The End of Multiculturalism?

Chad Alan Goldberg

Department of Sociology

University of Wisconsin–Madison

The distinguished cultural sociologist and social theorist Jeffrey Alexander defined the

civil sphere in his seminal 2006 book of the same title as "a world of values and institutions that

generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time."[1] Such a

sphere relies on civil solidarity, a kind of solidarity that transcends primordial differences of

language, race, religion, gender, and ethnicity. To be sure, "real civil societies are created by

social actors at a particular time and in a particular place." These founders, their qualities, and

the place of their creation subsequently become consecrated and conflated with "the very essence

of civility," while out-groups are in contrast deemed unfit for incorporation into the civil sphere.[2]

But Alexander's book developed a theoretical framework for understanding the historical

struggles of excluded out-groups to expand civil solidarity and achieve incorporation in the civil

sphere. The Jewish question occupies a prominent place in this discussion. "In the history of

Western societies," Alexander rightly remarks, "no issue has loomed larger for the civil sphere

than the incorporation of the Jews," and his book accordingly devotes nearly 90 of its 550 pages

to the Jewish question.[3] In this paper, I would like to suggest that Civil Sphere Theory provides

an important basis for making sense of the resurgence of antisemitism in the United States in

recent years.

Alexander examined the Jewish question in relation to three ideal-typical modes by

which excluded out-groups have been incorporated into the civil sphere.[4] The first of these

modes of incorporation is *assimilation*, which he defined as the separation of the person who

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[1] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.
[2] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 6.
[3] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 462. On the Jewish question, see 459–547.
[4] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 425–57. See also Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Theorizing the 'Modes of Incorporation': Assimilation, Hyphenation, and Multiculturalism as Varieties of Civil Participation," *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 3 (Nov. 2001): 237–49.

belongs to an out-group from the stigmatized qualities that distinguish the out-group from the core group. This separation is accomplished by dividing private from public life: "Members of primordially stigmatized groups could participate in the discourse and institutions of ... civil society insofar as they completely shed these identities upon entering the public domain."[5] Assimilation permits the members of out-groups to be evaluated positively, thereby expanding their opportunities for civic participation, but it fails to challenge the negative evaluation of their out-group qualities. This "delicate and tense balancing between negatively evaluated *qualities* and positively evaluated *persons*," Alexander argued, makes assimilation a "highly unstable mode of incorporation" that may be pushed backward toward new forms of exclusion or forward toward alternative modes of incorporation such as hyphenation and multiculturalism.[6]

The *hyphenated mode of incorporation* is more open to and accords more positive recognition to "foreign" or "outsider" particularities than does the assimilative mode of incorporation, and in this respect Alexander regarded it as a "progressive alternative." Nevertheless, he argued, hyphenation remains fraught with challenges for Jews and other out-groups. Alexander distinguished "strong and weak versions of this hyphenated approach." In the strong version, exemplified by the notion of America as a melting pot, foreign particularities are blended with core identities into a higher synthesis, a new collectivity typically described in national and/or racial terms, which is supposed to transcend "the particular identities of core and out-group alike." Jewish qualities (like those of other out-groups) are in this way eventually subsumed and thereby rendered invisible. In the weak version of hyphenation, "ethnic particularities" remain "evident and pronounced," but this persistence does not indicate "equal

[5] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 429.
[6] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 431, 460-61 (emphasis added).

valuation of core and outsider qualities." On the contrary, "significant rank ordering of primordial qualities remains" in this situation. The "qualities of excluded groups" are seen as "complementary" but still inferior to the core group. Alexander concluded that the hyphenated mode of incorporation, like the assimilative mode, provides a "highly unstable" basis for the expansion of civil solidarity and therefore is liable to be "pushed backward to assimilation and even to exclusion" or else forward to the multicultural mode of incorporation.[7]

As Alexander conceived it, the *multicultural mode of incorporation* goes further and differs markedly from the assimilative and hyphenated modes of incorporation because it entails the positive evaluation of out-group qualities such as minority racial status, peripheral national origins, or marginalized religion. These "primordial qualities," previously thought to disqualify their bearers from civil inclusion, "become reinterpreted as representing variations on the sacred qualities of civility."[8] Although Alexander denied an "inevitable developmental or evolutionary logic" to the civil incorporation of out-groups[9], his account of the American Jewish experience proceeds from assimilation to hyphenation to multiculturalism. Following the dilemmas and failures of the assimilative and hyphenated modes of incorporation earlier in the 20th century, Alexander argued, "the instabilities of Jewish American incorporation were pushed in a multicultural direction" from the 1960s onward. Simply put, "Christian Americans began to find Jewish qualities attractive in themselves."[10] Alexander's evidence for this thesis was mostly drawn from popular culture, including a close reading of the "Jewish self-representations" of Philip Roth and Woody Allen, as well as demographic trends like intermarriage.

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[7] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 431-43, 460-61.
[8] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 461, 452.
[9] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 472.
[10] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 530-31.

Fifteen years after the publication of *The Civil Sphere*, its discussion of the Jewish question in America appears overly sanguine. America's erstwhile love affair with Jewish qualities has taken a startling and disturbing turn. Anecdotal and statistical evidence reported by the journalist Jennifer Rubin in 2018 suggested a sharp rise in antisemitism in the United States.[11] This trend was manifested in the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where neo-Nazis chanted "Jews will not replace us," as well as the murderous assault on Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018, which the Anti-Defamation League described as "likely the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States." In its 2018 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, the Anti-Defamation League found that "the number of anti-Semitic incidents was nearly 60 percent higher in 2017 than 2016, the largest single-year increase on record and the second highest number reported since ADL started tracking incident data in the 1970s."[12] The US Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that hate crime incidents targeting Jews and Jewish institutions in the US spiked about 37 percent in this same time period (between 2016 and 2017).[13] The ADL's 2019 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents reported more than two thousand antisemitic incidents, an increase of 12 percent from the previous year, and "more than in any year since the Anti-Defamation League began tracking [antisemitic incidents] four decades ago." This record number of antisemitic incidents in 2019 included the deadly stabbings or shootings of Jews at a rabbi's home in Monsey, New York; a kosher grocery store in Jersey

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[11] Jennifer Rubin, "American Anti-Semitism: It's Getting Worse," *Washington Post*, Oct. 27, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2018/10/27/american-anti-semitism-its-getting-worse/?utm_term=.840cb3da1e61.

[12] Rubin, "American Anti-Semitism."

[13] Erin Donaghue, "New FBI Data Shows Rise in Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes," CBS News, Nov. 13, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-hate-crimes-up-new-data-shows-rise-in-anti-semitic-hate-crimes/.

City, New Jersey; and a synagogue in Poway, California.[14] According to the FBI's annual Hate Crimes Statistics Report, antisemitic incidents increased by 14% from 2018 to 2019, when they comprised the largest single category of incidents related to religion and 13 percent of all hate crime incidents in that year.[15] Although the ADL's 2020 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents showed a decline of four percent from the previous year, it was still enough to make 2020 "the third-highest year for incidents against American Jews since ADL started tracking such data in 1979."[16] The FBI's 2020 report on hate crimes also showed a decrease in antisemitic incidents, though they remained the largest single category of incidents related to religion, and more than 8 percent of all hate crimes that year despite Jews constituting only 2 percent of the population.[17]

The rise in antisemitic incidents is associated with a shift in cultural attitudes toward Jews in the United States. There are signs of such a shift on both the political left and the political right. On the one hand, the antisemitic motifs of Jewish foreignness or alienness, exclusive particularism, power, and wickedness parallel or correspond to antizionist motifs that have appeared in the discourse of some self-styled progressives.[18] By antizionism, I do not mean criticism of Israel or Israeli policies. Rather, I mean an ideological formation that demonizes

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[14] Johnny Diaz, "Anti-Semitic Incidents Surged in 2019, Report Says," *New York Times*, May 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/us/antisemitic-report-incidents.html.
[15] FBI 2019 Hate Crimes Statistics Report, https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/FY-2019-Hate-Crimes.
[16] Anti-Defamation League, "U.S. Antisemitic Incidents Remained at Historic High in 2020," https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-antisemitic-incidents-remained-at-historic-high-in-2020.
[17] FBI 2020 Hate Crimes Statistics Report, https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2020-hate-crimes-statistics. Jeremy Sharon, "Antisemitism: Jews Target of 58% of All Religiously Motivated Hate Crimes in US," *Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 31, 2021, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/antisemitism-jews-target-of-58-percent-of-all-religiously-motivated-hate-crimes-in-us-678228.
[18] Mitchell Cohen, "Auto-Emancipation and Antisemitism (Homage to Bernard-Lazare)," *Jewish Social Studies* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 69-77.

Israel in a selective, one-sided, essentialist, or paranoid fashion as uniquely illegitimate and as central to and symbolic of oppression everywhere, and which therefore seeks to eliminate Israel. While antisemitism and antizionism are analytically distinguishable, Jews and Israel (or "Zionists") play analogous symbolic roles in these cultural structures. For example, Representative Ilhan Omar, who is widely regarded as among the most progressive members of the US Congress, has at various times claimed that "Israel has hypnotized the world" while doing "evil," declared that congressional support for Israel was "all about the Benjamins" (i.e., money), and suggested that American supporters of Israel "push for allegiance to a foreign country." This kind of rhetoric from the left combines at least two antisemitic motifs, one that money makes Jews powerful, and the other that Jews are more loyal to their own national interests than to the country in which they are citizens.[19] It inverts the claim made by the jurist Louis Brandeis more than a century ago that Zionism makes the "American Jew" a "better American."[20] Today, in contrast, the counterdemocratic code in the discourse of civil society is used to taint American Jews who do not embrace antizionism—which, surveys show, is most American Jews—as bad Americans.[21]

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[19] In 2019, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution that condemned antisemitism, which was widely seen as an implicit rebuke of Omar's rhetoric.

[20] Louis D. Brandeis, "The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It," speech to the Conference of Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis, April 25, 1915, https://louisville.edu/law/library/special-collections/the-louis-d.-brandeis-collection/the-jewish-problem-how-to-solve-it-by-louis-d.-brandeis. Brandeis stated: "Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism…. There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American." Brandeis was expressing a version of what the historian Jonathan Sarna has called the "cult of synthesis" in American Jewish culture. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 1/2 (Autumn-Winter 1998–99): 52–79.

[21] Some 82% of American Jews reported that caring about Israel is essential or important to being Jewish in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019–2020. Only 16% of American Jews said that caring about Israel was not important to their Jewish identity. Justin Nortey, "U.S. Jews Have Widely Differing Views on Israel," Pew Research Center, May 21,

On the other hand, under Donald Trump's presidency from January 2017 to January 2021, the term "globalist" spread from far-right, antisemitic websites into mainstream civil and political discourse. The use of the term as an anti-Jewish dog-whistle received widespread attention in 2018 in connection with the resignation of Trump's chief economic advisor Gary Cohn and the attempted bombing of the billionaire philanthropist George Soros's home in New York. As Aryeh Tuchman, the associate director of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, noted at the time, the application of the term to Jews carries a "host of associations that cannot be extricated from the history of anti-Semitism." He linked the term to "long-running conspiracy theories about Jewish populations not being loyal to the countries they live in and cooperating through secret international alliances."[22] Taken together, contemporary antizionist and antiglobalist discourses directed against Jews reproduce the incoherent pattern that the Russian-Jewish writer Moshe Leib Lilienblum had already noted in the late 19th century: "the opponents of nationalism see us as uncompromising nationalists, with a nationalist God and a

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2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/21/u-s-jews-have-widely-differing-views-on-israel/. In a survey conducted in 2021 for the American Jewish Committee by an independent research company, 60% of American Jews reported that a connection with Israel was very or somewhat important to their Jewish identity, 72% reported that they considered Israeli Jews as family (siblings, first cousins, or extended family), and 81% reported that their families were strongly or moderately pro-Israel. AJC 2021 Survey of American Jewish Opinion, June 14, 2021, https://www.ajc.org/news/survey2021. In another recent survey conducted by the Jewish Electorate Institute, a majority (62%) of American Jews said they felt emotionally attached to Israel, and a supermajority of American Jews (67%) agreed that it is antisemitic to deny Israel's right to exist. Ron Kampeas, "Poll Finds a Quarter of US Jews Think Israel is 'Apartheid State,'" *Times of Israel*, July 13, 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-finds-a-quarter-of-us-jews-think-israel-is-apartheid-state/.
[22] Eli Rosenberg, "Trump Called Gary Cohn a 'Globalist'; Here's Why Some People Find That Offensive," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/03/09/trump-called-gary-cohn-a-globalist-heres-why-some-people-find-that-offensive/. William K. Rashbaum, "At George Soros's Home, Pipe Bomb Was Likely Hand-Delivered, Officials Say," *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/nyregion/soros-caravan-explosive-bomb-home.html.

nationalist Torah; the nationalists see us as cosmopolitans, whose homeland is wherever we happen to be well off." Both cultural representations can be found in Trump's public remarks. He described Biden during the 2020 presidential election as a "servant of the globalists," leaving it to his followers to infer just which globalists he meant, and he invokes the same stereotypes that Omar does linking Jews to money and financial power, though Trump does so admiringly. Yet Trump also embraces the nationalist goals of Israel's far right. He has insinuated that American Jews are foreign guests motivated chiefly by cupidity and allegiance to Israel (always conflated in his mind with its far right). Ultimately, his stance was transactional: in exchange for Jewish support, he would protect Jews and the economic and political interests he attributed to them. When American Jews overwhelmingly opposed Trump, it seemed to genuinely baffle him, and (as we have seen) Jews became the objects of pronounced aggression during his presidency.[23]

Do these trends and developments represent a temporary aberration from the multicultural incorporation of Jews that Alexander described fifteen years ago, or a more enduring cultural shift? It is, of course, too soon to say, though I suspect it is the latter. As Alexander himself cautioned, the multicultural mode of incorporation is "unstable in its own way" and gives rise to new "problems of boundary definition and identity."[24] These remarks help

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[23] Allison Kaplan Sommer, "Trump Calls Biden a 'Servant of the Globalists,' Using Term Viewed as Antisemitic Dog Whistle," *Haaretz*, Oct. 21, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-jewish-democrats-attack-trump-for-calling-biden-a-servant-of-the-globalists-1.9250569. Yair Rosenberg, "Trump Keeps Pushing Anti-Semitic Stereotypes, But He Thinks He's Praising Jews," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/21/trump-keeps-pushing-anti-semitic-stereotypes-he-thinks-hes-praising-jews/. "Anti-Semitism in the US Hits 4-Decade High: Report," *Deutsche Welle*, May 12, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/anti-semitism-in-the-us-hits-4-decade-high-report/a-53402428.
[24] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 544.

to explain the cultural shift we seem to be witnessing today in regard to American attitudes toward Jews.

The transition that began in the 1960s from a hyphenated to a multicultural mode of civil incorporation had important consequences for American Jews. On the one hand, Christian America's multicultural embrace of Jewish qualities allowed "confident assertions of Jewish difference." As examples, Alexander pointed to a "return to … traditional religious practices" in non-Orthodox synagogues, the growth of Jewish day schools, and the creation of Jewish Studies departments and programs. These assertions of Jewish difference clearly signaled a rejection of the assimilationist project of unifying the American-Jewish self through the elimination of Jewish qualities, but they did not entail the divided identity that was characteristic of hyphenation. Instead, the multicultural mode of incorporation unified the Jewish self in a new way: not by obliterating Jewish qualities but by creating "thicker and deeper forms of mutual identification" between the core group (Christian Americans) and the excluded out-group (Jewish Americans). "The identities of once-marginalized groups," as Alexander put it, came "to be viewed both as legitimately and importantly *different* from the core group's and, at the same time, as fundamentally *the same.*"[25]

Yet Jewish assertions of difference were paradoxically accompanied, as Alexander noted, by Jewish anxiety "about the continuing viability … of Judaism in America." How can we explain this paradox? "If difference can be recognized only when there is increasing solidarity between core and out-group," he wrote, then "it should not be surprising that, even as they begin

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[25] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 544 (my emphasis). Just as alienation is overcome in Hegel's philosophy when spirit recognizes the seemingly objective and external world as an expression of spirit itself, so multiculturalism enables core group and out-group recognize themselves—their "shared humanity"—in each other despite their apparent differences.

to cultivate their differences, Jewish Americans would come to feel more like non-Jewish Americans and the latter more like them."[26] In Alexander's account, it is precisely this mutual identification that creates anxiety about the loss of a distinctive Jewish identity.

I would like to suggest that rising antisemitism in America may reflect the "problems of boundary definition and identity" that Alexander associated with multiculturalism, but in a different way than he anticipated. Rather than evincing *Jewish* anxiety "about the continuing viability … of Judaism in America," rising antisemitism reflects *non-Jewish* anxiety about the continuing viability of America when core-group and out-group identities are viewed as "fundamentally the same"—hence, the chant of "Jews will not replace us" in Charlottesville in 2017. This would mean that contemporary antisemitism is not merely a rearguard backlash against the multiculturalist trends that Alexander described more than a decade ago; it is, in dialectical fashion, a backlash that arises from the very problems of boundary definition and identity that multiculturalism itself produces.

I leave aside here the complicating question of minorities like Omar who belong neither to America's historically Christian core group nor to the Jewish out-group. Most of her supporters belong to the Christian core-group by cultural heritage even if they do not identify as Christians, but the anxieties of someone like Omar herself would be more complicated. Since Muslim Americans have arguably not experienced a multicultural mode of incorporation, their identities may be more divided in a manner characteristic of hyphenation or W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness.[27] Moreover, the relative success of the multicultural incorporation of

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[26] Alexander, *Civil Sphere*, 546.
[27] Du Bois famously noted the "double consciousness" of the "American Negro" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. For the relevant passages, see W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Social Theory of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Phil Zuckerman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2004), 23-26.

Jewish Americans since the 1960s may generate resentment among such minorities against an out-group that is now perceived to have joined the core-group.[28] The resurgence of antisemitism in recent years show this perception to be highly questionable.

Although "thicker and deeper forms of mutual identification" between America's historically Christian core group and its Jewish minority are apparently harder to sustain in the current conjuncture, it would be an exaggeration to say that identification has turned to repulsion. More likely we are seeing a return to the ambivalence which, I have argued elsewhere, has historically been characteristic of Christian attitudes toward Jews.[29] We can also expect this ambivalence to be expressed and managed though the social mechanisms of splitting and in-group purification. By splitting, I mean the Freudian defense mechanism that replaces a mental structure with two or more part-structures. I have in mind particularly the splitting of an object (not the ego), which allows one part-structure to be experienced as good and the other as bad. There is a long history in which core-group members have applied this mechanism to the Jewish out-group, making "distinctions between good and bad Jews, between the useful and the useless, between the productive and the parasitical."[30] The sociologist Erving Goffman used the term in-

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[28] This resentment may even take the form of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's sense, which is to say, it may lead to an inversion of the values associated with the object of one's resentment. European-born intellectuals like Alain Badiou, Matti Bunzl, and Enzo Traverso (the last two have Jewish backgrounds) have also insisted that Jews are now part of the core-group and no longer an out-group. After the Shoah, they contend, Jews became privileged insiders of a dominant Judeo-Christian, European, or Western order at the expense of new out-groups, particularly Muslims. For a critical discussion of this thesis, see Chad Alan Goldberg, *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 186n137, 188n153.

[29] Goldberg, *Modernity and the Jews*, 116–17. For this argument, I draw on Shmuel Eisenstadt, Zygmunt Bauman, and Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

[30] David Vital, *A People Apart: A Political History of the Jews in Europe, 1789–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 193. Vital distinguishes this older, individualizing approach from the tendency of modern antisemitism to cast the Jewish question in "rigorously

group purification to describe an analogous process within stigmatized out-groups in which one part of the group "take[s] up in regard to those who are more evidently stigmatized" than themselves "the attitudes the normals take" toward the group as a whole.[31] This, too, is a recurrent feature of modern Jewish history; it can be seen, for example, in the relationship between the bourgeois, assimilated Jews of western Europe and the United States and the poorer, more traditional Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe in the context of rising antisemitism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. If the resurgence of antisemitism in recent years is at least partly rooted in the problems of boundary definition and identity generated by the multicultural mode of incorporation, then splitting, in-group purification, and similar coping mechanisms are likely to become more visible and prominent.

In sum, I have argued that while there was a shift beginning in the 1960s toward a multicultural mode of incorporation for American Jews, as Alexander argued fifteen years ago, the resurgence of antisemitism in recent years—in the form of a sharp rise in antisemitic hate crimes as well as changing patterns of discourse and cultural representation—calls into question the stability of this mode of incorporation. However, the analysis of multiculturalism that Alexander developed in 2006 also provides important theoretical tools for explaining these changes. Alexander himself noted the instability of the multicultural mode of incorporation and pointed out the new problems of boundary definition and identity that it generated. In his

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collective terms" (emphasis in the original). According to the latter perspective, "it was the Jews as a collective … that mattered" because it determined the Jewish qualities from which "no Jewish individual could ever free himself however genuinely and strongly he might … wish to do so" (193-94). Within contemporary leftist circles, hostility to Israel increasingly defines which Jews are inside and which are outside what the sociologist David Hirsh calls the "community of the good." David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 40-65.

[31] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 107-8.

account, these problems explained why American Jews felt anxiety "about the continuing viability … of Judaism in America" despite an unparalleled embrace of Jewish qualities by the Christian core group. What I have suggested here is that these problems of boundary definition and identity also generated analogous anxieties among non-Jewish Americans, and these anxieties are contributing to the resurgence of antisemitism in America today.