

The Misuse of Expertise



CHOLARS POSSESS a unique kind of power: They are the “experts” on whom we rely to educate our children and our communities and to elevate our understanding of past and present. Communal organizations turn to scholars to provide information, perspective, and analysis, and to evaluate programs,

conduct original research, and make policy recommendations.

The power of the expert has long derived from the assumption that they bring objective, informed, and incisive analysis to the topics at hand. What those outside of academia may not understand, however, is that the standard of academic “objectivity” has long been eroding. Thanks to the postmodernist rejection of Enlightenment ideals of truth, objectivity, progress, morality, reason, and more, many scholars have come to instead embrace subjectivity, the influence of identity (or “positionality”) in understanding the world, and critical theories that argue that the motivating forces behind civilization are struggles for power along the lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so forth.

Once scholars began to see the past and present through the lens of power—a binary between the oppressors who have power and the oppressed who do not—it was a short step to arguing that scholarship and teaching should not simply open students’ minds to injustice and oppression, but should be used as tools to combat it. Hence the rise of the “scholar-activist.” At a time when the vast preponderance of liberal arts faculty in American universities share left-leaning political perspectives, however—77.6 percent of professors at Harvard identified as liberal or very liberal, for example—the risk of viewpoint homogeneity and single-minded political indoctrination is clear.

Jewish studies have not been immune from such trends. In the last several years, the “Jewish Studies Activist Network” has weighed in on many contemporary political conflicts in the United States and Israel. Calls to action proliferate across the field, whether in open letters or statements by professional associations. For example, in its June 2020 statement on the death of George Floyd, the Association for Jewish Studies called on its members to “channel our personal outrage in the application of our professional research, scholarship, practice, and teaching to participate in overturning the deeply entrenched institutional sources of race-based inequality that are barriers to a more just and equitable world.” More recently, over 200 Jewish and Israel studies scholars signed a May 2021 statement labeling Zionism as “a diverse set of linked ethno-nationalist ideologies...shaped by settler colonial paradigms” that have “assumed a hierarchy of civilizations” and “contributed to unjust, enduring, and unsustainable systems of Jewish supremacy, ethno-national segregation, discrimination, and violence against Palestinians.”

SAPIR asked Professor Jonathan D. Sarna to opine on the power of the scholarly “expert” in a time of subjectivity and activism. Sarna has observed these trends over his lifetime, first while growing up in a household of Jewish-studies pioneers, and then through his own award-winning career of many decades. Among his many roles in the field, he has held multiple leadership positions in Jewish studies, Israel studies, and Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University, is a past

president of the Association for Jewish Studies, and is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

SAPIR: Tell us about the beginning of Jewish studies in the academy—the original ideal of objectivity and the goal of staying removed from Jewish communal interests and contemporary politics.

JS: The academic study of Jews and Judaism began in Germany in the 1820s. Revealingly, its founders employed the term *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, “the science of Judaism.” In their essential sourcebook *The Jew in the Modern World*, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz underscore that *Wissenschaft* “unambiguously meant ‘science’ in the fullest sense of the term: a devotion to factual accuracy, normative neutrality and the quest for empirically grounded truth.” The founders of the field, in short, aimed high. They aspired to scholarship that would be rigorous and value-free, “without any preconceived opinion,” and aiming “neither to put its object in a favorable, nor in an unfavorable light.”

While these scholars wrote history informed by their times, and some, but not all, were politically engaged, they believed—and this is key—that their scholarship and their politics should be kept rigidly separate.

The idea that Jewish studies, like science, should be objective and value-free continued when the field migrated to America. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906), the first great product of American Jewish scholarship, reflected its ideals. So did the American Academy of Jewish Research, founded in 1920 in part “to formulate standards of Jewish scholarship.” The early practitioners of Jewish studies in American universities, giants such as Harry Wolfson of Harvard and Columbia’s Salo W. Baron, modeled *Wissenschaft des Judentums*’ central ideals.

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echoed the lofty goals of scholars in many other disciplines. As Peter Novick recounts in *That Noble Dream*, his historiography of objectivity in American history, historian Charles Beard praised the scientific method as “the only method that can be employed in obtaining accurate knowledge of historical facts, personalities, situations, and movements.” The scientific method, Beard insisted, was “the chief safeguard against the tyranny of authority, bureaucracy, and brute power.”

Beard understood that pure objectivity was actually unattainable. Influenced by philosophy and the sociology of knowledge, he appreciated that “every historian’s work—that is, his selection of facts, his emphasis, his omissions, his organization, and his methods of presentation—bears a relation to his own personality and the age and circumstances in which he lives.” While acknowledging that no one can be totally objective, he nevertheless understood, as did the scholars who founded and maintained my field, that one is not free to desist from that goal. Objectivity is akin to perfection: While we know that we cannot achieve it, we must strive for it nevertheless.

SAPIR: What power did striving for an ideal of objectivity confer upon Jewish studies professors as “experts”? Were there weaknesses to this approach?

JS: In the early 1990s, a significant Jewish communal leader contacted me in response to a hate-filled book by the Nation

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of Islam, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, that blamed Jews for the slave trade. “Could you write a response showing that Jews had nothing whatsoever to do with the slave trade and in fact were staunch abolitionists?” he asked. “Well,” I stammered. “It’s actually very complicated. There were Jewish slaveholders and slave traders in the U.S., and there were also Jewish opponents of slavery. Jews were divided.” “You scholars!” the leader exploded. “On those rare occasions when I call upon you, you invariably disappoint me! Why can’t you just produce what the Jewish community needs?”

The conversation highlighted for me the difference between an expert scholar committed to learning, objectivity, and truth and a communal activist committed to strengthening and protecting the Jewish community. My job, as I understood it from the perspective of the academy, was to offer rigor, complexity, and balance. What the community sought, at least at that moment, was a powerful response to an antisemitic libel. The Jewish leader who contacted me understood that complexity, nuance, and scholarly dispassion would prove no match against the lies, oversimplifications, and passion of the Nation of Islam. Indeed, when objectivity and scholarship go head to head against passionate advocacy, advocacy usually wins in the courtroom of public opinion.

Looking back over a career spanning more than 40 years, however, I have no regrets at disappointing that leader who sought to lure me from scholarship into advocacy. The Jewish community, it seems to me, requires experts who command a body of knowledge—in my case, American Jewish history—and who can be relied on to present the truth as best they understand it. Postmodernists may scoff at the very notion of truth, but in our Trumpian world, it seems to me that commitment to truth has never been more important. The job of scholars is thus, first and foremost, to gather and teach well-documented truths. As new evidence becomes available, scholars must be open to modifying those truths on the basis of newly discovered knowledge.

In the heat of ideological battle—over slavery, religion, Israel, gender issues, and the like—advocates may lose patience with scholars. They may even attempt to stifle, defund, and excommunicate them, to declare their scholarship wrong and wicked. Committed scholars nevertheless believe that, in pursuing truth, they answer to a different calling than communal leaders and ideological advocates do. Truth, scholars believe, will inevitably triumph in the end.

SAPIR: How has the ideal of objectivity changed? Scholars now seem to embrace their own political and ideological biases and believe that these positions are critical to shaping communal policy in particular directions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this shift?

JS: Political identities have long shaped scholarly agendas. Marxists, for example, stimulated important scholarship concerning workers and economics; they shifted history away from just the study of elites. Zionists stimulated new interest in the history of the Land of Israel and of the Jews who returned to it. Feminists inspired a whole library of books concerning women, past and present, and of gender as an analytical category.

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of activists that political identities should shape not only the *agendas* but also the *conclusions* of scholars, that truth should be subservient to politics, and that uncomfortable truths should be suppressed or “canceled.”

A good example of this arose from the new political focus on “Jews of color.” Jewish history books have indeed paid far too little attention to this subject. Much has been written, in my field, about people such as the American Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro and the Jewish sculptor Moses Ezekiel, but next to nothing about their black offspring, the product of illicit relationships with (usually non-Jewish) women of color. More scholarship on Jewish diversity worldwide is by all accounts urgently necessary.

In place of such scholarship, however, in 2019, a partnership between The Jews of Color Field Building Initiative and researchers from Stanford and the University of San Francisco produced a widely publicized report claiming that “Jews of Color represent at *least* 12-15% of American Jews, or about 1,000,000 of the United States’ 7,200,000 Jews.” Their press release predicted that “some decades from now, Jews of Color will become the majority of U.S. Jews,” and they urged the Jewish community to shift resources to take account of this development.

Two highly esteemed Jewish demographers, Professors Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, challenged these claims on scientific grounds, citing the 2013 Pew Study on American Jews and arguing that “the percentage of Jews of Color is almost certainly closer to 6% nationally than to ‘at least 12%–15%’; and this percentage has not increased significantly since 1990, although it is likely to do so in the future.” To their — and observers’ — surprise and horror, their well-argued, dispassionate scholarly critique met with a torrent of politically motivated abuse, first in dozens of anguished and angry comments (now removed) on their post in *eJewishPhilanthropy*, and then more substantially when Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote an op-ed accusing the scholars of racism, saying it was “appalling

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that the authors chose to publish their article at all.” Thousands of people signed a petition lambasting the two men for opposing a “vibrant, equitable, multiracial Jewish community.”

A year after this controversy, the 2020 Pew study confirmed that Sheskin and Dashefsky had been right all along: “92% of U.S. Jews describe themselves as white and non-Hispanic,” the Pew study reports, “while 8% say they belong to another racial or ethnic group.”

To activists, the admirable political goals of combating racism and embracing Jews of color may justify distorting the empirical truth in favor of sentiment, just as the Jewish leader looking to rebut the Nation of Islam on the question of Jews and slavery had admirable reasons for wanting me to do so. But even high-minded motivations cannot justify sacrificing truth for the sake of political expedience or utility. Absent a shared commitment to “truth even unto its innermost parts,” as my university’s motto puts it, the scholarly enterprise as a whole is imperiled, and the free market of ideas closes down.

SAPIR: Can you reflect upon the power of the “expert” in Jewish communal life, including when scholars are called upon to conduct Jewish communal research and evaluation?

JS: Jewish communal organizations must be wary of exaggerating the power of the expert. Nobody is all-knowing and nobody can be fully objective — period. Moreover, communal organizations (like

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their corporate counterparts) often hire experts to tell them what they want to hear. An inquiry phrased as “can you help me persuade my board that ...” may yield a learned brief, but it is unlikely to be an objective scholarly analysis. Worst of all, in my experience, are leaders (or funders) who invite experts to speak and then publicly challenge them. “Why did you invite me if you think you know everything already?” I have more than once found myself wanting to ask. If you think the expert you invite knows less than you do, save your money and don’t bother calling.

The best approaches I have received are those framed as open-ended inquiries. In early 2009, at the height of the Great Recession and the Madoff scandal, when endowments plummeted and large donors declared bankruptcy, the Jewish Funders Network invited me to “share knowledge of Jewish (or specifically American-Jewish) life in times of economic uncertainty. What were the challenges that arose?” they asked. What were the innovations that came in these times? What was the role of good leadership in these struggles and in creating solutions?” By framing the questions as they did, JFN made clear that it had no specific agenda but sought a relevant presentation that would draw upon my expertise to help leaders craft policies for times of crisis.

As a rule, objective queries posed in broad terms—“we as an organization are struggling with this problem. Can you help frame it in a larger historical context that illuminates different sides of the issue?”—are more likely to elicit helpful responses than those that look to academic experts to solve problems of a nonacademic sort, or to support preordained conclusions.

One final suggestion: If you seek a written report from an expert, demand footnotes and a bibliography. Scholars are taught to cite sources in defense of their claims and to build on prior research. Asking them to employ an academic style in their reports will encourage the dispassion that the best scholarship demands, and it will make explicit the universe of thought in which researchers are situating themselves or against which they are defining their views.

SAPIR: You’ve been part of Jewish studies for your entire life. How does it feel, at this point in your career, to see how the field has changed?

JS: I am the son of the renowned Jewish Bible scholar Nahum M. Sarna, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Brandeis University, and many other institutions for 60 years. The world of Jewish studies was small, clubby (and almost totally male) for decades, and my parents frequently hosted fellow scholars for dinner; they also believed in including their children in these meals and conversations. So, in addition to my father’s colleagues, many of whom I also saw weekly on Saturday morning at synagogue, I had the honor to meet many of the foremost Jewish luminaries of the 20th century: Salo W. Baron, Jacob Rader Marcus (later my teacher and mentor), Gershom Scholem, and Harry Wolfson. I also met some of the early women in the field, including Lucy Dawidowicz and Naomi W. Cohen. My understanding of Jewish scholarship was shaped by these pioneers.

The most important value I learned from them was to consider scholarship itself a sacred calling. It required long hours of intensive study and demanded adherence to the highest and most exacting of standards. Woe to the scholar who overlooked a source, failed to cite an important article, or embarrassed himself by displaying ignorance.

Politics above all was anathema to these pioneers, for its values were seen to be antithetical to those of the scholar. Scholars

pursued truth; politicians pursued power. Scholars might discuss politics and even express political judgments; several did over my parents' Shabbat table. But in their research, they abjured politics lest it taint and distort the timeless scholarship that they yearned to produce.

To reinforce scholarly standards, the scholars I grew up with called out those who, they believed, strayed from the canons of scholarly purity. A scholar who accidentally revealed his biases in print was treated much like one who accidentally revealed an undergarment. It was a source of unending embarrassment. A scholar who displayed ignorance was mocked. A scholar caught plagiarizing or forging was barred from the fraternity of scholars forever; those were unpardonable offenses.

Scholars who strayed from the canons of moral or religious purity, by contrast, remained respected scholars with a “but” henceforward attached to their names. One might be “a great scholar but a *meshumad* [apostate],” “a great scholar but intermarried,” “a great scholar but a lecher,” “a great scholar but a miserable human being,” even “a great scholar but an antisemite”! This language denoted the separation of rarefied scholarship from other realms of life. One could be expelled from scholarly Eden for scholarly offenses alone.

The sciences and the arts followed the same rules as scholars did in the world in which I was raised. We celebrated scientific breakthroughs even if made by terrible human beings. And we judged art on the basis of artistic standards alone, no matter how depraved the artist.

Bad behavior still mattered, of course, and nobody in my world doubted that scholars, scientists, artists, indeed anybody who broke the law or committed gross moral offenses should be punished. But the punishment extended only to the person, not to their work. To do otherwise—to refuse to read, cite, publish, or admire a miscreant's creative work—was to be guilty of what philosophers call a “category error.”

Today, category errors abound throughout the academy. Jewish studies are no exception. I watch with a mixture of incredulity and horror as colleagues and friends cast aside the scholarly values on which we were raised and replace them with ideologically tainted political ones. A growing list of books and people may no longer be published, cited, or even mentioned, never mind met with, even for scholarly purposes. Academic departments and learned societies debate political resolutions. Words such as “objectivity,” “truth,” and “merit” provoke ridicule and pushback.

What, I wonder, would the giants of the past think of these changes? And what will scholars of the future think of us? *