

# I

---

## Introduction

In the spring of 1982, historian Morton Keller served as Harmsworth Visiting Professor of American History at Queen's College, Oxford. While there, he was given a chance to meet the Patroness of the College, the Queen Mother herself. Upon meeting the visitor from the United States, she inquired where he usually taught. "Brandeis, ma'am," Keller responded. The Queen Mother sighed: "There are so many new universities today."<sup>1</sup> At last count, the United States harbors well over four thousand colleges and universities. This book depicts only one of them. It is not an institutional history. No scholarly history of Brandeis exists, nor is this volume bucking to be so regarded. It does not aspire to provide a record of campus activities and issues. Instead, *Learning on the Left* recounts part of the past of a university that is distinctive, because it hired faculty members and produced students who made a difference in American politics. They became noteworthy as political activists, as political thinkers, and as political writers. They exerted considerable influence in a nation that achieved its independence two centuries before Keller's encounter with the Queen Mother. Within the boundaries of American politics, this particular university has punched above its weight. That is the thesis of this book.

The case presented here is cumulative, so depth must be sacrificed to breadth, though the endnotes can serve to supply a fuller paper trail. Because Brandeis was founded as recently as 1948, any historical account is bound to be

brief. Frederick M. Lawrence, who served as eighth president, liked to point out that more Americans have walked on the moon than have headed Brandeis University. *Learning on the Left* rarely analyzes the internal policies that presidents and deans and provosts have pursued. Yet it cannot pretend to be comprehensive in the profiles that it presents, a goal that would tax the energy of the author as well as the patience of his readers. All of the figures depicted in *Learning on the Left* sought to act and think politically. Ideally, that means to temper commitment with realism, earnest passion with sound judgment, the ardor of dedication with the coolness of reason. How convenient that *Brand* and *Eis* happen to be the German terms for “fire” and “ice.”<sup>2</sup> How effectively these elements were reconciled in the lives and works of faculty and alumni can be judged from the following pages. What unites the figures portrayed in this book is of course their affiliation with the university. But no study of their political salience can be circumscribed to the campus; the careers that they forged afterward (and sometimes before) must be traced to verify the argument of this book. Their lives and their ideas testify to the significance of what these figures did when they were *not* inhabiting classrooms in Waltham, Massachusetts.

The portraits are therefore largely extracurricular, and the implications may well resonate beyond the Brandeis campus. They also constitute a case study of the fate of liberalism, a term that has had a heavy workout in Western thought over the span of a couple of centuries. How might it be defined? In the United States, in the second half of the twentieth century, a keen devotion to the ideal of an open society, as well as protection of disfavored minorities in particular, is what separated liberals from conservatives. The left has tended to favor change over stability, to prefer liberty over authority, to seek remedies in government rather than to cut slack to corporations, and to invest in hopes for a better future more than in reverence for the past. For the first fifteen years or so of Brandeis University, the progressivism of its faculty and students diverged from the national mood of conservatism. For the next decade or so, liberalism was subjected to pressure from a nascent militant left. Animated by greater urgency than liberals, radicals have been more sensitive than others to economic injustice, and their challenge to the limits of postwar liberalism also partakes of the story. Republicans have served on the faculty and could be found in the student body. So have conservatives. But their influence never remotely

matched the role that socialists as well as liberals played in the earliest decades of the university, and that liberals have played all the way down to the present.

In tracking how a new educational institution affected the nation's politics, many ways of telling this story are available. Here its structure is thematic. Its span briefly includes the twenty-first century. Yet *Learning on the Left* is also weighted heavily toward the first three postwar decades. That is because an act of more distant historical retrieval is more urgent and more necessary than when memories are fresher and the actuarial tables have yet to take full effect. When Brandeis was tiny, with graduating classes in the low three figures, its faculty in particular took on a larger-than-life impact that was bound to be reduced as the size of the community grew. But the top-heavy chronological emphasis has a further justification. Like virtually all other American campuses, Brandeis became depoliticized by the end of the 1970s. Protests became rarer and less disruptive. Faculty and alumni continued to serve as an index of the vicissitudes of the public culture, but the political profile of the institution became much less odd and less noticeable. No emphatically conservative perspective emerged, but campus discussion of public issues became far less impassioned.

Because *Learning on the Left* mostly belongs to the genres of political and (somewhat less so) intellectual history, entire disciplines that are essential to a liberal arts curriculum are ignored. In 2017 two faculty members arrived in Stockholm to share a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (though Brandeis lacks a medical school). The research of neuroscientists Jeffrey Hall and Michael Rosbash in circadian rhythms has no overt political implications, so such scientists are absent from the pages that follow. So is Roderick MacKinnon '78, a biochemistry major, who won a Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2003 "for discoveries concerning channels in cell membranes." The creative arts are also omitted (with a few exceptions), as are the classics. Yet even such fields as anthropology and economics are largely neglected. The most famous account of faculty-student relations at Brandeis is undoubtedly *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson* (1997). Mitch Albom '79, who majored in sociology, wrote this memoir of his friendship with a former professor, Morris S. Schwartz (1916–95); and the book remained on the best-seller lists in both hardcover and paperback for more than seven years.<sup>3</sup> The apolitical Albom

produced five subsequent number 1 best sellers, but any assessment of their impact (in forty-two languages) belongs in a very different book.

Did Brandeis University decisively shape what its faculty members and alumni have said and done in American political history? How big a difference did Brandeis make in stimulating or encouraging or reinforcing the political ideas and commitments to which the men and women in this book subscribed? No answer can be satisfactory; no stab at generalization can be much more than guesswork. Coincidence cannot be discounted. Some faculty members were only briefly employed at Brandeis. Some arrived with their political views already fully formed. Take the most famous person ever to teach at Brandeis. She once confided to a friend that she would have voted socialist in 1932 (the candidate was Norman Thomas), but for the impediment that her own husband was running for the presidency too.<sup>4</sup> His name was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Others associated with Brandeis developed their most important ideas only after leaving Brandeis, and then may have significantly revised or even repudiated them. Difficulties of generalization became evident in a 2011 monograph that the firm of Couleurs Livres published in Brussels. The ten intellectuals who were profiled personified the “*nouveaux penseurs de la gauche américaine.*” Three of these fresh thinkers brandished Brandeis connections: political theorist Michael Walzer ’56, political theorist Susan Moller Okin, and sociologist Richard Sennett. But because John Rawls, born exactly nine decades earlier, could hardly have been called a “new” theorist, and because Charles Taylor is a Canadian, the space allotted on this list to Brandeis looms even larger. And yet the commonalities it might have fostered cannot easily be tabulated.

Even when the undergraduate experience can be deemed formative, that phase of life usually lasts no more than four years. Consider, for example, the close friendship of the political theorist Michael J. Sandel ’75 and the journalist Thomas L. Friedman ’75. They happen to have met as classmates in Hebrew School in Minneapolis, where, as seven-year-olds, they co-starred in a Purim play, and a little over a decade later linked up at Brandeis.<sup>5</sup> It would be foolish to conjecture that, had they matriculated elsewhere, Sandel and Friedman would have occupied different (or lesser) niches in public life. The achievements of these two alumni can hardly be ascribed to their indebtedness to the institution that certified the completion of their degree requirements. On the

other hand, it cannot be entirely irrelevant that the men and women portrayed in these pages attended Brandeis, or taught there, as opposed to, say, Brigham Young or Texas Christian or Ole Miss. Communists believed that the forces of history could be deciphered, and typically began their analyses by proclaiming that “it cannot be an accident, comrades . . .” Such is the supposition of this book too. Incontestable proof of crucial institutional influence is elusive, but such disproportionate political involvement of Brandeis professors and alumni is suggestive.

If so many new universities (as well as older ones) exist today, what distinguishes Brandeis from the others? Is there a way to solve the riddle of singularity? Jewish auspices and atmosphere certainly made Brandeis unique among the secular institutions of higher learning in America. But how Jewish values have actually operated and how they might be applied have been contested from the beginning, and no consensus has ever quite emerged. The quest for the meaning of that legacy is not likely to be fulfilled. The arguments that it has inspired have not ceased, and perhaps that irresoluteness is for the best. The story of Brandeis is embedded within a broader struggle, by which American Jewry fought for the right to be equal while also asserting the freedom to be different. But not everyone portrayed in this book is Jewish, and not everyone who is Jewish displayed interest in the implications of that identity. The Jewish sponsorship of the university has nevertheless been very important; and its Jewish milieu—even if not quite entirely definable—has been recognizable. But to account for the pronounced leftward tilt of the faculty and alumni, a religious explanation should not be overstated. In making the case for the necessity of Brandeis, founding president Abram Leon Sachar (1899–1993) highlighted the eagerness of Jews to join the philanthropic procession that began with the denominational backing of the seminaries of the colonial era. This slant characterizes his own indispensable memoir, *A Host at Last* (1976), an account that packs far more information into it than any other volume about the institution that he headed for the first two decades. Sachar sought to present its creation as a perpetuation of the colonial tradition, as a replay of the formation of seminaries that were intended to train the Protestant ministry. He wanted Brandeis to be appreciated as an extension of an academic legacy that entwined scholarship and salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Brandeis was therefore to be a gift, offered to the nation by the most

conspicuous minority in the annals of Christendom. The men and women portrayed in this book, whether as reformers or as radicals, as insiders or as incendiaries, might therefore be understood as pumping life into the lineage of dissidence in the vicinity of the Pilgrims' pride. But Sachar's claim was also misleading. For what is so exasperatingly peculiar about the Jews is that they are not merely a religious group. They do not constitute the counterpart of the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and others who created what would become some of the most admired centers of learning in the world. Jews are also an ethnic group. Though membership can be voluntary (through a process of religious conversion), they have primarily been an ancestral group that has normatively transmitted identity through the mother. The enmity that modern Jews have aroused has not only—or commonly—been motivated by their rejection of the divinity of Christ. Even Jews professing no religious faith have been historically subjected to hostility, and the founders of this liberal arts institution—a university that has never trained or ordained rabbis—were secular. Thus the circumstances that spurred its formation, in the immediate wake of the greatest crime ever committed against the Jewish people, differed sharply from the origins of, say, Dartmouth. The pivotal scholars in Jewish studies in the early years of Brandeis had all been German-speaking refugees, and several of their colleagues in other academic departments personified the “Judeo-Bolshevism” of Nazi vitriol. The impetus for the founding of Brandeis cannot be separated from the problem of antisemitism, which midcentury American Jews generally experienced as social barriers erected on the right, located at entrenched and established bastions of the republic.

The liberal atmosphere of the campus was intended to be both a riposte to bigotry and a refuge from it; and a clue to the progressive orientation of the university can be found in the credo that President Jehuda Reinharz PhD '72 enunciated in defining the mission of the institution—“a Jewish-sponsored nonsectarian university, open to all and dedicated to scholarly excellence and education for social responsibility.” In 1977, when members of the first graduating class returned to the campus after a quarter of a century, *Newsweek* noticed not only the “largely liberal” politics of the faculty and the “strong emphasis on social issues.” The magazine also reported that “an astonishing number of graduates turn out to be activist intellectuals and social critics.”<sup>7</sup> This book can be read as an attempt to validate that observation.