TWO FACES OF UNIVERSALISM: JEWISH EMANCIPATION AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

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Abstract

It is widely recognised in Sociology that Universalism is an equivocal principle: on the one hand, inclusive and challenging of all exclusions in the name of a common humanity; on the other, exclusive of those deemed inhuman, not yet human or positively anti-human. Universalism has indeed 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 manifest in depictions of ‘the Jews’ as a particularistic people. The former declares that Jews are human beings and that this human status should have practical consequences; the latter turns ‘the Jews’ into a homogenised and unitary category deemed incapable of meeting the universal standards of humankind. The ‘Jewish question’ has historically straddled these two faces, but it remains necessary to distinguish conceptually between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question, that is, the question of what is to be done about the harm the Jews allegedly inflict on humanity at large. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relation between these two faces of universalism through a brief review of three historical moments: the 18th century Enlightenment, 19th century revolutionary tradition, and contemporary cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: universalism, Jewish emancipation, Jewish question, antisemitism, enlightenment, Marx, cosmopolitanism.

“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)

Introduction

It is widely recognised in the field of Sociology that Universalism is an equivocal principle: on the one hand, it is inclusive and challenges all
exclusions in the name of common humanity; on the other, it can be exclusive and repressive of those deemed inhuman, not yet human or anti-human. Nowhere is this equivocation more pronounced than in the universal principles embodied in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. They contained in practice multiple exclusions – women, slaves, colonised peoples, Jews, Protestants, foreigners, actors, etc. – but the idea that every human being has the right to have rights provided the register under which the excluded could and did demand rights for themselves. They set the scene for the successive battles to come for what Jürgen Habermas has named ‘the inclusion of the other’ and Lynn Hunt has named ‘the logic of universality’. At the same time the universal principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, revised and extended in 1791 and 1793, also set the scene for the exercise of terror against those condemned as *hostis generis humani* or ‘enemies of the human race’. The terror embodied at that time in the guillotiné has subsequently been re-enacted in all manner of ways against newly discovered ‘enemies of humanity’.

The temptation in Sociology has been to posit a choice between philosophical and methodological universalism on one side and postmodern and postcolonial critiques of universalism on the other. What is at stake here is which epistemological approach to adopt and how this selection can be justified. However, what if the equivocation lies in the principle of universalism itself and what is demanded of us is not a choice between one approach and another but rather recognition of the equivocal character of what is out there in the world?

In this paper I shall explore this question through the relation of Universalism to Jews. The premise of my argument is that Universalism has shown two faces to Jews. Its emancipatory face has been manifest in movements for legal recognition of Jews as equal citizens and for social recognition of Jews as equal human beings. Its repressive face has been manifest in depictions of ‘the Jews’ as a particularistic people incapable of embracing or actively hostile to the values of universal humanity. The inclusive face of Universalism declares that Jews are human beings and that their human status should have practical, legal and political consequences. The exclusive face of Universalism turns ‘the Jews’ into a homogenised and unitary category outside of and opposed to the universal aspirations of humankind. The two faces Universalism has shown to Jews are characteristically expressed in the idea of ‘Jewish emancipation’ on one side and that of ‘the Jewish question’ on the other.

To be sure, the ‘Jewish question’ is a catch-all phrase that has as often as not straddled the two faces of universalism, but I argue that
conceptually it is necessary to distinguish between the inclusiveness of Jewish emancipation and exclusiveness of the ‘Jewish question’, which refers in effect to the harm the Jews allegedly inflict on humanity as a whole and what is to be done about it. To illustrate this claim, I shall briefly review three historical contexts in which this relation has come to the fore: the 18th century Enlightenment, 19th century revolutionary thought and contemporary cosmopolitanism.

Enlightenment thought and the Emancipation Movement

The troubled relation between universalism and antisemitism has not gone unnoticed within sociological thought. For example, in his analysis of *The Civic Sphere* Jeffrey Alexander rightly draws the readers’ attention to the ‘endemic inferiority’ projected onto Jews within the eighteenth century Enlightenment. He maintains that even among supporters of emancipation Jews were characteristically represented as locked in the past, self-centred and tribal, loyal only to their own, unwilling to participate in the civic life of ‘Christian’ societies. Alexander cites Arthur Hertzberg’s claim in *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, that ‘modern, secular anti-Semitism was fashioned not as a reaction to the Enlightenment … but within the Enlightenment’, and maintains that it was commonplace within the Enlightenment to say that the Jewish religion contained principles that made it difficult or impossible for Jews to manifest the universal solidarity required for civil life. The common refrain on the Jews, as Alexander puts it, concerned their ‘bitter hatred of all who do not belong of the tribe’ and their inability to look at non-Jews as ‘members of a common civil society’.  

The point Alexander makes is that in the eighteenth century Enlightenment the two faces of universalism might appear as opposites but were intimately connected. He argues that leading advocates of emancipation were commonly saturated with concerns about the ‘Jewish question’ and prone to justify emancipation in terms of finding a ‘solution’ to the ‘Jewish question’. There is much truth to this argument. It was the orthodoxy within the Enlightenment to take for granted the harmlessness of the Jews, especially their tendencies toward usury and behaving as a nation within the nation. The Enlightenment orthodoxy sought to explain this harmlessness by reference to the restrictive social and political circumstances in which Jews were forced to live, and to seek a solution through the hope that better circumstances would make Jews better human beings. If the Jewish question was the question of what to do about the harm Jews caused for society, the Enlightenment solution was
neither to leave things as they were nor to get rid of the Jews by forced conversion, territorial expulsion or physical elimination, but to improve the Jews by improving their status in society. It was through this enlightened logic that Jewish emancipation was deeply imbricated in the Jewish question.

The most famous example is that of the leading Prussian supporter of Jewish emancipation, Christian von Dohm, who argued that ‘the hard and oppressive conditions under which the Jews live almost everywhere’ explained their corruption. He maintained that since ‘the Jew is more a man than a Jew’, he or she could be improved once treated as a human being.\(^5\) The French revolutionary supporter of Jewish emancipation, Clermont-Tonnerre, argued along the same lines that ‘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’. He argued along the same lines that ‘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’.\(^6\) In both cases, that of the Prussian reformist and the French revolutionary, ‘the Jews’ were spoken about rather than spoken to. Their harmfulness was presupposed, explained as the ill effect of the old order, and countered through the credo that emancipation would provide the golden key permitting the Jews to become productive members of society.

It is clear that anti-Jewish prejudice was not simply overcome even within the Enlightenment and emancipation movement, but it is also important not to overstate the case. First, although arguments in favour of emancipation were often rooted in the Jewish question, the aim of Jewish emancipation itself was a huge step forward. It meant that denial of equal rights to Jews was no longer to be tolerated and that Jews were to be integrated as human beings of a certain faith (or no faith at all) in a society of equal citizens. It signalled the abolition of an order in which Jews were permitted to profess their own religion and run their own self-government but were subject to multiple fiscal, occupational and residential restrictions that left the majority in poverty, vulnerable without to persecution and within to the power of rabbinical elites.

Second, Enlightenment and the emancipation movement contained a plurality of voices, among which there were those that focused less on the harm Jews caused to their host societies than on the harm host societies inflicted on Jews. Jews could be participants in Enlightenment, not merely
beneficiaries of Enlightenment. The best-known case in point was Moses Mendelssohn, friend and colleague of Kant, who in 1781 solicited von Dohm’s text on *Civic Improvement of the Jews*. Mendelssohn took exception to Dohm’s presumption that Jews needed fundamental regeneration to make them worthy of equal rights. He understood that Enlightenment ‘had not trodden down all the tracks of barbarism in history’ and saw parallels between the prejudices of those who in the past sought to transform Jews into Christians and those who now wished to transform Jews into productive citizens. He held 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 the condition of civil union, ‘we must rather do without civil union’. The ‘we’ here was quite different from the ‘we’ of Dohm and Clermont-Tonnerre. Mendelssohn called on fellow-Jews to remain ‘stiff-necked’ in the face of the Faustian pact they were supposed to enter, which demanded abandonment of ‘harmful’ Jewish habits in return for equal rights. He not only defended the utility of Jewish traders and bankers, but also attacked on universalistic grounds the idea that any human being is simply useless. Mendelssohn revealed that the temptation to typify any category of human beings as ‘useless’, ‘harmful’ or ‘parasitic’ is a violent abstraction and that the rights of human beings should be considered independently of the contribution they are deemed to make to the community.

Perhaps the key point to make here is that enlightenment is a cooperative learning process that deploys the idea of universalism reflexively not only as grounds of criticism of external conditions but also of inward-looking self-criticism. Consider Kant. The great cosmopolitan philosopher showed that he was not immune to the premises of the Jewish question when he wrote of Jews that ‘all estimation of other men, who are not Jews, is totally lost, and goodwill is reduced merely to love of their own tribe’, and when he dabbled with the view that the ‘Palestinians’ were ‘cheaters’ who benefitted only from ‘outwitting’ other people. Was Kant able to transcend this prejudice? The jury is out on this question. We know that in the last decade of his life Kant advanced his critique of colonialism and of the racial ways of thinking that accompanied colonialism. His typifications of ‘the Jews’ were aligned with equally prejudicial typifications of other ‘nations’ and ‘races’ including Asians, Africans and Native Americans, but all such racial presuppositions were destabilised by his universalistic theory of both the monogenetic origins and future moral unity of the human species. We can speculate on why the critique of colonial ways of thinking evolved in Kant’s later political
writings: perhaps it was for a mix of endogenous reasons like his turn toward a philosophy of right whose premise was the unity of the human race, exogenous reasons like his knowledge of the slave revolt of the Black Jacobins in Saint Domingue, and communicative reasons like his friendship with Mendelssohn. Kant’s own support for Jewish emancipation also evolved even if it remained qualified in ways characteristic of the Enlightenment; he never approached the extremes of either Fichte’s declaration of the absolute unsuitability of Jews for European citizenship of any kind or of Hegel’s later unqualified endorsement of Jewish emancipation.11

*Emancipation and the ‘Jewish Question’ in the revolutionary tradition*

Let me move on to my second moment: the revolutionary tradition. Jeffrey Alexander finds ‘striking parallels’ between representations of Jews in the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the representations of Jews in nineteenth century Marxism. He argues that Marx himself built upon anti-Jewish stereotypes as part and parcel of his universalistic critique of capitalism. Notoriously, in his second *Essay on the Jewish Question* Marx seems to be saying that Jewish idolatry of money must be abolished for human emancipation to be possible. According to Alexander, Marx’s own proto-antisemitism goes some way toward explaining why Marxist movements subsequently displayed ‘powerful antisemitic overtones’.12 Alexander captures well the temptations of revolutionary movements to flirt with or embrace anti-hegemonic forms of antisemitism. My question, however, is whether this is the whole story? What occurred, I suggest, is that the opposition between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question that had been contained within Enlightenment thought was now broken into extremes: with on one side opposition to emancipation articulated in the name of the Jewish question and on the other opposition to the Jewish question articulated in the name of emancipation.

This opposition was the substance of the dispute between Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx in 1843-44 over the ‘Jewish question’ in Germany.13 Bauer, a radical Young Hegelian, argued that Jews should not be granted equal rights until they abandoned Judaism. He saw the attachment of Jews to Judaism as the sign of their hostility to universalism. He maintained that while history is a process of evolution, the Jews refuse to change; that their concern is self-interest and not the interest of the whole; that they claim discrimination at the hands of European society but through their
financial power actually possess prodigious influence over its destiny; that their particularism is encapsulated in the pride in being the ‘chosen people’. Bauer argued that as long as the Jews did not repudiate Judaism, emancipation would be a licence to inflict further harm on society. Against the French juridical turn toward the ‘Rights of Man and Citizen’, Bauer stood for a German social turn toward human rather than the political emancipation. On this basis he was able to reformulate universalism in terms of a world without Jews.

Marx’s two Essays on the Jewish Question and then Marx and Engels’ monograph on The Holy Family challenged with increasing intensity Bauer’s opposition to Jewish emancipation as well as his more general devaluation of civil and political rights. Step by step Marx began to discern the banality of Bauer’s radicalism and to develop the insight that the ‘Jewish question’ was simply irrelevant to Jewish emancipation. The essential logic of Marx’s argument was very simple and to the point: Since the rights of man include the right to be religious or not in any way one wants, what grounds could there be for excluding Jews because of their religion? Since the rights of man include rights of private property, what grounds could there be for denying civil rights to Jews because of their alleged egoism? Since the rights of citizens abstract political man from society, what grounds could there be for denying political rights to Jews because of their alleged role in society? Since money was the earthly God of the bourgeois world, what grounds could there be for excluding Jews for allegedly turning money into their God? Marx maintained that Bauer’s prejudices about ‘the Jews’ were the visible sign of a larger inability to understand modern society. The real question was not the ‘Jewish question’, which was in any event a question of the lens through which the burgeoning antisemitic consciousness perceived ‘the Jews’, but whether a backward state like Germany, which had not yet granted equal rights to Jews, could catch up with modern states like the US and France that had long since done so. Marx and Engels never ceased to declare their contempt for the ‘foul and enervating literature’ of those species of radicalism and socialism that were capable only of ‘hurling the traditional anathemas against liberalism’, while representing the Jews as ‘a secret world power which makes and unmakes governments’. Indeed, many of the radicals and socialists Marx and Engels criticised were bearers of such anti-Jewish prejudices, including Dühring, Proudhon, Fourier, Lassalle and Bakunin.

The battle between emancipationists and anti-emancipationists within the radical tradition reached some kind of temporary resolution in the 1870s, when the emancipation of Jews became an accomplished fact in
most of Western Europe. Marxists generally supported Jewish emancipation in the hope that legal recognition of Jews as equal citizens would also lead to Jews becoming full human beings – and in some instances join the revolutionary movement. They were faced, however, with the fact that the formal equality accorded to Jews generated multiple resentments and gave rise to political forms of antisemitism, which no longer traced the harmful qualities of Jews to their Judaism but to their unalterable quality of ‘Jewishness’. In this context Marxists generally declared their opposition to antisemitism, but were also tempted to frame antisemitism as a response to the actual harm Jews inflicted on society. They were tempted to present improvement in the behaviour of Jews (especially in the financial dealings of Jewish bankers) as the condition of success in the struggle against antisemitism. The notion that antisemitism contained a kernel of truth was widely held within Marxist circles – so much so that Marx’s own writings on the Jewish question were re-read as if it were Marx, not Bauer, who anticipated a ‘world without Jews’.

To be sure, there may have been aspects of Marx’s work that encouraged this distorted reading. According to Karl Löwith, 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’. This conception of human emancipation as emancipation from every kind of particularity is not without support in Marx’s own texts, especially The Communist Manifesto, and when read through the lens of the Jewish question was vulnerable to the argument that human emancipation meant in practice emancipation from ‘the Jews’. However, while for Bauer the idea of human emancipation was premised on particularising the Jews and then imagining a ‘world without Jews’, the vista of human emancipation Marx developed was to overcome the dominance of abstractions in the modern world – symbolised in this instance by the abstraction of ‘the Jews’. Marx did not condemn Jews for failing the test of universality, the presumption of the Jewish question, but on the contrary aimed to extract Jewish emancipation from the grip of the Jewish question.

In the revolutionary tradition of the nineteenth century, no less than in the Enlightenment tradition of the eighteenth, the two faces of universalism continued to manifest themselves in shifting relations between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question now translated into the language of political antisemitism. The Bauer-Marx debate, like the Dohm-Mendelssohn debate over half a century earlier, made explicit this opposition and radicalised it.
Contemporary cosmopolitanism and the ‘Jewish question’

Let us now turn to our own times. In the Holocaust antisemitism became the sign under which, in most countries of Europe, Jews were stripped of legal rights, morally degraded, herded into ghettos, and murdered through starvation, torture, shooting or gas chambers. In this period the so-called ‘final solution to the Jewish question’ took on a life of its own and was seemingly prioritized over all other imperatives – economic efficiency, political domination, even winning the war. After the Holocaust antisemitism did not simply vanish but serious attempts were made to recognise the harm it caused and exclude it from the European landscape. The words ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Shoah’ were redeployed to conceptualise this event; the story of the Holocaust was afforded a significant role within the public sphere; official apologies, national commemoration sites, memorials, museums and laws criminalising Holocaust-denial became widespread; with the fall of the Iron Curtain ‘Europeanization’ drew some former satellite countries of the Soviet Union into the orbit of Holocaust commemoration; and Auschwitz became perhaps a crucial signifier of absolute evil. Confronting Europe’s antisemitic past became part of the reconstructive project of transforming Europe into a pluralistic, multi-layered, postnational political community. Given the social integration of surviving Jews in Europe and America and the formation of Israel as a ‘Jewish democratic state’, one could be forgiven for thinking that the ‘Jewish question’ was pushed to the margins of the Western world. It is in this spirit that Jeffrey Alexander writes of the acceptance of Jews today in American society as equal human beings also worthy of respect as Jews. Referring to the popularity of Woody Allen films, he wittily observes it is now the non-Jew rather than the Jew who must give up an earlier identity in order to make the ‘transition from provincialism to cosmopolitanism, from particularity to universalism’, and that Jewish difference has at last gained recognition as a positive identifier and source of admiration.21

Again the question I pose is whether this is the whole story or can we still hear within the pluralistic culture of European and American civic society echoes of the Jewish question in new discursive forms? Such echoes seem to me audible, for example, in the criticism expressed within self-consciously universalistic circles of intellectual and political life that collective memory of the Holocaust has become particularistic: that it privileges the suffering of Jews at the expense of other sufferings, that it turns the cry of ‘Never Again’ into the injunction ‘never again to Jews’;
that the treatment of the Holocaust as *radical* evil, rather than as one evil among many, crowds out other injustices; that the focus on antisemitism ignores the other racisms that have supplanted antisemitism in Europe; and that the accusation of ‘antisemitism’ is misused to stigmatise whole categories of people as antisemitic – ‘the Muslims’, ‘the Left’, even ‘Europeans’ in general. The thrust of this critique is that *universal* meaning is no longer drawn from collective memory of the Holocaust and that an exclusive emphasis on *Jewish* suffering undermines the spirit of universalism to which the world aspires.\(^{22}\) The Israel question overshadows these concerns. It has become common parlance to maintain that the principal reason collective memory of the Holocaust is now distorted is to protect Israel from criticism, that an ethnically defined ‘Jewish state’ is an anachronism that has deeply destructive practical consequences, and that it is because Israel cannot be defended openly that it is defended covertly through the charge of antisemitism. The major refrain of this critique, loss of universal resonance in commemoration of the Holocaust, may be subjected to empirical testing. As an assumption, however, echoes of the Jewish question reverberate within it.\(^{23}\)

The work of the Marxist philosopher, Alain Badiou, may serve to illustrate a harsher, less equivocal version of the contemporary revival of the Jewish question. Badiou polemises against what he sees as a powerful current of thought whose mission, as the title of one of his jointly authored works attests, is to find ‘antisemitism everywhere’ (*Antisémitisme partout*). He raises the spectre of a ‘victim ideology’, which is fixated on the extermination of Jews and only Jews, renders all other forms of racism invisible, demands that Israeli crimes be tolerated, and accuses of antisemitism those, like himself, who refuse to tolerate them. Badiou maintains that such ‘purveyors of antisemitism’ place themselves not just on the side of Israel against Palestinians but of all occupying and repressive power against popular resistance.\(^{24}\) He speaks in the name of a universalism he traces back to St Paul’s disconnection of Christianity from established Judaism, and contrasts this European tradition of universalism with the ‘identitarian’ claims of Israel and its supporters. He affirms the credo that the state must be universal and from this avowedly cosmopolitan standpoint stipulates that the Jewish state is a throwback to the emphatic nationalism of a superseded era of European history. He maintains that Israel’s defenders resort to the charge of ‘antisemitism’ precisely because an ethnically defined state can no longer be explicitly defended.

Am I wrong in hearing in Badiou the old thematics of the Jewish question expressed in a new form? The word ‘Jew’ is now avoided or
abstracted by speaking of ‘the Jew’ as a signifier or sign. The representation of ‘the Jews’ we find in traditional versions of the Jewish question is now reconfigured in terms of a critique of Holocaust commemoration, the Jewish state, Israel’s supporters, Zionism, even the struggle against antisemitism. In his analysis of Holocaust commemoration, support for Israel and struggles against antisemitism Badiou offers no recognition of the diversity of their political forms of expression in which cosmopolitan and nationalist perspectives coexist with and contest one another, or of the normality of the ‘particularism’ for which he singles out these particular political activities. Rather his work exemplifies a shift of emphasis within the sphere of post-war universalism from engagement with the history and legacy of European antisemitism to denouncement of the threat posed by an amorphous array of targets, none of which mention Jews but all of which are identified with Jews.

My contention is that the echoes of the old Jewish question can still be heard in the nooks and crannies of our own cosmopolitan culture and derive from imposing the matrix of a Manichaean struggle between the universal and the particular onto conflicts that are human, all too human. The struggle for the soul of universalism persists within contemporary cosmopolitanism. Old prejudices can still be heard, like George Eliot’s ‘twentieth echo of an echo’, and the universalistic consciousness still has its work cut out.

Conclusion: the equivocations of universalism

The most cherished ideas of universalism can function as renewed sources of dichotomous thinking. To take one fairly recent example, the idea of ‘postnationalism’ started life as an emancipatory project for postwar Europe and more generally as a resource for thinking about the concrete forms in which a pluralistic universalism might be embodied in existing political communities. However, there is also a temptation to transform the distinction between nationalism and postnationalism into a moral division of the world between ‘us’ and ‘them’, in which ‘we’ extol ourselves as ‘postnational’ and label ‘others’ as ‘national’. The process of dichotomising this distinction allows ‘us’ (once again) to pride ourselves on our universalism and find ‘others’ guilty of particularism. In place of a postnational vision for changing Europe, constructed in order to come to terms with its horrendously violent past, Europe is represented as the privileged site of postnationalism. All that is at odds with this self-image – Europe’s own history of ethnic identification, ethnic cleansing,
indifference to others, crimes against humanity, genocide, etc. – is projected onto an Other.

The return of the Jewish question is just one form in which the opposition between Universalism and Particularism can be re-instated; we see it in the pathologising of ‘Zionism’ as the repository of all ‘we’ do not recognise in ourselves.\(^\text{27}\) It is not inevitable, but it remains a potentiality within universalism that the most inclusive forms of universalism can metamorphose into instruments of exclusion. Universalism has to be reflective or it may become nothing at all. In the light of the three historical instances I have touched upon in this paper, we are hopefully in a better position to draw certain conclusions about the equivocations of Universalism.

First, the ambivalence of universalism in relation to Jews has led some commentators to focus on anti-Jewish tendencies within the Enlightenment, the revolutionary tradition and contemporary cosmopolitanism at the expense of its emancipatory tendencies. They do not realise, however, that giving up on universalism means giving up on a key philosophical antidote to antisemitism. As we challenge the limits of Enlightenment, the limits of the revolutionary tradition and the limits of contemporary cosmopolitanism, we should not abandon the humanity they promoted, achieved for some, and promised for all. Other commentators have embraced the demand that Jews needed to rid themselves of their asocial or anti-social tendencies in order to become full citizens of the world – including Jewish nationalism and Zionism. They do not realise that accepting the terms of the Jewish question can mean accepting the theoretical presuppositions of modern antisemitism. The position I seek to occupy challenges both the distrust of universalism shown by its critics and the faith in universalism shown by its self-proclaimed advocates. My belief is that there is a space beyond these poles, where it is possible to embrace the unity of the Universal and the Particular in a more reflexive mode: that is to say, without turning the Universal into an ‘ism’ and setting it against the particularism ascribed to ‘the Jews’. It is a space in which we seek not only to reconcile the Universal and the Particular, the human being and the Jew,\(^\text{28}\) but also to reconcile both the Universal and the Particular with the Singular in a sense articulated by Hannah Arendt: ‘we are all the same … in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’.\(^\text{29}\)

Second, we should recognise that political currents genuinely committed to universalistic principles – whether from liberal, socialist or Marxist standpoints – have at times shown themselves capable not only of welcoming Jews into the civic community, not only of combating

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antisemitism, but also of locating the sources of antisemitism in the behaviour of Jews themselves and of demanding that Jews must change to become full members of the civic community. The conventional wisdom that universalistic forms of political and intellectual thought are by virtue of their universalism immune to the temptations of antisemitism fails to capture this troubling ambivalence.  

Walter Benjamin’s well-known observation in his Theses on the Philosophy of History, that ‘there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’, may exaggerate the identity of civilisation and barbarism but it alerts us to the ties that bind the civilising function of universalism to the barbaric search for a ‘solution’ to the ‘Jewish question’.  

Third, we should recognise that modern antisemitism has taken and continues to take different forms, some of which are reactionary and some radical. This distinction has been historically blurred by all manner of fusions and crossovers, but conceptually it remains significant. Reactionaries aim to reverse the achievements of the Revolution in the name of traditional hierarchy, national identity, religious truth, etc. They represent ‘the Jews’ as the sign of a world gone wrong – as architects of anticlericalism, loss of privilege, the egoism of human rights and the dissolution of stability – and they represent the old order as a happy state that guarded itself against ‘the Jews’ by enforcing on them an inferior civil and legal status. Radicals embrace the achievements of the revolution and present themselves as its faithful heirs. They represent ‘the Jews’ as a reactionary power opposed to the revolution who undermine the principles of 1789, subject society to a new tutelage and impose their own domination through conspiracy and the covert power of money. They conceive of ‘the Jews’ either as relics of the past evidenced by the caste-like character of Jewish Law, or more actively as the personification of the dark side of modernity whose calculating utilitarianism contradicts the genuine universalism of the Moral Law. To be sure, these conceptually distinct forms of antisemitism can come together; for example, in Soviet uses of the antisemitic term ‘rootless cosmopolitan Jew’, Jews were conceived as having no roots in the nations that granted them hospitality and as acting through an international network in ways loyal only to themselves. The bad universalism signified by the term ‘rootless cosmopolitan Jew’ was contrasted both with a traditional conception of ‘Russian nature’ and with a modern conception of the good universalism the revolution brought into being.  

Fourth, the historical ambivalence of universalism has led some commentators to treat antisemitic tendencies within Universalism as an exclusive property of the past rather than as an enduring potentiality of
present. The ascription of antisemitism to the past has taken many forms, including positivist sociology with its trust in societal modernisation and historicist Marxism with its trust in historical progress. What we might call the ‘past-ification’ of antisemitism is in fact a common thematic within Sociology: modernists have presented antisemitism as a product of pre-modernity, for instance, of German backwardness and late state formation; postmodernists have presented antisemitism as a product of modernity and of the instrumentally rational character of the modern state; postnationalists have presented antisemitism as the product of a nationalist age when Jews were excluded from the ethnically defined nation; cosmopolitans have present antisemitism as the product of the methodological nationalism that once reigned supreme in the modernist imagination. The shared assumption behind these sociological approaches is that antisemitism is always in the past and may be backed up by historical evidence purporting to demonstrate that antisemitism has been marginalised in mainstream society – not least as the result of social learning processes brought into being by the experience of the Holocaust.

Contemporary cosmopolitanism conforms to this sociological tradition when it contrasts the homogenising universalism of the past, the ‘humanistic’ universalism which it presents as sacrificing plurality and particularity, with the pluralistic ‘postuniversalism’ or ‘pluriversalism’ of the contemporary cosmopolitan vision, which it presents as recognising ‘difference’ and as rejecting all homogenising claims. The time-consciousness of contemporary cosmopolitanism assumes a break between past and future; the Jewish question is associated with the past and based on the ‘either-or’ logic of either being a Jew or a human being. This notion is now declared historically obsolete in favour of the ‘both-and’ logic of being respected both as a Jew and as a human being. The strength of this time-consciousness is that it challenges the naturalism of ‘eternal antisemitism’ approaches, which present antisemitism as a permanent, insuperable feature of relations between Jews and non-Jews, but its answer to an essentially a-historical frame of reference is to turn it on its head and confine antisemitism to history. My argument is to look for a space beyond the alternatives of naturalising and historicising antisemitism, in which the question remains open of whether the forces that once gave rise to antisemitism remain operative in the here and now. In place of a ‘then and now’ time frame a more reflexive approach to universalism opens up buried questions: not least, it reveals that suspicion of homogenising claims was already present within the universalism of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary tradition; and that the sacrifice of particularity is still a temptation within contemporary cosmopolitanism.
What we see in all these instances is an ongoing struggle for the soul of universalism. The cosmopolitan project should in my view be conceived as an engaged project that pits itself against regenerated forces of domination and exclusion, and not as a quietism that looks back on the past with the contented smile of one securely ensconced in a new age.

To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, we cannot simply assume that what was good in the past, the emancipatory face of universalism, has become our heritage or that what was bad in the past, the ‘Jewish question’, has simply been buried by time in oblivion.\(^{37}\)

One final word: if echoes of the Jewish question are still to be heard in contemporary cosmopolitanism, as I suggest they are, so too are the echoes of Jewish emancipation. The cosmopolitan imagination is altogether right to distinguish between particularistic and universalistic ways of combating racism and antisemitism, but it must also acknowledge that if particularism is a temptation that faces all antiracist and anti-antisemitic movements, why pick on movements against antisemitism? The cosmopolitan imagination should criticise the limits of nationalism but not of course to identify all that is wrong with nationalism in general with Jewish nationalism. The cosmopolitan imagination should appeal to universal principles to combat racism and antisemitism, but not take the most nationalistic opponents of antisemitism (the ‘right-wing settler’, the ‘Jewish lobbyist’) as representative of the whole nor pathologise opponents of antisemitism as deviants. Nothing is more ‘natural’, more usual, than that if you are attacked as a Jew, Muslim, African or Black, you fight back as a Jew, Moslem, African or Black. The cosmopolitan imagination should show us why it is wrong to treat whole groups of people as unitary, otherised categories, but not respond to such categorical thinking by simply reversing the problem and labelling the labellers. The sociologist Raymond Aron correctly warned against mirroring antisemitic depictions of Jews in depictions of antisemites as essentially defined by their hatred of Jews. We must resist the temptation to paint a portrait of the antisemite that is as totalising as the antisemite’s stereotype of the Jew.\(^{38}\) The cosmopolitan imagination observes that while a common defence of antisemitism is that it is true to reality, what marks out antisemitism is its resistance to empirical criticism. 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. Similarly if we point out that most Jews are not supporters of ethnic cleansing and that most supporters of ethnic cleansing are not Jews, the
antisemitic imagination remains no less fixed on the Jew who supports
ethnic cleansing. 39

We may conclude that the two faces of universalism are not easily
disentangled: to do so requires an on-going and radically incomplete
process of thought, criticism and understanding. The ‘lesson’ of this paper
is not that universalism must be abandoned because of its exclusionary
aspect but rather that its emancipatory aspect must be rendered iteratively
reflective.

Notes

1 Habermas, J. The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory.

2 Edelstein, D. The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of

3 Benhabib, S. ‘We and the Others’ in The Claims of Culture: Equality and

459-548. The quotation is from Arthur Hertzberg, The French Enlightenment and
the Jews: The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism. New York: Columbia
University Press, 1990, p. 7. See also Rose, P. Revolutionary Antisemitism in
and Traverso, E. The Jews and Germany. Nebraska: University of Nebraska

5 von Dohm, C. ‘Concerning the amelioration of the civil status of the Jews’
(1781) in Paul Mendez-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz eds. The Jew in the Modern


7 Mendelssohn, M. Jerusalem. New England: Brandeis University Press,
University Press, Jewish Lives, 2010; Mirabeau, Sur Moses Mendelssohn, et sur

8 Kant, I. Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. Cambridge:

9 Kleingeld, P. Kant’s second thoughts on race. Philosophical Quarterly, 57,
229, 2007 pp. 573–592; Bernasconi, R. Kant’s third thoughts on race. In: Reading
291–316.

10 Fine, R. Enlightenment cosmopolitanism: Western or Universal? In
Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism (eds. D. Adams and G.Tihanov), London:

11 Fichte prioritised the Jewish question over Jewish emancipation. In his *Contribution to the Correction of the Judgments of the Public on the French Revolution* (1793) he not only held that the Jews constituted a ‘state within a state’ and grounded itself in ‘hatred of the entire human race’, but concluded that Jewry and the principles of the French Revolution were fundamentally at odds. He wrote: ‘I would see no other way to give the Jews civil rights than to cut off their heads in one night and put others on them in which there would not be a single Jewish idea’. Cited in Meld Shell, S. *Kant and the Jewish Question. Hebraic Political Studies*, 2, 1, Winter 2007 pp. 101–136 at p. 132. Hegel by contrast responded in his *Philosophy of Right* (1821): ‘although it may well have been contrary to formal right to grant even civil rights to the Jews, on the grounds that the latter should be regarded … as members of a foreign nation, the outcry which this viewpoint … produced overlooked the fact that the Jews are primarily human beings; this is not 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 persons in civil society… 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… While the demand for the exclusion of the Jews claimed to be based on the highest right, it has proved in practice to be the height of folly.’ Hegel, W. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 pp. 295-6.


Marx’s recognition that in capitalist society wogeworkers are not mere commodities but owners of commodities, beginning with their own labour-power, meant that as owners of property (however minimal or formal) workers become themselves subjects of right. For Marx, recognition of the right of all human beings to have rights, as Hannah Arendt was later to put it, was the beginning of their long and arduous journey of human self-emancipation.


38 ‘Anti-antisemites tend to present all the colonisers, all the antisemites, all the whites as essentially defined by their contempt for natives, hatred of Jews, desire for segregation. They paint a portrait of the coloniser, the antisemite or the whites that is as totalising as their stereotypes of the Jew, the native or the Blacks. The antisemite must be wholly antisemitic.’ Aron, R. *Paix et Guerre entre les Nations*. Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1969 pp. 87-88.