

## English-Speaking Jewry as a Field of Study

W. D. Rubinstein

### Abstract

Historical, sociological, and demographic facts distinguish between Jews in English-speaking countries and Jews elsewhere in the world in modern times: 1. Jews in the English-speaking world have never known tragedy, and the history of the Jewish people in English-speaking countries has always, or almost always, been a striking success story; 2. Antisemitism has always been minimal and Jews here have lived in societies where pluralism is accepted; and 3. The societies of the post-Reformation (post-1700) English-speaking world have been distinctively hallmarked by near-universal modernity in the sense meant by sociologists and historians: distinctively lacking in medieval atavisms, specially privileged groups, or obstacles to peaceful democratisation. This article argues that, given these common realities, the experience of Jews in the English-speaking world is a viable field of study in modern Jewish history.

**Keywords:** English-speaking world, history, Jewish Studies, antisemitism, Diaspora

Recently I had to write and lecture in a course in the History Department at Melbourne University on the history of Jews in the English-speaking world, that is, on Britain, Australia, and the United States, with regrettably less attention paid to South Africa, Canada, and New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> So far as I am aware, this was the first time any university course anywhere in the world had been given on Jewry in the English-speaking world as such. In fact, and more extraordinarily still, no one has ever written a book on Jews in the English-speaking world as such, despite all the hundreds and hundreds of monographs on every aspect of Jewish history and Jewish civilisation which pour off the presses in bewildering profusion every year. It is, indeed, uncommon if not unknown to think of the 'English-speaking world' as a field of study in modern Jewish history. Significantly, neither American nor British nor Australian scholars in this area do so, preferring other modes of division or unity in modern Jewish history.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it is almost glaringly obvious—not that being glaringly obvious has ever stopped academics from missing the point completely—that there are striking commonalities in the experience of Jews in the English-speaking world. In this paper, the question of whether the English-speaking world is



indeed a viable and distinctive unit of study in modern Jewish history, and if so, why, will be examined. I would also like, more briefly, to discuss possible rivals to this mode of division, as well as those areas where commonalities do not obviously exist.

Three historical and sociological facts seem to me to distinguish English-speaking Jewry from those elsewhere in the world in modern times, as well as one demographic fact of enormous, but almost universally overlooked, importance. The three historical facts, which distinguish English-speaking Jewry from other Jewries, especially those of continental Europe, are, firstly, that in the English-speaking world Jews have never in modern times known tragedy and the history of the Jewish people in the English-speaking countries has always, or almost always, been a striking success story; secondly, that antisemitism, at least in its most destructive form, has always been minimal and Jews here have lived in societies where pluralism is accepted; and thirdly, the societies of the post-Reformation (post-1700) English-speaking world have been distinctively hallmarked by near-universal modernity in the sense meant by sociologists and historians: distinctively lacking in medieval atavisms, specially privileged groups, or obstacles to peaceful democratisation.

Underlying all of these factors, however, is a demographic change of the most profound importance; it is set out in the accompanying table (see Table 1). The movement of the Jewish people to the English-speaking world over the past 200 years, and especially over the past 110 years, is certainly among the most important demographic changes which have occurred to Jewry in modern times, rivalling in its demographic aspects the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, yet it is a change which is almost always ignored or even unperceived.

In the below table, the main languages spoken by the Jewish people in 1790, 1890 and 1990 are set out; obviously these figures can only be estimates, but the magnitude of the change will be strikingly clear. In 1790, there were only about 2.5 million Jews in the world, of whom one percent—25,000 Jews—lived in the English-speaking world and presumably spoke English (although that of course is itself problematical). About 1.5 million were Yiddish-speaking Jews in Europe; about 900,000 lived in the Afro-Asian world and spoke Arabic, Ladino, or some other language—German, French, Hungarian, Spanish, or Portuguese. Another 200,000, it is suggested, were Ethiopian Jews, although this figure, lacking in any evidential base, strikes me as inflated. Moving 100 years ahead, to 1890, the population of world Jewry had now grown to 10 million, an enormous increase. Of these 10 million Jews, about 7.5 million spoke Yiddish; of this number, just over 5 million lived in the Russian Empire and about 2 million in the Austrian Empire, Rumania, and elsewhere in eastern Europe. About 1 million Jews lived in the Afro-Asian world; about 600,000 were in Germany, France, Latin America, Hungary, the Netherlands, etc., and were primarily speakers of the languages

of those countries. English-speaking Jewry—or more precisely, Jews living in English-speaking countries—had now grown to one million in number, or 10 per cent of the total, with about 850,000 in the United States, 100,000 in Britain, and 50,000 elsewhere.

Table 1. Approximate figures for language/nationality distribution of the Jewish People, 1790, 1890, 1990

1790	1890	1990
c. 2.5 million Jews worldwide	c. 10 million Jews worldwide	c. 14.3 million Jews worldwide
A. English speaking countries: c. 1% (25,000), mainly UK	A. Resident in English speaking world: c. 950,000-850,000 in USA, 75,000 in UK; 20,000 elsewhere (Australia, S. Africa, Canada)	A. English speaking countries: 7 million-6.5 million in North America, 350,000 in UK, 100,000 in South Africa, 100,000 in Australia, 5,000 in New Zealand
B. c. 1.5 million Yiddish speakers	B. 7.5 million Yiddish-speakers: 5.5 million in Russian Empire, 2 million in Austria-Hungary (Galicia, etc), Rumania, etc.	B. Hebrew-speakers: 3.8 million Jews in Israel
C. c. 900,000 in Turkish Arab world	C. 1 million in Arab-Turkish world (c. 50,000 Palestine)	C. Russia: c. 2 million
D. c. 100,000+ elsewhere—Germany, Hapsburg Empire, (?200,000 Ethiopian Jews, by repute)	D. 500,000 in Germany, France, Latin America, etc.	D. France: 600,000
		E. Latin America: 450,000
		F. Other Europe: 300,000 (Hungary, Rumania, Belgium, Germany)
		G. Elsewhere (Turkey, Iran, Arab world) <100,000
		Yiddish speakers in 1990: conceivably 400,000 whose primary tongue is Yiddish (Soviet Union; strictly Orthodox communities in America, Israel, etc.; elderly European Jews throughout world)

Moving again a century forward to the present, we find that the Jewish population of the world is currently about 14.3 million, of whom about 7 million, or just under one half, now live in the English-speaking world—6.5 million in North America, 350,000 in Britain, 100,000 each in South Africa and Australia. The two largest non-English-speaking Jewries are now in

Israel, with its 3.8 million Hebrew speakers, and the Soviet Union, with perhaps 2 million mainly Russian-speaking Jews. Additionally, about 600,000 Jews live in France, 450,000 in Latin America, and 100,000 elsewhere. Apart from the rise of English and the English-speaking Jewries, there have been a number of changes in the linguistic map of Jewry during the past century: firstly, the near-disappearance of Yiddish (which now has perhaps 400,000 vernacular speakers, in Russia, among strictly Orthodox communities in the West, and among elderly migrants and refugees), a victim of the Holocaust and migration and assimilation by the survivors to other linguistic areas; secondly, the near-disappearance of Afro-Asian Jewry as such, with its own linguistic traditions, a casualty of Arab hostility and the rise of Israel with its own *lingua franca*; and, thirdly, the rise of Israel with its own Hebrew-speaking Jewry, Hebrew having been, for all practical purposes, unknown as a vernacular even 100 years ago.

Indeed, it is no great exaggeration to say that the Jewish world today is bifurcated into an English-speaking Jewry in the Diaspora and a Hebrew-speaking Jewry in Israel, both of which were unknown, even unimaginable, 150 years ago. I think it fair to say that few people fully appreciate or are even aware of the magnitude of the linguistic change which has overtaken world Jewry in the space of less than four generations, a change certainly without parallel since Biblical times, if then.

Before turning to consider whether the English-speaking world is indeed a viable and separate unit of study in modern Jewish history, perhaps we should say a few words about the nature of the English language itself in this question. Are the English-speaking areas a socio-cultural unit of relevance as a category to modern Jewish history? One can, tentatively, point to four reasons why English as such should be so viewed. Firstly, in the modern world English is the universal *lingua franca* of communication, trade, diplomacy, and scholarship. This fact has enhanced the centrality and influence of Jewry, its involvement in intellectual debates and, probably, accentuated its flight from the ghetto. Secondly, there is the unique richness of English, a language with a larger vocabulary than any other, the tongue of Shakespeare and Milton. I might add that this fact of its unique richness has speeded the virtual demise of Yiddish and made its loss easier to bear. Thirdly, there are the commonalities among the English-speaking nations as political, economic, and social units. Finally, one might suggest that rivalry and antagonism in the contemporary Jewish world is between the liberal English-speaking Jewries of the Diaspora and the Orthodox Hebrew-speaking Jewry of Israel. English-speaking Jewry is part of the most important and pluralistic worldwide cultural universe of our time, while Hebrew-speaking Jewry in Israel is in many respects a ghetto—as, I hasten to add, it must be. Much of the antagonism and hostility that exists in the Jewish world at the present time, I would suggest, concerns the clash of values of two different cultural-linguistic universes.

Against this viewpoint may be put the contrary view that language is irrelevant to the Jewish problematic, and that the same contemporary problems are found among French or Spanish-speaking Jewries as in those of the English-speaking world. We shall return to this central question later.

The key question we are trying to account for is why Jewish success in the English-speaking world has been so marked. As I put it, perhaps melodramatically, in the course I gave, in other courses on modern Jewish history you study Auschwitz and Treblinka; in this one we look at Broadway and Hollywood. One can, I think, point to eight major reasons as to what distinguishes English-speaking Jewry from other Jewries:

First, there were no continuous pre-existing Jewish communities in the English-speaking world prior to 1656, and hence no pre-modern attitudes or hostility to Jews. Jews were legally barred from living in Britain from 1290-1656, and hence Jews do not have a continuous history as they do on the European continent and elsewhere. Jews re-entered the English-speaking world only when it was undergoing profound change in the direction of liberalisation and democracy.

Secondly, Jewish numbers in all countries of the English-speaking world were always initially very small, even in America. The Jewish community was, everywhere, virtually invisible, unimportant, and marginal, an oddity rather than a threat.

Thirdly, there were the profoundly important effects of the Reformation upon the status and perception of Jews in the English-speaking world which probably existed nowhere else. Populist hostility against allegedly sinister and dangerous minority groups in the English-speaking world was largely directed against Roman Catholics and the Pope rather than against Jews. Anti-Catholicism is, in many respects, the antisemitism of the English-speaking world, with the populist fear of both an elite Catholic conspiracy (especially of Jesuits) and a mass threat from systematic conversion, and from mass ethnic immigration (of Irish, Italians, and others). Both the international conspiracy theory and the sexual, pornographic component of hostility to Jews, both such powerful and long-standing elements in continental antisemitism, have their uncanny parallels in Protestant Anglo-Saxon hostility to Catholicism, with the Papacy, the Catholic clergy, and the Catholic powers viewed as an octopus-like international conspiracy, and with lurid, pornographic depictions of nunneries and monasteries time-honoured facets of the hostile populist image of Catholicism throughout the English-speaking world, including Australia. Protestant anti-Catholicism unquestionably diverted much hostility from the Jews, by creating a functional and symbolic equivalent to antisemitism. The Reformation's radical iconoclasm, moreover, ended the ubiquitous symbolic portrayal or ritual reiteration of the Crucifixion in most Protestant sects, especially in the English-speaking world. This brought to an end a potent source of hostility to the Jews, the continuous reiteration of their alleged guilt

for the Crucifixion. The visual and ritual bases for perceiving the Jews as universal scapegoats were largely absent from the Protestant English-speaking world.

Added to that, a new and seriously underestimated force for friendliness to the Jews, Protestant—especially Calvinist—philo-semitism, appeared in the seventeenth century, with Protestants commonly viewing themselves as literal successors to the Old Testament Hebrews and, hence, as having considerable affinity to the modern-day Jews. Some smaller Protestant sects often viewed themselves as small, linked, endogenous, persecuted but ‘chosen’ elites similar to the Hebrews; often, too, they were pro-Zionist. This philo-semitism affected, in a positive way, the attitude of Protestants from as early as Cromwell through Smuts to many of today’s Protestant philo-semites.

The triumph of Protestantism also lifted the prohibition on ‘usury’ and removed the stigma attached to Jews in Medieval Europe as a pariah caste of financiers. The ‘Protestant ethic’ analysed by Weber showed once again the propensity of Protestants to imitate the alleged characteristics of Jews. Protestant minority groups like the Huguenots, Quakers, and overseas Scots Presbyterians were often renowned for their financial and business acumen and, to reiterate, comprised an intermarried, endogenous elite, a ‘chosen’ ‘cousinhood’, remarkably similar to that of the Jews. This had the important effect of removing the pariah status attached to Jewish financial pursuits.

Moving from the Reformation to other matters, we can highlight an equally important factor peculiar to the English-speaking world which advantaged Jews wherever they lived in this linguistic world: the tradition of democracy and pluralism, and especially the tradition of liberalism, characteristic of the English-speaking democracies. Liberalism, pluralism, and democracy were all achieved throughout the English-speaking world and were significantly different from non-English-speaking countries which achieved these values, being far more broadly based, ubiquitously held, unchallenged by non-liberal ideologies, and more tolerant per se than elsewhere. Again, the effects of this tradition upon the Jews were varied and profound. Perhaps most importantly of all, there were never any *formal* barriers to Jewish equality or to achievement based upon Jewish talent, the exclusion of practising Jews from the British House of Commons until 1857 being perhaps the most notable exception. Toleration and fairness per se were values to be prized, perhaps above any other values; the written and unwritten constitutions of the English-speaking democracies, and their Bills of Rights, were almost always scrupulously observed where the rights of Jews were concerned, even during the darkest days of wartime hysteria and depression. In the English-speaking world, and in striking contrast to the continent, political extremists and fanatical ideologies were almost marginalised by the electoral process, with the overwhelming majority of voters preferring mainstream candidates to extremists. Perhaps the most striking example of

this occurred in Britain during the Depression, when Sir Oswald Mosley's New Party received only 36,377 votes at the 1931 General Election, conducted at the bottom of the Depression, while the National Government led by Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin received 14.5 million votes. At the same election, the British Communist Party received exactly 74,824 votes.

The contrast between Britain and, say, Germany, where the Nazis were rising to power mainly through the electoral system at this time, can hardly be more striking. In the 1930 Parliamentary elections in Germany, Nazi representation rose from twelve to 107 seats, with 77 seats elected by the Communists. At the 1932 Presidential elections in Germany, von Hindenburg received 18.7 million votes, compared with 11.3 million for Hitler and 5.0 million for Thalmann, the Communist candidate. In other words, nearly 47 percent of the German electorate voted at free elections for a Presidential candidate whose declared aim was to end democracy in Germany: compare this to Britain, where Fascists and Communist combined polled less than one-half of one per cent of the vote in 1931. Some have, indeed, put a share of the thanks for this happy state of affairs on the physical shape of the British Parliament and its mode of debate, in which the government and opposition face each other with only ten feet or so separating the front benches; when a front-bench speaker rises to talk, he is facing the opposition and has his supporters behind him; moreover he has to address the speaker, not his opponent. In this situation, it is a brave man who can persist in truculent demagoguery, and it is well-known that this type of rhetoric has always been regarded with derision by Parliament, while consensus-seeking on serious issues is the rhetorical norm. Neither Hitler nor Lenin would have lasted a week in the British Parliament before being written off by the power-brokers as hopeless vote losers and, worst of all, as crushing bores.

Beyond this, there is another important matter which may be directly related to the question of the English language as a delimiting universe relevant to the Jewish experience. The English-speaking world has been distinguished, in its major philosophical tradition, by the Anglo-American school of empiricism, as opposed to the mainstream continental tradition of philosophical rationalism. The sceptical mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy—Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Pierce, Russell, Ayer, etc.—have always held that there are no innate ideas or *a priori* knowledge and that 'truth' is only the product of induction and of inferences from experience. This tradition has directly contrasted with the continental tradition of rationalism (in the philosophical sense), which, from Plato, the Medievalists, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Kant, and Hegel, have claimed the opposite, that there are innately-known ideas and objectively 'true' truths. It is often argued, most famously by Karl Popper, that this continental tradition has led directly to what Popper terms 'historicism', the claim that history has an unfolding cosmic meaning, that good society must be ordered according to an

objectively 'true' ideology, and so on, which led directly to both Marxism and fascism. There seems very little doubt that this is one important area in which, directly and over a long period of time, the universe of discourse common to the English-speaking world worked to the advantage of Jews situated there and to the enormous disadvantage of Jews situated in other linguistic universes of discourse, the English cultural milieu acting as a Great Wall of China to exclude non-empiricist argument, although this itself was presumably reinforced by other factors.

Four other factors of importance should also be noted under the heading of democracy and pluralism. Elites in the English-speaking world appeared regularly to have a genuine commitment to equality and fairness, for example, the Whigs in nineteenth-century England and official support by the American government for beleaguered Jewry in Russia and elsewhere from the nineteenth century onward. Because of the combination of forces in the English-speaking world, with the perhaps paradoxical ascendancy of relatively liberal elites like the Whigs in post-1688 Britain, toleration and equality often became values demanded by ostracised 'right wing' groups such as the Roman Catholics, which might in other circumstances have supported antisemitism if they had been in the ascendancy. Thirdly, concerning this point, toleration and liberalism spread universally throughout the whole of society, without the endemic deep divisions of a country like France, where forces favourable to and hostile to the Revolution of 1789 fought each other for the next 150 years, the Jewish question, as the Dreyfus Affair showed, not infrequently being at the cutting edge of this ideological civil war.

Finally, to a striking extent, when the battles for freedom and democracy were fought and won in the English-speaking world, Jews did not have to fight for these values and were not participants, certainly not disproportionately so, for the values advanced by others. Antisemites could not with any degree of plausibility associate Jews with the dangerous radicals of 1776 in America, of 1832 in Britain, or with the Federationists in Australia; Jews merely benefitted from the commitments of others.

If toleration and democracy were values almost unique to the English-speaking world which worked to the advantage of Jews, so was the peculiar and inclusive nature of capitalism and economic development in these countries. Capitalism came earlier to the English-speaking world than elsewhere, and in a more unambiguous form; non-Jews, especially Protestant dissenters, were the bearers of modernity, modern values, rationality, and other disturbing forces with which the Jews were so frequently associated on the Continent and which so often caused antisemitism; non-Jews, especially Protestant dissenters, 'sparked' the industrial revolution in Britain and America. Non-Jews rather than Jews were regularly the 'outsiders' and *nouveaux-riches* in terms of new money and the plutocracy: the Rockefellers,



Morgans, Fords, Vanderbilts, Astors, Mellons, Barings, Northcliffes, Baillieus, and so on, were even more potently symbolic of unabashed capitalism than the Rothschilds and Montefiores. In the English-speaking world, uniquely, money has been regarded as a legitimate universal solvent and key determinant of status, rather than lineage. Wealthy Jews were just as legitimate as wealthy Gentiles. ‘Captains of industry’ and ‘self-made men’ were and are role models for all—the ‘rags to riches’ story, the ‘log cabin to White House’ tale being perhaps the most potent and pervasive myths in most of the societies of the English-speaking world, benefitting Jewish, and for that matter, non-Jewish newcomers such as (in the Australian case) Alan Bond and George Hercu—not, perhaps, the most felicitous examples at the present time. Washington Irving’s celebrated description of the ‘almighty dollar’ as the ‘one universal item of veneration’ in the United States in his time has been the case throughout all of modern history in the English-speaking world, and for every group in society.

There are, in addition to all of this, several other major points which also demarcate and distinguish the English-speaking world. I would draw particular attention to the lack of radical breaks with the past in any English-speaking country, to the fact that there was never, in any English-speaking country, a total revolution in society with its attendant loss of symbols and pre-existing norms *à la* Weimar Germany or post-1917 Russia. There were no revolutionary elites and no perpetually aggrieved class of reactionary exiles. The seeming exception to this, post-1766 America, apart from its historical distance, is often seen in Burkean terms, as a restoration of pre-existing liberalism and ‘salutary neglect’ which was gratuitously interfered with by King George III and his ministers.

Furthermore, although in every English-speaking country without exception there were ethnic and religious tensions and divisions, these seldom, perhaps never, touched or involved Jews centrally. I have already mentioned the hostility between Protestants and Catholics, as in nineteenth-century Britain and Australia; another instance is the conflict of blacks and whites, the central line of ethnic division throughout American history, which led to a Civil War in which 600,000 people were killed. The same holds for the sectional divisions between North and South in the United States and between the wealthy south and industrial north in Britain. None of these, even remotely, involved Jews. Even the hostility between WASPs and New Immigrants in America did not exclusively involve Jews, Jews being only one of dozens of immigrant groups.

Moreover, the English-speaking world was always successful in economic and political terms. From the eighteenth century it was always relatively affluent (whatever individual poverty there was), technologically advanced, always victorious in wars—a major point which is insufficiently emphasised—and, in consequence, without a national inferiority complex or feeling of relative deprivation such as was often pervasive in Germany,

leading to much of Germany's tragic problems and hankering after a strong leader.

Finally, and thankfully, no English-speaking country ever directly experienced the Holocaust or Nazi occupation, the only exception to this being the minor oddity of the Channel Islands. This in itself distinguishes the twentieth-century history of the English-speaking world from virtually the whole of continental Europe.

If we, indeed, view the English-speaking world as a valid unit of study in modern Jewish history, two important consequences seem to flow from all that I have said. First, Jews were seldom, or never, central to any widely-held 'construction of reality' as was so common on the European continent. Concerning Hitler himself, according to Lucy Dawidowicz, 'the Jews inhabited Hitler's mind. He believed that they were the source of all evil, misfortune and tragedy, the single factor that, like some inexorable law of nature, explained the workings of the universe.... The Jews were the demonic hosts whom he had been given a divine mission to destroy' (Dawidowicz 1975, 47-48). Outside of the lunatic asylum, very few people, even extremists, in the English-speaking world ever perceived Jews in this light. Secondly, and following from this, Jews were regularly and normally seen either *a priori* as legitimate or as one of many minorities. They were never, or certainly very seldom, seen as uniquely evil or alien or indeed as illegitimate. This has given to the Jewish presence in the English-speaking world a legitimacy it arguably has lacked anywhere else in the Diaspora.

If we do not accept the view that the English-speaking world constitutes a valid unit of study, what is the competition? How should we view or divide Jews in the Diaspora? A number of alternatives have been proposed: the Jews of modernity; Jews in frontier societies (which would exclude America and England); Jews as one of many minority groups (with modern Jewish history having a value as a 'tracer' or 'lightning rod' for the health of democracy); Jews in *galut* prior to worldwide *aliyah*. Yet it will be clear from all that I have said that I am convinced that English-speaking Jewry is a valid and fruitful unit of study, one surprisingly neglected by modern Jewish historians, with real, rather than imaginary, commonalities and real modes of distinction from other Diaspora societies.

This is not to say that there are no differences between either the Jewries in the English-speaking countries or these societies themselves. Obviously there are, although the historical evolution of each community is surprisingly similar in many ways. To take one example, the religious composition of the Jewish community in America, with its notable Reform and Conservative majority, differs markedly from that of Britain, with its moderate Anglo-Orthodox mainstream tradition, emphasising decorum and

the establishmentarian virtues, or from the post-war Jewish religious divisions in Australia and South Africa, where more right-wing and European streams in Orthodoxy have obtained the upper hand from the pre-existing moderate Orthodoxy. Yet these divisions, though important, are probably not as important as the commonalities or of the validity of the English-speaking world as a major unit of study, which should be pursued in comparative studies.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 'Menorah' 4, nos. 1 & 2 (December 1990): 120-131, this essay was first presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Jewish Studies, held at the University of New South Wales, 15-18 July 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Two sources known to me discuss the specially favourable circumstances attaching to Anglo-Jewry, compared with continental Europe, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, making some of the points emphasised here, but in a more limited way: Endelman 1979, 13-85, and Salbstein 1982, 17-53. So far as I am aware, however, no analyst of modern Jewry has ever looked at the English-speaking world as comprising a distinctive unit among the Jewish people.