

Close Reading Assignment

Over the course of the school year we have read a plethora of texts detailing the lives and hardships of Jewish immigrants settling in America. One of the texts that I found the most interesting however was titled “Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939”. This book was published in 1997 and written by Daniel Soyer who is a Jewish professor of history and is currently teaching at Fordham University. Soyer’s main purpose for writing this book was to discuss and provide information about the societies of Jewish immigrants and their place in American culture. Moving on, the main reason I found this text the most fascinating over all the other texts we have indulged in thus far is because it holds an in-depth discussion on the importance of these hometown Jewish immigrant societies. These societies were called *landsmanshaftn* and provided members with valuable material benefits and served as places for formal and informal social interaction. Furthermore, this text also relates to many of the other texts we have read so far too. However the text I will be focusing the most on in terms of its relation to the aforementioned text is titled “BEFORE TRIANGLE: THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910”. I chose this text because it detailed the unification of Jewish immigrant workers to get better working conditions which pairs up very nicely with the first text I mentioned. First let’s talk more about the first text, “Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939”.

The text “Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939” included many different ideas and arguments. The main ideas of the text however were about how Jewish immigrants organized themselves and their societies when they moved to America. The most popular way Jewish immigrants organized themselves when they immigrated to America was by living with other Jewish immigrants from the same hometown or region.

These associations of Jewish immigrants from the same hometown were known as landsmanshaftn. This is explained when Soyer states “Landsmanshaftn, associations of immigrants from the same hometown became the most popular form of organization among Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” The previous quote is Soyer’s description and explanation of exactly what a landsmanshaftn is. This quote is relevant because it describes and explains perfectly how Jewish Immigrants settling in New York and other places in the United States organized their societies. Moreover, another one of the central ideas and arguments found in the text is the fact that landsmanshaftn wasn’t an idea that was exclusive to Jewish immigrants. In fact immigrants from all over the world utilize their own version of landsmanshaftn when they immigrate to new countries. This is shown when Soyer states “The landsmanshaftn principle was in no way peculiar to Jewish migrants. In fact, it is one of the most common forms of immigrant organization throughout the world, and groups as diverse as Chinese in Singapore and Ibo in Calabar, Nigeria, have formed associations based on village or region of origin.” The aforementioned quote shows Soyer’s description of how the landsmanshaftn principle was used in other cultures. This quote perfectly sums up one of the main arguments of the text by showing how landsmanshaftn was a concept used by millions of immigrants around the world and not just Jewish migrants who had immigrated to America. It’s interesting to see how my understanding of the text and it’s main arguments relates so much to what we’ve been discussing in class these past few weeks.

My understanding of the text was definitely coupled and related to some of the things we talked about during class. For example, during class with Professor Elhanan we talked about how closely knit Jewish immigrant societies were in America. We talked about how Jewish

immigrants used the benefits of their unified organizations to cope with the struggles of living in America. These discussions contributed to my understanding of certain quotes from the text like, “Organized variously as independent mutual aid societies, religious congregations, and fraternal lodges, and reflecting a variety of political and religious orientations, landsmanshaftn provided their members with valuable material benefits...”. The previously mentioned quote depicts a much more detailed explanation of the concepts we discussed in class. In addition, without these aforementioned discussions I would not be able to find any relations between them and my understanding of the text. Furthermore, we also discussed in class about how landsmanshaftn was not a concept that was exclusive to the Jewish immigrants living in America. We also talked about how Jewish people from all sectors of the world formed their own societies and organizations. These discussions contributed to my understanding of certain ideas in the text such as this, “Outside of the United States, Yiddish-speaking Jews in Paris, Buenos Aires, Israel, and other immigrant destinations established similar societies.” This quote gives examples of how Jewish people outside of those who immigrated to America utilized the principles of landsmanshaftn in their respective countries. This quote is relevant because it gives an example of how my understanding of the text correlates with the discussions we had in class. The text “Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939” was not only related to discussions we had in class however.

The previously mentioned text is also related to the reading “BEFORE TRIANGLE: THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910”. One way my first text is related to this one is through the concept of landsmanshaftn. Both texts show how landsmanshaftn benefitted Jewish immigrants living in America. For example, in “BEFORE TRIANGLE: THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910” it states that “Many of the Jewish girls who joined the ILGWU were

supported by their families and neighbors, some of them socialists and trade unionists.” The previous quote describes the reactions of the Jewish community to Jewish garment workers joining a union to fight for better working conditions. This quote is relevant because it shows how the principles of *landsmanshaftn* were present during these times. This concept was also present and explained with great detail in the first text. Another example of how both texts included the principles of *landsmanshaftn* is when the same text states “In late December the union and the employers proposed a settlement. Though some terms were good – a shorter work week, employers paying for needles and power, shop-based negotiations for wage rates, reinstatement of the strikers...”. The previous quote describes the result of the unionization and strikes of the Jewish immigrant workers. This quote is relevant because it shows how this text and the first text both include the principles and concepts of *landsmanshaftn*. It’s interesting to see how all the readings we’ve been doing so far are so connected with each other.

In conclusion, it was interesting reading and analyzing the arguments in “Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939” and comparing it to other texts and discussions. It’s plain to see how the concept of *landsmanshaftn* was so important to this text and how it related so much to what we talked about during class. It was also fun seeing the same concepts come up in “BEFORE TRIANGLE: THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910”. Overall, it was interesting to see how all the readings are so closely interconnected with all the other things we do in class.

Bibliography

1. Frank, Miriam. BEFORE TRIANGLE: THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910.
2. Soyfer, Daniel. Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939. Harvard University Press, 1997.