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Reviews

Revisiting the Jewish question

- Reviews section -

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I once heard an anecdote about a Jewish comrade walking into his first meeting of a new socialist organization in the United States and asking a friend who the other Jews were in the room. The friend pointed out a handful of people—about a third, perhaps half of the room—to which the comrade responded, “This is the most *goyische* [non-Jewish] socialist meeting I’ve ever seen.”

Jews have always been insiders to Marxist efforts to understand and change the world; and Jewishness, understood as a set of motifs, as a theological and metaphysical tradition, and ultimately as a socio-political experience, has profoundly shaped Marxism. Enzo Traverso writes in the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate*, “Marxism and the Jews [are] not two separate entities—a theory applied to an external object—but two intimately intertwined subjects interacting in different and changing ways for more than a century” (pg. XI). Isaac Deutscher once said, “The Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition”; and so too, we may add, does the Jewish radical belong to a Marxist tradition that transcends Marxism—be it [Barnaby Raine’s “Semitism,”](#) [Daniel Kahn’s “rootless cosmopolitan worldview,”](#) or Walter Benjamin’s secularized Messianism.

This fact about the history of Marxism’s development presents a contradiction: the contemporary Left has taken an important tack in recent years by embracing feminist standpoint epistemology and its emphasis on building political milieus inclusive of—and indeed, shaped from the beginning by—comrades of various oppressed identities to ensure their centrality in understanding and responding to questions of oppression. How is it possible, then, that a political tradition shaped so profoundly by Jews and Jewishness has struggled to develop a nimble critical theory of antisemitism under capitalism? As Traverso summarizes, “The history of the Marxist debate on the Jewish Question is the history of a misunderstanding” (pg. 216). How is it that save for a brief period of clarity during the reign of the German Nazis, Marxists have failed to notice, much less understand, the ongoing dialectical relationship between the bourgeois organization of political life on the one hand, and the prospering of political antisemitism on the other?

This question, which continues to haunt the Jewish Left today, animates Italian Marxist Enzo Traverso’s dive into the history of Marxist thought on anti-Jewish oppression. Traverso completed the first manuscript of what would become *The Jewish Question* in 1989, just months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is structured as a chronological summary of various Marxist positions on the problem of antisemitism; and at the time of its first printing, it was understood as a continuation of the debate initiated by Marx, perhaps bookending the Marxist engagement with what Traverso has since dubbed “Jewish modernity.” Three decades removed from the collapse of the Soviet Union, my experience of the book was more like that of a history book, cataloging the various ways in which Marxists of a bygone era sought to deal with the problems of anti-Jewish oppression and universal emancipation. Yet, with antisemitism on the rise globally, it was the arguments of Marxists from the late-19th century, and not Traverso’s own reflections, which most immediately resembled the political environment on the Left today. It is this experience of seeing oneself and one’s comrades in the discussions of the turn of the century—with all the dramatic irony that the imminence of the Nazi holocaust brings to the debates—that gives Traverso’s intellectual history its critical weight.

In 1890, Frederick Engels, Karl Marx’s longtime and closest collaborator, wrote an illuminating [letter on antisemitism](#), which read in part, “Anti-Semitism betokens a [backward] culture, which is why it is found only in Prussia and Austria, and in Russia too. Anyone dabbling in anti-Semitism, either in England or in America, would simply be ridiculed, while in Paris the only impression created by M. Drumont’s writings—wittier by far than those of the German anti-Semites—was that of a somewhat ineffectual flash in the pan.” This statement was representative of the Marxist position in two regards: first, Engels clearly denounced antisemitism, but he did so not as a matter of political program, but rather of modern sensibility. His boast at the end of the article that the antisemitic German press had mistaken him for a Jew reads like a lyric from Phil Ochs’s [“Love Me I’m a Liberal”](#): Engels “feel[s] like [he’s] almost a

Jew.”

Second, the reason why opposition to antisemitism seemed a matter beneath the level of political program is that the political economy of the developed capitalist countries had shifted such that antisemitism, an ideology rooted in the feudal mode of production, could no longer find a material base. This claim, put to rest as a matter of history by the Nazi holocaust, is ironic on two accounts: one, because Engels himself had been an open antisemite earlier in his political career, calling Jews “the dirtiest of all races” in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848 (pg. 26). And two, because just seven years later, the Dreyfus Affair in France would bring illusions of capitalism’s tendency toward the assimilation of Jewish identities into the national body-politic crashing spectacularly down.

Despite history’s quick correction to Engels’ overly optimistic position, his dismissiveness at the absurdity of modern antisemitism—equal parts vulgar materialist and idealist in its teleological rendering of historical progress—remained popular in two settings: the developed economies of Western Europe and North America, and the core of the Russian Empire. In the former case, several decades of emancipation had “created a layer of ‘state Jews’ who were socially and politically conformist, defenders of a form of conservative liberalism...and who rejected any form of rebellion” (pg. XII).

The historic advancements in Jewish social standing and institutional access that these more assimilated communities experienced allowed them to view the rising tide of antisemitism as a far-away product of backward Russia. The liberatory effects that Engels ascribed to modernization had come to fruition; at least until they had not. As the wave of modern antisemitism reached the West in conjunction with the third wave of westward Jewish migration, even western Jews began to see that antisemites were simply not being laughed out of the room any longer, and began to organize in self-defense.

In Russia, the Engelsian position was held first and foremost by the Bolsheviks, who waged a fierce fight against all manners of Jewish nationalism and upheld [the line that](#) “Hatred towards the Jews persists only in those countries where slavery to the landowners and capitalists has created abysmal ignorance among the workers and peasants.... [It] is a survival of ancient feudal times.” Even though the Bolsheviks adopted Engels’ theoretical line, its political character was vastly different in precisely one of the backward economies where Engels believed antisemitism still held a material base. The Bolsheviks waged an active ideological fight against antisemitism and supported Jewish self-defense against the proto-fascist violence of the czarists. For Engels, in the West, such work was redundant.

Between Western Europe and Russia, a wide array of Marxist opinions on the Jewish question emerged that Traverso’s book recapitulates. It was in these regions, namely central Europe and the Russian borderlands, where history clearly got away from Engels’ pronouncements. For one, while Engels’ understanding of antisemitism as a vestige of feudalism suggested that antisemitism would be a largely peasant phenomenon in the modern world. Yet Austria and the German Empire saw the rise of an antisemitic political movement with its roots first and foremost in the ranks of the middle class. Central European antisemitism was a modern phenomenon, more closely resembling the racism of modern colonialism than the Christian anti-Judaism of the Middle Ages. For another, these were the regions where legal emancipation—or in the Russian case, gestures toward it—had brought only antisemitic backlash, rather than the assimilation promised by the Western experience. Consequently, even those Marxists who maintained Engels’ assimilationist politics had to develop alternative theories of assimilation that did not rely on a mythical social progress accompanying modernization.

On one end of the early spectrum of opinion, many Austrian Marxists saw the Jews as representatives of capital. They believed antisemitism to be either a fundamentally harmless form of proto-anti-capitalism or else a specter held up by the liberal bourgeoisie to pose as defenders of the oppressed. They were clear that the antisemitism of their society was no holdover from medieval Christianity, but rather a new phenomenon thriving within the crucible of rapid industrialization and colonialism; and yet they advocated a position of neither supporting nor opposing this

antisemitism, as the workers' struggle was indifferent to the fate of so-called Jewish capital.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Jewish nationalists of the Russian borderlands promoted a militant brand of Jewish self-organization in response to the immediate threat of antisemitic violence. Neither the Bundists nor the Marxist Zionists saw antisemitism as a product of Russian economic backwardness. Quite the opposite: it was precisely the modernization policies of Nicholas II, brought to an untimely close by his assassination, that had spurred the massive wave of violence that Jewish nationalists were now forced to confront. Industrialization in Russia had only deepened the economic marginalization of borderland Jewish communities, which gave rise to the social tensions that produced antisemitism. In short, antisemitism was no disembodied, free-floating bigotry calling out from the Dark Ages; it was embedded within Russia's imperial political economy, and could not be dislodged without a struggle for national liberation.

These are only a few of the voices that participated in the discussions that Traverso's book excavates, but they give a sense of the breadth of the theoretical and political debates waged by Marxists during the birth of modern, capitalist antisemitism. All of them, save for the Jewish nationalists of the Pale of Settlement, supported assimilation as the desirable and inevitable resolution to the Jewish question. At question was only whether this would be a natural result of the bourgeoisie's victory over feudalism or whether emancipation had simply created a new ghetto, launching the Jews into a structural conflict with the intelligentsia and petit bourgeoisie.

As the ranks of organized antisemites grew stronger and more numerous, however, Jewish Marxist theories of antisemitism became more complex: Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, once sympathetic to the Engelsian line, would be forced by the rise of the Nazis to revise their theories, coming to understand antisemitism in similar terms as the Jewish nationalists—not a vestige of feudalism smoldering among the peasantry, but a profoundly capitalist form of middle-class reaction. For Trotsky, who gave perhaps the most sophisticated Marxist political account of antisemitism in his late writings on fascism, Nazi antisemitism was “the expression of modern decaying capitalism.”

Even at their best, however, these theorists—among whose ranks should be added Walter Benjamin and especially Abram Leon—failed to grasp the total depth of fascist antisemitism. “Fundamentally,” Traverso writes, “they perceived anti-Semitism as an epiphenomenon, a ‘tactic’ or a simple prejudice, and not as a goal in itself of Third Reich policy. As the Holocaust would clearly show, Nazi anti-Semitism did not correspond to any criteria of productive rationality” (pg. 158). The stubborn classical Marxist may have chalked Buchenwald up to primitive accumulation and state repression, but Treblinka demanded a new theory.

This was one impact of the Nazi holocaust on Marxist antisemitism theory. Another was an unsettling of the assimilation consensus first established by Marx in [“On the Jewish Question”](#): “The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.” Whereas, in Traverso's words, “Classical Marxism was incapable of...recognising the Jewish aspiration to a distinct separate identity,” in Auschwitz's shadow, such an aspiration could be forgiven—even sympathized with. Then the national question—whether the Jews constituted a nation, a caste, a people-class, a people without history, or something else—was put to bed by the establishment of a Jewish settler-colony in Palestine. In short, the entire political and social basis for the Marxist debates of the early twentieth century was overthrown; and yet, over half a century later, many of these early arguments have resurfaced.

If the Engelsian political-economic analysis of antisemitism has not returned to prominence, his Hegelian self-assuredness regarding society's relative progress beyond antisemitism certainly has. This “misunderstanding,” as Traverso puts it, is only deepened by the proliferation of a [chauvinist, pop-Zionist literature](#) within which the fight against antisemitism is counterposed to the fights for liberation of other peoples, particularly Black folks and Palestinians. In light of this reaction by ruling-class Jews, we have our own Victor Adlers and Franz Mehrings, who have concluded that the political question of antisemitism is nothing more than a canard of the (Zionist) ruling class, to which the proper response is to refrain from any systematic work either supportive of or in opposition to

antisemitism. But we also have our own Rosa Luxemburgs, holding the line in a less complicit fashion that “for the disciples of Marx and for the working class a Jewish question as such does not exist” (pg. 10). And slowly but surely, our Vladimir Medems are emerging, who apply the later Marxists’ structural analyses of the roots of capitalist antisemitism in a more or less modern, anti-racist, and anti-fascist response to organized antisemitism.

The reason for this return to prehistoric perspectives on the Jewish question (prehistoric in the sense that they emerged prior to the historical experiences that form the basis of any serious Marxist appraisal of antisemitism under capitalism) is the same reason why so many talented, turn-of-the-century Jewish Marxists accommodated to an essentially class reductionist analysis of anti-Jewish oppression: “The emphasis on assimilation...essentially concealed a constant attempt to suppress the Jewish Question” (pg. 9). For many Marxists, particularly Jewish Marxists, Judaism appears as a political enemy—either the conservative, religious Judaism of the shtetl or else the Zionist “[Blood and State Judaism](#)” of today’s North American, Israeli, and British Jewish communities. As Traverso suggests with the psychoanalytic metaphor of suppression, assimilationism is a problematic but powerful resolution to the contradiction posed by the Marxist’s struggle against antisemitism, on the one hand, and her struggle against Judaism, on the other. The antisemite answers the Jewish Question with the negation of Judaism “as a ‘social abstraction’”; the Marxist assimilationist resolves it through the negation of Judaism as a concrete social object (pg. 221).

Marxism has struggled to confront the Jewish Question head-on precisely because it is so entwined with Jewishness—including the heretical break with Judaism that characterized the political arcs of virtually every Jewish interlocutor in the Marxist antisemitism debates. Now, as at the turn of the century, Jewish Marxists have led the assimilationist charge—then with critiques of “separatism” of which Trotsky accused the Bund, now by criticizing the “[Holocaust-centric lens](#)” of those Jews doing substantive organizing to combat antisemitism.

There is, of course, an alternative to both antisemitic and assimilationist answers to the Jewish Question. It is what Trotsky proposed when he wrote to [the Jewish press in Mexico](#) that “to work for international socialism means also to work for the solution of the Jewish question”—though his perspective, shaped as it was by the ongoing controversies over Zionism and the “bureaucratic farce” of [Birobidzhan](#), was limited to territorialism. It is what the Jewish Labor Bund carried out in practice by investing tremendous resources into the cultural life of Ashkenazi Jewry, even as they continued to preach “neutrality” with respect to the question of assimilation or non-assimilation.

These political traditions never realized their liberatory potential: the development of the politics of Jewish liberation—that is, a Marxist politics advocating not a negation of Judaism, but a redemption of the Jews—was cut short with the lives of its practitioners at Auschwitz, and has yet to be taken back up. Traverso laments the fact that “In the post-war period, Marxists have produced some remarkable analyses of Zionism but...the available literature on the history of Jewish socialism...represents an ethnic revival (the rediscovery of a cultural identity by the Jewish community of the Diaspora) rather than a re-appropriation by the left of a segment of its history” (pg. 10). He laments because with mass antisemitic movements plaguing the streets of the United States, England, Belgium, Norway, Germany, France, Ukraine, and Hungary, to name a few, a re-appropriation of the politics of Jewish socialism by the Left is precisely what is needed.

Traverso’s book is, above all else, a corrective to the prevailing naivety that assimilation can solve, or already has solved, the Jewish question. It is a reminder that in the absence of proactive liberatory movements, “history [can] be a march towards catastrophe as well as progress” (220-1). But in confronting the current wave of antisemitism, we have the benefit of historical experience: Trotsky and Leon can be our starting place, not the culmination of our work.

Source: [Tempest](#)

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