Leo Strauss

The Early Writings
(1921–1932)

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It is the view of political Zionism that the plight of the Jews [Juden] can only be alleviated by the establishment of a Jewish state, by the consolidation of the power of Jewish individuals into the power of the Jewish people. In pursuit of this end, Herzl played off the power of the Jews (or at least all a Jewish power as such) against the political powers, and, on the other hand, he played off the political legitimation of his project by the Great Powers, who in matters of political significance were the only decisive elements, against the Jews. Neither of these factors was really under his control. But as he played them off against one another, the politically amorphous power of Jewish individuals solidified into a political will, into the political significance of the Jewish people.

While thoroughly approving of this goal, Nordau rejects Herzl's means as "underhanded" ["intrigue"]. He wants the power, but he rejects intrigue as a means of obtaining power. He wants the power, but he calls for the adhesion that, at this time, we have no control over any power. Thus he brings about the transition from political to spiritual Zionism, which makes a principle of the Jewish people's powerlessness—indeed, of its aversion to power.

The motive for this falling away from Herzl is itself already a spiritual one: "humanity." We know that the Zionism of Herzl was self-evidently determined by impulses of decency and loyalty. But Herzl knew all too well that, in politics, to speak of truth or utopia is ambiguous. Politics must create realities, and under certain circumstances the most effective and yet likely means to succeed in creating realities is to pass off preconditions as having already been fulfilled, and thus to evoke the necessary efforts. This is particularly true in the case of preconditions of a moral nature that are brought about only by great efforts that the dull masses are reluctant to make. Today's untruth, perhaps precisely by being passed off today, may actually become tomorrow's truth. The sky blue of the Zionist optimism of Herzl was, in good part, conditioned by the considerations of pragmatists. Nordau put into circulation the fairy tale of Herzl's enthusiastic visit to his people, a fairy tale in which he himself did not believe, so that in this quite drastic way he could substantiate the betrayal by the Jewish people of its leader: in other words, he did so for political reasons.

We learn something about Nordau's judgment of Herzl from his comments in his diaries, in a form unexpected by the purposes of agitation. "Nordau finds me incensed and underhanded in my dealings with priests and with the Jewish people. I think that one day he will make public this
also in other respects. Zionism failed from the outset to reach the level intended by Herzl. It is with full attention that Herzl limited himself to an argumentation that was both more accessible and more immediately effective. Nordau remained on this lower level and, compared to Herzl, managed to move on it with less skill and tact, and with greater error.

"Zionism, like any historical movement, emerged from a strongly felt and deeply recognized need, the need for a normal existence under natural conditions." (Zionistische Schriften, p. 178.) For Nordau, Zionism is a product of the newly acquired spirit of reality, which had been lacking in the previous era of gait and assimilation.

In the gait, the Jewish people lived as a Labyrinth—it lacked the ground beneath its feet in both the literal and the figurative sense, and it depended on all of the contingent of the behavior of other peoples. In this condition life is sustained by a strong will to existence. All ideas and all forms of Judaism are unconsciously in the service of preserving the national existence as well as heightening the will to existence. The ideas of the Zionists and the Messiah upheld under all circumstances the faith in the possibility and necessity of holding out the faith in a national future. On the other hand, by aiming at what is miraculous, what is unattainable by human effort, these ideas prevent that faith from leading to action. All Jewish cultures and ways serve the purpose of separation from the peoples, hence they are in the service of preserving the national existence; on the other hand, by keeping the people away from the conditions of normal life of a people, they prevent this very life. The absence of a political center has the same effect on the Jewish people cannot be assimilated at any one spot—and, on the other hand, just for that reason all comprehensive political action is impossible. This, therefore, is the enemy of gait; it provides the false comfort that stands behind him, or about the occurrence made under the immediate impression of Herzl's death. Herzl's "exquisite sensitivity made him the originator and leader of Zionism." If today Herzl appears to many a long-suffering visionary in Israel (cf. the recent apocalyptic of Emil Cohn), it is largely due to Herzl who is to blame for it. While posing as an admiral, he diminished Herzl. He contributed much to the frustration of Herzl's original impulses by explaining the greatness of Herzl himself and to the Jewish people, in sentimental categories. This was all the more deplorable, because in terms of its ideology and hence
in the belief in the "mystical" redemption by the Messiah, by glorifying the ideas of the gopher than, for all their mysticism, had a very sober and functional. Animatism takes away from the Jew the self-sufficiency of gopher life, and gives them instead the illusionary assurance of trust in the human and civilizational. In politics, not unlike that of the gopher, is limited to the needs of the moment. But it is less useful than it is commonly depicted, for it involves the attitude of the host nations, believing that the Jewish question can be resolved once and for all by shutting one's eyes to it. It is nothing but a "trustee of evil, destiny, of historical consciousness." 

This was the sacrifice of Jewish Judaism brought to its emancipation. The basis of this emancipation was the dualism of the French Revolution, which declared the necessary emancipation of the Jews from a syllogism. However, precisely as a result of the French Revolution and the strengthening of the civilizing tendencies that derived from it, national antagonisms showed themselves all the more sharply—quite the opposite of the goodwill and hopes of liberal Judaism. The emancipation emerged from a change that took place solely in the non-Jewish world. This change was a move in the direction of absolute ideas (humanitarian, de-characterized religiosity), which were subjectible to all human beings, and hence also to the Jews. This secularization of Christian ideas, to Nordau, as hifelerend and rationally necessary as the secularization of Jewish ideas in misanthropy is "Kloil and prophetic." Apparently the idea of chosenness, even in a castigated state, possesses a significantly lesser degree of rationality than the idea of universalism in the sense of the Christian enlightenment.

Zionism succumbs the separation, effected by assimilation, between Zionism and nationalism, between national, worldly ends and spiritual means—but it abandons nationalism. In opposition to assimilation's will to perish, it goes back to the gopher's will to live. Nordau vehemently assails for its abandonment of Zionism, yet he does not acknowledge that, in a deeper sense, this previously mentioned separation prepared the ground for Zionism. Indeed, just as he viewed the voluntary-emancipatory development as conditioned only by the non-Jewish world, so he is forced to regard Zionism as the product of the non-Jewish phenomena of nationalism and assimilation. For this reason, he fails to achieve an understanding of the internal legitimacy, the Jewish

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1 The term "Zionism" is used by Nordau in two different senses that are impossible to confuse with one another.

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necessity of a Jewish development that is influenced by and learns from European nationalism and anti-Semitism.

At this point, we would consider two things. First, we see how Zionism continues and heightens the de-Judaization tendency of assimilation; it does it more purely, for the sake of its struggle against the illusionism, the lack of grounding in reality (Humboldt's gopher), which is recognized in the illusionism of the assimilation. Second, Nordau's critique of emancipation displays something typal of current Zionism, namely, the coexistence of a naive Enlightenment faith in the ideas of 1789 and a realistic skepticism concerning their actual significance for the Jewish question. In Nordau, just as much as in Herzl, the sober kernel of Zionism emerges above the shell of the lofty ideals of the French Revolution, which are self-evident to both assimilation and Zionism, but Zionism is a child of the nineteenth century. Instead of the "volcanic" conception of Jewish history, which orients itself by the great national catastrophes, Nordau demands a "Neoplatonism," less melodramatic conception, which sees in the accumulation of mass, political and economic fact the cause of large revolutionary changes. Both the plight of the Jews and its alleviation lose all semblance of the miraculous. We are not dealing any more with the coming of the Messiah but with a "long, difficult, common effort of the Jewish people. In Zionism matters, theology has no say. Zionism is purely political. The most general philosophical foundations are supplied by a biologically grounded ethics. The question of whether it is legitimate to apply this standpoint to the Jewish question does not arise. This is the voice of a science that is free of presuppositions (kosnoseitische Wissenschaft). If we disregard the question of legitimacy, it is true that, once one has replaced theology with causes in regard to the organic, one is also supposed to replace nationalistic with the demands of nationalism. Nordau's criticism of assimilation is with yet another example of the general rule that change in the motives of German Jew (generally Western Jewish) intellectual life is a function of change in the motives of European Jew.

The close relation to biology characterizes the Zionism of Nordau just as much as the enthusiasm for technology characterizes the Zionism of Herzl. To put it bluntly, Herzl has the attitude of the northern German engineer—"In line with our scientific achievements, we'll get the job done,"—whereas Nordau has the attitude of Herren die apotheose, who puts his famous scientific knowledge in the service of the public by engaging in the improvement of cider making, while constantly emphasizing his virtue.

Assimilation decries the existence of the Jewish question while Zionism acknowledges it. One might surmise that this acknowledgment belongs to

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Chapter 2

that series of endeavors of the nineteenth century that addressed all “questions” resulting from the problematization of self-evident facts of life (i.e., the death penalty question, the religious question, the sexual question, etc.). This nuance in the treatment of the Jewish question is also present in Noddau, which should come as no surprise in a student of Lubarsch, and in the author of a book entitled The Convention Law of Civilized Humanity. However, he goes further. He has the contemporary sympathy for the helots and the corresponding indignation at the Spartans. But it is self-evident for him that one must replace the history of assimilation with the Spartan spirit of Zionism. This, however, is none other than the consequence that follows for ethics, and hence also for Jewish politics, from the displacement of teleology by the more manly causality.

NOTES


Max Noddau (originally: Simon Maximilian Steifel), 1849-1925, physicians, journalist, and critic. He met his Hausendorf companion Theodor Herzl in Paris in 1892, and eventually assumed the public role of vice-president of the Zionist congresses. After Herzl’s death in 1904, Noddau broke with the “practical Zionists” who took over the organization and whose goal it was to settle in Palestine even without first obtaining the political guarantees of the Great Powers. After 1903, Noddau, whose oratory on the Jewish question had fixed the earlier enemies, no longer participated in these meetings. The occasion for Strauss’s essay was Noddau’s death on January 23, 1925, in Paris. Cf. Michael Stammler, Zionism and the Fin de Siecle: [Zionismus und Nationalismus von Noddau zu Jakobovic] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

1. George Zimmerman, going “mental” (where Goeth refers to “mixed”); “intellectual” (wherein it refers to the activity of the mind); or “internal” (wherein it refers to the “spirit”). To avoid the possible religious connotations of the latter, one might prefer “intellectual Zionism” to “spiritual Zionism.” Yet the reference to “beauty” in the following shows that Strauss sees Noddau’s intellectual home in the context of cultural Zionism, which is not so much an intellectual supposition as it is a hybrid of cultural/intellectual and religious traditions. One of Strauss’s intellectual projects (flecked with an intellectual beauty at his own)—that is, to project a distinction between the intellectual/cultural and the religious—has as its sole goal here: to clarify their hybridization in the concrete case of Zionism. Herzel’s revolutionary archetypal (at least as is understood in the school of Western historiography to which the early Strauss belonged) concept in the philosophy of the Jews, a cause that Strauss sees here as betrayed by

Noddau. Strauss generalizes this insight when he insists that the political sphere in its own right to which religious or intellectual motifs/motivations attach so necessarily. In contrast, his work, here as elsewhere, in a “methodological” in that it identifies “secondary uses” of (intellectual and spatial) materials and, based on such identification, reconstructs their original locus.


3. Lawence, literally, a “people living on the air.” Derived from the more common expression Lawenceh, that is, “names living on air.”

4. The term Strauss uses here is entwurfsübend, cf. similarly Entwurfsübend in "Re- spons to Frankfurter’s ‘Weid de Prinzip’" and in ‘Paul of Laodicea.’


6. Entwurfsübend are four paragraphs earlier, as ‘verwirklichende Verknüpfung des Zionismus mit dem Mannesmum’ and as in essay on Paul of Laodicea, where Strauss introduces the entry Entwurfsübend “as an almost impossible” career of his own, whereas here (in an earlier publication) he uses it without apology.

7. In Der Jude 7 (1923): 660: “verwirklichen und politischem wissenschaftlichen” (vs. We follow Mennel’s translation in GS, 2:230: “verwirklichen und politischem wissenschaftlichen.” The major nineteenth-century source for a conception of history that emphasized the significance of the past and significantly was Hypolite Taine.

8. Horace: a character in Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. I thank John Green for pointing me to this source.

9. Cécile Lemberg (1835-1909), Italian-Beginning with L’homme déshonoré (1876), Lemberg compared data of sociology, physiology, and other more finely broken down phases of phenomena in evolutionary terms and determined the nature of criminal behavior as a biologically conditioned trait. Because of their direct impact on the nature of crime, punishment, and punishment, his studies were widely influential in his time among criminologists and jurists and helped to inaugurate the field of criminal anthropology. Noddau and Lemberg exchanged signed presentation copies of their works and enjoyed a close rapport. Noddau’s main work, Die konstitutionelle Lagen der Kriminalverjet (Leipzig: Blächer, 1843), is dedicated to Lemberg, while the latter dedicated Die Kriminal- und Rassenschaff (First ed.: Alcan, 1907) to Noddau with the words: "Many of these, comme le bon, le plus grand et le plus paternel." The friendship also extended to Lemberg’s daughter Paula and Grace.