

TWT Antisemitism Reading Group – Session 1

The following extracts are from Maxime Rodinson's introduction to Abram Leon's book, A Materialist Interpretation of the Jewish Question (as printed in Rodinson's collection of essays: Cult, Ghetto and State, published 1983). This text was chosen to help us explore a foundational assumption of the current prevalent understanding of antisemitism: that antisemitism has always existed everywhere and will continue to do so. Please bear this assumption in mind as you read.

This text was written as a preface for a new edition of *La Conception materialiste de la question juive*, the book written by the Belgian Trotskyist Abram Leon and published in Paris in 1968 by *Etudes et Documentation internationales*. Leon, who died in Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of twenty-six, had abandoned his earlier Marxist-leaning Zionism for Trotskyism. He drafted this work between 1940 and 1942, under the atrocious conditions of occupied Belgium, in the midst of the terrible difficulties of his clandestine militant activity in the resistance.

The existence of most of the ethnic groups, peoples, and nations with which historians deal is circumscribed, usually over many centuries, by specific factors that are lasting, stable, and even permanent: community of territory, language, history, culture, and so on. Even the most idealist of theorists cannot ignore this solid material base, which at least imposes limits on idealist theorization.

There is no such thing as an independent 'Western spirit' or 'Chinese spirit', although a set of relatively constant empirical factors may at least bring about some degree of permanence of the ideal phenomena that accompany them. In the case of the Jewish entities down through history, however, far fewer consistent empirical factors can be detected. It is therefore hard to see what substratum of empirical forces could be the basis of any so-called spirit of Judaism identical over time, independent of differences in period, locale, and social structure, acting similarly on the various groups of Jews of very different nature.

Thus, neither reality, nor the concrete life of Jewish groups, nor the psychologies of individual Jews can be explained as the translation into the real world of uncaused ideal phenomena. Granted, these ideal phenomena exist, and they are not at all epiphenomena. They have had extremely important effects. But in no way can they be considered to lack causes, to be unaffected by reality, and therefore immutable. They can always be analysed, and their dynamic interpreted as a consequence of their past, their state at an earlier phase on the one hand and of the particular current situation of the group that is their living support on the other.

Features essentially characteristic of Europe after the Crusades have often been unduly and unconsciously transposed to the past. They have also been transposed, equally unduly, to other cultural spheres. Even in the diaspora, the Jews of Antiquity were not especially engaged in commerce. Leon was misled on this point by historians who had used the inadequate documentation of the time and were influenced by this tendency to transpose subsequent conditions backward in time. An author very familiar with the history of the Egyptian Jews writes that in Egypt under the Roman Empire they were 'beggars, sorcerers, peddlers, artisans, and traders of all kinds,

dealers in antiques, and usurers, bankers, farmers, tenants, working men, and sailors, in short, they did everything from which they could hope to derive a livelihood'. And S. W. Baron notes that this portrait 'also fits, with minor modifications, other countries of the dispersion'. Flavius Josephus was able to write at the end of the first century after Christ: 'As for ourselves, therefore, we neither inhabit a maritime country, nor do we delight in merchandise...and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains in cultivating that only'. In his beautiful thesis, B. Blumenkranz has shown on the basis of very nearly exhaustive documentation that before the eleventh century, Jews in Western Europe lived without segregation in the midst of the European population, having more or less the same professional occupations as the middle layers of the latter.

In the Muslim East, where medieval conditions have largely persisted to the present day, sects or religious communities have subsisted for centuries and millennia, even though few of their adherents show any great interest in the doctrines that gave rise to them so long ago. The Druze, for example - members of a sect formed in the eleventh century and theoretically possessing a very scholarly doctrine derived in part from neo-Platonist philosophy-are no more than Syrian or Lebanese peasants who are aware that their customs are different from those of others and who tend to react as a unit, much like a little nation or sub-nation, however much they have been encompassed within many different successive states. They have fiercely defended their identity, their particularism, their group interests, and they continue to do so to a large extent, despite the fact that they share most of the cultural features of their neighbours of the other religious communities, speak the same Arabic language, and belong to the Arab ethnic group according to all the usual criteria - and this despite the recent strength of the ideology of Arab nationalism, which exerts pressure towards unification.

Likewise, the great ideologies of the past - religious and not nationalist - have reacted against this tendency towards the persistence of particularism. These ideologies acted to guarantee state unity. The Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman Empire, strong and unitary states that resemble modern nations in some respects, did not impose a single ideology on their subjects, but allowed a certain degree of pluralism. Their requisites were minimal. They never envisaged the suppression of the Jewish *ethnos*. The conflicts of these states with Israel occurred solely because of what seemed an excess of particularism among this people, an inclination towards separatism that raised concern about their loyalty to the state. Yahvism, the religion of Israel, had evolved from a national cult increasingly aiming at intra-national exclusivism towards an exclusive universalist cult. Yahveh had first been imposed as the sole god of Israel. Considered stronger, more potent, than the gods of the other nations, he was in the process of being dubbed the only existing one. Many Yahvists scorned other gods, going so far as to consider them non-existent.

The religious element in this war is obvious. It is even more visible in the revolt of 132-35, in which Rabbi Aqiba played a great role of ideological inspiration. The nationalists were able to base themselves on the few vexations that narrow-minded, corrupt, or provocative prosecutors like Gessius Florus had introduced against Jewish religious customs; they were also able to capitalize on the messianic current of thought. But it

was quite clear that the principal motivation was the struggle against political oppression. Many very religious-minded people held that their faith was perfectly compatible with submission to Rome, provided the necessary protests were issued when Roman functionaries interfered with the religious customs of their people.

Leon correctly invokes similar uprisings around the same time in other Roman provinces. In these cases, as in Palestine, social demands enhanced the enthusiasm of disadvantaged layers in their participation in the national revolt. He could also have mentioned the example of the Gauls, contemporary with and closer to the Jewish case in some respects. In 69, taking advantage of the turmoil that both preceded and followed the fall of Nero, the Batavian prince Julius Civilis aroused his people - Germans in immediate contact with the Gauls - by appealing against the vexations suffered at the hands of Roman officers.

The Roman Empire, a pre-nation of impressive dimensions, unified in part by a close-knit network of economically interdependent units, fostered the fusion of certain ethnic groups and certain cults as well, but not the disappearance of universalist religions or sects. The ethnic groups of the western part of the empire were fused, and they lost, along with their languages (Iberian, Gallic, and so on), the cultural features that distinguished them from one another, thus becoming mere regions of the Latin world, of Romania. Geographical factors, relative isolation, and the memory of a glorious past permitted at most a certain degree of regionalist consciousness which, once historical conditions were propitious - after economic impoverishment, the dislocation of commercial links, and the barbarian invasions - would later permit a slow rebirth of national (or pre-national, if you will) identity, along with linguistic differentiation. The ethnic groups of the East, while retaining their popular languages (Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and so on), sometimes fused among one another, as in Anatolia or Syria-Phoenicia, but they preserved a set of specific cultural features more sharply, albeit in the framework of new entities. Because of its powerful geographical unity, Egypt retained a national identity of its own, as indeed it has generally done throughout its history. The Jews were protected against any fusion by the close-knit tissue of particular practices imposed by strict Yahvism on the first 'Zionists', who had returned to Judea from Babylon at the end of the sixth century before Christ. One could very well seek accommodation with the ambient world, agree even to respect the gods of neighbouring peoples, as Alexandrian Judaism did, and adapt as much as possible to Hellenistic civilization, as was done for a whole period symbolized by the frescoes of the synagogue of Doura Europos (in the Damascus museum), in which Moses is depicted in the unexpected features of a pedagogue bearing the thin Greek-style ringed beard. But those who abandoned the distinctive practices of the *ethnos* immediately stood outside it. Before the accommodations of the third century, this was necessary in order to accede to certain public functions.

Thus could one abandon the Jewish *ethnos*. But although it was forbidden to join it without having been born to it, no one was under any pressure to leave it, or to abandon the universalist religion linked to it. The repressive measures against the extremist nationalists, advocates of political independence for Palestine, or against the Jews of the provinces who from time to time had bloody clashes with the other ethnic groups of the same area (contemporary Jewish nationalist literature incorrectly calls

these pogroms, and sees them as manifestations of eternal anti-Semitism), were police operations that did not overturn this principle. Vespasian and Titus refused to assume the title *Judaicus*, or 'conqueror of the Jews', as the emperors had taken the titles *Germanicus*, 'conqueror of the Germans', or *Africanus*, 'conqueror of the Africans'. They were supposed to have conquered not the Jewish people, but a faction of Jewish extremists gone astray in Judea. It was Judea that had been mastered (*Judea capta* or *devicta*, it says on Flavian coins), not all the Jews, among whom these sovereigns counted very many supporters, and even, in the case of Titus, a tenderly beloved friend, Berenice. If he did not marry her but left her, *invitus in vitam*, it was for fear not of specifically 'anti-Semitic', but of Roman traditionalist reactions, such as those Anthony had suffered for his liaison with the Egyptian Cleopatra.

To return, however, to the Jewish *ethnos*, it thus continued to exist, an endlessly dispersed diaspora with its two stable territorial bases in Palestine and Babylonia, from which emanated, significantly, the Mishnah and the two Talmuds, drafted in the regions of greatest Jewish concentration, where the problems of agricultural and artisanal life as much as those of urban and commercial life had to be treated from the standpoint of religious jurisprudence. The Babylonian base flourished under the rule of the Sassanid Persian Empire, which was relatively tolerant. The Palestinian base (now centred in Galilee) withered very slowly under the rule of the Roman Empire. In no way did the emperors persecute the Jews, even favouring them as the Christian threat mounted, but they were careful to avoid any possible resurgence of their dangerous nationalism. On the other hand, bad experiences with wavering proselytes, and the necessities of a new organization based no longer on the aristocracy and the priests but on clerks contributed to turning the Jewish community back on itself. The general trend of the eastern nationalities drifted towards de-Hellenization - at least superficially, for many of the Hellenistic elements that had been absorbed were retained, here as elsewhere, whatever some may say.

For this period, too, any explanation based on the functional specialization of the Jews must be rejected. At the conclusion of an exhaustive investigation of the condition of the Jews in the Latin world before the Crusades, B. Blumenkranz sums up the results on this point as follows: 'The Jews were subject to the same laws as the Christians, and nothing else distinguished them either. Speaking the same language, dressing in the same manner, engaging in the same professions, they intermingled in the same houses, just as they all came together under arms to defend the common homeland.' In the course of his work, he explains: 'Apart from public functions...there was no activity from which the Jews were formally excluded.' The restrictions mentioned were religiously based, in general not applied, and were far from reducing the Jews to any specialization whatever. Thus the attempt to prohibit Christians from consulting Jewish doctors, and the prohibition on trade in liturgical objects. 'No document of our period, whether legal or practical, charges the Jews with usury; [moreover], at that time there was very simply not yet any commerce in money on a large enough scale to make it a problem of public order.' In addition, while 'there was no lack of attempts to deny Jews the right to own land, on the whole they remained without success.' Those are the decisive points.

The Christian people, it seems, were free of special resentment against the Jews. The few rare incidents that have come down to us seem due to factors other than the ethnic-religious cleavage, or else amount to the usual minor conflicts that result from any sort of differentiation. Sometimes the provocation came from the Jews. Sometimes the Christian crowd took the side of the Jews, as in Paris in 582, when a Jew named Priscus was killed during a brawl by a Jew recently converted to Christianity. One of the murderer's companions was lynched, and the murderer himself barely escaped the same fate.

If a different attitude was taken towards pagans, whose 'freedom to worship' was smashed by the Christian state after a brief transitional phase of tolerance, it was perhaps in part because of the schism in ideology itself, which ranged Judaism and Christianity on the same side, mother and daughter religions, both monotheistic and universalist at least in principle. But it may well have been mainly because the organization of pagan practices necessarily had the character of a public cult. In the struggle between Christianity (the 'preponderant belief', as the pagans bitterly called it) and declining paganism during the fourth and fifth centuries, at stake was the ideology that would be adopted by state and municipal institutions, the practices these institutions would finance, the public holidays that would be celebrated, the divinities to which the authorities would pledge their allegiance. No problem of this sort existed as far as Judaism was concerned, for this was a cult reserved for a particular ethnic group, whose members, if it came to that, could always be forbidden the right to proselytize beyond the limits of their *ethnos*, and which, after the third century, could not possibly have aspired to control the state.

Long distance trade and the regional specialization of agricultural and craft production developed enormously in the Muslim Empire and the states that arose from its fragmentation (which nevertheless preserved close links). The Jews, like the other elements of the population, participated in this development, and many of them became merchants. As the leading specialist in this matter has noted: the 'bourgeois revolution' of the Muslim Empire during the eighth and ninth centuries 'certainly expedited the process by which the Jews were transformed from a people engaged mainly in manual trades into one whose most characteristic occupation was commerce... In Muslim times they again found themselves confronted by a highly mercantile civilization [after similar developments in Babylonia in the sixth century before Christ, and then again in the Hellenistic world - M.R.] but responded to the challenge so completely that they became themselves a nation of businessmen.' Significantly, the author also notes: 'This transformation by no means went on unopposed. An early Jewish writer of the Karaite sect [Karaitism was a Jewish 'heresy' - M.R.] stigmatized the devotion to the business profession as un-Jewish and as an aping of the Gentiles - meaning the Arabs or the Muslims in general.'

It is true that during the High Middle Ages, essentially from the seventh to ninth centuries, trade between the Muslim and Christian worlds was a specialty of the Jews, because of the facilities they enjoyed as a result of their ubiquity, their education in an age of illiteracy, and the fact that they were only half-citizens in the existing empires (Frankish, Byzantine, and Muslim), and thus entitled to certain rights while escaping many of the restrictions imposed on others. Nevertheless, even during the ninth

century, when their role in this trade reached its apogee (they were then rid of their Syrian and Greek competitors, while the new intermediaries, Italians and Scandinavians, were not yet in full flight), only a tiny minority of Jews participated in it, and as I have just said, their exclusive hold on it was only partial and quite temporary.

Once again, the persistence of the Jewish entity, both in the Latin West prior to the Crusades and in the Muslim world down to the present day, results simply from the pluralistic character of these societies, from the inadequacy of the forces of unification, from the lack of genuine efforts on the part of the preponderant ideology within the state to extend totalitarianism as far as the destruction of rival theologies. In these conditions, the normal tendency of communities to perpetuate themselves and to defend the interests and aspirations of their members at the level of the community triumphed.

The conjunction in Judaism of religious and ethnic particularism assured its survival within pluralist societies in which unifying forces were weak.

Once again, there was no lasting, persistent, systematic, and generalized effort to eliminate the Jewish entity. Those who were persecuted too severely in one country or were expelled from it were able to find refuge elsewhere, albeit sometimes outside Christendom, in the relatively more hospitable Muslim world.

To this negative reason for the survival of Judaism during and after the epoch of the Crusades a positive cause must also be added: the functional specialization that the Jews were coming to acquire.

Between the sixth and twelfth centuries, 'the Jewish occupational stratification underwent a radical change. A people theretofore still largely deriving its livelihood from farming and handicrafts was being transformed into a predominantly mercantile population with a strong emphasis on the money trade. The climactic stage of that evolution was not to be reached until the later Middle Ages and, even then, was to be limited only to a few areas north of the Alps and the Loire. But the basic trends became fully manifest long before 1200. They operated most strongly under Western Christendom, and were constantly reinforced by the gradual transfer of the Jewish people's centre of gravity from East to West, as well as by the slow infiltration of Western concepts and institutions into the Muslim areas.'

A range of causes *tended* - with very important exceptions - to make the Jews abandon landed property. In the West, the increasingly crystallized feudal system found it difficult to integrate the Jews, for it was not easy to ask them to swear a Christian oath and it was distasteful to recognize them as suzerains of the common people, and still less of Christian nobles (although it did happen).

The process of accelerated urbanization through which the Muslim world was then passing encouraged many Jews to embark on careers in banking and the liberal professions, although these were by no means their exclusive preserve. In antiquity and, in its continuation, under Byzantine domination, Jews never constituted an important segment of the banking profession. By legalizing a modest rate of interest, the later Roman and Byzantine Empires obviated the necessity of legal evasions and prevented the creation of special ethnic or religious groups dedicated to this

commercial branch.' The religious laws against 'usury', very broadly interpreted in the Muslim East and in Christian Europe alike, on the contrary helped to encourage the Jews in this specialization. In the Muslim East, the opportunities available to Muslims for getting around the law and the presence of the Christians, another subjugated minority, effectively impeded this evolution, repugnant to the entire orientation of the medieval Muslim world, towards a dynamic economy with a highly developed 'capitalist' sector.

If there were Jewish bankers - not necessarily restricted to issuing interest-bearing loans - there were also Christian and Muslim bankers, and all the professions (especially the urban ones) had representatives among the Jews. The high proportion of merchants of all varieties merely reflects a general urban phenomenon. In the Latin West, on the other hand, 'powerful forces increasingly drove Jews into moneylending as their major occupation... From the outset, Jews arriving in more advanced lands possessed more cash than their Christian competitors.' Compensation paid for land confiscations augmented their initial capital. Very slowly, the ecclesiastical prohibitions finally had their effects, preventing the clergy, for example, initially the most important group of money lenders, from continuing this activity. The Jews were able to engage in it openly, although sometimes only as figureheads for unscrupulous Christians. The kings above all - the protectors of the Jews, who were considered their serfs and therefore placed outside feudal protection - had every interest in encouraging the Jews to specialize in this commerce, which they were thus able to control. After allowing the Jews to enrich themselves, they could then despoil them, by confiscation or by more subtle methods, with much greater ease than they could their potential Christian rivals. Nevertheless, 'it was not until the thirteenth century that moneylending became the preeminent occupation of Jews in France, and still later in Germany'. In Spain it was never a preponderant activity for them. 'We must bear in mind, however, that Jews never became the sole, and frequently were not even the main, suppliers of credit. The Church may have been increasingly successful in eliminating moneylending by the clergy, but it never seriously hampered such transactions among merchants. Foreigners, in particular, were generally less subject to the pressures of public opinion and threats of anathemas...' They often became lenders. 'Afterwards, foreigners from Mediterranean countries who were frequently called by such names as Lombards and Cahorsins (often, like the term "Jews", these designations were used in a generally pejorative vein) took over a major share in English and French banking. Even if employed in the service of the Papacy...they were no more popular with their debtors. Ultimately, they, like their Jewish competitors, suffered from street attacks and formal expulsions. In fact, they were usually expelled before the Jews.'

The theory of the Jews as a people-class thus has some validity from the lower Middle Ages onwards in Western Europe. Once again - and this bears repeating - this does not mean that the Jews were the only ones to engage in money-lending, nor that all Jews were moneylenders. In fact, there were serious class divisions within the Jewish communities. But it is fair to say that throughout a region of particular importance in the world, these communities revolved around those of their members who practised this profession, and that poor Jews shared in the profits of the bankers through mendicancy, patronage, and so on.

It is also quite true that the advances of the capitalist sector and then of the capitalist economy in Western Europe made the Jews less useful, and that, this being the case, it was easier for unifying ideological trends that implied the persecution and then the expulsion of these heterogeneous communities to gain ground. Especially since the violent popular hatred aroused by the initial consequences of capitalist development could easily be diverted against this minority, which seemed its most trenchant symbolic support and against whom the ideological arsenal of Christendom offered so many keen weapons. The Jews truly appeared as the scapegoat, the classic image of the genuine anti-Semitism that Jewish nationalists have sought unfairly to impute to all conflicts involving Jews throughout **space and time.**

It is true that in another sense secularization was tending to whittle down this community. Indeed, the modern state, founded on the basis of the rise of the capitalist bourgeoisie and, at the outset, of centralized monarchies, was tending to abolish the pluralism of the earlier societies, to suppress all particular community legal systems, along with any autonomy of a quasi-state type, any state within the state. The multiplicity of sects in the countries of refuge, like the Netherlands, and in the new countries peopled with immigrants, like the United States; the conciliatory liberalism that had arisen after the religious wars in England; the yearning for authoritarian centralization, as in France, and for the overthrow of any Roman tutelage, as in Austria, were all leading, in conjunction with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, to a tendency to consider all subjects or citizens of a state as members of a national community having the same status as all others. Membership of a church, religion, or sect was becoming a mere choice that would lead to adherence to a free association at most. By tradition, there were still state religions, but the status entailed few privileges. Religions were losing what state or quasi-state character they may have had. This rule was applied to Judaism too.

This time Judaism was on the road to complete liquidation. In Western Europe and America it was preserved by the constant influx of Jews from countries of Eastern Europe or the Muslim world, in which medieval conditions had persisted: the autonomy and particularism of their communities, the visible sign of which was the preservation of special dialects or even languages (like Yiddish, a Germanic dialect spoken in Slavic countries), accompanied, in the latter case, by an entire Yiddish literary culture. But it was not long before the new arrivals followed the evolution charted by their previously established co-religionists before them. Moreover, the countries from which they had come, which were themselves entering the sphere of Western capitalism, the destroyer of particularisms, were showing signs of advancing down the same road. One could predict, with the 'Stalinist' Marxist Otto Heller, 'the end of Judaism' as a particular mode of life. Some men and women of Jewish descent preserved a certain faith among others. Others, on the contrary, were melting into the wider society like many of their forebears in the past, preserving varying degrees of sentimental attachment to a particular tradition that did have its glories. For many, even this descent was finally forgotten. It is hard to see any reason to consider this trend catastrophic. Judaism was preserved by anti-Semitism and by modern political Zionism, which was a consequence of it.

Zionism achieved its principal objective, the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, by exploiting a situation brought about by European and American imperialist powers, and by relying directly on one or another of these powers on various occasions. As Leon among others pointed out, this has not at all resolved the 'Jewish problem' but has even aggravated it seriously. Many people had predicted, Jews and non-Jews alike, not only revolutionaries and Marxists, but also bourgeois liberals, it has in the first place created an intractable problem in the relations between the Jewish colony of Palestine and the Arab people whose elementary right to be master in its own territory was violated by this colony. The Palestinian protest was soon supported by the entire Arab world. It could not have been otherwise during a period of rising Arab nationalism. The cycle of protests and reaction thus set in motion has already given rise to several wars and innumerable minor military operations, riots, clashes, and attacks, both individual and collective. It is readily predictable that this process will continue, and there is every reason to expect one or several tragedies of the first order in Palestine.

As was inevitable, the Palestinian problem, created by Zionism and compounded by its local triumph, has spread hatred of the Jews into the Arab countries, where anti-Semitism was previously virtually unknown.

The Palestinian problem has contributed to strengthening the most reactionary forces in the Arab countries, who are quite content, like their colleagues everywhere, to accord national questions priority over social progress. Even socialist elements were constrained to devote a great part of their efforts to the struggle against the state of Israel, which in the eyes of their masses seemed, not without considerable justification, to be the incarnation of a world imperialist advance. Zionist success in Palestine has afforded the imperialist powers myriad opportunities to peddle their support and weaponry in the Middle East. In Israel itself, the reactions of the Arabs have enabled the most chauvinist and retrograde orientations to gain ground, through a blackmail based on national unity similar to that which is used in the Arab countries. An important part of the world Jewish population, the Israeli Jewish colony, thus finds itself committed to a dead-end course, driven to a policy of preventive aggression abroad and discriminatory legislation at home, the entire situation encouraging a racist and chauvinist mentality that impels society down the road of social regression.

In the present conditions of exacerbated struggle between the hungry masses of the Third World and the capitalist imperialist powers, of pressure by the masses of the Communist world for democratic socialism, and of international and intranational tensions in the capitalist world, it is imperative to prevent the 'Jewish problem' from being used to aid the manoeuvres of the most reactionary forces. The struggle against them is everyone's business. The fight to turn the Jewish masses away from them is more particularly the business of Jews. That this is difficult makes it all the more necessary. It requires, as I said earlier, lucidity and courage. Abram Leon gives us an example of both of these.

Judaism is explained by history and not outside it. It merits no special scientific or moral privilege. There was no divine or extra-rational necessity for the survival of the Jewish people or the Jewish religion as such. The only moral necessity is to demand

respect for the legitimate collective rights of a religious or secular community when it exists, but not to maintain it, recreate it, or reinforce it when impersonal social factors (and not brutal constraint, force and persecution) cause it to wither. If Judaism or the Jewish people have been the bearers of some particular values that are laudable, beautiful, and still useful, then these must be defended because of their intrinsic validity, without regard to the people or ideology that has adopted them. The Jews are men and women whose individual right to existence must be defended, just like anyone else's, against anti-Semitic barbarism. Any structure that some of them have been led to create must be judged on its own merits and demerits.