

The End of Jewish Modernity

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Introduction

On 24 December 1917, Leon Trotsky, the newly appointed foreign minister of Soviet Russia, arrived at Brest-Litovsk for negotiations to be held with the Prussian empire in view of a separate peace. His delegation included a certain Karl Radek, Polish Jew and citizen of the Habsburg empire, wanted in Germany on account of his defeatist propaganda. As they got off the train, they began distributing leaflets to the enemy soldiers, calling for international revolution. The German diplomats observed them dumbfounded.¹ When they came to power, the Bolsheviks had made public the secret agreements between the tsarist regime and the Western powers; their aim was not to be accepted by international diplomacy but to denounce it. The state of mind of the German plenipotentiaries in the face of their Soviet counterparts is hard to comprehend today; we would have to imagine the arrival of an Al-Qaeda delegation at a G8 summit. Jews at this time were identified with Bolshevism, that is, a worldwide conspiracy against civilization. A bellicose conservative such as Winston Churchill saw them as ‘enemies of the human race’, representatives of an ‘animal barbarism’. Civilization, he wrote, ‘is being completely extinguished over gigantic areas, while the Bolsheviks hop and caper like troops of ferocious baboons amid the ruins of cities.’ They destroyed everything in their path, ‘like vampires sucking the blood of their victims’. Carried away by his eloquence, Churchill did not flinch from attributing Jewish traits to Lenin; this ‘monster standing on a pyramid of skulls’ was simply the leader of ‘a vile group of cosmopolitan fanatics’.²

The wave of anti-Semitism triggered by the Russian Revolution did not stop short at Western diplomats. John Maynard Keynes, a member of the British delegation at the Versailles conference of 1919, described in striking terms the contempt that Lloyd George displayed towards Louis-Lucien Klotz, minister of finance in the Clemenceau government, who was particularly intransigent on the question of German reparations. Klotz, wrote Keynes, was ‘a short, plump, heavy-moustached Jew, well groomed, well kept, but with an unsteady, roving eye’. In a fit of sudden and uncontrolled hatred, Lloyd George ‘leant

forward and with a gesture of his hands he indicated to everyone the image of a hideous Jew clutching a money-bag. His eyes flashed and the words came out with a contempt so violent that he seemed almost to be spitting at him. The anti-Semitism, not far below the surface in such an assemblage as that one, was up in the heart of everyone.’ When the British prime minister called on his French opposite number to put an end to the obstructionist tactics of his finance minister, who, by his intransigence, risked playing the game of European Bolshevism alongside Lenin and Trotsky, ‘All around the room you could see each one grinning and whispering to his neighbour “Klotzky”.’³

Let us now jump forward half a century. On 27 January 1973, again in Paris, the representatives of the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam signed a peace treaty at the end of another famous conference. The American plenipotentiary was Henry Kissinger, a German Jew who had emigrated in 1938, at the age of fifteen, to escape Nazi persecution. In this conference, however, the roles had changed. Kissinger did not represent revolution, but counter-revolution. It was he who, following his elevation to the State Department under President Nixon, had ordered the military escalation in Vietnam and Cambodia. Anti-war demonstrators across the world identified Kissinger with bombing and napalm. A few months after the Paris conference, Kissinger gave the green light to General Pinochet’s putsch in Chile. The Nobel Peace laureate could boast of having organized several wars during his term at the State Department, some horrifically murderous, from Bangladesh to Vietnam, East Timor to the Middle East, as well as *coups d’état* from Chile to Argentina.⁴ The hatred he aroused, deep as it was, had nothing in common with anti-Semitism, but rather with the rejection of what was now called imperialism.

Imperialism, indeed, was for Kissinger a kind of vocation. From the time of his studies at Harvard he identified with Metternich, the architect of restoration at the Vienna Congress of 1814, and above all with Bismarck, the builder of German unity, a statesman who saw international relations not in terms of abstract principles but rather of the balance of forces and *Realpolitik*. After the model of Bismarck, who had succeeded in 1871 in imposing Prussian hegemony in Europe by upsetting the balance of the concert of Europe, he saw himself as strategist of American hegemony in the world of the Cold War. Aware

that power required self-restraint, Bismarck had been a ‘white revolutionary’, that is, a counter-revolutionary, capable of challenging the international order ‘in conservative garb’.⁵ In the wake of Bismarck, Kissinger sought to be the embodiment of *Machtpolitik* in the second half of the twentieth century.

Trotsky and Kissinger: archetypes of the Jew as revolutionary and the Jew as imperialist. It is true that this opposition might need a certain qualification. On the one hand, a conservative Jewish diplomacy had already appeared in the nineteenth century, particularly in Great Britain and in France under the Third Republic, where the Alliance Israélite Universelle had a certain influence. On the other hand, there were still many Jewish revolutionaries in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in France. The fact remains that Trotsky and Kissinger embody, beyond the chronological distance that divides them, two opposite paradigms of Jewishness. The first left its mark on the interwar years, the second on the years of the Cold War. This book sets out to study this change: its roots, its forms and its outcome.

Today, the axis of the Jewish world has shifted from Europe to the United States and Israel. Anti-Semitism no longer shapes national cultures, having given way to Islamophobia, the dominant form of racism in the early twenty-first century, as well as a new Judeophobia generated by the Israel-Palestine conflict. The memory of the Holocaust, transformed into a ‘civil religion’ of our liberal democracies, has made the former pariah people a protected minority, heir to a history providing a standard against which the democratic West measures its moral virtues. In parallel with this, the striking features of the Jewish diaspora – mobility, urbanity, textuality, extra-territoriality – have extended to the globalized world, normalizing the minority that formerly embodied them. It is Israel, on the other hand, that has reinvented the ‘Jewish question’ against the grain of Jewish history itself, in a statist and national form.

Jewish modernity, therefore, has reached the end of its road. After having been the main focus of critical thought in the Western world – in the era when Europe was its centre – Jews today find themselves, by a kind of paradoxical reversal, at the heart of the mechanisms of domination. Intellectuals are recalled to order. If the first half of the twentieth century was the age of Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, the second half was

rather than that of Raymond Aron, Leo Strauss, Henry Kissinger and Ariel Sharon. It is possible, of course, to trace other trajectories, and mention in such varied fields the names of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Eric Hobsbawm, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, Noam Chomsky and Judith Butler, to show that critical thought does indeed remain a living Jewish tradition, with the capacity for renewal. But though this is undeniable (and reassuring), it is not enough to alter the general tendency. This metamorphosis did not take place without conflict and resistance, which continue today within a Jewish world that is in no way monolithic but remains very heterogeneous and complex. For example, many Jews still vote for the left, both in Europe and the United States, but this choice – often in the way of a tradition, an inherited culture – is no longer overdetermined by the particular position that they occupy in the social and political context. It is rather when they do not vote simply as American, French or Italian electors, but first of all as Jews, that their preference tends to go to political forces of the right. This is the conservative turn that the present book seeks to examine: its aim is neither to condemn nor to absolve, but to take account of an experience that is now at an end.

In many respects, this mutation of Jewish existence only follows a more general shift in the axis of the Western world. Why should Jews remain a focus of ‘subversion’ in a planet that has emerged from the Cold War, after the historical defeat of communism and the revolutions of the twentieth century? It is precisely by adapting to the chorus of the world that Jews have changed. They have become a mirror of general tendencies, whereas during the long wave of Jewish modernity they acted above all as a counter-tendency. Using a musical metaphor beloved of both Edward Said and Theodor W. Adorno, we could say that their voice, which used to be dissonant, is now in counterpoint. Today, it blends in with the harmony of the dominant discourse. The anomaly is over and exhausted, for better or worse.

Writing this book reawakened in me the memory of several inspiring individuals, now departed, whom I should like to remember here. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who was a member of the jury for my thesis at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS), in 1989, agreed to write a preface for this when it was published a year later. Soon after its acceptance, he presented me with the new edition of *L'affaire Audin*, his first book, thanks to which I discovered

the commitment of Jews to the Algerian independence struggle.⁶ It was through Pierre's good offices that my book came to be read by the great Marxist Orientalist Maxime Rodinson (1915–2004), who wrote me a letter that was both critical and friendly. Soon after, I was contacted by some other remarkable people. First of all, Boris Frankel (1921–2006), to whom we owe the introduction of Freudo-Marxism into France, and who told me his colourful life story which is now the subject of a fine autobiography.⁷ A Jew from Danzig, he came to France as a refugee in 1939 and became a Trotskyist during the Second World War, in Switzerland where he had managed a further escape thanks to the complicit negligence of a French frontier guard. Expelled after the war, he remained stateless until the 1980s, when Mitterrand granted him French citizenship. In May 1968, General de Gaulle had tried to expel him to Germany, but his native country had no desire to welcome a stateless rebel and immediately returned him to France. He lived in great poverty, and devoted his leisure time entirely to exhibitions of painting. Germanophile in culture, like many émigré German Jews, he could not go without *Die Zeit* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The affection with which he spoke to me of his exile friends, including Manès Sperber and Lucien Goldmann, helped me to understand Hannah Arendt's remarks on the human warmth of pariah Judaism. Finally, I heard from Jakob Moneta (1914–2012) in Frankfurt, whose very fine autobiography I was already familiar with.⁸ He had been victim of a pogrom in Galicia as a child, and came with his family to Germany as refugees, where he became a communist towards the end of the Weimar republic. After 1933 he moved to Palestine, but returned to settle in Cologne in 1948, critical of the foundation of the Israeli state: a remarkable choice at a time when Germany was still *terra non grata* for the World Jewish Congress. Attached to the German embassy in Paris in the 1950s, he used his diplomatic passport to take risks in supporting the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Moneta led me to discover another remarkable figure little known outside his own country: Sal Santen (1915–98). This Jew from Holland survived Auschwitz, where most members of his family were exterminated. In Amsterdam, where he lived as a journalist and writer, he was condemned in 1960 to two years in prison for his activities in support of the Algerian national movement. He had participated along with other anti-colonial activists in a network that concocted false

papers, and in the establishment in Morocco of a small arms factory for the FLN. These men did not view themselves as ‘victims’, but as militants and committed intellectuals. I always had the impression that Jewishness for them was an *ethos*, an experience of the world, an existential commitment on the side of the oppressed. They defined themselves as internationalists, a word that for them had nothing abstract about it, but was how they had traversed their century of fire and blood. It is to their memory that I would like to dedicate the present book – a homage, I should add, that is more than just emotional; it also bears on a methodological choice. For various reasons, which relate to my education as much as my birth, my approach to Jewish history is strictly secular. I have passionately read Gershom Sholem and Yosef H. Yerushalmi, I admire their erudition and I have learned much from their works, with which it would be laughable to compare my own, but my view of history is significantly different from theirs, both in its motivations and its objective. I have never been interested in Jewish history as an object of study in itself. What is fascinating about it, to my mind, is the prism it offers for reading the history of the world. At the origin of my research, therefore, there is no quest of identity such as inspired Yerushalmi’s vocation as a historian when he saw in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts Gauguin’s painting entitled, *Where do we come from, where are we, where are we going?*⁹ In this sense, my book is simply another way of historicizing the twentieth century – an effort to which I have devoted other books as well – and beyond this, to question our own present.

I

What Was Jewish Modernity?

The concept of modernity has never enjoyed a clear and strict definition. Its meaning changes from one discipline to another, likewise its temporal divisions. It is more current in the field of literature and the arts than in that of historiography. Political modernity and aesthetic modernity are not simply different objects but also different epochs, even if there has always been some connection between the two. In this book, ‘modernity’ refers to a phase of Jewish history that is inextricably intertwined with history in general, and the history of Europe in particular. It includes various distinct dimensions – social, political, cultural – which, once again, have to be studied in their mutual relations. Historical periodizations, moreover, always arouse objections. In most cases they are approximate and unsatisfying. Periods are conceptual constructions, conventions, frames of reference rather than homogeneous temporal blocs. Epochs, like centuries, are mental spaces that never coincide with the divisions of the calendar. The same holds likewise for the boundaries of Jewish modernity. A posteriori, however, this appears in our historical consciousness as an epoch of extraordinary cultural richness with a well-defined and coherent profile, somewhat like Hellenism for Droysen, the Renaissance for Burckhardt or the Enlightenment for Cassirer.

According to the historian Dan Diner, Jewish modernity covers the two centuries from 1750 to 1950, from the beginnings of emancipation (the debate on the ‘improvement’ and ‘regeneration’ of the Jews) to the immediate aftermath of the genocide.¹ Prepared by the Enlightenment reformers, the decree voted by the French National Assembly in September 1791 set under way a process that, throughout the nineteenth century, transformed Jews everywhere in Europe into citizens – apart from in the tsarist empire, where this was delayed until the revolution of 1917. During the Second World War, the Holocaust violently broke what had seemed an irreversible tendency, then the birth of the state of Israel reconfigured the structure of Jewish modernity. This mutation

was already prefigured at the start of the twentieth century, with the great transatlantic migration of Jews from central and eastern Europe; Nazism accentuated it, provoking the exile of German-speaking Jews (which some historians have interpreted as a gigantic cultural and scientific transfer from one side of the ocean to the other);² finally, after the war, the exodus of survivors from the extermination camps completed the turn. The axis of the Jewish world was shifted in this way – demographically, culturally and politically – from Europe to the United States and Israel. On the eve of the Second World War, almost ten million Jews had lived in Europe; by the mid 1990s less than two million remained.³ After the war, Jewry practically ceased to exist in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Germany and Austria, the countries that had been its main centres. On top of this, between 1948 and 1996 close to a million and a half Jews left Europe to settle in Israel,⁴ which also received a massive influx (in equivalent proportions) of Jews from the Maghreb and the Near East, followed by Russian Jews. If the end of the Cold War did not mark a break comparable with that of the years 1945–50, it is because the decades that followed the fall of the Third Reich were those of the dissolution of the ‘Jewish question’ in Europe. The birth of Israel, on the other hand, generated a ‘Palestinian question’. Europe became aware of the riches of a destroyed continent at the heart of its history and culture and sought to rescue this inheritance, but this rediscovery of its Jewish past inevitably crossed with the present of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Emancipation at one end, the Holocaust and the birth of Israel at the other, those are the historical boundaries that frame Jewish modernity. After having been its cradle, Europe became its tomb and its heir.

Emancipation led to an exit from the ghetto under a two-fold pressure: ‘assimilation from without, collapse from within’.⁵ It is true that Jews had played a far from negligible role since the Middle Ages, in culture as well as in the economy, being a major factor in the transmission of knowledge from philosophy to medicine. But emancipation secularized the Jewish world, breaking the walls that protected its particularism. By granting them the status of citizens, it forced Jews to rethink their relationship with the world around them.⁶ The emancipatory laws, by carrying out the reforms projected by the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century, put an end to a temporality of memory fixed by liturgy and plunged Jews into the new temporality of history, chrono-

logical and cumulative. Jewishness was steadily separated from Judaism, coming to be embodied in a new figure, that of the ‘godless Jew’ (*gottloser Jude*) or secular Jew, the definition of himself given by Freud.⁷ Now emancipated, they became members of a political entity that transcended the borders of the religious community built around the synagogue; they ceased to be an *external* element, whether stigmatized or tolerated, persecuted or enjoying ‘privileges’ within society. Before this major turn they led a life apart, despite the generalized lack of political rights – their condition was certainly better than that of enserfed peasants. Accession to citizenship questioned the structure of their community life. From this turn on, the marginality of Jews was more a question of the attitude of the world around them than of their own desire to preserve a separate life. Modern anti-Semitism – the word appeared in Germany in the early 1880s – marked the secularization of the old religious prejudice and accompanied the whole trajectory of Jewish modernity as an insurmountable horizon, sometimes internalized, marking the limits to the dissolution of traditional Jewish communities. This is the source of the mixture of particularism and cosmopolitanism that characterizes Jewish modernity.⁸

During the ‘long’ nineteenth century, the Jews of western Europe became integrated into the national societies in which they lived, at the price of their collective and community rights (in Clermont-Tonnerre’s famous formulations, the state must ‘reject Jews as a nation’ and ‘grant everything to Jews as individuals’).⁹ This set under way a process of confessionalization, which relegated Jewishness to the private sphere, while the myth arose of Jews as a ‘state within the state’.¹⁰ They became ‘Israélites’ or ‘of Mosaic faith’ (*jüdischen Glaubens*). With its assimilation into national cultures, Jewishness metamorphosed into a kind of moral substratum, a ‘spirit’ that rabbis, scholars and notables celebrated as harmonizing with the various European nation-states, from the German Reich to the Habsburg empire, the French republic to the Italian monarchy. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, anti-Semitism posed an obstacle to emancipation. Here, the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) appeared half a century later than in Berlin, Vienna or Paris, and took on a national form: secularization and modernization gave birth to a Jewish nation whose pillars were the Yiddish language and culture.¹¹ This was an extra-territorial community, as the historian Simon Doubnov has defined it, mingling with the people

around it and sharing their own language (Russian or Polish), but with the addition of Yiddish, and certainly not sharing a national identity.¹² Tendentiously, Jews remained a community apart, recognizable and distinct from others even if their life no longer (or not only) turned around religion.

The multinational empires of the nineteenth century – in which the *Ancien Régime* survived in modernizing societies¹³ – formed propitious soil for the social and political integration of minorities. The specific features of the Jewish diaspora – textuality, urbanity, mobility, extra-territoriality – adapted better to these (despite tsarist anti-Semitism) than to nation-states.¹⁴ The empires were far more heterogeneous than nation-states, in terms of ethnicity, culture, language and religion, and they tolerated (or even encouraged) the presence of diasporic minorities. Their dynastic legitimacy enabled them to perpetuate the principle of ‘royal alliance’: the submission of Jews to a protecting power that guaranteed freedom of trade and worship,¹⁵ an old tradition that was only challenged by the advent of absolutism, followed by the nation-states of the nineteenth century. The nation, for its part, viewed every ethnic, linguistic or religious minority as an obstacle that it sought to overcome, by championing policies of assimilation or exclusion.¹⁶ The retrospective and nostalgic idealization of the Habsburg empire that Stefan Zweig celebrates in *The World of Yesterday* (1942) is the best literary illustration of this love of European Jews for the liberal autocracies that came to an end with the First World War.

The urbanization of Europe gave rise to great metropolises in which Jews formed large minorities. The interstate networks they had established for more than a century had become one of the vectors of the continent’s economic integration. Thanks to emancipatory laws, they experienced a marked rise, and the most powerful of their number were welcomed into the European elites. In France, a *haute bourgeoisie* business class existed already under the July monarchy and was consolidated under the Second Empire, when the Pereire brothers played a major role in the creation of a national railway network. In 1892, the 440 heads of financial establishments included close to 100 Jews.¹⁷ In Germany, in 1910, the 600 richest taxpayers included 29 Jews. Jews were well established at the heart of the industrial, financial and commercial bourgeoisie. Similar tendencies were to be found at the same time in the Habsburg empire.¹⁸ Their culture oriented to