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The American Jewish Periphery: An Overview

by

Joel Perlmann
The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College

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The Levy Economics Institute
P.O. Box 5000
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504-5000
http://www.levy.org

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ABSTRACT

This paper calls attention to the American Jewish periphery—Americans of recent Jewish origin who have only the most tenuous connections, if any, with those origins. This periphery has been growing to the point that there are now, for example, nearly a million Americans with recent Jewish origins (origins no farther back in time than the nuclear family in which they were raised) who report that they are Christians. The paper focuses heavily on the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 2000. First, the dataset provides us an excellent dataset on "Americans of recent Jewish origin." Second, it provides us with a great deal of information about the ethnocultural trajectories of those Americans, as shown in the social and cultural characteristics of NJPS respondents. Finally the paper considers some of the (sometimes bitter) discussions about the NJPS as a cultural phenomenon indicative of an ethnic group grappling with widespread intermarriage: specifically, the discussions about which NJPS respondents should be recognized as full-fledged Jews, and which should be thought of as having drifted too far to be so defined. I also draw on the experience of other ethnocultural groups for illumination as to how these groups have dealt with a legacy of widespread intermarriage.

INTRODUCTION

This paper calls attention to the American Jewish periphery—to its growing importance in the American Jewish experience and, hence, in the study of American ethnicity and assimilation. By the American Jewish periphery, I mean those Americans of recent Jewish origins who have only the most tenuous connections, if any connections, with those Jewish origins.[1] This periphery has been growing to the point that there are now, for example, nearly a million Americans with recent Jewish origins (origins no farther back in time than the nuclear family in which they were raised) who report that they are Christians. I focus heavily on the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000, to which I refer throughout as the NJPS. First, I emphasize that the survey provides us an excellent dataset on a particular population, but the population in question is not "American Jews" but "Americans of recent Jewish origin." This distinction will probably strike some researchers who have used the dataset as obvious as soon as they read these sentences; nevertheless, I don't think it has been discussed much (if at all). Second, I stress that the dataset provides us with a great deal of information about the ethnocultural trajectories of Americans of recent Jewish origin—how they were raised and how they have come, as adults, to relate to their Jewish origins. In the course of making this second point, I provide a good deal of descriptive information from the NJPS dataset itself. Again, much of it will be familiar to those who have used the dataset or studied the works of those who have. Still, I think some will be new, even to most who have followed the literature closely. Finally, I turn from the dataset itself to the debates around it. I am not interested here in the technical questions—about how random digit dialing, sampling frames, weighting, or screening were carried out, or even about the decisions to ask fewer questions of respondents judged not to be Jewish today. Rather, the contentious feature that interests me is the effort by study administrators to define which NJPS respondents, which Americans of recent Jewish origin, should be recognized as full-fledged Jews. My point is not to condemn or defend this effort, but to underscore that it can be usefully

[1] I use the term "American Jewish periphery" with apologies to Gary Tobin and Sid Groeneman, who discussed a very similar group as the "American Jewish penumbra" (Tobin and Groeneman 2003). My usage is restricted to the population with Jewish origins no farther back in time than the nuclear family in which the respondent was raised, whereas they appear to include also more distant origins.

understood as a typical result for an American ethnic group that has reached a stage in which intermarriage has become very prevalent, and the children of intermarriage have a wide array of attachments to their Jewish origins. Thus, the NJPS serves both as dataset and as a subject of revealing cultural struggle itself. I also draw on the experience of other groups for illumination in this connection, and I argue that more such comparative work would be useful.

I should clarify at once that my goal is not to ask the familiar question, "Can the American Jewish community survive in the future?" Obviously, there is some connection between the growing number at the margins and the question of group survival, but it is by no means a straightforward connection. The survival of the group primarily depends on *other* people than those on whom I concentrate; it primarily depends, that is, not on the periphery, but on the core, on people who are much more solidly involved with their Jewish legacy. Trends at the core and periphery are bound to have some connections to each other, but in many ways, these trends develop independently.

I cannot claim long expertise through research on the contemporary American Jewish experience; if I have missed relevant work by others, I apologize in advance. Of the work I do know, Bruce Phillips' fascinating papers (2005a and 2005b) have been especially helpful for me. In any case, I am reasonably confident that the study of the American Jewish periphery has not received the attention it deserves, given its numeric and theoretical importance. My purpose here is to set out questions and some evidence in the hope of stimulating refinement, correction, and especially much more exploration.

NJPS 2000 AS A SURVEY OF AMERICANS WITH RECENT JEWISH ORIGINS

Surveying American Jews through stratified random sampling, no matter how sophisticated the stratification design, is difficult because the Jews comprise less than 2% of the American population, and so many screening calls must be made (typically using random digit dialing) before reaching a Jewish respondent. Furthermore, there is always the question of what to ask: are the Jews to be identified as a religion, an ethnic group, or in some other way? The NJPS obtained a sample of 5,148 respondents who were selected

from a vastly larger number of initially screened households through a series of four screening questions:

- What is your religion, if any?
- Do you have a Jewish mother or Jewish father?
- Were you raised Jewish?
- Do you consider yourself Jewish for any reason?

When at least one adult member of a household provided an affirmative answer to one of these questions, that household was included in the sample, and one qualified adult household member was randomly selected as the sampled respondent. Study administrators wrote that this battery of screener questions "reflects the view that there are many ways to define the Jewish population, based on religion, ethnic, and purely subjective or ideological definitions." The questions leave a nagging awareness that the context of exploration is set by a question on religion, but I am not sure any alternative strategy would have been better.[2]

In any case, from my point of view, the big advantage of the NJPS screener questions is that they do a reasonably good job of capturing people who came from a family with some recent Jewish origin. That is, the respondents had a parent or guardian with Jewish origins. Also, of course, the screener questions will capture "Jews by choice," those who formally converted to Judaism under the auspices of some rabbinic authority or chose to become Jewish informally. My interests in this paper generally bypass the Jews by choice; these Jews can be easily isolated from those of recent Jewish origin in the dataset. And so when I compare respondents with single and mixed origins below, Jews by choice are among the small group excluded altogether (others excluded are respondents with missing data on some relevant aspect of origins). On the other hand, in discussing the contemporary attachment categories that respondents report, Jews by choice are included among other Jews.

[2] On the NJPS, I have found Klaff and Mott (2005), and Kadushin, Phillips, and Saxe (2005) especially helpful.

Consider how the screener questions differ from the United States ancestry question, which asks, “What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origins?” One difference, of course, is that the ancestry question explicitly excludes a religious answer, so “Jewish” is an unacceptable ancestry response. Also, the ancestry question itself does not ask about membership in any specific origin group and, therefore, the respondent decides which origins to list. When one’s origins are all in one or two groups—Italian, Mexican, Polish—that decision may seem straightforward; but the descendents of many generations of ethnic blending have many choices. Or rather, they would have many choices if they knew the genealogical record. Consider the offspring of a fourth-generation Italian and someone of English, German, Swedish, Scotch-Irish, and Native American roots.

A better comparison with the NJPS screener questions would be with an ancestry questions that asks explicitly whether or not an individual has origins in one particular named group. That is just what the Hispanic question on federal questionnaires does ask: “Is this person … Hispanic?” Note, moreover, that answering yes to the Hispanic question does not mean that the respondent does not have other ancestries as well. It might be said that one difference between the Hispanic origin question and the thrust of the NJPS screener questions is that the screener only seeks to go back to the respondent’s own nuclear family of origin in seeking Jewish roots. Thus, a respondent who is aware of a Jewish grandparent, but believes that this genealogical fact had no impact on the relevant parent or on him or herself will presumably be screened out of the NJPS. Of course, in the parallel case, the respondent to the federal questionnaire *might not* declare him or herself to be of Hispanic origins either. If there is only *knowledge* of the roots, but no *identification* with those roots, the ancestry question is unlikely to elicit mention of those roots; the Hispanic question may or may not elicit them. The NJPS seems to be like the ancestry question in this regard when it comes to knowledge of origins more than one generation back, but even stronger than the Hispanic question in encouraging mention of relevant roots found in one’s own nuclear family of origin, even if one does not identify

with them. Like both census questions, the screener questions do not tell us anything about how many generations removed from immigration the group member is.[3]

On the other hand, the NJPS screener process also tries, wisely I think, to protect against over-inclusiveness. There is a follow-up screener question (not listed among the four mentioned above) that is asked of those who do not list themselves as Jewish by religion, parentage, or upbringing and yet respond affirmatively when asked whether they "Consider themselves Jewish in any way." The follow-up probes whether or not the respondent is simply making a Christian theological declaration—for example, a statement that all Christians are in some sense Jewish. This is a problem that the census ancestry and Hispanic questions do not confront. A purist, coming from the census context, might protest that if the respondent identifies with Jews only out of Christian theological principle that is the respondents business and the researcher should not weed out such responses. But this purist approach simply cannot be allowed to stand in studying Jews. The group of Christians involved in these affirmative responses to the question about considering oneself Jewish are admittedly only a minute fraction of all American Christians—perhaps 1%. But 1% of American Christians amount in absolute numbers to about 50% of Americans of Jewish origins. Including these Christians in a sample of Jewish-origin people would drastically skew the NJPS results in meaningless directions: not only would huge fractions of NJPS respondents report that they are Christians; they would also report living in small cities and towns of the South and Southwest, lower average incomes and education than the rest of the respondents, higher membership in the Republican party, and so on. So common sense must win out over the purist form of ancestry question in taking on the Jewish questions.[4]

To summarize then: the NJPS screener questions seem to me to do a reasonably good job in identifying people who are aware of Jewish origins in their parents'

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[3] The ancestry question in the 1980 and 1990 censuses phrased the instructions that accompanied the question in terms of "the ancestry group with which this person identifies." I have not found that feature of the instruction in the 2000 census materials (Lieberson and Waters 1988; U. S. Bureau of the Census 2006).

[4] The size of this Christian group can be seen in categories 12 and 18 of the NJPS administrators' allocation schedule, which were assigned not to the NJPS but to the control group of other Americans than those who meant the screening criteria (Klaff and Mott 2005). There are only 38 such sample members, but the average weight for these people is about 50 times the average weight assigned to a respondent in the NJPS dataset. Adding them into the NJPS would have the effect of raising the population that the NJPS purports to represent by close to 40% (from 5,148 sample members representing a population of about 5 million to 5176 sample members representing a population of about 7 million).

generation and adding to that group the much smaller number who became Jews by choice. For simplicity, I will slip into calling the sample one of Americans with recent Jewish origins; but recall that I am also including the Jews by choice (including in the last group both formal converts and others).

We can now proceed to ask in more detail about the nature of those recent Jewish origins. It is a staple of research on American Jews that intermarriage has been climbing rapidly in recent decades, and the questions I want to ask about recent Jewish origins are indirectly related to that rise in intermarriage. Intermarriage is both a *reflection* of assimilative tendencies and a *stimulus* to further assimilative tendencies. People who intermarry feel they have much in common, despite ethnoreligious differences, and families that draw on two traditions, rather than one, in raising the next generation are less likely, other things being equal, to stress one of those traditions as fully as families of one origin. It is possible, of course, at the familial or communal level to work *against* these trends, but these generally are the trends.

Table 1 shows the proportion of all NJPS respondents who said that one or both parents were born Jewish, Jewish and something else, or born not Jewish.[5] I have cross-tabulated these responses with responses to another question as to whether one was raised Jewish, Jewish and something else, or only something else. From the cells of this cross-tabulation, I've constructed two categories—single Jewish origins (68% of the weighted sample), mixed Jewish and non-Jewish origins (28%), and all others (4%). The single origins are defined to be inclusive: it includes all those who responded that both parents were born Jewish, whether or not they were raised only Jewish. At the same time, it includes those raised "only Jewish," whether or not they said that both parents were born Jewish. The purpose of this inclusivity is to accept as "single" origin those respondents who had a parent not born Jewish but were nevertheless raised as Jewish only. In the NJPS sample, just over a fifth of those who reported that one parent was not born only Jewish were raised only Jewish.[6] But it is not the inclusivity that makes the single-origin group dominant. By my definition, it comprises 68% of respondents; had I limited it to those who reported two parents born only Jewish, it would still have included 59% of the

[5] There are some complexities due to missing data, answers to variants of the question, and so on.
[6] Another eighth were raised partly Jewish.

NJPS respondents. The small "other" category comprises those with incomplete responses, as well as those who are Jews by choice and not by virtue of their parents or upbringing.

Table 1. Assigning NJPS Respondents to Single, Mixed, and Other Origins

parent's origins	*percentage of NJPS respondents*					
	all respondents		Respondents also sorted by how "raised"			
			Jewish	Jewish + other	other only	missing
both born Jewish	60		54	2	3	0.2
one born Jewish, one mixed	1		0.2	0.1	0.4	
one born Jewish, one not Jewish	23		6	3	14	0.1
both mixed	0		0.0	0.0	0.3	
one mixed, one not Jewish	4		0.1	0.2	4	
both not born J.; at least one 'is' Jewish*	7		1	1	5	
both not -- other than row above	3		1	0.4	2	
incomplete parental data	1		0.0	0.0	1	0.0
total	*100*		*62*	*7*	*30*	*0.3*
Estimated adult population, 18 + over	5019519					

Notes:
1) Blank cells have no entries; cells with smaller font and figures shown to one decimal place represent less than 0.5% of the respondents. Unweighted N: 5,148.
2) Respondents in cells shaded darkest were classified as having single origins (68% of the weighted total sample), those in cells lightly shaded as having mixed origins (28%), and those in unshaded cells as having other origins (4%).
3) This table, like all subsequent ones, includes all NJPS respondents; for the difference between the size of this sample and that used in NJPS publications, see also Table 8.
* These respondents answered another screener question, "Are either of your parents Jewish?" in the affirmative, but later said neither parent was "born" Jewish or partly Jewish.

Recall that I am including here all those respondents who told the NJPS interviewers that they had recent Jewish origins; this is a much more inclusive definition of the relevant population than NJPS reports themselves use. I will come back to this difference later, but for the moment, notice simply that the NJPS reports rule out a large number on the American Jewish periphery and typically discuss an American Jewish adult population of 3.6 million individuals. I am dealing with a much wider definition, the NJPS sample members who have some recent Jewish origin, whether or not the NJPS administrators or we ourselves would call all of these respondents Jewish. This wider population is estimated to include just over 5 million adults, using the NJPS weights.

Table 2 shows the dramatic difference in the proportions of NJPS respondents with single origins across the age spectrum. Among the oldest, those 75 years of age and older, 87% of the sample members have single origins and 10% have mixed origins. The proportions shift steadily across the age cohorts, so that among those 25–34 years of age, 61% have single origins and 36% mixed origins, and among those 18–24 years of age the figures are 55% and 43%, respectively. Recall that I am using an inclusive definition of single origins; in particular, if an intermarried couple chose to raise their child Jewish, that child is classified as having single origins. Nevertheless, among young adults of recent Jewish origin, we are approaching the point at which, even by this definition, single origins will soon encompass less than half the group.[7]

Table 2. NJPS Respondents by Origin Type

origin type	percentage of NJPS respondents		percentage of NJPS respondents -- by age				
			18-24	25-34	35-54	55-74	75 +
single	68		55	61	65	75	87
mixed	28		43	36	29	22	10
other	4		2	3	6	3	3
Total	100		100	100	100	100	100

Definitions:
single=both parents born Jewish, or raised only Jewish
mixed=some Jewish and some non-Jewish parentage and raised mixed or non-Jewish
other=Jews by choice and miscelaneous cases with missing data.

On classifying respondents by origin, see also Table1.

The single-mixed spectrum is also strongly tied to the geography of American Jewish life (Table 3). I crudely distinguished among three types of location: the New York City metro area (including 24% of all weighted NJPS sample members in the age group), a group of other big Jewish metro centers (43%), and the rest (33%). The other big Jewish metro centers include the metro areas along the Atlantic corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C., Chicago, four metro areas in Florida, and three in California. The rationale for this crude middle category is, that despite the great differences among these places, they represent either large centers in themselves and/or

[7] Indeed, using only the criterion of parental birth, the proportion with one parent born Jewish and one born not Jewish has surpassed the proportion with two parents born Jewish in the group 18 to 24 years of age (49% vs. 38%).

reasonably large centers which are moderately close to each other. The sheer size of the local Jewish population may not be the way students of intermarriage would define the relevant marriage market for an individual; much more important would be the proportion of Jews in that market. Nevertheless, the size of the local Jewish population is at least relevant to the better measure. In any case, for our purposes, something else may well be more important than the proportion of Jews in the marriage market anyway. The larger the Jewish population, the higher the probability that Jewish institutions will be developed and that Jewish awareness and involvement will be easier to sustain. Relying on this crude division into three types of areas, we find that in the New York metro area, 84% of sample members are of single origin, 15% of mixed origin; in the middle group of big Jewish metro centers, 73% and 24% respectively, and in the rest of the country, where a third of all NJPS respondents live, 50% vs. 44%. Indeed, young adults (18 to 34 years of age) are slightly more likely to live outside the biggest Jewish metro centers (38%) and among them, single origins are already the minority type, by 42% to 55% for mixed origins.

Table 3. NJPS Respondents' Origin Type by Geographic Location

origin type		percentage of NJPS respondents		
		Metro 1	Metro 2	all other
single		84	73	50
mixed		15	24	44
other		1	4	6
Total		100	100	100

Definitions:
metro 1= the New York City metropolitan area
metro 2 =the Atlantic corridor from Boston to Washington, D.C.; the Chicago metropolitan area; 4 metropolitan areas in Florida; 3 metropolitan areas in California.
All other = the remainder of the United States.

By way of summarizing, consider how these origin findings differ from the well-known finding that American Jewish intermarriage has been rising sharply. First, as I stressed earlier, origins refer to the way respondents grew up and not to their own marriages (in fact, I do not discuss their own marriages in this paper at all). Second, my figures refer to a combination of parental intermarriage patterns and parental decisions on

child-rearing—both reported by their adult children, the NJPS respondents. So the connections between the growth of intermarriage in the parents' generation and the growth of mixed origins in the respondents' generation are related, but in complex ways. One desideratum, indeed, would be a clear review of the intermarriage rate by birth cohort in the parental generation that we could then relate to the reports of single vs. mixed origin by age in NJPS 2000.

NJPS RESPONDENTS: THE CONTINUUM OF THEIR OWN JEWISH ATTACHMENT TYPES

I utilize here a classification system for the entire spectrum of respondents' Jewish attachment, involving nine categories of attachment (Table 4).[8] The first four categories are the familiar American Jewish religious denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or other. Among the small number of "other," about half were Reconstructionists; the rest gave a variety of answers, many indicating that they were between the other denominations. Respondents who reported that they could be classified with one of these denominations were so classified. However, a large number of "other" respondents had said they were Jews but resisted classification with any denomination; they comprise the fifth category of attachment, called here "Just Jews."

[8] The classification scheme for the more tenuous categories of attachment, that is, for the American Jewish periphery, closely follows the classification system Bruce Phillips (2005a and 2005b) has used, although the criteria by which I sorted respondents into attachment categories may differ slightly from his.

Table 4. The Continuum of American Jewish Attachments (NJPS respondents, 2000)

Attachment categories	percentage of NJPS respondents		
	all	by origin type:	
		single	mixed
Respondent mentioned Jewish denomination			
1. Orthodox	6	9	0
2. Conservative	17	23	2
3. Reform	23	31	3
4. Other	2	3	0
Subtotal: all denominations	*49*	*66*	*6*
Other types of attachment			
5. "Just Jew"	19	23	10
6. No Jewish attachment, no religion	8	4	20
7. No Jewish attachment, non-Christian religion	4	0	11
8. Jewish attachment and Christian	6	2	12
9. Christian, no Jewish attachment	14	4	41
Subtotal: all other types of attachment	*51*	*34*	*94*
Total: all attachment types	*100*	*100*	*100*

Definitions:
rows 1-4 = mentioned Jewish religion and a denomination;
row 5 = all other mentions of Jewish attachment (other than row 8);
row 6 = do not consider themselves Jewish in any way, and do not affiliate with any religion;
row 7= same as row 6, but affiliate with a non-Christian religion;
row 8 = any form of Jewish attachment and affiliation with any form of Christianity;
row 9 = same as row 6, but affiliate with Christianity.

Single vs. mixed origins: see definitions in Table 2.

Note: Christians whose only reason for claiming Jewish attachment is derived from their Christianity are not included in the NJPS.

At the other end of the spectrum, a large number of NJPS respondents said that they were Christians, or that they were both Christians and Jews, my eighth and ninth categories in the spectrum of attachments.[9] On the other hand, only a small number of people said they were Jewish and some religion *other* than Christian—Jewish and Buddhist for example. These I classified by their Jewish response (by specific denomination or "Just Jew"). The rationale for distinguishing the Jewish/Christian mix

[9] Notice that even if a person classified as both Christian and Jew also mentioned that he or she could be classified with a specific Jewish denomination, they were not classified in that attachment category, but in the eighth category, Christian and Jew. Involved are about a quarter of the respondents classified as Christian and Jew, or about 1.5% of the NJPS weighted sample.

from the Jewish/other mix is based on both numeric and theoretical considerations. Only the former involves significant numbers or respondents. Moreover, there are a great many more NJPS respondents who mention *only* a Christian religion. Those who answered both Christian and Jew may, therefore, be seen as a bridge to that large ninth category of attachment. And finally, as the United States is overwhelmingly a Christian country, the most extreme point on the continuum of assimilatory changes is from Jewish to Christian.[10] Finally, I distinguished two other categories of attachment that fall between "Just Jews" and "Jewish and Christian." The sixth attachment type, in rank ordering coming after "Just Jews," is a fairly large group of respondents (and, as we shall see, especially young respondents) who say that they have no Jewish attachment, religious or other, and also that they are not members of any other religious group. By contrast, the seventh category is small and I include it only for the sake of conceptual clarity: these are respondents who reported that they had no Jewish attachment but they were adherents of a religion other than Christianity. Overall, Table 4 shows that 49% of the NJPS weighted sample are members of denominations (6% Orthodox, 17% Conservative, 23% Reform); another 19% say they are "Just Jews." One fifth say that they are Christians only or both Christian and Jewish. Notice, finally, that these categories of attachment are independent of origin type. By whatever criterion the respondents qualify as Americans of recent Jewish origin, the distribution across the nine categories of attachment illustrates how they describe their outlook today.

I now attempt to describe more fully what sort of people make up these attachment categories. Partly, my goal is methodological: to show that these differences in responses meaningfully reflect differences in outlook and background. My goal is partly substantive: to shed at least a little light on the social and cultural profiles of the people in these categories. The evidence in the NJPS is fulsome on the mainstream Jews, but much less so on the American Jewish periphery; still, we can make some progress.

I will concentrate on the part of the spectrum of attachments about which we know least. Specifically, I will often *exclude* from consideration respondents who have been classified by denomination—except the Reform Jews, and I also exclude the small

[10] By contrast, to note that some peripheral Jews claim to be Jews and Buddhists at the same time may at most say something about marginal patterns of searching for spirituality, or about more modest steps to leave the Jewish fold.

proportion who claimed to be adherents of religions other than Judaism or Christianity. Thus, I will generally concentrate on five categories of attachment: Reform, "Just Jews," "no Jewish attachment and no other religion," and the two Christian categories. I include the Reform Jews in order to determine how far the respondents in the Reform category differ from those in the non-denominational categories. Reform, after all, is the Jewish religious denomination associated with having made the fullest compromises with modern American life, making ease of entry into the American mainstream smoothest at the religious/cultural level. Is, as the Orthodox might say, the Reform "the soft underbelly" of older attachments, a link to the more tenuous attachments? I explore this question only by asking whether the people classified as Reform share the same socio-cultural profile with the more tenuous attachment categories.

Consider first the stunning connection between an individual's report of single or mixed origins, and the kind of attachment reported (shown in Table 4 for all attachment types). Among those with single origins, 66% gave a denominational affiliation, and more than a third of these were Orthodox—23% of all single-origin respondents. By contrast, among those reporting mixed origins, *almost no one* reported a denominational affiliation, a fifth said they were "Just Jews" (only 4% of those with single origins had said so) and *just over half* reported themselves in one of the two Christian categories. Since those with mixed origins are more prevalent among younger adults and especially among those respondents living outside the biggest Jewish centers, it is no surprise to learn that tenuous forms of attachment are also more prevalent among the young and outside the biggest Jewish metro centers (not shown). Still, these are tendencies, not very strong connections; after all, we also find plenty of people with single origins among the young and in those locations. So the indirect connection between age or metro status on the one hand and attachment type on the other is by no means as strong as the direct connection between origin type and attachment category. In this context, and in several others below, one could of course disaggregate with multivariate analysis; but for the most part, knowing the resulting coefficients would not much advance my goal of learning about the composition of these attachment groups.

Now consider the cross tabulation of origins and attachments "the other way," by asking how prevalent people of single and mixed origins are among various attachment

groups (Table 5). The Reform Jews overwhelmingly reported single origins. Those who said they were “Just Jews” were almost as likely to have done so. But there is a great divide between these two attachment groups and the other three, which are predominantly made up of respondents who claimed mixed origins. This is hardly surprising in connection with the Christian attachments. However, notice also the different origins of those who reported themselves “Just Jews” and those who said they had no Jewish attachment, nor attachment to any other religion. These are not, it seems, the same sort of people who happened to give a slightly different response on the screener questions about Jewishness.

Table 5. Selected Attachment Categories: Their Composition by Origins, NJPS 2000

Attachment category	origin type		
	single	mixed	total*
Reform Jew	92	4	100
"Just Jew"	82	15	100
No Jewish attachment, no religion	32	68	100
Jewish attachment and Christian	28	60	100
Christian, no Jewish attachment	18	79	100

*Includes "other" origins, not shown at left; for definitions see Table 2.

The specific responses to the religion and denomination questions further clarify the composition of these two categories of attachment. Three quarters of those who said they were “Just Jews” responded to the religion question by mentioning Jewishness, but when they were asked about denomination, they former group gave their “Just Jew” response (Table 6, panel A). That response may cover quite different meanings in different age groups and in different parts of the country; but it should be stressed that this group cannot be taken to be embracing an ethnocultural or secular definition of Jewishness, instead of a religious one, simply because they said they were “Just Jews.” A few of the people so classified did, indeed, report specifically that they were secular or ethnic in their Jewishness. Both these types of responses together amount to a mere 6% of all those classified as “Just Jews”—contrasted with 75% of those in this attachment category who actually opted for the vaguer statement about being “Just Jews.”

Table 6. Specific Responses in Selected Broad Attachment Categories: NJPS 2000

A. "Just Jew" and no Jewish attachment, no religion

A1. By responses to the religion question

Response	% of all in the attachment category		
	"Just Jew"		No J. attch. no religion
Jewish	61		
Jewish and other	15		
other rel (specified or unspecified)	4		
Agnostic	4		12
Atheist	0		9
none, no religion, secular	16		80
*total **	*100*		*100*

*Just Jew: 19% of all NJPS respondents,
no Jewish attachment, no religion: 8% of all NJPS respondents.

A2. Responses to the Jewish denomination question

Response	% of all in the attachment category		
	"Just Jew"		No J. attch. no religion
Just Jewish	75		n/a
Ethnic\cultural	2		
Secular, agnostic, atheist	4		
no religion, Jewish denomination, etc.	4		
"other," "non-practicing," misc	15		
	100		

B. Those who claimed a Christian affiliation

Christian denomination mentioned	Christian affiliation		
	and a Jewish attachment		only
Catholic	28		39
Baptist	13		18
Pentacostal/Charismatic	5		2
Methodist	5		5
Episcopalian	4		7
Lutheran	3		4
Presbyterian	3		4
Unitarian	3		3
All others specified	23		15
Christian unspec.	14		4
*Total***	100		100

**Christian and Jewish: 6% of NJPS respondents; Christian only: 15% of NJPS respondents.

What people *do* mean when they report being "Just Jews" is hard to say, and (to repeat) it could well mean different things in different age and geographic subcultures. However, two conclusions about this group seem clear enough. First, its members differ in origins from those of the "no Jewish attachment and no religion" category, and second, the size of the "Just Jews" group cannot be used as a measure of ethnicity or secular Jewishness. At the risk of belaboring this last point, note that the 6% of the "Just Jews" category who gave an ethnic or secular meaning to their response amount to about 1% of all NJPS respondents.

The specific Christian denominations mentioned by respondents in one of the two Christian attachment categories are revealing, too (Table 6, panel B). First, they allow us to rule out any speculation that Unitarianism functions as some sort of halfway house for Jews adopting Christianity—only 3% of these respondents reported that affiliation. Nor is it the case that the highest status Protestant denominations predominate; for example, the Episcopalians are swamped by the Catholics. The distribution is very roughly reflective of the American mainstream, not of any especially "Jewish" way of becoming Christian.

The median age in the Christian groups is moderately lower than in the Reform or the "Just Jew" category, as one would expect given the greater prevalence of mixed origins among the younger adults (Table 7, panel A). And similarly, a much higher proportion of the Christian groups are found outside the biggest Jewish metro areas—49%–51% compared to 31% of the Reform Jews (panel B). Nevertheless, these associations should not be exaggerated; the American Jewish periphery is not restricted to the youngest or to the smaller Jewish metro areas. For example, almost two fifths of NJPS respondents with Christian affiliations were found in the middle geographic category. Finally, the strikingly younger median age of those who claim no Jewish attachment and no religion is due to factors other than the high proportion of those people with mixed origins; those affiliated with Christianity, after all, are even more heavily of mixed origins, but are not as young. The low median age of those with no Jewish attachment and no religion is probably an age characteristic and not a birth cohort characteristic. Still, if so, it is intriguing to speculate about which of the other attachment categories they may adopt in future years; given their mixed origins, one suspects it may be one of the Christian categories.

Table 7. The Socio-Cultural Composition of Selected Attachment Categories: Reform Jews and the Periphery, NJPS 2000

A. Median Age

Attachment category	median age
Reform Jew	50
"Just Jew"	49
No Jewish attachment, no religion	35
Jewish attachment and Christian	45
Christian, no Jewish attachment	43

*B. Geographic location**

Attachment category	percentage in each type of place			
	Metro 1	metro 2	all other	total
Reform Jew	22	48	31	100
"Just Jew"	30	44	27	100
No Jewish attachment, no religion	15	41	44	100
Jewish attachment and Christian	10	39	51	100
Christian, no Jewish attachment	16	35	49	100

*For metro definitions see Table 3.

*C. Education***

Attachment category	% BA	% grad. degree
Reform Jew	74	37
"Just Jew"	61	29
No Jewish attachment, no religion	58	24
Jewish attachment and Christian	41	19
Christian, no Jewish attachment	39	13

*D. Household income over $100,000 in 1999***

Attachment category	% yes
Reform Jew	38
"Just Jew"	28
No Jewish attachment, no religion	29
Jewish attachment and Christian	14
Christian, no Jewish attachment	16

**Limited to respondents 25-64 years of age

E. American Political perspective

Attachment category	% liberal or very lib.	% Dem. voter
Reform Jew	46	61
"Just Jew"	45	53
No Jewish attachment, no religion	42	35
Jewish attachment and Christian	24	38
Christian, no Jewish attachment	23	33

Table 7. The Socio-Cultural Composition of Selected Attachment Categories:
Reform Jews and the periphery, NJPS 2000
(continued)

F. Are half or more of all friends Jewish?

Attachment category	% yes
Reform Jew	56
"Just Jew"	44
No Jewish attachment, no religion	13
Jewish attachment and Christian	17
Christian, no Jewish attachment	12

G. Connections to Israel

Attachment category	Visited? % yes	Emotionally tied? % not very, not at all	Familiar with soc.- pol.? % not very, not at all
Reform Jew	34	36	10
"Just Jew"	26	45	19
No Jewish attachment, no religion	9	78	31
Jewish attachment and Christian	8	44	24
Christian, no Jewish attachment	6	61	28

H. Belief in God?

Attachment category	% yes
Reform Jew	77
"Just Jew"	61
No Jewish attachment, no religion	51
Jewish attachment and Christian	94
Christian, no Jewish attachment	96

It is especially clear in the remaining social characteristics presented here—features of socioeconomic status, American political outlook, and reports on Jewish matters—that there is a systematic difference between the first and last pairs of attachments, on the one hand, the two explicitly Jewish attachments (Reform Jews and "Just Jews") and the two Christian attachments. Whatever the differences *within* each pair, the differences *between* the pairs are important. The group with no Jewish attachment and no religion occupies a middling position, closer to one or the other pair, depending on the measure. Small and young as it is, too much should not be made of its fluctuations from measure to measure.

A glance at educational attainments makes it clear that it is not the most educated who are in the most tenuous attachment categories; the reverse is closer to the case (panel

C). The same is true of household income data (panel D). Still, even among the Christian respondents, both degree completion and attainment of a high household income appear to be notably more common than in the nation as a whole (e.g., Smith 2005). The social history here would be important to sort out: the connections between parental education, income intermarriage, and childrearing choices, as well as the intergenerational transmission of educational and income levels.[11] There is also a big divide in political outlooks between people in the two clearly Jewish categories and those in the Christian categories (panel E).

There is relatively little in the NJPS about how the Jewish periphery relates to specific Jewish issues because NJPS administrators chose not to ask them these sorts of questions.[12] Still, the NJPS did ask a few relevant questions of everyone. The proportion of people reporting that half or more of their friends were Jewish links the Reform with "Just Jews" and sharply distinguishes them from the other three groups (panel F). A similar lineup holds in connection with Israel (panel G). A minority in any group have visited the country, but such visitors are most common among the Reform, and then among those who are "Just Jews." Feelings for Israel do not line up quite so neatly, presumably because the Christian groups share some of that feeling, and because those who claim no Jewish attachment and no religion are especially untouched by such feelings. The emotional attachment to Israel is not negligible in the American population generally. Nevertheless, more than such a "base level" connection is involved, at least for most of our respondents; thus, for example, those claiming Jewish and Christian attachment are less likely to report low emotional attachment than those only Christian. Acknowledgement of low levels of familiarity with the social and political situation in Israel is fairly rare; such as it is, the spread confirms the general rank ordering of the attachment types.

Last but not least, belief in God does not carry us very far, but it confirms the notion that the Christian attachments most approach American norms (panel H). Even among those who claim no religion, half say they do believe in God, as do three fifths of

[11] In summarizing educational and income data, I limited the sample to those 25–64 years of age (in order to avoid distortions created by those who had not completed schooling or had retired from the earning population).

[12] More work could probably be done by analyzing data asked only of part of the spectrum, but I didn't want to deal with a big missing data problem situated just where I wanted to look most intently.

“Just Jews” and three quarters of Reform Jews. Yet among those with Christian attachments, the “yes” proportions soar into the mid 90s.

All in all, the patterns presented in this section are of some substantive interest; and the NJPS can be mined for still more. Nevertheless, we can go only so far in understanding the American Jewish periphery with the NJPS dataset; it was not collected to illuminate this population, after all. A fuller portrait will require focused attention from researchers.

THE PERIPHERY, AMERICAN-JEWISH INSTITUTIONS, AND ASSIMILATION RESEARCH

When origins are mixed and attachments so varied, who gets counted as a Jew from this periphery? We need look no further than the NJPS itself to see one context in which the question played out. The United Jewish Communities (UJC) sponsored and published the official reports about the NJPS survey, but these reports do not deal with the population of recent-Jewish origin, a population of 5 million adults. Rather, the reports focus chiefly on “Jewish” adult population, which numbers in the mid-three million range. On occasion, the reports also describe another group of some 700,000 “Jewish connected individuals.” The Jewish connected person “has some Jewish background... and belongs to a non-monotheistic religion” (Klaff and Mott 2005). The mutually exclusive religious outlooks, then, are between being Jewish and adhering to another monotheistic religion. Now there are only two other monotheistic religions and few American Jews have converted to Islam. So, in plain English, if a person of Jewish origin defines himself as a Christian, he or she is no longer “Jewish” or “Jewish connected.” However, if a person simply says he or she is a member of some *other* religion—then the respondent is “Jewish connected” (but not Jewish). The NJPS administrators define the non-monotheistic religions as theologically compatible Judaism, while labeling Christianity (except Unitarianism) and Islam as incompatible on the basis of historical struggle between the monotheistic religions. One senses that this tortured reasoning justifies what is really a sociological insight about assimilation and the mainstream role of American Christianity.

Now my point is not to criticize or embrace these decisions, but to note that the effort is to define which part of a continuum should be included in studying Jews. For policy makers, and for many other purposes, such decisions about who is to be included may make good sense, but when it comes to studying the dynamics of change over time, it will often be much more illuminating to look at the periphery, as well as at the core.

From a numeric point of view, the effect of these deletions should be appreciated (Table 8). The NJPS administrators have, on occasion, published the *unweighted* effect of these definitional restrictions: 625 individuals were removed from a sample of 5,148 as non-Jews (read "Christians") and 376 others were treated as Jewish connected (panel A). These groups comprise 12% and 7%, respectively, of all NJPS respondents. To the best of my knowledge, the NJPS administrators have never shown the impact of these deletions on the weighted NJPS sample. The non-Jews comprise 19% and the Jewish connected make up 14% of the weighted respondents; thus, a total of 33% of all respondents are removed from the population of recent Jewish origin in defining the population of Jews (panel B). Among young adults (18–34 years of age), the excluded groups together comprise 42% of all respondents.

Table 8. The Proportion of NJPS Respondents Classified as "Jewish" and other: the NJPS 2000 Classification System

A. The unweighted sample

classification	N of cases		% of cases
Jewish	4147		81
Jewish-connected	376		7
non-Jewish	625		12
total	5148		100

B . The sample with NJPS recommended weights applied

classification	est. pop. represented: N (in 000s)		% of total population		
			all adults		18-34 yrs. of age
Jewish	3360		67		58
Jewish-connected	697		14		22
non-Jewish	963		19		21
total	5020		100		100

A similar survey effort had been carried out ten years earlier in the 1990 NJPS (Goldstein 1992). For the more recent survey, the administrators of 2000 NJPS somewhat narrowed the definition of who is a Jew. They did so partly because the earlier survey had not included one of the screener questions: “Do you consider yourself a Jew for any reason?” Since, for example, some people who said they had no religion also answered the fourth screener question in the negative, the NJPS 2000 administrators felt they had additional information on the basis of which those respondents should not be counted as Jews. However, a comparison of the two surveys suggests several other observations about definitions. The 1990 NJPS also offered a suggested definition of who is “really” a Jew, the concept of the “Core Jewish Population” or CJP. This 1990 definition, like the 2000 one, excluded anyone who reported that they had adopted another religion—primarily, it will be recalled, Christians. Also, most reporting from the 1990 dataset tended to focus on the CJP. Nevertheless, despite the focus on the CJP, the 1990 NJPS administrators tended to present the problem of definition as something different researchers, with different questions in mind, would have to solve in a variety of ways. Besides the CJP, the 1990 study administrators also showed what some of the other relevant aggregations of respondents would be, and some of these were notably larger populations than the CJP. Thus, despite the suggestion that what most researchers might “really” be looking for was the CJP, the study administrators left the clear impression that different questions required different definitions, and that the dataset could help researchers get at many of these definitions. By thus highlighting the entire range of attachment types, I think the earlier study administrators ultimately did send a valuable message about the ambiguities that arise from a legacy of large-scale intermarriage.

The tendency to focus on the CJP has a history of its own because it is widely used as the most convenient way to estimate the size of the future American Jewish population. The CJP includes those born Jewish who have not affiliated with another religion and Jews by choice. Yet, in an era of tenuous attachments, this definition will be unstable, because the subgroups included and excluded are both changing. As already emphasized, people of Jewish origin who say they have no attachment to Jewishness and no other religion (included in the CJP) are an ambiguous group, and their social profile is surely very different from what it was in 1910, and probably in 1960. Similarly, more

than a third of those who have adopted another religion seem to find reasons for continuing to think of themselves as Jewish. Is it so very clear that they should be excluded from "Jewishness," while those who have *not* adopted another religion, but in fact say they have *no connection* to things Jewish, should be defined as Jewish?

Consider in this connection one subset; the respondents who said they have no Jewish attachment and a religion other than Judaism or Christianity. They, in particular, may not differ much from those who said they have no Jewish attachment and no religion, yet the former are excluded from the CJP, while the latter are included. We should appreciate that the religious choices of the former are generally ill-defined: 80% did not specify what their religion was, many of the rest gave such marginal responses that the NJPS codebook aggregates them under "specified other" faiths, and still others gave as their religion Satanism, earth religion, etc. By contrast, only 6% of respondents in this attachment category mentioned Buddhism, Taoism, or Islam. These people, like those of no Jewish attachment and no religion, are younger on average than others and about as likely to live outside the major Jewish metropolitan centers. If the small sample size can be trusted, they are also the most likely to have mixed origins.

What, then, can population projections based on the CJP definition mean when they are carried a generation or two into the future? If one assumes a group is unlikely to intermarry with others—such as American blacks in 1940—one can project its size over the generations. But when group members are very likely to intermarry, and when for so many descendents a range of highly tenuous forms of attachment are sure to be the norm, it is difficult to assign a substantive meaning to the numbers. There are significant similarities between the efforts to project the size of the Jewish population, and the efforts to project the racial composition of the American population (Goldscheider 2004; Perlmann 2002).

Bruce Phillips has provided a powerful example in using the 1990 and 2000 NJPS datasets to study the Jewish periphery. Still, I want to raise one quibble about Phillips's approach, because it, too, concerns the definitional matter—who is a Jew? He designates those individuals of Jewish origin who call themselves Christians as "Christian Jews," that is, Jews of the Christian religion (Phillips 2005a). I read into this terminology an attempt to make a *normative* point, opposite to the one the UJC has made—namely that

these people of Jewish origin *are Jews* in some sense. A non-essentialist view would argue instead that what is interesting is what is happening to a large and growing group of people, not whether we can read them in or out of the fold.

Recent reflections by Richard Alba (2006) suggest one way of reconceptualizing the attachments. The congruence of religion and peoplehood among the Jews has traditionally created a “bright line” boundary between Jews and non-Jews; the definition of the CJP in the 1990 NJPS may indeed be regarded as reflecting this bright line: you can say you have no religion and be a Jew, but you cannot say you have another religion and be a Jew. Alba suggests that this bright line may be blurring. One indication of this blurring (the most extreme) is that individuals may be able to claim they are affiliated with more than one religion. In a mixed origin household, one can share Christmas and Easter with one set of in-laws or grandparents, Hanukkah and Passover with another. This form of behavior will sit well with general unbelief, but it will sit well also with a view that all faiths worship the same highest ideals and the same dimly perceived creator. Just as the great-grandchild of an Italian Catholic immigrant may also have roots among Swedish Protestants, the great-grandchild of a Russian Jewish immigrant may also have those Swedish Protestant roots. The latter descendent may also embrace religiocultural trappings from both traditions. Still, how widespread is this kind of blurring? If it remains very rare, even in the context of a generation of high intermarriage, that fact may affirm that the bright line will survive for the vast majority. The multiple religion pattern is most striking and numerically most important in the NJPS among those claiming Jewish and Christian affiliation; this group currently comprises only 6% of NJPS respondents generally, barely more among young adults and only 9% even among those respondents living outside the biggest Jewish metro centers. Also, these people comprise a decided minority of all who say they have Christian affiliation, and they do not all consider their Jewish attachment to be religious in nature. The other Christians do not consider themselves Jewish in *any* way (religious, ethnic, etc.). The blurring of the religious bright line is an intriguing idea, and deserves careful exploration.

American Jewish institutions are already in the process of grappling with decisions about how to relate to this growing periphery, and this challenge will grow in the future. It will grow in numeric terms and probably also grow to encompass more

features of community life. The most obvious way in which institutions have confronted questions about the periphery is in terms of denominational decisions when intermarriage is possible, the absorption of a non-Jewish spouse into a congregation, and the education of children of mixed origin. In the future, other issues may develop as well.

Since other American groups have faced fuller intermarriage earlier than the Jews, is there anything to be learned from comparisons with others? The case of the Jews is somewhat different than that of other European ethnic groups—quite apart from the congruence of religion and peoplehood among the Jews. The degree of institutional development among the Jews is so great that formal contexts within which situations involving tenuously attached people may arise are more plentiful. While I may simply be ignorant of how issues of mixed origin people have arisen among Italian or Irish Americans, some heuristically interesting parallels seem to lie among the racial minorities. The shift in federal racial statistics procedures, allowing a respondent to claim origins in more than one race, was a recognition of the salience of intermarriage. There is evidence that the move got a big boost from conservative Republicans for reasons that had little to do with recognizing intermarriage for its own sake, but that does not affect my point that African-American organizations (as well as other racially-based organizations) were anxious about how recognizing the intermarried might affect them. The chief difference from the Jewish case, I think, is not that the federal government was involved in these questions, but rather that the African-American organizations were worried most about dilution of their numbers when voting rights and civil rights cases would depend on numbers. Jewish institutions may wish to show large numbers (to claim, for example, they speak for a bigger number), but the payoffs from increasing numbers are far less direct. A parallel of minor importance is that some African-American concern probably also developed from the discomfort of having to recognize complexity where simplicity had set the definitions in the recent past.

A more instructive parallel is the case of the American Indians. For this group, issues arising from intermarriage are an old story. Control of tribal institutions and enjoyment of tribal property (reservation lands, etc.) are restricted to members of the tribe, and membership, in turn, depends on two factors. One is the ability to show that a certain proportion of one's ancestors were in fact tribal members—the "blood quantum."

The blood quantum can be quite low, it should be noticed, far below 50%. The other criterion rests on showing evidence of involvement with the fate of the tribe. The important differences from the Jewish case (for my purposes) are not in the fact that the Indian case involves a very different social class profile and involves federal treaties and laws about tribal status. Rather, what is helpful to notice, I think, has to do with property. Jewish institutions are much less likely than Indian tribes to have property from which only members draw material gain, gains that decline in magnitude as each new claimant takes a share. While there are exceptions, most American Jewish institutions would seem to be the sort that one joins only if one is in fact interested in the activities taking place there.

Nevertheless, one can imagine growing tensions and challenges over who has a right to engage in activities, who has the right to lead institutions, and who has the right to speak for members. Will new joiners of tenuous Jewish connectedness wish the institutions to change their activities in one way or another—to support less Hebrew, less involvement with Israel, more interfaith discussions, more emphasis on Jewish discrimination than on anti-Semitism—etcetera? Of no small interest, I think, is will the group that comprises the Jewish electorate change in nature, especially as the oldest of today's first and second generation depart from the scene? But the voting issue may be relatively minor in the end. It is already fractured in terms of liberal vs. conservative leanings, and that it is entirely possible that on the Israel issue, the tenuously involved may be no less supportive than the more involved—especially given the high level of support among Americans generally.

Regarding leadership and questions of who speaks for the group, the case of Walter White, President of the NAACP from 1931–55, is emblematic of numerous instances. "[White] was estimated by anthropologists to be no more than one sixty-fourth African black. Both his parents could have passed as white…He had fair skin, fair hair and blue eyes." (Davis 1991). But White's case also illuminates the way in which the Jewish case may resolve itself. "He had been raised as a segregated Negro in the Deep South and had experienced white discrimination and violence." Anyone who *feels* strongly enough, who *identifies* as a Jew, will probably qualify for involvement. In cases

in which it matters whether or not such a person is Jewish by Halachic criteria, formal conversion may be, to paraphrase Henry IV, well worth the price.

One domain in which struggle is likely to increase, quite possibly *the* domain, is also related to one central sociological question about the American Jewish periphery. Jewish organizations already disagree sharply about whether community resources—material and other resources—should be expended over drawing in the periphery or strengthening those already most affiliated. Should the goal be greater numbers or a leaner and meaner Jewish community? I close with this question because part of the answer for Jewish institutions will depend, in turn, on a better understanding of the American Jewish periphery—the extent to which this periphery retains some concern or feeling for *something* Jewish. It is not impossible that people in this periphery have stronger attachments or curiosity than those of mixed ancestry in other European American ethnic groups because Jewishness has traditionally involved so much self-consciousness about difference and its preservation. If there is a residue, it may affect behavior among a large number of people—not forever surely, but perhaps over the course of a generation more than one might have expected from the experience of other American ethnics. The need to understand this American Jewish periphery better links the American Jewish institutions and the sociologists of American ethnicity and assimilation.

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