Marxism and Multiculturalism: Lessons from London's East End

Abstract
This article uses the lens of the East End of London, to examine 130 years of socialist and Marxist responses to racism and to ethnic and religious division. It looks both at how action was organised, and also at the debates of those trying to put Marxist ideas into practice, who all had to strike a balance between the pragmatic demands arising from working with ethnic minority groups, and the dangers of separatism. And it shows that, despite the difficulties, Marxism - far from neglecting divisions that cut across the basic economic categories of class, as is so often claimed – has a long history of analysing them and of arresting ethnic and racial conflict.

Key words:
Multiculturalism, Marxism, Jews, Bengalis, East End, cultural-national autonomy

This is an account of 130 years of socialist and Marxist praxis in an area renowned both for its multicultural population and for its poverty. It uses historical examples as the basis for a critical discussion on the problems and possibilities that activists can face when campaigning for greater equality between and among different ethnic groups. The lessons this history gives in understanding and working within multi-ethnic societies, can provide us with an essentially different approach to that of - increasingly discredited - liberal multiculturalism.

The East End
The East End of London is a place associated with strong but, in some ways, contradictory images; a place of cockney kinship and immigrant ghettos, at once English and 'alien'. The East End is famous for battles with organised racism, but it is also portrayed, as Jane Jacobs notes, as a 'multicultural-receptor' and symbol of English tolerance. (Jacobs 1996:87 and 101) And overriding all this has been the shared poverty of an area outwith the city walls. Until recent revalorisation and encroaching redevelopment, this was a place of almost unremittingly low-wages and of making ends meet. It was a working-class area, with an admixture of small-scale immigrant-run entrepreneurism, which was based around workshop trades (especially clothing) and, latterly, the 'Indian' restaurant industry. Poverty does not respect ethnic boundaries, but different groups tended to concentrate in different areas of work.

It was the relative cheapness of the place, as well as the proximity of the city and of the old London Docks, that made the East End a magnet for successive waves of immigrants. French Huguenots set up their silk looms in seventeenth-century Spitalfields; Irish Catholics worked in the Docks loading and unloading the products of the British Empire; Jews escaping the poverty and pogroms of Eastern Europe arrived by boat from Hamburg and the Baltic ports; and Bengali seamen in the Empire's merchant navy jumped ship and began chains of immigration that expanded with the new pressures and possibilities of the post-colonial world. More recent arrivals have included refugees from Somalia and migrant workers from the new EU member states of Eastern Europe. This article takes its examples from the Jewish and Bengali immigrations, which formed successive, large, and relatively self-contained communities,

spreading out from the west end of the modern borough of Tower Hamlets (where it butts up against the City of London). Both these immigrant groups came from traditional, patriarchal and predominantly rural or small town societies, with their own distinct religion and culture; and the economic situation facing the Bengalis at the time of their greatest immigration in the 1980s, showed remarkable similarities to that faced by the Jews at the turn of the last century. Between them, Jews and Bengalis have been an important presence in the area for some 130 years. The ideas discussed here have come out of a decade of academic engagement with the political mobilisation of these two immigrant groups. My research has taken the form of recorded interviews and more ethnographic methods, as well as work with archival sources and published theoretical debate.

The 'Jewish Question'

Although multiculturalism today is generally associated with post-colonial immigration, the issues it attempts to address are much older. In searching for the evolution of Marxist ideas about such issues, it is helpful to look at the responses of the early Marxist theorists to the juxtaposition of different national and ethnic groups within European countries, and within the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Of particular interest is the discussion of 'the Jewish Question', because this could have no territorial resolution (at least within the countries concerned); and also because this question and the theories surrounding it were brought to the East End 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, structures that he hoped to see demolished. Jewishness would then cease to be, as Jews would be simply part of wider humanity. (Marx 1844a) The stark language of his writing on the 'Jewish Question' has discouraged more sympathetic Marxists from referring to it;[1] 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, (Jacobs 1992:29) 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.[2]

The concept of Jewishness as a 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. (Levin 1977:100 – 112) The central figure in developing and promoting a Marxist understanding of the predicament of the Jewish worker was Karl Kautsky, who was largely based in Austria and Germany, but also spent some time with Engels in London. For Kautsky the problem was anti-Semitism, and the ultimate solution assimilation, though this

---

[1] Such as Karl Kautsky, see Jacobs (1992) p 9

[2] 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'.

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, and in an article published in 1885, he described anti-Semitism as socialism's 'most dangerous opponent'. (Jacobs 1992:12) The article also argued that Jewish 'racial characteristics' were products of history rather than nature, themes he was later to develop much more fully. (Kautsky 1926) 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.

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'. (Kautsky 1904)

Jewish Internationalism in London

The Jewish life that these socialists had left behind in Russia and Russian occupied Poland was predominantly inward looking and conservative, relying on old traditions to strengthen it against a hostile external society. The first Russian Jews to receive more modern education were generally glad to turn their back on their former ways, and this feeling was 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 lay with the Russian peasants. When Aaron Lieberman argued that Jewish revolutionaries in Vilna (modern Vilnius) should concentrate their propaganda on Jewish workers and publish socialist literature in a Jewish language, this was a ground-breaking departure. 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 Russian Jews, who were already crowding into the East End. In 1876, together with nine other 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 religious leaders, backed up by the long-settled Anglo-Jewish establishment. (Fishman 1975:97 – 134, Levin 1978:40-46)

Lieberman's socialism was tinged with a romantic love of his Jewish heritage, but he was a professed internationalist, and the Hebrew Socialist Union combined solid internationalist principles with an attempt at pragmatic Jewish organisation. This approach was to become the accepted pattern (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 and charges of unfair competition – 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. (Quoted in Fishman 1975: 112)

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'.[3] (Quoted in Gartner 1960:107) And in 1885, Winchevsky launched a new title, the *Arbayter Fraynd* (Worker's Friend) 'to spread true socialism among Jewish workers'. (First issue, quoted in Gartner 1960:109) 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 social and political enlightenment of its Members, the promotion of the intellectual, moral and material welfare of mankind'.[4]

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 that characterised the workshop trades was addressed by William Morris, of the Socialist League, while Russian Anarchist leaders spoke of members' duty towards Russia, which was on the brink of change; but there is no mention of specifically Jewish interests.[5]

Winchevsky followed Lieberman's lead in combining internationalist politics with pragmatic Jewish organisation. 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. (Gartner 1960:107 – 8)

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. (Fishman 1975:150) 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.'

---

[3] 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.
[4] Rule card in Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick
[5] 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.)

(Fishman 1975:151 – 2) 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.

Looking back at his earlier activities from the perspective of the 1920s, Winchevsky felt that he and other radicals damaged their cause by an over-emphasis on atheism, for which their fellow Jews were not yet ready. (Quoted in Howe 1976:106) No doubt many of the more orthodox would also have been offended by writing such as *Yehi Or*, but Winchevsky spoke a language his readers understood.

The Jewish socialists - and also their political opponents - understood religion's potential to channel incipient class resentments into a safe, non-socialist course, and they needed to appeal to their more religious fellow immigrants. In Russia, with entrenched traditional religious structures and the need for secret organisation, socialists would even recruit in the synagogue forecourt. (Goldinger:16) In London, the socialist leaders of the 1889 parade of 'Jewish unemployed and sweaters' victims' to the Great Synagogue in Duke's Place, explained that this plea to the distinctly unsympathetic Delegate Chief Rabbi was important in order to demonstrate to

> our still deluded brothers… that they cannot expect any improvement in
> their condition, either from the rich or from religion; only from their
> united strength, together with all the workers of the whole world…[6]

Anarchists tended to be aggressively anti-religion, even holding dinners and balls on the holy fast-day of Yom Kippur and provoking a violent response from worshippers, but the social democratic groups generally adopted a more tactful approach. (Fishman 1975:169) Orthodoxy was in decline, but there could still be practical difficulties in incorporating more religious Jews. Gartner records that 'It seemed useless to have religious Jews in socialist clubs because such attempts invariably exploded with the lighting of the first cigarette on the Sabbath.' (Gartner 1960:113) There are parallels here with current debates about attracting Muslims to events held in pub meeting rooms.

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 later in 1889. Despite all the difficulties associated with a workshop trade and a constantly replenished pool of labour, East End Jews were able to prove 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. However, 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.'[7] (Quoted in Fishman 1975:178)

---

[6] *Arbayter Fraynd* 22nd – 29th March 1889, p 2, quoted in Feldman (1994) p 333. Fishman (1975: 165-8) describes the march, while the Delegate Chief Rabbi's views were published in the *Jewish Chronicle* 22nd February 1889
[7] The biblical reference is typical of Yiddish writing, even by non-religious socialists.

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. (Russell and Lewis 1900:198)

Even the immigrant Jews themselves, though generally welcoming, were not exempt from similar feelings towards newer arrivals. (*Select Committee on the Sweating System* q.930 – 940)

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. (Beatrice Potter in Booth 1902:40 – 41 and 61, and Royal Commission 1903:paras 129 – 31) 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 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. (*A Voice from the Aliens* 1895:8 [8])

These battles are only too familiar; and newer immigrant groups also stress the contributions they have made to the economy. The Bengali-run Indian restaurant industry has claimed that it employs 'more people than steel, coal and shipbuilding combined', (*Curry and Tandoori*, undated cutting) 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. The Anarchists made no concessions to the sensibilities of more religious Jews, but their efficiency as trade union organisers was welcomed way beyond their own followers. As Rocker later explained, the 1912 Jewish Tailors' strike 'was even more important morally than economically'. (Rocker 1956:219) 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

---

[8] A copy can be seen in the Wess Archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick

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. (Fishman 1975:300)

Back in the Haim - the Jewish workers' movement in Russia

The actions and debates of the Jewish internationalists in London have to be understood in international context, and especially in the context of developments 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[9] were consolidating a separate position within the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party through the creation of the Jewish 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 with 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 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 –he did, though, stress the crucial importance of keeping ties with the Russian and Polish movements. (Quoted in Levin 1978:247)

The first steps towards separate organisation seem to have been taken without realising how far they would lead. As the forces of Russian socialism 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'. (Levin 1978:259)

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 to have been 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.[10]

---

[9] 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.

[10] 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.

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. The Bund was not, however, destined to remain comfortably within the wider Russian organisation. By the time of the RSDLP's second Congress, held in London in 1903, their pragmatic turn towards the Jewish workers had become a point of principle.

Marxist Internationalism versus Cultural-National Autonomy

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 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 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 (quoted in Jacobs 1992:37) was territorially based, but with the proviso that different regions inhabited by 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'. (Quoted in Levin 1978:268)

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. (Levin 1978:277) 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.

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 into new areas, where the Bund was demanding the monopoly representation of workers previously 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 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? (Congress Minutes, quoted in Woods 1999:139)

The Bundists were overwhelmingly 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'. (Lenin 1961 Vol.6:485) 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; (Lenin 1961Vol.6:519) and he complained of the Bund misinterpreting the RSDLP's actions towards itself as specifically anti-Jewish, and so stirring distrust among Jewish workers. (Lenin 1961Vol.7:101 – 2) (Those who have found themselves branded as racists for arguing against multiculturalist positions may find a parallel here.)

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. (Lenin 1951:24 – 25)

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'. (Lenin 1964 Vol.20:25) 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 that still hotly debated issue, the segregation of schools. Lenin argued 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'. (Lenin 1963 Vol.19:533) 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 would 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.[11]

---

[11] Trotsky in *Stalin*, published 1940, quoted in the introduction to Trotsky (1970), edited by Peter Buch, p11

By contrast, the Bund, following the failure of the 1905 revolution, had turned its attention to semi-legal cultural work, strengthening its 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 also that it introduced an arbitrary freezing of a historical phase of community development and would 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 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. (Weinberg 1998) 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. The ideological fuzziness demonstrated here is in contrast to the line the early Bolshevik government took on religion, which can be described as uncompromising while still attempting to be tactically sensitive. Their draft programme of 1919 explained that they would 'organise the most widespread scientific education and anti-religious propaganda'; and, at the same time, they retained the Provisional Government's law allowing freedom of religion, and noted that 'It is necessary… to take care to avoid hurting the religious sentiments of believers, for this only serves to increase religious fanaticism.' (Lenin 1965 Vol.29:134)

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; and 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 close links to events in Russia, and also in 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 Jews of London's East End.

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 in the thirties, found that the Circle 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.
> (Letter to the author 7 July 2005)

Although many members of the Circle would have described themselves as internationalists, there appears to have been little thought given to 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…' (Interviewed 8 October 2002) 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).[12] 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".' (Jacobs 1978:26) 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.[13]

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, 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. (Freedland 2005:177)

The Workers' Circle reflected existing Jewish separateness, and 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. (Liebman 1979:597-8) 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 primarily focused through the Communist Party, which was well represented in the Workers' Circle. The East End party was

---

[12] See interview with Jack Shapiro 26th 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).

[13] Mick Mindel interviewed by Jerry White, 7th February 1977. A copy of the tape is in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library

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 has attempted to do. (Alderman 1983:117) 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, (Jack Shapiro, interviewed 8 October 2002) 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 borderline between tactical community organisation and divisive seperatism - is illuminated by the debates that surrounded Proltet. Proltet was a Yiddish theatre group, active in the early thirties, that was 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'.[14] 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'.[15] 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. (Srebrnik 1995:26 – 27 and Goldinger:87 – 117)

From 1928 to 1933 Communist Party growth had been restricted by the policies of 'class against class', which had stopped Communists from working with others - even 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. (Branson and Heinemann 1971:197–198)

Unity in Action
The strength of the Party in the late Thirties East End 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

---

[14] B. Woodward in the WTM *Monthly Bulletin*, January 1933, quoted in McCreery p 298
[15] Proltet's open letter to the *Monthly Bulletin*, quoted in McCreery p 299

had reverted to new forms of nationalism and anti-Semitism,[16] 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 in mobilising workers to stop Mosley's British Union of Fascists marching through the East End, was seen as a symbol of working-class unity; and the major housing campaigns of the late 1930s were tied into wider political struggles. The fight against fascism and the fight for better housing boosted each other. People 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. (Glynn 2005)

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. (Piratin 1978:32)

Max Levitas, who lived in Brady Mansions, where he was convenor of a twenty-one week rent strike in 1939, explained to me 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. (Interviewed Autumn 1999)

---

[16] 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.

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 ancestors, as 'Englishmen', and tells the tenants, 'we ordinary people are the real England'.

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 political conjunction, 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 Party continued its policy of compromise with capitalism. 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 party policy on 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.' (Piratin 1978:79)

This blurring of older Marxist class arguments was to have particular effect on the party's attitude towards ethnic groups, as groups, and – through its impact on left and progressive movements more widely - ultimately enabled the growth of multiculturalist ideas. The new Communist line was demonstrated when, after the Soviet entry into the war, the British Party set up a Jewish Bureau, using arguments very similar to those given by Proltet. 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'.[17]

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.

---

[17] Manuscript report of a National Conference of Jewish members of the CPGB, held on 31st January 1943. CPGB Jewish Bureau records, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

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, as the Blitz and post-war redevelopment hastened the drift to the suburbs. In their place came new waves of immigrants, especially Bengalis from Sylhet in what was then East Pakistan. Many of these men – like so many of the Jews before them - began their immigrant life in garment workshops; others took unskilled jobs in hotels, catering or the railways, and over the years Sylheti immigrants built up and worked in the greater part of Britain's 'Indian' restaurant industry.

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 mobilisation of British Bengalis 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, they actually lost much of their earlier potential as the community's political leadership. (Glynn 2006 and 2008a)

The same was true of the Leftists' role in developing welfare organisations. Tasadduk Ahmed, who played a key part in British Bengali political organisation of all kinds, promoting student discussions as well as community welfare, was 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. (Interviewed by Caroline Adams, 1980s.[18])

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.

---

[18] A copy of the tape is in Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

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 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. (Glynn 2005) Black groups had dipped their toe into East End anti-racist struggles in the early seventies; and in the latter half of the decade, under the influence of activists from the Race Today Collective, Black (in this case almost entirely Bengali) organisation became increasingly not just a matter of fact, but of principle.   Tower Hamlets had become an important focus for new forms of ethnic minority politics.

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 allotted public housing in the Bengali-dominated areas of the E1 postal district, 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, 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, separateness was perpetuated through the resulting segregated community and ethnically distinct electoral wards. (Glynn 2010) 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. BHAG's followers had learned to fight, only to strive for a greater share of the establishment cake.

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. (Shukra 1998) The celebration of difference soon became an end in itself. Radical separatism became transformed into safe 'multiculturalism', which was adopted by the liberal establishment and allowed to grow from cultural sensitivity, into the political privileging of cultural concerns and community loyalties.

As the political ground moved to the right, multiculturalism was actively encouraged by politicians seeking a radical veneer while they abandoned old left ideas of class equality. And cultural and ethnic divisions have been strengthened through new partnership forms of governance based on consensus between interest groups. (Glynn 2008b) The main benefactors of partnership governance have been the business lobby - at the expense of democracy and genuine political debate (Geddes 2006) - but organised ethnic or religious-based groups can also strengthen their position. Early examples of this were restricted to 'regeneration' projects, where different 'community groups' were invited to contribute to discussions and compete for funding, and where grants directed towards minority groups on the basis of their ethnicity could cause natural resentment among their white neighbours and destructive inter-ethnic competition. As more areas of governance have embraced partnership forms – and Tower Hamlets is held up as an exemplar of this type of governance[19] – well-organised groups have become increasingly powerful players in civil society. The best organised group in Tower Hamlets is based around the mosques, and, in line with the central government drive to encourage religious groups to be active civic players, this has been involved in a range of activities, including schemes to increase school attendance and wean youths from drug addiction. (Glynn 2009)

Thus multiculturalism has helped to give a wider role to Islamic organisations, which may not share its liberal values, and which already have an ideological pull with which liberal politics cannot compete. (Glynn 2002) 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. As in other Muslim 'communities', growing numbers were turning towards more political understandings of Islam, often described as Islamism. The definition of this term has been the subject of much debate, but I am using it here to refer to all those different forms of Islam in which people believe that it is not possible to separate a private religion from public action because religion bears on every aspect of life, and that to be a Muslim is a matter of politics as well as of faith. Those campaigning for progressive change across the whole of society will find that politically active religious groups will accept reforms only within their own terms.

The Respect Experiment

Islamists were already running the most vibrant organisations in Tower Hamlets when the wars in Afghanistan and then Iraq brought Muslims everywhere into political activity. And when the secular Left leaders of the anti-war movement attempted to use that movement as a springboard for a new political force – the Respect Coalition - Tower Hamlets became the central focus of its

---

[19] Tower Hamlets Council was awarded Beacon Status for Community Cohesion in 2003-4 with much emphasis given to its 'effective partnerships' (www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

campaign and provided the conditions for electing George Galloway as its single MP. Respect attempted to unite Muslims and socialists into an instant radicalism, and turn a tactical alliance over a single issue into what was tantamount to a political party. (Glynn 2008b) Apart from Galloway, who came from the Labour left, the Respect leadership was dominated by the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP); however, in their attempt not to alienate their potential Muslim constituency, they were prepared to water down and even jettison fundamental sections of their own socialist programme. (*Weekly Worker* 31 January 2008)

As I have argued at length elsewhere, (Glynn 'Muslims and the Left') the Respect project demonstrated a lack of understanding of the nature of Islam, and of religion more generally. Secular Muslims, who regard religion as a private matter, might become more fully absorbed into socialist politics; but those for whom Islam is the ultimate arbiter in all aspects of life, will always turn to their religion for guidance. There may be areas where they will agree with socialist views, but the very name, Islam, means submission to the rule of God, as revealed to Muhammad. And one thing on which Islamist and Marxist writers agree is that their respective understandings of the world are fundamentally incompatible. In the Marxist view, 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man.' (Marx 1844b:1) 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'. (Marx 1844b:1) Fundamentally different interpretations of the world lead to fundamentally different programmes for righting the world's wrongs.

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 needs to remember that their ultimate aims are very different. There have been many times in history when alliances between the two have been formed, and as many bitter disappointments. Such popular front politics is only achieved at the expense of basic principles. The Islamists know this, and Islamist organisations maintained a semi-detached position regarding both the Stop the War Coalition and Respect.[20] However, despite their respect for their new comrades, many on the Left have failed to learn from them the vital lesson of faith in ones own ideology.[21]

While Islamist organisations kept their distance, on the ground in Tower Hamlets many individual Muslims saw Respect as a vehicle that could be used to benefit the disproportionately deprived Bengali community, and also themselves. This essentially pragmatic approach recognised shared interests, but not necessarily shared values, and was very similar to how a previous generation had regarded the local Labour Party. As they had in the Labour Party, many

---

[20] Islamist leaders walk a political tightrope, however, when they try to negotiate a position in the political establishment. (Glynn 2009)

[21] When I wrote this paper, my intended audience was people who would describe themselves as progressive or on the Left. I put a draft version on the web and was glad to find that it had been appreciatively quoted. However I was a little taken back when I clicked on the link and found that my admirer was a Muslim columnist who was quoting my argument over the incompatibility of Marxism and Islam to upbraid Salma Yaqoob for her closeness to the SWP. Now I don't think that Yaqoob has compromised her Islamic position – she is a practicing Muslim and a conscientious political liberal who chose to go with the non-SWP wing after Respect split - and my concern is for what is happening to the British Left, but it was disconcerting to find myself a character in my own story.

Bengalis were happy to make use of traditional patriarchal village networks to bring in the votes and also to support their positions in the party and challenge SWP control. (Glynn 'Muslims and the Left')

Although Respect was active in support of Defend Council Housing, which is dominated by the SWP, its popular front politics prevented it from articulating and developing any wider coherent left programme. With few overarching principles, other than opposition to the war in Iraq, it was forced to rely on opportunistic alliances, and there was little to hold the organisation together. When the inevitable split happened in November 2007, the Respect experiment could not be said to have pushed forward the cause of socialism – and many on the left would accuse it of having muddied the waters. Winchevsky had discovered the importance of not alienating people through insensitivity to their religious beliefs, however Respect was so anxious to be inclusive that they actively encouraged political involvement through religious identity, so promoting a new wave of identity-based politics.

Galloway has claimed a place in the history of East End radicalism, but in their bid for a short cut to socialism, Respect did not learn the lessons of that history. As they competed with New Labour for the Muslim vote – and both parties have been blatant in their attempts to woo Muslims as a religious group – it was not surprising to see the reappearance in the local paper of aggrieved letters from old white East Enders asking what about us? (Glynn (2008b) 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 had to be won on the estates of Tower Hamlets, not just in the ballot box.

Learning from History
One hundred years after the Brünn Resolution, support for cultural and ethnic politics, in the form of liberal multiculturalism, seemed to have become the litmus test of progressive thought and political correctness. Then, this last decade, politicians of all hues began to compete to declare multiculturalism a failure. The focus remains on culture and cultural difference, but instead of being celebrated, this is now increasingly problematised. Crucially, however, in the rush to bury multiculturalism, there has been little analysis of the reasons for its failure, and for the wider lack of social harmony of which that failure is a part.

Multicultural theory is based around an unresolved conflict. It 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, and western liberal concepts of difference-blind equality run up against the mores of other traditions (Taylor 1992:43). Exponents of multiculturalism find themselves facing the practical details and difficulties of interpreting hegemonic liberal values so as to accommodate cultural, ethnic and religious distinctions and conflicts. (Parekh 2000) But more importantly, in viewing society through a cultural prism, they risk missing the bigger picture. They risk ignoring and neglecting the socio-economic structures and processes that impact on people's lives and life chances, and that the Marxist approaches outlined in this article attempt to address. They have nothing to say about the growth of neoliberal capitalism and the resulting increase in economic inequality, and instability. However, the tensions that result from this inequality, and from the accompanying competition for limited resources, have fertilised a resurgence of racist scapegoating that seeks to overturn

the gains in intercultural understanding that multiculturalism fostered. Reactionary responses to multiculturalism's failures are not restricted to far-right groups such as the British National Party (BNP). They have begun to infect mainstream thinking, and are thriving off the growing recession.

Writing in *Race and Class*, Arun Kundnani has provided a cogent criticism of the turn towards a new intolerant assimilationism – and its imposition in the form of a government-sponsored monolithic British nationalism - as well as of the conservative impact of the older institutionalised multiculturalism. (Kundnani 2002 and 2007) However, his alternative prescription relies on a vague plea for universal human rights and a return to the anti-racist movements that came out of the fights for Black Power and against colonialism. He welcomes the opportunity for a 'revival of the left-wing critique of multiculturalism' begun by *Race and Class* two decades ago; but this was a critique that itself rejected materialist analysis and class unity in favour of the dead-end of organisation based around identity.

The history given here has shown the importance of interpreting the position of ethic minorities as part of a wider materialist understanding of social structures and processes. The Marxist focus is not on the rights of the individual or group, but on society as a whole; and this history demonstrates the possibilities for a return to a class-based politics that can bring about real improvements in people's living conditions and opportunities, regardless of ethnicity. The socio-economic integration implied by this does not require the homogenisation of cultural differences. (Brubaker 2001:543) However, if we continue to allow a political focus on culture and identity – be it through multiculturalism, reactionary nationalism, or even identity-based anti-racist organisation – this can distract attention from fundamental socio-economic divisions and hold back progress towards greater equality. When, in consequence, society polarises and rifts widen, the frustrations of those at the bottom can turn against ethnic minorities; and, as we are now witnessing, everyone suffers.

In a fair society, resources should be allotted according to need – rather than to each according to his (or her) ethnicity. If one ethnic group is generally 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 not institutionalised racism or growing levels of Islamaphobia, or that ethnic minorities can relax their vigilance in the fight against prejudice of all kinds; or that anyone should stop enjoying – or spending public money on – different cultural events.[22] What it does mean, is that community-based organisation is not enough. In fact, as this history shows, identity politics can even be counter-productive. There are deep and fundamental inequalities that cut across all ethnicities and communities and that need to be addressed.

Marxism argues that racism and ethnic divisions are derived ultimately from socio-economic structures, and the struggle against those divisions and prejudices must be incorporated in the struggle to change those structures – it must be a socio-economic struggle. (Miles 1982

---

[22] Though it does question the desirability of promoting such organisations as specifically Bengali youth clubs and football teams

and 1993) This history demonstrates the importance of this basic argument and some of the problems and possibilities of putting it into practice.

References

Alderman, Geoffrey 1983, *The Jewish Community in British Politics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Blumenfeld, Simon ?1939, *Enough of All This! A Rent Strike Play*, London: Left Book Club Theatre Guild (There is a copy of the play in the Unity Theatre collection in Merseyside Maritime Museum.)

Booth, Charles 1902 [1889], *Life and Labour of the People of London, 1st Series Vol. 4*, London: Macmillan and Co Ltd

Branson, Noreen and Margot Heinemann 1971, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson

Brubaker, Rogers 2001, 'The return of assimilation? Changing perspectives on immigration and its sequels in France, Germany, and the United States', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, 4: 531 - 548

Feldman, David 1994, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840-1914,* Newhaven and London: Yale University Press

Fishman, William J 1975, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914*, London: Duckworth

Freedland, Jonathan 2005, *Jacob's Gift: A Journey into the Heart of Belonging*, London: Hamish Hamilton

Gartner, Lloyd P 1960, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870 – 1914*, London: George Allen and Unwin

Geddes, Mike 2006 'Partnership and the limits to local governance in England: Institutionalist Analysis and Neoliberalism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, 1: 76-97

Glynn, Sarah 2002, 'Bengali Muslims: the new East End radicals?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, 6: 969-988

Glynn, Sarah 2005, 'East End Immigrants and the Battle for Housing: a comparative study of political mobilisation of the Jewish and Bengali communities', *Journal of Historical Geography* 31: 528-545

Glynn, Sarah 2006, 'The Spirit of '71 - how the Bangladeshi War of Independence has haunted Tower Hamlets', *Socialist History Journal* 29: 56-75

Glynn, Sarah 2008a, 'Wimbledon Revolutionary' in *Sheikh Abdul Mannan: A Leader of the Liberation Movement in the UK*, edited by Mohammad Nurullah, Dhaka: Jyotsna Publishers

Glynn, Sarah 2008b, 'East End Bengalis and the Labour Party – the end of a long relationship?', *New Geographies of Race and Racism*, edited by Claire Dwyer and Caroline Bressey, Aldershot: Ashgate

Glynn, Sarah 2009, 'Liberalising Islam: creating Brits of the Islamic Persuasion' in *Muslims in the West: Spaces of hope*, edited by Richard Phillips, London: Zed

Glynn, Sarah 2010, 'Playing the Ethnic Card: Politics and segregation in London's East End' *Urban Studies* (forthcoming)

Glynn, Sarah (submitted) 'Muslims and the Left: An English case study'

Goldinger, David (unpublished manuscript) *Memoirs of David Goldinger*, originally written in Yiddish in 1946 – 54, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

Howe, Irving 1976, *The Immigrant Jews of New York*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Jacobs, Jack 1992, *On Socialists and 'the Jewish Question after Marx'*, New York: New York University Press

Jacobs, Jane M (1996) *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the city*, London: Routledge

Jacobs, Joe 1978, *Out of the Ghetto: My Youth in the East End. Communism and Fascism 1913-1939*, London: Janet Simon

Kapp, Yvonne 1976, *Eleanor Marx: Volume II, The Crowded Years (1884-1898)*, London: Lawrence and Wishart

Kautsky Karl 1904, 'On the Problems of the Jewish Proletariat in England', *Justice 23rd April 1904* p 4, downloaded from www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky

Kautsky, Karl (1926) *Are the Jews a Race*, Jonathan Cape: USA, downloaded from www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky

Kundnani, Arun (2002) 'The Death of Multiculturalism' *Race and Class* 43(4): 67-72

Kundnani, Arun (2007) 'Integrationism: the politics of anti-Muslim racism' *Race and Class* 48(4) 24-44

Lenin, VI 1951 *Critical Remarks on the National Question,* Progress Publishers: Moscow

Lenin, VI 1961 – 65, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers

Levin, Nora 1978, *Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871 – 1917: While Messiah Tarried*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Liebman, Arthur 1979, *Jews and the Left*, New York: John Wiley and Sons

Marx, Karl 1844a, *On The Jewish Question*, downloaded from www.Marxist.org/archive/marx

Marx, Karl 1844b*, Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, downloaded from www.Marxists.org/archive/marx

McCreery, Kathleen 1979, 'Proltet: Yiddish theatre in the 1930s', *Race and Class* XX, 3

Miles, Robert 1982, *Racism and Migrant Labour*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Miles, Robert 1993, *Racism after 'race relations'*, London: Routledge

Parekh, Bhikhu (2000) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

Parliamentary Papers 1888 XX, *Select Committee on the Sweating System*

Piratin, Phil 1978 [1948] *Our Flag Stays Red*, London: Lawrence and Wishart

Russell, C and HS Lewis 1900, *The Jew in London*, London: T Fisher Unwin

Rocker, Rudolf 1956, trans by Joseph Leftwich, *The London Years*, London: Robert Anscombe

Royal Commission on Alien Immigration 1903 IX, Vol. 1 *Report*

Shukra, Kalbir 1998, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain*, London: Pluto Press

Srebrnik, Henry Felix 1995, *London Jews and British Communism 1935-1945*, Ilford: Vallentine Mitchell

Taylor, Charles 1992, *Multicultralism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, Princeton University Press

Traverso, Enzo 1994, trans Bernard Gibbons [first published in French 1990] *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, New Jersey: Humanities Press

Trotsky, Leon 1970, Ed and introduced by Peter Buch *On the Jewish Question*, New York: Pathfinder

Weinberg, Robert 1998, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the making of a Soviet Jewish homeland*, Berkely: University of California Press

Woods, Alan 1999, *Bolshevism: The road to revolution*, London: Wellred