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Review:

Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question, Robert Fine and Philip Spencer

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Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question, Robert Fine and Philip Spencer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), ISBN 978-1-5261-0498-4, pp. 135, £18.99.

Given the Left's strong tradition of commitment to the cause of universal emancipation, its problematic attitude towards antisemitism has attracted considerable attention from scholars, historians, and researchers of the contemporary world alike. Available analyses of left-wing antisemitism in early to later modern societies emphasize both time and place-specific elements and the continuity of its recurrence. Good examples among recent publications of this genre are William Brustein and Louisa Robert's historical study, *The Socialism of Fools? Leftist Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (2015), and Dave Rich's assessment of the contemporary situation in the United Kingdom, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel, and Anti-Semitism* (2016). In *Antisemitism and the Left*, Robert Fine and Philip Spencer focus less on the forms this antisemitism takes and more on its causes and the issue of what has kept the "Jewish question" alive among *marxisant* and socialist thinkers. The authors lay out the argument framing their discussion in the introduction: "Universalism is an equivocal principle. It shows two faces to the world: an emancipatory face that looks to the inclusion of the other on the assumption that the other is a human being like ourselves, but also a repressive face that sees in the other a failure to pass some fundamental test of what is required for membership of humanity" (p. 1). The universalist principle informing the ideology and practice of the Left has from its foundation likewise included both a pathway to emancipate Jews as members of humanity and a means to suppress their particularity.

The authors – Robert Fine, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick and a specialist in human rights, racism, and antisemitism; Philip Spencer, Emeritus Professor in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Kingston University – explain their personal interest in trying to unravel the Left's entanglement in the Jewish question:

> We . . . both come from a Marxist-socialist background, whose legacy has shaped our understanding of and response to various distorted forms of modernity that have preoccupied us: racism, antisemitism, genocide, crimes against humanity, apartheid, ethnic nationalism, totalitarianism etc. . . . Our relation to antisemitism ought to be not different from our

> relation to other forms of racism: both should be open to the liberating power of education, research, engagement, criticism and self-reflection [pp. 5–6].

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter 1, "Struggles within Enlightenment: Jewish Emancipation and the Jewish Question", explores eighteenth-century debates about Jewish emancipation, in which, Fine and Spencer argue, lie the origins of the dilemma of antisemitism among modern, progressively minded thinkers and activists. The universalist premises of the Enlightenment and contemporary revolutionary traditions presumed that Jews would give up their Jewishness in return for civic and legal emancipation. Differently put, the seeds of the persistent "Jewish question" in modern Western thought, the authors claim, can be located in the Enlightenment's founding credo that all rights as members of the human race should be granted to individual Jews, but none to Jews as a collective carrier of particularity. Rather than simply claiming that the universalism of the Enlightenment was deceptive or a failure, Fine and Spencer wield their arguments gently as they bring out the complexities and "equivocations" of the ideas under discussion.

Chapter 2, "Marx's Defence of Jewish Emancipation and Critique of the Jewish Question", revisits Marx's writings on the subject in the context of debates among nineteenth-century revolutionary thinkers about the "Jewish question". Fine and Spencer's assessment is critical of two contradictory interpretations of Marx's position on the issue. One presents his ideas as being in a straightforward sense antisemitic while the other trivializes or dismisses the obvious anti-Jewish utterances in his writings as forms of anti-capitalist critique. Instead, they propose, we should recognize that Marx's innovative contribution to the critique of the "Jewish question" from the position of universalist humanism was formulated by a "child of Enlightenment who struggled to emancipate the Enlightenment from its own anti-Judaic prejudices" (p. 41).

Chapter 3, "Antisemitism, Critical Theory and the Ambivalence of Marxism," explores Marxist debates about the situation of Jews and antisemitism in the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, focusing especially on the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg – who strongly opposed the nationalist turn in the socialist/communist movement in all her writings – and of the Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. The authors pay particular attention to Horkheimer and Adorno's post-Holocaust analysis of antisemitism not as a consequence of the

operation of capitalism but as a deeply rooted problem of the civilization process *per se*.

Chapter 4, "Political Life in an Antisemitic World: Hannah Arendt's Jewish Writings", examines Arendt's critique of three types of Jewish responses to antisemitism: assimilationism for its blindness to the growing menace first to the security and then to the very existence of the Jews; Zionism for its potentially exclusionary understanding of national belonging; and cosmopolitanism for its rigid universalist stand, which denies the specificity of Jewish experience. As they explore Arendt's deliberations about practically applicable versus dogmatic notions of cosmopolitanism, Fine and Spencer suggest that she understood the former as a form of solidarity, which can reconcile the universal and the particular in the struggle against antisemitism (p. 77).

Chapter 5, "The Jewish Question after the Holocaust: Jürgen Habermas and the European Left", examines debates within the Left about the residues of antisemitism after the Holocaust. The first part of the chapter is about Habermas's Enlightenment-inspired universalist programme for a good society founded on post-nationalism, constitutional patriotism understood as a legal-civic commitment and loyalty to their state on the part of citizens, and universal human rights as the standard of judgment in world society. The authors then move on to explore the way in which the contemporary Left misappropriates these ideas by absolutizing the notion of universalism and singling out Israel – and, with it, Jews in general – for supposedly violating these universalist principles through their nationalist/particularist interests and pursuits.

In the final chapter, "The Return of the Jewish Question and the Double Life of Israel", Fine and Spencer continue their reflections on the universalism versus particularism theme. Within this framework, they explore yet another revival of antisemitism on the Left in the (dis)guise of anti-imperialist and internationalist causes. They examine current debates within the Left about representations of Israel and Zionism as the enemies of universalism – the contemporary embodiment of the "Jewish question". They conclude their survey by suggesting that in order to emancipate itself from "the shadow of the Jewish question" the Left must recognize what that question is, "not only in its emphatically antisemitic form as the 'final solution' but also in its less lethal forms *within* the Enlightenment, *within* emancipation struggles, *within* revolutionary Marxism, *within* critical theories, and *within* the contemporary left" (p. 124).

Given the recent rise of antisemitism around the world, not least on the Left, this book is certainly timely. It offers a well informed, engagingly written, and insightful discussion of the examined ideas in the *longue durée*. Fine and Spencer are especially to be commended for recognizing the complexities and ambiguities of relevant ideas and positions. Its broad scope and weighty content notwithstanding, the study is succinct (135 pages) and readers will therefore readily be able to find time for it in their busy schedules.

On a critical note, I wonder whether the inferences Fine and Spencer draw from the fact that Marx questioned the very premise of the "Jewish question" are not too neat. On this issue, I find more convincing the interpretations offered by Robert Wistrich and Gareth Stedman Jones among others, who emphasize the ambivalence of Marx's attitudes towards Jews. For all that Marx struggled, as the authors argue, to emancipate the Enlightenment from its anti-Judaic prejudice, in this respect he remained a child of his time. This emphasis on Marx's ambivalence would also match the spirit of Fine and Spencer's focus on the complexity and polyvalence of relevant ideas more closely.

I was surprised by the authors' supposedly self-evident inclusion of Arendt as a representative of the Left. True, throughout her intellectual life Arendt displayed a kind of radicalism of thought and a natural sympathy for the oppressed (as did a good number of secular Jews of different ideological persuasions still guided by the impulse of *tikkun olam*, which they had absorbed in their parental homes). She also maintained personal contacts with socialist/communist thinkers and activists. But, as Margaret Canovan, Philip Hansen, and Seyla Benhabib among others have shown, her ideas and arguments hardly qualify by any standard definition as Marxist or even *marxisant*. In an essay on Arendt published in 2006, Spencer himself in fact considers the extent to which Arendt can be identified with the traditions of the Left and concludes that her position in this respect was "ambiguous".

Throughout the book, Fine and Spencer repeatedly point to the false dichotomy construed between the ideas of universalism and particularism, arguing instead for their reconciliation in the form of a universal species-wide human solidarity and particular, group- and issue-specific commitments and loyalties. It is a shame that they do not on any of these occasions refer to Michael Walzer's auspicious concept of particularist universalism as a *Weltanschauung*, which combines group-specific concerns and loyalties with an identification with, and commitment to,

a broader, overarching community, its values, and purposes. In the case of conflicts between these two orientations, the concept calls for a compromise-based or negotiatory (rather than a zero-sum/either-or) mode of resolution. Incorporating Walzer's reflections on the promises and challenges of particularist universalism into their discussion of the Left's recurrent problem with the "Jewish question" would, I believe, have been rewarding.

These quibbles notwithstanding, *Antisemitism and the Left* is definitely recommended reading for all those interested in the functioning of antisemitism past and present. Fine and Spencer's claim that the contradiction embedded in the idea of universalism as the founding principle of the Enlightenment and the subsequent intellectual formations it inspired has been an important factor generating and sustaining the Jewish question applies not only to the tradition of the Left but also to modern Western thought in general.

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