

"I'm hated therefore I am"

Orthodox Marxists insist that a distinctive Jewish identity will, and ought to, wither away as capitalist social and economic processes mature. To hasten this inevitability they advocate that Jews jettison their separate identity here and now. Michael Rosen challenges assimilationism on the Left.

At the recent SWP Marxism 90 week, I went to John Rose's talk on antisemitism and Israel. It's an annual pilgrimage. Beforehand I always tell myself that it will put me in touch with something systematic and thorough on Jewish and anti-Zionist issues but I nearly always come away with a sore head. Someone might tell me that the Jews have survived because it was materially necessary to the ruling class. When I ask if ideas come into it at all, I'm told that I am precisely the kind of bourgeois idealist I should steer clear of.

This year John Rose wanted to talk about Jewish identity, Bush's policy on Israel and the history of the Bund in Poland – all in 40 minutes. Curiously, he began by reminding us of the Chief Rabbi's jolly little comment about assimilation in Britain today being "of Holocaust proportions". (Boo, tut tut, hiss.) John had the statistics behind the Chief Rabbi's statement. It certainly does look like there's a few empty shuls out there. Later, as I'm leaving, I overhear a conversation between two young SWP-ers.

"Great ... that stuff about assimilation," says one.

"What?"

"I had no idea so many Jews were assimilating, great eh?"

"Yeah, great."

I thought I would escape without a sore head this year. No such luck. Here were two young Marxists in London in 1990, pleased that Jews were "assimilating". But why? My mind runs over a few holy Marxist texts – throwing off superstition, sigh of the masses... The couple's possible line of argument develops in my mind: "Judaism means primitive religion, women cooking gefilte fish all day long, support of Israel, men in little hats, rape of the phallus, odd holidays, cut off from the rest of society. Assimilation means coming out of dark synagogues, wearing jeans, watching TV, not thinking your life is governed by some supernatural dad, reading *Time Out* and *The Guardian* and not asking your parents who you're going to sleep with. People like this are nearer to being socialists than the religious ones." Maybe I caricature, but it must broadly be along these lines. And you don't find this just in the SWP. It crops up in many parts of the Left.

The word assimilation seems to be specially reserved for Jews. When black people were asked to do a similar thing, they were asked to "integrate". When Catholics do it, they "lapse". But Jews should "assimilate". This is one of the longstanding answers to the "Jewish Question" (why's it a question? and what *is* the question?). "If only Jews would take off their hats, put on their foreskins and stop gabbling away in

languages we don't understand, there would be no more persecution – look at Nigel Lawson and Leon Brittan ... whoops, all right, Denning did go over the top but the rest of us aren't like that." Of course, it's a nonsense. Assimilated Jews aren't any more safe from antisemitism than the *frummers* (religious Jews).

But hang on. If somebody assimilates, they assimilate from something to something. What are we supposed to be assimilating to? And why should it be so welcome to two Marxists in 1990? They presumably would admit that in orthodox Marxist terms the prevailing ideology is the ideology of the ruling class: individualism, commodity fetishism, racism, militarism, capitalism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, consumerism and so on. Now surely that can't be a good idea, that Jews are assimilating into *that*. A Jew who sits *shiva* isn't any further away from the Marxist dawn than someone carrying that band of "isms" round in her head, is she?

Maybe I've oversimplified. Come in Marxist: "Yes, comrade, the prevailing ideology is the ideology of the ruling class but bourgeois culture isn't all bad. Trotsky said that after the revolution we won't burn Shakespeare plays and Mozart scores. We'll be able to see them as great humanists and anti-totalitarians. And anyway, in secular society there are spaces, oppositional moments, counter-cultural resistances. An assimilated Jew is nearer to those spaces than the religious Jew and so nearer to 'political consciousness'."

This is where the assimilation position begins to show its underwear. There is a sense here that Jews and other "ethnic" groups are culturally divergent, non-normal, minority, exotic and the like, but mainstream western secular society is normal, neutral, and liberated from the Inquisition and witch-burning. This is just cultural imperialism. Why is Mozart assumed to be better than Irish flute music? Why is going to the National Theatre assumed to be better than going to a football match or a JSG social? Why is serial monogamy (dominated by sex stereotyped ideas of beauty) necessarily better than arranged marriages; why are jeans better than kameez? Why is St Augustine more interesting than Hillel; why is Hobbes more interesting than Spinoza? Whoever is glad that you, Jew, have assimilated, is basically saying not much more than "I'm glad you're more like me".

Actually, everyone is ethnic. A suburban, agnostic, middle-class, *Sunday Times*-reading, scampi-eating, suit-wearing chartered accountant is just as ethnic as a Rastafarian. As is an inner city, jeans and T-shirted atheist. *Socialist Worker*-reading, spag bol-eating further

education lecturer. So where in all this is the assimilated Jew who brings such pleasure to the SW couple? Well, it's quite possible that he or she is also a suburban, agnostic, middle-class, *Sunday Times*-reading, scampi-eating, suit-wearing chartered accountant. She might vote Tory, he might play golf. None of which seems to me to have anything whatsoever to do with heralding the socialist dawn. My attitude is quite simple: Nigel Lawson is no nearer socialism than the *Hassidim*.

If only the matter could rest there. But I've still got a sore head because I'm worried. I've seen the argument against black integration argued very strongly in *Socialist Worker*. I've read their approving summaries of Lenin on national, religious and minorities questions and it all sounds good, tolerant, multicultural stuff. So what's wrong with the Jews? If black people don't have to "integrate" in the struggle, why should we?

There's another orthodox answer to this. And it stinks. "Black people have fought an anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, anti-racist struggle, their culture is riven through with aspects of this: music, humour, lifestyle. Many black people seem to give off an up-yours vibe to police/ruling class ways. But Jews, well Jews, aren't they Hassidim, and Bernard Levin, and Hendon, and doctors, lawyers and accountants? And don't they all support Israel? We're not stereotyping here, comrade, we've got some excellent Jews in the party and you won't hear them raving on about the joys of bagels, Woody Allen and the Bund." Ah, stop there. You *didn't* hear Jews in the SWP talk about the Bund until recently. As John Rose put it at the meeting, "two years ago I discovered the Bund" and the SWP will soon be publishing a translation of a Bundist pamphlet. Jews who said they were Jews, socialists and workers but who didn't join Communist parties? Look out, John, you might be accused of favouring divisive separatism. In case you need an answer, try this one: joining Marxist parties in the past has neither prevented antisemitism nor brought the millenium any nearer.

At the meeting John and another speaker used the old Sartre justification for saying you're a Marxist and a Jew: I'm a Jew as long as there is antisemitism. In other words: "I'm hated, therefore I am". This position implies that after antisemitism has gone in the socialist millenium, I won't have to bother about being a Jew. I can get on and be ... er ... er what? A member of the international working class? It's one of those artificial abstract ideas that Marxists concoct in smoke-filled rooms, repeat over and over again in journals and meetings, and then in rare moments of self doubt wonder

why nobody takes any notice of it.

The point is people need to make sense of the world. We try to get through our days and nights with minimum anxiety. This means eating things we like, wearing what we like, making love the way we like, marking people's deaths the way we like, bringing up children the way we like and so on. These are our cultural habits. Where necessity and oppression bear down on us, we like to find ways of coping with it, which may mean repressing awareness of it, or imitating our oppressors, or singing, praying, joking or fighting or whatever. These are cultural habits too. Now, if history tells me I'm a Jew and experience tells me I'm a socialist, why, oh why, should my sole justification for calling myself a Jew be the defensive: I'm hated, therefore I am? Non-Jews don't have a monopoly on the best ways to get through the days and nights with as little anxiety as possible. And, as we know, Jews are certainly not ignorant of ways to fight oppression and persecution.

So finally we come face to face with what we are supposed to be assimilating from: Judaism and Jewishness. Actually I'm almost completely ignorant of Judaism, but it sounds like a lot of other religions. Some people do it one way, some people do it another way; some say you can't do this, others you've got to do that. Every so often you do something where you meet up with your family, your friends, or a whole group of people. Every so often someone dies, someone gets born, someone says they want to live with someone else, and so people get together again. Sounds OK. Certainly nothing there tells me that doing any of this would necessarily prevent you from fighting oppression and exploitation. It's no more of an obstacle than being a suburban agnostic. So far, so good. But what about Jewishness?

Well, now we're getting personal. Jews are as diverse as any other minority you can think of. And 'twas ever thus. In Roman times, Jews were everything from bankers to slaves and now they are everything from bankers to wage-slaves. Some kinds of Jewishness are good at coping with life and fighting for socialism, and others aren't so good. *Nu?* We're OK. We've got nothing to be ashamed of. We've got nothing to shed before we're entitled to be socialists. Most Marxists I know go to theatres, concerts, sometimes eat fish and chips and swear in English. None of which is superior to singing Yiddish songs, reading about Auschwitz and calling people *shmoks*. We don't have to apologise for anything. We don't have to reduce ourselves to "I'm hated, therefore I am." We could say: "I *fress*, therefore I am," or "I've got *chutzpah*, therefore I am."