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Part 2

Sociology's Reaction to Antisemitism

Rereading Marx on the “Jewish Question”

Marx as a Critic of Antisemitism?

ROBERT FINE

Two views prevail concerning Karl Marx’s alleged antisemitism. The disparaging view is that Marx, notwithstanding his Jewish origins, was himself an antisemite *avant la lettre* or at least made use of antisemitic tropes and reproduced antisemitic stereotypes in his own work. This view is present among some commentators on Marx and firmly entrenched among students of modern antisemitism.¹ It is based in particular on a reading of the second of Marx’s two 1843 essays, “On the Jewish Question,” where he appears to link Judaism to huckstering and global financial power and to equate human emancipation with emancipation of society from Judaism. His representation of Jews is said to inherit a long tradition of radical anti-Jewish hostility and to prefigure the more virulent, political, and sometimes “socialist” antisemitism to come. Marx is portrayed in this literature as a progenitor of what is today labeled the “antisemitism of the Left.”

By contrast, the apologetic view adopted by most Marxist commentators tends to ignore the whole issue of antisemitism in Marx’s own writings. If confronted, it either trivializes it as a passing personal prejudice that did not enter into Marx’s scientific writings or it normalizes it as a sign of his times. In some cases it translates Marx’s negative typifications of Jews and Judaism into the more acceptable language of anticapitalism, for example, by translating the word *Judentum* into the more neutral *commerce*.² In other cases it may even endorse the negative typifications of Jews it finds in Marx’s writings, on the grounds that it is necessary to understand what is true in the antisemitic imagination in order to com-

bat it and on the assumption that Marx's negative typifications of Jews derive in part from empirically verifiable Jewish phenomena. If we put these strategies together, we too often find in Marxist scholarship on Marx a propensity to bypass or dissolve the question of antisemitism.³

The problem I have with the first of these interpretations, the disparaging view that Marx was in some significant sense antisemitic, is that beyond the second essay on the Jewish question there is scant evidence of antisemitic thinking in his published works. Marx was known to deploy racist and antisemitic epithets in some of his private correspondence with Engels.⁴ A frequently cited case is his depiction of fellow socialist Ferdinand Lassalle as *Jude Itzig* in letters to Engels (July 30, 1862 and May 29, 1863). However, such private correspondence was not intended for public consumption, the name Itzig seems to have been in regular use among Jews as a deflator of grandiose pretensions by a fellow Jew, and the remark should be read as a facetious mockery of Lassalle's own predilection for the pseudo-science of physiognomy.⁵ In further private correspondence with Engels Marx made fun of Lassalle's "smooth, self-important, vainglorious, deceitful charlatan's physiognomy" (June 6, 1853) and expostulated that Lassalle "proved by his cranial formation and hair" that he "descends from the Negroes who had joined Moses' exodus from Egypt" (July 30, 1862). We may wish to accuse Marx of bad taste or chuckle at his acerbic wit, which I am more inclined to do, but there is no evidence that he had any interest in or truck with the pseudo-science of physiognomy. There is plenty of evidence that he became increasingly infuriated by Lassalle's authoritarian and antiliberal form of socialism.

There is occasional use of anti-Jewish epithets in Marx's political articles. The best known is an article titled "The Russian Loan," published under Marx's name on January 4, 1856, in the *New York Daily Tribune*. One offending passage runs thus: "We find every tyrant backed by a Jew, as is every Pope by a Jesuit. In truth, the cravings of oppressors would be hopeless, and the practicality of war out of the question, if there were not an army of Jesuits to smother thought and a handful of Jews to ransack pockets. . . . The real work is done by the Jews, and can only be done by them . . . as they monopolise the machinery of the loan-mongering mysteries." This article was probably written by Engels, though Marx put his name to it, and attacked the role of *Jewish* finance alongside that of *Jesuit* ideology.⁶ It is noteworthy, however, that a couple of years earlier, on

April 15, 1854, Marx wrote an article about Ottoman-ruled Jerusalem in which he commented, “Nothing equals the misery and the sufferings of the Jews at Jerusalem, inhabiting the most filthy quarter of the town . . . the constant objects of Mussulman oppression and intolerance.”⁷ Marx’s attack on Jewish loan-mongering was arguably in a tradition of radical Jewish critiques of the “economic Jew”—not unlike, say, Irene Nemirovsky’s radical critique of a rich Jewish merchant modeled on her father in her 1929 novel *David Golder*. Whether or not we consider Marx’s critique of Jewish finance antisemitic, it was compatible with sympathy for the suffering of the great majority of poor Jews.⁸

Perhaps the more telling objection to the antisemitic representation of Marx lies in the support he gave to the emancipation of Jews, that is, to the movement in Germany to remove all civil and political restrictions on Jews and grant them equal civil and political rights alongside other citizens. Marx and Engels were consistently critical of socialist and radical thinkers who opposed Jewish emancipation or made support for the emancipation of Jews conditional on Jews giving up their Judaism or in some other way “improving” themselves. It is noteworthy that many of the socialists and radicals Marx and Engels attacked in their writings did have antisemitic leanings. These included Bruno Bauer, to whom Marx’s double-essay “On the Jewish Question” was a response, the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the cooperative socialist Charles Fourier, the radical philosopher Eugen Dühring, the insurrectionist socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui, and the revolutionary anarchist and pan-Slavist Mikhail Bakunin.⁹

Consider, for instance, the case of Bakunin, a leading opponent of Marx in the First International. He put the existence of a Jewish conspiracy to control the world at the center of his political thinking. In his *Appeal to Slavs* (1848) he wrote that the “Jewish sect” was a “veritable power in Europe,” reigning despotically over commerce and banking and invading most areas of journalism. “Woe to him who makes the mistake of displeasing it!” he wrote.¹⁰ In letters to the Bologna section of the *International* Bakunin was equally graphic:

This whole Jewish world, which constitutes a single exploitative sect, a sort of bloodsucker people, a collective parasite, voracious, organised in itself, not only across the frontiers of states but even across all the differences of political opinion—this world is presently,

at least in great part, at the disposal of Marx on the one hand and of the Rothschilds on the other. . . . In all countries the people detest the Jews. They detest them so much that every popular revolution is accompanied by a massacre of Jews: a natural consequence.¹¹

Conspiracy thinking, cult of violence, hatred of law, fecundity of destruction, Slavic ethnonationalism and antisemitism—these elements were inseparable from Bakunin’s revolutionary anarchism. Marx’s own interest was less in the anti-Jewish prejudices of these authors than in the cognitive and normative limitations of which these prejudices were symptomatic. Still, Marx’s consistent criticism of those on the “Left” who displayed antisemitic tendencies places a big question mark by the proposition that Marx himself was antisemitic or espoused antisemitic views.

If we turn to the second of the prevailing views on Marx’s relation to antisemitism, the apologetics found especially within Marxism, this is no more solidly grounded than the denigration of Marx as an antisemite. It tends to work on the assumption that antisemitism is an ideology of nationalists, while Marxism is a universalist way of thinking opposed to all forms of racism, including antisemitism. Marxists consequently downplay or deny antisemitism within their own ranks, including Marx himself. As Lars Fischer argues, leading members of the pre-1914 German Marxist movement were prone to defend Marx’s essays on the Jewish question on the dubious grounds that he was facing up to the truth-content of antisemitic representations of Jews.¹² They read Marx’s essays on the Jewish question as support for the argument that Jews had to *earn* the right to legal and political equality by overcoming their own exclusivism and by confronting the hypocrisy of demanding their own emancipation while not standing up for the general cause of emancipation. According to this interpretation, Marx’s own reading of the Jewish question was that the demand of Jews for equal rights was incompatible with their indifference to the rights of others.¹³

The Marxist scholar Franz Mehring offered a case in point when he approvingly cited a passage from the work of Bruno Bauer as if it were Marx’s own view. The passage in question was critical of “defenders of Jewish emancipation” for privileging Judaism and exempting it from criticism: “The same people . . . who watch with pleasure when Christianity is subjected to criticism are capable of condemning anyone who also wants to

subject Jewry/Judaism to criticism. . . . The defenders of Jewish emancipation have hence appropriated the odd position of fighting against privileges and at the same time granting Jewry/Judaism the privilege of immutability, invulnerability and unaccountability.”¹⁴ Eduard Bernstein wrote in a similar vein that “Marx favoured postponement of the question of equal rights for Jews . . . until the coming socialist revolution.” Karl Kautsky appealed to Marx as authority for the prescription that “the sooner Judaism disappears, the better for society and for the Jews themselves.”¹⁵ As Enzo Traverso put it, “The Marxism of the Second International . . . welcomed the idea of Jewish assimilation as the inevitable and desirable culmination of the ‘path of history,’” and cited Victor Adler’s desire for “the death of the wandering Jew”.¹⁶ When Marx’s texts on the Jewish question were republished by the German Social Democrats in 1881, only the bulk of the second essay, the section that contains the most problematic statements about Jews and Judaism, was reproduced. Bernstein justified this selection on the grounds that the entire text was too long and the most important passages were those that dealt with “the social significance of Jewry.”¹⁷ Marxists in this period (with Rosa Luxemburg as an exception) were wont to focus on the second of Marx’s essays on the Jewish question because they read it as resonating with their own preconceptions and concurred with the view they associated with Marx that Jews had to overcome their antisocial instincts if they were to become worthy of equal rights.¹⁸

The legacy of this Marxist reading of Marx was to encourage Marxists to embrace the Jewish question uncritically and to encourage scholars of antisemitism to treat Marx and Marxism as part of the problem, not as a critical resource. The proposition I wish to put forward is that both disparaging and apologetic representations of Marx offer deeply problematic frameworks for reading Marx’s texts and for reconstructing his contribution to our understanding of the Jewish question. The aim of this chapter, then, is to return to Marx without the weight of this ideological baggage. What is at stake in this project is not just what we think of Marx himself, but the reconstruction of a critical theory in which the critique of antisemitism is afforded the centrality it deserves.

The Origins of the Marx-Bauer Debate

In the European Enlightenment there was no shortage of anti-Jewish prejudice on show, but there was also a strong thread of support for the

emancipation of Jews.¹⁹ Most Enlightenment writers denounced the conditions under which Jews were forced to live and championed civil and political reform—either as a road to the “improvement” of Jews or more radically as a right of Jews.²⁰ In the last decades of the eighteenth century German reformers and French revolutionaries alike appealed to the universality of rights to combat the persecution of Jews. For example, Clermont-Tonnerre famously wrote, “We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals.”²¹ His argument was directed against the prerevolutionary status of Jews in France, which designated Jews a separate “nation” that could profess its own religion and have its own institutions of self-government, including its own courts, but remained subject to fiscal, occupational, and residential restrictions.²² He called for the abolition of the subordinate status of Jews in the old order and for the granting of equal civil and political rights to Jews in the new order. However, his words could also be interpreted as a demand that Jews should be refused civil and political rights as long as they maintained their Judaism, and it was this demand that was endorsed by some of Marx’s contemporaries but not, I suggest, by Marx himself.

In the Enlightenment one of the key debates around the Jewish question was between assimilationists, who looked to the reform or disappearance of Judaism as the desired effect of emancipation, and anti-assimilationists, who argued that Judaism need not and ought not to be suppressed in the course of building an inclusive and universal civil life. Among the latter Moses Mendelssohn famously wrote, “Adopt the mores and constitution of the country in which you find yourself . . . but be steadfast in upholding the religion of your fathers, too. Bear both burdens as well as you can.”²³ Among the former Abbé Gregoire supported emancipation on the grounds that it would lead to “the moral and physical regeneration of Jews.”²⁴ Similarly, in his 1781 essay “Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of Jews” the Prussian reformer Christian von Dohm held that Judaism as it existed contained antisocial principles that prevented Jews from “keeping faith with the community.” He demanded that Jews be granted civil and political rights precisely to enable them to overcome their “deficiencies.”²⁵ In his 1791 letter to the Jews of Alsace, Isaac Berr (himself Jewish) presented the emancipation of Jews as the start of a process in which Jews must “work a change in our manners, in our habits, in short, in our whole education . . . and divest ourselves en-

tirely of that narrow spirit of Corporation and Congregation in all civil and political matters.”²⁶ We should not overstate the distinction between assimilationists and anti-assimilationists in the Enlightenment period, since Mendelssohn also looked to the autonomous self-reformation of Judaism as a complement to emancipation—one that would do away with its backward-looking, messianic excesses and reconstruct it as a religion “within the bounds of reason,” to use Kant’s phrase.

In the postrevolutionary period the links connecting the emancipation of Jews to the Jewish question broke apart and shifted to an opposition between emancipationists on one side and ideologues of the Jewish question on the other. Citing the universalistic ideals embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, emancipationists espoused the inclusion of Jews as equal citizens. Ideologues of the Jewish question tallied up the negative qualities of Jews and expressed deep distrust at the prospect of granting them equal rights they did not deserve. A holding position was that Jews might be granted equal rights once they abandoned their Judaism.

The shifting nature of this debate may be illustrated by the polemics between the older Hegel and the radical Jacob Fries. Jews were largely excluded from Fries’s category of “the people.” In a pamphlet titled *On the Danger Posed to the Welfare and Character of the German People by the Jews* (1816) Fries maintained that Jews should be prohibited from establishing their own educational institutions, marrying Gentiles, employing Christians as servants, and entering Germany. Fries added for good measure that Jews should be forced to wear a distinctive mark on their clothing and be encouraged to emigrate.²⁷ Hegel was highly critical of Fries’s radical populism, which he characterized thus: “In a people among whom a genuine communal spirit prevails, all business relating to public affair would gain its *life from below, from the people itself*.” Hegel argued that this populist philosophy reduced “the complex inner articulation of the ethical, i.e. the state, the architectonics of its rationality . . . to a mush of ‘heart, friendship and enthusiasm.’” Fries, he wrote, substituted feeling for the work of understanding, expressed contempt for science on the grounds that truth cannot be known while at the same time declaring this truth to be incontrovertible, and reduced ethics to subjective conviction with the result that the most criminal of principles could be accorded the same status as the most democratic and ethical.

Hegel described the hatred of right and law Fries displayed as “the chief shibboleth whereby false friends of ‘the people’ give themselves away.”²⁸ He declared it a matter of “infinite importance” that “a human being counts as such because he is a human being, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc.” He added that when we speak of Jews as *human beings* “this is not just a neutral and abstract quality . . . for its consequence is that the granting of civil rights gives those who receive them a *self-awareness* as recognised *legal* persons in civil society.” He dismissed those who sought to deny civil and political rights to Jews on the pretext that Jews belonged to a “foreign nation,” arguing, “If they had not been granted civil rights, the Jews would have remained in that isolation with which they have been reproached, and this would rightly have brought blame and reproach upon the state which excluded them.”²⁹

Two decades later the legacies of Hegel and Fries split into yet more polarized extremes. Bruno Bauer, a radical theologian and member of the Young Hegelian circle, published a monograph, *The Jewish Question* (*Die Judenfrage*), in 1843, and three further articles in 1843 and 1844. Bauer’s argument was that for Jews to become full Prussian citizens on an equal footing with other citizens, they first had to surrender their Judaism. He characterized Jews as an ahistorical people in the sense that while history called for evolution, the Jews always wished to stay the same.³⁰ He declared that the Jewish spirit lacks the historical capacity to evolve and the basic resources for the elevation of morality. Indeed Bauer displayed a well-worn litany of anti-Jewish prejudices: Jews pride themselves on being the only true people but are indifferent to the happiness of other peoples; Jews claim discrimination at the hands of Christian society but possess prodigious influence over the destiny of Europe through their financial power; Jews call for their own emancipation but not for the emancipation of others; Jews are hated in the Christian world but provoke this treatment since they have no interest in the progress of humanity at large; Jews derive no universal moral principles from their own suffering. Bauer concluded that there could be no Jewish emancipation as long as Jews clung to their Judaism. The civil equality of Jews could be implemented only where “Jewry no longer exists.”

In response to Bauer’s refurbishment of the Jewish question, Marx picked up on the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment project. In 1843 and 1844 he wrote in quick succession two essays “On the Jewish Question” and then coauthored with Engels *The Holy Family*. The first es-

say contained a strong defense of Jewish emancipation, the right of Jews to equal civil and political rights, and the end of all restrictions on movement, residence, professional activities, and access to the civil service. The second essay addressed and seems to bristle with anti-Jewish economic stereotypes. Finally, the monograph *The Holy Family* offered a scathing critique of the “holy criticism” or “critical criticism” of Bauer and like-minded German radicals who resurrected the Jewish question and opposed Jewish emancipation. These writings were part of the young Marx’s larger critique of the Young Hegelian and early socialist movements.³¹

Marx’s criticisms of Bauer turned from an initial tone of respect for Bauer’s “dash, perception, wit and thoroughness” to heavy sarcasm directed against “Saint Bruno’s holy criticism.” Marx began his first essay “On the Jewish Question” by paraphrasing Bauer’s opposition to the legal emancipation of Jews:

You Jews are egoists if you demand a special emancipation for yourselves as Jews. You should work as Germans for the political emancipation of Germany and as men for human emancipation and you should look upon the particular form of oppression and shame which you experience not as an exception to the rule but rather as a confirmation of it. . . . The Jew by his very nature cannot be emancipated. . . . The Jew himself can behave only like a Jew towards the state, i.e. treat it as something foreign, for he opposes his chimerical nationality to actual nationality, his illusory law to actual law, he considers himself entitled to separate himself from humanity, he refuses in principle to take any part in the movement of history, he looks forward to a future which has nothing in common with the future of mankind as a whole and he sees himself as a member of the Jewish people and the Jewish people as the chosen people.

According to Bauer’s view of the world, the natural inclination of Jews was to betray the “universal cause” for the sake of their own Jewish interests. For Jews to demonstrate their commitment to the cause of universal human emancipation, they had to abandon their Judaism: “As long as he is a Jew, the restricted nature that makes him a Jew will inevitably gain the ascendancy over the human nature which should join him as a man to other men.”

To Bauer's rhetorical question—Why should the German be interested in the liberation of the Jew if the Jew is not interested in the liberation of the German?—Marx responded with unconditional support for Jewish emancipation: “We do *not* tell the Jews that they cannot be emancipated politically without radically emancipating themselves from Judaism, which is what Bauer tells them.” Bauer asked of Jews, “Do you from your [restricted] standpoint have the right to demand political emancipation?” Marx inverted the question: “Does the standpoint of political emancipation have the right to demand from the Jews the abolition of Judaism and from man the abolition of religion?”³² Bauer maintained that “the Christian state . . . cannot allow adherents of another particular religion . . . complete equality with its own social estates.” Marx replied that as a matter of fact in France and North America “the Jews (like the Christians) are fully politically emancipated,” and added in relation to Germany, “States which cannot yet politically emancipate the Jews must be rated by comparison with the perfected political state and shown to be underdeveloped.”³³

For Marx the Jewish question was really a German question. It was not about the nature of Jews but about the Prussian state: “Criticism . . . becomes criticism of the political state.”³⁴ The real subject matter of the Jewish question was political emancipation.³⁵ Freedom of religion, the right to be religious or not in any way one wishes, is not the same thing as freedom *from* religion. In the United States there was no state religion, and yet it was “the land of religiosity *par excellence*.”³⁶ Political emancipation signifies that religion becomes a private right and the state becomes a secular state. It does not signify the abolition of religious distinctions but their transformation into nonpolitical matters. Since political emancipation grants freedom of religion and does not demand freedom from religion, there is no reason to demand of Jews that they free themselves from the Jewish religion.

Marx argued that Bauer's opposition to Jewish emancipation was symptomatic of an inability to come to terms with modern political life more generally. By attributing to political movements a *social* significance more fundamental than their *political* significance, Bauer translated the exclusion of Jews from citizenship into the self-exclusion of Jews from society: “Only those exclude themselves who do not wish to take part in its development.”³⁷ Bauer devalued rights and representation as the “illusion of the masses” and bemoaned the thoughtlessness of the “representa-

tives of the mass” who sowed these illusions. In *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels jibed in response, “How low ‘the mass’ is in comparison with holy criticism.”³⁸ For Bauer the social was everything; the political was nothing. He put the overcoming of Judaism at the center of the revolutionary endeavor of political life to “constitute itself as the real harmonious species-life of man.”³⁹ Bauer offered the vista of human emancipation *in opposition to* the rights of man and citizen and on the grounds that political emancipation falls short of human emancipation devalued political emancipation. The contrast with Marx could not be stronger. Marx characterized the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as a “great step forward” that marked the difference between “the modern representative state and the old state of privileges” and turned the affairs of state into the affairs of the people.⁴⁰ Marx acknowledged the limits of political emancipation: “The fact that you can be politically emancipated without . . . renouncing Judaism shows that political emancipation *by itself is not human emancipation*.”⁴¹ However, he drew the opposite conclusion to that drawn by Bauer. The point was not to devalue civil and political rights but, on the contrary, to revalue them. The critique of the limits of rights is not the same thing as the trashing of rights.

In a passage often cited out of context to prove that Marx was a “critic” of rights, Marx observed, “Not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires, and separated from the community.”⁴² The grammar of Marx’s argument is, I would suggest, quite simple and runs along these lines. It is true that none of the rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, but then it makes no sense to exclude the Jews on the grounds of their alleged egoism and separation from the community. As David Seymour writes, “The situation Bauer attributes solely to the Jews as a consequence of their particularistic ‘restricted nature’ is in fact attributable to members of civil society *as* members of civil society.”⁴³ The radicalism of Marx’s essay lay in liberating the emancipation question from the Jewish question.

The Notorious Second Essay

Let me now turn to the second of Marx’s essays on the Jewish question. The language of the second essay is troubling. Let me quote at some length from the Penguin translation to give a flavor of how troubling it is:

What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the secular cult of the Jew? Haggling. What is his secular God? Money. Well then! Emancipation from haggling and from money, i.e. from practical, real Judaism, would be the same as the self-emancipation of our age. . . .

We therefore recognise in Judaism the presence of a . . . contemporary anti-social element whose historical evolution—eagerly nurtured by the Jews in its harmful aspects—has arrived at its present peak, a peak at which it will inevitably disintegrate. The emancipation of the Jews is in the last analysis the emancipation of humankind from Judaism. . . .

Money is the jealous God of Israel before whom no other God may stand. . . . Exchange is the true God of the Jew. His God is nothing more than illusory exchange. . . . What is present in an abstract form in the Jewish religion—contempt for theory, for art, for history, for man as an end in himself—is the actual and conscious standpoint, the virtue, of the man of money. . . . The chimerical nationality of the Jew is the nationality of the merchant, of the man of money in general. . . .

The ungrounded and unfounded law of the Jew is only the religious caricature of . . . the purely formal rites with which the world of self-interest surrounds itself. Here too the supreme relation of man is the legal relation, the relation of laws which apply to him not because they are the laws of his own will and nature but because they dominate him and because breaches of them would be avenged. . . .

As soon as society succeeds in abolishing the empirical essence of Judaism—the market and the conditions which give rise to it—the Jew will have become impossible. . . . The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.⁴⁴

How are we to understand the tension between Marx's unequivocal defense of the political emancipation of Jews in his first essay and his deployment of this mouthful of anti-Jewish economic stereotypes in the second essay?

One interpretative strategy is to normalize it. We could observe that the use of *Jew* as a synonym for *usurer* was eminently respectable and that similar economic stereotypes of Jews were found widely within the

radical milieu of which the young Marx was part.⁴⁵ We could point out that Moses Hess (a pioneer of Zionism) wrote of the special role of Jews in the bourgeois “huckster world” and regarded Jews as the prototype of the “man of money”; or that Heinrich Heine wrote in an attack on Jewish bankers that he did not believe that “Israel ever gave money, save when its teeth were drawn by force”; or that the Hegelian scholar Eduard Gans, whose lectures Marx attended at university and who founded a society for Jewish studies, declared in the society’s journal that Jewish life reflected a “double aristocracy whose component parts . . . are . . . money and rabbis.”⁴⁶ These instances may illustrate how widespread anti-Jewish economic criticism was among radical intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, but they do not address why Marx used language in the second essay that seems to cross any boundary between social criticism of certain Jewish classes and proto-antisemitism.

Perhaps Marx was more Bauerite than I have suggested? The difference between Bauer and Marx could on this reading be reduced to the difference between one who demands that Jews give up their noxious Judaism *prior* to being granted equal rights, and the other who advances equal rights for Jews as a prequel for Jews giving up their Judaism. If we followed this line of interpretation, we could read Marx as at once an advocate of equal rights for Jews and a critic of their secular attachments to money. We could say that Marx was chastising the Jews: “You take your rights but offer nothing in return.” This reading of the text turns Marx into a pale reflection of Bauer, but it does not explain the discontinuity with the first essay, in which support for emancipation of Jews is radically dissociated from anything to do with the Jewish question.

Let me put forward, then, an alternative reading of the text. It is that the grammar of Marx’s response to Bauer in the second essay is meant to be the same as the grammar of his response in the first essay. While Bauer represents the Jew as “moneyman,” Marx responds that in the modern world “money has become a world power.” While Bauer imagines that money is “the practical spirit of the Jews,” Marx responds that money has become “the practical spirit of the Christian peoples.” While Bauer insists that Jews play a clandestine and destructive role in the financing of the modern state, Marx responds that the power of money has become as pervasive as nation-states. While Bauer says that money is the “jealous God of Israel” before whom no other god may stand, Marx

responds that the God of the Jews has become the God of the world. In short, the second essay turns the anti-Jewish economic stereotypes Bauer expressed on their head.

Articulated in an intensely facetious style, Marx's strategy was not to challenge the veracity of antisemitic representations of Jews but to reveal their irrelevance. The association of Judaism with global financial power was not Marx's but Bauer's; it was the common sense of the evolving antisemitism that Bauer represented. We may speculate that Marx used Bauer's proto-antisemitic language in the second essay to express his growing disgust with this whole way of thinking. Marx's tone certainly became harsher and more sarcastic the more he saw through the shallowness of Bauer's "radicalism." This reading of the text may also help explain why Marx never returned to the proto-antisemitic thematics sometimes attributed to him. However, if I am right in this interpretation, we still have to ask why Marx did not make it plain that he did not endorse the anti-Jewish stereotypes he was mocking.

The distinction between the grammar of Marx's response to Bauer and that of Bauer's other (Jewish and non-Jewish) critics is that Marx refused to engage with Bauer on the terrain of whether his depiction of Jews was empirically grounded.⁴⁷ Some of Bauer's other critics had amply demonstrated that "the Jews" were a more complex, differentiated, and class-divided category of people than Bauer could possibly acknowledge. Hess pointed out that Bauer's association of *Judentum* with egoism exposed a woeful ignorance of Jewish society on the part of its author: "Nothing is more foreign to the spirit of Judaism than the egoistic salvation of the isolated individual. . . . No nation refutes egoism more strongly than the Jewish."⁴⁸ Heine declared wittily, "Some think they know the Jews because they have seen their beards."⁴⁹ Marx has often been criticized for not dwelling on the inaccuracy of Bauer's representation of "the Jews," but we may treat this as a mark of recognition that no amount of evidence about the true nature of Jewish life is going to change the mind of those who choose to go down an antisemitic path. As Sartre observed a century later, the antisemitic outlook is effectively resistant to empirical criticism of this sort. In *Antisemite and Jew* (1946) Sartre described antisemitism as a "passion" that is not caused or refutable by experience: "The essential thing here is not a 'historical fact' but the idea that the agents of history formed for themselves of the Jew."⁵⁰ There is a sense in which the

antisemite can never lose the argument. If we point out that most Jews are not powerful financiers or that most powerful financiers are not Jews, the antisemitic imagination remains no less fixed on the Jewish financier. Marx's refusal to challenge Bauer on empirical grounds may be read as an intuitive understanding that antisemitism is not simply a prejudice that can be dispelled by evidence.

The radicalism of Marx's response to Bauer lay in breaking from the whole perspective of the Jewish question.⁵¹ His defense of Jewish emancipation broke from any assumption of the goodness of Prussian or Christian civil society. It refused to attribute the uncivil traits of civil society to the exclusivism of Jews. It had no truck with the idea that Jews had to earn their right to rights by throwing off their allegedly harmful Jewish characteristics. It repudiated the idea that the humanity of Jews—like the humanity of criminals in Bentham's panopticon—was an abstraction whose realization required penitence, reform, education, and self-punishment. Marx detached the emancipation of Jews from all such qualifications.⁵²

The Jewish Question and Human Emancipation

If divergent readings of Marx's second essay are possible, how are we to decide which is the most accurate? It may be indicative of how we should read these essays on the Jewish question that Bauer went on to play with the idea of shipping German Jews to "the land of Canaan" and to paint the Jews as "white Negroes" incapable of conversion to Christianity,⁵³ while Marx went on to develop a universalistic critique of value, money, and capital. We cannot enter into the young Marx's mind, but let us imagine that Marx himself was at the time of writing uncertain of what he meant. This may allow us to work out another interpretative strategy, one that relates Marx's words to his wider conception of human emancipation.

Marx's retention of the distinction between political and human emancipation proved prescient not because he wanted to devalue the rights of man and citizen but, on the contrary, because equal rights for Jews (which for the most part were achieved in western Europe by the 1870s) proved to be a prelude not for human emancipation but for political antisemitism. Legal recognition of Jews turned out to be no guarantee of social recognition. Indeed it was when Jews achieved equal legal status that antisemitism became an organized political movement, and it was

in the name of antisemitism that a wave of *ressentiment*, nurtured by a sense of injustice that Jews were treated as equal human beings, was directed at Jews and at states that recognized Jews.

Marx's critique of capitalism was guided by humanist concerns and based on a universalistic idea of humanity. His aim was to comprehend the fate of humanity in the modern capitalistic world.⁵⁴ In a society dominated by the dull compulsion of economic forces, in which humanity is enslaved to the movement of things, Marx's goal was the emancipation of humanity by humanity, a "real humanism," as he put it. What content did Marx give to the idea of "real humanism"? According to Karl Löwith's account, Marx's idea of human emancipation signified "emancipation from every kind of particularity in human life as a whole; from the specialisation of occupations just as much as from religion and privatisation."⁵⁵ This conception of human emancipation as emancipation from every kind of particularity receives support from those sections of the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels pay homage to the dissolving effects of bourgeois society: "All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away. . . . All that is solid melts into air. . . . All that is holy is profaned." Marx and Engels attributed the power of dissolving all particulars to the demonic energy of the bourgeoisie: "The bourgeoisie . . . has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest. . . . The bourgeoisie has resolved personal worth into exchange value. . . . The bourgeoisie has drowned . . . religious fervour . . . in the icy waters of egoistical calculation. . . . The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured. . . . The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil."⁵⁶ The bourgeoisie created a proletariat lacking in name, individuality, place, and all particular qualities. Nothing could be taken from them because all had already been taken. They had been made into commodities bought and sold in the marketplace. Marx was soon to recognize that wagedworkers in capitalist society are not commodities but owners of commodities, beginning with their own capacity to labor. They therefore have more to lose than their chains.⁵⁷ In the *Manifesto*, however, communism appeared as the movement of the proletariat whose aim was to abolish particularity for all—property, family, independence, marriage, religion, and nationality—while the bourgeoisie had abolished them only for some.

If this were Marx's conception of human emancipation, then it would be hard to imagine what place there could be for Judaism or Jews in the communist future. The specter of capitalism Marx and Engels put forward so forcibly appears uncomfortably close to the premonition Nietzsche had of a barbarism-to-come: "The waters of religion are ebbing and are leaving behind swamps or ponds; the nations are again separating from one another in the most hostile manner and are trying to rip each other to shreds. . . . Never was the world more a world, never was it poorer in love. . . . Everything . . . serves the coming barbarism."⁵⁸ If Jews appear, as they do in the antisemitic imagination, as the particularized people par excellence, then it is but a short step to see emancipation from Judaism as a first step in the emancipation of humanity from all particulars. Did Marx as a young man, like Nietzsche after him, have a brief sojourn in the infected territory of antisemitic thought? It is doubtful. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels wrote of the "barbarism" into which capitalist society was regressing and poured scorn on the "foul and enervating literature" of so-called German true socialism—a form of socialism capable only of "hurling the traditional anathemas against liberalism, against representative government, against bourgeois competition, against bourgeois freedom of the press, bourgeois legislation, bourgeois liberty and equality, and of preaching to the masses that they had nothing to gain, and everything to lose," by all of these. One of the key aims of "true" German socialism, as Marx and Engels called it, was to dissolve the fiction of equal rights for Jews and present the Jews as "a secret world power which makes and unmakes governments."⁵⁹ Marx's disgust with this political philosophy was palpable.

For Bauer and those who followed in his footsteps, human emancipation was premised on particularizing the Jews and then imagining a "world without Jews." The vista of human emancipation Marx put forward was quite different. He does not say much about it, but in the final paragraphs of the first essay on the Jewish question he introduces this formulation: "Only when real individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a species-being in his empirical life, only when man has recognised and organised his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political* force, only then will human emancipation be completed."⁶⁰ In this singular utopian moment Marx offered a conception of human emancipation that was based not on overcoming

the achievements of political emancipation but on overcoming the dominance of abstractions over individual lives—a dominance exemplified in its most irrational form in the abstraction of “the Jews.” The real humanism Marx reached out for was not about excluding Jews for failing the test of universality but about recognizing the humanity of all human beings, including Jews. For Marx, recognition of the right of *all* human beings to have rights, as Hannah Arendt later put it,⁶¹ is the beginning of a long and arduous journey of human self-emancipation.

This humanist Marx is not the only Marx we can find, and in order to uncover it we have to shake off “the pulviscular cloud of critical discourse” that has surrounded Marx’s work.⁶² We have to reconstruct for ourselves Marx’s own writings. However, one advantage of this reading of Marx is to recover a tradition of critical theory, which understands that the Jewish question is fundamentally a non-Jewish question and that resistance to antisemitism is a core component of critical theory and practice. This approach may not solve the puzzle of the second essay to everyone’s satisfaction, but it is to my mind what is most important.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Silberner, “Was Marx an Anti-Semite?”; Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*; Poliakov, *Histoire de l’Antisémitisme*, 227–37; Kaplan, *Marx Antisemite?*; Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner*, 296–305; Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, 350–52.
2. See Wheen, *Karl Marx*, 56.
3. See Fischer, *The Socialist Response*; Postone, “History and Helplessness”; Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism”; Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*.
4. Léon Poliakov argues, “Un coup d’œil sur la correspondance de Karl Marx suffit pour nous apprendre qu’il se complaisait à des pointes antisémites jusqu’à la fin de ses jours.” While we must take seriously a man of Poliakov’s scholarship, I do not share this view. Poliakov comments on Marx: “On peut croire aussi que les Juifs, qu’il ne connaissait qu’à travers quelques bourgeois, lui paraissaient aussi condamnables que ce monde” (*Histoire de l’Antisémitisme*, 233–34). Poliakov was convinced that Marx was in a long line of radicals who identified bourgeois society with Judaism.
5. See Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution IV*, 60.
6. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 262n18.
7. Quoted in Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 51.

8. Traverso records that in Germany in 1780 nine-tenths of Jews belonged to the poorest strata of the population and that a century later the proportion had been reversed: the poor constituted no more than a tenth (Traverso, *The Jews in Germany*, 14). At the time of Marx's writing, in 1843, Julius Carlebach records that small traders and hawkers constituted 66 percent of the Jewish working population in Prussia and most of the Jewish working population in Eastern Europe. Marx recognized that the historic role of Jews in commerce and usury in precapitalist commercial society was being replaced by the more systematic processes of national capital (Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 56).
9. Engels wrote of Dühring's "hatred of Jews, exaggerated to the verge of absurdity." Engels went on, "That same philosopher of reality who has a sovereign contempt for all prejudices and superstitions is himself so deeply imbued with personal crotchets that he calls the popular prejudice against the Jews, inherited from the bigotry of the Middle Ages, a 'natural judgment' based on 'natural grounds,' and he rises to the pyramidal heights of the assertion that 'socialism is the only power which can oppose population conditions with a strong Jewish admixture.' (Conditions with a Jewish admixture! What 'natural' German language!) Enough of this. . . . He cannot produce his philosophy of reality without dragging in his repugnance to tobacco, cats and Jews as a general law valid for the whole of the rest of humanity, including the Jews themselves" (Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 126, 161).
10. Quoted in Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 3: 293.
11. Quoted in Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 3: 296.
12. Fischer, *The Socialist Response*, 13.
13. Fischer, *The Socialist Response*, 39.
14. Cited in Fischer, *The Socialist Response*, 53.
15. Cited in Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 265–66.
16. Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, 4.
17. Fischer, *The Socialist Response*, 58.
18. Even Luxemburg is quoted as saying in 1910 that Marx arrived at an understanding of the "social base" of the Jewish problem, namely, that Judaism was nothing other than the "spirit of the usurer and the trickster" (Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, 16).
19. See Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, 269–368.
20. Gottlieb, "Between Judaism and German Enlightenment"; Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Mirabeau, *Sur Moses Mendelssohn*.
21. Quoted in Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 155–58.
22. Gershom Scholem's comment that emancipation costs the Jews "the formal disavowal of Jewish nationality—a price that the outstanding writers and the spokesmen of the Jewish vanguard were only too happy to pay," should be read in the light of the restrictions "nationality" implied in the prerevolutionary context (cited in Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, 22).

23. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, quoted in Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, 477.
24. Quoted in Traverso, *The Jews and Germany*, 5.
25. Quoted in Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, 466–71. See also Robert Fine, “Cosmopolitanism and Antisemitism.”
26. Quoted in Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, 477.
27. Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, 119–20.
28. Hegel, *The Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 15–19.
29. Hegel, *The Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §209R, §270n.
30. Engels once characterized Jews as one of the ahistorical and residual peoples who were once suppressed by the more historic nations and then became “fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution.” He also described Polish Jews as “the dirtiest of all races.” However, Engels also denounced antisemitism as a reactionary form of “feudal socialism” with which social democracy could have nothing in common (Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, 23–26).
31. Colletti’s introduction to Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 7–56.
32. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 213, 212–13, 227, 216.
33. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 137–38. See also Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 214–17.
34. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 216.
35. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 112–13.
36. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 217.
37. Quoted in Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 119.
38. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 118.
39. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 222.
40. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 143.
41. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 226.
42. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 230.
43. Seymour, *Law, Antisemitism and the Holocaust*, 11.
44. Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 236–41.
45. Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, 1: 591–608.
46. Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, 1: 593–95.
47. Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 353.
48. Quoted in Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 195.
49. Quoted in Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 190.
50. Sartre, *Antisemite and Jew*, 15.
51. I do not see the evidence for the contention of Jeffrey Alexander that “Marx continues to insist, as other Jewish reformers had before him, that Jews must change to achieve the emancipation promised by civil society” (*The Civil Sphere*, 486). The change Alexander thinks Marx insisted upon was that Jews could achieve “real emancipation only by abandoning religion and working for revolutionary transformation” (487). Keen as Marx was for Jews and non-Jews

- to take the road of revolution, there is no evidence in Marx's works that he made the emancipation of Jews *conditional* upon their joining the revolutionary cause. Such a scenario would have gone directly against the spirit of Marx's actual insistence on distinguishing political from human emancipation.
52. This interpretation diverges from Traverso's comment that Marx took up themes already present in Ludwig Feuerbach, that Judaism was the religion of egoism, and more generally in the Young Hegelians that the Jew was equated with money (Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, 18). Marx in his youth was immersed in the thinking of the Young Hegelians but was also involved in a critical appraisal of the "radical extremes" (Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*) into which the Hegelian synthesis was split. Marx learned to reject both the Christian theological critique of Judaism and its secularized derivatives.
 53. Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism*, 147.
 54. See Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, 42–43; Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 102–30.
 55. Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, 106.
 56. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 38.
 57. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 64–65.
 58. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 148–49. Nietzsche foresaw a spiritless radicalism arising from these swamps, full of hostility to rights, law, culture—and Jews. "I have not met a German yet who was well disposed toward the Jews," he wrote, and did not exempt himself as a young man: "During a brief daring sojourn in very infected territory, I too did not altogether escape this disease" (cited in Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 119). In *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche described antisemites as "*men of ressentiment*, physiologically unfortunate and worm-eaten, a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts against the fortunate and happy" (111 §14). Mealy-mouthed he was not.
 59. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 57.
 60. Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 234.
 61. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 298.
 62. Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* 6.

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