

Assimilation and Enlightenment

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A considerable part of the theory of modern assimilation has been articulated, either explicitly or implicitly, in reference to the Jewish experience. This is hardly accidental as both the assimilatory program of modernity and the response to it had been most fully developed in the context of the problems of Jewish assimilation. As the Jews confronted the assimilatory pressure in virtually every modernizing society of Europe, their problems were at no time confined to one nation-state thus providing a comparative perspective and the possibility for generalization. Given this unique position, the whole process can be scanned from a supra-local or a supra-national point of view. Either approach can reveal the limits and inner contradictions which are otherwise likely to remain invisible.

In the academic and popular image, the German Jew occupies a central place and is in many ways regarded as prototypical of the Jewish assimilatory drive, i.e., the emergence of the Jews from the ghetto and their entry into the modern world. Quite a few circumstances have contributed to this prominence.

Most obvious is the fact that almost all Jewish, or Jewish-born founders and heroes of modernity, from Marx to Wittgenstein, wrote their seminal contributions to modern consciousness in German. Any investigation of the social and cultural context that gave them the courage and determination to destroy and create leads inevitably to the scrutiny of Jewish life in Germany and in the countries affected by German culture.

Equally obvious is the pivotal position German Jewry occupied for more than a century among all other national Jewish communities. Up to the outbreak of the First World War, German Jews boasted the richest, most comfortably settled, most culturally advanced and creative community in diaspora. Collectively, they were firmly established in the role of main purveyors of Jewish ideologies, self-definitions and fashions. Through Moses Mendelssohn, they served as brokers in the marriage between Judaism and the En-

lightenment. Through Theodor Herzl, they rendered the same service to the marriage between Jewishness and modern nationalism. With equal power and authority, they set patterns for the reassessment and "modernization" of Jewish law, for the project of emancipation-through-acculturation, or for avenues of escape from Jewish identity. The Jewish periodical, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, had every right to advertise itself in 1890 as a "spiritual gathering point for all cultivated Jews."

A less obvious, yet paramount, factor in the prominence of German Jewry was its position between small, well rooted and on the whole affluent Jewish communities of the West and the great masses of East European Jewry. German Jews lived an insecure, challenging and adventurous frontier-style life in more than one sense. Superimposed on the evident geographical frontier was a cultural one as well: while the Western Jews prided themselves on their growing cultural refinement, their Eastern relatives were sinking ever deeper in what by Western standards could be viewed only as pre-modern mysticism, superstition and "lack of culture." Located in closer proximity to Eastern Jewry than all other Western communities (in fact, much too close for comfort; incorporation of Posen and Silesia into united Germany made topographical, political and social separation from the "uncivilized" tribe unviable), German Jews had to assume the frontier role of cultural mediators and translators. Secure in their authority of narrators, they articulated the identity and the problems of Eastern European Jews for all other Jewish communities; without German mediation, Eastern-European Jews would have remained both voiceless and invisible to their Western brethren— at least until the start of their massive exodus to the West in the late nineteenth century. Their arrival was preceded by the German narration and the stereotype it forged and disseminated. The reception they received in the West and the policies they found applying to them were first tried and tested by the

Jewish frontier-posts in Germany. Thus for the duration of "high modernity" and through the heyday of its assimilation, German Jewry served as lynchpin in holding the two branches of the diaspora together. Germany was the testing ground for the viability of cultural assimilation as a vehicle of social integration in a modern (or, rather, modernizing) society. Its history offers an inventory list of the driving forces of assimilation, the dilemmas and obstacles that are bound to arise along the way of assimilation.

Germany was the testing ground for the viability of Jewish cultural assimilation.

The fact that the Jews differed from the rest of the population, or rather from every one of the many different groups within the population, was in no way unique. On the contrary, sharply distinct ways of living practiced by, and ascribed or imputed to the mutually segregated ranks or estates, had been the rule through the centuries which preceded the modern era. In this sense the distinctiveness of the Jews made them just one case in a wide set of phenomena, collectively defined by the modernizing state as its paramount concern.

Jewish communal autonomy was an abomination from the point of view of the absolutist, all-penetrating and monopolistic tendencies of the new state power, and had to be crushed, except for the few issues which were of no concern to the state. The peculiar legal status of the Jews — legal restrictions as well as prerogatives, residential and occupational exclusions as well as juridical autonomy— had to give way to new universal codes which recognized no group privileges or legal form of discrimination. If legal equality progressed but haltingly throughout the German lands, this was for reasons not specifically connected with the Jews; the fate of German modernization was tied to the convoluted history of German unification. German Jews, who viewed with jaundiced eye the legal equality bestowed by the Napoleonic Code on their relatives across the Rhine, and who made vociferous demands for their own *Gleichberechtigung*, (equal rights before the law) sought to speed up a process which was bound to come to completion anyway — all the more so for Germany's own modernizing impatience. Equality before the law meant the sapping of communal autonomy, discreditation of communal authority, and undermining of the centrifugal influence

of communal and corporative elites; it was an indispensable part of the process leading to the institution of modern state power.

Abolition of legal privileges and discriminations was but one aspect of the modern thrust toward uniformity. Modernization was also a cultural crusade; a powerful and relentless drive to extirpate differences in values and ways of living, customs and speech, beliefs and public demeanor. It was a drive toward redefining all cultural values and styles except those endorsed by the elite. It was aimed in particular at those values and modes of behavior that resisted this *early form of Gleichschaltung*, an attempt at bringing every aspect of life under state control, and were therefore defined as inferior: signs or stigmas of backwardness, retardation, mental impairment or, in extreme cases, of insanity. The ultimate purpose of this cultural crusade was the establishment of a strict cultural hierarchy for the nation. Loyalty to discredited values and modes of behavior meant confinement to the lower rungs of the cultural ladder; persevering could lead to exclusion from the universe selected for missionary activity and confinement to permanent estrangement. On the other hand, if an individual attempted to shed the discredited values and acquire the endorsed ones, this was interpreted as one more proof of the universal validity and desirability of the dominant values and the superiority of their carriers.

Modernization was a cultural crusade that sought to extirpate differences in values and ways of living.

It was the cultural elite that usurped, and jealously guarded, the right to judge and evaluate whether the efforts to overcome cultural inferiority had been truly earnest and, above all, successful (indeed, the whole idea of social improvement as the task of assimilation derived its sense from the presence of such a firmly entrenched and uncontested cultural elite). For the individuals aspiring to be admitted to the company of the elect, the world became a testing ground and life a permanent trial period. They had to submit to constant scrutiny and never ending examination. They soon learned, if they did not know it before, that they were under observation, that the observation would never end, and that acquitting oneself from a trial, even a most exacting trial, would not exempt them from further tests. They also learned that they would be allowed

no influence on the content of examination and on the standards by which the results are marked. These were set examinations, and the standing board of examiners had full freedom to change the papers and the rules of marking without notice.

"Jewishness is like a concentrated dye..."

Many decades later another German Jew, the writer Jakob Wassermann, was to find out that however German his touch, it would leave on everything the stamp of Jewishness. As a friend explained, sympathetically yet uncompromisingly: "Jewishness is like a concentrated dye: a minute quantity suffices to give a specific character—or at least, some traces of it—to an incomparably greater mass." Wassermann found no evidence to the contrary that would prove his friend wrong. Everything he learned the hard way from his own life's experience confirmed his friend's opinion. No one among his German critics and companions "would concede that I too bore a color and stamp of German life" — even if the world viewed his novels as delectable specimens of high-quality German literature. Whatever his German readers—admirers and detractors alike—found impeccably, unchallengeably "German" in his work, free of a single hue or shade setting it apart from the accepted standards of the German novel, was ascribed to Jewish zeal, shrewdness, or gift of imitation, rather than to Germanhood. His writing's "unconscious and inherent characteristics seemed to them a product of deliberation, of Jewish ingenuity, of Jewish cleverness in adaptation and disguise, of the dangerous power of deluding and ensnaring."

After years of incessant toil and many impressive literary achievements, Wassermann lost faith in the ultimate success of his efforts. Lack of appreciation for his works as contributions to German literature, German culture, or German consciousness, was not a temporary setback, an outcome of neglect or misfortune. Bitterly, Wassermann bid farewell to the dreamers whose illusions he once shared and whose naïveté he now discovered: "No accomplishment, no renunciation of self, no toil or passion, no figure of speech or image, no melody or vision will suffice to bring him [a German Jew], as a matter of course, the confidence and dignity and inviolability which the least of those who stand in the opposing camp enjoys to the full."

Because he is not told, does not know or would not admit that final truth, the German Jew is spared no

humiliation. Along the way to ultimate defeat he turns into a figure of ridicule and derision. He is tempted to embark on a conduct that hostile and suspicious opinion had first demanded, only to brandish it later as a proof of Jewish arrogance and pushiness and to deploy it as the clinching argument against granting the zealot full citizenship in the native culture. And the striving for a goal whose remoteness grew with the diligence of the effort to reach it, was fated to go on forever, with no end to the humiliation of the runners and no shortage of excuses for their detractors.

Dimensions of Loneliness

As rejection acquired the awesome regularity of daily routine, loneliness turned from a temporary state into fate. Loneliness now characterized the world in which the business of life was conducted and to which one had to adjust to endow life with meaning. Skillful dissector of human psyche that he was, Wassermann offered an uncompromising insight into this loneliness reflected in his tormented and incurably wounded self when he writes:

"No individual claimed me as a being akin to him, nor did any group; neither the people of my blood, nor those whom I yearned to join; neither those of my own species nor those of my choice. I had at last decided to make a choice; and I had made it. It had been my inner destiny rather than a free decision that had brought about my severance from the old circle. The new neither received nor accepted me..."

Loneliness became the fate to which the German Jews had to adjust.

German Jews had little confidence, and mounting evidence to the contrary, that their bid for full and unconditional membership in German society and culture was likely to be granted in a, however distant, future. What made this uncertainty particularly unbearable was the lack of a rear line of trenches to which they could retreat in case of defeat. They were stuck in a no-man's land, exposed on all sides to enemy shells, offering no place to hide but the craters left by past hits.

They had left the trenches to advance, of course. But they left them also because the trenches did not seem a more reliable defense, nor did they seem worth

defending. However faulty they may be in other respects, the immediate, undeniable, tangible effect of assimilatory pressures of the modern state was the discreditation of private armies and collectively built fortifications. Attracted by the offers extended to individuals only, members left their communal hideouts when possible, and those who could not leave perceived them as prisons rather than shelters if they could not. Communities, which in the past had learned to live and survive in a hostile or indifferent environment, could not well retain their integrity for long when faced with the deceptive offer of personal friendship and brotherhood coupled with outspoken condemnation if they refused. Not only were they not the only homes currently on the market, but their quality as accommodations had been questioned and was declared obsolete and inferior. The remaining residents resented their cooperative duties and tried hard to reduce them to the bare, routine essentials, the meaning of which they neither understood nor wished to fathom. Attracted by the glittering prizes offered in other quarters, the residents considered their current addresses as liabilities sometimes shameful, always constraining.

Offers of personal friendship and brotherhood were coupled with outspoken condemnation.

After several decades of assimilatory adventure, little was left of the pre-modern cohesiveness of the Jewish world. New generations continued to be born into that world and be assigned to it by birth. But they poorly understood the meaning of the assignment. What they saw could hardly arouse enthusiasm, much less inspire devotion. Once he had started on his long journey back to Judaism, it dawned upon Gershon (then Gerhard) Scholem that his father's Jewish identity was much too shallow to accommodate the roots he wished to strike. It was reduced to a ritual carefully stripped of emotions. Jewish tradition, though it was accepted and adhered to, was treated too lightly for Scholem's newly awoken sensitivity to stomach. He felt deeply offended when his father, a fairly representative member of the "numerically by far strongest group" among the German Jewry of the time, "the broad Jewish liberal middle class," lit his cigar with the Sabbath candle, mumbling a mock blessing: "Boirei pri tobakko." Scholem came to believe that were he to identify himself as a Jew (and Scholem did not mean

by that, either at that stage or later in his life, embracing of orthodoxy in its rabbinical version), he would first have to discard the sham Jewishness as it was sustained and perpetuated by whatever remained of Jewish community life in Germany.

An acute and incurable tension remained between the resilience of Jewish particularity and the utopia of assimilation.

In the famous, though never sent, letter to his father, Franz Kafka complained that he was never offered any "Jewish material" of which to mould his identity; one could hardly count the boring and perfunctory synagogue services and farcical Passover feasts as material that could be used to shape anything but spiritual homelessness.

The zeal with which the Jews tried to rid themselves of whatever the native elites declared to be the mark of the alien, was itself forged into the brand of Jewishness. With a twisted logic which to its victims looked more like a curse, the Jewish *Entjudung*, the exercise in modesty and self-effacing, was perceived by the native opinion as *Verjudung*, as the Jewish invasion and conquest of vital areas of social and cultural life of the nation which should have been kept pure from corroding foreign influence. When Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne became journalists, masters of direct speech, light style, informed and ironic comment journalism as such became a symbol of Jewishness, a Jewish invention for all, a Jewish retreat for some, a Jewish conspiracy for the most hostile among native opinion-makers. The acute and incurable tension between the resilience of Jewish particularity and the utopia of assimilation was destined to remain, in Jacob Katz's words, "a central feature in the history of the Jewish community" in post-Enlightenment Germany. Peculiarity remained resilient partly because the legal emancipation arrived too late for the Jews to enter the old-established occupations previously closed to them; partly because they continued to practice occupation that were "Jewish by definition" to which they had been confined and in which they were enclosed in the past; but also, and most remarkably, because as they entered new occupations and excelled in practicing them, these new occupations showed a stunning tendency to be classified as Jewish. The professional pragmatics these occupations framed and promoted was described as the emanation of Jewish spirit, and

the skills they required were defined as inborn qualities of Jewish character.

The traditional, pre-Enlightenment Jewish segregation took on a new and subtler form of estrangement. Separation was replaced (or, rather, topped up by) loneliness. Assimilation did not incorporate the Jews into German society, but transformed them into a separate category of "assimilated Jews," apart from the traditional Jewish community as much as from the native German elites. Unlike the old Jewish estate from which the assimilants wished to emancipate, the new category suffered from a profound ambiguity of status, marked by the contradiction and continuous friction between the self-definition and socially binding classification. The assimilating Jews acted under the pressure to prove their Germanhood, yet the very attempt to prove it was held against them as evidence of their duplicity and, in all probability, also of subversive intentions.

The circle was bound to remain vicious, for the simple reason that the values to which the Jews were told to surrender in order to earn acceptance were the very values which rendered acceptance impossible. Germanhood, like all nation-bound qualities, was singularly unfit for the purpose of assimilation driven by learning and self-improvement. Nation is not a product of learning, however protracted. Nation is a commonality of fate and blood or not a nation at all. At the moment when the self-improvement of an individual starts, the question of national membership has been settled for a long time; no self-drilling zeal can remake the past or declare it non-existent. Everything one can acquire in the course of self-training must seem abominably wan and unreal when confronted with the solidity of the sedimented and petrified past.

Nation is not a product of learning but a commonality of fate and blood.

The paradoxical outcome of assimilatory effort was that the very activities and ways of living, intended to obliterate the separation, were seen as reasons for setting their bearers apart. Contrary to the popular adage "be a Jew at home, a man in the street," the would-be Germans felt truly German only at home, where they stayed protected from the unsympathetic, scrutinizing gaze of the German street. They either subconsciously sought the company of people like themselves or embarked on the perilous adventure of

assimilation or, much to their amazement and horror, found themselves in such a company through a process of negative selection. Wherever he moved in Düsseldorf, in Hamburg, in Berlin, in Paris, Heine "was surrounded by Jewish-born associates of various persuasions and various degrees of congeniality."

Assimilation transformed them into a special category of "assimilated Jews" which suffered from a profound ambiguity of status.

Almost a century later, Scholem found that the same was true for his highly assimilated family: there was practically no social intercourse with non-Jews. "One day it dawned on me that for friendly intercourse our home was exclusively visited by Jews, and that my parents paid visits only to Jews." Almost totally Jewish were the participants of the "dancing classes" frequented by the adolescents of "good German families." On his jubilee, Scholem's father was paid courtesy visits by his Gentile associates, yet he felt that it would be "unfair" to reciprocate (one of the ironic consequences of such social isolation was Jewish unawareness of the intensity of popular Judeophobia; they neither met antisemites, nor stooped to read their press, and thus their "hopes and readiness for integration grew as in a hothouse" they were free to dream their dreams undisturbed by the counterevidence of harsh reality. They only had the opportunity to preach to the converted, and thus the Germany into which they wished to integrate existed mostly in their collective fantasy and remained immune to empirical test).

Powerful forces, which Kafka described as residing "around inside me"—external and internal, external internalized and internal projected outside—all combined to draw German Jews, however fully "assimilated," back upon themselves. It was that invisible, yet all-too-real (because tightly enclosed and in the end spiritually feeding on itself) community of part-refugees, part-outcasts whose experience was reformed into the "Jewish Germany": the target of their assimilatory effort and the collateral against which the trust in the final success was borrowed.

Imagining the Real Germany

Jewish Germany was the only Germany to which the Jews could reasonably hope to be admitted. The brightest among them understood this well, though

they hardly ever gave up hope that the "real Germany" will in the end come close to the Jewish ideal. The more courageous among them resolved to speed up the process of merger, preaching the glory of "true" Germany, as Jews imagined it, against everything which distanced the real one from the ideal although they more often than not drew comfort from the belief that in their fight they had history on their side and that in the long run the ideal Germany would prove its truth against the resilient, yet temporary lie of reality. Of that "true Germany," which was presumably hidden inside the unprepossessing exterior of the practical one and struggling to get out, they were genuine, ardent and passionate patriots. Many Germans, however, failed to recognize in the object of their loyalty and love the national home they wished (depending on their political allegiances) either to preserve or to construct. As Michael Meyer commented in *The Origins of the Modern Jew*: "In the struggle to piece together a unified German society out of a torn political fabric, the Jew became a symbol of all that frustrated the effort. He was the cosmopolitan, the remnant of the Enlightenment feeding upon the German organism into which he could never really be absorbed."

The Jews never gave up hope that the "real" Germany would come close to the Jewish ideal.

And thus it had to happen that, as George Mosse put it, "emancipation meant not only a flight from the ghetto past but also from German history." The first made the second necessary; the first could not be accomplished without the second. The effort to assimilate cast the Jews in a head-on clash with the very society to which they wished to be assimilated. What in practice expressed itself in an exchange of one, the orthodox Jewish, peculiarity for another, the German one, could be only accomplished with the help of an ideology of annihilation of all particularity in the name of the universal human values of science, rationality, truth which, as Immanuel Wolffe put it, will embrace all humanity.

For the Germans, their own emancipation (i.e., establishment of political, economic and cultural unity indispensable for a nation clamouring for a honourable place in the rapidly modernizing Europe) meant first and foremost a forceful promotion of German collec-

tive identity with the usual accoutrements of joint and exclusive historical tradition and cultural lore.

For the Germans emancipation meant the forceful promotion of their collective identity.

No wonder that *Das Junge Deutschland*, a movement set up by among others, Heine and Börne with the explicit intent to fight German political backwardness, cultural parochialism, and ethical philistinism, was viewed by its German addressees with horror and revulsion and soon re-dubbed *Das Junge Palästina*. Jewish efforts to render the Germany they loved more suitable for civilized human cohabitation (a transformation which, they believed, would add to the glory of Germany among the enlightened nations), were perceived as a subversive activity threatening to sap the integrity and strength of the rising nation. Friedrich Rühs ("The Jew does not truly belong to the country in which he lives") and Heinrich Leo ("The Jewish nation stands out conspicuously among all other nations of this world in that it possesses a truly corroding and decomposing mind") had set the pattern for what was to become a standard German response to the Jewish promotion of Enlightenment ideals.

Jewish enthusiasts of Enlightenment and Germany, and above all of the Enlightened Germany, did not accept the verdict; they refused to recognize its legitimacy and the credentials of those who reiterated it with monotonous and unflinching resolve. They saw themselves as authentic and lawful spokesmen for the true spirit of German culture, and could think of no reason why they should not do the job of preserving and resuscitating everything that was noble in German tradition: the job many non-Jewish Germans neglected or refused to perform. Already Moses Mendelssohn (still barely tolerated in Berlin and granted the right of residence, normally denied to Jews, as a special favour only) thought it fit and imperative to criticize his monarch Frederick the Great for writing poetry in French and for neglecting the beauty of the German tongue. With the passage of years, the job was no closer to completion, but the zeal of its practitioners grew ever more intense.

In 1912 Moritz Goldstein asked a worried question, whose validity and timeliness his Jewish intellectual readers stoutly refused to accept: What should one think of the fact that the German cultural heritage of

that generation was to a large extent in the custody of Jews, while the great majority of German people contested their authority for this?." The most prominent among German-Jewish journalists of the time, like Maximilian Harden or Theodor Wolff, excelled in the irreverent critique of the most cherished German institutions and stood out from most of their non-Jewish colleagues by a total lack of constraint in profaning the sacred, including the army and the Kaiser himself, while the universally feared theater critic Alfred Kerr exercised truly dictatorial power over a wide spectrum of German artistic life.

The German Jewish intelligentsia was confident that the unpleasant realities of German blinkers and phobias would be washed away.

The amazing self-confidence of the assimilated German-Jewish intelligentsia could be sustained over generations of disappointments and defeats only by the belief in the distinction between the essence and the "mere appearance" of Germanhood. The unpleasant realities of current German blinkers and phobias were bound to be washed away by the pure humanity gushing from the fount of "true Germanhood;" the truth of German spirit would eventually out, whatever the temporary setbacks. One needs to distinguish between German culture and the ways of the Germans (a distinction that was strikingly similar to the one made later by Georg Lukacs between rational and authoritative "class consciousness" and the short-lived and fraudulent "consciousness of the class"). It was this belief that allowed Hermann Cohen to state in the preface to his *Ethik des reinen Willens*: "While I must take a principled posture of opposition to this modern style of Germanism, I feel fortified by the knowledge that I am harking back to the original power of the essence of German spirit, contrary to its ephemeral distortions."

The "original power" and the "essence" of German spirit was woven of the memories of the brief "classical" period of German Enlightenment, of the idealized images of Schiller, Lessing, Goethe, Kant, Herder, treated with reverence previously accorded only Old Testament patriarchs. The elevated place of Goethe in the pantheon of German culture was fought for, tooth and nail, in the intellectual salons of Rahel Varnhagen, Dorothea Mendelssohn or Henriette Herz. There, as in

the writings of countless Jewish biographers and analysts of the German classics, the prophets of German culture were praised for promoting universal human values, and Germanhood itself was defined as an attitude of openness to the universally human, as an aptitude to articulate ideas that are valid for the whole of humanity.

German Jews celebrated German spirit for its emancipation from nationalistic parochialism. They painted the icon of their worship with the brushes of extra-territorial reason and species-wide morality. They also did their best to improve the real face to make it resemble more closely its idealized portrait. The most formidable German legal theorists of the rationalist school were almost all Jews (Georg Jellinek, Eduard Lasker, Eduard Gans, Hugo Preuss). And the call for German philosophers to return to their all-too-German, and yet most universalistic, Kantian roots, came from the Marburg Jew Hermann Cohen.

Cohen was for most of his life an unqualified believer in German-Jewish symbiosis, if there ever was one. That there is an "elective affinity" between Judaic and German essences was for Cohen "not essentially a descriptive but a regulative" proposition. It said in effect: there are a number of social and intellectual forces at work in both the German and the Jewish historical cultures which can and should be used so as to advance as much and as quickly as possible, whatever dynamic force they possess, toward the goal of a cosmopolitan, humanistic, ethical world society. In other words, the essence of both Judaism and Germanhood resided in their shared tendency to obliterate their respective identities. Cohen's "Germanness" was to be at its most German the moment it had fulfilled itself in the humanity which knows of neither German nor Jew.

It was for that reason that Hegel, by that time the dominant influence on German academic philosophy, was to Cohen unacceptable. Hegel, after all, obliged to accept the real as the product of Reason, as embodiment of rationality; something which Cohen could not do without surrendering his right to criticise Germany as it was in the name of Germany as it could and should be and would eventually become. The latter was to be morally imperative, rationally requisite and by the same token was for the time being an infinitely remote target for the empirically given political and social reality. Cohen reached to Kant over Hegel's head in his search for an adequate form and legitimation for philosophical disavowal of real Germany in the name of Germany as it ought to be. Kant entitled Cohen to aver bluntly and uncompromisingly in his *Begründung der Ethik* that the ultimate unity of mankind is simul-

taneously the criterion and the goal of ethics, and that ethics strives to re-create man in accordance with the idea of mankind.

At the same time, Cohen contributed heavily to the cult of the State as the superior authority entitled to brush aside and disregard the entrenched interests of estates, classes, and their likes. The State was to perform the role of universalizing power; to this purpose it had the right and the duty to develop the law solely in accord with the idea of itself. This image was born of the tender memory of the emancipating, liberating and enabling State. But it also easily lent itself to an entirely opposite interpretation, one which came to the fore when the another capacity of the German State to promote not the symbiosis, but the incompatibility of German and Jews was revealed in all its homicidal splendor. The potential for such an interpretation was firmly and irremovably set in a conception which defined emancipation as universality rather than pluralism, as obliteration of differences rather than their equality, as the omnipotence of the state rather than its constriction by a freely self-asserting and self-managing, multi-cultural society. In light of such a conception, one could hardly bear a grudge against those Germans who, rather than admit emancipation as a necessary condition for the blending of cultures, demanded self-effacement of Jewish identity as a condition for being granted admission to German society. A generation or two later they would demand—and perpetrate—the effacement of the Jews themselves. And they would do it with the help of the selfsame omnipotent state bent of universalizing the only human condition it deemed to accord with itself.

Heinrich Rickert, a neo-Kantian philosopher of the Marburg circle, is said to have suggested that Cohen's thought was not so much a matter of philosophy as of race. He was not wide off the mark. He would be even closer to the mark had he added that it was a matter of the race who hoped to emancipate itself by assimilating with another, which, unlike, itself was determined to preserve and cultivate its identity.

Shame into Pride

Reactions to the perceived bankruptcy of assimilatory dreams took among German Jewry three essential forms. The first response came most naturally. Its essence has been described by Milton Himmelfarb: "Both honor and interest required that they change the state of a society in which it made a substantial political and social difference whether one was a Jew or a Christian. Temperament and circumstances determined whether they would work for that change in

conventional or in revolutionary ways." Indeed, there was no shortage of German Jews who had chosen either of the two ways. Barred from active political participation in the nationalist parties and movements (in spite of the ultra-patriotic enthusiasm, and genuine German-nationalist dedication that many an assimilated profusely and sincerely demonstrated), the Jews entered in disproportionately large numbers the liberal camp and its many, mostly cultural and journalistic, extensions. They hoped to use the extant institutions of political power to enforce the assimilatory promise in a contract that would be binding for both sides; to remove, by political means, social and cultural obstacles in the way of fulfillment of the assimilatory efforts. At the same time, a large number of Jews flocked to the nascent social-democratic movement for much the same reasons though with less trust in the capacity of the existing order to improve its performance to-date. In their assessment of the magnitude of change required to wipe out the Jewish stigma, they followed the perception of Karl Marx whose father's accomplishment, in Murray Wolfson's opinion, was "to establish a sense of shame in his son both for his parents' Jewishness, and for the servile aspect of his father's [Heinrich] attempt to escape from it." Karl Marx concluded that in place of parental servility no less was needed than "an organization of society which would abolish the preconditions for huckstering, and therefore the possibility of huckstering" thus rendering the very "huckstering Jewishness" for which Heinrich Marx felt the compulsion to apologize, impossible. "On the other hand, if the Jew recognizes that this practical nature of his is futile and works to abolish it, he extricates himself from his previous development and works for human emancipation as such and turns against the supreme practical expression of human self-estrangement."

Another, equally predictable, response to the perceived failure of assimilation was Zionism (which in Germany never came anywhere near the magnitude and popularity of the first). There is little doubt that the birth of political Zionism, particularly in its most consequential form, Herzl's version, was the product of the disintegration of assimilatory efforts, rather than of fruition of the Judaic tradition. As Carl E. Schorske put it, Herzl, known for his distaste for traditional Judaism, which he blamed for a physically and mentally malforming impact, "generated his highly creative approach to the Jewish question not out of immersion in the Jewish tradition but out of his vain efforts to leave it behind. Even Herzl's conception of Zion can best be understood by viewing it as an attempt to solve the

liberal problem through a new Jewish state and to solve the Jewish problem through a new liberal state." Herzl's Zionism was a twin attempt to salvage the Jews from the collapse of European liberalism and to salvage liberalism from the consequences of its collapse in Europe.

There was also a third, arguably the most profound and radical, response. In spite of, or perhaps because of, its audacity and consequentiality which make it difficult to embrace it in full, its aspects have been thus far the least discussed and commented upon of the three. Its most perceptive and complete expression can be found in Martha Robert's commentary on Freud's exhortation, "I call on you to assimilate by discovering what you really are":

"Obviously no such words implicit in Freud's work will be spoken for many years; serious people will laugh at this old wives' tale for a long time to come. Nevertheless, once the *Traumdeutung* was published, the situation in regard to assimilation underwent a historic change; psychoanalysis had built a bridge to the other side, a solid bridge which was its work from end to end, and from then it was psychoanalysis, a Jewish science, that will provide the bases for communication between the two sides."

As interpreted by Martha Robert, Freud exemplified the most consistent conclusion to be drawn from the collapse of the emancipatory strategy in that assimilationist form, which had been enforced by making uniform ambitions of the modern national state. It was the only one that emphatically rejected assimilation with its acceptance of asymmetry of power, of non-negotiable hierarchy of values and of one's own cultural inferiority; and the only one that decidedly discarded the strategy of cultural self-effacement. It was a rebellion against seeking universality by erasing one's own identity and giving up what was unique in oneself. It proposed, instead, to raise one's individuality to the level of universal value: to give, rather than give up.

Freud's case illustrates what is there to be given; how much the uniquely Jewish experience may yet contribute to the shared treasury of universally valid wisdom. The experience of the Jews in their host societies gave them collectively a unique cognitive perspective into the social and psychological processes of modernity. A willed dissolution of such insight in the abstract model drawn from a "universally human" point of view cannot but detract from the scope and the depth of potential understanding. Universality of human wisdom can gain little, and lose a lot, from suppression of the diversity of cultures and of communal experiences.

The German-Jewish experience offers a useful vantage point from which to view some of the crucial, yet frequently underemphasized or overlooked, facets of the mechanism of assimilation.

Obliteration of cultural distinctiveness was construed and perceived as the prime vehicle of political emancipation.

Assimilation, as distinct from cross-cultural exchange or cultural diffusion in general, is a typically modern phenomenon. It derived its character and significance from the modern "nationalization" of the state, i.e. from the bid of the modern state to linguistic, cultural, and ideological unification of the population which inhabits the territory under its jurisdiction. Such a state tended to legitimize its authority through reference to shared history, common spirit, and a unique and exclusive way of life rather than to extraneous factors (as for instance, dynastic rights or military superiority), which, on the whole, are indifferent to the diversified forms of life of a subjected population.

The gap between uniformity inherent in the idea of the nation and the practical heterogeneity of cultural forms inside the realm under unified state administration constituted therefore a challenge and a problem, to which national states responded with cultural crusades, aimed at the destruction of autonomous, communal mechanisms of reproduction of cultural unity. The era in which national states were formed was characterized by cultural intolerance; more generally, by intolerance of all that was different. Practices that departed from, or not fully conformed to, the power-assisted cultural pattern, were construed as alien and potentially subversive.

The nationalization of the state blended the issue of political loyalty and reliability (seen as conditions for granting citizenship rights) with that of cultural conformity. The postulated national model served as the ideal objective of cultural crusade, but it was deployed as the standard by which membership in the body politic was tested. Exclusive practices, as they applied to those disqualified, were explained and legitimized by the assertion that they had failed the test. In the result, citizenship and cultural conformity seemed to merge; the second was perceived as the condition, but also as a means to attain the first.

In this context, obliteration of cultural distinctiveness and acquisition of a different, power-assisted

culture was construed and perceived as the prime vehicle of political emancipation. The consequence was the drive of politically ambitious, advanced sectors of "alien" populations to seek excellence in practicing the dominant cultural patterns and to disavow the cultural practices of their communities of origin. The prospect of full political citizenship was the main source of the seductive power of the acculturation program.

The drive to acculturation put the ostensible identity of politics and culture to the test, and exposed the contradictions with which the fusion was inescapably burdened and which in the long run proved responsible for the ultimate failure of the assimilatory program. Cultural assimilation was an intrinsically individual task and activity, while both political discrimination and political emancipation applied to the "alien" (or otherwise excluded) community as a whole. As the acculturation was bound to proceed unevenly and involve various sections of the community to varying extent and at varying speed, the advanced sectors seemed to be held back by the relatively retarded ones. Cutting the ties with the community offered no way out of the impasse, as the standard of acceptability, like the capacity of a bridge, would be measured by the strength of its weakest pillar. On the other hand, acting as a cultural broker, or missionary, on behalf of the dominant culture in order to accelerate the cultural transformation of native community only reinforced the commonality of fate between the acculturated and the "culturally alien" sections of the community and further tightened the already stiff conditions of political acceptance.

The cultural traits acquired in the process of acculturation jarred with the inherited and ascribed nature of national membership hiding behind the formula of common culture. The fact that they achieved cultural similarity made the acculturated aliens different from the rest, "not really like us," suspect of duplicity and probably also ill intentions. Cultural assimilation in the framework of a national state is self-defeating. As it were, national community, though a cultural product, could sustain its modality as a nation only through emphatic denial of a "merely cultural," i.e. artificial, foundation. Instead, it derived its identity from the myth of common origin and naturalness. One was or was not a member; one could not choose to be one.

Though it effectively alienated its agents from their community of origin, assimilation did not lead to full and unconditional acceptance by the dominant nation. Much to their dismay, the assimilants found that they had in effect assimilated solely to the process of as-

similation. Other assimilants were the only people around who shared their problems, anxieties and pre-occupations. Having left behind their community of origin and having lost their social and spiritual affinities, the assimilants landed in another community, the "community of assimilants" no less estranged and marginalized than the one from which they escaped. Moreover, the new alienation tended toward self-exacerbation. The *Weltanschauung* of the assimilants was forged out of the shared experience of their new community and gained its shape from a discourse conducted mostly inside its framework. This had a marked tendency toward underlining the "universalistic" character of cultural values and militating against all and any "parochiality." This circumstance set their perceptions, their philosophy and their ideals apart from the "native" ones and effectively prevented the gap from being bridged.

Despite the growing evidence of inconclusiveness and hopelessness of the assimilatory efforts, the social figuration sedimented by the policy of assimilation proved to be a trap from which there were few, if any, avenues of escape. It was, presumably, the profound and prospectless isolation of the victims of assimilatory dreams which prompted the astounding steadfastness with which the majority of German Jews stuck to their guns through thick and thin. Probably for the objective or subjective lack of other real options, they resolutely refused to admit the futility of their dream even when the rising tide of vicious antisemitism with discernible exterminatory undertones swept through the country that smarted under the collapse of German Empire in defeat.

Gradually, the drama of assimilation turned into the grotesque before it ended in tragedy. When the Weimar Republic, burdened from birth with incurable sickness, entered its final years of decline and decay, leaders of the "Germans of Mosaic persuasion" felt it necessary to invoke the threat of the World Jewry's retaliation as their last sanction against approaching doom. At the same time, "they made themselves suspect in the eyes of those whom they wanted to convince of their loyalty and to whom they turned for support and protection." A few years later the day of reckoning finally arrived. The "Germans of Jewish origin" felt obliged to make an unambiguous choice. The official organ of German Jewry declared that, as always, German Jews "stand with Germany against all foreign attacks. [They] are, always have been, and can only be true to Germany." Till the end, it was a only small, sober and perceptive minority which saw through the self-delusion and declared the project of assimilation

dead and buried. A somewhat larger minority, yet still a minority, came to the conclusion that the old policy of assimilation was moribund and the idea could not be kept alive without major revision.

Those who discovered the inner contradictions, and hence the ultimate futility, of assimilatory hopes in general, or at least the original policy of assimilation, sought a remedy, or an alternative, in one of three partly novel, partly modified strategies:

Political action aimed at reforming or revolutionizing the rules which guided in practice (as distinct from declared theory) the granting of political and social rights. This action intended, so to speak, to take the nation-state by its word; to force it to abide by its own expressed intention to render the admission to the national community dependent solely on demonstrated acceptance of national values and culture.

Gradually the drama of assimilation turned into the grotesque before it ended in tragedy.

An action grounded in the conviction that the practices of the nation-state cannot be reformed, that the failure of assimilation is neither contingent nor rectifiable, and that the state can be a home only for a nation. Such action, a counter-nationalism of sorts, mirrors all the characteristics of the modern nation-state of whose rejection it had been born: its uniformizing ambitions, its intolerance of difference and peculiarity, its promotion of an ascribed character of communal membership, and the blending of issue of political membership with cultural and ideational conformity, i.e., wholehearted acceptance of the overall pattern, with a challenge only to one's own role in its implementation.

The most radical alternative strategy rejected the very idea of universality built or imposed "from the top." It admitted as universally valid only of a culture built "from the bottom up," composed of communal contributions, constructed through raising unique communal experiences and attainments to the level of universal significance, and all that under conditions of lasting (not just tolerated, but encouraged and cultivated) cultural pluralism.

This last alternative, however, takes us beyond the era the modern nation-state. While the first two strategies

are completely at home in the house of modernity not just compatible with its major principles of construction, but able to be conceived and to survive only in its interior, the third one must await proof of its viability until the dismantling of many quite fundamental aspects of its design. One can say that the third strategy anticipated the advent of an era loosely and perhaps misleadingly called "postmodernity," and that it can reach full fruition only in the postmodern context. Three aspects of contemporary change usually subsumed under the concept of post-modernity are particularly relevant in this respect.

A pronounced, though by no means conclusive, tendency toward separation of state and nation has sometimes been described as a "resurgence of ethnicity." This casts a shadow on the deeper cause of the phenomenon: the growing gap between membership in a body politic and ethnic membership which takes away much of the original attraction of cultural assimilation. This separation is more than incidentally related to the establishment of alternative, mostly non-cultural and nonideological, foundations of state power. The era of state-led cultural crusades seems to be grinding to a halt.

Under these conditions, ethnic differences are likely to engender less antagonism and conflict than in the past. It is true that various aspects of heterophobia associated with a preoccupation for boundary-drawing are still in operation; but the continuous re-drawing of boundaries typical of contemporary, i.e. post-modern, culture and the ease with which they are crossed in the absence of official border-guards renders the antagonisms somewhat more shallow, short-lived, and less venomous or radical. With the state being indifferent to cultural and ethnic pluralism, tolerance stands a better chance than ever before. This means, however, that the drama of assimilation is likely to become a matter of historical interest well before reaching its conclusion.

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