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Zionism, Emancipation, Capitalism, and the Construction of the “Jewish Question”

During the late nineteenth century, as Europe enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity, prominent Jewish political and social thinkers strived to construct a national identity for themselves and the people they represented. Around this time, the idea of the “Jewish Question” became widely discussed. This “Jewish Question” was believed to be a problem plaguing the Jewish people that some sort of organized activity would solve. While some Western European Jews believed that remaining loyal to their local country would be the right solution, thinkers such as Theodore Herzl and Leo Pinsker embraced the idea that the Jewish people would never be able to truly integrate into Europe. Thus, they believed that the Jews must establish their own state. (Pinsker, 182) Others, such as the members of the Jewish Labor Bund argued that the woes of European Jews are closely linked to capitalism and thus international socialism would be the proper solution. (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155)

Despite the multiple representations of the “Jewish Question” that existed during the nineteenth century, most thinkers agreed that anti-Semitism was the driving force behind it. However, the thinkers did, in fact, have differing representations and constructions of how anti-Semitism existed for the Jewish people. Pinsker represents anti-Semitism in his writing, *Auto-Emancipation: An appeal to his people by a Russian Jew,* as a phenomenon which degrades the Jews and strips away their dignity. (Pinsker, 184) He constructs anti-Semitism by contrasting Jews to ghosts. Pinsker argues that the fear of Jews “is the fear of ghosts” (Pinsker, 185) because both groups represent the dead. This metaphor alludes to the Jewish history as a nation that existed many centuries ago. When Jews went into exile, they became a people living in foreign territory and thus simple relics of a past long gone. (Pinsker, 185) For this reason, Europeans fear Jews as an unnatural group. And thus this fear is expressed in “Platonic…hatred” (Pinsker, 185) towards the Jewish people. In addition, Pinsker compares the Jewish people to beggars by presenting how nations view foreigners as guests. Pinsker argues that civilized European countries treat foreigners kindly because they themselves expect hospitality in the foreigner’s home country. (Pinsker, 187) This hospitality does not apply to the Jewish people, who Europeans looked upon in contempt as foreigners inhabiting their country, because Jews “can make no such return” (Pinsker, 187) to a country they call home. Jews are not able to repay Europeans for their hospitality and are therefore looked down upon as beggars. (Pinsker, 187) Thus, by comparing Jews to ghosts and beggars and tying that comparison to anti-Semitism, Pinsker represents the “Jewish Question” as a problem to which only Zionism, the creation of a Jewish state, would solve.

Theodore Herzl, in his utopian novel, *Altneuland* bolsters Pinsker’s argument for the need of a Jewish state. He does so through constructing the utopian New Society in the ancient Jewish homeland of Palestine. His novel starts out in the then present, the start of the twentieth century, in Austria where a depressed Jew from the professional class named Fredrich is struggling to fit in. Despite Fredrich being out of touch with his faith, and being a fully integrated Jew, this anti-Semitic society makes it impossible for him to get work. After the woman he was courting gets married off, Fredrich becomes fed up with life. (Herzl, 18) Fredrich then meets Kingscourt, an old millionaire of German nobility, who is also sick of life. They sail off to spend the next twenty years on a private island secluded from society. (Herzl, 26) The novel then skips to the imagined future of the 1920s when the duo leave their seclusion and arrive in the recently established and already prosperous Jewish state in Palestine. (Herzl, 49) Herzl states that in this utopian future, anti-Semitism no longer exists in Europe because the Jews now have their own state and are finally able to play the role of host to Europeans. (Herzl, 99) Throughout the novel, Herzl also constructs the “Jewish Question” as a spiritual one. He does this by showing how Fredrich is finally able to embrace his Jewish identity during his time in the Jewish state to the point where “Fredrich decided to join the New Society.” (Herzl, 209) Furthermore, throughout the novel, Kingscourt constantly feels his respect for the Jewish people grow to the point where he even exclaims that he’s beginning to feel “Judaized.” (Herzl, 180)Through Kingscourt’s experience with Jewish culture as a non-Jewish person, Herzl optimistically reaffirms Pinsker’s argument that a Jewish state would better connect the Jewish people with the rest of the world when he mentions that “toleration can and must always rest on reciprocity.” (Herzl, 139)

In addition to linking the “Jewish Question” to anti-Semitism, both Pinsker and Herzl bring up the topic of emancipation when constructing their opinion of the “Jewish Question.” Emancipation refers to what occurred to the Jews of Western Europe who were living in secluded ghettos during the start of the nineteenth century. After Jews were freed from these ghettos, they were legally integrated into society. In fact, as nationalism gained momentum in Europe, some Jews began to identify more with the country they lived in than with their religion. However, much of society still didn’t accept them, and as a result many Jews felt excluded. Herzl shows this phenomenon through Fredrich’s predicament as a young Viennese who can’t fit into society no matter how much he tries. (Herzl, 29**)** Herzl no doubt conveys his own predicament through Fredrich, as he himself was a secular Viennese Jew who realized that Jews wouldn’t be able to fit into European society. Moreover, Herzl shows how emancipation divided the Jews, as he mentions in *Altneuland* that not every Jewish person is required to be a member of the New Society. Pinsker, despite being of Russian Jewish origin, conveys a similar message to bolster his argument for a Jewish state when he proclaims “the Jews…are everywhere aliens.” (Pinsker, 198) Overall, both Pinsker and Herzl don’t portray emancipation as the solution to the “Jewish Question” but as a means to divide the Jews.

While Herzl and Pinsker believe that the “Jewish Question” can only be solved with a mass exodus of many Jews from Europe to Palestine, many prominent thinkers believed that other actions were possible. The Jewish Labor Bund from the Russian Empire believed that the “Jewish Question” could be solved within Europe. This group in their writing, *Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund* stated that anti-Semitism is the direct result of capitalism. (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155**)** They state that capitalists who have garnered a lot of hatred from common men, “seek to save [themselves] by destroying [their] Jewish competition.” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155) They then cite how the Czar in Russia diverted hatred from himself by promoting pogroms against the Jews. (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155**)** Moreover, the Central Committee of the Bund doesn’t consider all Christians to be anti-Semites, as they believe the “intelligent, class-conscious Christian worker is [their] comrade…under the flag of international socialism.” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 156) In the opinion of the Central Committee of the Bund, the best way to solve the “Jewish Question” is by “answer[ing] violence with violence” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 156) and creating a workers socialist revolution. To them, only an overthrow of capitalism would solve the problem of anti-Semitism. Therefore, the Jewish Labor Bund represents the “Jewish Question” as tied to socialism.

Herzl in *Altneuland* also attempts to represent the “Jewish Question” as an economic one. Although, he isn’t as radical as the Jewish Labor Bund, Herzl does share some similarities with them in his depiction of the “Jewish Question.” Herzl never states that capitalism is the main driver of anti-Semitism, nor does he show overt hatred towards the wealthy classes. However, he does depict the wealthier Jews such as Blau and Gruen as greedy and obnoxious, while sympathetically painting the poverty stricken Jews such as David and his family as compassionate. At the start of the book, Blau and his fellow bourgeoisie Jews laugh hysterically at a rabbi for mentioning the idea of a mass exodus of Jews to Palestine. (Herzl, 16) However, a ten year old David dreams of starting anew in the land of Palestine. (Herzl, 32) Through these contrasting depictions, Herzl represents the “Jewish Question” as a problem that mainly affects the poor Jews and thus Zionism is more for them. In addition, throughout his novel, various characters talked about the advantages of starting from scratch, (Herzl, 102) which was most likely supposed to attract poor Jews who had nothing to lose by moving to Palestine in the real world. Furthermore, Herzl constantly expresses how cooperation and service within the New Society is much better than just making money for oneself in this utopian future. This optimistic faith in cooperation depicts how Herzl tied socialist elements to traditional Zionism to construct the “Jewish Question.”

The “Jewish Question” is indeed a complicated one. Herzl, Pinsker and the members of the Jewish Labor Bund all agree that anti-Semitism from Europe plays a big role in the “Jewish Question.” However, while the members of the Jewish Labor Bund believe that capitalism drives anti-Semitism, Pinsker believes that a lack of a homeland relegates the Jewish people to being despised by society. (Pinsker, 198) Herzl, in addition to reaffirming Pinsker’s belief, provides an idealistic solution for the Jewish state as one that will be initially founded by Jewish people from the poor economic classes. Thus, the various views and beliefs of these thinkers greatly contributed to the overall Jewish political thought of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

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