
 Review

*An Idea Betrayed:
Jews, Liberalism and
the American Left*
by Juliana Geran Pilon

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Most books on history fall into one of two main categories, the micro or the macro. In the latter case, there is an attempt to “tell it all” from the beginning of recorded history right up to the present. As for the former, the focus is much more narrow. For example, US history, or European history, or World War II.

The present book under review does not fit neatly into either category. Rather, it has one foot in both of these camps. On the one hand, it goes way, way back in time, and reaches into the present. That is the macro element. But it also narrowly focuses on only two dimensions: the Jews, and the downward, regrettable path from classical liberalism, or libertarianism, to left, liberal, politically correct, socialism and the connections between these two universes of discourse.

This is a book by a gifted author. Her words fairly leap off the page at you, and her command of the material she addresses is thorough. Abraham Lincoln had a relationship with the Jewish community of the day? Who knew? Certainly not I. She sets for herself two tasks, and brilliantly succeeds in both. The first is to document the ruination of Judaism as it takes on both anti-Zionism and, yes, anti-Semitism, conflating this religion with, of all things, woke socialism. No. Contrary to all too many reform Jews and their rabbis, Judaism is not at all reducible to, or an equivalent of, the left wing of the Democratic party. To be Jewish it is not at all necessary to adopt the policies and attitudes of that Jewish Senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders. Second, left liberalism, or progressivism, it quite a gigantic step down from classical liberalism. The latter stood for, and still stands for freedom, liberty, private property, free enterprise, laissez faire capitalism. The former for egalitarianism, “equity,” transgenderism, racism, the required use of politically correct pronouns.

What interests me most in her tales of woe are the self-hating Jews, those who really are traitors to their co-religionists, to their ethnicity. These people have sold their souls to a mess of pottage; not so much if at all for financial reasons, rather to socialism, communism, and other anti-life philosophies. In order to get along with, to be accepted by, the groups they wish to placate (Black Lives Matter, Hamas, Iran, Hezbollah, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement; campus protests against Israel) they have embraced the extremes of anti-Zionism, even anti-Semitism.

Pilon owes a debt of gratitude to retired Harvard Professor Ruth Wisse, and she is not at all behindhand in expressing it. In so doing, Pilon has demonstrated her excellence as a student of this world class scholar.

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No book is perfect, and I would be derelict in my duty as a reviewer if I did not mention a few of my minor reservations. For example, on pages 81 and 85 she offers a strong, quite proper and eminently justifiable condemnation of eugenics as a coercive policy. But she disparages it as a “cult of science” thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Playing around with genes is how we now have watermelon with practically no seeds and tomatoes of all sizes and varieties. On page 83, she rejects racial differences in intelligence, saying there is no evidence to support such a contention. Murray and Herrnstein’s *Bell Curve* is chopped liver? On page 85 she disparages “cutthroat completion.” This is strange coming from a strong advocate of free enterprise such as she. On numerous occasions she mentions the “Civil War” that supposedly took place in 1861-1865 in the US. Not so. In a true civil war, such as Russia, 1917, Spain 1936, two contending sides each want to rule the entire country. In the US at that time, the North did indeed wish to rule the South, but the latter did not return the favor. Instead, it wanted to secede. So this was a war of secession, not a civil war. On page 140, William F. Buckley announced that he would prefer to be ruled by the first 2,000 names (not 100 of them) in the Boston telephone book rather than by the Harvard professoriate. On that same page she mentions the following Jews who supported capitalism: William S. Schlamm, Morris Ryskind, Eugene Lyons, Frank S. Meyer and Frank Chodorov. Curiously, she omits Ayn Rand, Ludwig von Mises and Murray N. Rothbard. On page 153, she is entirely too pro President Eisenhower for my taste. I find it difficult to forgive him for requiring that Israel not annex the Sinai Peninsula, which that country had won in defensive wars against Egypt. But these are minor glitches, and/or matters of tastes and preference in which allies in the intellectual war for freedom and liberty, as this author and I, can disagree.

This book transcends the micro-macro distinction in that it offers macro coverage, all throughout history, but only as it pertains to its two main micro foci: Jews and liberalism-socialism. Within these parameters, it offers a scintillating and very thorough coverage. All throughout this volume Pilon offers in bold face type numerous inspirational quotes; these alone are almost worth the entire price of admission. There are few books that disappoint me in that they are much too short. This is one of them. It is only 350 pages (50 of them devoted to notes and bibliography), but I so enjoyed reading it I wish it were twice that size. Hint, hint to the author: write a follow up volume II!