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Reply to Nathan Cofnas's Comments on Edward Dutton

Abstract

I address Nathan Cofnas's criticisms of my book *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* contained in an article he wrote ("Is Kevin MacDonald's Theory of Judaism "Plausible"? A Response to Dutton (2018)," *Evolutionary Psychological Science* [2018]). Cofnas's criticisms of *The Culture of Critique* fall short of posing any challenge to the thesis of the book. He fails to grasp the theoretical basis of the book and therefore assumes that it relies on general statements about Jewish ethnocentrism and intermarriage when in fact it relies on showing the Jewish identities and motivations of specific sets of Jewish intellectuals and political figures. Moreover, in his criticisms he consistently and fails to take account of the defense of my work in my online comments on his previous papers criticizing my work.

* * *

Nathan Cofnas is making something of a cottage industry for himself in criticizing *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (CofC) (MacDonald, 2002/1998). In a reply to Edward Dutton, he continues his technique of ignoring my previous replies and making unfounded assertions about the scholarship and mistaken assumptions regarding the theoretical basis of CofC (Cofnas, 2018). Cofnas begins with a general condemnation of my work.

[MacDonald] repeatedly claims that the leaders of the school "strongly identified" as Jews. He says that "the agenda of the Frankfurt School" was to facilitate "radical individualism...among gentiles while retaining a powerful sense of group cohesion among Jews" (p. 215). What evidence does he have for this claim? He does not quote a *single sentence* from any Frankfurt School leader that endorses group cohesion among Jews.

Cofnas ignores comments in my second reply where I pulled together my evidence in CofC that indeed the Frankfurt School intellectuals had a strong Jewish identity and desire for Jewish group continuity—ethnocentrism by any other name (MacDonald 2018b, 25–26)).

[Statements on the Holocaust by Frankfurt School figures] are part of the evidence I use to establish Jewish identification and their support for Jewish ethnocentrism. One has to remember that the culture of the Holocaust had not been generally established as part of the general mainstream culture of the West—a much later development dating from after the Arab-Israeli war

of 1967 (see Peter Novick's, *The Holocaust in American Life*; Adorno died in 1969). Consider this from Zoltan Tar in his *The Frankfurt School*: "The experience of Auschwitz was turned into an absolute historical and sociological category," with the point being that "no study of sociology could be possible without reflecting on Auschwitz and without concerning oneself with preventing new Auschwitzes" (Tar 1977, 165; quoted in Chapter 5). This seems to me to indicate a strong Jewish identification. And how else can one interpret the intellectual shenanigans of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* except as an attempt to support Jewish ethnocentrism and group continuity and preclude any discussion of Jewish behavior as relevant to anti-Semitism?

Even more to the point, Cofnas never comments on this passage from Chapter 5 of *CofC* regarding Horkheimer who was the person with ultimate administrative power in the Frankfurt School:

Horkheimer had a strong Jewish identity that became increasingly apparent in his later writings (Tar 1977, 6; Jay 1980). However, Horkheimer's commitment to Judaism, as evidenced by the presence of specifically Jewish religious themes, was apparent even in his writings as an adolescent and as a young adult (Maier 1984, 51). At the end of his life Horkheimer completely accepted his Jewish identification and achieved a grand synthesis between Judaism and Critical Theory (Carlebach 1978, 254–257). (Critical Theory is the name applied to the theoretical perspective of the Frankfurt School.) As an indication of his profound sense of Jewish identity, Horkheimer (1947, 161) stated that the goal of philosophy must be to vindicate Jewish history: "The anonymous martyrs of the concentration camps are the symbols of humanity that is striving to be born. The task of philosophy is to translate what they have done into language that will be heard, even though their finite voices have been silenced by tyranny."

Tar (1977, 60) describes Horkheimer's inspiration as deriving from his attempt to leave behind Judaism while nevertheless remaining tied to the faith of his fathers.

Moreover, if indeed Adorno and the Frankfurt School were genuine leftists with weak ethnic identities, they would have been equally concerned about Stalin's genocides, e.g., of Christian Ukrainians. There is no evidence that they were.

Horkheimer's strong Jewish identification lends further support to Adorno's Jewish identification because they seem to have been intellectual clones of each other. Adorno 'had a very close professional relationship with Horkheimer to the point that Horkheimer wrote of their

work, “It would be difficult to say which of the ideas originated in his mind and which in my own; our philosophy is one’ (Horkheimer 1947, vii).” A true radical leftist with no ethnic identity would have been repulsed by Horkheimer’s ethnic commitment. Adorno never said, “no poetry after the Holodomor.” And what was a self-proclaimed radical doing associating with ethnocentric colleagues funded by an ethnocentric Jewish benefactor and associating mainly with Jewish scholars in New York and Los Angeles? Why did none of the Frankfurt School moral luminaries publicly criticize the vertical ethnic integration of the School?

This seems to me decisive. Judaism would continue the way it always had—ethnocentric and refusing to lose its sense of difference from the surrounding society— but the rest of society would be changed to inoculate it against anti-Semitism.

Cofnas completely ignores these statements in *CofC* (and he repeats the same baseless charges in the section “Is the Thesis of *CofC* More “Plausible” Than the Default Hypothesis?”). Moreover, he ignores my comments in the second reply showing clearly that Jewish continuity was much on the minds of Horkheimer and Adorno (MacDonald, 2018b, 27). The following comments from Chapter 5 of *CofC* on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* clearly show their concern for Jewish group continuity.

The end of anti-Semitism is thus viewed as a precondition for the development of a utopian society and the liberation of humanity—perhaps the closest that the Frankfurt School ever came to defining utopia. [The footnote here reads: As an indication of the self-conscious Jewish identifications of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer attributed the refusal of Frankfurt theorists to “name the other” to their following the traditional Jewish taboo on naming God or describing paradise (see Jay 1980, 139).] The envisioned utopian society is one in which Judaism can continue as a cohesive group but in which cohesive, nationalistic, corporate gentile groups based on conformity to group norms have been abolished as manifestations of psychopathology.

Horkheimer and Adorno developed the view that the unique role of Judaism in world history was to vindicate the concept of difference against the homogenizing forces thought to represent the essence of Western civilization: “The Jews became the metaphoric equivalent of that remnant of society preserving negation and the non-identical” (Jay 1980, 148). Judaism thus represents the antithesis of Western universalism. The continuation and acceptance of Jewish particularism becomes a precondition for the development of a utopian society of the future.

* * *

Cofnas continues: Dutton and MacDonald “say that the default hypothesis should be supplemented with a much more complicated theory about how Jews are genetically and culturally adapted to benefit themselves by undermining gentile society.” This is a tendentious version of my theoretical approach in *CofC*. I make no assumptions about Jewish genetics or “cultural adaptations,” whatever the latter might mean. I do argue that the main figures of these movements had strong Jewish identification and saw their work as advancing Jewish group interests, chiefly combatting anti-Semitism.

* * *

Cofnas writes, “the theory of *CofC* ... requires only that Jews are high on ethnocentrism.” This is false. It does not stand or fall on the issue of whether Jews in general are high on ethnocentrism. It stands or falls on whether I established that the central figures in these movements strongly identified as Jews and saw their work as advancing Jewish interests.

* * *

Cofnas then discusses the general issue of whether people tend to act in accordance with their ethnic interests. However one answers this, what is important for *CofC* is that the people I discuss in fact acted on their *perceptions* of Jewish ethnic interests—chiefly ending anti-Semitism; I need make no general claims about Jewish ethnocentrism and I do not. (I think Dutton is right that people tend to act in the ethnic interests, although Europeans tend to be individualists and therefore less prone to doing so [MacDonald, 2018c].

* * *

Cofnas then continues with his erroneous assumption that *CofC* depends on a general finding that Jews in general are ethnocentric, his main argument in opposition being contemporary rates of intermarriage. But of course this is completely irrelevant to whether the figures discussed in *CofC* had strong Jewish identification and saw their work as advancing Jewish group interests, chiefly combatting anti-Semitism.

* * *

Cofnas disputes my interpretation of a citation (Niebuhr, 2001) I used in the Preface to the Paperback Edition of *CofC* (2002; p. xvii). I claimed:

Recent guidelines for Reform Judaism emphasize traditional practices of conversion, such as circumcision, that are likely to minimize converts, and proselytism is explicitly rejected. It would appear that Conservative religious forms of Judaism will be the rule in the Diaspora and there will be a self-conscious ethnic aspect to Jewish religiosity.

My interpretation of the statement is accurate. The new guidelines were intended to minimize converts and proselytism was rejected. “[T]he guidelines were meant to emphasize the movement’s receptivity to converts, not an interest in proselytizing. ... [T]he guidelines reflect a continuing shift within Reform

Judaism away from what some rabbis refer to as a “minimalist” approach to the faith and toward a greater embrace of traditional practices, which were discarded by the movement’s founders in the 19th century.” Clearly, they are tightening things up to get away from a minimalist approach and a greater emphasis on tradition and clearly oppose proselytism. In any case, however one interprets this, it is not relevant to a critique of *CofC*.

This is the point I was making. However, Cofnas points out that author states that converts are welcomed (while he ignoring the parts of the article that emphasized minimizing converts and rejecting proselytism). These statements are of course not inconsistent. Moreover, the high rates of conversion and intermarriage in the contemporary diaspora may indeed lessen Jewish power and influence in the future, but they are irrelevant to assessing Jewish power and influence at this time and they are irrelevant to the thesis of *CofC*.

* * *

Regarding whether intermarriage has benefits for Judaism, Cofnas seems to think that to make such a (well-documented) claim means that “the theory thereby loses any predictive or explanatory value.” But what theory is that? Surely not the theoretical basis of *CofC* which makes no claims about Jewish intermarriage.

* * *

Finally, responding to Cofnas addresses an issue from my first reply—how to interpret the Jewish victims of the Polish security forces during the post-World War II period. Although he is replying to Dutton, the reader is left with the impression that I had not addressed this issue. However, I had already rejected this claim on different grounds than Dutton does. He should have at least referred to this material. This is from my first reply (MacDonald, 2018a):

Unfortunately, [Jaff] Schatz [1991¹] doesn’t explain why Jews were targeted by the security forces but cites an article by Włodzimierz Rozenbaum [1972–73] that is generally congruent with Schatz’s treatment. In his treatment, over the period from around 1949 to 1968 Jews were targeted because they were seen as overrepresented in the government. Even in 1947 Deputy Prime Minister Władysław Gomułka, who was eventually removed due to “nationalist deviation,” approved a request by the Minister the Public Security (secret police) to replace Jewish personnel with “true” Poles, a policy he (Gomułka) claimed had been approved by Stalin; however, there is no indication of whether this was carried out. Many Jewish communists had joined the government in the immediate aftermath of the war, as Schatz also notes, but beginning in 1949 they began to be “systematically eliminated from important positions in the Party apparatus, the administration, and in the armed forces” (Rozenbaum, 1972–1973, 76). The forty percent Jewish victims figure comes from a 1956

¹ Schatz (1991) is cited extensively in Chapter 3 of *CofC*.

report on the military secret police which also noted that there were only a few Jews in that organization at that time. (Rozenbaum, 1972–1973, 76). These trends paralleled trends in the Soviet Union at the time, and accelerated after Stalin’s death (e.g., Nikita Khrushchev’s remark that “you have already too many Abramoviches” (in Schatz 1991, 272).

From 1955–57 this continued, with Jews who had held powerful positions in the post-war period being targeted by Stalinists who blamed them for abuses during this period and appealed to popular hatred for “Jewish rule” to rally public opinion against liberalizing tendencies (favored by Jews). After a spate of emigration, by 1957 only 25000 Jews remained in Poland, but the trend to remove Jews from positions of power continued, followed by “the all-out purge of 1967–1968” (Rozenbaum, 1972–1973, 83). At the end, Jews were targeted because of or (more likely) on the pretext of their Zionist sympathies in the context of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Thus Jews were increasingly victimized by the government and security forces from 1949–1968 because of their prominent positions in the government—an account in agreement with the material I cite from Schatz. If there is one thing Jews have learned, it’s that no system of government is guaranteed to be resistant to anti-Jewish attitudes. The main story line is the gradual triumph of Polish nationalism at the expense of Jewish power. Similarly, after being a dominant elite in the Soviet Union beginning with the Bolshevik Revolution and extending at least well into the 1930s (and really until after World War II), Jewish power declined, Jews were purged from positions of power, and Jews ultimately became leaders of the refusenik movement aimed at being able to emigrate from the USSR [Slezkine, 2004].

Surely it is incumbent on a critic to not simply ignore the rebuttal of his arguments by the person he is criticizing.

* * *

In conclusion, Cofnas’s criticisms of *CofC* fall short of posing any challenge to the thesis of the book. He fails to grasp the theoretical basis of the book and therefore assumes that it relies on general statements about Jewish ethnocentrism and intermarriage when in fact it relies on showing the Jewish identities and motivations of specific sets of Jewish intellectuals and political figures. Moreover, in his criticisms he consistently fails to take account of the defense of my work in my online comments on his previous papers criticizing my work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

As the sole author, I state that there is no conflict of interest.

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