

OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

Comments on “The New Jewish Question”

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If the “old” Jewish Question had asked how a Jew could be a citizen, the “new” one posed by Daniel Boyarin’s remarkable and courageous article asks how nationality can exist without a state. Striking about this formulation is the distance it marks from the European debates about emancipation and assimilation that had defined its predecessor. Boyarin’s context is not continental but imperial, taking into account Jews in colonized lands as much as the historical relationship between Europe and empire. As Hannah Arendt was the first to argue in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, this relationship possessed an outward trajectory that went through anti-Semitism and an inward return by way of genocide.¹

Boyarin’s shift from an “old” to “new” Jewish Question, however, does not proceed in the way that Aamir Mufti describes one version of this transformation in his book *Enlightenment in the Colony*, where Europe serves as a precedent for the rest of the world and the Jewish Question is turned into one about the national minority as a modular form.² Instead of deploying Benedict Anderson’s idea of nationalism as an endlessly replicable enterprise to understand the minorities it excludes, Boyarin is interested in differentiating between neighborhoods and trajectories as well as scales of comparison and analysis, thus freeing the Jewish Question from Europe as well as Christianity.³

In his recent book, *Neither Settler nor Native*, Mahmood Mamdani performs a similar operation in his criticism of the nation-state and its language of majority and minority, one that had defined the “old” Jewish Question in a truly replicable and even universal way. Instead, Mamdani traces the emergence of race and caste as the content of what would become national majorities and minorities to the Iberian Peninsula after the *Reconquista* and on the eve of empire. He argues that this vocabulary, pioneered in the identification and expulsion of Jews and

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1958).

² Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1998).

Muslims, was fully developed in the New World, Africa, and Asia rather than Europe.⁴

What brings the “old” and “new” Jewish Question together is a shared crisis of temporality that is manifested in the unfathomable survival of communities that apparently should no longer exist. From the theological category of supersession that Boyarin powerfully suggests informs the will to deny Jews a collective or political identity even today, to the Hegelian and Marxist one of dialectical sublation, colonized and minoritized peoples are condemned either for refusing to claim political and indeed human universality through assimilation or of doing so too quickly and thus betraying it by the alleged falsity of their demands for equal treatment.

Boyarin writes instead about the anti-dialectical desire among such peoples to suspend the universal fulfilment of history by holding on to their suspect particularity as a kind of not-yet that speaks from experience while nevertheless refusing the ontological weight of any permanent identity. His examples are drawn from Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Rather than celebrating the alternative ontology of an identity that can only be a mirror image of the colonial one repudiated, *Négritude* suspends this possibility by recognizing its own derivation from the colonizer’s fantasy. It also understands that the universality of citizenship can be achieved only by the extinction of this particularity.

In perhaps the most famous treatment of the “old” Jewish Question, Karl Marx reveals the working of this logic of extinction. He does so in a critique of Bruno Bauer’s argument that Jewish emancipation depended upon the resignation of religious identity by man in civil society as much as by the citizenship of a state. That religion as the criterion used to define both minorities and majorities could only disappear from the one realm if it did so from the other to make a true assimilation possible. But Marx thought that it was the universal form of citizenship itself that was the truly theological category in this debate.⁵

A juridical abstraction, the universality of citizenship, he contended, was built upon the disavowed particularity of man in civil society. And the latter’s unequal reality was identified with the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew. The Jew’s conversion or assimilation, then, was impossible unless it meant destroying the reality of capitalist relations themselves. It was not the particular difference of the minority that was problematic as an archaism or remnant from the past, in other words, but the universal citizenship of the majority into which it was expected to dissolve.

In describing how the absolutist state in western Europe had depoliticized social relations that were once defined by castes, guilds, and estates to make the theological abstraction of citizenship possible as a universal form, Marx seems to

⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020).

⁵ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Early Writings*, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 211–42.

suggest that the Jews were or at least were seen as being the only remnant or survival of such a politics. And as so often in his writing, he seems tempted by this apparently anachronistic figure, for if nothing else it might provide a genealogy for class conflict as the motor of history and its destiny in the future politicization of civil society.

Can we see Boyarin's call for a nation out of place and without the state as a gesture by which he takes up the possibility of politicizing civil society that Marx appears to have left aside? But he can do so only by foreswearing the historical determinism and ontological finalities of the dialectical method, as well as by abandoning the European context of the "old" Jewish Question with its various projects for a "final solution." This is how the impossible not-yet of Jewish nationality that Boyarin defines as being fundamentally "ambivalent" blocks the universal logic of history by refusing its fulfilment.

Boyarin writes about this in the context of colonial racism and anticolonial nationalism, but not merely to borrow its vocabulary for his "new" Jewish Question. He points out how Fanon puzzled over the temptation of self-annulment facing the supposedly more "assimilable" European Jew whose "race" was not always self-evident. This made both the Jew's assimilation and its repudiation into acts of political will rather than necessity. What did it mean to claim Jewish nationality and secular citizenship at the same time? Bruno Bauer had condemned this doubling without understanding its suspension of ontology in a narrative of the not-yet. It is as if the Jews' insistent particularity served as a kind of *Katechon* holding back the apocalyptic fulfilment of universal citizenship that would mark its extinction.

This account put me in mind not of racism and nationalism but caste, the poor cousin of race in Western scholarship. Far more than the exponents either of Négritude or anticolonial nationalism in Africa and Asia, it was the Dalit or "untouchable" leader B. R. Ambedkar who grappled most profoundly with the threat as much as temptation of assimilation or sublation in both religious and Marxist terms. Gandhi, the man and Mahatma he took as his enemy, had challenged Ambedkar to say who he was if he was not a Hindu. Who would he be if he gave up his caste? And how might such a repudiation of the past that had formed them do little more than empty Dalits of collective identity to hand their future into the possession of others?

If he was not to dissolve his people and make them culturally and politically homeless, Ambedkar had to wrestle with the problem of claiming the very identity he wanted to disclaim. He conducted this paradoxical struggle on several fronts, turning geographically scattered and culturally fragmented castes into a singularity through a new name, Dalit, while making them into a political interest through the world's largest program of affirmative action. He also claimed another history for Dalits by converting to Buddhism, which could be owned because it had few adherents left in peninsular India. And he posed Buddhism against the assimilationist logic of Marxist class struggle.⁶

⁶ See, for instance, Valerian Rodrigues, *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

In all these ways Ambedkar and the caste question speaks to Boyarin's "new" Jewish Question in a way that colonial racism and anticolonial nationalism cannot. The latter enters his narrative through Partha Chatterjee's work on Indian nationalism, from which Boyarin rescues the possibility of a nation not yet wedded to a state.⁷ But the more apt comparison might have been Muslim nationalism in the same country, which, like early Zionism, began by criticizing the nation-state and its institution of majorities and minorities. It finally claimed an ambiguous statehood in Pakistan, with Jewish survival and internationalism among its explicit exemplars as I have argued in my own work.⁸

Both Zionism and Muslim nationalism had to compromise with the nation-state in the simultaneous birth of Israel and Pakistan through twin partitions. But this was done so imperfectly as to require great violence to sustain the state as a political form. Neither has been able to dispense with its internationalist dimension and both possess histories that are capable of being mobilized against the nation-state and breaking its hold on the political imagination. The allegedly existential crises that both countries freely acknowledge as defining their national identities can give rise to paranoia as much as the ability to think of entirely new futures. This is no longer a possibility for India.

In his book comparing the Jewish Question with its supposedly Muslim counterpart in colonial India, Mufti valorizes the figure of the Jew as "self-conscious pariah," the last word of the term deriving from the name of an Indian caste that Hannah Arendt had first noted without making a model of it. To do so is to recommend a perverse pleasure in defeat and heroic isolation. It is a vision deprived of politics. Crucial instead, as Boyarin claims, is going through the nation form itself to emerge on the other side. If Pakistan and Israel are forever on the verge of doing this, which in part explains the violence endemic to their societies, then countries like South Africa are already in the process of doing so as Mamdani suggests.

South Africa's transition from Apartheid could not be accomplished as a purely internal process. Nor did it occur through war and negotiation with external powers, as in accounts of decolonization. It required the active involvement of diasporas, exiles, and sympathetic individuals the world over. Indeed, it might have been the relative absence of conventional forms of international intervention, military and economic, that made this transition possible, as was true for the more successful "transitions" following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet such intervention seems to characterize all visions of transition in Israel as well as Pakistan.

Most surprising in this respect is that the most popular of these visions, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, claims international intervention as its model. By its own argument, BDS has taken on the role that states and the international community are meant to play by imposing punitive

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁸ Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

sanctions on a criminal regime. This effort is inadvertently mitigated by the movement's weakness and so its own vulnerability to sanctions of many kinds. Such vulnerability gives BDS its moral idealism, but this is promptly squandered by the desire to speak in the name or at least in place of the state and international order.

Itself a product of British naval supremacy from the nineteenth century, the sanctions regime in international law is also routinely condemned when deployed against countries like Cuba and Iran by the very people who would like to apply it elsewhere. It has colonized the imagination of activists such that they seem unable to think of other ways to understand withholding one's participation in another's violence. This is why South Africa's transition from Apartheid is mistakenly taken as their singular precedent. Forgotten are the far more influential movements of withholding and withdrawal that have not taken the state for their model.

Of these, Gandhi's mass movements of noncooperation and civil disobedience provide widely known examples.⁹ But while they involved boycotts, resignations, and refusals to participate in colonial institutions, these forms of withdrawal were not conceived as being punitive in nature. In fact, it was the protestors who were meant to be sacrificing various kinds of conveniences and advantages as well as rendering themselves open to punishment in the process. And their willingness to voluntarily undergo such privations was meant to appeal to the humanity of their opponents and help in instigating their conversion.

Gandhi considered the ostensible nonviolence of a sanctions regime to be spurious so long as it was intended to be punitive. His own acts of withholding and withdrawal were motivated by love for the opponent's humanity, no matter how residual it might have become. This was love not as some universal assimilation or intimate identification but the desire to live with difference and have it remain true to its better self. This kind of narrative also characterized some parts of the transition from Apartheid but seems absent from BDS. Indeed, the latter movement demands sacrifice only from those among its supporters who live in or have connections to Israel and the territories it occupies. But this tells us that love and sacrifice remain crucial to the movement even as they are disavowed by it.

Sacrifice and love were in Gandhi's view capable of bringing about a more decisive transformation than state-sanctioned law and punishment. But it is also the kind of language that Boyarin thinks should define the solidarity of Jews conceived both as a nation without a state and as the fellow citizens of non-Jews. The duality of his political vision, which in the days of the "old" Jewish Question would have been understood in anti-Semitic terms as the treachery of divided loyalties, represents in our own time the suspension of finality and its logic of extinction. It limits as well as augments one form by the other to make for a truly global politics no longer determined by reasons of state alone.

⁹ See Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Although Boyarin's political dualism is familiar enough in the frequent pairing of national as well as international solidarity from across the political spectrum, its true advocates have always been religious communities. Jews, Muslims, and Roman Catholics all possess long histories in which nation-states have suspected them of divided loyalties due to the very structure of their religious lives. Unlike the competing loyalties of those torn between equivalent alternatives, such as states, churches, ethnicities, or ideologies, the political dualism of these religious communities has to do with different orders of belonging.

It is the non-equivalence of dual belonging that is crucial to Boyarin's argument because it limits as well as opens up the nation-state to different forms of love and loyalty without seeking to demolish it. This expansive and nonviolent vision is nevertheless more dangerous to the logic of conventional politics than any rivalry between equivalents. It is, therefore, potentially far more transformative in its very idealism than even the most radical politics. And it has more hope of succeeding than the latter precisely because it has already come to exist in some form through the practices of global attachment and mobility.

By allowing two political visions to "touch" each other without any relationship of contract, reciprocity, or equivalence, to say nothing of supersession and dialectic, Boyarin has suspended the economy of universal and particular as well as majority and minority that defines the nation-state. And in doing so he has retrieved one part of the politics that had characterized early Zionism as much as Muslim nationalism, which is to say the effort to dispense with the disempowering category of the minority and as a consequence the majority as well. This effort had once led Jewish and Muslim thinkers into semi-imperial and internationalist visions in which no communal majority or minority could exist.

Striking about Boyarin's description of such overlapping differences is his use of the term *touchability*. This word may put those familiar with European philosophy in mind of Emmanuel Lévinas and his discussion of the phenomenology of the touch or caress, but in India it cannot but recall a caste hierarchy in which some are "touchable" and others "untouchable." As both Ambedkar and Gandhi realized each in his own way, to make all castes touchable should not result in the dissolution of their differences into the universality either of citizenship or a national majority. The Mahatma was averse even to the kind of third-party mediation that allows the liberal state to claim universality by rendering its subjects into so many particularities each an abstract equivalent of the other.

Touchability indicates physical proximity without the mediation either of a state or indeed of the understanding as Lévinas argues. It suggests rather a juxtaposition that allows differences to exist without becoming particulars suborned by the universal in political as much as intellectual terms. Although Boyarin uses this word to name the relations of Jews as citizens as well as noncitizens, it also describes the relationship between the overlapping domains of the nation without a state and the state without a nation. Even among individuals the juxtapositions of touchability bring moral rather than legal

relationships to the fore, and in doing so provide a fitting response to the new Jewish Question.

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