

INTELLECTUALS AND JEWS

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If I were a sociologist, I could simply ask: why are so many leading intellectuals Jews? And why, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, were Jews so active on most intellectual front lines? The question was as often asked as its answers varied. Their learning-oriented culture, we are told, has predisposed the Jews to more secular intellectual pursuits. Their religious heritage was, moreover, easily translatable into secular utopian ideals. Jews, since their emancipation, were eager to embrace the culture of their environment, to make it their own, to help shape it. Their continued discrimination in spite of their legal emancipation throughout the nineteenth century drove them into special professions—law, medicine, science, scholarship—while excluding them from others—civil service, the army, government.

But I am not a sociologist, and these are not my questions, or at least not my main questions. As a historian of culture and of ideas I rather want to focus attention on three character-features of the Jewish cultural tradition which are essential to the understanding of intellectuals—or at least intellectuals of a certain kind—in the modern world. These three character- features are independent yet intertwined. 1) Judaism since the last pre-Christian centuries was committed to an ideal of open knowledge. 2) Knowledge is first and foremost the interpretation of texts—or of the world and of history as a meaningful text. 3) Judaism was the place of origin of sects which viewed themselves as a chosen avant-garde.

To add vagueness to complication, I shall refrain from attempts to define either part of my subject. I do not presume to know what the "essence of Judaism" is, nor is it clear what we mean by "intellectuals." Surely not every scholar, scientist or artist is an intellectual. The term, albeit an old one, came only in the nineteenth century to name those groups which, a century earlier, were called "Enlighteners"—illuminati, philosophies, ideologues, Aufklärer: those who

fulfilled Kant's commandment "dare to know," sapere aude. Intellectuals, in this narrow sense of the word, were and are marked by a strong self-image as an avant-garde, the conscience and consciousness of their time and society. They often felt that they were a marginal if not alien group, but they also saw themselves as a chosen-few, whose mission it is to understand the world and society, to criticize prejudices and inequities, to disseminate true knowledge. I want, in part, to draw attention to this curious avant-garde-consciousness with its unique fusion of knowledge and salvation, and to trace its partial origin in Jewish culture.

Open and Closed Knowledge

Only two ancient societies I know of, the Greek and the Jewish, advanced an ideal of open knowledge. This was a fact of inestimably important consequences. In most primitive societies I know of, systematic knowledge—knowledge relevant to the society as a whole—was closed, secretive knowledge, acquired through initiation or oral tradition, confined to a family, a clan, a class, a professional group. Babylonian astronomy or Egyptian medicine was confined to priests; the art of writing to scribes. Only in Greece and in ancient Israel do we find the ideal—albeit the ideal only—of an open knowledge. This meant not only that all items of knowledge became open and accessible to all, but also that the criteria of what constitutes true knowledge became transparent and open to discussion and criticism. One of the major intellectual revolutions, the idea of mathematical proof, was the direct outcome, indeed, the expression, of this ideal of open knowledge. Needless to say, it was an ideal only. Only the leisure class of ancient Greece engaged in *qewriva*. And yet: when he gave a literary presentation of his theory of ideas, Plato made Socrates call upon a slave to show that the latter "remembered" no less mathematics than Meno. All of us, slaves and freemen alike, have a soul that once before its birth gazed upon the very same ideas. All of us once knew, and are still capable of remembering, everything worth knowing.

Yet while Greek philosophy and science knew the ideal of open knowledge, it came to know only late, in its Hellenistic phase, the ideal of salvation through knowledge—as, e.g., the Epicurean contention that with their atomistic-chanceful cosmology they can free humanity of its fear of the gods and of death: Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas. And still it was an individual, not a universal-social salvation, much as also the Stoic ideal of the wise; if indeed "salvation" (and not "freedom" or "happiness") is the right rendering of this ideal at all, which I doubt. The hope for a social "salvation through knowledge" has other origins.

The Jewish society since the fourth century BCE also advanced an ideal of open knowledge independently—with very different nuances, different because (1) Judaism is (or became) an interpretative religion par excellence, and (2) it was a historical-eschatological religion. Judaism is an interpretative-textual religion: the history of Jewish law (hklh), midrash, kabbala, is first and foremost the history of texts, their commentaries and supercommentaries. Studying traditional texts and interpreting them were, within the Jewish tradition, a primary religious command and value. The ideal of open knowledge was born in the Jewish world exactly when Judaism became a textual interpretative religion. Interpretation and exegesis were, again, open in both senses of the word: it obeyed transparent rules and was therefore open to doubt and well defined, decidable controversy. Moreover, those engaged in interpreting the law were laymen who formed an open group of "scribes," "Pharisees," $\mu\gamma\mu\kappa\jmath$ $ydy\mu t$.

Now this was not always the case. In biblical, pre-exilic times, the application and exposition of the law was the reserve of priests: $\mu\gamma\mu\gamma b$ $h\gamma h\gamma$ rva $fpwvh$ law $\mu\gamma wlh$ $\mu\gamma nhkh$ la $tabw$ μhh (Deut 17:9). But after the Babylonian Exile, Judaism became secularized in the sense that the interpretation of the law became slowly usurped by laymen—a process that concluded after the destruction of the second temple (70 CE). So keen were these laymen-sages to emphasize their legitimacy, that they did not shy away from falsifying history.

We read in the beginning of the treatise Avot: Moses received the law from Sinai and handed it over to Joshua, and Joshua [handed it over] to the elders (μynqzh), and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Synagogue (hlwdgh tsnc yvna). Note that the priests are altogether omitted from this chain of tradition in spite of explicit biblical evidence to the contrary—the evidence I quoted earlier and many more. Rabbinic Judaism decided matters of law neither by sacral esoteric traditions nor by inspiration: ynb1 hrwth ... lwq tbb ^ygygm ^ya: attention is not to be paid to a heavenly voice ... the Torah has been given to mankind. Even the antiquity of traditions was not the supreme criterion—witness the banning of Eliezer ben Hyrkanos on that very issue. The law was to be decided by open debate (tybl snky al wrbk wkwt ^yav dylt lk vrdmh), a debate which follows transparent rules of interpretation and is decided by majority ruling (wrmgw wnmn).

A tension between ideal and reality, the ideal of open knowledge and the reality of the confinement of learning to the few, permeated the history of western thought and science to our own days. Only the aristocracy of free men engaged, in ancient Greece, in "theory" (and left the practical sciences to the laborers). At least, this was so since the fifth century BCE—earlier it may have been different. B. Farrington has argued that the Presocratics took the inspiration for their cosmologies from industrial-mechanical processes, and that it was no more the case in the Age of Plato and Aristotle. Our sources are replete with expressions of extreme contempt of scholars (μymkj ydymlt) against μylyla ydb[l hntwn wlyak ≈rah μ[l wtb ^twnh lk : "whosoever gives his daughter in marriage to an am ha-aretz is the same as one who gives her to an idolater." Knowledge in the Middle Ages was confined to the clergy: it was, so to say, vertically closed yet horizontally open. We shall return to the Middle Ages later in the lecture.

The real breakthrough of the ideal of open knowledge came with the Enlightenment. A recent interpretation discovered at the core of the Enlightenment "the revival of paganism."

Paganism is, of course, a term invented by Jews and Christians; and though many philosophers of the Enlightenment were anti-clerical if not anti-religious, they nonetheless secularized and inverted the Christian tradition from which they came. From Christianity, the Enlightenment inherited its missionary zeal—not from any pagan religion of classical antiquity, for none of them possessed it. The Christian tenet that extra ecclesiam nulla salus was transformed into the new belief that there is no salvation except through the use of reason: "Die Befreiung des Menschen von seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit." Superstition and ignorance became, in their eyes, the original sin of mankind. In the texture of the ethical-social doctrines of the philosophers, we detect a basic concern that places them closer to the mainline of Christianity than to any ancient philosophical school: in many countries, the illuminati, Aufklärer, philosophers, set out to reform humanity and society through knowledge and reasoning. The masses, they believed, must be raised to the level of the philosopher. Maimonides in the 12th century, by contrast, believed that the masses were, are, and will remain dumb and ignorant even in the Messianic days. In contrast to their medieval counterparts, the rationalists in the 18th century ascribed to each and every person a "common sense," bon sens, gemeiner Menschenverstand which suffices to make each of us capable of being educated. Even the shift in the connotation of the term "common sense" tells a good part of the story. In the technical vocabulary of the medieval schools it stood for the so-called sixth sense—the additional capacity to coordinate sense-data that flow from the other sense-organs. But since the 17th century the term came to connote the innate capacity of every person to judge and reason correctly.

Not all Enlighteners believed, as did Lessing, in the steady, progressive "Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes." But all of them believed in the social function of science, in salvation through knowledge. They set out to create the largest possible common ground of education—the true "formation" (Bildung) of humankind.

Now in doing so, they regarded themselves as true pioneers, as an avant-garde. And in all the future ideologies that had any share in the heritage of the Enlightenment, the dialectical self-assessment of the true intellectuals, an elite malgré-elle was central. Or better, intellectuals know themselves to be, in the eyes of society, marginal; yet they view themselves as the true voice and pointer of the future, an avant-garde. Whence did this peculiar, almost self-contradictory notion of an avant-garde come from?

The Avant-Garde and the Meaning of History

Another, even older, feature of Jewish religion was its explicit historical orientation. I discussed elsewhere the original setting of this historical consciousness in Israel. In a few sectarian-apocalyptic, marginal groups of the centuries before and after the CE did this develop into a sense of history as a unified text to be decoded. And within these groups—notably the Dead Sea Scrolls sect—we also find, for the first time, a unique new consciousness of being an avant-garde, to compensate for their keen awareness of being marginal. Now the earlier prophets extended visions of future redemption to all of Israel, however small the number at the end of days may be; by contrast, the apocalyptic sectarians divided sharply between themselves and the rest of the world, Jewish or not. They named themselves a "holy community" (v̄dwq̄ t̄d[]) and the rest of Israel "the city of vain" (awwv̄ r̄y[])—here is the origin of Augustine's motif of the two cities, civitas Dei and terrena civitas, except that those early apocalypticists, unlike Augustine, have no room for a civitas permixta. They, the members of the sect, were the avant-garde of the new magnificent world (ai[wn]) in the midst of the old, doomed one. Our world, our order of nature and society, "hurries towards its end": quia festinans festinat [= rhmy rhmn] seculum pertransire (4 Ezra). It will crumble under its own wickedness; nothing may be done to ameliorate its conditions. A new world, a new cosmic order is about to come in our own very days after terrible catastrophes and tribulations. Only they, the members of the sect, will be saved, because only they have the knowledge of the End of Days, a knowledge about the end which is reserved to the time of the end: "Many shall roam and knowledge shall multiply" (Dan

12:14), ת[ד הברתו מבר ופפוו. The knowledge about history and the end of history came to them both from alleged ancient prophecies which were hidden and sealed so as to be discovered at the end of days—apocalypses—and from the right method of decoding the text of biblical prophets (רפ) which they only, the members of the sect, obtained from their founding father, the teacher of righteousness (קדח הרמ). Their salvation comes through knowledge, and they are an avant-garde—representatives of a new cosmic-social order in the midst of the old one.

This peculiar consciousness of redemption through knowledge—confined to those who share your beliefs—was then transmitted to early Christianity. The early Christians likewise saw in themselves an apocalyptic avant-garde and called themselves the true Israel (verus Israel): they knew about the savior. This firm knowledge was the basis for a new concept of belief—"belief that" rather than "belief in," knowledge rather than the biblical trust (wdb[hvbmw yyb wnymay), pivsti" rather than hnwma (Buber). If the knowledge at Qumran was esoteric, the early Christian knowledge, albeit exoteric and open, was paradoxical, a "scandal": Et resurrexit die tertio, certum est, quia impossibile est (Tertullian).

Here and there, after the hellenization and spread of Christianity, we encounter small groups and sects which emphasized knowledge in a more philosophical sense as a sole mode of salvation—such as the Gnostics. By and large, however, Christianity—in contrast, e.g., to Manichaeism—was not a religion of or for intellectuals. If we look, in the history of Christianity, for a definite class which saw it as its task to examine traditions and to criticize accepted conventions, we ought to advance to the Middle Ages, to the beginnings of the universities in the 13th century. Members of the universities defended avidly not only their corporative status ("universitas" in medieval Latin means no more than "corporation"). They defended even more their right to teach and discuss every topic (libertas disputandi), a right they had under the condition that they not decide any dogma or Church-teachings. How revolutionary this libertas

disputandi was, we see, for example from the way Thomas Aquinas begins, in his Summa Theologiae, the proofs for God's existence: videtur quod Deus non sit. Time and again, university teachers are summoned to trials and asked: did you not say such-and-such? And they would often answer, I said it, but I did so disputandi more, non asserendi more and this is my right and privilege. Here lies the origin of the self-consciousness of intellectuals as a group called upon to examine, criticize, to look at rational alternatives in the interpretation of texts and options.

Among these intellectuals we find some, already in the beginning of the medieval universities, who saw in philosophy the only instrument of salvation. Christ is in us, claimed one Amalrich of Bena, only inasmuch as we are enlightened by philosophy; and it matters little whether we are Christians, Moslems or Jews. God is in us to the measure in which we participate in the active intellect (intellectus agens, $l [wph \ 1kc]$). Amalrich was declared a heretic after his death, his body exhumed and burnt. His disciples were few. But it is significant that he could have appeared at all.

Of much greater impact, down to the 19th century, were Joachim of Fiore and later the radical Franciscans that followed him. Their doctrines also touched upon the history of the words "intellectual" and "intelligence." Spiritualis intelligentia was the common name given in Christianity, since antiquity, to the deeper understanding of the Scriptures against the mere literal-historical understanding. Christian theology accused the Jews of having only the latter, the "carnal" understanding the Bible, wherefore Jews are unable to see the hints veiled in the Old Testament for the veracity of the New Testament. In its spiritualis intelligentia or tradition of quattuor sensus scripturae, Christianity continued the hermeneutical practices both of the apocalyptic $r\upsilon p$ and of the Stoic allegories of myths. (In the 13th century Jewish exegesis started likewise to distinguish, under Christian influence, the $s"drp$). In the 13th and 14th centuries, about two generations after Amalrich of Bena, a small but vocal group arose in the

new rounded Franciscan order. Its members called themselves "Spirituals." They saw themselves indeed as an intellectual avant-garde of the eschaton; and they, too, referred to the verse in Daniel, quoted above: pertransibunt plurimi, et multiplex erit scientia. In Joachim of Fiore they saw their ideological rounding father. Aided by a hermeneutics of parallels and prefigurations (concordia novi ac veteris testamenti), Joachim "decoded" the meaning of history as the enfoldment of the persons in the Trinity. The period of the father was the period of the Old Testament. The period of the son was (and still is) the period of the New Testament. A third period, a period of the Holy Ghost, is about to break out; it will be the period of the "Eternal Testament." In the hands of Joachim and the Franciscans was a method of predictions without divination—the analysis of the structure of the past reveals the future, because every period anticipates and prefigures the period that follows. Because of their knowledge, the Franciscans saw themselves as the true avant-garde of the tempus spiritus sancti. Their impact on utopian-millenarian movements was inestimable—down to the Saint Simonists during and after the French Revolution. Even the Socinian reformer Servetus, who denied the existence of distinct persons within the deity and was burnt at the stake in Calvin's Geneva, admitted that there is a trinity in the working of the divine economy within history—in the style of Joachim.

Some enlighteners recognized their affinity to Joachim of Fiore. His teachings, we hear from Lessing, were not "an empty dream" (eine leere Grille). But I am not concerned here with the actual role that Joachim and his teaching played in the transmission of utopian ideas. What I rather wanted is an enterprise akin to what Foucault called "archéologie de savoir": to uncover the genealogy and the many layers in the making of the intellectual's self-image. We have identified and traced three features—the penchant for interpretation (or the textual bent of mind), the sense of being an avant-garde, and the commitment to open knowledge—the belief that knowledge alone saves.

Marx was the first to articulate the avant-garde-consciousness of intellectuals in modern-secular terms. The communist party is the avant-garde of the proletariat because it alone possesses a non-falsified consciousness. It knows the law of history, its knowledge is true inasmuch as it translates immediately into praxis. The party, i.e., intellectuals, read the text of history correctly and act accordingly. That they are capable of correct reading is in itself a product of history: only the last phase of bourgeois society reveals the structure of history to those who can read it. The praxis means: preparing the revolution, first by dissemination of understanding. None of this can be said to be directly derived from the Jewish tradition—certainly not utopian visions as such. To say that Marx was inspired by the prophetic tradition is a-historical nonsense. To show the affinity of his notion of finding meaning in history by an avant-garde of intellectuals with a long genealogy partly rooted in Jewish apocalypticism and text-orientedness is not nonsensical at all.

The same text-orientedness, coupled with an elevated notion of the role of the decoder as liberator, we find in psychoanalysis or, if a modern example be desired, in the deconstructionist ethos. Again I do not claim that there is something "Jewish" any more than "Christian" in these movements. I merely claim that Jewish traditions had a long-term part in shaping them, in shaping the posture of intellectuals in the modern world in general. At least, I hope to have advanced a plausible case.