a Social Democrat, and only that.”<sup>5</sup> Alas, although Trotsky thought that he was “a Social Democrat, and only that,” non-Jewish Russians saw him as a Jew after all: “He was shattered . . . when in 1926 the first intimations reached him that his Jewish origin had not remained unimportant, particularly in the party struggles.” In 1937, two decades after the Russian Revolution, defeated by Stalin and in Mexican exile, Trotsky realized that Jews were not dissolving in the warm and welcome waters of socialist comradeship. In an interview with Jewish newspaper correspondents he said:

During my youth I rather leaned toward the prognosis that the Jews of different countries would be assimilated and that the Jewish question would thus disappear in a quasi- automatic fashion. The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this perspective.<sup>6</sup>

In Trotsky’s 1938 “Letter to American Jews menaced by Fascism and anti-Semitism,” he predicted that “the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the *physical extermination of the Jews*.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he noted in *Thermidor and anti-Semitism*, that Jewish Bolsheviks were being exterminated as the bureaucracy, as a regressive force, was using Jews as scapegoats. “History has never yet seen an example when the reaction following the revolutionary upsurge was not accompanied by the most unbridled chauvinistic passions, anti-Semitism among them.”<sup>8</sup> Trotsky’s recognition that reactionary responses to revolution foster anti-Semitic scapegoating implies a further, unasked question: why did anti-Semitism persist as an available resource for scapegoating, in revolutionary Russia? In face of this murderous anti-Semitism in both Germany and Russia, Trotsky came to favor emigration of Jews from Europe, although the destination was not clear. As for Zionism, he said that “the attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine . . . [is] a tragic mockery of the Jewish people. . . . The future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews.”<sup>9</sup> In “The Resistance of Small Socialist Groups Against German Fascism” Kessler examines the failure of the German Social Democratic and Communist parties to combat the rise of fascism, preoccupied, as they were, with viciously fighting each other. Unfortunately in addressing efforts at resistance, he completely neglects the work of Claudia Koonz’ brilliant book *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1987). Kessler’s neglect of Koonz’ excellent and supremely relevant work parallels his neglect of women generally. Rosa Luxemburg, who certainly might have merited a chapter of her own, is mentioned only in two paragraphs on the significance of her death. Kessler’s later chapters focus on the harmful effects of Stalinism on German politics, and of anti-Semitism regarding scholars returning from exile abroad. His discussion of the relationship

between Soviet anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is too complex to be analyzed here. His penultimate essay, "The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Radical Right in East Germany" examines, with depth and complexity, the rise of the radical right, especially neo-Nazism, in the new German states, the former GDR. In his final essay, Kessler rails against "a canonized, anti-pluralistic Marxism-Leninism," (p.202) and against the substitution of dogma for analysis. He faults East German Marxist historians because "they were largely immune to the insights and research from disciplines which were unknown to the founding fathers of Marxism. [They] did not open themselves to the . . . reception of personal and mass psychology [resulting in] a narrow perspective which was particularly harmful in the analysis of Fascism" (pp. 202-3).

## Considering Kessler: A Major Contribution

KESSLER'S CONTRIBUTION is a thorough and nuanced exploration fueled by a principled commitment to combating and exposing anti-Semitism, and exploring its sources. The significance of Kessler being a *non-Jewish* German brings the issue out of the ghetto, out of the odor of self-serving concerns; he is taking responsibility as a Leftist non-Jewish German for his country's history and practices. I hope that a next step will involve integrating the work of feminist scholars, sorely missing in various aspects of his own analysis, and crucial to his project of broadening "narrow [Marxist] perspectives." Kessler's analysis is far from simplistic. It is measured and conveys the complexities of the issues. He brings to an English audience information based on numerous German sources, making one wish that they too were available in English, especially some of Kessler's own other writing. (In pouring over this fascinating work, I sorely missed an index and bibliography.) His book raises questions which invite further thinking. Kessler leaves to us, his readers, the task of thinking out the implications of this tarnished history for Marxist analysis of nationalism & minority rights.

### Some Further Reflections on the Wrong Question

NEITHER ZIONISM NOR "*dawikeit*" nor assimilation has solved the Jewish Question. Fundamentally, it's the wrong question. Is the Jewish Question "what should be done with (or to) the Jews?" — a rather anti-Semitic formulation at its core? Or is the Jewish Question "what should the Jews do to save themselves?" Both formulations presuppose a structure of inequality, an existential situation of anti-Semitic domination which must be fully analyzed and confronted. Underneath them is the ethnic and cultural nature of the State, neither universal nor neutral. Here is the one serious contribution of Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question": he pointed out that the secular state is substantively Christian.

[I]t is not the so-called Christian state, the one that recognizes Christianity as . . . the state religion . . . that is the perfected Christian state, but rather the atheist state, the democratic state . . . [that is substantively and deeply Christian.] In the North American states, where the Constitution does not impose religious belief . . . people . . . do not believe that a man without religion can be an honest man . . . [and] North America is the land of religiosity *par excellence* . . . .<sup>10</sup>

All the more remarkable, then, is Marx's failure to understand the *particularities* of his own standpoint, in which Jews are seen as particular, while German Christian Marxists are seen as general, universal, lacking particularity. There is a "Jewish Question," but there is not, for Marx, a "Christian Question." Nor did he understand his own experience: that assimilation into a dominant culture means encountering daily and radically its bigotries against you (as African-Americans learn

in integrating White society, or members of the working class learn with upward mobility.) How can a system of inequality be transcended by such contaminated processes? Although anti-Semitism and racism permeate capitalist and imperialist society — indeed it is hard to see how they would maintain themselves *without* anti-Semitism and racism — the demise of capitalism cannot solve them without a thorough examination of the way that anti-Semitism and racism permeate the dominant national cultures: Anglo-Christianity, German and Russian chauvinism, etc. And then, beyond that examination, we need a strategy to cleanse these dominant cultures of their superiority complexes. Just as anti-racists have turned around what used to be called “the Negro Question” to analyzing White Supremacy, and feminists have made clear that the problem is not “the woman question” — it is male supremacy, the answer to “the Jewish Question” is the question of destroying and dismantling all systems and ideologies of racial and religio-ethnic domination, and supplanting them with a culture and practice of real and substantive equality. Kessler’s book is a valuable contribution to that goal.