

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Pierre Birnbaum**, *Geography of Hope: Exile, the Enlightenment, Disassimilation*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 479 pp. \$US 65.00 hard-cover (978-0-8047-5293-0)

Imagine sociology without Marx, Durkheim, and Simmel; without Mannheim, Mauss, and Aron; without Wirth, Schutz, Elias, Goffman, and Garfinkel; without Merton, Riesman, Shils, Bell, and Gellner. Imagine, in other words, a sociological moonscape without the Jews. Their ascent to preeminence in sociology and modern culture more generally owes itself to various factors. Marginal to respectable society, Jews were best positioned to question it. Torn between rejection and incorporation, they were naturals in understanding social conflict and integration. Professionally, their intellectual rise in the 20th century was aided both by the traditional Jewish emphasis on education and by the emergence of social science disciplines as parvenu as they were.

The story of the intellectual prominence of Jews is too obvious for Pierre Birnbaum, a French professor of history and sociology who recently retired from the Sorbonne, to linger on. His theme in *Geography of Hope* is more subtle: the manner in which eight humanistic and mostly secular Jewish intellectuals approached their bona fide or residual Jewishness. One — Karl Marx — rejected it outright. Another — Hannah Arendt — envisaged it as a fact of life, a datum that occasioned both solidarity and reserve. Three — the philosophers Isaiah Berlin and Michael Walzer, and the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi — embraced their Jewish background wholeheartedly. And three — Durkheim, Simmel, and Raymond Aron — confronted it with various degrees of ambivalence. Birnbaum devotes chapters to each of these writers, examining their stance on the tensions between rationalism and sentiment, Enlightenment universalism and local cultural attachment, pluralism and solidarity, assimilation and identity. He notes that the sociologists among them desisted from close sociological study of Jewish experience. At best, they touched on it tangentially; Simmel's concept of the "Stranger" and Durkheim's use of the example of Masada, in *Suicide*, to refute Gabriel Tarde's theory of mimicry, come to mind. The sociologists were more robust, however, when Jews were the object of political attack:

Durkheim actively defended Captain Dreyfus against the French radical right; Aron angrily denounced General De Gaulle's depiction of the Jews, in the wake of the June 1967 Six-Day War, as an "elite people, sure of itself and overbearing."

A disproportionate number of Jewish intellectuals who consciously affirmed their tradition, Birnbaum observes, came from eastern or central Europe, regions that remained less assimilated than their western counterparts. The book's title, *Geography of Hope*, alludes to this territorial bias, but also to the ability of Jews to survive, for millennia, the depredations of those who pilloried, persecuted, and murdered them en masse. Alas, a geography of hatred confronted — and still confronts — a geography of hope. From Stoecker to Stalin, from Hitler to Hamas, the modern world teems with fanatics desiring a world cleansed of Jews. And some of the most rabid anti-Semites are people of Jewish heritage. Consider Marx. The systemic traits he eventually ascribed to the bourgeoisie — the embodiment of money, exploitation, and alienation — were ones Marx originally attributed to the Jews. That narrative recalibration is well known. Less often remarked on is the sheer vulgarity and vitriol of Marx's diatribes. In texts intended for publication, but especially in his private correspondence, Marx harangued Jews both as an entity (a people "with circumcised souls") and as individuals (Lassalle is "that Jewish nigger," "the Braun Yid"). Such remarks are carefully airbrushed from most studies of Marx's thought which, painting him as a "progressive," are ill equipped to handle, let alone explain, comments that depict Jews as so degraded that they even corrupt the public "lavatories."

Characteristically, a book about Jews is also about those of us who are not Jews, about predicaments that are modern rather than simply Jewish. So, for instance, Aron's analysis of "multinational citizenship," summarized by Birnbaum, is especially germane to recent discussions of diversity. Aron believed that constitutional pluralist regimes should welcome cultural heterogeneity — but with a key proviso. Allegiances based on ethnic identity are valid, he said, provided that all members of a liberal polity envisage themselves as members of a "community of fate," willing, in extremis, to defend the country that harbours them, and, by extension, to champion the country's values of freedom and toleration. For Aron, patriotism and plurality are compatible but the onus falls on both the state *and* ethnic groups to work together to buttress national solidarity. A territory of cultural enclaves is not a society. It is probably not even a culture.

This valuable book can be recommended to sociologists interested in the history of ideas and, even more so, of human predicaments. But it is

not without flaws. Editorially, the text is botched. It has no index. It contains a number of spelling errors (for instance, and repeatedly, Ashheim instead of Aschheim) and misattributions (e.g., David Gordon instead of Daniel Gordon). The book is far too long and consequently repetitive. Coming to matters of substance, some of its conclusions are forced. An example is the tendentious story he tells of Hannah Arendt's demand for financial restitution from the West German government to compensate her for the loss of an academic career. Arendt claimed that *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, the book she began in Germany before fleeing the country, was in fact her Habilitation thesis, the second doctoral qualification required for teaching faculty. That is doubtful; Arendt had not planned a university career at this stage, and she had certainly not applied for Habilitation candidacy. The truth, I believe, is far simpler: Arendt wanted the money that financial compensation would provide. Such an interpretation is too crass for Birnbaum even to consider; instead, he infers a more elevated motive: "It was as if, once and for all, she were determined to enter the public space par excellence that the university scene represents with a work explicitly having to do with a Jewish theme" (p. 224). That, as Mark Twain might have put it, is a stretch. A more paradoxical conclusion about Arendt's life is that without totalitarianism, without the experience of being a refugee, and without refugee status as a ladder to citizenship in the world's most open and wealthy country, it is unlikely she would ever have become a brilliant intellectual.

Despite these blemishes, *Geography of Hope* is an important work and, in its own way, timely. For in these days of renewed hostility towards Jews, camouflaged as anti-Zionism or as posturing indignation at a conspiring, belligerent "Jewish lobby"; at a time when Western intellectuals routinely reserve a special kind of contempt for the state of Israel — pluralist and democratic — that they rarely entertain for its regional neighbors, dictatorships and thug-ocracies every one; in such an age, it is sobering to recall how much we owe the Jewish people. It is equally salutary to recognize that Jewish intellectuals brought a special pathos, depth and insight to sociology without which our discipline is almost unthinkable.

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