

Religion and the Birth of Jewish Radical Politics

Adam Sutcliffe

The disproportionate presence of Jews in the history of left-wing political movements has been widely noted—by historians, Jewish leftists themselves (who have often proudly romanticized this lineage), and their right-wing adversaries (among whom it has served as an enduring anti-Semitic theme). Radical Jews have almost always been vigorously anticlerical, and are usually considered as antithetical to religion in every way. In light of recent work by Talal Asad, Jose Casanova, Charles Taylor, and others that has complicated the relationship between religion, politics, and the slippery process we describe as “secularization,” however, the place of religion in the emergence of Jewish political radicalism in the first half of the nineteenth century is due for reexamination. Despite their hostility to all traditional religious practice and their ambivalent or even hostile attitude to the Jewish collectivity, the trace of a Jewishly religious approach to the ethical meaning of history infused the thought of this first wave of Jewish radicals, up to and including Marx himself.

In his excellent book *Redemption and Utopia* (1988), Michael Löwy noted the large number of early twentieth-century central European Jewish thinkers, such as Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lucács, and Gershom Scholem, who were drawn to utopian and libertarian visions of the future inspired both by German Romanticism and by Jewish messianism. Despite their utter alienation from traditional Judaism, they found within the religion a pulsing source of radical, antinomian energy, in stark contrast to the clinical rationalism that the sociologists Max Weber and Werner Sombart were then identifying as Judaism’s central hallmark. Löwy argues that this secular radicalization of Judaism emerged only toward the end of the nineteenth century, almost exclusively in Germanic Europe. Jewish radicalism has an earlier history too, however, the religious undercurrents of which have not been seriously explored.

All roads in the history of Jewish radical politics lead back to Spinoza. Both the Jewishness and the religiosity of this most famous outcast from the Sephardic community of Amsterdam have been endlessly contested, but since his death in 1677 he has certainly been



Ludwig Börne. Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, shelf number S36_F03093.

an immensely compelling, inspirational figure to many on the political left, and to left-wing Jews in particular. Despite his uncompromising rejection of Jewish law and rabbinical authority, the emancipatory impulse of Spinoza’s philosophy is expressed in religious terms. Blessedness, he writes at the close of his posthumous *Ethics*, is not the reward for virtuous living, but is itself the knowledge, consciousness, and love of the unity of all things in God that enables the wise individual be truly virtuous and happy. Spinoza’s other major work, meanwhile—his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670)—is a close analysis of the Hebrew Bible, building a universalist argument against theocracy and for freedom of thought and speech on the particular example of ancient Jewish history.

David Biale, in his penetrating recent study of the Jewish secular tradition, *Not in the Heavens* (2011), makes the important point that the Jewish embrace of universalism is itself marked with Jewish particularity: because Judaism stands in Western culture as the essence of particularity, Jews seeking to escape this position have often rejected particularism with intense vehemence and

embraced universalism with a singular passion. Spinoza can be interpreted as a case in point, and certainly his lucidly geometric philosophy has been lauded by many as the purest possible antithesis of the particularistic legalism of his birth community. The eager espousal of universal values by Jews, then, should be seen as an inversion of normative Judaism rather than as an exit from it, and as such not only defined in relation to religion but also in a sense itself religious.

The place and meaning of religion in European society was never more in flux than in the early nineteenth century, and for nobody was this more so than for Jews negotiating the rapid transformations of the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic eras. Jews in this period reformulated the Jewish religion, adopted mainstream secular culture with an eagerness that has often been described as quasi-religious, and were also disproportionately drawn to radical political movements that were tinged with religious idealism. It is interesting, for example, to note the significant number of Jews drawn to the early utopian socialist movement led by the French count Henri de Saint-Simon. Typically young, assimilated or assimilating, and from affluent banking families, these Jewish Saint-Simonians embraced both the messianic and the productivist facets of this movement. One of them, Gustave d’Eichtal, who retained a strong attachment to his Jewishness despite his childhood baptism into Catholicism, was so convinced of the affinity between Judaism and Saint-Simonianism that he instigated a proselytizing mission to the largest synagogue in Paris, and argued that the female messiah whom the group actively anticipated would not be a gentile but a Jewess.

In Germany, the dominant influence on the first generation of Jewish radicals was Hegel. The political energy of France, however, made a strong impression on many of them, and when the July Revolution broke out in Paris in 1830, the French capital immediately became an irresistible magnet for several German Jews who found a special role mediating between these two cultures. Heinrich Heine is the most famous member of this group, but more interesting politically is the essayist Ludwig Börne. Born in the Frankfurt ghetto in 1786, Börne became steadily more

radical through his adulthood, dying in Parisian exile in 1837 a committed revolutionary. He was often extremely pointed in his writings on Jews and Judaism, emphasizing the alienating fiscal preoccupation of the world of his upbringing, and sharply critical of Frankfurt's most famous Jews, the Rothschilds. Despite his Protestant baptism in 1818, however, he retained an identificatory concern with the political rights and collective future of German Jewry. He also explicitly connected his commitment to freedom and cosmopolitanism to his Jewish background: "The Jews are the teachers of cosmopolitanism," he famously wrote. Only in his final years did he become explicitly interested in religion, and when he did so it took a Christian form. In the mid-1830s, Börne encountered the work of the democratic socialist French Catholic, Félicité Lamennais, and with great enthusiasm translated into German his aphoristic *Words of a Believer*. This religious turn should not be dismissed as an expression of confused, even self-hating, apostasy. As with the cultic "New Christianity" of the Jewish Saint-Simonians, although the framing of Börne's late religiosity was Christian its political essence was universal and the impulses leading him to it were profoundly shaped by his Jewish background and social position.

The religious universalization of Judaism is more explicit in a work identified by some as the first explicit articulation of German socialism: Moses Hess's *Holy History of Humanity* (1837). In this rather tortuously Hegelian tome, Hess divides history into three eras. Judaism dominated the first era, and Christianity the second; the third, modern era had been heralded by the messianic genius of Spinoza, and in its imminent egalitarian and utopian culmination the Jews were finally destined to fulfill their universal historical mission. Despite Hess's avowed atheism, an intensely Jewish messianism suffused his writing in this period: not for nothing was he mockingly nicknamed by his comrades "the communist rabbi." His universalist messianic radicalism is little changed—beyond the declaration that the Jews will fulfill their historical destiny by establishing their own state—in his much better-known, later Zionist work, *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862).

The connection between Judaism and political radicalism, then, has a deep history. Echoing and sometimes invoking Spinoza, Jewish radicals in the era of the emergence of socialism espoused political visions of the future that were shaped by Judaism both positively and negatively. They drew on religious traditions of utopian messianism, while

emphasizing a universalism that was consciously antipodal to the tribal particularism that they, like their non-Jewish peers, strongly associated with Judaism. However, their disavowal of Jewish particularity was not clear-cut. The Jews were almost invariably cast in an important role in the future unfolding of history, whether as a national exemplar (for the later Hess), a source of quasi-prophetic insight (for Börne), or a group whose necessary transformation was central to a wider overcoming of the pernicious social impacts of commerce and finance (a pervasive belief among early nineteenth-century reformists and radicals). This final association, most famously and vigorously asserted by another radical Jew, Karl Marx, in his *On the Jewish Question* (1844), is of course deeply particularly thorny and problematic. However, it also should be understood as in part religious: a political rearticulation of a messianic utopianism in which the Jews retained an uncomfortably central and heavily overdetermined importance.

Adam Sutcliffe is senior lecturer in European History at King's College London. His most recent book, co-edited with Jonathan Karp, is Philosemitism in History (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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