

## *Marxism and Multiculturalism*

### ***Abstract***

Most current debate on multiculturalism revolves around fundamental conflicts within liberalism. The liberal hegemony has meant that the intense and detailed debates that accompanied the evolution of Marxist social democracy have been relegated to the historical margins. There is an irony here as multicultural theory itself originally grew out of developments within Marxism – developments that began as criticisms of emphasis but ended up rejecting fundamental Marxist principles. The Marxist debate starts from a very different perspective. Its focus is not the individual, but society as a whole. The contention of this paper is that a re-examination of these debates and of their historical interpretations can throw a new light on issues today. An evolutionary history of the ideas will be accompanied by an examination of how they were enacted in a geographical context that is continuing to make multicultural history: London's East End.

### ***Key words:***

Multiculturalism, Marxism, Jews, Bengalis, East End, cultural-national autonomy

*Marxism and Multiculturalism*

The crisis in multiculturalism<sup>1</sup> exposes not only the unresolved conflict at its core, but the limits of its vision. Liberal multiculturalism extends the Rights of Man as an individual, to cover the rights of different cultural groups – and then must debate within itself what to do when these different rights inevitably clash.<sup>2</sup> And although the older liberal debate has been broadened beyond ideas of individual freedoms, this is not necessarily in a way that can help develop a fairer society more generally. In concentrating on the practical details and difficulties of interpreting liberal values so as to accommodate cultural, ethnic and religious distinctions, we risk missing the bigger picture. We risk ignoring all the other things that affect life and life chances. Marxists, both theoretical and practical, have long been concerned how cultural distinctiveness interacts with the development of society more widely. A re-examination of Marxist debates can help us move beyond the individual/culture box

Although multiculturalism today is generally associated with post-colonial immigration, the juxtaposition of different national and ethnic groups within European countries, and within the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, presented the early Marxist theorists with many similar issues. Of particular interest is the discussion of ‘the Jewish Question’, because this could have no territorial resolution (at least within the countries concerned), and because this question and the theories surrounding it were brought to Britain by the Russian Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Marx’s own, much discussed, relationship to Judaism might best be described as dismissive. To him, both religion and racial distinctions were regressive forces that he did not wish to promote. If these forces were removed, then, he argued, Jews would be distinguished only by their place in the economic structures of society, which he hoped to see demolished. Jewishness would then cease to be, as Jews would be simply part of wider humanity.<sup>3</sup> The stark language of his writing on the ‘Jewish Question’ has discouraged more sympathetic Marxists from referring to it;<sup>4</sup> and Marx himself demonstrated no particular interest in the plight of the Jewish worker. However, Engels engaged with the Jewish socialists in London and encouraged others to work with the East End Jews,<sup>5</sup> and Marx’s daughter Eleanor, who was active in East End Labour politics, taught herself Yiddish, and was glad to refer to her own Jewish roots.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly (2002)

<sup>2</sup> See Taylor (1992) p 43

<sup>3</sup> Marx (1844a)

<sup>4</sup> Such as Karl Kautsky, see Jacobs (1992) p 9

<sup>5</sup> Jacobs (1992) p 29

<sup>6</sup> Kapp (1976) p 521 and letter from Eleanor Marx Aveling, October 1890 (now in the Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick) in which she is glad to accept an invitation to speak at a public meeting condemning persecution of the Jews in Russia, adding ‘the more glad, that my father was a Jew’.

### ***Kautsky and the 'Jewish Question'***

The concept of Jewishness as a secular cultural identity only really evolved with the growth of the Jewish Socialist movement in late nineteenth-century Russia. Before that time, the specific concerns that Jewish socialists brought to the international debate were generally limited to combating anti-Semitism. While active opposition to anti-Semitism and racism would today be considered fundamental to Marxist practice, many nineteenth-century socialists were not convinced of its importance.<sup>7</sup> The central figure in developing and promoting a Marxist understanding of the predicament of the Jewish worker was Karl Kautsky, frequently regarded before the First World War as the doyen of orthodox Marxism. For Kautsky the problem was anti-Semitism, and the ultimate solution assimilation, though this could not and should not be forced. Kautsky recognised that anti-Semitism was not just a problem for the Jews. He understood its reactionary force in deflecting anger from the real causes of exploitation (especially in Austria-Hungary), and in an article published in 1885, he described anti-Semitism as socialism's 'most dangerous opponent'.<sup>8</sup> The article also argued that Jewish 'racial characteristics' were products of history rather than nature, themes he was later to develop much more fully.<sup>9</sup> Kautsky was consistently supportive of Jewish socialist movements, but he also insisted on the importance of avoiding isolation, and saw the Jewish movements as a transitional step towards a time when separate Jewish socialist institutions would be redundant. Zionism, by contrast, he found only regressive. It divided Jewish workers from non-Jews, strengthened anti-Semitism, and undermined Jewish participation in socialist movements.

Both Kautsky's interest in the Jewish position, and the way he related that interest to the wider socialist movement, are demonstrated by the brief article he wrote in 1904 for the East London Jewish Branch of the Social Democratic Federation. In this he describes how the 'speculative and critical' Jewish socialists could 'become a sort of yeast' to the English movement, and also help their comrades in Russia, 'as a part of the great war of the proletarians of all countries and races'.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Jewish Internationalism in London***

The nineteenth-century Russian Jewish life that the London immigrants had left behind was inward looking and conservative, relying on old traditions to strengthen it against a hostile external society. The first Jews who had been able to receive some more modern education were generally glad to turn their back on their former ways – a feeling only increased by the anti-Jewish prejudices of the radical Russian movements of which many became a part. Russian radicals of the 1860s and 70s, whatever their own ethnic roots, believed that the future of Russia

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<sup>7</sup> See Levin (1977) pp 100 - 112

<sup>8</sup> Jacobs (1992) p 12

<sup>9</sup> Kautsky (1926)

<sup>10</sup> Kautsky (1904)

lay with its peasants, and when Aaron Lieberman, argued that the Jewish revolutionaries in Vilna should concentrate their propaganda on Jewish workers and publish socialist literature in Yiddish, this was unusual. In 1875, Lieberman fled the Russian police and came to London, where he worked on a revolutionary paper that was smuggled into Russia. In London, he was shocked to see the miserable living and working conditions of the East European Jews, who were already crowding into Whitechapel. In 1876, together with nine other Russian Jewish immigrants, he set up the Hebrew Socialist Union in Spitalfields, but their bold attempt to spread socialism and organise the Jewish workers was soon sabotaged by the combined conservative forces of the workshop masters and the clergy, backed up by the Anglo Jewish establishment.<sup>11</sup>

Lieberman was not without contradictions. He was a professed internationalist, but his socialism was tinged with a romantic love of his Jewish heritage. As an organisation, however, the Hebrew Socialist Union under Lieberman's guidance combined solid internationalist principles with an attempt at pragmatic Jewish organisation, and this was to become the accepted approach (theoretically at least) for Jewish socialism and trade unionism in Britain. Lieberman and his comrades wanted Jewish trade unionism to become part of the much-admired English Trade Union movement. This was important for workers' solidarity, and also to dispel working class anti-Semitism – a point that Jewish trade unionists were to make repeatedly. A handbill from the Hebrew Socialist Union explains (in Yiddish):

...among the [Jewish workers] there is no unity and the masters can do what they please. Thus we not only suffer from disunity but also as a result draw upon us the dislike and hostility of the English workers who accuse us of harming their interests.<sup>12</sup>

It was almost eight years after this prologue to London Jewish socialism that Morris Winchevsky, who had been inspired by Lieberman's writing back in Russia, launched Britain's first socialist paper aimed at an immigrant readership. The *Poylisher Yidl* claimed to 'treat the Jew... as a man, as a Jew, and as a worker'.<sup>13</sup> And in 1885, Winchevsky launched a new title, the *Arbayter Fraynd* (Worker's Friend) 'to spread true socialism among Jewish workers'.<sup>14</sup> Earlier that year a group of Jewish socialists had reconstituted themselves as the International Workingmen's Educational Association, and set up a club in Berner Street off Commercial Road. In 1886 the club took over the running of the *Arbayter Fraynd*, and Berner Street became the centre of Jewish socialist activity. Clubs and journals were to form the two main axes of organisation for the East End Jewish radicals. The Berner Street Club's rule card grandly stated, 'The object of this club is, by

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<sup>11</sup> See Fishman (1975) pp 97 - 134

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Fishman (1975) p 112

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Gartner (1960) p 107. Although the language is masculine, consistent with the time in which it was written, Winchevsky was also concerned with the rights of women – see below.

<sup>14</sup> From the first issue, quoted in Gartner (1960) p 109

social and political enlightenment of its Members, the promotion of the intellectual, moral and material welfare of mankind'.<sup>15</sup>

True to its name, the Berner Street Club, though predominantly Jewish, attracted émigré revolutionaries from many countries. Links with British socialists were mainly through the Socialist League, who used the Berner Street meeting room. The Berner Street Club's fifth anniversary celebration in 1890 illustrates the dual concerns of its members. The fight against the sweating system was addressed by William Morris, of the Socialist League, while Russian Anarchist leaders spoke of their duty towards Russia, which was on the brink of change; but there is no mention of specifically Jewish concerns.<sup>16</sup>

Winchevsky followed Lieberman's lead in combining internationalist politics with pragmatic Jewish organisation, and although he was clearly at home in a Jewish cultural milieu, the fate of that culture was not what was important to him, or to others at that time. The Jewish socialist, he argued, considers the Jewish problem to be part of the general social problem, not one apart. And anti-Semitism was the result not of cultural difference but of economic conditions, with Jewish capitalists being used as scapegoats.<sup>17</sup>

Yiddish writing demonstrates a great fondness for satire, and Winchevsky's pamphlet, *Yehi Or* (Let there be Light), published in 1885, began a much-used tradition of religious parody. It incorporates a socialist version of Maimonides' *Thirteen Articles of Faith*, which begins 'I believe, with perfect faith, that whoever profits by the labour of his fellow man without doing anything for him in return is a willing plunderer'; and it even includes the liberation of women through enjoyment of the fruits of their own labour.<sup>18</sup> For Bill Fishman, Winchevsky's writings exemplify 'the paradox of the outcast Jew in the diaspora', because 'he intellectualised revolution as the weapon to end all anachronisms, yet remained a *hemische Yidl* ('a homely Jew') emotionally committed, in language and life, to his own Jewish poor.'<sup>19</sup> But Winchevsky demonstrated a strong understanding of the internationalist solution to that paradox, by preserving the essential ideological core of his socialism while adapting his method to suit those among whom he lived and worked. No doubt, many of the more orthodox would have been offended by writing such as *Yehi Or*, but Winchevsky was speaking a language his readers understood.

Looking back at his earlier activities from the perspective of the 1920s, Winchevsky did, though, question the emphasis that the Jewish radicals gave to passing on their own liberation from religion. 'My greatest delight' he recalled,

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<sup>15</sup> Rule card in Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick

<sup>16</sup> Unattributed cutting in the Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick (As the revolution proved less imminent than hoped, the possible clash of interests that these two speeches suggest failed to occur.)

<sup>17</sup> See Gartner (1960) p 107 - 8

<sup>18</sup> See Fishman (1975) p 150

<sup>19</sup> Fishman (1975) pp 151 - 2

‘was to prove that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that Joshua did not cause the heavens to stand still’.<sup>20</sup> In misjudging their community’s readiness for radical atheism, they only damaged their greater cause. This was even more true when anti-religious agitation took the deliberately provocative form of Yom Kippur balls, which were particularly favoured by the Anarchists.

### ***The Workers United***

Most important of the Berner Street Club’s activities, was the role it played in the Great Strike of London Tailors and Sweaters’ Victims in 1889. Despite all the difficulties associated with a workshop trade and a constantly replenished pool of labour, East End Jews proved they could play a full part in the New Unionism – the movement that, starting with the Bryant and May match-girls, had shown the potential power of organised unskilled workers across Britain. The strike was well reported in the press, and the support of English workers took concrete form at the public meetings and in the donation from the dockers of £100 left over from their own strike fund. It was a very significant step, but there was still a long way to go and many pitfalls ahead. The *Arbayter Fraynd* was sadly premature in announcing to workers after the strike, ‘You will now cease to feel strangers in a foreign land, and the great English working-class mass will accept you as brothers in their midst.’<sup>21</sup>

The dilemma of the British workers is summed up in Henry Lewis’s essay on ‘The Jew in London’, published in 1900:

Years ago I heard Ben Tillet [the dockers’ leader] say of the foreign Jews, ‘Yes, you are our brothers and we will do our duty by you. But we wish you had not come to this country.’ I think these words represent not unfairly the views of a large section of London workmen.<sup>22</sup>

Even the immigrant Jews themselves, though generally welcoming, were not exempt from similar feelings towards newer arrivals.<sup>23</sup>

The possible role of Jewish workers in bringing down wages was the source of much debate – of reasoned argument over whether the Jewish workshops took trade from existing English tailors or brought more work into the country, and of prejudiced comments that the Jews could undercut others because their squalid lifestyles gave them minimal needs.<sup>24</sup> The resulting crisis in relations was exacerbated by the Trade Union Congress, which passed anti-alien resolutions calling for immigration restrictions. Jewish trade unionists responded to the 1895 resolution with a pamphlet entitled *A Voice from the Aliens*. They used a variety of

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Howe (1976) p 106

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Fishman (1975) p 178. The biblical reference is typical of Yiddish writing, even by non-religious socialists.

<sup>22</sup> Russell and Lewis (1900) p 198

<sup>23</sup> *Select Committee on the Sweating System* q. 930 - 940

<sup>24</sup> See Beatrice Potter in Booth (1902) pp 40 – 41 and 61, and Royal Commission (1903) paras 129 - 31

examples to argue that Jewish immigrants created work for themselves and for English workers by developing new areas of trade, and they ended by appealing to their ‘fellow-workers’,

whether... it is not rather the capitalist class (which is constantly engaged in taking trade abroad, in opening factories in China, Japan, and other countries) who is the enemy, and whether it is not rather their duty to combine against the common enemy than fight against us whose interests are identical with theirs.<sup>25</sup>

These battles are only too familiar. We have all heard comments like those expressed by Tillet; and newer immigrant groups also stress the contributions they have made to the economy. For example, it is claimed that in Britain the Bengali restaurant industry employs ‘more people than steel, coal and shipbuilding combined’,<sup>26</sup> as well as generating millions of pounds worth of associated business.

In the years before the First World War, the battle for trade unionism among the East End Jews was led not by the Marxists, but by the Anarchists, who had gained control of the Jewish radical movement in the lean period of the 1890s. Their internationalism was demonstrated in the surprising figure of the charismatic leader who soon came to dominate and resuscitate the group. Rudolf Rocker was a German gentile who taught himself Yiddish to work with the Jews. Just as Jews in 1889 had proved that they could play a full role in British New Unionism, so, aided by Rocker’s revived *Arbayter Fraynd* and Anarcho-syndicalist political organisation, Jewish tailors again took their place in the industrial struggles of 1912. As Rocker later explained, the 1912 Jewish Tailors’ strike ‘was even more important morally than economically’.<sup>27</sup> It was a strike not just for better conditions in the workshops (though it was that too), but in demonstration of worker solidarity; and its prime motivation was to take action in support of the striking English West End tailors. As in 1889, the tailors’ strike coincided with that of the dockers and now they held big joint meetings and demonstrations. This time the tailors settled first and the East End Jews were able to give practical help to the dockers by taking dockers’ children (generally Irish Catholic) into their own homes.

### ***The Jewish Workers’ Movement in Russia***

While Yiddish-speaking Jewish unions attempted to take their place in the British trade union movement, many of their comrades back in the northwest part of the Jewish Pale of Settlement<sup>28</sup> were consolidating a separate position within the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party through the creation of the Jewish

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<sup>25</sup> *A Voice from the Aliens* (1895) p 8. A copy can be seen in the Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick

<sup>26</sup> *Curry and Tandoori* (undated cutting)

<sup>27</sup> Rocker (1956) p 219

<sup>28</sup> Before 1917 Jews were not allowed to live outside a restricted area in the west of the Russian Empire without special permission. The Pale covered (roughly) modern Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, plus what was then Russian occupied Poland.

Bund. By the 1890s, the labour movement among the Jewish workers had grown to such a size and strength as to provide practical inspiration to workers across the whole of Russia. In the Pale itself, an immediate effect of this growth was the activists' tactical shift to Yiddish in order to speak to the Jewish workers. This was a pragmatic choice, but it was to have two major and connected consequences. It encouraged the development of separate Jewish workers' movements, and it stimulated the flowering of a secular Yiddish culture, – a secular *Yiddishkeit* – which itself added a new dimension to the debates about Jewish 'nationality' and identity.

In 1895 Julius Martov made a speech to the Vilna socialist leaders that would come back to haunt him. In it he put forward the aim of building 'a special Jewish labour organisation'. He wanted to build on the strength the Jewish movements had already achieved, and he was also concerned with the oppression of the Jews in Russia – though he did stress the crucial importance of keeping ties with the Russian and Polish movements.<sup>29</sup>

The first steps towards separate organisation seem to have been taken without fully realising how far they would lead. As the forces of Russian democracy moved towards a more formal union, the Jewish activists organised themselves into a caucus representing Jewish interests. In 1897 different Jewish workers' committees came together to form the General Jewish Workers' Union [Bund] in Russia and Poland. (Lithuania was added later.) The group's leader, Arkady Kremer, explained that the Bund would not only be part of the general political struggle but would also fight for Jewish civic rights 'because Jewish workers suffer not only as workers but also as Jews'.<sup>30</sup>

Jews in the Russian Empire formed a distinct and concentrated group, isolated by an endogamous religion, their own language and culture, ingrained prejudice, and a raft of legal restrictions, and they occupied a distinct socio-economic position. But, although separate organisation might seem almost inevitable, in the south of the Pale, and among those allowed to live outside it, there were disproportionate numbers of Jews who joined the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in the mainstream Russian movement, demonstrating that separatism was not the only option.<sup>31</sup>

The Bund's numerical and organisational strength enabled it to play a key role in the organisation of the First Congress of the new Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP), in 1898, and to demand the Jewish Group's continued autonomy. But the Bund was not destined to remain comfortably within the wider Russian organisation. By the time of the RSDLP's

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Levin (1978) p 247

<sup>30</sup> Levin (1978) p259

<sup>31</sup> Traverso (1994) p 39 notes that in 1905 Jews formed around 4% of the Russian population, but were estimated to make up 11% of the Bolsheviks and 23% of the Mensheviks, as well as having their own Jewish Bund.

second Congress, held in London in 1903, their pragmatic turn towards the Jewish workers had become a point of principle.

The move towards Jewish separatism was spurred on by the growth of Zionism, which was beginning to offer Russia's Jews an alternative way out of their oppression and to heighten awareness of specifically Jewish problems. At the same time, a practical and theoretical precedent for separate organisation was provided by the Austrian Marxists. In 1897, the Austrian Socialist Party responded to the national tensions within the Hapsburg Empire by adopting a federal structure with six autonomous national groups, and two years later, at their 1899 Brünn Congress, they put forward a federal solution to the Empire's problems based on self-governing regions. The agreed Brünn resolution<sup>32</sup> was territorially based, but with the proviso that different regions of the same nation would be united in a single autonomous union – a compromise that reflected the arguments for recognising non-territorially based autonomous national groups. These events, and the theories of 'cultural-national autonomy' on which the concept of non-territorial nationalism was based, were closely observed by the Jewish socialist groups, even though Otto Bauer, the principal theoretician of cultural-national autonomy, had argued that this was not relevant to the Jews who were, at least, 'ceasing to be a nation'.<sup>33</sup>

The issue of Jewish national rights was raised at the Bund's Third Congress in 1899, and its Fourth Congress in 1901 passed a resolution supporting non-territorial national autonomy for Russia, including for the Jewish people.<sup>34</sup> Although it was thought too soon to put forward the demand, and although, even at the next congress in 1903, the debate on the national question was heated and divided, the Bund's course had been set.

### ***Marxist Internationalism versus Cultural-National Autonomy***

Lenin and the group round *Iskra* (The Spark), the journal he had founded in 1900, were implacably opposed to the Bund's arguments, which they saw as destructive of class unity. And they believed intra-class division was already being encouraged by the expansion of the Jewish workers' movement southwards, where the Bund was demanding the monopoly representation of workers already incorporated into the mainstream of the RSDLP. Fierce polemical argument was accompanied by tactical manoeuvring (from both sides) over the organisation of the Second RSDLP Congress, eventually held in London in 1903. It was a famously tense meeting on many counts, but for the Bundists the final crunch came when they insisted on the exclusive right to speak in the name of the RSDLP on all Jewish affairs. Martov countered,

We cannot allow that any section of the party can represent the group, trade, or national interests of any sections of the proletariat. National differences play a subordinate role in relation to common class

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Jacobs (1992) p 37

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Levin (1978) p 268

<sup>34</sup> Levin (1978) p 277

interests. What sort of organisation would we have if, for instance, in one and the same workshop, workers of different nationalities thought first and foremost of the representation of their national interest?<sup>35</sup>

The Bundists were unanimously defeated and their delegates walked out of the Congress. Lenin had argued against the Bund's call for federation on the grounds that this institutionalised 'obligatory partitions'.<sup>36</sup> In *Iskra* he pointed out the 'bitter mockery' of the Bund's call for a joint struggle to avoid a repeat of the pogrom at Kishinev, which was made at the same time as they put forward rules to keep the Jewish workers separate,<sup>37</sup> and he complained of the Bund misinterpreting the RSDLP's actions towards itself as specifically anti-Jewish, and so stirring distrust among Jewish workers.<sup>38</sup>

Lenin's many attacks on the Bund pull no punches. Although his argument, in essence, was similar to that put by Kautsky, he drew the line at what constituted dangerous separatism in a different place, and he saw the Bundist position as a threat to the unity and strength of the movement in Russia. 'There is a borderline here,' he wrote, 'which is often very slight, and which the Bundists... completely loose sight of. Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight *for* any kind of national development, *for* "national culture" in general? – Of course not.' And he pointed out that at the Brünn conference it had been argued that cultural-national autonomy would tend to strengthen clericalism and perpetuate chauvinism.<sup>39</sup> Lenin's objection to the Bund's emphasis on national culture was not an objection to culture as such, but to their prioritising of culture and emphasis on cultural divisions. The Bund identified culture with the nation and so, Lenin argued, inevitably with the dominant culture of the ruling classes, which pretends to be the culture of all, and obscures class divisions.<sup>40</sup> Lenin was not concerned with whether workers take pleasure from traditional folksongs or high opera, but with the use of culture as a political tool to destroy working-class unity.

Lenin's response to cultural difference was pragmatic. A Marxist, he explained, should oppose the slogan of national culture 'by advocating, in all languages, the slogan of workers' *internationalism* while "adapting" himself to all local and national features'.<sup>41</sup> The orientation remains Marxist, and this Marxism is articulated through different cultures for practical and not dogmatic reasons. This could describe the approach adopted by Winchevsky in *Yehi Or*, almost thirty years earlier.

Central to cultural-national autonomy was the segregation of schools (still, of course, a hotly debated issue today). Lenin argued, in line with working-class

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<sup>35</sup> Congress Minutes, quoted in Woods (1999) p 139

<sup>36</sup> Lenin (1961) *Collected Works* Vol. 6 p 485

<sup>37</sup> Lenin (1961) *Collected Works* Vol. 6 p 519

<sup>38</sup> Lenin (1961) *Collected Works* Vol. 7 pp 101 - 2

<sup>39</sup> Lenin (1951) *Critical Remarks on the National Question* (Progress Publishers: Moscow) pp 24 and 25

<sup>40</sup> Lenin (1964) *Collected works* Vol. 20 pp 23 - 24

<sup>41</sup> Lenin (1964) *Collected works* Vol. 20 p 25

internationalism, that this would be reactionary, but that under ‘real democracy’, which ‘can be achieved only when the workers of all nationalities are united’, ‘it is quite possible to ensure instruction in the native language, in native history, and so forth, without splitting up the schools according to nationality’.<sup>42</sup> Children of all nationalities should be mixed, and equal rights and peace would be achieved through solidarity.

For a brief period, before the rise of Stalin, the Russian minorities experienced a new freedom; and the new regime discussed the nature of proletarian culture. Under socialism it was understood that every worker would have increasing time for cultural pursuits, but that people should want to continue to pursue cultural difference was not really expected. Looking back at this period, Trotsky wrote:

One of the aims of the Austrian program of “cultural autonomy” was “the preservation and development of the national idiosyncrasies of peoples.” Why and for what purpose? Asked Bolshevism in amazement... the thought of artificially preserving national idiosyncrasies was profoundly alien to Bolshevism.<sup>43</sup>

By contrast, the Bund, following the failure of the 1905 revolution, had turned their attention to semi-legal cultural work, strengthening their symbiotic bond with secular *Yiddishkeit*. For the Bundists, preservation of Jewish culture had become an essential creed. Others claimed not only that this was destructive of class unity and unnecessary, but that it introduced an arbitrary freezing of a historical phase of community development and would only bring new restrictions on individual and cultural evolution.

In practice, the Bolsheviks in power bowed a certain extent to separatist pressures. They set up a Jewish branch of the party, and established many institutions that reflected the cultural demands of the Bundist programme: Yiddish schools, journals, libraries and socialist-realist drama; Jewish agricultural settlements; Yiddish speaking Jewish National Regions; and even, in the 1930s, an Autonomous Territory designated for Jewish colonisation in Birobidzhan in the (inhospitable) Soviet Far East. All these developments were followed with more than interest in the Jewish East End, and Branch 11 of the Jewish Workers’ Circle gave especial support to Birobidzhan.

Bundist influence was never as strong in London as it was in New York, for two reasons. From the 1890s, Jewish radical politics in London had become dominated by the Anarchists, but also, just as America was receiving an influx of Bundist political refugees following the failed revolution of 1905, Britain introduced the Aliens Act that put the first restrictions on immigration. However, all emigrant communities kept a close watch on events in Russia, and also in

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<sup>42</sup> Lenin (1963) *Collected works* Vol. 19 p 533

<sup>43</sup> Trotsky in *Stalin*, published 1940, quoted in the introduction to Trotsky (1970), edited by Peter Buch, p 11

Poland – where the Bund continued as a separate organisation right up to the Second World War. The Bund had a special Foreign Committee to co-ordinate political work and fund raising, and Bundists would continue to play an important role in the debates that took place among the Jewish emigrants.

### ***Breaking out of the Circle – the 1930s***

In London, all forms of Jewish radicalism were represented at the Workers' Circle, which itself exemplified the contradictions within Jewish internationalism. This organisation was founded in 1909 in the mould of the political circles in Russia – but without their need for secrecy – and grew to be an active social club cum friendly society, with a busy programme of lectures, concerts and other events. Members could always be sure of finding passionate political debate, as well as endless games of dominoes, and the circle served as a school of radical politics, especially in the twenties and early thirties. Jack Shapiro, who became an active member of the Communist Party, found that it was

full of a vast variety of militants fresh out of the revolutionary parties in their own countries [whose] militancy and keenness to keep the struggle alive was an important inspiration to young people such as myself.<sup>44</sup>

Although many members of the Circle would have described themselves as internationalists, they appear not to have discussed opening membership to non-Jewish workers. Shapiro explains that this was because 'it was taken for granted that there was a separation between Jews and non-Jews in Stepney. It was taken for granted that you shopped in a Jewish shop...'<sup>45</sup> Some Jews mixed more, depending on where they lived and how they spent their spare time, but Jewish memories of East End childhoods often describe the boundaries beyond which it was not considered safe to go alone (as well as adventures beyond those boundaries).<sup>46</sup> In his autobiography of the period Joe Jacobs recalled his surprise when he attended his first May Day march: 'What had happened to the "Yoks" and Jews. We were all "comrades".'<sup>47</sup> As late as 1938, Mick Mindel, of the United Ladies Tailors, had to confront ingrained Jewish separateness when he led the campaign to persuade his Jewish union to amalgamate with the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. As he later explained,

It was really easy to arouse the opposition to [this policy] on the grounds that I was depriving the Jewish Workers of their independence, of their trade union: leading them into a Union which didn't understand the Jewish problems and Jewish people.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> letter to the author dated 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005

<sup>45</sup> Interviewed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2002

<sup>46</sup> See interview with Jack Shapiro 26<sup>th</sup> June 2002; Jacobs (1978) p 25; and Jerry White's interviews with former residents of Rothschild Buildings (copies of tapes in Tower Hamlets Local History Library).

<sup>47</sup> Jacobs (1978) p 26

<sup>48</sup> Mick Mindel interviewed by Jerry White, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1977. A copy of the tape is in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library

Mindel's father was a Bundist political refugee and founder-member of the Workers' Circle, and Mindel, himself a Communist, was acutely aware of Jewish sensitivities. His great nephew, Jonathan Freedland, further records the role played by Mindel's partner, the Communist trade-unionist Sara Wesker, in speaking to the older union members about the benefits of amalgamation in their native Yiddish.<sup>49</sup>

The Workers' Circle reflected existing Jewish separateness, but it could also help perpetuate it. In its Yiddish school, the Circle attempted to pass on secular Jewish culture to the next generation. In supporting the Aid for Spain Campaign it concentrated on an International Brigade battalion made up of Jews from Poland and elsewhere. And in promoting a united front against Nazism it affiliated to the World Jewish Congress in 1937. Non-Jewish friends might come to Circle House to share a cup of tea, but they were not expected to take a more active part in proceedings.

In his study of *Jews and the Left*, Arthur Liebman explained how the community basis of American Jewish socialism ultimately proved to be a fundamental weakness that hastened its decline. It provided initial strength, but as other Jewish interest groups and organisations became more powerful and the Jewish working class constituency itself declined, the socialism was forgotten.<sup>50</sup> It is tempting to wonder whether, if the Workers' Circle had encouraged a wider membership, some descendant organisation might have continued a little longer.

Radical politics in the East End of the Thirties was focused through the Communist Party, which was well represented in the Workers' Circle. The East End party was overwhelmingly and disproportionately Jewish, but reports do contain quite a number of non-Jewish names and the East End branches worked with people throughout the British party. The Jewish turn towards Communism was encouraged to a large extent as a reaction to the rise of fascism internationally and locally, but that does not mean that it can be dismissed as an 'infatuation', as Geoffrey Alderman attempts to do.<sup>51</sup> Those who became interested in Communism through the fight against fascism were given plenty of opportunity to find out what the Party stood for, and the glaring social inequalities that surrounded them provided a powerful argument in themselves. Party membership introduced young Jews to a wider world, as they campaigned outside the old boundaries and sang Irish songs with their Catholic comrades,<sup>52</sup> but even so Jews and Jewish secular culture predominated, and this was especially true in the Young Communist League.

The anomalous position of the East End Jewish Communists – and the elusiveness of that tactical separatist borderline – is illuminated by the debates that surrounded Proletet. Proletet was a Yiddish theatre group, active in the early thirties, that was

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<sup>49</sup> Freedland (2005) p 177

<sup>50</sup> Liebman (1979) pp 597-8

<sup>51</sup> Alderman (1983) p 117

<sup>52</sup> See interview with Jack Shapiro 8<sup>th</sup> October 2002

started by young Polish immigrants through the Workers' Circle and became part of the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM). Its members were largely recent immigrants, and the group grew out of the Yiddish school, so its initial choice of language was perhaps inevitable. But this provoked criticism from the Central Committee of the WTM, who claimed that 'only some very old Jews do not understand English, and as our object is to reach as many workers as possible, we defeat our purpose by presenting Yiddish sketches'.<sup>53</sup> In defending its position, Proltet argued from a point of principle. The forces of reaction were reaching the Jewish masses through popular Jewish newspapers and the Zionist movement, and had to be rebuffed through a Jewish revolutionary movement: 'wherever there is reaction it needs to be fought, and fought in its own language'.<sup>54</sup> Members of Proltet themselves were becoming assimilated and the group did not outlive the decline of the WTM; however, the promotion of Yiddish cultural activity continued to be important for some Jewish Communists.<sup>55</sup>

From 1928 to 1933 Communist Party growth had been restricted by the policies of 'class against class', which meant that it had refused to work even with other socialists, but the victory of the Nazis in Germany prompted an abrupt sea change in Communist politics. The Party turned outwards, calling for a Popular Front of workers' parties and those of the 'progressive' bourgeois, and putting itself at the centre of radical struggle; and in the East End it was able to develop an exceptionally dominant position, with a semi-mass base.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Unity in Action***

The strength of the Party in the late Thirties came out of new movements - the fight against fascism and the fight for better housing - that complemented their work in the trade unions and brought in new people and a new sense of purpose. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union had reverted to new forms of nationalism and anti-Semitism,<sup>57</sup> but, although the British party was always subject to the Comintern and intolerant of those who questioned authority at any level, its grass-roots work in the pre-war East End was developed as a paradigm of Marxist internationalism. Many of those who enjoyed the Jewish culture of the Worker's Circle were determined to prove the universality of the ideas they debated there.

The Communists were anxious to draw attention to the threat that fascism and anti-Semitism posed to the whole of the working class, and to emphasise the breadth of anti-fascist support across the class. The 'Battle of Cable Street', in which they played a leading role, was seen as a symbol of working-class unity. The fight against fascism and the fight for better housing boosted each other. People

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<sup>53</sup> B. Woodward in the *WTM Monthly Bulletin*, January 1933, quoted in McCreery p 298

<sup>54</sup> Proltet's open letter to the *Monthly Bulletin*, quoted in McCreery p 299

<sup>55</sup> See Srebrnik (1995) pp 26 - 27 and David Goldinger's *Memoirs* (manuscript in National Museum of Labour History, Manchester) pp 87 - 117

<sup>56</sup> Branson and Heinemann (1971) pp 197 - 198

<sup>57</sup> Although Stalin's 1913 article, *Marxism and the National Question*, written under the guiding hand of Lenin, remained a standard Communist text, Stalin cut across his own arguments both in his theories and in practice.

were drawn into the Communist Party by the fight against fascism, and, through the party, they helped to organise the concerted attack on slum housing. The fight for better housing brought everyone together, Jew and Gentile, to attack the social and economic causes on which fascism thrives.<sup>58</sup>

This is epitomised in the description of one of the early housing battles as told by Phil Piratin, who was later to become Communist MP for Mile End. The events took place in 1937, in Paragon Mansions, which had an active tenants' committee and Communist sympathisers among the tenants; however, the immediate concern was the threatened eviction of two families who had no connection with the committee. Communist activists discovered that this was because they were both members of the British Union of Fascists, which had done nothing to help them. The Communists now had a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the strength of working class unity and of their Party and to discredit the fascists. Under Communist leadership, the tenants united to barricade the block against the bailiffs and police, and armed themselves with mouldy flour and pails of water, and during the lunch hour an impromptu meeting was held outside to explain to passing workers what was happening. The uncomfortable mixture of flour and water and public antipathy persuaded the bailiffs to hold off for a fortnight to allow further negotiations with the landlord. And most importantly, as Phil Piratin later wrote,

The kind of people who would never come to our meetings, and had strange ideas about Communists and Jews, learnt the facts overnight and learnt the real meaning of the class struggle in the actions which now followed.<sup>59</sup>

Max Levitas, who lived in Brady Mansions, where he was convenor of a twenty-one week rent strike in 1939, explained in a recent interview how such strikes could also demonstrate another aspect of class unity:

We were fighting the Jewish landlords the same way as we'd fight any landlord that increases rents, doesn't care if he repairs flats, so forth and so on: these are the enemies of the people and must be fought - if they are a Jew, black or white. And this helped to develop a much more broader understanding and [to unite] the struggle against Mosley and the fascists.<sup>60</sup>

The Communists were always anxious to stress the inclusive nature of the movement. Simon Blumenfeld's Rent Strike Play, *Enough of All This*, which was written and performed at the time, has the Jewish Secretary of the Stepney Tenants' Defence League, Tubby Rosen - Tich Rose in the play - as central character, but the other characters are Father John (based on Father John Groser, the League's President), the landlord, and the Irish Catholic residents of a housing block. In his speech at the final meeting, Rose speaks of them all, and their

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<sup>58</sup> Glynn (2005a)

<sup>59</sup> Piratin (1978) p 32

<sup>60</sup> Interviewed Autumn 1999

ancestors, as ‘Englishmen’, and tells the tenants, ‘we ordinary people are the real England’.<sup>61</sup>

### ***The Popular Front***

Left critics of the Communist Party tactics of this period argue that Popular Frontism contained the seeds for the disintegration of the workers’ unity that was being painstakingly built up through grass roots activism. Trotsky drew a distinction between this and a ‘united front’, in which separate groups work together over a particular issue - such as the fight against fascism - but many people do not draw this linguistic distinction and the two terms tend to get used somewhat indiscriminately. The broad Popular Front politics practiced by the Communist Party risked generating support for the other parties with whom they worked; and even within their own ranks immediate campaigns could take precedence over the bigger fight to transform society. Although it was conceived as a response to a particular situation, Popular Frontism continued to be pursued after the war and gained a permanent place in Soviet Communist theory.

Even after the defeat of the fascist threat, the 1945 Communist election manifesto, *The British Road to Socialism*, eschewed radicalism in favour of broad inclusive policies, to the frustration and disillusionment of many Party members. Piratin had been concerned that the Communists should not lose their identity under the immediate concerns of the tenants’ movement, but the policy under which he was elected in 1945 was far from revolutionary. In fact, as he himself explained, ‘essentially, as understood by the electors, it was not so very different from that of the Labour Party.’<sup>62</sup>

This blurring of the older Marxist arguments was to have particular effect on the party’s attitude towards ethnic groups, as groups, and ultimately enabled the growth of multiculturalist ideas. After the Soviet entry into the war, the British Party set up a Jewish Bureau, using arguments very similar to those given by Proletet, and its chairman explained that the correct Jewish Communist attitude was:

“I am a good Jew, and I realise the trials and tribulations of my people.

I therefore dedicate myself to help them, and the only way to help them is to fight for Communism, which is the solution of their problems”.<sup>63</sup>

These were extraordinary times, which produced strange political combinations; however the monthly *Jewish Clarion*, launched by the party just before the end of the war, continued to be produced as a specifically Jewish journal until 1957.

### ***British Bengalis and the Legacy of Stalinism***

Notwithstanding the post-war election of a Communist MP and Communist councillors, the heyday of East End Left radicalism had past. Disappearing too, increasingly rapidly, was the area’s Jewish community, to be replaced in the

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<sup>61</sup> There is a copy of the play in the Unity Theatre collection in Merseyside Maritime Museum.

<sup>62</sup> Piratin (1978) p 79

<sup>63</sup> Manuscript report of a National Conference of Jewish members of the CPGB, held on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1943. CPGB Jewish Bureau records, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

following decades by new waves of immigrants, especially Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan.

The general level of political consciousness among the new – often illiterate – immigrants was low, but the British Bengali community included a highly active layer. This was centred around politicised students, whose Leftist nationalist ideas, nursed in the cradle of East Pakistani politics, were further developed in London, where they remained focused on their own Bengali community. The evolution of British Bengali Left politics was constrained by the Stalinist doctrines of Popular Frontism, ‘socialism in one country’, and revolutionary ‘stages theory’ – in which socialist revolution was seen as separate from and following after a previous bourgeois revolution. These allowed the underlying struggle for socialism to become lost and diverted under the immediate demands of other causes.

Leftists played a leading role in the massive Bengali mobilisation in support of Bangladeshi independence in 1971, but, in accordance with these doctrines, they temporarily put aside their socialist demands to work alongside the nationalists. And when independence had been won, they found (in an echo of the situation in Bangladesh itself) that they had been so busy propagating the nationalist cause and avoiding anything that might discourage the broadest possible involvement, that people remained ignorant of socialist ideas. Not only did the British Bengali Left fail to gain from the political mobilisation that accompanied Bangladeshi Independence, but they actually lost much of their earlier potential as the community’s political leadership.<sup>64</sup>

The same was true of the Leftists’ role in developing welfare organisations. Tasadduk Ahmed, who played a key part in Bengali political organisation of all kinds, promoting student discussions as well as community welfare, was himself a paradigm of this politics. Looking back, he recalled,

My main experience in the UK has been the experience of how to manage or organise united front activities, keeping my own belief to myself and to my close associates.<sup>65</sup>

Although he and his comrades spoke the language of Marxist internationalism, their first focus, the focus of all their activity, was the Bengali community. Working-class unity remained an ideal, but Stalinist theory enabled this to be seen not as the cause that should dictate immediate action, but a dream for an ever-postponed future.

### ***Black Radicalism – New Separatism***

The next generation of Bengali activists had little connection with the old Bengali socialist traditions – and many only arrived in Britain with their mothers and siblings after the independence war. Like the Jews in the Thirties, they found

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<sup>64</sup> Glynn (2006)

<sup>65</sup> Interviewed by Caroline Adams, 1980s. A copy of the tape is in Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

themselves fighting a double battle against racism and appalling housing conditions. But this time the overriding ideology influencing their organisation and actions was that of Black Radicalism.<sup>66</sup> Black groups had dipped their toe into East End anti-racist politics in the early seventies; but in the latter half of the decade, under the influence of activists from Race Today, Black (in this case almost entirely Bengali) organisation became increasingly not just a matter of fact, but of principle.

Black Radicalism was inspired by events in America and liberation struggles in the former colonies. Its ideology developed out of the interaction between Communist Popular Frontism and anti-colonial and black rights movements, whose leaders were regarded by the Communists as a 'progressive bourgeois'. It was a formative strand of the New Left that developed from criticism of tendencies towards excessive structuralism *within* Marxism, to criticism of Marxism itself. Black Radicalism disputed Marx's essential argument that the primary division in society is class, based upon ownership of the means of production, and that revolution must come initially and finally from the proletariat united against the exploiting capitalist classes. Socialist revolution remained the ultimate aim, but the autonomous black revolution had to come first, and would help to bring it about. In this version of the 'stages theory' the majority of the working class was temporarily excluded from the equation altogether. The white working class itself was seen as part of the problem, and the socio-economic causes of working-class racism were overlooked. Separate organisation, far from being seen as a risk, was regarded as the solution, but Black Radical theory never confronted the crucial question of how the step was to be made from autonomous movements to overall unity - perhaps because there was no answer.

In the East End, Race Today activists organised Bengali squatters and would-be squatters into a Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), which demanded that its members be re-housed closer together in the safe area of E1, away from outlying, predominantly white, estates; and they organised Bengali anti-racist vigilantes. Together, these movements played a key part in empowering a generation of young Bengalis. There was little discussion of political ideology - which was, anyway, never fully theorised - but Black Radical ideas impacted both on the geographical development of the community and on its social and political integration with its non-Bengali neighbours.

Even when BHAG was no longer active, the new separateness was perpetuated through the resulting ghettoised community and ethnically distinct electoral wards. There had been no coming together of different groups in a common cause, as had occurred in the Thirties, and BHAG had not attempted to link housing problems and racism to issues beyond the Bengali community. This was grass-roots politics with the politics reduced to a poorly defined identification of Bengalis as a deprived community that needed to help itself. BHAG's followers had learned to fight, only to strive for a greater share of the establishment cake.

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<sup>66</sup> Glynn (2005a)

### ***Diversity and Disintegration***

The idea of autonomous organisation had opened a Pandora's box, and the Eighties saw the simple dualism of Black Radicalism shattered into a new politics of competing identities and new ethnicities.<sup>67</sup> The celebration of difference soon became an end in itself. Radical separatism became transformed by the liberal establishment into safe 'multiculturalism', and this has been allowed to grow from cultural sensitivity, into the political privileging of cultural concerns and community loyalties.

One result is the encouragement of religious groupings as active players in civil society. Thus multiculturalism has legitimised and strengthened Islamic organisations, which may not share its liberal values, and which already have an ideological pull with which community politics cannot compete.<sup>68</sup> Well before 9/11, many young Bengalis, who could find little inspiration in the pragmatic politics of the generation that had been mobilised in the seventies, had been attracted by the alternative ideology and practical grass-roots work of the mosque. Beyond and apart from the headline grabbing concerns over Islamic revolutionaries, political Islam has brought new divisions and moral pressures into families and communities. And those who want to see progressive change across the whole of society will soon find that religion will accept reforms only within its own terms.

### ***The Respect Experiment***

George Galloway and Respect are attempting to unite Muslim groups and socialists into an instant radicalism;<sup>69</sup> but one thing that Islamists and Marxists both agree, is that their respective philosophies are based on different, and mutually incompatible, understandings of ultimate truth. A religion such as Islam may incorporate ideas that can be interpreted as socialist, but the very name, Islam, means submission to the rule of God, as revealed to Muhammad. In the Marxist view, '*Man makes religion, religion does not make man.*'<sup>70</sup> The world will be changed by human action, but in order to change the world for the better, it is necessary first to interpret it correctly. That is why Marxists will argue against what they believe to be a wrong interpretation of the world, and why, for Marx, '*the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.*'<sup>71</sup> Whilst it is possible to imagine an Islamic socialism being practised by secular Muslims, who regard religion as a private matter, it is impossible to combine the two different and complete worldviews of Marxism and Islamism. To attempt to do so can only result in fatal compromise to one or other ideology.

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<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of Black politics see Shukra (1998)

<sup>68</sup> Glynn (2002)

<sup>69</sup> Glynn (2005b)

<sup>70</sup> Marx (1844b) p 1

<sup>71</sup> Marx (1844b) p 1

This does not mean that Marxists and Islamists cannot or should not work together on particular issues when, as is often the case, they share similar immediate aims. But each should remember that their ultimate aims are very different. There have been many times in history when alliances have been formed, and as many bitter disappointments. This Popular Front politics is achieved at the expense of fundamental principles. The Islamists know this. They have kept a semi-detached position, and (apart from the pressures caused by their revolutionary co-religionists) have generally come through the political upheavals of the last few years stronger and uncompromised.<sup>72</sup> However, despite their respect for their new comrades, many on the Left have failed to learn from them the important lesson of faith in one's own ideology. Winchevsky had discovered the importance of not alienating people through insensitivity to their religious beliefs, but this is not the same as actively encouraging religious organisations to play a political role.

Galloway claims a place in the history of East End radicalism, but in their bid for a short cut to socialism, Respect has yet to learn the lessons of that history. As they compete with New Labour for the Muslim vote – and both parties have been blatant in their attempts to woo Muslims as a religious group – it has not been surprising to see the reappearance in the local paper of aggrieved letters from old white East Enders asking what about us?<sup>73</sup> In order to build links across ethnic divisions in the shared fight against inequality there is no substitute for painstaking grass-roots work that addresses basic socio-economic issues. The battle has to be won in the estates of Tower Hamlets, not in the ballot box.

### ***Learning from History***

Over one hundred years after the Brünn Resolution, support for cultural and ethnic politics has become accepted as almost the litmus test of progressive thought and political correctness (even if this is now tempered by lessons in 'citizenship'). But the debates of that time still raise issues for all those who are concerned with bringing about real improvements in people's living conditions and opportunities. Socio-economic integration does not have to mean the homogenisation of all differences;<sup>74</sup> whilst, if we continue to allow multiculturalism to distract political attention from fundamental socio-economic divisions, we will hold back progress towards greater equality.<sup>75</sup> And when, in consequence, society polarises and rifts widen, the frustrations of those at the bottom will turn against ethnic minorities – especially if these can be perceived as having received any sort of special treatment – and everyone will suffer.

In a fair society, resources should be allotted according to need – rather than to each according to his (or her) ethnicity.<sup>76</sup> If one ethnic group is generally

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<sup>72</sup> Islamist leaders walk a political tightrope when they try to negotiate a position in the political establishment, but that is another story.

<sup>73</sup> See Glynn (2005b)

<sup>74</sup> See Brubaker (2001) p 543

<sup>75</sup> See Anthias (2001) p 638

<sup>76</sup> While I have been concerned that multiculturalism undermines needs-based resource allocation,

more deprived than others, it would still benefit – or at least those members would who actually needed more help. Today, the Bengalis, like many other former immigrant groups, have come of age and taken their place within local structures at all levels. This does not mean that there is no institutionalised racism, or that ethnic minorities can relax their vigilance in the fight against prejudice of all kinds; or that anyone should stop enjoying – or even spending public money on – Bengali cultural events.<sup>77</sup> What it does mean, is that community organisations are not enough, and community politics can even be counter-productive. There are deep and fundamental inequalities that cut across all ethnicities and urgently need to be addressed.

The best known modern exponent of the ideas discussed in this paper is Robert Miles, who stands out among more recent writers on issues of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ for his rigorous Marxist argument. Miles claims that what we describe as racism is not the result of a thing called ‘race’ but of processes of racialisation that arise out of the material conditions of capitalist development. Dominant groups have promoted racialisation to legitimate the social hierarchies of colonialism, nationalism and the post-colonial world, and to fragment opposition to their control. He argues that, by explaining the process of racialisation, Marxism provides the key to its demise. If racism is derived ultimately from socio-economic structures, then the struggle against racism must be incorporated in the struggle to change those structures – it must be a socio-economic struggle.<sup>78</sup> This account has examined the implications of the Marxist approach through a 100 year history of the actions and debates of some of those who have attempted to put it into practice, and who have all had to strike a balance between the pragmatic demands arising from working with ethnic minority groups, and the dangers of separatism. It has shown that, despite the difficulties, Marxism - far from neglecting divisions that cut across the basic categories of class, as is so often claimed – has a long history of analysing them and arresting ethnic and racial conflict.

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the fundamental concept of allocation according to need has come under attack by Dench et al in their study of kinship, race and conflict in *The New East End*. (2006). Their critique of liberal orthodoxy singles out the needs-based welfare state as chief culprit, blaming it for the breakdown of community and counter posing it to traditional concepts of mutual aid; and their conclusions fall back on a potentially conservative (and rose-tinted) mix of family values and group-based obligations, replacing individual interests by group interests, and failing to take account of broader socio-economic changes. However, I would argue that the problem is not the prioritising of those in greatest need, but chronic under-funding, which has meant that this can only be achieved at the expense of those a little better off.

<sup>77</sup> Though it does question the desirability of specifically Bengali youth clubs and football teams

<sup>78</sup> Miles (1982) and (1993)

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