Auto-Emancipation and anti-Semitism

Homage to Bernard Lazare

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To Mitchell Cohen, emancipation is more than just a transfer from one state or society to another. It is defined by the world you leave behind and the world you enter, and your status in both places. To understand the Jewish experience of emancipation, one must try to understand both the individual's transformation and the reaction of the larger receiving group.

I.

Is there a simple logic to emancipation? Yes: it takes you from one status to another, at least in principle. But a great deal depends on the world you leave and the world you enter – and the overlaps between them. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine an emancipated society that is not democratic. Yet historically speaking, emancipation did not necessarily mean democracy. Jews were sometimes emancipated by enlightened, absolutist monarchs. You can be granted civil rights and be judged by the same laws as everyone else without having the right to vote (perhaps because nobody has it). You can also have both civil rights and the franchise, yet find it necessary to muffle your public voice because of the chills of political or social or cultural or religious prejudice.

If much depends on the worlds you leave and enter, a great deal depends also on who “you” are, before and after. Emancipation implies that you were part of a group with civil disabilities; the disabilities are then lifted. Once the group is emancipated, once its past legal status dissolves, do its members enter the new world as individuals, or as a new version of the group, or as a combination of both?

Finally, much depends on what I’ll call “readjustment”. Prejudice cannot be remedied solely by supplying rights and juridical guarantees to its victims, however important these rights and guarantees. Emancipation, successful emancipation, also means a larger social, cultural, and political readjustment – not just by the emancipated person, but by those around him or her. Simone de Beauvoir made this point in a radical way when she wrote in The Second Sex that “Just as in America, there is no Negro problem, but a white
problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the Woman problem has always been a man's problem." [1] Emancipation implies a novel propinquity among people who have previously been separate (or, a redefinition of intimacy in the case of men and women). In a democracy, it means that people who have previously been outsiders and powerless will have a share in determining society’s fate.

II.

In sum: emancipation is more multifaceted than its logic. Insert it into history – it cannot be elsewhere - and its reality becomes messy, and not simply a matter of...logic. Consider what may be called the two logics of Jewish emancipation. The first emerged roughly between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, parallel to the development of modern European states. The idea – the hope – was simply that Jews could leave behind old restrictions and be admitted into the Enlightening societies around them. It did imply a readjustment by Jews, an uneasy trade-off captured later in the phrase: “Be a Jew at home, a man outside.” With this privatization of pluralism, reason, a universal human quality, would dissolve all prejudices. The idea of a universalizing solvent was central also to liberalism, republicanism, and later Marxism, taking form, respectively, as individualism, citizenship, and the proletariat.

The second logic emerged out of despair about the first’s prospects, and can be called the logic of “auto-emancipation”, after the title of the proto-Zionist pamphlet published in 1882 by Leo Pinsker, a Jewish physician in Odessa. In the previous year, pogroms had violently ravaged Jewish life in some 200 towns in the Tsarist empire. They were applauded both by the regime and by its radical populist foes. Pinsker had once been an advocate of “enlightenment”, of combining cultural “modernization” of Jews with liberalization of the Tsar’s empire; this was a model of emancipation similar to that in Western Europe.

But now he wrote in anguish that no matter what the Jew did, he was construed as a problem, always blameworthy: “for the living the Jew is a dead man, for the natives an alien and a vagrant, for property holders a beggar, for all the poor an exploiter and a millionaire, for patriots a man without a country, for all classes a hated rival.” [2] Pinsker was a physician, and so it is unsurprising that he characterized anti-Semitism as a disease. He proposed a cure: a new politics of self-determination, Jewish political independence. Other east European Jews would respond to anti-Semitism with their feet (emigrating in vast numbers) or, later, by advocacy of diaspora nationalism. But Pinsker anticipated Theodor Herzl’s call, a decade and a half later, for a Jewish state in response to rising anti-Semitism in western Europe and the stuttering of emancipation there. Pinsker and Herzl were proponents of collective political readjustment of Jewish relations with the world.

III.

I think we must evaluate Jewish politics today as a long term descendant of the troubled struggles for emancipation and auto-emancipation. Both struggles were quests for some sort of “normalcy”, differently defined, and both assumed the modern state as a framework. Emancipation aimed at integration into a society within it, while Zionism took statehood itself, that is, Jewish political independence, to be the perspicacious response
to the rise of anti-Semitism and the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries. Whatever one thinks of Israel’s evolution, its policies and its plight, it is
difficult to challenge Zionist pessimism in light of those events.

Zionists did not foresee a catastrophe on the scale of the Holocaust, and some of them
did not grasp the politics of the 1930s with clarity. For example, Vladimir Jabotinsky, who
often warned loudly of anti-Semitism’s dangers, was still able to write in 1938 that he
foresaw a massive revival of nineteenth century liberalism: “I feel its time is coming; I
think in about 5 years it will have enthusiastic crowds to back it.” He believed that
liberalism’s “catchwords” would then “be repeated all the world over with the same
hysteria” as those of communism and fascism had been. [3] Still, the Zionists had a much
keener general sense of the historical menace – the intransigence – of anti-Semitism, than
most of their critics, especially those who believed that universalistic solutions (eg a
classless society) resolve all particular problems. It is useful to remember that the
relative security enjoyed by post-emancipated Jews in today’s Europe did not come of a
simple evolution out of emancipation but after unprecedented catastrophe.

There is an essential political distinction between the Jewish citizens of France or the
United States and those of Israel: French or American Jewish citizens constitute minority
groups within their respective societies while Israeli Jewry composes the majority
citizenry of a sovereign state. But there is also an important political similarity; in all
three cases, the vehicles of Jewish political modernization were transformed in the late
twentieth century. Social democracy was the vehicle in both American and Palestinian
settings. The Democratic party became America’s functional counterpart to European
Social Democracy in the 1930s. It was through Franklin D. Roosevelt’s reformist “New
Deal coalition” that most American Jews integrated into mainstream American politics (a
process that accelerated after World War II and which was, of course, enhanced by the
traditions of American pluralism). In Palestine, Mapai, the social democratic party
founded in 1930 and led by David Ben-Gurion, integrated Jewish immigrants into a state-
in-genesis. As the New Deal consolidated Democratic dominance in the U.S., the Zionist
labor movement established its hegemony in Jewish Palestine. [4]

The New Deal Coalition and Israeli Labor unraveled in the 1970s; both proved incapable
of reinventing themselves, and found their cultural worlds besieged. In fact, this failure
was concurrent with a general intellectual impasse in western social democracy. Changes
of substantial magnitude – revolutions in communications and technology, the progress of
neoliberal globalization – were underway, and fiscal structures of national statehood,
which were essential tools of domestic policies in welfare states, were challenged. The
premises of Zionism, which were formulated at the same time that socialist movements
 burgeoned in Europe, were those of the nation state. Those premises are no longer fully
valid, not because of battles over Palestinian and Jewish rights, but because of the
changing role of the nation state. This may not yet be so evident as a consequence of
Israel’s embattled circumstances, but I think it will become so, just as it took a while to
see that some long-standing social democratic assumptions about class politics were no
longer tenable. Jewish political culture will have to be reinvented as much as social
democratic egalitarianism needs to be.

French republicanism is also challenged by the changing role of the state, both within the
European Union and in the world at large. Scholars like Pierre Birnbaum and Ira
Katznelson have argued, I think persuasively, that a strong French state was the crucial variable in French Jewish emancipation. The Republic played a role analogous to the New Deal in the U.S. and social democratic state-building in Israel. The extent to which the Republic is Europeanized and its society pluralized, is the extent to which the meaning of citizenship must be rethought and reinvented, and so too, inevitably, the circumstances of post-emancipation Jews. Before I try to make some suggestions that I think apply to all three countries that I have discussed, I want to take a short detour.

IV.

Both emancipation and auto-emancipation failed to resolve the problem of anti-Semitism. Prejudice has its own manner of reasserting itself, sometimes in new ways, sometimes just in new guise. Iain Pears, the English novelist, remarked recently, “anti-Semitism is like alcoholism. You can go for 25 years without a drink, but if things go bad and you find yourself with a vodka in your hand, you can’t get rid of it.” [5]

I don’t know if contemporary specialists call alcoholism a “social disease”, but I do know that alcoholics often protest vigorously that there is no problem; or they protest that the problem is long gone. And I know that compelling them to speak aloud of their problem is considered urgent to its treatment. One reason why I subtitled this article “Homage to Bernard Lazare” is that this French-Sephardic anarchist-Zionist, a remarkable figure who transformed from Jewish anti-Semite into valiant champion of Dreyfus, and whose death at age 38 was in 1903, just a century ago, was never silent when he was disquiet.

Several motifs recurred in classical anti-Semitic discourse, and I think it is useful to recall them nowadays. They came together in a consistent, if not necessarily coherent, whole:

1. Insinuations: Jews simply don’t – indeed, cannot – fit properly into society. There is something both foreign and sinister about them;
2. Complaints: Jews are too particularistic, too preoccupied with their “own”, clannish rather than properly solidaristic. They make themselves into a problem. If the “Jewish problem” is singular in some way, it is their own fault, and usually covered up by their special pleading;
3. Remonstrations: Jews carp that they are victims, but in reality they have enormous power, especially financial. It is everywhere, though not visible. It is exercised manipulatively and conspiratorially, behind the scenes;
4. Recriminations: Astonishing misdeeds are ascribed to Jews, ranging from the murder of God to the ritual slaughter of children to selling military secrets to the enemy, to being capitalists or middlemen or landlords or moneylenders exploiting the poor – or whoever. And Jews always deceive you.

This is no more than a sketch, and I leave aside some consequential historical matters like the transformation of pre-modern, theologically based Jew-hatred into modern, national-racial anti-Semitism. I don’t mean to minimize the distinction between religiously inspired bigotry, which permits, at least in principle, for relief by conversion, and national-racial antagonism, which assumes immutable, “natural” sources of hostility among Jews and non-Jews. But I do want to stress the reproduction of a prejudiced discourse despite that change, and to suggest that the discourse functions like a closed circuit; no marshaling of evidence seems able to short it.

Take the four motifs of anti-Semitism, alter a few words and phrases, and they become
uncannily like the anti-Zionist motifs repeated in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds, and also in many Western left-wing and intellectual circles:
1. Insinuations: The Zionists comprise an alien implant, which can never fit into the Mideast. Their state was created by western imperialism;
2. Complaints: The Zionists are exclusivist, and a Jewish state can never be democratic;
3. Remonstrations: The Zionists carp that they are victims, but in reality they have enormous power, especially financial. It is everywhere, but not visible. It is exercised manipulatively and conspiratorially behind the scenes. Look at their control of Washington;
4. Recriminations: Zionists are guilty of astonishing and dastardly deeds and deceptions, ranging from the “imperialist aggression” of 1967, to Barak’s claim that he made a real offer at Camp David, to the Jenin “massacre”.

In principle, I think that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are distinguishable; one is a political position, the other a prejudice. Yet the overlap between anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist discourses today is considerable, and it is especially striking at a time when many intellectuals, notably the post-modernist left and postcolonial theorists, base their work on the very notion of “discourse”, contending that clusters of assumptions, embedded in our languages and cultures, pre-select how we think about the world, and mesh the production of knowledge with power.

V.

It may be that alcoholism will always be with us, even if it depends on different alcohols. It probably cannot be abolished except by totalitarian measures, but that doesn’t mean that other, democratic measures ought not to be taken against it. I want to suggest that in this transformative moment, five interlinked ideas may be useful in strengthening democratic resistances to inebriation:
First: the reassertion of secular humanism. In recent years, some political thinkers, like the late John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman in the United States, have argued that secular humanism and religious faith are both “comprehensive” world-views, and, consequently, a liberal democratic state ought to be neutral between them. [6] I think that secular humanist culture should be privileged in liberal democracy (or in what I would prefer, social democracy) because it can encompass religious lives, whereas religious culture cannot do the same for secularism. Hence I disagree with Rawls’s separation of public from secular reason.

Humanism, with its Renaissance origins among thinkers who were mostly religious in one way or another, challenged the totalizing metaphysics of the Middle Ages and fostered intellectual pluralism by accepting the legitimacy of multiple authorities – Greek and Roman in addition to the One Authority. This compelled people to evaluate, to think for themselves, to see different points of view, to make choices. All of these are prerequisites of a free society, one in which critical citizens are the final authority but which allows individuals to evaluate and choose among various life options, whether secular, religious, or a mix of the two.

Second: cultural and religious pluralism ought to be both protected and valued. Societies and governments ought not still to pretend that we live – or ought to live – in a world of abstract individualism. We are social individuals, and fundamentalist individualism, like all forms of fundamentalism, is oppressive. Bernard Lazare proposed that human beings
have “within their reach a certain number of ideas which belong to the treasury of the species, but each individual has his own special way of expressing these general ideas [...] The same follows for groups of individuals [...] Why should we regiment the human species, why should we make it bow down before a single rule [...]?” [7] Lazare took this notion very far and made it political as well as cultural. As an anarchist, he advocated a federal rather than a centralized society, so when anti-Semites groused that Jews were a “state within a state,” he retorted: “I find that there are not enough states within the state; that is, [...] there are not within modern states enough free and autonomous groups bound to each other.” [8]

Third: Pluralism, radicalized, can lead to fragmentation, to a sense that nothing unites or even binds citizens in a democratic society. (This is a problem for Lazare’s anarchist formulation). I think an amended version of what John Rawls calls “public reason” helps to counter this. Democratic debate on the basic political matters – for Rawls they are only constitutional – must address “citizens as citizens.” [9] I think that a pluralistic society needs two stages of this sort of deliberation. In the first, democratic citizens would express arguments rooted in their particularities – whether political, cultural, religious, eccentrically individual, or even inebriated and prejudiced. This allows democratic citizens to hear each other out, to compare perspectives and learn from others, to adjust to different claims. But in the second stage, citizens would, as Rawls suggests, translate their deliberations into a common political language. If they cannot translate – if they are, for instance, too busy drinking vodka – they cannot persuade. The point is similar politically to Jurgen Habermas’s argument that “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse.” [10]

Fourth: The society in which these deliberations takes place needs to be an equality-friendly society. Large inequalities of wealth and social power can corrupt democratic exchange and fragment a society as much as cultural or religious differences can. An equality-friendly society accepts differences among individuals or groups, but always presumes equality as its anchor; it presumes that it is always inequalities that must be justified.

Fifth: All these ideas come together in what I would call “rooted cosmopolitanism”. Rooted cosmopolitanism is opposed to integral cosmopolitanism (which reifies humanity), as well as integral individualism (which reifies the ego), and integral nationalism (which reifies a particular group). It is a dialectical idea (excuse me for using this unpopular phrase). It rests on the legitimacy of plural loyalties while insisting on democratic commonality.

Rooted cosmopolitanism lives out the tensions between universalism and particularism, rather than coercing them into any false reconciliation. In the words of Lazare, you cannot be universal, you cannot “participate in the human endeavor” without also being particular. [11] Any “post-emancipated” person – black or woman, Muslim or Christian, Arab or Chinese, or French or American – might say likewise.

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Footnotes


3. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "Letter to J. Bartlett", 9 December 1938, at the Jabotinsky Institute and Archives, Tel Aviv. Bartlett was editor of the London News Chronicle.


6. For an argument about liberal democracy, secularism, and religious culture, focused on public funding for the arts, see: Bruce Ackerman, "Should Opera be Subsidized?", "Operas and Citizens: Mitchell Cohen Responds", and "Lighten Up!: Bruce Ackerman Ripostes", *Dissent*, Summer 1999.


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