

***La France sans les juifs. Émancipation, extermination, expulsion* (France without the Jews. Emancipation, extermination, expulsion). By Danny Trom. Presses Universitaires de France, 2019. 155 pages. €15.**

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The title of Danny Trom's new book *France without the Jews* suggests political prophecy and its corresponding genre of the political pamphlet. However, it is neither: the book turns out to be a profound (albeit short and fragmentary) analysis of the re-emergence of the "Jewish problem"—not only in France, but generally in contemporary Europe—in the form of an essay. The essay form is justified on the one hand by the difficulties of expression: the long-superimposed silence on these issues by critical intellectuals and enlightened public opinion has rendered discussion hesitant and stuttering. On the other hand, the author detects quite a few shortcomings of sociology's and political theory's understanding of what is happening today in French society—in particular, those disciplines' interpretations of Israel and Zionism. How come French Jews are leaving? Nobody can say, as sociologists are studying immigration rather than emigration. What can be said about Israel as a country, its relationship to Europe, and especially the (anti-)politics of the European Union? What does Israel stand for politically and existentially for the Jews of the Diaspora? Trom does not find answers to these questions in contemporary political science, therefore he advances his own answers, without yet coming up with a systematic theory.

As both a Jew and critical intellectual, the normalization of anti-Jewish attacks and generally the anti-Jewish turn of a large portion of French opinion in a climate of censorship

promoted especially by the critical left, has had a profound impact on the author, and has prompted him to employ the essay form. In the first chapter, in fact, the author expresses outright the impossibility of creating an academic text on the issue.

The breaking of this silence about anti-Jewish sentiment in France came with the publication of Jean-Claude Milner's book *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique* (The criminal penchants of democratic Europe [Paris: Verdier, 2003]) which, according to Trom, "established itself as an indispensable starting point for the diagnosis of the epoch," but which at first only had a "half-secret audience, with the shared feeling that a new situation, at long last designated as such, liberated them from isolation" (17). The fragmentary and essay-like nature of *La France sans les juifs* is intended to signal that reflection on the re-emergence of the "Jewish problem" has only begun, and that we not only need to rethink political theory thoroughly in order to understand its causes, but we must also learn how to express ourselves in a direct and fearless manner. Trom himself has been on the forefront of this courageous reflection and rethinking for more than ten years now.

Milner's book, besides its liberating spirit, provides some important insights and concepts that Trom uses in his own work. First of all, the deployment of the term "Jewish problem" instead of "antisemitism" broadens the

perspective in several ways. It enables the author to treat a much wider range of phenomena without necessarily having to classify them as antisemitic in an unequivocal manner, while still being able to criticize them. Another advantage of this framework is that he does not need to distinguish antisemitism from anti-Zionism by getting into rhetorical or semantic arguments for or against their identification. He does not consider their relationship to be semantic or even pragmatic. Trom is not interested in examining how anti-Zionism slips into antisemitism due to rhetorical or symbolic exaggeration or why this slippage occurs so often in the case of political action because of the blurred boundaries between seemingly different types of political intent—for example, when an anti-Zionist demonstration/cartoon/text becomes antisemitic. Nor does Trom attribute the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism to some kind of unconscious projection which would characterize a symptomatic reading—for instance, when anti-Zionist talk is taken to be the surface expression of a concealed, underlying antisemitism. Rather (and without criticizing these approaches, which obviously have an important role to play in fighting everyday antisemitism), he wishes to establish that antisemitism and anti-Zionism are structurally linked and constitute the core of the return of the “Jewish problem.” It is precisely this structure that he tentatively tries to unearth in his book by showing that anti-Jewish sentiment inside the French Republic corresponds to an aversion against Israel. In other words, he shows that in France (and presumably also elsewhere in Europe) anti-Zionism takes part—neither randomly nor indirectly—in the discourse of the “Jewish problem.”

In *La France sans les juifs*, Trom proposes at least three elements and their interconnections that should be viewed from this perspective: the politics of resentment (maintained by certain critical intellectuals) which targets Jews by singling them out as “privileged,” as a group breaching the principles of French republican equality (“the Jews are not the operator of

republican equality anymore, but the operator of all the injustices *inside* the Republic” [71]); the image of Israel in European minds as the “last colony” or a “rogue state” that has appropriated a territory in an illegitimate way and created an anachronistic “ethno”-nation-state; and, finally, the historical evolution of Europe and European politics (in Trom’s analysis, its “anti-politics”) after World War II, which views Israel and Israeli politics as an anomaly.

Trom has already dealt systematically with the politics of resentment, more precisely with its intellectual foundations in a key work entitled *La promesse et l’obstacle. La gauche radicale et le problème juif* (The promise and the obstacle. The radical left and the Jewish problem [Paris: Cerf, 2007]). This book provides extremely insightful political and methodological analyses of influential critical theories of society and politics which make Jews and/or the Holocaust and/or Israel the target, the object, or the instrument of their critique. According to its conclusion, critique in our epoch has been entangled with the “Jewish problem” to a large degree, legitimizing its formulation again, and often supporting antisemitic conclusions. It is a task of the utmost importance to disentangle critique and the “Jewish problem” while it is still an option. Every antisemitism scholar should be acquainted with this book (it is rather unfortunate that it is not available in English), as it provides an exceptionally penetrating reading of the theoretical bases of what is usually called the “new antisemitism.” The same topic with similar conclusions under the heading of the “false universalism of critical theory” is dealt with by Eric Marty in his *Radical French Thought and the Return of the “Jewish Question”* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015) and also by Robert Fine and Philip Spencer in their *Antisemitism and the Left. On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2017).

In his second book *Persévérance du fait juif. Une théorie politique de la survie* (The perseverance of the Jewish fact. A political theory of

survival [Paris: EHESS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2018]), a magistral treaty on “Jewish politics” (or rather the lack of it), Trom analyzed the vertical relationship which historically existed everywhere between Jews and the sovereign in Europe for centuries by way of an analysis of the rabbinic literature on Esther—a relationship that guaranteed the protection of Jews from the local population in exchange for submission and allegiance to the Crown. This vertical structure came to be disrupted in the era of popular sovereignty, and then was totally annihilated by the state-professed racial antisemitism that culminated in Nazi rule. Trom proposes that the aim of Zionism should be understood as the desire to provide a substitute for this vertical-protective relationship through the creation of the state of Israel. Therefore, he argues, Israel should not be considered as a belatedly created nation-state, but rather as a “state shelter” that recreates the structure of protection which no longer exists in European states.

Now, *La France sans les juifs*, by alluding occasionally to these previous works, strives to follow and connect seemingly separate lines of reflection and apply them to the question of European politics after World War II. According to Trom, European development has been based on defeat (no European country could claim victory after World War II, except for the UK which, however, has always been distant from the core of European integration) and on shared guilt over the Holocaust. Europe needs the memory of the genocide in order to establish itself on the ideal of eternal peace. This ideal, Trom contends, excludes the idea of politics, unless it is the politics of appeasement. But Europe does not need the actual presence of Jews. Although it has European origins, Israel does not share in Holocaust guilt and firmly resists European injunctions to recognize its own “guilt” and give up politics. Trom also notes that after the war there was no political exchange between Europe and the surviving and remaining Jews, only between the defeated countries (from both sides) themselves. Jews

were not real political actors and addressing the Nazi genocide was not the paramount concern of the countries emerging from the war. On the contrary, they did everything to alleviate the charge for the crime. Europe’s lack of concern with Jews postwar was exposed by the Six-Day War when it became clear that Israel was supposed to fulfil the role of the missing interlocutor in this discourse (151-152).

Undoubtedly, viewed from an apolitical Europe, Israel is a complete anachronism. Europeans and European political theory are unable to see that Israel replaces Jews’ former royal protection (48); and this explains why European Jews are attached to the new state even if they are not avowed Zionists. From the perspective of the European renunciation of politics, Zionism can only be misunderstood. It is this misunderstanding, then, that nourishes Europe’s rejection of Zionism before any “criticism” of the politics of any Israeli government even takes place.

The helplessness of political theory when it comes to the interpretation of Israel is demonstrated by the author in an exceptionally insightful and elegant manner. He analyzes two great political thinkers, Raymond Aron and Hannah Arendt, and their attitudes to the Six-Day War. Aron and Arendt were both Jewish, but neither of them Zionist. Their political ideas differ to a large degree, as do the reasons why they reject or ignore Zionism. However, the Six-Day War provoked very similar feelings in both of them. Aron was a liberal-conservative supporter of the European-style nation-state, espoused French republican values, and during most of his life he remained largely indifferent to the state of Israel. Arendt, once a Zionist and always a promoter of genuine Jewish political action, later on rejected the concept of the nation-state as the framework of politics because, for her, it was prone to totalitarianism. On this basis, she did not sympathize with the state of Israel. Nevertheless, during the Six-Day War, both thinkers expressed acute anxiety about the fate of the Jewish state. According to Trom, the crisis of 1967 revealed something

crucial with regard to the situation of the Jews, not only in Israel but also (and especially) in the Diaspora: namely, the need for enhanced protection. However, this “excessive” protection is precisely something that the European states cannot provide anymore; it can only be guaranteed by the state of Israel which, according to Trom, is not a nation-state in this respect. In short, Israel is “the equivalent of the protective function of the state, realized somewhere else” (129). This enhanced protection given to one group is not legitimate in the modern democratic nation-state because it contradicts the principle of equality among citizens. The little that now remains of it, such as the protection of synagogues and Jewish schools, raises enough suspicions and nourishes enough resentment as it is. Enhanced protection, therefore, can only occur outside Europe.

Through his parallel analyses of Aron and Arendt, Trom shows their failure to adequately interpret the Jewish condition and Israel. The two thinkers were incapable of conceiving of the Jewish state as a “state shelter” that provided the “excess” protection vital for the survival of the Jewish people. Their brief change of attitude under the impact of the Six-Day War seems to invalidate their ideas. But when the obvious and present danger threatening the Jewish state passed, they failed to revise their thinking. In fact, in this presentation, those are precisely Arendt and Aron who, as a result of their sudden and unexpected support for Israel, cast doubt on their own theories and, ironically, by the same token,, unwittingly confirm Trom’s views.

Finally, there is still the politics of resentment to account for, the theoretical aspect of which has already been mentioned. In Trom’s diagnosis, resentment against Jews as a “privileged” minority is prevalent in France and is compounded by militant social criticism. The “illegitimate privileges” of Jews are numerous: their perceived high social status, especially

compared to that of other minorities; the Shoah as to be the greatest example of human suffering; the supposedly exceptional status of Israel, its “impunity”, on the world stage (for Europeans, the strong are always morally reprehensible while the “weak” have superior moral status, regardless of what they stand for); and even the right to special police protection for their institutions. In the Republic, all of these factors make Jews targets of the politics of resentment (69). Trom believes that there is a flourishing political subculture in France in which Jews are represented as the cause of the hardships of the downtrodden (71). He argues that Islamism is not at the heart of the problem, but only the tip of the iceberg: the militarized and often terrorist version of this culture of resentment, which lies way deeper than its Islamist manifestations (67). However, the image becomes even more complicated when some of the traditional victims of discrimination (immigrants of Muslim background for the last several decades, for instance) become actors of violence against Jews. This explains why recent public talk about antisemitism is considered suspicious and worrisome by many, who think that it contributes to Islamophobia. But there is no symmetry between antisemitism and Islamophobia: Jews are not the mediators of Islamophobia, and no Islamophobic attacks have been attributed to Jews (61). This became especially clear during the *Charlie Hebdo* protests when the attack on the kosher shop was quickly forgotten: if there is no symmetry, and it is not socially or politically acceptable to point this out (and compare this to the breadth of the debate over the rights and wrongs of journalism), the reaction is silence. And this pervasive silence demonstrates that while political responses to antisemitic acts do still come from government, society as a whole is uninterested. As Danny Trom suggests, this may be the reason why Jews leaving France is an irreversible process.