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5/2/2018
ETHS 126
Applied Theory Paper

Good Jew/Bad Jew: The Policing of Jewish Identity and Presence in Social Justice Movements

On a theoretical level, intersectionality is built on the fundamental precept that human identities and experiences are not two-dimensional. They are understood to be multifaceted, with each individual embodying the confluence of ethnicity, gender, orientation, class, et al. Each of those aspects influences and informs the others, and so they must be understood as not existing in a vacuum. This concept stands at the core of many contemporary social justice movements and is used as a rallying point for inter-communal solidarity and joint action. Somehow, however, certain groups are excluded from this realm of inclusion; of these, perhaps the oldest and most prominent is the Jewish people. As Judaism cannot be easily categorized as one existent kind of identity, it is often excluded from all possible options. In keeping with many long-standing narratives about Jews, both as individuals and as communities, Judaism itself is perceived as being perpetually “other”; since Jewish identity is difficult to categorize, it is labelled as untrustworthy, or worse– dangerous.

As a result of this cognitive dissonance and exclusion from intersectional thought, Jewish activists are often policed in regards to if and how their Jewishness is permitted to manifest in social justice spaces. Furthermore, when those individuals seek solidarity in the struggle against anti-Semitism, their claim is seen as worthy of support only if they pass certain political or social

tests to prove that they are, in the eyes of the group, one of the “good Jews”. By maintaining this double standard and erasing the need to acknowledge Judaism as a valid intersectional identity, these movements unconsciously perpetuate and contribute to the trend of anti-Semitic otherization of Jewish individuals and communities.

One of the fundamental issues with discussing Jewish identity in regards to existing theories around race and ethnicity is that Jews– and, therefore, Jewish identity– existed before the concept of race did. Judaism is a religion, a culture, and an ethnic group, and it contains all of those facets simultaneously and without prioritization or contradiction. Individuals who identify as being Jews may do so on the basis of some or all of those forms of affiliation, thus creating a broad spectrum of possible forms of Jewish identity. When looking at each of those subcategories (religion, culture, and ethnicity), they each contain their own divisions and spectrums that contain a plethora of possible expressions. Jewish religion can be organized into different denominations based on observance and geography; Jewish culture can be mapped out into subgroups based on the map of the diaspora; Jewish ethnicity encompasses a wide variety of ethnotypes that share certain genetic commonalities. In this sense, each individual aspect of Jewish identity works just as any other identity would: having many types of expression stemming from a shared origin. What makes Judaism unique as an identity is the particular ways in which religious, cultural, and ethnic manifestations overlap with one another despite significant external divides between different communities. In essence, the Jewish diaspora is internally perceived as having produced diversity, not division, within the Jewish nation.

Due to the multidimensional nature of Jewish identity, external entities and organizations have historically struggled to find ways to label, count, or otherwise categorize Jewish communities. In the absence of easily found distinguishing features, such as skin tone or language, states and kingdoms had a variety of different approaches to the diasporic Jews in their midst. Many societies sought to artificially define Jewish identity and presence through externally enforced methods. These “markers” took a variety of different forms throughout the centuries, such as legally required markers on clothing or restrictions on professions or housing. Inevitably, such clear distinguishers turned Jewish individuals into easy targets for persecution and othering in from their surrounding environment. Aside from causing Jewish communities to become increasingly isolationist (a trait that endured for centuries across much of the Jewish diaspora and is still present to a certain degree in many parts of the Jewish world), such attempts to externally define who and what is Jewish through clumsy and contrived means led to a misunderstanding of Jewishness that has endured into the present.

Modern developments in the theories around race and ethnicity, while definitely expanding the discussion to be far more inclusive of diverse racial and ethnic identities, still have issues interacting with people whose experiences around these subjects traverse multiple categories; as such, the literature around the subject of Jewish ethnic identity is still hard to find and rarely discussed in more mainstream forums. However, there is one group whose experience is being currently brought to the fore and which, in that sphere, has much in common with the experience of Jewish individuals: multiracial people. Jewish and multiracial people share in the struggle of being able to affiliate with multiple groups while not being fully accepted into any of

them. In her essay *An "Other" Way of Life: The Empowerment of Alterity in the Interracial Individual*, theorist Jan R. Weisman explores this phenomenon in greater depth, referring to it as a state of being "*other than other*. They are no longer *other* by virtue of partially or not belonging, but by virtue of *completely* belonging to a group that is different from all, yet overlaps with many other existing groups" (Weisman 156). The sensation of living as an eternal outsider caused by the lack of acceptance into clearly defined category or community often causes individuals in both demographics to experience a strong sense of isolation and frustration in their pursuit of a fully realized ethnic or racial identity.

Weisman, however, does not see this state of being as necessarily negative. In her essay, she offers a different interpretation of this liminal identity and its potential impact on those who share it. Otherness, by its very nature as a term within the discussion of social structures, implies a distinctly hierarchical insider/outsider binary in which only the former can be understood as worthy of recognition. In its place, Weisman introduces the concept of positive alterity: essentially, this is the notion that a non-standard form of identity is a legitimate alternative rather than merely an inferior option for those who do not or cannot fit within the existing system. This paradigm proves to be particularly useful when it comes to understanding and analyzing multiracial, diasporic, and itinerant ethnicities. Weisman explains the potency of this approach by claiming that "[t]he fact that the group they have chosen is neither recognized by society nor geographically locatable...does not matter to them. In fact, such lack of recognition by those not in the group may serve to heighten the sense of positive alterity that interracial individuals

experience by such identification" (Weisman 158).

By removing the implicit power dynamic found in the state of otherness and replacing it with an egalitarian state of alterity, this paradigm has the potential to turn detrimental and even dehumanizing experiences of otherization into powerful and celebrated rallying points for previously marginalized ethnic identities. Given that, historically and in the present, much of anti-Semitism (both implicit and explicit) is based in the perception of otherness rather than inferiority as is found in other forms of racial and ethnic oppression, this approach is of particular relevance to Jewish individuals and organizations seeking to make their presence and needs known within the broader mainstream conversation around race and ethnicity. On the other hand, given that it is not the most prevalent or easily-understood approach to recognizing and resisting systemic and social oppression, it can harder to explain to those whose racial and ethnic identities are more easily labeled. This particular nuance forms the crux of the dissonance found between Jewish individuals and communities and contemporary social justice movements.

Historically speaking, Jewish Americans have been one of the most consistently progressive demographics in American society. From Jewish immigrants spearheading the American labor movement in the nineteenth century to contemporary Jewish activist organizations such as Bend the Arc and JOIN (Jewish Organizing Institute and Network), there is a strong and storied history of Jewish involvement in shaping the American ideological landscape through political engagement and social action. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study done by the Pew Research Center, Jewish-identified Americans are

approximately 64% Democratic or Democratic-leaning, 26% Republican or Republican-leaning, and 9% Independent or unaffiliated; the statistical average for all US adults in this study was recorded as 37% Republican, 44% Democrat, and 18% Independent/unaffiliated. From these numbers, it is difficult to ignore that not only are Jewish-identified Americans more politically engaged in general, they are significantly more inclined towards progressive or liberal politics than the average individual in the United States. Given the longstanding religious and cultural imperatives within Jewish tradition around communal responsibility, social welfare, and protection of minority groups from persecution, this comes as no great surprise.

The great point of contention when discussing the relationship between Jewish communities and American social justice movements is the subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since Israel is characterized by its role as a Jewish nation-state, many Jewish Americans find themselves being associated with the issue regardless of their actual level of engagement with Israel, if there is any at all. By nature of this correlation, many Jewish people find themselves forced into an awkward sort of ambassadorship in which their environment expects them to not only educate everyone else about the history and nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but to also allow themselves be interrogated on their personal stances around the issue by anyone who inquires. Much of this associative pressure comes from the widespread presumption that all Jewish individuals are personally tied to the State of Israel in some way and that, by extension, being Jewish and being Israeli or actively supportive of Israel are somehow mutually inclusive traits.

While that conclusion may have been a relevant perspective to some minor degree through much of the twentieth century, especially around the time of Israel's inception, contemporary Jewish Americans have a wide variety of levels and forms of relationship with Israel both as a concept and as a country. On a deeper level, there is no real consensus within the greater Jewish community on how necessary an attachment to Israel even is to the formation and development of Jewish identity. A study performed by Arnold Eisen and Steven Cohen in 2000 as part of their book *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* on the subject of American Jewish outlooks on Israel sheds some much-needed light on the nuance and diversity of opinions that exist around this relationship. In the study, they found that levels of emotional attachment to Israel began to lower towards the end of the twentieth century, with the percentage of respondents marking their emotional involvement as "extremely attached" or "very attached" decreasing from 37% in 1988 to 27% in 1997. When it came to the connection between opinions on Israel to Jewish identity, a meager "20%...thought it essential for a good Jew to support Israel...about a third... found [it] entirely irrelevant to their concept of what a good Jew does" (Cohen and Eisen 2000).

In light of this information about these subtleties and nuances in the relationship between Jewish Americans and Israel, the assumptions found in social justice spaces around the supposed homogeneity in that relationship suggest a cognitive dissonance that is not only fallacious but potentially dangerous to Jewish activists seeking to interact with larger movements. There is an ongoing discussion happening about and around Jewish individuals in these spaces, largely based on the idea that the affiliation of Jews with Israel to any degree makes them guilty by

association; as a result, there is an unspoken need to “test” Jewish individuals seeking to engage with social justice movements or participate in any meaningful way in progressively-minded organizations to see if they match the group’s perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Submitting to this form of policing and passing this test, therefore, makes one a “good Jew”, whereas dissent or failure earns the title of “bad Jew”.

One example of such testing drew the public eye in UCLA in 2015, when Rachel Beyda, a Jewish student applying for a position on the student council’s judicial board, was questioned regarding how her Jewish identity might impede her ability “to maintain an unbiased view” (Nagourney 2015). Another such incident occurred within the Chicago Dyke March in 2017, where participants carrying Jewish pride flags (the standard rainbow pride flag with a Star of David) were forced to leave by the organizers of the march. To justify their action, the organizers claimed that the presence of those flags was “triggering” and “made people feel unsafe” and that they didn’t condone the presence of any symbols “that can inadvertently or advertently express Zionism” (Politi 2017). One of the most apparent consequences of Good Jew/Bad Jew policing is the transformation of Zionism, belief in the Jewish right to self-determination and support of the existence of an independent Jewish state in the ancestral homeland of Israel, into a epithet so controversial that it is treated in some social justice circles as an ideological obscenity equivalent to racism or homophobia.

Perhaps one of the most explicit cases of this kind of negative exceptionalism in recent months is found in the leadership of the Women’s March. Despite publicly affirming their

platform's commitment to "intersectionality" (Women's March 2018), the leaders of this movement appear to turn a blind eye to Jewish needs and anti-Semitism alike. In March 2018, it was revealed that Tamika Mallory had deep ties with Louis Farrakhan, the head of the Nation of Islam who has been publicly promoting deeply anti-Semitic rhetoric since 1977. Despite enormous public outcry and controversy, the leadership of the Women's March refused to denounce and end that affiliation (Pagano 2018). More recently, Tamika Mallory withdrew her support for the racial bias training provided by Starbucks to its employees and further called for a boycott of Starbucks due to the involvement of the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish organization over a hundred years old dedicated to combating anti-Semitism in particular and advocating for minority rights in the United States in general, claiming it to be a racist organization dedicated to "constantly attacking black and brown people" (Leibovitz 2018).

The deliberate exclusion of Jewish presence and Jewish needs from spaces dedicated to social justice– and intersectional social justice at that– indicates that there is still a great deal of work to be done before those movements can fully and truly live up to their ideals. Judaism, due to its longevity and diversity, includes a wide variety of perspectives and experiences around oppression, othering, privilege, and what lies in between those concepts. By artificially imposing an insider/outsider binary through gatekeeping policies in order to determine which Jewish people and organizations deserve to take space in a social justice lens and thus receive solidarity from other groups, these organizations inadvertently perpetuate the anti-Semitic practices of ostracism long imposed on Jewish identities and communities in an attempt to isolate them from their environment, be it through practical affairs or abstract concepts. While the Jewish

relationship to concepts around race and ethnicity is highly conditional in nature, Jewish liberation cannot and should not be treated as equally conditional. The Jewish pursuit of positive alterity and the creation of an independent form of identity is the most recent incarnation of an ongoing intracommunal conversation around where and how Jewish individuals and groups place themselves in relation to other, more easily defined, identities. Dawne Moon perhaps best explains this shift in the thought process around Jewish identity politics in her writings, saying that "Rather than making totalizing claims about "identity," what it is and how it works, we need to look inductively at the ways people come to share understandings of who "we" are, who "we" are not, and what "we" need to do to make the world safer, fairer, or more peaceful. Understanding different narratives of collective selfhood attunes us to the processes by which people come to define themselves, as well as to the processes by which they come to feel, amid the social complexity of the 21st century, that they make sense— that they belong somewhere" (Moon 2012).

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