

Jews and Other Europeans, Old and New

Zygmunt Bauman

In the late nineteenth century the great European project of nation-building was set in motion. It was meant to end in a Europe of unified nation-states, each with its own language, history, traditions and a people undivided in its loyalty. The local or 'merely ethnic' communities would be effaced, subsumed into the homogeneous nation. Assimilation was the means whereby outsiders would become insiders, strangers would become citizens.

The Second World War, and the Holocaust, brought this project to its tragic and murderous end, laying bare the contradiction at its heart. Outsiders could not be assimilated since their loyalty was, by definition, always voluntary and therefore always seen as untrustworthy. As the historical epitome of the European outsider, Jews accordingly remained suspect despite all their ingenious efforts to assimilate. They experienced first-hand the ambivalence of the assimilatory drive, which was, from their point of view, to become like everyone else, and, from their hosts' point of view, to deepen belonging by emphasizing difference.

Nowhere were the challenges and miseries of this process more pronounced than in the demographically complex nations of East-Central Europe, with its seemingly bottomless reservoir of unassimilated *Ostjuden*. With the disappearance of Eastern European Jewry, the drama of Jewish assimilation—with its extraordinary explosion of creativity—came to an end.

In post-war Europe Jewish assimilation has, with the demise of the crusading spirit of nationalism, dissolved into a mundane and generalized show of conformity that runs alongside postmodernity's emphasis on a seemingly infinite variety of privatized identities and choices. The sting has been taken out of Jewish assimilation, not because it was achieved, but because the life-and-death pressures to homogenize are no longer there.

Those few generations of European Jews who were forced to wrestle with the contradictions of assimilation were arguably the pioneers of the postmodern condition, making visible the ambiguities, aporias, undecidables and ambivalences that mark contemporary existence for all Europeans. It is this that counts as the Jews' most profound contribution to contemporary European culture.

In her essay 'We Refugees', Hannah Arendt recalled a highly educated German Jew addressing a gathering of German Jews who had recently escaped across the Rhine: 'We have been good Germans in Germany and therefore we shall be good Frenchmen in France.'¹ He had been warmly applauded by the closely packed audience, Arendt remembered, and she noted that no one had laughed. But why should they? The speaker Arendt quoted was not joking, whereas his fellow refugees, squeezed into the auditorium, would not have recognized the joke even if he had been. Neither he nor his likeminded listeners were entirely aware of the profound inanity of the statement. But, in any case, it was not a laughing matter for them but a matter of life and death. That they did not feel like laughing, or had perhaps forgotten how to laugh, was the ultimate triumph of the great European journey into a *continent of nations*.

At the other end of that journey, each incongruous hotchpotch of localities, languages, histories, calendars and customs was expected to emerge, once and for all, as a unified *nation* with one history, one language, one set of traditions, one fate and one object of loyalty. However, in order to

complete the process, local or 'merely ethnic' histories, languages and traditions needed to be effaced and forgotten, local or 'merely ethnic' destinies streamlined into a national history under the management of one indivisibly sovereign state power. Consequently, previously disparate and multilayered loyalties needed to have only one focus, to be harnessed to only one chariot, that of the *nation-state*. This emerging nation-state was to be a happy land of homogeneity: a clean house without strangers. As that house was being raised from its foundations, and before it acquired its roof, strangers had either to stop being strangers—or stop being.

Strangers could not be trusted by the spokesmen and aspiring managers of the budding nations. The merit of being a Frenchman or Frenchwoman, after all, lay in their *inability* to become good Germans. He or she was *born* French, and the act of being born stood out from other acts for the sheer *impossibility* of its ever being revoked: once born and bred in France, always French. Strangers, on the other hand, were,

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¹ Hannah Arendt, 'We refugees' [1943], in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books 2007), 272.

and remained, free to embrace or reject Frenchness or Germanness. For that reason alone, their choice of one or the other could not be relied on to be secure, let alone to last forever. None of their choices could be as solid, let alone as irrevocable, as to preclude a further, different, choice. The speaker recalled by Hannah Arendt inadvertently, and suicidally, confirmed the worst suspicions of the good Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.

Stop being strangers: a demand that already included the impossibility of its fulfilment since, by the logic of nation-building, to ‘stop being a stranger’ meant, in the final analysis, to ‘stop ever having been a stranger’.

Even if not intended as such, by the logic of nation-state-building, Arendt’s speaker’s statement *was* a joke, and a cruel one, though it only turned into a joke once the budding nation-state’s deadly serious message came to be delivered. That message, or rather command, was short and sharp, leaving nothing to the imagination: assimilate! Stop being what you are, and become something completely different. Stop being strangers: a demand that already included the impossibility of its fulfilment since, by the logic of nation-building, to ‘stop being a stranger’ meant, in the final analysis, to ‘stop ever *having been* a stranger’. By that logic, the rule ‘once a stranger, always a stranger’ is the very essence of strangeness. The act of being born ‘in’ could not make someone forever an insider of the nation unless those born ‘out’ were not doomed to remain forever outsiders. The stigma of not being born a native could not be washed off. Georg Simmel famously defined the stranger as someone who has come and does not go away. And, he could have added, someone who does not stop being a stranger, despite having decided, and having permission, to stay.

Called, and trying hard, to be someone else

Let me repeat: the command to assimilate would not have turned into a cruel joke had it not come from the spokesmen of the budding nations. *Coming from them*, it had to turn into a bloody-minded, even potentially homicidal joke—and it did because, *for them*, the nation derived its most glorious of glories, its unwavering and unyielding authority and its unrivalled allure by establishing a *home*, the very opposite of a hotel or a campsite, and by becoming the home of all those born of it and temporary accommodation, at best, for the others. To assimilate, an alien had to wash off his alien-ness. But the alien-ness he was ordered to wash off was a stain that could not be eradicated, however strong the detergent, namely, *not having been born native*. (In regard to the Jews, the popular slogan of the time insisted that buckets of holy water would not wash off their Jewishness.) No wonder Lev Shestov, a Jew

who tried to become first a Russian and then a Frenchman, turned to God as his last hope. But it was to a god who was a miracle-worker, a god made to defy the demands of the world that were impossible for mortals to fulfil, a god potent enough to cancel out the past, to obliterate what it had been and make it into something that never was. In short, a god whose greatness ‘was His inconsistency’,² a god who was potent enough to ‘annul history’, to make history ‘cease to exist’,³ allowing its *victims* to live. Shestov’s God was the god of a people ordered, goaded, forced to confront and to perform an impossible task. The task of assimilating: the quintessential impossibility.

A century or so before Shestov, Heinrich Heine did whatever he could to acquit himself of that task, to ‘get rid’ of his Jewishness. Publicly and vociferously, and using all his remarkable writing talents, he lent earnest support to the popular conviction that ‘Jewishness’ was a disease in urgent need of a radical cure. He disowned and disavowed the Judaic lore to which many of his brethren remained stubbornly in thrall as a fossil of not just a bygone but a *shameful* past. He used all his uncanny eloquence to deride, ridicule and pillory the qualities stereotyped as ‘specifically Jewish’: the ‘physical clumsiness and gracelessness’, the parvenu behaviour of Jewish *nouveaux riches*, the vulgarity of the *Fresser* (glutton) who ‘despised the higher flights of the mind’, or the incapacity to communicate in German without polluting and defacing its beauty with the offensive ugliness of Yiddish.⁴ Heine eventually settled in France, hoping (not without reason, as it transpired) that among Frenchmen it would be easier for him to pass as a German or even as a plenipotentiary of the German *Geist*. For the Germans, in spite of his exquisitely German poetry, Heine would remain, generation after generation, unredeemably Jewish.

Unlike Heine, Sigmund Freud never denied his Jewishness, though neither did he make an issue of it, let alone see it as a problem needing urgent attention. He proceeded with an unclouded and unshakeable confidence that his work was simultaneously part and parcel of German scholarship and a contribution to ‘human science as such’, only to find out that ‘his efforts to pass unnoticed only attracted attention’ and that ‘he was identified as a Jew by the very effort which he hoped would make him unrecognizable’.⁵

Tails you lose, heads they win

It was perhaps Ludwig Börne, Heine’s contemporary, who first grasped the unavoidable failure of the assimilatory enterprise when he observed: ‘some accuse me of being a Jew; some excuse me from being one; some even praise me for being a

² Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. from the Russian by Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴ See S. S. Prawer, *Heine’s Jewish comedy* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1986), 760–1.

⁵ Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud’s Jewish identity*, trans. from the French by Ralph Manheim (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1976), 17.

Jew. But all think about it.⁶ A hundred years passed, and another great German writer of the twentieth century, Jakob Wassermann, would find that, however hard he tried to make his *oeuvre* not just unmistakably but also superbly and impeccably German, its very perfection was ascribed to characteristically Jewish zeal, pushiness and cunning, and was as repulsive as treacherous dissimulation and camouflage.⁷

A few years after Wassermann's public admission of his frightening discovery, Artur Sandauer, a formidable Polish literary historian and critic, would formulate the concept of 'allosemitism' (from 'allus', Latin for 'the other'),⁸ referring to the Gentile practice of setting the Jews apart from all the rest, as people radically different from all and any other people and therefore needing separate concepts in order to be described and comprehended, as well as special treatment in all or most social and cultural situations. Accordingly, the concepts and treatment usefully deployed when dealing with other people or peoples simply would not do in the case of the Jews. 'Allosemitism' is an intrinsically ambivalent attitude, able to embrace everything from love and respect to outright condemnation and genocidal hatred, and so it faithfully reflects the endemically ambivalent phenomenon of 'the other', the stranger—and, consequently, of the Jew who, in Europe at least, is the most radical incarnation, indeed the epitome, of the stranger.

If you happened to be cast on the receiving end of assimilation, you were in a no-win position. Tails you lost, heads they won. You might try hard to look like 'one of them' as 'naturally' as they did, only to be told, and to realize belatedly, that, contrary to your belief, it was *being* 'one of them' that defined the 'naturalness', not the other way round. Your very diligence, unswerving loyalty and dedication to the ways of your adopted lifestyle were bound to be taken for symptoms of the falsity of your pretence, and perhaps even your malice aforethought. Hermann Cohen could present his neo-Kantianism as 'harking back to the original power of the essence of German spirit', and insist that 'we German Jews' thought in 'the spirit of Lessing and Herder, Leibniz and Kant, Schiller and Goethe even in matters of our Jewish faith',⁹ but all to no avail. If anything, such sentiments provoked responses directly opposite to Cohen's expectations. His appeal to a preordained symbiosis between 'Judentum' and 'Deutschtum', and their mutual dissolution in the new 'human, all human' universality that knew of no national and religious parochialisms—'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 cosmopolitan, humanistic, ethical world society'¹⁰—rang true with the hosts and regular guests of the intellectual salons of Rahel Varnhagen, Dorothea Mendelsohn or Henriette Herz, where 'Germanness' was defined as an aptitude for articulating ideas valid for 'the whole of humanity' and as an attitude of openness to the 'universally human'. It also made sense to Georg Jellinek, Eduard Lasker, Eduard Gans and Hugo Preuss, prophets and heralds of the rationalist school of law, which traced German jurisprudence to universal human reason. But Cohen's romance with universality hardly endeared him to the rising numbers of German patriots and nationalists, by whom it would not and could not be taken for anything other than a vicious sabotage of all their strenuous efforts at national self-assertion.

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Not without good reason, Cohen and those others who shared his hopes saw in the notion of human universality the sole chance of success for the assimilatory drive. After all, the pressure to assimilate was lived through as a pressure to be like anyone else, to stop being odd, to renounce one's identity, which sounded uncannily like a call to attack and obliterate idiosyncrasies and to embrace a one-size-fits-all pattern. But assimilatory pressures of the nation-building era were aimed in exactly the opposite direction: not towards *effacing* but *sharpening* the differences between identities. Assimilation was a profoundly ambivalent idea, but its internal ambivalence looked very different depending on from which end of the spectrum it was being contemplated; and the clash between these two incompatible perspectives, experiences and intentions was impossible to avoid.

The last act of the European drama of Jewish assimilation

By and large, the era of nation-building that gave birth to the 'assimilation problem' has come to an end in most of Europe. There is, however, another, gruesome, reason why the challenges, glories and miseries of assimilation ceased to be a problem for European Jews. Namely, the dissipation of the unique social/political/cultural Central European setting that

⁶ Quoted from Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish self-hatred: anti-semitism and the hidden language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 162.

⁷ See Jakob Wassermann, *My life as German and Jew*, trans. from the German (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), 72.

⁸ See Artur Sandauer, 'O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku; Rzecz, którą nie ja powinienem był napisać (On the plight of the Polish writer of Jewish origin in the twentieth century; an essay that someone else should have written), in *Pisma Zebrane* (Collected Works), 4 vols (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1985), vol. 3.

⁹ David Baumgardt, 'The ethics of Lazarus and Steinthal', *Leo Beck Institute Yearbook* 2, 1957, 205-17 (213-14).

¹⁰ Quoted in Steven S. Schwartzschild, 'Germanness and Judaism—Hermann Cohen's normative paradigm of the German-Jewish symbiosis', in David Bronsen (ed.), *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933: the problematic symbiosis* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1979), 129-72.

originally gave Jewish assimilation its romantic appeal and bore a good deal of responsibility for its tragic course.

Before the Second World War, East-Central Europe was a seemingly bottomless reservoir of *Ostjuden*, shtetl and ghetto Jews. As they moved westward, joining their more affluent and enlightened co-religionists who were hoping to win acceptance into the societies of their chosen homelands, these *Ostjuden* scratched open the half-healed wound of Jewish strangeness and continuously recharged, inflamed and contaminated the 'assimilation problem', rendering it perpetually unresolved and in all probability unresolvable. This part of Europe, however, was also a veritable cauldron of aspiring or budding would-be 'native' nations and conflicting nationalist pressures and demands.

National claims were incompatible, and no one embodied the incompatibility more blatantly than the Jews, these ubiquitous, supranational, all-European strangers.

Confronted by the various tasks thrown up by the 'primitive accumulation of legitimacy' in these incipient nation-states, and unsure of their chances of survival, let alone of guaranteed success, the old and new nationalisms strewn across East-Central Europe's multidimensionally heterogeneous demographic mixture were particularly bigoted and ruthless. All the more so due to the irritating fact that practically none of their demands went uncontested. As acquiescence to any one of the competing nationalisms was bound to antagonize all its competitors, the populations who were at the receiving end of mutually exclusive claims, while being deprived of, and denied, a prospective homeland of their own, were doomed, whatever response to the pressures they might have contemplated or attempted to put into practice. Their declarations of loyalty to any of the competing ethnicities aspiring to the status of nation were bound to make more enemies than friends; even friends could not be relied on as they would forever remain suspicious of the new converts' allegiance to their cause and likely to drop them as allies once their own aims were achieved. Since no step taken on the road to assimilation was conclusive under such circumstances—hardly any step was accepted by watchful and distrustful observers as conclusive proof of the converts' loyalty, hardly any verdict that they pronounced would remain uncontested for long—the process itself was unending: a task not only lifelong, but extending into the posthumous life of the defendants who were permanently eligible for retrial.

Squeezed between conflicting territorial and cultural claims, the Jews were denied the prospect of a successful (final, ultimate, uncontested) end to the disappearing act elegantly called 'assimilation', even before they—whether by design or by default—yielded to the terms set by the powers-that-be. There was no way they could reach the goal they were urged

to strive for, even with the maximum exertion of skill and dedication. As the most perceptive among them, like Gustav Mahler, would sooner or later discover, they were 'thrice homeless: as Bohemians among Austrians, Austrians among Germans, and Jews everywhere'. National claims were incompatible, and no one embodied the incompatibility more blatantly than the Jews, these ubiquitous, supranational, all-European strangers.

True, the aspiring nations were often all too eager to employ the services of the Jews in the pursuance of their proselytizing crusades. The Jews were bearers of Magyarhood among the peasant Slavs, carriers of German culture among the Czechs of Prague, prophets of the German *Geist* in the multilingual capital of the Hapsburg empire, allies of the Polish patriots fighting to wrest the peasants earmarked for future Polish citizenship out of a Russian or German embrace. One suspects, however, that Jewish services were willingly used mostly because these servants could be so easily dismissed once their support was no longer needed. It all happened exactly as another perceptive East-Central European, the Viennese Arthur Schnitzler, prophesied:

Who created the German Nationalist Movement in Austria? The Jews. Who left the Jews in the lurch and indeed despised them as dogs? The German nationals. And just the same thing will happen with the socialists and the communists. Once dinner is ready to be served, they will chase you from the table.¹¹

Recycling the pillory into a crow's nest

The plight of East-Central European Jewry generated a great deal of human misery, yet it simultaneously turned the assimilatory episode into one of unprecedented cultural creativity and spiritual discovery. With the disappearance of Eastern European Jewry, Jewish assimilation lost much of its energy—and drama.

Not every assimilation story is tragic however, and not all assimilation is culturally creative. As a matter of fact, the opposite seems to be the case nowadays, even increasingly so. Throughout the western world the crusading spirit of nationalism has dissipated into the vague historical memory that is dusted off during one-day celebrations of independence or anniversaries of victories, week-long cricket test matches or month-long football world cups. As ready-made, shop-supplied identity kits of caps and t-shirts replace the blood-soaked flags, the etiological myths of common fate, blood, soil and collective missions become redundant. The daily life of assimilation is dull and uninspiring. It is hardly a source of agony and certainly not a stimulus to iconoclasm and intellectual adventurism. But, with the demise of the tragedy and cruelty of politically inspired homogenization, the cultural explosiveness of the assimilatory episode has also all but gone.

For the great majority of diaspora Jews, comfortably settled now in the middle classes of their respective countries,

¹¹ Quoted in Michael Ignatieff, 'The rise and fall of Vienna's Jews', *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 1989, 22.

‘assimilation’ means no more than keeping up with the Joneses. ‘Thou shalt not step out of line with thy neighbour’ is assimilation’s sole commandment, one easy to observe, as Cynthia Ozick caustically commented, by ‘rushing out to buy a flag to even up the street’.¹² Assimilation has now dissolved into a generalized conformity of public appearance that peacefully cohabits with a mind-boggling variety of private choices. Overt conformity is all the easier to maintain since diversity has been recognized as the foremost of personal virtues, a duty and a matter of pride. Amidst the cornucopia of class, generational, gender, occupational or merely socially free-floating and territorially unbound, electronically virtual and boundary-jumping lifestyles, it is difficult to set apart as particularly problematic or especially challenging ways of life that may be ethnicity-linked and thus subject to rules strikingly different from those guiding other dimensions of diversity. On the whole, it seems, attention is focused, rather undramatically, on the efforts of affluent Jewish residents of affluent streets to be ‘like’ the rest of the affluent residents, of Jewish youth to absorb and duplicate the latest lifestyles of young-but-seasoned fashion addicts, of Jewish professionals to live and dress and decorate their offices in the way most recently recognized as right and proper for professionals of their standing, of Jewish academics to act in accordance with the most up-to-date among the fast changing campus fads and foibles.

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The sting has been taken out of assimilation not because the Jews have acquitted themselves perfectly of the task it imposed—having performed what the homogenizing pressures of assimilation pushed them to perform—but because its pressures are no longer there: not in the liquid modern world of universal, fluid and ephemeral particularities, a world integrated through common participation in the diversity game, resigned to ambiguity and no longer struggling for *Eindeutigkeit* (unambiguous clarity) or believing in its feasibility. The social, political and cultural success of Jews in countries that are secure in their identity, and no longer afflicted by nation-building obsessions and nation-protecting hysteria, has by now broken all records of Jewish socio-cultural achievements in East-Central Europe, while provoking relatively little resentment and no retaliatory pressures. For instance, David Biale calculated that in 1986, in

the United State, Jews constituted 20.9 per cent of top university faculties, 11.4 per cent of government, business and trade union elites and 25.6 per cent of the media industry.¹³ Furthermore, the media industry in question, a relatively recent invention, has made the Jews and their astounding success more visible and accessible to public scrutiny than ever before; there is no comparison with the notorious *jüdische Presse* rumours that were ammunition and poisoned arrows in the hands of the leaders and ideologues of budding German nationalism a century or so ago.

We may say retrospectively that the agony and splendour of assimilation was a relatively brief and localized episode in the history of the modern world. It encompassed but a few generations, spanning the stormy yet short period needed by the modern states to entrench themselves in their historically indispensable yet perhaps transitory nationally uniform guises. These few generations that were thrown into the cauldron of seething nationalist passions were already cut off from their roots though not yet absorbed in the new nation and so forced to stretch their talents, ingenuity and ambition to the utmost in order to build for themselves a home that others would see and enjoy as their natural and unproblematic heritage. It is these generations that Franz Kafka spoke of as four-legged animals whose hind legs had lost touch with the ground and whose forelegs sought a foothold in vain. The empty, nowhere space in which these *Menschen ohne Eigenschaften*—or, more to the point, people without *socially recognized* (or approved) qualities—were suspended, felt like an uncanny halfway house between paradise and hell: the paradise of infinite opportunities for self-creation and the hell of perpetual contingency and unredeemable inconclusiveness. For a few generations, the travellers—forced to take off yet forbidden to land—had no other place to inhabit. Both the agony and the splendour of assimilation were confined to that brief flight through the no-man’s land of non-identity, in a world otherwise neatly divided into fenced-off homesteads, each earmarked for one and only one of the many rigid and pugnacious, quarrelling identities. Enticed, blandished or coerced to take to the air, the flier—whether keen or resentful—made an easy target for gamekeepers and poachers alike. But they also shared with other flying creatures the privilege of that vast and sharp vision called, with more than a touch of awe and jealousy, the ‘bird’s-eye view’.

Both the splendours and the agony of assimilation sprang from the same roots. The game proved to be an exceedingly fertile one even as it was ultimately unwinnable. Although, as Max Frisch put it, for everyone at all times, ‘identity means refusing to be what others want you to be’, the command to assimilate meant refusal of the *right to refuse*.

Frustrated, the dedicated ‘assimilants’ turned time and again into mutineers. The myth of belonging exploded, and the dazzling light of the explosion drew out of its exilic darkness the truth of the incompleteness, frailty and endemic

¹² Cynthia Ozick, *Art and ardour* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 159.

¹³ David Biale, *Power and powerlessness in Jewish history* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 180.

until-further-notice mode of the wanderer's existence. Being in the world the way one is *chez soi*, at home, could only be achieved in another world, a world perhaps wholly different from the world from which the unwitting 'assimilants' set off on their frustrating voyage of discovery. One could look for that other world, as György Lukács did, in an authority bold and mighty enough to dismiss the ruling judgements of the day and proclaim its own judgements, as if it were and would remain the last: in, for example, the absolute and uncontested authority of aesthetic perfection, or the invincible power of the 'historically inevitable' alliance between the suffering proletariat and the bearers of universal truth. Or one could, on the other hand, seek consolation, as Walter Benjamin did, in the notion of 'new angels created each moment in countless hosts, so that after they have sung their hymn before God, they cease to exist and pass away into nothingness'. Benjamin thus became, as Theodor Adorno pointedly remarked, one of the first thinkers to note and to accept that the 'individual who thinks becomes problematic to the core, yet without the existence of anything supra-individual in which the isolated subject could gain spiritual transcendence without being oppressed'.¹⁴ And also without immunity from the 'horror of loneliness', the evidence of which Gershom Scholem found in 'many of Benjamin's writings'.¹⁵

It so happened that the Jews of Europe—not necessarily by choice—were the first to experience the harrowing dilemmas, ineradicable ambivalence and indeed awesome aporias of modern life . . . European Jews, one is tempted to conclude, were cast in the drama of modern nation-building as the pioneers of modern thought.

One might say that the more uncompromising and vicious the assimilatory zeal of the aspiring nation-builders and self-appointed nation-guardians, and the more ham-fisted the agents of conversion, the more spacious and culturally vigorous life at the receiving end of assimilation tended to become. This period of astonishing Jewish cultural creativity was born out of pain and suffering, much like modern universalism was born out of the fustiness of parochialism. It was perhaps necessary first to agonize at the receiving end of the modern rage for order, certainty and uniformity in order to see through the lie of universality and learn to live with difference, ambivalence, contingency and infinite possibilities crowded inside the undecidable being. In the event, it was the

pillory that went down in history as the crow's nest from which land was sighted at the end of the long modern voyage.

It so happened that the Jews of Europe—not necessarily by choice—were the first to experience the harrowing dilemmas, ineradicable ambivalence and indeed awesome aporias of modern life, and so enjoyed the dubious privilege of being the first, perhaps also the keenest, people to try out, experiment with and expose as deceitful the whole spectrum of individual remedies and collective therapies that they hoped would defuse and detoxify them. On the field where the contradictory pressures of modern imperatives met and clashed, modern ambitions could be—and were—part of an *experimentum crucis* in which they were explored, tested and seen through. Out of that experience the contradictions and dialectics of modern life were moulded. European Jews, one is tempted to conclude, were cast in the drama of modern nation-building as the pioneers of modern thought.

The post-war market stall of selves

There are ample, and in my view convincing, reasons to believe that herein lies the secret of what is commonly perceived to be the uniquely creative contribution of European Jews to modern culture and, above all, to modern self-awareness and self-understanding. I also think, though, that this period of Jewish creativity, as well as the nation-building that engendered and maintained it over a century or two, was an episode of European history that is now by and large over. On that northwestern peninsula of the Asiatic continent called 'Europe', identity is no longer the front line along which coercion and freedom, imposition and choice, inclusion and exclusion confront each other in a war of attrition. In our part of the world 'identity' has become, for all intents and purposes, an 'identainment': it has moved from the realm of physical and spiritual survival to that of recreational amusement, one of the principal pastimes of *homo ludens* rather than *homo politicus*. It has also largely been *privatized*, having been shifted from the political into the poorly structured and volatile realm of individually run 'life politics'. As most functions that have, or might be, moved into that space, it has undergone a fast and thorough process of *commercialization*. The play entitled 'identity-search' or 'identity-building' is nowadays variously staged, spanning the whole spectrum of theatrical genres from epic drama to farce or grotesque, although tragedies are rather few and far between. As these tragic versions diminish, the Jewish presence in modern culture loses much of the distinction and heroic flavour that were its trademarks at the moment of the Jewish modern awakening. If being forced to struggle to keep identity alive while facing, point blank, all the contradictions and inanities of ambivalence and of the interplay of continuities and discontinuities was a *differentia specifica* of Jews on a continent obsessed with national self-assertion, then all the inhabitants on the planet of diasporas, whether they know it or not and whether they like or detest the news, are Jews.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*', in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: critical essays and recollections* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 14.

¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: the story of a friendship*, trans. from the German by Harry Zohn (London: Faber, 1982), 234.

Andrzej Stasiuk, an outstanding Polish novelist and an insightful analyst of the contemporary human condition, suggests that ‘the possibility of becoming someone else’ is the present-day version of salvation or redemption, now largely discarded and dismissed. ‘It is highly probable’, he suggests, ‘that the quantity of digital, celluloid and analogue beings met in the course of a bodily life comes close to the volume which eternal life and resurrection in flesh could offer’.

Applying various techniques, we may change our bodies and re-shape them according to different patterns . . . When browsing through glossy magazines, one gets the impression that they tell mostly one story—about the ways in which one can re-make one’s personality, starting from diets, surroundings, homes, and up to rebuilding of psychical structure, often code-named a proposition to ‘be yourself’.

Sławomir Mrożek, an internationally known Polish writer with firsthand experience of many lands and cultures, compares the world we inhabit to a

market-stall filled with fancy dresses and surrounded by crowds seeking their ‘selves’ . . . One can change dresses without end, so that the wondrous liberty the seekers enjoy can go on forever. . . . Let’s go on searching for our real selves,

it’s smashing fun—on condition that the real self will be never found. Because if it were, the fun would end . . .

In our part of the world ‘identity’ has become, for all intents and purposes, an ‘identainment’: it has moved from the realm of physical and spiritual survival to that of recreational amusement, one of the principal pastimes of *homo ludens* rather than *homo politicus*.

If happiness is permanently within reach and if reaching it takes but the few minutes needed to browse through the Yellow Pages and pull a credit card out of a wallet, then obviously a self that stops short of reaching happiness can’t be ‘real’, can’t be the one that spurred the self-seeker to embark on a voyage of self-discovery. Such a fraudulent self needs to be discarded as ‘inauthentic’, while the search for the ‘real’ one goes on. And there is little reason to stop searching if one can be sure that, in a moment, another moment will duly arrive, bringing new promises and bursting with new potential.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is an independent think tank working for an inclusive Europe, where difference is cherished and common values prevail.

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