The Jews' Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America by David S. Koffman (review)

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American Jewish History, Volume 105, Numbers 1/2, January/April 2021, pp. 300-303 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2021.0025

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tionalist who came to Argentina in 1906 and never joined the Farband (146). For Katz, Buenos Aires existed in relation to at least three other Yiddish centers: New York, Moscow, and Warsaw. Jacobo Botoshansky was a “citizen of the Yiddishland” who placed activism for the Yiddish language above Polish-Jewishness (83). While the fate of Poland and of the Jews living there mattered deeply to many Jewish immigrants in Argentina, the author may overstate the importance of Poland’s political boundaries to the self-conceptions of Polish Jews beyond the Farband, especially considering the relatively more expansive global geographies of Yiddishism and Jewish diaspora nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Polacos also encompasses the cultural choices that awaited new immigrants who “made America” to Argentina. The “new Polish immigrants” or “argentiner yidn [Argentine Jews]” of the 1920s and 1930s saw themselves as Jews and Yiddish speakers foremost, and their “Argentineness was a specific cultural idiosyncrasy of their Jewishness” (111). They composed essays, stories, and poems in Yiddish depicting urban life in Buenos Aires, idealism and disillusionment, tango music and mate, a traditional Argentine drink, and poverty in the conventillos (tenements). They lived alongside “israelitas argentinos” [Jewish Argentines] who, having arrived decades earlier or been born in Argentina, expressed their Jewishness in Spanish, joined ethnic Jewish clubs like the Sociedad Hebraica, or the Liga Israelita pro-Argentina (a Jewish group that opposed immigration), participated in parliamentary politics, and translated Yiddish literature into Spanish.

An original and important contribution to the history of one of the lesser-known Yiddish centers, Polacos provides a wealth of material for those who are interested in the Argentine “branch” of interwar Polish-Jewish culture.

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Considering the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the period of peak US expansion and national consolidation, Koffman sets out to understand encounters between Jews and Native Americans.
“How did American Jews make use of Indians, both real and imagined, as their ambitions in America as both Americans and Jews transformed? How did American Jews understand the place of Native Americans in their own quests for integration and advancement or for helping ensure justice and equality in America? How did Jews, a newly arrived ‘clannish’ group in a country celebrated for its diversity, openness, and meritocracy, see themselves as related to, distinct from, or refracted by those other quintessentially ‘tribal’ Americans? [H]ow did Jews put Indians to use in their efforts to remain Jewish or recreate Jewishness in America”? (3).

Chapter 1 looks at “pioneer” Jews who moved to the western US, seeing themselves “as colonial whites and their own settlements, hardships, and accomplishments as heroic contributions to the winning of the American West.” They “acted as unabashed agents of colonialism as a way of combatting anti-Semitic stereotypes that criticized Jewish men for lacking brawn or not pulling their weight in the nation’s military operations. . .Western Jews cast themselves as recapitulations of the original pilgrims, clearing the path for commerce and settlement through their efforts at both engaging Indians in productive capitalism and subduing them through acts of violence. They viewed Indians as both impediments to and vehicles of their participation in the march toward civil progress” (15). In Chapter 2 Koffman discusses Jewish attitudes toward land, arguing that “immigrant Jews absorbed and fueled America’s quest for imperial acquisition in the West, helping form part of its potent vision of expansionism and an equally martial vision of manhood. Nineteenth-century Jewish desire to feel existentially rooted in the new land fueled much of what Jews worked through in their imaginations of and encounters with Native Americans” (15). Chapter 3 presents Jewish merchants and the economic encounter with American Indians, the most prominent manifestation of face-to-face meetings between members of the different groups. Jews who “went west primarily as small businessmen to pursue wealth. . .constructed meaning out of their roles as traders and linked this Jewish occupational profile to the nation-building process,” in which “Indians provided an intimate foil for Jews keen on having petty trade recognized as beneficial for expansion.” One intriguing subset of the Jewish-Amerindian commercial interaction comprised the “Jewish Indian ‘curio’ dealers. . .who positioned themselves between red and white worlds as half Indian, half ethnographer experts, representing the Indians whose ‘Indianness’ they sold in the form of cultural objects” (16).

In Chapter 4 Koffman turns to the “acculturated, enfranchised Jews of the urban east who devoted considerable efforts to justice for Native Americans” in the early twentieth century’s climate of rising xenophobia (16). “American Jews and Native Americans fretted over their exclusion
from the mainstream American body politic; both feared that white America’s assimilatory aspiration for them would lead to their cultural obliteration.” Amerindians “provided Jews with a useful and malleable rhetorical tool for confronting tensions around assimilation and disappearance, naturalization, citizenship, and the idea of ‘adoption’ versus naturalization” (17).

Chapter 5 describes a “cadre of Jewish pro-Native activists” in and beyond Washington, DC (17). Acting out of “Jewish enlightened self-interest,” this set of “Jewish bureaucrats, lawyers, and philanthropists [. . . ] worked on behalf of Indian causes,” finding “power and influence in the federal government for the first time in America under the Roosevelt Administration,” playing a fundamental role in “drafting, passing, and implementing the 1934 [Indian Reorganization Act], consolidating federal case law on Indian affairs, and promoting Indian cultural, economic, health, education, and political interests” (17–18). At the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Jews “consistently linked Indian uplift with an articulation of minority rights and cultural pluralism within the United States and on international stages that went beyond Indian paternalism” (18). They also helped “build the organizational infrastructure and intellectual foundations of the Indian civil rights movement that blossomed in Indian hands after World War II, particularly the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA)” (17).

In response to the nativism of the 1920s and 1930s, according to Chapter 6, “a sizable number of Jewish intellectuals and activists [in the social sciences] followed the German Jewish ‘father of anthropology’ Franz Boas into careers concerned with knowing, understanding, and ultimately improving the lives of Native Americans.” These figures “played a critical role in shifting anthropology’s basic framework away from its roots in race thinking, social evolutionism, and missionary work,” instead advancing “cultural pluralism and relativism.” Their efforts “to salvage, collect, and preserve disappearing American Indian culture was a form of ventriloquism” as their focus on “Native American families, religions, languages, and cultures. . .dovetailed with the concerns that preoccupied American Jewry in the 1930s through the 1950s.” Supporting both Jewish and Native American causes professionally and beyond, these Jewish anthropologists “loaned their scholarly authority to the BIA, particularly its Ethnology Board, and the AAIA, intending to produce policy changes at the federal and state levels,” seeking to promote “Native American education, political sovereignty, linguistic and cultural autonomy, economic advancement, health, and social well-being” (18).
Koffman is a sophisticated, theoretically-informed and careful historian. He writes engagingly and straightforwardly. His book, filled with valuable original research and findings, material that will be new to most readers, fascinating linkages, colorful anecdotes, and analytical insights, is important and welcome, an intervention that re-envisions central aspects of American Jewish history from the perspective of the seeming margins.

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Schneur Zalmon Newfield’s book on the exiting of Ultra-Orthodox Jews from their communities is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on this topic. Based on a qualitative research study of Jews who left Satmar and Lubavitch communities in New York, it provides an in-depth view of the past and present experiences of interview participants. The book is informed by sociological theory and concepts and describes the historical context of these two Hasidic movements. Throughout this volume Newfield compares the experiences of the two groups of exiters within the additional context of his own decision to leave the Lubavitch community in which he grew up.

Newfield describes the boundaries the Satmar and Lubavitch establish between themselves and the outside, a means of maintaining their own communities. The sects draw sharp distinctions between Jews and gentiles, Ultra-Orthodox Jews and non-observant Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews and other Jewish religious groups, and among Hasidic sects. Viewing exiters as a threat, they denigrate them. Yet the exiters and their families do not break off all ties.

The leading concept Newfield uses is “liminality.” Based on the writings of Victor Turner, Newfield defines it as a state of being in-between, neither here nor there. When one leaves an insular community like Satmar or Lubavitch, one is neither “in” nor “out” of the community in which one was raised and the one he or she is joining. In contrast to Turner’s view that liminality is a temporary stage, Newfield sees it as a