

**Early Identity-Politics:
The Case of Cahan and Schiff
(1915-1917)**

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Abstract

Today, the terms “identity-politics” or “recognition-politics” enjoy an important presence in public debate, and it is widely accepted that these terms started to be important especially the 1960’s. Yet, as this article wishes to prove, identity-politics form part and parcel of modern politics from its’ beginning some 200 years ago. In a nutshell, the essence of modern politics involves the constant process of power distribution, based on mass participation. Modern politics reveals a dichotomy between idealism propelled by concepts of ‘enlightenment,’ on the one hand, and the power and control of the various resources which in themselves constitute the essence of politics, on the other. Hence, various devices and mechanisms were created and used in order to close, or, at least, veil the gap. This historical process was accelerating in the 18th century, which gave birth among many others concepts to “ideology,” “enlightment,” “emancipation,” which in turn stood behind the emergence of mass-media. From this perspective, it becomes abundantly clear why “identity politics” must have been part of modern politics from the very beginning, and why the mass media became the de facto arena for political activity. All of these were present also in the modern-Jewish-history case: from early 19th century on, new Jewish leaderships were forging new Jewish ideologies, while trying to push them ahead through political groups whom expressed themselves through particular mass-media. Such was the case of the Jewish Daily Forward [JDF], an Yiddish daily newspaper, that was born in New York in 1897. The JDF was based on a specific sort of ‘identity-politics’ that in fact widen the gap between words and deeds. Hence, on the one hand it is a particular story of a particular Jewish case in a particular time and place. On the other, the JDF’s history provides an example of an early “identity politics” two generations before “identity” became a token and a reference-point.

I.

Today, the term “identity-politics” is commonly used within the political debate. According to one plausible definition,

“The term ‘identity politics’ has come to represent a wide range of political activities and theorizing originating in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social

groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestoes, or party affiliations, identity-political formations typically aim at securing the political freedom of a specific constituency which is marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness which challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of achieving greater self-determination.”¹

“Identity-politics” is also known as “recognition-politics.” If to follow Nancy Fraser’s distinction: “recognition politics” is the other side or the opposite of “class politics.”² In other words, the emphasis on “identity” leads activists to claim “recognition” of their “otherness,” be it on culture, gender or the likewise grounds. On the other hand, the emphasis on “class” leads activists to claim “redistribution” on economic scale. Fraser convincingly suggests that an “integrative approach” rather than an “either/or dichotomy” should be adopted in order to better understand reality “in the service of participatory parity,” which is needed to “meet the requirements of justice for all.”³

As to when precisely “identity-politics” came into being, conventional wisdom would suggest that it appeared during the post-2nd World War era, more especially the 1960’s. This common opinion is widely applied to other schools such as “feminism,” “criticism,” “environmentalism,” “globalism” etc., all of which supposedly came into existence in the last thirty to sixty years. As Nancy Fraser put it: “In today’s world, claims for social justice seem increasingly to divide into two types.” “In today’s world.” More specifically: although “egalitarian redistributive claims have supplied the paradigm case for most theorizing about social justice for the past 150 years, today however we increasingly encounter [or]... confronted with a new constellation.”⁴

Though true that “recognition” or “identity” politics are making more way these days, this article purports to suggest that identity-politics existed long before the 80’s, 70’s or 60’s. In fact, any attempt to pinpoint an exact date or specific era in which identity-politics came into existence would be foolhardy. A more reasonable assumption would be that identity-politics form part and parcel of modern politics, namely the processes described by social thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and many others of his era.⁵ In

¹ See also, Deborah Dash Moore, “Introduction,” in *American Jewish Identity Politics*, ed. Deborah D. Moore, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 1.

² Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Delivered at Stanford University, 1996) http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/f/Fraser98.pdf

³ Ibid, 67.

⁴ Ibid, 3, at passim.

⁵ See for instance: Joseph Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy’s Guide* (New York: Harpers and Collins, 2006).

a nutshell, the essence of modern politics involves the constant process of power distribution, based on mass participation. Modern politics reveals a dichotomy between idealism propelled by concepts of “enlightenment,” on the one hand, and the power and control of the various resources which in themselves constitute the essence of politics, on the other. Hence, various devices and mechanisms were devised in order to close, or, at least, veil the gap. According to Prof. Zvi Lamm, the term “ideology” was coined by the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) in a 15 page-pamphlet published in 1790. Tracy no doubt suggested this term as part of the *enlightments* longing to create and enhance “the requirements of justice for all” politics. Yet, Napoleon depicted de Tracy and his likes as “chatter-box, detached from reality.” Later on came Karl Marx and from his times on “Ideology” is usually a word to be used in order to cover “interests” or hidden agendas.⁶ If to look for a common ground or a mid-point between de Tracy’s and Marx’s understanding of this term, Ideology is at its minimum a device or a method to bridge the gap between reality as it appeared or described, and reality as it should be or amended. No wonder 18th century gave birth not only to “ideology,” “enlightenment” and “emancipation,” but also to mass-media which was the main vehicle to pass-on this or that “ideology” on its way to be translated into politics. From this perspective, it becomes abundantly clear why “identity politics” must have been part of modern politics from the very beginning, and why the mass media became the *de facto* arena for political activity.

II.

From mid-17th century to the end of the 20th, Jews all over the world, but especially in 19th and 20th century Europe, established and ran some thirty-thousand printed journals, newspapers, magazines etc. Most of them would not survive for more than two or three issues. One of them – *The Jewish Chronicle* – established in 1839 or 1840, and is still much alive and kicking.⁷ This amazing data, suggested by Shalom Rosenfeld, a journalist on his own and an historian of Jewish Press,⁸ reflects most and foremost Jewish process of politicization and modernization.⁹ As suggested in the previous chapter of this article, each and every Jewish periodical reflected on the one hand the longing of its’ creators, writers and readers for a better world (being it reformist, socialist, orthodox, Zionist, communist etc.). On the other – as the old Jewish joke goes: “where there are two Jews there are three opinions” - the mere fact that there were so many different periodicals

⁶ Zvi Lamm, *In The Whirlpool of Ideologies–Education in the 20th Century* (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2002), 21-23 [Heb.].

⁷ See for instance: Avraham Greenbaum, “Newspapers and Periodicals,” *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Newspapers_and_Periodicals

⁸ Shalom Rosenfeld, “Writing ‘with 70 pens’ and in Many Languages,” *Kesher*, 6 (1992), 5-6 [Heb.].

⁹ See for instance: Eli Lederhendler, *Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: NYU Press, 1994).

reflects the above mentioned quest for “recognition,” so essential in the making of “identity politics.”

It was not “only” a question of language. Different Jews expressed their unique uniqueness in the same language. It was not “only” a question of class. Different Jews expressed their unique uniqueness even when they shared the same social status. It was not even a question of ideology or religion. Different Jews expressed their unique uniqueness also when they pledged allegiance to Marx, Marxism or any other Holy Scripture or God. Notwithstanding, Jewish press like any other tended to present also the mundane, the curious, the innovative, in a word: “the news.” Not to mention the fact that it was an ever growing market. In 1800 there were only 2 million Jews all over the globe. In 1900 there were some 11 million, more than 80% in Europe.¹⁰ This meant and even stronger bias toward uniqueness and recognition.

In short, if a daily newspaper was to become successful, it had to cater as much as to the natural human penchant for scoops from the darker side of life, as to give its readers a direction, a road map and an identity. The more complex and dynamic the social environment, the more so. Such was the case of the *Jewish Daily Forward [JDF]*, a Jewish – even Yiddish – daily newspaper, that was born in late 19th century in USA. The history of the *JDF* is on the one hand a particular story of a particular Jewish case in a particular time and place. On the other, as this article wishes to show, the *JDF*'s history provides an example of an early “identity politics” two generations before “identity” became a token and a reference-point to the polemics concerning the ways and means to achieve “justice for all.” In short: some time “identity politics” would lead people away from it.

III.

The *JDF* was perhaps the single most influential publication in “Jewish” New York at the peak of the great migration. Reaching its highest circulation mark in 1915 – 200,000 copies – the *JDF* acted as the barometer of the Jewish street.¹¹ Established in 1897 by some fifty “Yiddish-speaking socialists,” the *JDF* attempted to provide a niche between the dogmatic “Marxist” socialism led by Daniel De-Leon, on the one hand, and Jewish Orthodoxy, led by influential dailies such the *Tagesblatt*, on the other. To further complicate matters, in 1905, Louis Miller, who had been pivotal in establishing the *JDF* during its “seven years of famine,” as some “forvertists” defined the years 1897-1903, established yet another socialist or “progressive” daily [*Die Wahrheit*]. Within this fraught environment, bearing in mind that this was America and thus synonymous with

¹⁰ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13992-statistics>

¹¹ For a comprehensive history of the *JDF*, see: Ehud Manor, *Forward - “The Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts)”* (Newspaper: Immigrants, Socialism and Jewish Politics in New York, 1890-1917, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2009).

business, ratings, commercial aspects etc., the *JDF* fought its way towards success... And it did indeed prosper.

By 1922 the *JDF* owned assets worth about one million dollars, after making one and a half million in the previous decade.¹² This financial strength gave the paper sufficient leeway to act along the lines that characterized its most influential personality, Abraham Cahan. Back in 1897, Cahan was Miller's friend and one of another fifty Yiddish-speaking socialists who had brought the *JDF* into existence. Since Cahan was an outstanding and gifted journalist, his decision to leave the paper was a hard blow. No wonder the "forverlists" were more than happy with Cahan's decision, in 1903, to return to the editors desk, though not before demanding (and receiving) – "absolute full power [sic]."¹³ Indeed, thanks to Cahan, the *JDF* grew to be an independent newspaper, running according to its own policies, supporting or opposing contemporary trends, without compromising its ideological identity. What enabled the paper to determine its special character, was the fact that the *JDF*'s ideology, which epitomized Cahan's own ideology, was sufficiently flexible to allow it to have its cake and eat it, as it were. It both maintained popular appeal, which was essential not only for financial reasons, whilst, in the words of Abraham Liesin, concomitantly succeeding in portraying an image of a "pure and moral" publication.¹⁴ One of the strategies the paper applied to achieve these somewhat contradictory goals, was to be sufficiently critical in its abstract ideas – such as "capitalism," "socialism," "Zionism" etc. – without paying too much attention to the question of what the resulting, tangible influence of this criticism would have on reality.

According to the afore-mentioned theoretical terms, indeed the *JDF*, far more than "[...] organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestoes, or party affiliation [...fostered] identity-political formations which typically aimed at securing the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. To put it more simply, the paper's "belief systems, programmatic manifestoes, or party affiliations," acted as its tools for forging a neo-marginalization of its "specific constituency." Since the Jewish immigrants came mainly from backward and hostile Eastern Europe, "Neo-marginalization" merely recreated their former Jewish world insulated from outside influences. In light of this objective reality, the *JDF* aimed ostensibly at the creation of a Jewish separateness, under the guise of the most universalistic ideology of them all: "socialism." What strikes an un-biased observer is the fact that whilst the *JDF* advocated "socialism," it also played a significant role in praising Jacob Schiff, who undoubtedly represented the incarnation of "capitalism." This issue generated popular comment, and Cahan saw fit to dedicate a full-length editorial explaining the discrepancy. In short, Cahan suggested, that

¹² Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 542.

¹³ Abraham Cahan, *Bletter fun main Leben*, Vol. 4 (New York, 1930), 342.

¹⁴ Abraham Liesin, *Zichronot u' Chavayot*, (Tel Aviv, 1943), 159-160 [Heb.].

“It has been a long time since we treated capitalists as *treifa* [sic]. If a capitalist is a good person, you can do good work with him [...] The Schiff’s and the Marshalls [sic] are not socialists, but they are warm-hearted Jews that have done some good deeds, which can be considered radical deeds [...] Schiff is one of the richest millionaires in America, and one of the richest Jewish millionaires in the world. He is a conservative, but he has a noble heart. If we were abstaining from working with this kind of people, we would have been deemed narrow-minded fanatics.”¹⁵

The fact is that Cahan and the *JDF* did treat the greater part of all other “capitalists as *treifa*,” especially if they were members of the Democratic Party or on the fringe. Hence, the special place kept by this “socialist” daily for “the Schiffs and Marshalls,” should be interpreted as a deep expression of the *JDF* identity politics. If at all plausible, such an interpretation would constitute an alternative to the common view that the *JDF* was a harbinger of Jewish Americanization, but one of a long list of progressive factors that created “the progressive era,” etc.¹⁶

IV.

On the one hand, Schiff was the incarnation of American capitalism, rendering him, in theory, the major foe of socialism in general, and Jewish – or Yiddish- speaking – socialism in particular. Yet, on the other hand, Schiff was treated by most American Jews in the same light as the House of Rothschild was treated by most European Jews, namely as “the king of the Jews.” While it would be reasonable enough to expect a progressive factor to fiercely criticize such a symbol of conservativeness, the fact is that the *JDF* echoed the general sympathy most American Jews showed towards their benefactor, Schiff. Indeed, Schiff epitomized philanthropy, warm Jewish heartedness and an endless devotion to Jewish affairs. Born in Germany in 1847, Schiff arrived in America right after the end of the Civil War. Within the next ten years, Schiff’s reputation as one of the most influential financiers in the U.S, facilitated his renown as an eminent philanthropist. Having emanated from the remote, poor and endemically violent Russian Pale of Settlement and experienced a period as a local downtown Jew, Schiff could hardly fail to show a benevolence that quickly made its way to the press. Everybody knew how Schiff, would stop and chat with the common people, while riding in his carriage in Central Park on Sunday afternoon.¹⁷ If he wanted to preserve his

¹⁵ *JDF*, November 21, 1917, 4.

¹⁶ This is the common knowledge concerning the *JDF*. See: *Encyclopedia of The American Left*, eds., Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, Dan Georgakas, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992), 118, 865-866. Moses Rischin, *The Promised City – New York’s Jews 1870-1914* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1970), 123-126.

¹⁷ Adler Cyrus, *Jacob H. Schiff - His Life and Letters* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928). Naomi W. Cohen, *Jacob H. Schiff – A Study in American Jewish Leadership* (Hannover – London:

own popularity, it was reasonable for Cahan not to challenge Schiff, even though, via his involvement with the *JDF*, he set himself fervently against conservatism and capitalism. In other words, Cahan was going against the very “system” that created the lowest poverty on the one hand, yet gave rise to incalculable wealth, on the other.

A different take on Schiff’s special status in the *JDF* might claim that for modernizers such as Cahan, Schiff’s capitalism and political conservatism were probably inferior to his function as a role model for the modern Jew. Well respected by gentiles, Schiff was a symbol both of the Jews ability to become an American – even a prominent one – whilst concomitantly pledging allegiance to Jewish identity. Unlike the Jewish Orthodox or Zionist practices, as conceived by the *JDF*, this did not imply neo-self-segregation, confining Jews within a New York ghetto or a Palestinian one (in what was then Palestine) for that matter. The ideology of Jewish universalism, or non-ghetto Judaism, was exactly what Yiddish-speaking socialists had in mind and tried to inculcate in the public mind via the offices of the *JDF*.

In the following chapters a different, more fact-based perspective will be propounded. The relevant issues will relate solely to the 1st World War era, not only because this era constituted a dramatic era per-se, but also because at that time, president Wilson was applying his own identity politics, known as “hyphenated politics.” Despite its applicability, placing our story within the context of the 1916 presidential campaign would stretch beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, the *JDF*’s identity politics stand on their own merit, without recourse to any specific political event such as the 1916 campaign.

V.

As the war to end all wars lingered on, delegations from warring countries tried to obtain U.S financial credit to finance the war effort. Jacob Schiff, one of the top six American financiers,¹⁸ did everything in his power to prevent any loans or extension of credit to England, France or Russia. The declared reason for this was that a Jew should

Brandeis University Press, 1999). See also Mathew M. Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ According to the Pujo Committee, nominated by The Congress in 1912, “In order to obtain full and complete information of the banking and currency conditions of the United States for the purpose of determining what legislation is needed.” See: Pujo, *Report of the Committee Appointed Pursuant To House Resolutions 429 And 504 To Investigate The Concentration of Control Of Money And Credit, 62D Congress 3d Session, House of Representatives, Report N. 1593* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 28 February 1913), Investigation, Part I, p. 3; Report, pp. 6, 34, 56, 90, 92-101. For a detailed financial description of Kuhn & Loeb Co., Schiff’s firm, see pp. 77-80.

<http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/publications/montru/>

not help his brethren's enemy.¹⁹ This position was cherished by the *JDF*, which described Schiff as "one of the best among capitalists."²⁰ Such a non-political, "moral" stand on the part of the *JDF* can be easily understood, and no doubt Cahan's endorsement of Schiff could be taken as reflecting "natural" Jewish feelings. However, as the War and the questions pertaining to it constituted part of real-world politics, and as we know that both Schiff and the *JDF*, among many others, were dealing with politics, this stand on the loan issue should be viewed from a political perspective. In short, by avoiding loans from the allies, using the anti-Russian pretext, Schiff assumed a de facto pro-axis stand. Thus, it is small wonder that other Jews, no less angry and frustrated with Czarist regime policies toward the Jews, saw things differently. Not only did prominent Jews, such as Louis Brandeis, support pro-ally American neutrality (namely supporting loans to England or France), but less prominent, though no less important ex-Russian Yiddish-speaking Jews, also adopted the pro-ally political cause. One such case was Louis Miller, who exploited the *Wahrheit* to publish pro-Russian messages in Yiddish, generating tens of thousands of copies a day. In other words, in both the aforementioned cases, "natural" emotions were the underlying motive for opposing politics; readers of the *Wahrheit*, Yiddish-speaking socialists, legitimized Russia's war effort, while the *JDF* readers, who were also Yiddish-speaking socialists, condemned it. In the latter case, finding refuge under Schiff's umbrella proved to be a matter of expediency, as in late 1917 Louis Marshall, Schiff's right hand man, saved the *JDF* from the wartime censors hook.²¹

Until then, the *JDF* had virtually been Schiff's only official spokesperson. Loan-seeking delegates came repeatedly. "Would Schiff block the one-billion loan?" asked a headline on the *JDF*'s front page, upon a visit of a French delegation, a year after the war broke out.²² The *JDF* mentioned the problems confronting the committee, such as protests from the German ambassador, the German governments intentions to apply for a loan and the reservations of some American bankers as to the soundness of the operation.²³ As negotiations advanced and the loan seemed inevitable, the *JDF* denounced the collaborators as hypocrites! The paper criticized the move as "patriotic," on the one hand yet potentially profit gaining, on the other. The one billion dollars would be transferred over a long period of time, and be used to purchase commodities on the American market. In the meantime, the bulk of the sum would be used for other

¹⁹ Cyrus Adler, *Jacob H. Schiff [Vol.1]*, 213-215. Gary Dean Best, *Financing A Foreign War: Jacob H. Schiff and Japan, 1904-1905* (AJHQ Vol. LXI, 1971), 313-324.

²⁰ *JDF*, January 22, 1915, 4.

²¹ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *Louis Marshall and The Jewish Daily Forward: an Episode in Wartime Censorship (1917-1918)*, in *For "Max Weinreich in his Seventeenth Birthday"- Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature and Society* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 34-43.

²² *JDF*, September 15, 1915, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

interest-generating activities.²⁴ Some days later, the *JDF* quoted Schiff's clarifications, in which he acknowledged what the benefits this loan could bring to American industry, while stressing that the chances that the Russians might also benefit, obliged him to oppose it.²⁵ Two months later a Russian delegation arrived, only to receive the same attention from Schiff and the *JDF*, which pointedly quoted the financiers reservations as to the Russian intentions, to arrange a modest sum of sixty million dollars only on the private market.

"As long as there is no commercial treaty between the United States and Russia,²⁶ it is risky to make any loan to Russian representatives, even from the private sector. Banks in Russia are in the hands of the government, and if the private banks are not able to return the loans, the government will do no better. Such was the case with credit extended to French banks. It ended with the French government taking on more loans to pay back the previous ones. You see, my arguments are not emotional even though emotions do affect them. A regime that destroys its citizens' homes and kills them by the thousands does not deserve financial support from any American financial institution."²⁷

This Russian delegation apparently did not do well. Negotiations dragged on for weeks, and Schiff's campaign certainly made an impact. However, when some financiers considered undertaking the loan, Schiff harnessed "emotions" more than ever. "Shame on America" quoted Schiff by the *JDF*, "if such a loan were given."²⁸ Cahan decided to cheer him up a little. "Jews all over the world should thank Schiff," proclaimed an editorial in the early spring of 1916, some four months after the Russian delegation arrived.

"Schiff should be praised for his brave, sharp and sentimental statement against the Russian loan. Today it is no longer a secret that the Russian government is slaughtering Jews. Schiff is well respected on Wall Street, but his stands on issues other than finance are also heard and respected. His last statement will hamper Nicolay's chances of obtaining American credit and will also thwart the love that some so-called Native Americans have been showering on Russia of late. The Czar is doing his best to manipulate American public opinion, including promises concerning the Jews that he

²⁴ *JDF*, September 21, 1915, 1.

²⁵ *JDF*, October 2, 1915, 1.

²⁶ The Russian-American Commercial Treaty signed in early 19th century, had been abrogated in 1911, under heavy pressures generated by Schiff and Marshall. See: Naomi Cohen, "The Abrogation of the Russo-American Treaty of 1832," *JSS*, 25/1 (1963): 3-41. Gary D. Best, *Ibid*, 166-205.

²⁷ *JDF*, November 25, 1915, 1.

²⁸ *JDF*, February 29, 1916, 1.

will fulfill when the war ends. Therefore, it is extremely important for the Jews that the world knows what is actually happening in Russia [...].”²⁹

In late November 1916, the *JDF* reported Schiff’s peace efforts. These efforts were not as far-reaching as similar efforts made a year earlier by Henry Ford had been. Schiff did not hire a ship or make promises “to try to get the boys out of their trenches and back home by Christmas.”³⁰ Nevertheless, the press in Europe did heed Schiff’s efforts. Yet, while some critics condemned these de-facto pro-German peace moves, Cahan wrote:

“As opposed to Fords naïve idealism, this peace movement includes serious figures such as Schiff, ex-president Taft, important bankers, financiers and great capitalists [...] people in France and in England are watching this movement anxiously, accusing it of being pro-German. However, its goal is to bring peace.”³¹

A few days later, yet another editorial expanded on Britain’s rejection of Schiff’s endeavors. The *JDF* referred to British allegations that Schiff was a German agent as “savage,” and went on to detail the roots of the affair. To begin with, they repudiated the pro-German claim by pointing out that many of those involved were not of German extraction. The *JDF* was right, of course. The motives of “Schiff, ex-president Taft, important bankers, financiers and great capitalists” were not cultural but politico-economic. Either way, after using the cultural argument to refute the cultural interpretation of Schiff’s peace movement, the editorial resorted to political abstractions and theology:

“The Allies are afraid of Schiff’s movement, because they admit he is one of the wisest individuals in America, and he understands that it is time for peace. When we say “it is time for peace,” we mean that the people want peace. The ruling classes in England do not want peace now, as they did not want it earlier. Their goal is to destroy Germany [...]. At first, people were ready to swallow any lie, so they supported the ruling classes, but not anymore. Schiff’s plan to advance peace throughout the neutral countries will encourage people to present their own peace plans. When each side knows exactly what his rival is up to, neutral countries, headed by the United States, will strive for a compromise among the parties. This kind of peace propaganda will make its way to England as well, and the English people will therefore learn about the true, dreadful nature of the war. Schiff has taken a noble and grand burden upon himself. Let us hope that the savage attacks on him in the English press do not discourage him. If, oh if, the war is shortened even by a day, he will be despised again by the English ruling classes, while he will be admired by the English working class, the English masses and the

²⁹ *JDF*, March 2, 1916, 4.

³⁰ *The New York Times*, November 25, 1915, 1.

³¹ *JDF*, November 29, 1916, 4.

English petit-bourgeoisie. These are the classes whose blood is being sapped by the war.”³²

One can only guess as to the extent the average *JDF* reader comprehended these arguments. Who were “Schiff, ex-president Taft, important bankers, financiers and great capitalists,” if not “the ruling classes”? By what method would “the people” devise their “peace plans”? Were “the working class,” “the masses” and “the petit-bourgeoisie” in America so united as to have one sole political plan, apart from admiring Jacob Schiff? In short, where were Cahan’s political convictions leading?

This politics of praise did not restrict itself to war politics. One of the most striking practices was the constant, venerating reports in the *JDF* of Schiff’s astronomical contributions. Money certainly does make the world go round; however from a progressive, not to mention socialist newspaper, one might expect some reservations about philanthropy. Nevertheless, just the opposite was true. The *JDF* tried not to miss even one occasion when Schiff opened his wallet and made one of his famous six-digit contributions. The sub-text was quite clear: we socialists are the harbingers of the world to come. In the meantime, let things be as they always have been.

In January 1917, Schiff turned seventy. For his birthday, he made two one-hundred-thousand dollar contributions: one to East European Jewish victims; the other to the Red Cross.³³ A few days later, “the millionaire and philanthropist,” in case someone had somehow managed to forget, made yet another one-hundred-thousand dollar donation, this time to the Orthodox movement.³⁴ The message was clear: no social problem should be neglected, there would be no discrimination between local or foreign co-religionists, or between Jews and Christians, or between Reform and Orthodox Jews. The underlying message was clearly evident. Each contribution equaled about 130 years of sweatshop workers toil, sometimes even more, as in the case of a party organized this time by Schiff, where the *JDF* reported separate contributions of “five hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”³⁵ Deeds are deeds, and words, which describe deeds, are also deeds. Writing a check or writing a hallowing editorial about the one who wrote the check, are sometimes “two sides of the same coin,” so to speak.

Schiff’s reputation within Jewish-socialist circles headed by the *JDF* grew even larger after the multi-millionaire testified to a Congress Committee on labor relations, that he rejected child-labor and supported the workers’ right to unionize.³⁶ Schiff also gained the *JDF*’s approval for his year-long involvement in labor grievances, such as a strike

³² *JDF*, December 1, 1916, 4.

³³ *JDF*, January 11, 1917, 1.

³⁴ *JDF*, January 20, 1917, 3.

³⁵ *JDF*, April 16, 1917, 1.

³⁶ *JDF*, January 22, 1915, 4.

that was held by “the needle trades” on January 1915. Schiff headed a group of “worried citizens” that urged both sides – workers and employees – to get over their differences. The *JDF* quoted Schiff as saying that while “a terrible war is going on in Europe, a war within the textile industry cannot be justified [...]. In the name of the people, please settle.”³⁷

VI.

Schiff may have been viewed as “the champion of the people,” but so also was the *JDF*. However, many Zionists also tried to be, along with other public figures who leaned much ideologically speaking more naturally towards what today is known as “Jewish peoplehood,” a movement known then in Hebrew, though in Yiddishist pronunciation, as “Klal-yisrael.”³⁸ While for Schiff, a devoted Jew, Judaism was nothing but an apology or a religion, he nevertheless catered to the sufferings of his “co-religionists.” As far as the *JDF* was concerned, Jews were for the most part, hard-working people, laborers, an oppressed class within a “capitalist” framework. Once capitalism was abolished, the Jews would live happily ever after. For Zionists of all sorts, as for those who had no problem with Jewish “peoplehood,” a combined Jewish endeavor for the betterment of the Jewish lot did not require justification. Jews were an ethnic group, a people, and a nation, inclusive of religious, class and even gender aspects. From the “identity” point of view, the affinities between the knights of “socialism” led by the *JDF*, and the far-out “capitalists” incarnated in the figure of Jacob Schiff, were more plausible, as long as their views did not focus solely on “pure and simple” ideologies, but rather on the actions of this or that factor, within the specific public arena. Considering all the fore-mentioned factors –the *JDF*, Schiff, Zionists, “Klal-Yisraelniks” etc. – the most important arena was clearly the Jewish one.

Shalom Ash [1880-1957], the once celebrated Jewish writer, is an excellent example of “Klal-yisraelnik.” Committed to no particular “ism,” Ash was accepted in many Jewish circles, including the *JDF*. However, when Ash wrote articles in the *Zukunft*, through which he questioned Schiff’s commitment to the Jewish cause, the *JDF* was forced to take sides, and take sides it did. The *Zukunft*, the intellectual review founded in 1892, was yet another branch of Yiddish speaking socialism, even though it was less “radical” than the *JDF*. Ash’s arguments bordered on “nationalist,” since he compared Schiff to the late Baron Moritz Hirsch or the venerable Baron Edmund de Rothschild. As opposed to these two prominent European Jews, Schiff – according to Ash – paid too much attention to “non-Jewish causes.” Hence Schiff should not be surprised if “the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See Yosef Gorni, “Klal Yisrael: from halakha to history,” in *Contemporary Jewries: Convergence and Divergence*, eds. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yosef Gorny, Yaacov Ro’I, (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2003), 13-22.

Jewish street” did not show the gratitude it expected.³⁹ There is no easy way to measure “gratitude,” but Cahan made his contribution by allotting considerable space in the *JDF* to Schiff’s answer to Ash’s reservations. Schiff’s arguments acted like oil in the bones of the *JDF*, which printed them on the first page:

“Jews must be Jews only by religion. In all other aspects of life they should be Americans and they must not regard themselves as a separate group. If they had stuck to this policy in Russia as well, maybe their destiny there would have been different [...] the attack on me came from a man that does not even hold American citizenship. He’s been here for only 18 months now, and yet he takes the liberty of criticizing my 54 years of service here [...] Judaism is only a religion, and if Jews in America, like those in Poland or Russia, adhere to their language and customs, they will suffer greatly for it. Yiddish, if used at all should be restricted to the intimacy of the home only. We are Americans and our children should be Americans. We must strive to make sure they cherish our religion while speaking English and taking part in the American life. Be good Americans. Be good Jews. Those who seek to segregate themselves cannot be good Americans.”⁴⁰

Before exploring these arguments, a contextual note should be made. At the same time Schiff was pronouncing his Jewish and American credo, two political moves – a Jewish one and an American one - were gaining strength and heading straight forward. Both were not “the cup of tea” either of Schiff or Cahan. At the Jewish front, “khal-yisruelniks” and Zionists were joining forces within the “American-Jewish congress movement,”⁴¹ a body to be built on “American” grounds, namely democratic process which included all American-Jews, in order to make the post-war world safer for the Jews. At the American front, incumbent president Wilson was running a hyphenated campaign, in order to improve his standing at the upcoming presidential elections. Not “per-se” of course. Wilson wanted a second term in order to go on applying his quasi-socialism (the American term back then was “progressivism”) in the United States, giving back America to the Americans, making by this even America safer for democracy.⁴² On both fronts –Jewish and American - Cahan and Schiff practically on the same opposing sides. Of course they pronounced their opposition to the democratization of American-Jewry and the amelioration of a more-just American economic redistribution, from totally different “identities.” Cahan was “socialist” hence he opposed any “capitalist” president, especially if he was a Democrat, namely one that

³⁹ Shalom Ash, “Jacob Schiff – a karakteristish,” *Zukunft*, March 1916, 288-289. See also: Shalom Ash, “dos yiddishe lebben in yor 1915,” *Zukunft*, January 1915, 9-13.

⁴⁰ *JDF*, May 22, 1916, 1.

⁴¹ Hence AJCM.

⁴² On Wilson’s economic policy: William Diamond, *The Economic thought of Woodrow Wilson* (New York, AMS Press, 1982). See also: Louis Brandeis, *Other People’s Money and How the Bankers Use it* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914). <http://www.law.louisville.edu/library/collections/brandeis/node/191>

tends to use – more precisely: abuse - the divine purity of “the revolution.” Schiff was simply a finance capitalist and a veteran Republican supporter. While Cahan was pushing his crowd to vote for “the Socialist Party,” in fact he was helping Schiff making America safer for the G.O.P. Similarly, while Schiff opposed the “American-Jewish congress movement” on a conservative-elite basis, claiming that democracy should be kept for American and not for Jewish politics, Cahan adopted the same position toward this “Klal-yisrael” initiative, though on the grounds that inter-class cooperation was both impossible and wrong.

As for Schiff’s attack on Ash, even writers of the *JDF* could not refrain from attacking his assertion that eastern-European Jews are to be blame for their own sufferings. Many writers and readers of the *JDF* were no less angry at Schiff’s harsh words against their “mome-lushen.”⁴³ Moses Olgin, who within two years would become a devoted communist, even went as far as to attack Schiff’s premise that Judaism was a “religion” to be confined to “a synagogue.” Having said that, no wonder Olgin ventured a surprisingly non-forverlist notion, according to which Judaism represented “feelings, a sense of uniqueness, based on national historic development, common destiny and a specific national essence.” This real “klal-yisrael” position, if not early pro-Zionist stand in anti-Zionist guise was being promulgated by a devoted Jewish communist. Olgin knew he was perhaps going too far! He, therefore, specified that:

“We, socialists, do not idolize either the language or any other national symbol .. Yet we think that the strength of the people’s spirit is engraved in the Jewish language [...] Schiff cannot understand that it is possible to be both a good Jew and a good American simultaneously. For him it is a question of “either ...or,” while for us it is a question of “both... and” [...] our kids can learn English and also Yiddish [...] to be an American is to take part in the struggle for a better society, to be involved in politics, to improve the laws. All of these are being carried out by us, socialists, with vigor.”⁴⁴

Indeed, Olgin certainly had a point. Yiddish-speaking socialists were politically active within the American scene, and they certainly managed to express themselves perfectly well both in English and Yiddish. What for Schiff were acts of “segregation,” for them (Yiddish-speaking socialists) was an affirmation of their loyalty to America. However, this was the case for “Klal-yisraelniks” as well as for outspoken Zionists. Neither saw any contradiction between good Americanism and good Jewishness. Perhaps the most extreme example of this attitude is seen in the all-American Louis Brandeis, Wilsons right hand and fierce opponent to capitalism as it developed back then, and who in June 1916 became the first Jew to reach on of the symbols of the acme of “Americanism”: the Supreme Court. Two years earlier Brandeis had asserted: that be “good Americans”

⁴³ *JDF*, May 23, 1916, 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

meant that Jews had to be Zionists.”⁴⁵ Brandeis” declarations carried political aims and objectives, just as Schiff *et al.* did. There is no such thing as an “identity per-se.” All declared identities had their hidden – or less hidden – agendas. When Ash attacked Schiff, what he had in mind was not so much to what extent non-Jewish institutions would benefit from Schiff’s money, but rather the fact that “the king of the Jews” in America opposed the AJCM. So it is more probable that Schiff was well aware that using the Yiddish platform did not indicate isolationism. He must have realized that Yiddish-speaking socialists, not to mention their renowned figure-head, were affording him de facto total political backup in some 150,000 daily copies.

Since Schiff was being severely attacked by the more pronounced “Klal-yisrael” Yiddish press, and mainly by the outspoken pro-Wilson and pro-AJCM *Wahrheit*,⁴⁶ Cahan decided that enough was enough. After two weeks of public debate, the *JDF* announced Schiff’s retirement from “Jewish politics” on its front page. Schiff made this declaration in a meeting of the Kehillah of New York, a sort of “klal yisrael” organization established in 1909. The *JDF* quoted Schiff’s speech extensively, while bitterly accusing “parts of the Jewish press” of propagating erroneous criticism. No doubt Schiff did not include the *JDF* in that “part.” Either way, this criticism forced Schiff to conclude that he must resign, although he promised to “maintain his philanthropic efforts on behalf of the Jews of Russia and Poland.” As Schiff’s words touched the hearts of most of the Kehillah members, a motion to endorse his statement gained a majority vote, albeit with some opposition from the Zionist delegate.⁴⁷ Under the title of “Jacob Schiff,” Cahan dedicated a full-length editorial to this “warm-hearted Jew.”

“Schiff belongs to the capitalist side. He is even one of its leaders. He stands for the structure the *JDF* rejects. Politically we stand at opposing poles. However, we socialists can do justice and can tell the difference between bigotry and the enlightened. Schiff is a capitalist but as an individual he holds lots of the fine and shine. He is a conservative yet has a warm heart. He strives for the common good. At this moment, we socialists must think of him as the good-hearted Jewish “macher” [...] in his public deeds he represents a capitalist with “neshama-yetera” [sic] [...] he loves the Jewish people a great deal [...] we socialists can see that even in the deepest parts of the capitalist side there are signs of spiritual uplifting. Millions of Schiff’s, Fords or people like the late Peter Cooper, demonstrate it. And when such a Schiff stands and talks with tears in his eyes, one feels none but the deepest sorrow and sympathy. We already stated that most attacks on Schiff emanate from personalities with double-standard. This fact also creates the gulf between Schiff and his criticizers, since Schiff is honest and pure [...] respect and dignity

⁴⁵ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Brandeis.html>; see also: Philippa Strum, *Brandeis: Beyond Progressivism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 114-115.

⁴⁶ *Wahrheit*, June 2, 1916, 3.

⁴⁷ *JDF*, June 5, 1916, 1.

are his most important values, simple values long forgotten in many circles. If Schiff were younger, we would tell him that assaults and slanders are part of public life, but Schiff is close to 70 years old now [...] he deserves better than that. His words in the Kehillah meeting sparked profound affection toward him, both from socialists and anarchists, as well as from confirmed conservatives.”⁴⁸

These words could have made a strong case for Wilson and the Democratic Party in the approaching elections. Was not Wilson’s [and Brandeis’] party, namely the Democratic Party, based upon “millions” of good capitalists? If one follows the progressive heritage [at least until 1916!] of Ford or Cooper, Cahan was in fact endorsing an industrial America which counteracted the heavy hand and burden of Wall Street finance magnates such as Schiff. Either way, the moderate tone Cahan used in this editorial can be understood as an excellent evolutionist-pragmatic-political approach. Such pragmatic progressivism characterizes most modern political parties, including the democrats of 1916, who were basing their political plans on the Wilson-Brandeis progressive platform. However, Cahan was not aiming at pragmatic-politics of the sort that might have improved the lots of the Yiddish-speaking lower classes. He was aiming at identity-politics of the sort that, no doubt, enhanced the self-esteem of most of the Yiddish-speaking lower classes.

* * *

This article has made the assertion that identity-politics rather than real-politics were the main concern of Cahan and the *JDF*, and, from that point of view, it would be sound to conclude that Cahan was not only a harbinger of “neo-journalism,” as Moses Rischin put it,⁴⁹ but also the harbinger of “identity-politics,” and if not an harbinger, at least a promoter, an early and quite a successful one, If to judge by the fame he enjoyed and keeps on enjoying to the date, making even scholars hard to revised the common knowledge concerning that great person.⁵⁰

In 1920, Jacob Schiff died. The twenties marked a deep shift in both Jewish and non-Jewish politics. In retrospective, 1917 was a clear watershed for it hailed the proclamation of the “Balfour Declaration.” and opened a new chapter in the history of Zionism. In that year also, the U.S declared war on Germany, making the “poor” world safer for

⁴⁸ *JDF*, June 6, 1916, 4.

⁴⁹ Rischin, *The Promised City*, 123. Moses Rischin, *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ Hasia R. Diner, “Book Review of: Ehud Manor, Forward: The Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts) Newspaper: Immigrants, Socialism and Jewish Politics in New York, 1890–1917, Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009” *Urban History*, 38/ 1 (2011): 195-196. As the reader of this book review could see, Prof. Diner would not offer even a shred of a counter evidence to refute the thesis of my book.

democracy, shortly before closing the doors of the strongest democracy to the poorest countries of the world. In 1917, two Russian revolutions also took place; one would overthrow the Czar and the other would extinguish human hope for many years to come. The era of identity-politics ended, at least for two generations. As free immigration came to a halt, not only into the United States but also throughout the world, Cahan was one of the earliest to realize that the Jewish *Altersheim* should and would become the most comprehensive solution for the Jewish people in modern times.

In 1925, Cahan paid a visit to Palestine, where he established political ties with his local comrades, the leaders of the emerging Zionist labor movement. Within the next four years, he would return there again. While die-hard “Yiddish-speaking-socialists” would stick to their clichés, describing the anti-Jewish violence of 1929 as “the outcome of Jewish-capitalist exploitation of the Arab proletariat,” Cahan would lead the *JDF* towards a better understanding of the “*Yiddische-Frage*” in *Eretz Yisroel* and elsewhere. From the twenties on, Cahan and the *JDF* would become a sort of a bridge between the future leaders of the State of Israel and its quintessential ally, American Jewry.⁵¹

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⁵¹ Goldstein Yaacov, *Jewish Socialists in the United States – The Cahan Debate, 1925-1926* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998). Ehud Manor, “They are just like the Bund – How did the JDF became pro-zionist,” *Yiunim Bitkumat Israel*, 16 (2006): 499-538 [Hebrew; English abstract].