

OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

“Not just for their own use ...”: Solidarity in Times of Discord

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In May 2015, I happened to visit Frankfurt am Main, where during my haphazard exploration of the city I blindly strolled into the building of the Bockenheimer Depot where a new opera was to premiere that evening. It was entitled “Am unseren Fluße” (By Our River), as I saw on the banner outside, and I thought it would be something ecological. I was more interested in the building than in the show, but the decorations of which I could get a glimpse from the lobby and an animated Bohemian crowd drew me in. It turned out to be a powerfully moving piece allegorizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and by extension all human territorial conflicts of that kind, bringing out the absurdity inherent in all territorial claims, profiteering by third parties, humanity’s shared frailty, and love that transcends this all. Some reviewers later referred to it as a “Middle Eastern Romeo and Juliet.”

While watching the piece, I was guessing where it comes from: I assumed a well-meaning German or some other enlightened foreigner must have written it. I couldn’t imagine it coming from Israel or the US diaspora, through whose lobbying and rhetoric we in the United States mostly imagine Israel. In fact, the attacks on Norman Finkelstein for his demand that Israel respect international law, or on Tony Kushner for his sympathy with disenfranchised Palestinians, are what comes to mind when one hears about diaspora politics. The opera in Frankfurt unabashedly preached peace. Critical of self as of others, refusing to hate “enemies,” seeing them just as a mirror image of the self, conscious of historical ironies, commonsensical, constructive, it came across as a breeze of fresh air. It felt like freedom. Here was somebody who, refusing to fall in line with ideological demands to think and feel according to the interests of the state, talked about people. How surprised I was to learn after the performance that this piece, commissioned by the Frankfurt Opera, was written by the Israeli composer Lior Navok.

Despite living many years away from my home country of Russia, with whose government I never agreed, I fell victim to the common bias of associating a country with its rulers and not with its dissent. Political winners own the culture. The plight

of blindness to opposition is especially characteristic for American discourse where we are invited to boycott the Israeli academics, artists, and intellectuals, most of whom oppose their government's policies toward Palestinians, and thus to help this very government in their efforts to suffocate dissent. On the contrary, the Frankfurt Opera reached out to Israel's dissidents in an act of solidarity, offering artists like Navok a forum and support for expressing their different vision. So did Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said with their Israeli-Palestinian orchestra.¹ Reading Daniel Boyarin's piece about the "diaspora nation" brought back the same feeling of liberation that I experienced in my Frankfurt encounter with what came across as normality and common sense—an expression of solidarity.²

In the United States, solidarity is a difficult and today an almost obsolete concept. Identity politics requires each aggrieved group to fend for itself, mistrustful of others and exclusive of the pain that defines it. It is not surprising that Boyarin's call for solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and mutual aid would meet with resentment in today's climate of discord. Curious about the reactions to Navok's opera, I looked up the reviews and immediately hit on a well-meaning person slandering the Frankfurt production for "avoiding the conflict." In fact, in a time of war, when the conflict is the norm, a call for peace comes across as countercultural, rebellious, subversive, intolerable. It is a baffling expression of nonconformity.

The concept of "diaspora nation," which I understand as a concept of trans-ethnic, transcultural, trans-geographical solidarity, defies, as Boyarin says, the antagonisms implicit in "modern colonial ideologies of Eurocentric progressivism" as well as the thinking from the point of view of "ethnic nation-states."³ A diaspora nation is horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-teleological, and fluid. But above all, it is complex, accommodating many cultural interests and identities that are negotiable. As everyone knows, the Jews have already been a diaspora nation for thousands of years, according to the criteria of a common narrative, a common language, and common practices, cited by Boyarin. But to redefine or reimagine today's state of Israel on the premises of its diasporic origins as a multicultural and multilingual substate with autonomy in Palestine, which the historian Dmitry Shumsky uncovered in the writings of the founding fathers of Zionism, is a challenging task. This task is at the core of Boyarin's undertaking.

It stands to reason that, in the context of larger imperial conglomerates, those ethnicities that strove for statehood or autonomy, such as Tatars or Jews, would imagine this autonomy within the given options, as loose and non-nationally exclusive autonomous regions within the Russian, Japanese, or Ottoman Empires. With their dissolution after the First World War and the introduction of the Wilsonian model of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state, the once liberating nationalisms armed themselves with sovereignties, ideologies, and troops. Today, with the great global circulation of populations and the evident dissolution of nation-states, the diaspora nation returns to life at the point where

¹ See "The Orchestra Bridging the Israeli-Palestinian Divide" (<https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/israel/articles/daniel-barenboim-and-edward-said-s-west-eastern-divan-orchestra/>).

² Daniel Boyarin, "The New Jewish Question," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9.1 (2022): 42–66.

³ Boyarin, "The New Jewish Question," 42, 43.

history seems to have gone wrong, offering, in my eyes, a concept relevant to everyone.

With the dedication of his piece to Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, representatives of another diaspora nation, Boyarin repays an homage to the African-Jewish solidarity expressed by Fanon, whom Boyarin quotes saying in regard to the Jews: “I cannot dissociate myself from the fate reserved for my brother.”⁴ In this homage are legible the implications of the diaspora nation, which I read as a plea for a two-state solution for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If in Fanon’s case Jews were “good to think with” about African postcolonial identity, Boyarin’s dedication makes clear that African Americans are good to think with by analogy to the situation of Palestinians in the state of Israel. Acts of solidarity allow one to think through and express what can’t be easily expressed in a censured and self-censured discourse. They open new directions, alternative possibilities, release from oppressive determinisms.

Boyarin’s diaspora nation releases Jewish culture from its ideological appropriation by ethnic and religious statehood. It preserves the national, or rather cultural, basis while abandoning its sovereign master. Such attempts are not new. Boris Paramonov similarly released nineteenth-century Slavophilia from its bad associations with the statist and political instrumentalization by Russian territorial ambitions in the Balkans. He showed intellectual preoccupation with national culture as a global philosophical and cultural phenomenon that was specifically Russian only insofar as it originated in Russian geography and in the Russian language. In its historiopoesis, it was an application of Romantic philosophy, which in the Russian context especially appealed to many Jewish-Russian thinkers.⁵

The historiopoesis of Zion strikes me as being of a similar nature if we disregard the direct geopolitical implementation. Paramonov showed how the image of Russia developed by Slavophiles informed more than a hundred years of Russian literary tradition, well into the twentieth century—an image that resonates with other national cultures’ attempts to think of culture and thought separately from the pragmatism of politics. What is similar to Boyarin here is the attempt to think nationally and transnationally at the same time, to keep the self but not at the cost of the Other. Tolstoy is a good example of thinking the national in the framework of an explicitly non-Western worldism. And Tolstoyism, through the reception of his follower Iosif Trumpeldor (about whom there is more in the following), became an element of the socialist Zionism of the kibbutz. Although Boyarin disavows any kind of Zionism, his version of “diaspora nation,” growing out of the early Zionists’ nonstatist imaginings of a homeland, strikes me as Tolstoyan in kind, seeing the world as a home where national identities are preserved.

I think the term *nation*, however, doesn’t capture the inclusive multicultural diversity even within the Jewish culture that Boyarin wants it to represent. Boyarin mentions briefly the Black Semites and refers to such hybridized forms of language as “Judeo-German, Judeo-Tajik, Judeo-Arabic, Yinglish” as fragments of a “common language” that differentiates diasporic Jews from other

⁴ Frantz Fanon, “*Black Skin, White Masks*”: *New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 69; Boyarin, “The New Jewish Question,” 50.

⁵ Boris Paramonov, “Slavianophil’stvo,” *Grani* 135 (1985): 127–214.

folks.⁶ To me these examples rather signify an integration with other folk rather a differentiation. Try as we will to redefine the term *nation*, or return to its presovereign origins, “nation” got wedded with “state” so harmoniously for a good reason, and it is difficult now to divorce the term from its monologizing implications.

Like it or not, the term *nation* presupposes a binding allegiance and is a liability of Boyarin’s project. I wonder about my friends who are Russian Jews and half-Jews, lovers and connoisseurs of Russian poetry who are not religious and don’t follow the rites, speak neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, cherish no connections to Israel but adamantly identify themselves as Jewish: Where do they fit? It is they who taught me the true nature of internationalism: One day long ago, when I was complaining that Dmitri Hvorostovsky had left Russia, they told me without blinking that abroad more people will have access to his art. I couldn’t imagine a more convincing argument: Its simple rationality and common sense shamed me for my national sentiment. When I asked a Russian Jewish friend one day why Russian Jews are so dedicated to Russian culture despite all the horrors of pogroms and history of mistreatment, she corrected me: “You should rather ask, why are Jews dedicated to culture?” The diaspora nation doesn’t seem to accommodate easily these non-Jewish Jews. Perhaps nothing more restrictive than the term *people* would do.

I think of the Japanese anarchists who in response to their country’s embrace of Western-style colonialism developed the concept of “the people without the state,” separating, like Boyarin, culture in all its everyday materiality from the monopoly of the nation-state, which the Japanese government had been forming and militarizing under Western influence.⁷ Here the vision of the “diaspora nation,” it seems to me, could profit from Sho Konishi’s *Anarchist Modernity* (2013) as a counterpart to Shumsky’s *Beyond the Nation-State* (2018), which inspired Boyarin’s ideas. What Boyarin proposes was, in the Japanese case, not a mere thought-experiment but a piece of social reality. The invention of the Japanese notion of “the people without the state” also came into being as a result of intellectual resistance to war (in this case, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905). During the war, anarchist and Tolstoyan thinkers redefined Japanese society as “the space of people’s interactions and actions, dealigned from the territory of the nation-state.”⁸

The Japanese dissidents dissociated themselves from state agendas—first of all that of war, but also of the top-down organization of peacetime society. This effort was spearheaded by the Japanese paper *Heimin shimbun* (*The Commoners’ Paper*), notably by its characterizing the Japanese population with the word *heimin* (people on the same level, or commoners), as differentiated from the homogenizing *kokumin* (the state’s or nation’s people), which emphasized unity and allegiance. The term *people* underlines the diversity of the social groups involved; the word *nation* is, to the contrary, a homogenizing term. The Japanese anarchists of the period cultivated the social, local, and quotidian in a deliberate

⁶ Boyarin, “The New Jewish Question,” 64.

⁷ Sho Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Center Harvard, 2013), 160–67.

⁸ Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*, 163.

resistance to the state, evoking the “materiality” of culture that Boyarin identifies as the concrete reality of a diaspora nation.

Like the idea of “diaspora nation,” the notion of “the people without the state” had transnational implications. The notion also presupposed a different conceptualization of “international” relations, not as the relations among nation-states but as relations among individuals and nonstate-aligned groups. Ironically, border violations and revisions during the war contributed to an awareness of the possibilities of transborder exchanges and interactions among people and communities on a nonstate level. The transnational expansion of the meaning of *heimin* (*hei* connoting both “equal” and “horizontal plain”) denaturalizes or deterritorializes the notion of people in a manner akin to Boyarin’s “diaspora” nation.

The diaspora nation is, on the one hand, based on the interconnection among people of one ethnicity—Jews—across the border lines of nation-states, forming a multiethnic conglomerate that involves all other Jews of the world. Boyarin decentralizes Ahad Ha’am’s vision of a bicultural Jewish state as an autonomous region in Palestine, “the epicenter of a constant renewal of a Jewish culture throughout the world wherever Jews lived as well.”⁹ This decentralization is akin to the Japanese anarchist thinker Kōtoku’s understanding of “international society as a ‘society’ of ‘people’ as *heimin* independent of the state’s territory.”¹⁰ But because Boyarin limits participation in this diasporic nation by ethnicity, or Jewish tradition, we end up with a “national” transnationalism. Empathy, the basis for solidarity, and hence of the interhuman connections within the diaspora nation, becomes again nationally, or ethnically limited.

The most difficult part of Boyarin’s concept is the national basis of empathy because the transnational diaspora is driven by the human crosscultural but ethnically focused identification with others. Is limited empathy still empathy? Is it something that can be qualified? How does the passionate care for others differ from the passionate care of the self? Who are those brothers with whom the transnational community of Jews should identify? First of all, Arabs, with whom they share territory, but also all others living in their diaspora around the world, that is with everybody. Wouldn’t the particularism of the diaspora nation collapse upon itself if thought of in terms of empathy with others, or if, conversely, empathy is qualified and therefore meaningless? Doesn’t a double bind of responsibility to yourself and others risk collapsing upon its very binary? It seems to me Kōtoku’s vision of the world, which combined the idea of implementing the values of freedom and equality originating in the West with compassion for all humanity as a value of Eastern thought, is closer to what Boyarin himself envisions as Jewish diasporic values. Boyarin’s efforts, like those of Kōtoku, are valuable in that they aim at a revolution of consciousness that would allow an evolution of human beings without relation to the nation-state.

Shumsky’s discovery that the early theorists of Zionism had pursued neither sovereign statehood nor cultural purity, but rather a substate autonomy that could easily coexist with local peoples, should lead us to evaluate differently many iconic

⁹ Boyarin, “The New Jewish Question,” 81.

¹⁰ Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*, 179.

figures of statist militant Zionism. One example is Iosif Trumpeldor, mentioned previously. Trumpeldor's heritage goes back to the very roots of the *heiminism* of Meiji Japan. The socialist, Tolstoyan-inspired Jewish officer Trumpeldor was held captive in a POW camp near Osaka. There, for the first time, his interest in the ideas of a Jewish state and in the Tolstoyan ideal of egalitarian agricultural communities took practical form. He organized a community of Jewish commoners and fashioned interfaith cooperation with other groups, as the Japanese assigned prisoners of war to barracks by faith.¹¹ Such Japanese communal organization practices, called *sōgo fujo*, or mutual aid, were also among the lessons the Russian anarchist Lev Mechnikov had learned in Japan and transmitted to Kropotkin, whose famous social treatise *Mutual Aid* was read around the world (including in Japan).¹²

Trumpeldor who also learned Japanese and Chinese while in Japan must have been exposed to the Japanese-Russian cross-fertilized anarchist thought-practice. His statism was then of the kind discovered by Shumsky, with a military organization of citizens conducted for the purposes of defense and not aggression. By cross-cutting Konishi's research on the people without the state and Shumsky's study of the non-Jewish nonstate state of Jews, we can see how Trumpeldor's antistatist, pacifist Tolstoyism squared with his efforts toward repatriation of the Jews. Brought up in the Jewish religious tradition and dedicated to the Jewish cause but absorbing the broadest possible network of ideas and practices to advance it, Trumpeldor with his cross-border, transnational activism would be for me a classical example of a citizen of a diaspora nation.

Boyarin quotes a review of his piece saying that it "focuses on how things ought to be."¹³ Reading Boyarin, however, my impression was that the piece is also about how things could have been different had other, alternative paths of thinking and other political choices or options been followed. *Vis-à-vis* Shumsky's discovery, it is not difficult to imagine Israel as a federal multilingual state of cross-border cultural alliances of the speakers of many languages, indeed as a conglomerate of multiple diaspora nations.

Boyarin's idea of diaspora nation also opens further onto the question of human rights and rights of minorities. The state of Israel was formed to ensure the rights of the Jews but in violation of human rights of Arabs through the nation-state of which they became accidental citizens. Human rights are transnational, and thus different from the rights of Jews; "the human rights claims must seek redress beyond the nation-state because most often, as has been suggested, they concern the abuse of individuals by the nation-state."¹⁴

¹¹ See Aleksandr Shulman, "'Horosho umeret' za rodinu! Zhizn' Iosifa Trumpeldora," in *Gekholuts: Novyi Put': Biografiia, Vospominaniia, Stat' 1*, eds. Joseph Trumpeldor, Irina Legkodukh, and Dmitrii Losev (Feodosiia, Moskva: Izdatel'skii dom "Koktebel," 2012), 14–79. In this most recent Russian-language biography and reprint of Joseph Trumpeldor's writings, he is presented in the Soviet-style antagonistic, teleological rhetoric as a founder of the militarist Zionist state.

¹² Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*, 29–73.

¹³ Boyarin, "The New Jewish Question," 43.

¹⁴ William Banks, "Introduction," in Georg Brandes, *Human Rights and Oppressed Peoples: Collected Essays and Speeches*, ed. and trans. William Banks (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 8.

One of the founding fathers of comparative literature, Georg Brandes, thought of world literature in terms of a dialectic of national and transnational: “The world literature of the future will be all the more interesting, the more strongly its national stamp is pronounced and the more distinctive it is, even if, as art, it has its international side... ”¹⁵ His ideal imaginary of Denmark anticipates Boyarin’s moral intervention into the doings of the state of Israel via diaspora nation: Boyarin calls the Jews to remember their oppressed history in order to resist the oppression of others, as Brandes did in his 1904 Møn address. As a result of German annexation of Schleswig in 1864, thousands of Danes came under German rule, and Denmark found itself in a double bind of being both a colonizer and colonized. It became, shall we say, a diaspora nation. Brandes drew a lesson from the history of his own people by proposing an imaginative transformation of politics into morality and solidarity with the minorities of other countries:

More important is to develop within the people a sense of freedom and justice, *not just for their own use ...* Thus it was my ideal that it should be known that, despite the small size of our country, men lived here who felt sympathy with all wronged individuals or peoples across the world and who lifted their voices, spoke on their behalf.¹⁶

“Not just for their own use ...”: Brandes’s words resonate with Boyarin’s enterprise and return us to the question of solidarity and the humanitarian mission of the humanities. At the same time as the founding fathers of Zionism were working out an option for the Jews, Russian anarchists such as Mechnikov and Kropotkin were developing the notion of mutual aid, of solidarity and cooperation, not just “as a political strategy”¹⁷ but understanding it as a natural instinct that can be rationalized into another form of societal organization. The notion of cooperation, or mutual aid, bucked the Spencerian trend of seeing society exclusively through the lens of the “survival of the fittest,” a vision that legitimates capitalist competition and proprietary thinking.

It is difficult not to hear in early Zionist thinking, as interpreted by Shumsky, undertones of “mutual aid,” a concept that they shared with socialists, anarchists, and many pre-Marxist revolutionaries. The early Zionists wanted not just a state but a just, fair, and shared state. The diaspora nation is driven by this legacy of solidarity based in mutual aid and coexistence of differences, bridged by empathy and advocacy. This is not only a profoundly democratic notion but also a notion that challenges the proprietary understanding of identity, identity as a commodity, the type of thinking that suspects in every act of human

¹⁵ Georg Brandes, “Weltliteratur,” *Das litterarische Echo* 2.1 (October 1, 1899), 3.

¹⁶ Georg Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1899–1910), 15:443, quoted in Brandes, *Human Rights and Oppressed Peoples*, 11. Highlighted by William Banks.

¹⁷ See Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2015), 7.

solidarity an identity theft and thus enables the “divide and conquer” strategy—the doom of American progress.

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