The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843-1943) (review)

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provides a concordance with *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* and 52 plates of mostly clear photographs of the inscriptions. This reviewer's only quibble is that the plates show photographs of only 30 of the 228 inscriptions discussed in volume one, plus a paltry 20 of the 629 in volume two. In certain instances, a photograph that is lacking might have illuminated opposing readings of a given inscriptions (e.g., I, 99, no. 75).

This work has advanced far beyond its predecessors in many ways, and therefore is indispensable for research in this era, whether in Jewish history, ancient Western European history, or inscriptional study. All who use this primary source material are now very heavily indebted to David Noy's superb research and illuminating presentation.

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The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843–1943), by Enzo Traverso, translated from the French by Bernard Gibbons. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1994. 276 pp. $49.95 (c); $18.50 (p).

When the United Nations General Assembly repealed the notorious resolution that equated Zionism with racism on December 16, 1991, the timing could not have been more symbolic. The Soviet Union, the world's first workers' state and theoretical fountainhead of Marxism, was in its death throes, just nine days away from being thrust into that dustbin of history to which it had, at least rhetorically, consigned so many other social systems. Introduced in 1975 with Moscow's support, Resolution 3379 had been more than an exercise in Machiavellian *realpolitik* and Israel-bashing designed to recruit Arab and Third World allies. Its ideological roots predated the establishment of the state of Israel; indeed, its simple pronouncement that the very basis of Jewish nationhood in Israel was illegitimate was the distilled essence of Marxist-Leninist dogma regarding the Jewish right to self-determination.

In his book *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, originally published in French in 1990, Enzo Traverso leads us through this familiar terrain, though his narrative ends in 1943, the year that the doomed uprisings in Jewish ghettos in Hitler-occupied Europe signalled, for most Marxist Jews, an end to illusions and hope. We meet in these pages familiar names—among others, Otto Bauer, Ber Borokhov, Karl Kautsky,

Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Medem, Leon Trotsky, and Chaim Zhitlovsky. We listen again to the familiar quarrels between Austro-Marxists, Bundists, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and labor and socialist Zionists, arguments which would in the end be settled not through disputation and *pilpul* but by armed might.

Marxists faced some perplexing questions: What was the nature of antisemitism? Were the Jews a nation, a caste, or a religion? Did they have an historical future or were they destined to assimilate? While there were various answers, Traverso reminds us that, by and large, "Marxist culture remained the prisoner of a single interpretation of Jewish history, inherited to a large extent from the Enlightenment, which identified emancipation with assimilation and could conceive the end of Jewish oppression only in terms of the overcoming of Jewish otherness" (p. 2). Judaism was, if not a curse or stigma, then certainly a social anomaly. Marx had stated that the Jews had survived because they served as a socio-economic "middleman minority" necessary for the functioning of commerce in medieval Europe. Yet, while Jews were castigated as a "remnant" of feudalism, the Christian basis of antisemitism "was hardly ever mentioned" by most Marxists. In much of their literature, Jew-hatred was reduced to little more than "a tactic employed by the dominant classes to divide the mass of workers and exploit the prejudices of the petty bourgeoisie" (p. 9). Traverso notes that, perhaps as a result of this shallow analytical framework, socialists and Communists in Germany completely misunderstood and underestimated the danger posed by Nazism after World War I.

Of course in the eastern European lands, millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews neither desired assimilation, nor could easily be incorporated as "citizens," even if the various laws restricting their civil rights were to be removed. By the end of the 19th century, they also included a sizable proletariat. Thus, in opposition to the almost monolithic assimilationism of the German Marxists (and Bolsheviks like Lenin and Stalin), the Bundist theoretician Vladimir Medem insisted that the Jewish masses of eastern Europe were entitled to their own unfettered existence: his party fought for a socialist federation in which each constituent ethnic group would acquire "cultural national autonomy," thus making it possible to dispense with a national territory. Zionism, even in its "socialist" variants, was in his opinion a "mirage" which would divert the energies of Jewish workers and lead to "passivity" in the Diaspora (p. 107). The socialist Zionist Ber Borokhov, on the other hand, accepting the premises of those who declared that the Jews, being without a territory, common language, and economic infrastructure, could never constitute a nation, turned their conclusion on its head: the solution, argued Borokhov, was to "normalize"

the Jewish nation through the colonization of its historic homeland in *Eretz Israel*. Traverso faults Borokhov for minimizing the resistance Zionists would face from the indigenous Arab inhabitants of Palestine, and maintains that this "represents the Achilles heel of his entire theoretical elaboration" (p. 122).

The concluding chapters dissect the views of Antonio Gramsci (somewhat oddly, as the Italian Communist had little to say about matters Jewish), Walter Benjamin, and Abram Leon, the young Polish Jewish Trotskyist who characterized the Jews as a "people-class." Leon, too, was an assimilationist and considered Zionism "reactionary," though he would perish in Auschwitz two years after completing his manuscript (pp. 226, 228).

Traverso acknowledges the limitations of historical materialism in analyzing the "Jewish question," but he remains unconvinced that a territorial solution is the—or even an—answer. He congratulates the Bundists on "the richness . . . of their discourse" and, by pointing to their "attempt to theorize the nation differently by detaching it from territory" and disassociating citizenship and nationality (p. 235), makes of them forerunners to post-modernists who champion multiple political identities and multicultural states. Unfortunately, political doctrines which might prove successful in modern America never stood a chance when confronted by the forces of Hitler and Stalin.

The debate on Jewish nationhood for more than a century exercised Marxists and socialists. It is a long and an old story, but it probably always bears revisiting, if only as a cautionary tale. This well-researched book also refers to the analyses of contemporary European writers such as Roberto Finzi, David Meghnagi, and Massimo Massara, who may be unfamiliar to North American scholars. It concludes with a very useful chronology of significant events, and an extensive bibliography of works written in French, German, Italian and Yiddish (though none in Hebrew), as well as English.

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