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Robert D. Fine

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Cosmopolitanism and the critique of antisemitism: two faces of universality

Robert D. Fine
University of Warwick, Sociology, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT
The antisemitic imagination sometimes derides Jews as 'rootless cosmopolitans', and sometimes as the particularistic enemy of cosmopolitanism. The seemingly contradictory character of these antisemitic representations is not new but needs unpacking. In this article the author argues that Enlightenment cosmopolitanism has shown two faces to Jews: an emancipatory face manifest in movements for legal recognition of Jews as equal citizens and for social recognition of Jews as equal human beings; and a repressive face that has been expressed in the form of the so-called 'Jewish question'. The former holds that Jews are human beings and treats this sense of common humanity as a practical imperative; the latter turns 'the Jews' into an imagined collectivity incapable of meeting the universal standards of humankind. The Jewish question is in nuce the question of what is to be done about the harm Jews inflict on humanity at large; it appears and reappears in the modern world in a variety of forms; and it is always at odds with the emancipatory face of cosmopolitanism. The author illustrates this conflict within cosmopolitanism at three key moments of Western European history: the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, nineteenth-century revolutionary thought, and the 'new cosmopolitanism' of our own time. He addresses in a historical fashion some of the difficulties the ambivalence of cosmopolitanism poses for our understanding of antisemitism and conversely some of the difficulties the study of antisemitism poses for the further development of cosmopolitan ways of thinking.

Prejudices, like odorous bodies, have a double existence both solid and subtle — solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo, or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness.

— George Eliot, Middlemarch (1874)

Two faces of universalism
Under the register of the 'rootless cosmopolitan Jew', Jews have been conceived on one hand as lacking in roots in the nations that granted them 'hospitality', and on the other as acting as
an international network loyal only to themselves. This pejorative reference to Jews, which was favoured by Stalinist regimes after 1945 and paved the way for the trials and tribulations Jews endured in Eastern Europe in the post-war and Cold War periods, had connotations of disloyalty, lack of patriotism, foreignness and worldwide conspiracy. It was first cousin to cognate terms like ‘enemy of the people’ or ‘enemy of the human species’, which began their modern lives as markers of terror in the French Revolution, and signified what we might call a ‘bad universalism’. It was contrasted with the ‘good universalism’ associated with the idea of a universal nation, a nation whose particular interests corresponded with the interests of humanity as a whole, and more especially with Communist conceptions of ‘proletarian internationalism’, which identified Russia as the ‘universal nation’ par excellence.

Pejorative uses of the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ endure today within contemporary Sociology, including ‘Marxist’ Sociology, although with less fateful consequences. Radical critics of cosmopolitanism have lined up to demean it as the ‘class consciousness of frequent travellers’, as the ideology of corporate managers and intergovernmental bureaucrats, tax dodgers and jet-setting academics – anyone with expensive tastes and a globetrotting lifestyle. The once noble term ‘cosmopolitan’, proudly and at vast personal expense embraced by Jewish writers like Stephan Zweig and Joseph Roth to confront the allure of nationalism and Fascism in the inter-war period, has been decried as the idealized expression of those who renounce the normal obligations of national citizenship, such as paying one’s share of taxes and contributing to democratic social life. Before one can say Amazon or Starbucks, the cosmopolitan is turned into the ‘cosmocrat’ who runs the City or the ‘cosmoprat’ who floats ethereally above the world with a false sense of moral superiority. These sceptical currents contrast markedly with positive uses of the term ‘cosmopolitan’ among the classical figures of sociology, including Marx and Durkheim.

Antisemitism is a versatile beast and Jews have been vilified not only for being ‘rootless cosmopolitans’, but also for a failure to be cosmopolitan at all. Kant, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of modern cosmopolitan philosophy, echoed a well-established prejudice when he wrote that in the case of the Jews ‘all estimation of other men, who are not Jews, is totally lost, and goodwill is reduced merely to love of their own tribe’. Kant showed in this passage that it is possible to turn cosmopolitanism into a weapon against Jews, though Kant himself went on in later life to challenge the misuse of cosmopolitanism as a weapon against colonized peoples supposedly less civilized than the Europeans who conquered and occupied their countries. He began to destabilize the racial stereotypes perceptible in his own Anthropology by looking back to the monogenetic origins of the human species and forward to our future moral unity. The main point is not how far Kant was able to rid himself of the prejudice that the Jews were in some substantial sense locked in ‘love of their own tribe’ and bereft of ‘all estimation of other men’, but to acknowledge the possibility that even among the most cosmopolitan of thinkers, universal categories can, if adopted unreflectively, metamorphose into means of reproducing old racial and antisemitic typifications.

The Janus-faced capacity of cosmopolitanism both to pursue a policy of radical inclusion on the basis of common humanity and to pathologize one or other category of people as the enemy of humanity has manifested itself in its relation to Jews through a dialectic of emancipation and prejudice – in its emancipatory aspect treating Jews as fellow human beings and drawing practical conclusions from a sense of common humanity, while in its prejudicial aspect deeming Jews incapable of acting as universal human beings – at least as long as they remained Jews. The two faces of cosmopolitanism have not only represented
a problem for Jews but for all categories of people to whom the labels ‘not-yet human’, ‘inhuman’ or even ‘anti-human’ are attached. Yet what is specific to the Jewish experience in Western Europe is the way in which the property of ‘particularism’ has been projected onto them. A temptation that long preceded the constitution of antisemitism has been to treat conflicts between Jews and non-Jews not as ordinary human conflicts but as the symbolic expression of a metaphysical conflict between the Particular and the Universal – Judaism on the side of the particular and Christianity on the side of the universal. While Jewish emancipation movements have been oriented to the legal, political and social recognition of Jews, at least in the West, the Jewish question has typically been based on how to understand the harm ‘the Jews’ as a category inflicted on humanity as a whole, what to do about it and how to bring it to an end.

I shall seek to illustrate my argument by addressing the two faces of cosmopolitanism at three pivotal moments in Western history: the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the revolutionary tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the ‘new cosmopolitanism’ of our own day. I shall argue that at every stage there has been a struggle waged over the spirit of cosmopolitanism between forces of Jewish emancipation and of the ‘Jewish question’ that are not always easy to distinguish.

I should say as an aside that this task leads me to question some dominant modes of historical consciousness within my own field of Sociology. For example, some of the leading sociological advocates of the ‘new cosmopolitanism’, while acknowledging the dual character of cosmopolitanism, have placed it in a rigid time frame. Thus in *Cosmopolitan Vision* the sociologist Ulrich Beck wrote that universalism is two-faced, with ‘respect’ on one side and ‘terror’ on the other. Beck argued that Enlightenment universalism was based on the ‘elimination of plurality’ and ‘sacrifice of particularity’ and that it universalized ‘Western’ values in order to pathologized the values of others. He maintained that the ‘humanist universalism’ of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was deeply flawed in not recognising rights of particularity, but that at least it put human universality on the agenda. He then maintained that Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was succeeded by the rise of ‘methodological nationalism’ in the nineteenth century in which there was no universal moment at all. This appeared to Beck as the age in which nationalism, imperialism and racism became supreme. In the current period, according to Beck, what has finally arisen is ‘post-universalism’ that leans toward both a universal conception of humanity and toward the recognition of difference and rejection of all homogenising claims. Situating the cosmopolitan synthesis of the universal and the particular in the here and now has allowed Beck to label as ‘obsolete’ both the humanist universalism of the Enlightenment because of its readiness to sacrifice rights of subjective freedom to the universal, and the methodological nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that sacrificed any idea of the universal. This enabled Beck to present the new cosmopolitanism of our own age as ‘post-universal’ in the sense that it is finally capable of reconciling our universal humanity and our particular differences.

The central problem with this approach to history that I want to consider here is that it rules out the possibility that recognition of difference and suspicion of homogenising claims were already present within the Enlightenment or the alternative possibility that the elimination of plurality and sacrifice of particularity remain temptations within the new cosmopolitanism. I would suggest that it is an illusion of progress to lock the past in the past as if it contained no alternative possibilities, and to idealize the present in the present as if we have definitively learned the lessons of history and now know exactly what is to
be done. I would further suggest that we can problematize the limitations of this historical consciousness by reconfiguring cosmopolitanism not so much as a stage of history that renders obsolete the properties of a previous stage, but as a repeated struggle for emancipation that constantly has to confront its own demons. I shall endeavour to support this argument by exploring how that in all three of the cosmopolitan moments we survey in the history of the West – the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition and ‘new cosmopolitanism’ of our own times – a struggle has been waged over the spirit of cosmopolitanism between the perspectives of Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question.

**Universalism and the Jewish Question: the experience of Enlightenment**

One of the richest sociological accounts of relations between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question is to be found in Jeffrey Alexander’s *The Civil Sphere*. Alexander is especially skilful in revealing the extent to which the sacrifice of particularity was present in the Enlightenment and how this shaped its relation to Jews and Judaism. He offers various examples of the ‘endemic inferiority’ projected onto Jews even among supporters of Jewish emancipation. He observes how often Jews were labelled incapable of participating in the civic life of Christian societies, irredeemably egotistic and self-oriented, loyal only to their own and not to the host nation, and narrowly tribal in their orientation. Alexander cites approvingly a comment made by Arthur Hertzberg in his important study of *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*: that ‘modern, secular anti-Semitism was fashioned not as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the Revolution, but within the Enlightenment and Revolution themselves’.

Alexander maintains quite rightly that leading supporters of Jewish emancipation, like Christian von Dohm in Prussia, represented Jews as incapable of manifesting the universal solidarity required for civil life. Dohm endorsed the belief that the political harmfulness of Jews is the ‘general experience of our states’ because of the Jews’ ‘clannish religious opinions’, ‘bitter hatred of all who do not belong to the tribe’ and inability to look at others as ‘members of a common civil society’. It is true that Dohm was tempted to justify Jewish emancipation in terms of ‘solving the Jewish question’. He formulated the ‘Jewish question’ in terms of the corruption of Jews, understood in terms of conspiracy, usury and self-interest, and explained the corruption of Jews in terms of the restrictive circumstances in which they were forced to live. His great hope was that better circumstances would make Jews better people. Dohm argued that ‘the hard and oppressive conditions under which the Jews live almost everywhere’ explained their corruption, even if he added that fortunately ‘the Jew is more a man than a Jew’. Similarly, the revolutionary French emancipationist, Clermont-Tonnerre, attributed the corruption of Jews to the unjust laws of the old order and saw the abolition of these laws as the condition of Jewish improvement.

*Usury ... so justly censured is the effect of our own laws. Men who have nothing but money can only work with money: that is the evil. Let them have land and a country and they will loan no longer: that is the remedy ...*  

*The Jews have their own judges and laws ... that is your fault and you should not allow it. We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals ... It is repugnant to have in the state an association of non-citizens and a nation within the nation.*
In both cases, that of the Prussian reformer and French revolutionary, the harmfulness of the Jews was presupposed, explained by reference to the conditions Jews were subjected to, and translated into the credo that the overcoming of these conditions would permit Jews to become full, productive members of civil society. According to this concept of emancipation, improvement in the civic status of Jews would lead to improvement in the Jews themselves.

In an essay on ‘Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ (1930) Hannah Arendt perceptively commented that the idea of a ‘solution to the Jewish question’, which the Enlightenment deployed to support political emancipation, was later to become the conceptual ground on which modern political antisemitism would be built: ‘The classic form in which the Jewish question was posed in the Enlightenment provides classic antisemitism its theoretical basis.’13

We should, however, be cautious about overstating the negativity of Enlightenment. We should not lose sight of the extraordinary achievement it prefigured, the treatment of Jews as equal citizens with the same rights as other citizens. It prepared the ground intellectually for the supersession of the old order in which Jews were designated a separate ‘nation’ within their various host societies, permitted to profess their own religious and legal institutions, but subjected to all manner of occupational, fiscal and residential restrictions that left most Jews poor, vulnerable to persecution and in thrall to their own rabbinical and financial elites. Emancipation meant the construction of a society of equal citizens in which Jews would be integrated as autonomous human beings of a certain faith, or no faith at all, rather than as a separate ‘nation within the nation’.

We should also recognize that the Enlightenment was not confined to one voice.14 It was a magnificent international movement in which voices could be heard, which attended less to the harm Jews caused to humanity than on the harm the host society caused to Jews. Most notably, perhaps, the Jewish Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, the man who solicited Dohm’s text on Civic Improvement of the Jews, registered his approval of a development that meant that ‘the Rights of Man are beginning to be taken to heart’ but was very critical of Dohm’s way of arguing for the rights of man. Mendelssohn looked forward to ‘that happy time when attention will be given to human rights in all their proper compass’, but his premonition was rather of a barbarism to come: ‘Reason and Humanity raise their voices in vain; for hoary Prejudice has completely lost its hearing’.15 In the conviction that Enlightenment had ‘not trodden down all the tracks of barbarism in history’, Mendelssohn sought to radicalize the basis of Dohm’s conclusions. Observing how ‘prejudice assumes the forms of all ages, on purpose to oppress us, and puts obstacles in the way of our civil admission’16, he took exception to Dohm’s assumption that Jews needed moral regeneration. He saw parallels between the prejudices of those who in the past sought to transform Jews into Christians and those who wished now to transform Jews into useful citizens. Whilst Dohm maintained that improvement in the civic status of Jews would improve the Jews, Mendelssohn maintained that all special restrictions on Jews must be ended without demanding any changes in the behaviour of Jews in return. If abandonment of the Jewish way of life were either the condition or outcome of civil union, Mendelssohn added: ‘We must rather do without civil union.’ He called on Jews to remain ‘stiff-necked’ in the face of a Faustian pact that was demanded of them, that they abandon ‘harmful’ Jewish habits in return for equal rights. Mendelssohn was a universalist. His God was not the exclusive God of the Jews but the God of all humankind. When he defended the usefulness of ‘Jewish’ usury, he also rejected the notion that a society could ‘without serious injury to itself dispense with … the seemingly most useless of its inhabitants’.17 He protested against
the persecution of Jews but also against torture and religious fanaticism in general, against wrongs done to Jews but also against wrongs done by Jews. On the one hand, he held that Jews did not need lessons in universalism from those who brought them the Inquisition; on the other, he opposed Dohm’s plan to continue to grant Rabbis licence to persecute those who defied their authority.

Dohm was not the villain of the piece nor was Mendelssohn the hero, but we glimpse here the extent to which Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was a field of struggle as far as attitudes to Jews were concerned – not just between its more and less ‘tolerant’ representatives, but between two aspects of Enlightenment consciousness. For example, Voltaire has the reputation of being one of the less sympathetic of the illuminati to Jews, but he authored in 1761 a ringing protest against the Inquisition he put in the mouth of a fictional Rabbi of Smyrna. The Rabbi called on everyone to regard everyone else as fellow human beings and condemned an auto-da-fé in Portugal in which (according to Voltaire) a Jesuit, two monks, two Muslims and 32 Jews were burned to death. Concerning the murdered Jews Voltaire’s Rabbi said:

What was their crime? Nothing other than that of being born [Jews] … Can you believe that while the flames devoured these innocent victims, the Inquisitors and the other savages chanted our own prayers? … these pitiless monsters invoked the God of mercy and kindness, the forgiving God, while committing the most atrocious and barbarous crimes … Thus by a contradiction as absurd as their fury is abominable, they offer to God our makibs, they borrow our religion itself, while punishing us for having been brought up in our own religion.18

The paradox to which Voltaire’s Rabbi gave expression was that the Christian victimizers considered their Jewish victims incapable of acting as universal human beings, while they usurped for themselves the claim to universal humanity.19

The revolutionary tradition

Jeffrey Alexander demonstrates that many of the prejudices against Jews we find in Enlightenment cosmopolitanism were reproduced in the West in the revolutionary socialism of the mid-nineteenth century.20 He maintains that there were ‘striking parallels’ between representations of Jews in Enlightenment thought and those to be found in radical critiques of capitalist society. According to Alexander, Marx himself built on ‘anti-Jewish stereotypes to develop an anti-capitalist critique’, convinced himself that ‘Jewish qualities must be abolished for a good society to be established’, and paved the way for Marxist movements after Marx to carry ‘powerful antisemitic overtones’.21 He concluded that the inability of Marxism to face up to the rise of antisemitic movements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and its own dabbling with antisemitism reveal a broader ‘failure of universalism’.

Again this judgement seems to me overly negative. Opposition to Jewish emancipation in the name of a renewed ‘Jewish question’ was articulated within socialist, anarchist and other revolutionary circles, but what we also find is that the synthesis of Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question characteristic of the Enlightenment broke into mutually antagonistic extremes. Within revolutionary circles opposition to Jewish emancipation was now expressed in the name of the Jewish question and support for Jewish emancipation was now predicated on rejection of the Jewish question. This split was personified in the debate in 1843–4 between Karl Marx, a critic of the Jewish question who was firmly on the
side of Jewish emancipation, and the radical Young Hegelian Bruno Bauer, a critic of Jewish emancipation who was firmly on the side of the Jewish question.22

The problem with Judaism, as Bauer saw it, was that it was fundamentally hostile to any idea of universal humanity. According to Bauer, while history is a process of development, the Jews refuse to change and serve as an exception to its universal laws. They do not care for universal human interests; they do not evolve morally or spiritually as human beings; they show excessive pride in considering themselves the ‘chosen people’; they claim discrimination at the hands of European society but actually possess prodigious influence over the destiny of Europe – not least through financial manipulation. Bauer’s re-instatement of the Jewish question led him to declare that the Jews should be emancipated only if they rid themselves of their Judaism. Otherwise emancipation would serve as a licence to inflict harm on the world.23

Bit by bit Marx unravelled the anti-Judaic prejudice contained in his former colleague’s false radicalism. He sought to demonstrate how irrelevant the Jewish question was to Jewish emancipation. The main issue for Marx was not whether flesh and blood Jews actually fitted the image of Judaism Bauer drew – there were others who showed how far from the truth it was24 – but rather how to rid socialism of the whole way of thinking associated with the Jewish question. The grammar of Marx’s argument in favour of Jewish emancipation was quite simple. Since the rights of man include the right to be religious or not in any way one wishes, what grounds could there be for excluding Jews because of the alleged self-centredness of their religion? Since the rights of man include rights to pursue particular interests, what grounds could there be for denying civil rights to Jews because of their alleged particularism? Since the rights of citizens abstract political man from society, what grounds could there be for excluding Jews because of their alleged role in society? Since money in modern society is the supreme world power, what grounds could there be for denouncing Jews for allegedly turning money into their God? Marx revealed that Bauer’s opposition to Jewish emancipation was the sign of a general inability to understand the modern world or the role of rights, law and the state within it. The real question was not the Jewish question, but whether a backward state like Germany could catch up with progressive states like the United States and France that had already granted equal rights to Jews.25

Marx recognized that mainstream representatives of the revolutionary tradition made frequent use of anti-Judaic motifs in their critique of capitalism. For example, he and Engels expressed their contempt for the ‘foul and enervating literature’ of ‘true German socialism’ capable only of ‘hurling the traditional anathemas against liberalism’ and of presenting Jews as ‘a secret world power which makes and unmakes governments’.26 Marx and Engels between them developed the most biting critiques of leading Left intellectuals who waded in the murky waters of antisemitism – including Dühring, Proudhon, Fourier and Bakunin. Marx is wrongly accused of sharing the anti-Judaic prejudices of his age, a judgement that does not begin to capture the thrust of his argument in favour of emancipation. True, there are passages in Marx’s second essay of On the Jewish Question that appear to deploy anti-Judaic economic motifs, but read in the context of Marx’s first essay, written very shortly before, and in the context of Marx and Engels’ critique of Bauer in The Holy Family, written very soon after, it may make more sense to read them in a severe style, that is, as ironic formulations of the anti-Judaism he was attacking.27 The radicalism of Marx’s critique of Bauer lay in the fact that he was one of the first to dissociate Jewish emancipation from the Jewish question.
The difficulty encountered by Marxists after Marx is that although they tended to see themselves as heirs to Marx’s revolutionary critique of capitalism, they could be as tempted by the legacy of Bauer as by that of Marx himself. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the political emancipation of Jews was being accomplished in most countries of Western Europe, but it was accompanied by the growth of multiple social resentments collected under the label of ‘antisemitism’ and directed both at Jews and at the states that granted them equality. In this context Marxists generally rejected the antisemitic contention that the harm caused by Jews derived from an unalterable ‘Jewishness’, but they were still tempted to admit the corruption of Jews and look for improvement in the behaviour of Jews as a crucial first step in overcoming antisemitism. August Bebel is celebrated for having described antisemitism as the ‘socialism of fools’, but even this critical depiction could be read as a claim that antisemitism was a form of socialism, albeit a foolish form. Interpreted in this way, the inference was at times drawn, as Lars Fischer has argued in *The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany*, that antisemitism contained a kernel of truth that was a matter of concern for socialists as well as for antisemites.

A tendency grew within Marxism to re-read Marx’s critique of the Jewish question as if it were a defence and as if Marx were Bauer. Lars Fischer recounts that leading Marxist opponents of antisemitism, some of whom were Jewish, re-presented Marx’s essays *On the Jewish Question* as an argument for the postponement of the emancipation of Jews until the socialist revolution, that is, until such time as Jews could appear on the world stage as human beings rather than as Jews. In the Second International’s republication of Marx’s writings, it omitted the first essay that offers explicit support for the political emancipation of Jews until the socialist revolution, that is, until such time as Jews could appear on the world stage as human beings rather than as Jews. In the Second International’s republication of Marx’s writings, it omitted the first essay that offers explicit support for the political emancipation of Jews, included the second essay that contains the most problematic statements about money being the God of the Jews, and retitled the whole as ‘A World without Jews’. Mainstream Marxism was tempted to read Marx through the distorting lens of the Jewish question, even if within Marxism there were those like Rosa Luxemburg who understood the dangers present within this reading.

I do not wish to deny that the roots of Marxism’s misreading of Marx’s critique of the Jewish question can be found in certain ambiguities present in Marx’s own ‘real humanism’. If the conception of human emancipation developed in *The Communist Manifesto* signified, as Karl Löwith put it, ‘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’, then it is hard to imagine what place there could be for Judaism in this nihilistic vista of a future Communism in which the particular was so emphatically subsumed to the universal. Be this as it may, the prevailing conception of human emancipation Marx put forward was not aimed at excluding the Jews for supposedly failing the test of human universality, as it was for Bauer, but rather with overcoming the dominance of abstractions over real human beings epitomized by very abstractions of ‘the Jews’. The real humanism Marx reached out for was not about excluding Jews from civic life because of their alleged particularism, but about recognising that the right of Jews to have rights was like the right of all human beings to have rights, it was a starting point for a long and uncharted journey of human emancipation.

The struggles waged between advocates of Jewish emancipation and those of the Jewish question were more urgent within the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition than they had been within the eighteenth-century Enlightenment because of the rise of antisemitism. Marx’s emphasis on the need to construct within the revolutionary tradition a culture of
self-criticism as well as criticism of existing conditions, and to build on rather than trash Enlightenment conceptions of rights of particular freedom, was never more needed than when antisemitism became the sign under which the so-called ‘final solution of the Jewish question’ was given priority over all other economic and political imperatives. The problem was that echoes of the Jewish question could still be heard within Marxism itself. The battles fought between the critique of the Jewish question and its radical reinstatement turned out to be far from a marginal issue.

Contemporary cosmopolitanism

Let me now move on to the third ‘period’: the post-war turn to the ‘new cosmopolitanism’ in the West. Again I shall bounce off the work of Jeffrey Alexander. His case is that in American society today, or at least at the time of his writing, Jews are finally being accepted both in their universality as human beings and in their particularity as Jews. To use Ulrich Beck’s striking contrast, the ‘either-or’ of human universality or Jewish particularity has at last yielded to the ‘both-and’ of human universality and Jewish particularity. Alexander refers, for instance, to the popularity of Woody Allen films to make the case that it is now the non-Jew, not the Jew, who must give up an earlier identity to make the ‘transition from provincialism to cosmopolitanism, from particularity to universalism’. According to this history, Jewish particularity has gained the recognition it deserved as a positive identification and source of admiration. Alexander gives to history of the Jews, in the United States at least, a happy ending.

It appears that after the Holocaust the idea of the ‘Jewish question’ was marginalized and delegitimized in mainstream Western society. As the horror of the Holocaust became a more familiar theme in popular culture, public commemoration and laws criminalising Holocaust denial, working through Europe’s antisemitic past became an integral part of the larger European project to reconstruct Europe as a pluralistic, postnational political community. A cosmopolitan Weltanschauung developed which emphasized European responsibility to reflect generation after generation on its agency in the genocide of Jews. This normative stance called for an embodied and iterated European self-criticism of its own murderous history. There is, however, an ambiguous relation between facts and norms, as the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas has put it, which opens up a space to conceive of Europe as having learnt the lessons of history and rid itself of its longest hatred. In recent years there has been a subtle shift from a critical cosmopolitanism that demand of Europe an on-going engagement with its history of antisemitism, to a more complacent and Eurocentric form of cosmopolitanism that prides Europe on having the cultural resources to reflect on its history. The displacement of European self-criticism by sense of European self-satisfaction has been expressed in the new cosmopolitan confidence that history is on its side.

One of the normative concerns of contemporary cosmopolitanism has been that collective memory of the Holocaust should not become methodologically or politically nationalistic – it should not privilege the suffering of Jews at the expense of other sufferings, it should not crowd out other injustices, it should not neglect other forms of racism, it should not stigmatize whole categories of people as antisemitic, and it should not turn the cry ‘Never Again’ into the injunction never again only to Jews: in short it should not isolate Jewish emancipation from the emancipation of others. This appears to be the stuff of universalism. However, a reversal manifestly occurs when universalism is turned into the
accusation that the Jews have turned collective memory of the Holocaust into everything the cosmopolitan says it should not be, and when the agents of this collective memory are treated as a unitary group characterized by their exclusivity. The sociologist Raymond Aron raised an analogous issue in a discussion of racism and antisemitism, when he wrote of the temptation to treat racists and antisemites in as totalising a way as the racist depicts Black people or the antisemite depicts Jews.35

The realisation of this reversal may be exemplified in the authorship of the contemporary Marxist philosopher, Alain Badiou. He condemns what he describes as an exceedingly powerful and reactionary current in contemporary political life that speaks in the name of the 'Jew' and claims to see antisemitism everywhere (antisémitisme partout is the sarcastic French title of a book he co-authored).36 According to Badiou, this political current has constructed a 'victim ideology' that refers exclusively to its own Jewish victimhood, renders other forms of victimisation invisible, demands that Israel's crimes be tolerated, and accuses those who do not tolerate them of antisemitism. He declares that these 'purveyors of antisemitism' are not just on the side of Israel against Palestinians, but also on the side of all repressive power against popular resistance. Badiou writes in the name of a tradition of universalism he traces back to St Paul's disconnection of Christianity from established Judaism. Affirming the cosmopolitan credo that the state must be universal and non-identitarian, he sets it against the Jewish state by presenting Israel as placeholder for all that is hostile to the cosmopolitan vision. He imposes the matrix of a struggle between universalism and particularism onto the national conflict between Palestine and Israel. Badiou is in fact far closer to Bauer than Marx, when he singles out Israel as a uniquely illegitimate state, Zionism as a uniquely harmful nationalism, supporters of Israel as a uniquely powerful lobby, and memory of the Holocaust as a uniquely self-serving reference to the past.

This repressive aspect of cosmopolitanism brings the Jewish question right back into circulation, albeit in the form of antizionism. It turns cosmopolitanism into an ideology that accuses its 'other' of ideology. It converts cosmopolitanism from a demand for critical reflection on Europe's past into an uncritical resource to label 'others' as barbaric and idealize oneself as civilized. It takes the premise of the old Jewish question, that 'we must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals', as a justification for constructing Zionism as its other.37 Echoes of the old prejudices connected with the Jewish question are still to be heard in the new cosmopolitanism, but so too is the struggle between prejudice and emancipation. From a cosmopolitan point of view it is not of course wrong to criticize Israel: the many malpractices of the Israeli state must be criticized. Israel is no more exempt from criticism than any other state. What is wrong is to deploy the sign of cosmopolitanism to impose the perspective of the Jewish question onto a national conflict.38

The development of a cosmopolitan self-consciousness in the proper sense of the term is the endeavour to supersede nationalism, that is, the turning of the nation into an 'ism', not the endeavour to heap onto Jewish nationalism all the defects of nationalism in general. It confronts racism and antisemitism from a universal rather than national perspective, but understands that nothing may appear more 'natural' than that if you are attacked as a Jew, Muslim, African or Black, you fight back as a Jew, Moslem, African or Black. While criticism of exclusive forms of resistance to racism and antisemitism is a hallmark of cosmopolitan thinking, the cosmopolitan recognizes that exclusivity is a temptation facing all antiracist movements and does not single out resistance to antisemitism as if exclusivity
were its distinctive attribute. In its emancipatory aspect the cosmopolitan consciousness is not content to reconstruct old moral divisions of the world between ‘us’ and ‘them’, in which idealisation of the self as ‘universal’ and stigmatisation of the other as ‘particular’ are achieved through mechanisms of denial and projection. It recognizes rather the unity of our universal lives as human beings, our particular lives as Jews, Christians, Muslims and so on, and indeed our singular lives as unique thinking individuals.

**In conclusion**

The emancipation of Jews in Western Europe did not solve the Jewish question in part because support for Jewish emancipation was in large measure premised on the prejudices of the Jewish question, in part because the prejudices of the Jewish question were reinforced, reified and racialized once Jewish emancipation was accomplished, and in part because of the abstraction of political emancipation from the social emancipation of Jews. The legal recognition of Jews as equal citizens contained within itself the developmental possibility of encouraging the social recognition of Jews as fellow human beings, but it also contained within itself the regressive potential to breed resentment against the treatment of seemingly inferior and alien beings as if they were equal members of the same community. **Ressentiment** is the passion aroused by the treatment of the unequal as equal. If the allocation of equal rights to Jews was viewed by some as a merited reward for their contributions to the community, it could by the same logic also be viewed as an undeserved privilege that renders invisible the harm they do to the community and that makes sense only in terms of a conspiracy between ‘the Jews’ on the one hand and those political forces of the state that granted them rights on the other. It was not accidental that Jewish emancipation and the growth of antisemitism were coeval Western Europe in the last half of the nineteenth century, just as it was not accidental, as Alexis de Tocqueville acutely observed in *Democracy in America*, that the emancipation of slaves in the United States and the growth of anti-Black racism were coeval. The greatness of the emancipatory tradition represented by Mendelssohn, Marx and modern critical theory is that it not only challenged the negative representations of Jews expressed in terms of the Jewish question but also severed the justification of universal rights from any notion of communal worth or worthlessness.

The ‘Jewish question’ is no less the product of modernity than Jewish emancipation. We have seen that it assumes different forms in different periods – theological anti-Judaism, secular discrimination, genocidal antisemitism, demonisation of the Jewish nation, or some admixture of these elements. What seems to characterize the Jewish question in the West is the abstraction of the category of ‘the Jews’, the assumption that this category is the cause of harm to humanity, the projection onto ‘the Jews’ of the quality of either particularism or false universalism, practical attempts to find a ‘solution’ to the Jewish question, and not least resistance to all empirical criticism. In *Antisemite and Jew* Jean-Paul Sartre described antisemitism as a ‘passion’ that is neither caused nor refutable by experience: ‘The essential thing here is not a “historical fact” but the idea that the agents of history formed for themselves the Jew.’ There is a sense in which the antisemite can never lose the argument. If it is pointed 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. Similarly, if it is pointed out that most Israelis are not supporters of ethnic cleansing and that most supporters of ethnic cleansing are not Israelis, the antizionist imagination remains
no less fixed on the Israeli who supports ethnic cleansing. In this sense the Jewish question provides a template for misrecognising the world.

The temptation of the contemporary cosmopolitan consciousness is to situate the Jewish question in the past, as if it were an outmoded prejudice inexorably coming to an end. The allure of this time-consciousness is apparent when modernists treat antisemitism as the product of pre-modernity, postmodernists treat antisemitism as the product of high modernity, postnationalists treat antisemitism as the product of national modernity, and cosmopolitans treat antisemitism as the product of a bygone age of methodological nationalism. The assumption behind these forms of historicisation is to regard antisemitism as a residue of the past and close our eyes to new forms and new conditions of emergence. While the strength of this approach is to challenge naturalistic conceptions to antisemitism that treat it as a permanent feature of relations between Jews and non-Jews, its answer is merely to turn this time consciousness on its head and confine antisemitism to the past. It is never able to explain how things turn out so badly.

If cosmopolitanism is not reflective about its own capacity for reversal, it can simply end up reproducing all the old dichotomies. Cosmopolitanism is revealed here not so much as a stage of history that makes ‘obsolete’ what came before, but as a way of thinking that repeatedly has to struggle for its own existence. The cosmopolitan outlook is not a quietism that looks back on the past with the contented smile of one safely ensconced in the future, but a critical theory that pits itself against regenerated forms of domination and superstition – even against those that appear under the aegis of cosmopolitanism itself.43 The potential for the Jewish question to slip back into our cosmopolitan consciousness and to re-present ‘the Jew’ as the personification of the particular, is a compelling case in point.

Notes

1. See especially Edelstein, Terror of Natural Right, 26–42.
2. See, for example, Figes, The Whisperers, 454 and Gruner, “Russia’s Battle Against the Foreign.”
3. See Calhoun, “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers.”
4. See Gilbert Achcar, Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism.
5. Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, 100.
6. See Kleingeld, “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race” and Robert Bernasconi’s critique of Kleingeld in “Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race.”
7. See Habermas, Inclusion of the Other, for the inclusive face of cosmopolitanism and Benhabib, “Nous et les autres” in Claims of Culture for the exclusive face.
14. See especially Muthu, Enlightenment against Empire, ch. 1.
15. Feiner, Mendelssohn, 144.
17. Feiner, Mendelssohn, 143.

19. See also Hegel’s comment on Fries where he argued that it is 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.’ and 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 recognized legal persons in civil society’. Hegel repudiated those who sought to deny civil and political rights to Jews on the pretext that the Jews were a foreign nation and not an integral part of the people: ‘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 reproach upon the state which excluded them’. See Hegel, Philosophy of Right, Preface, 15–16.


23. For the history of anti-Judaism see the monumental work of David Nirenberg, Anti-Judaism, 433–9. As will become apparent, I do not share his interpretation of Marx or his premature placement of Marx in this Western tradition.

24. See for example the discussions of Moses Hess and Heinrich Heine in Hal Draper’s Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution.

25. For an elaboration of this argument see Fine “Rereading Marx on the ‘Jewish Question’” in Stoetzel, Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology, 137–59.


27. See Marx and Engels, The Holy Family, 112–43.


29. On the essentialist roots of the idea of “Jewishness” see Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 80–8.

30. See in particular Fischer, The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany.

31. This is well documented in Fischer, The Socialist Response to Antisemitism.

32. Löwith, Max Weber and Karl Marx, 106.

33. See Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, ix.

34. See also the work of Beller, Antisemitism, ch. 8. “After Auschwitz” and Sznaider, Jewish Memory And The Cosmopolitan Order, ch. 1.


36. See Badiou and Hazan, Antisémitisme Partout, and Badiou “The uses of the word ‘Jew’”. Badiou’s real target is probably the “new antisemitism theory,” which is in fact a diverse body of thought expressing concern over and analysing the development of new forms of antisemitism in the global age. See Judaken, “So What’s New: Rethinking the ‘New Antisemitism’ in the Global Age.”

37. For an emphatically reductive reading of the manipulative functions of the charge of antisemitism, see Butler, “The Charge of Anti-Semitism,” 101–27.

38. See for example Harrison, “Anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism and the rhetorical manipulation of reality”; ch. 1.


40. Glynis Cousin emphasizes the unity of the universal, the particular and the singular in “Rethinking the Concept of Western.”

41. Regarding the relation of modern antisemitism to other modern forms of racism see the insightful article by Christine Achinger “Threats to modernity.”
43. The idea of universalism as a “regulative idea” is helpfully discussed and defended in Chernilo, *The Natural Law Foundations of Modern Social Theory*. See also Fine, *Cosmopolitanism*, chs. 1 and 2.

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**Notes on contributor**

Robert D. Fine is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. He has recently co-authored a monograph, Antisemitism and the left: on the return of the Jewish question (Manchester University Press, 2016). His publications include *Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge 2007), *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (Routledge 2001) and *Democracy and the Rule of Law: Marx’s Critique of the Legal Form* (Blackburn, 2003). He has been a founding member of the European Sociology Network on Racism and Antisemitism.

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