

The perseverance of the Jewish fact A political theory of survival

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The ultimate criterion of validity for a political collective lies in the possibility of *persevering*. Admittedly, the Greeks of the classical era were concerned only with the stability of the city understood as a political regime, but the Hellenistic Empires, and the Roman Empire that inherited them, conceived of the continuity or the perpetuation of political entities in and of themselves. They in turn imprinted themselves so profoundly on the political experience of Europe, beyond the dismantling of the Empire, that the criterion of durability became both overdetermining and almost transparent. This is doubtless why the perseverance of “Israel” is the source of such widespread surprise around the “Jewish fact.”¹ This persistence is generally perceived as an anomaly, an answerless question, probably because of its exceptional duration, the curious path it took, and perhaps for other reasons too. Some will argue that an answerless question is a poorly framed question. But this must be underlined: because it is constantly asked, it has established itself as part of the reality of the Jewish fact that it addresses, and imperceptibly merges into it. The Jewish fact emerges as an interrogation of its own persistence. Others, following Leo Strauss, will remark that an indefinitely unresolved question is difficult to distinguish from a mystery.² Yet there is no good reason to resign oneself to this state of affairs. Friedrich Nietzsche and later Sigmund Freud exhumed the anthropological kernel of the durability of the Jewish fact, extended as a mechanism of immunization against defeat. But the persistence of the Jewish fact has also been supported by a *practice* of survival backed by an elaborate body of knowledge, one that has proved effective. This practice, *a priori* describable, has however never been empirically described. Although it has never been taken to the conceptual level or even named as such, in this book we will attempt to elaborate a *theory of the practice of the political perseverance* of the Jews. We will see that the biblical Esther Scroll—the rabbinical commentary on which will provide the raw material for this book—offers such an evident characterization of this practice that it, and its repeated, actualizations *constitute* if not this very mechanism, then at least its most ostentatious inflection.

If the promise of *enduring* is a *topos* of the Scriptures, perhaps even the most recurrent and the most striking, the Esther Scroll was understood as an exploration of the means of attaining it *in exile*, without a political-territorial base, without a “state,” despite the vulnerability of the dispersed people. It was thus interpreted as the guarantee of enduring in spite of the greatest danger. In his monumental *History of the Jews*, published in the mid-nineteenth century, Heinrich Graetz distinguished two angles from which the Jewish fact could be grasped: the “religious” angle, that of the relation to the law, and the “political and cultural” angle, which covers over domains. He did not, however, clarify the way in which they are hierarchized or

¹ I borrow the expression “Jewish fact” from Jean-Michel Salanskis, who designates the plurality of its modes of historical phenomalization (*Extermination, loi, Israël. Ethanalyse du fait juif*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2003).

² Leo Strauss, “Freud sur Moïse et le monothéisme,” in *Pourquoi nous restons juifs. Révélation biblique et philosophie*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2001, p. 265-293, here p. 290.

connected amongst themselves.³ When Max Weber wished, a few decades later, to delineate the historical reality of the Jewish fact, not initially through the cultural and civilizational prism of Judaism (*das Judentum*), but from a political angle proper, he described the “Jewish people” (*das jüdische Volk*) as the “pariah people” (*Pariavolk*) and the “guest people” (*Gastvolk*). These descriptions are relational from the outset. The first, which predominates in *Ancient Judaism*,⁴ emphasizes a relation of separation organized by a set of ritual prescriptions, a statutory separation both desired from within and later also suffered and imposed from without. The second, more apparent in *Economy and Society*,⁵ although scarcely explained, stresses a relationship of liaison, of coming to terms, between inviter and invited, between the *host* who receives and the *guest* who arrives (the French language refers to both poles of the relationship by the same word, *hôte*). By juxtaposing these two angles, and perhaps wavering between the two, Weber offers us two ways in which to understand this collective.⁶ In the first, the analysis revolves around the collective’s self-institution by the law: the pariah people both supports itself and suffers from its singular mode of enclosure; desired segregation and externally imposed segregation inextricably merge.⁷ In the second, the analysis revolves around the political experience of exile, around a deterritorialized and fragmented political body – “devoid of autonomous political organization,” in Weber’s words⁸ – residing within other political bodies that for their part are territorialized and ecologically assembled.

Let us remark from the outset that these two descriptive angles are already set by the author-composer of the Esther Scroll when the host accounts for his hostility towards the guest in the following terms: “There is a certain people (*am*) scattered (*mephuzar*) and separate (*mephorad*) among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom,” Haman, minister of King Ahasuerus, remarks reproachfully, before suggesting that he assent to this people’s elimination. Here, the double characterization of the Jewish fact—dispersed people (guest) and separated people (pariah)—is from the outset couched in terms of denunciation and threat in this biblical text that presents itself as a short edifying chronicle, relating how the Jews in the Persian kingdom, condemned to extermination, were finally saved. Although interdependent, dispersion *among* nations and separation *of* nations nevertheless deserve to be distinguished analytically in order that the conditions of a singular political experience may be isolated and explored in themselves. The decisive question is indeed which of the two experiences is the most significant with regard to the durability of the Jewish fact: the experience of the law (living under the law) or the experience of exile (living in exile). Here we will follow Franz Rosenzweig, who, for reasons he described as “sociological,”⁹ plumped for the experience of exile—an option that Strauss roundly criticized as falling under the auspices of a historicistic and sociological line of reasoning, contrasting it with the traditional lived experience of the law, judged more “empirical.”¹⁰ The question of the order in which to place the sequence has never

³ See Heinrich Graetz (Hirsch Grätz), *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, 11 vol., Leipzig, O. Leiner, 1863-1876; English translation, *The History of the Jews*, 6 vol., Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1891-1898, available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/42001>

⁴ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, New York, Free Press, 1952 [1917-1918]

⁵ *Id.*, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968 [1921].

⁶ See also Arnaldo Momigliano, “Considérations sur la définition wébérienne du judaïsme comme religion paria [1980],” in *Contributions à l’histoire du judaïsme*, Nîmes, Éd. de l’Éclat, 2002, p. 219-238, here p. 219ff.

⁷ It should be noted, however, that the analogy between Jewish separation and separation from within a caste system, on which the Weberian idea of a pariah-people is based, was refuted as early as 1937 by Salo W. Baron (*A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 1, *Ancient Times: To the Beginning of the Christian Era*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1952–1983, p. 31ff).

⁸ “Gruppe ohne autonomen politischen Verband” (Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie. Studienausgabe*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr-Paul Siebeck, 1972 [1921], p. 300).

⁹ Franz Rosenzweig, “La pensée nouvelle. Remarques additionnelles à *L’étoile de la rédemption*,” in *Foi et savoir. Autour de “L’étoile de la rédemption”*, Paris, Vrin, 2001, p. 145-170, here p. 164-165.

¹⁰ Leo Strauss, “Avant-propos à la traduction anglaise de *La critique de la religion de Spinoza*,” in *Le testament de Spinoza. Écrits de Leo Strauss sur Spinoza et le judaïsme*, Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1991, p. 257-308, here p. 280ff.

been given an answer than may be considered definitive. The option chosen here consists in giving precedence to the experience of exile and does indeed lead to a sociological and historicistic line of reasoning. A *certain* way of living under the law is entailed by the political experience of living under foreign domination; a certain way of conceiving what is authoritative is entailed by the way in which a political subject, over the course of its self-institution, drew a link between election and exile—the matrix from which it durably established itself as a guest-people *among* nations.

Regarding the experience of the guest, Alfred Schutz has provided us with an approach centered on the solitary “stranger”¹¹—a perspective that can nevertheless be advantageously transposed to the experience of a guest-collective, since it is the ordinary and impersonal knowledge of this stranger, this “arriver,” that matters in Schutz’s view. The stranger must deploy intense efforts in order to define the new situation in which they suddenly find themselves immersed, to lay down stable points of reference, to orientate themselves, and navigate their new social environment. To do so, Schutz specifies, the stranger has at their disposal a set of basic presuppositions, a “system of recipes” enabling them to proceed to adequately make the adjustments required by the situation. Schutz offers a formal description of this genre of practical knowledge in the form of maxims. First, “the same problems requiring the same solutions will recur,” such that “former experiences will suffice for mastering future situations”. Next, “we may rely on the knowledge handed down to us by parents, teachers, governments, traditions, habits.” Lastly, it is enough to know something of the type or the “general type or style of events” encountered in order to accommodate and manage them.¹² This system of recipes is a “scheme of interpretation” of the world and the latter has relevance only in view of action. From this praxeological perspective, the recipes are both the product of a stabilization of the expectations and the matrix from which the relevance of the scheme and the efficacy of the recipes of action are continually tested. The transposition of Schutz’s notations to the experience of Weber’s guest-people, of a guest-collective that thus conceives of itself and is understood as a stranger, as an arriver—even when its presence is sometimes lost in the mists of time—calls for a corrective. The *Gastrecht* (right of stay) evoked by Emmanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*¹³ is this particular right to reside accorded to a foreign collective. From the point of view of the “welcomer,” it is accorded on a discretionary basis and as such is revocable at any point. That is why Georg Simmel saw “strangers,” like European Jews, not as people who arrive but as people who stay ready to leave.¹⁴ The guest-people are effectively partway between arriver and leaver. Put differently: they are people who *remain*. “Remaining” supposes that they have arrived and casts ahead to an always possible departure. This mode of presence, consisting in “remaining”—not leaving but staying, indeed *resting* (the French verb *rester* means to remain)—is an activity in its own right.

The collective is welcomed conditionally, but it is not passive. It gradually accumulates a quantity of repeated experiences and organizes a reserve of knowledge to every practical end that it will deploy regularly and which it will draw upon so long as it should prove relevant—because it is effective. These schemes, stabilized and sedimented in experience, are highly diverse. This knowledge, of which Schutz highlights the importance, is not however considered in itself, because the phenomenologist of social life remains attached to describing the formal plane of experience, with regard neither for the categories of thought that inform the schemes

¹¹ Alfred Schutz, “The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 6, 1944, p. 499-507.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Emmanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, trans. Mary Campbell Smith, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1917 [1795], p. 54-55.

¹⁴ Georg Simmel, “Digression sur l’étranger” [1908], dans Yves Grafmeyer and Isaac Joseph (eds), *L’École de Chicago. Naissance de l’écologie urbaine*, Paris, Aubier, 1990, p. 53-59.

of interpretation, nor for their mode of linkage with action.¹⁵ The idealization *ich kann immer wieder*¹⁶ (“I can always again”, “I can reiterate”) that underpins basic confidence in the stability of the world and thus in the predictability of the course of things is in effect saturated with categories, ways of thinking, and *topoi* of thought, axioms and sayings that are admittedly generally held as self-evident, but which crisis brings out and forces one to explain, or occasionally to displace, modify or rework more fully. Anyone who turns their attention to this subject touches inevitably (and too abruptly) on the massive and obscure base on which political assemblages rest. Yet this base should be explored. It lies for the guest-people in the Talmud, which, as the historian Salo Baron opportunely sums up, “became the principal expression of a great crisis that shook the history of Jewish society and religion. At the same time, it was the powerful instrument that made it possible to overcome the crisis.”¹⁷ It is the expression and practical resolution of a political crisis opened by defeat and exile.

How to perpetuate the existence of the exiled, dispersed, impotent people, exposed to the greatest of dangers: that is the interrogation, anxious and yet so common, which reaches its apogee in the rabbinical commentary of the Esther Scroll. Since the threat of destruction that weighs upon the Jews in the latter was not, in the end, to be executed, the Shoah cannot appear otherwise than as a flagrant refutation of the efficiency of the traditional mechanism of survival that was in that instance put to the test. By stating that “to ‘prophetize’ the genocide, one had only to read the Book of Esther”,¹⁸ Pierre Vidal-Naquet commits a particularly revealing anachronism. In the aftermath, the historian lends the document a capacity to anticipate or predict the destruction, not seeing that, conversely, it is the factuality of the destruction that effaces *a posteriori* this ancestral certainty that the destruction of the people is very exactly impossible. The Book of Esther seems *retrospectively* to announce that which it had always rendered unthinkable.¹⁹ Norbert Elias underlines the extent to which, in contrast, the traditional mechanism cognitively limited access to reality: “For the majority of Jews, it would have been difficult to explain to themselves why the Germans treated them as their worst enemies. The only meaning they could give to this experience came from their own tradition. They had been persecuted since time immemorial. Adolf Hitler was a new Haman [the vice minister who obtained from the king the authorization to destroy the Jews, in the Esther tale], hailing from a long lineage, perhaps a little more threatening than his predecessors.”²⁰ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi specifies the exact nature of this limitation: the Jews did *not* understand what Nazi Germany had in store for them, not because the threat of their destruction was conceptually inaccessible to them, but because its execution was.²¹ We will see that the heart of the political mechanism of the Esther Scroll relates very exactly to this point of stoppage between decision and execution. It was not the Nazi threat, nor even the Nazi decision, but the Nazi shift to action

¹⁵ A linkage, which, it should be noted, has not received a satisfactory response in the social sciences since it was exemplarily questioned by Émile Benveniste over fifty years ago (Émile Benveniste, « Catégories de la pensée et catégories de langue », dans *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 63-74).

¹⁶ Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, vol. 1, Francfort-am-Main, Suhrkamp, 1979, p. 64ff.

¹⁷ Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 2, *Ancient Times to the Beginning of the Christian Era: The First Five Centuries*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1952–1983, p. 1027.

¹⁸ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les juifs, la mémoire et le présent*, vol. 3, *Réflexion sur le génocide*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995, p. 73.

¹⁹ Raoul Hilberg remarked: “Queen Esther ... more effective than the mobilization of an army” was once able to avoid what has happened today (postface to *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd edn, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, Harper and Row, 2003 [1961], p. 1112).

²⁰ Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen. Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Francfort-am-Main, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 454; translated into English as *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

²¹ Yosef H. Yerushalmi, “‘Serviteurs des rois et non serviteurs des serviteurs.’ Sur quelques aspects de l’histoire politique des Juifs,” *Raisons politiques*, vol. 3, no. 7, 2002, p. 19-52.

that signaled, or seemed to signal—the question at this stage remains open—the lapsing of the mechanism deployed by the rabbinical exegesis of the Book of Esther.

The Esther Scroll, we can see, is a text that surges up. It *prefigures* the crisis.²² And it surges in crisis. What matters here is thus not the gap between an event that is said to have indeed occurred in the Achaemenid Persian era (*res gestae*, according to Hegel's categories) and the narrative that is produced of it (*historia rerum gestarum*), but that the event, probably invented, has proven worthy of remembrance (*dignum memoriae*) and is continually commented upon by the long chain of authorized commentators. Absent at Qumran, several copies of the Book of Esther have however been found in the Cairo Genizah. Then, from the fifth century onwards, this text, which was included in the Jewish canon, was the object of growing interest that would culminate in the Middle Ages, while the number of commentaries dedicated to it continued to curve upwards until modern times. This growing reactivation of the Book of Esther, via different channels—from the multiple scholarly commentaries on the text to daily liturgy, from the annual festival of Purim to popular theatrical forms of the narrative, known in Yiddish as *Pourimspiel*, from the sixteenth century onwards, up to its untimely intrusions into our contemporary events in the writings of authors ignorant of this tradition—points to an uninterrupted chain of “realizations” of the tale. An immaterial artifact, the scroll has thus continually anchored itself in minds and has durably structured the experience of the Jews, of those who have thus thought of themselves as the recipients of the field of tension that it depicts. Determining whether this scriptural matter, which those who construe it as their narrative draw upon, is historical, legendary, or mythological is thus irrelevant to us here.²³ We can, however, state with some assurance that this matter has constituted a “memory-recollection,”²⁴ a sufficient mnemonic to perpetuate the *Gastvolk*.

Since the Esther Scroll constitutes a central component in and indeed concentrates the development of the mechanism of survival, as we will attempt to show, the Shoah necessarily appears to refute it. Vidal-Naquet suggests that the Jews did not understand what was in store *despite* their knowledge of the Scroll, Elias, that they did not understand it *with* it, and Yerushalmi, that they did not understand it *because* of it. But what did they understand, if they did not understand what was happening? This question immediately calls for a methodological clarification. In order to grasp what is known or unknown, graspable or ungraspable, apprehendable or unenvisageable, one needs to proceed with a second-order description of a genre of knowledge and its limits, to delineate the perimeter of a field of knowledge, and, consequently, what of this knowledge is out of sight. That supposes slipping within the very movement of those who move within it, to get a feel for its contours in order to clarify its logic. Those who move within it interrogate their vulnerability and the conditions of their own survival, such that the mechanism to which this book is dedicated appears at the outset as a rationalization of the consciousness of the mortal vulnerability of the people, for all practical purposes. This work of rationalization was embarked upon in the very earliest elaborations of rabbinical Judaism.

Delimiting this intellectual and nevertheless practical mechanism is no easy task. If sociology distrusts the substantial character of thought, political philosophy, in contrast, tends

²² In the sense intended by Hans Blumenberg: by prefiguring, by taking a path already signposted, the efficacy of the action is assured (*Préfiguration. Quand le mythe fait l'histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, p. 15).

²³ As Karl Löwith emphasizes, from the Jewish perspective, the reading of the Scriptures is always national and a “theological” problem is always first a political problem: “For this reason, the Jewish people could and can understand its political and historical destiny theologically/in a theological way” (*Histoire et salut. Les présupposés théologiques de la philosophie de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002 [1953], p. 241).

²⁴ Jan Assmann, *La mémoire culturelle. Écriture, souvenir et imaginaire politique dans les civilisations antiques*, Paris, Aubier, 2010, p. 194ff.

to ignore or underestimate the experiential anchorage of theoretical constructions.²⁵ To the first, it may be objected that a *praxis* is pre-reflective and ante-predicative until the test of its maladjustment, a test that sets in motion a process of explicitation and revision of that which hitherto remained tacit, or indeed unknown. To the second, it may be objected that a theoretical political construction is, if not always the product of an effort to resolve practical problems, then at the very least the reflection of a political experience and the tensions that are inherent in it. The conditions of possibility of political experience are beholden to categories that the variety of experiences continually verifies in the light of their own validity. But these categories, in return, constitute the basic elements of fictional constructions, oriented towards the practical mastery of the state of the world and the problems that regularly arise in it. The mechanism, however stable it is, remains no less exposed to the convulsions of the world. That is why we will need to conceive of this mechanism as a framework of idealization and of action, indissociably.

In order to reconstruct the logic of this mechanism, we propose to take the path, following those who have taken it with authority, towards an interrogation of a matter of which they conceived themselves as the depositaries. This endogenous perspective, which will enable us to extract from the rabbinical commentary a practical theory of perseverance, simultaneously requires a clarification of the situation of he who undertakes it, because any reiterated enquiry on the Esther Scroll never has any other foundation than the actuality of the reading reader. This foundation consists in a lived experience, an *Erlebnis*, which, before its promotion to the rank of philosophical concept, signified the surprise to still be alive, the experience of having survived an event.²⁶ This existential experience, prefigured in the Esther Scroll and maintained by the guest-people over the course of the history of its host nations, the indefinitely duplicated matrix through the generations and whose pertinence has proved *factual*, contrasts with glory, the political affect *par excellence* of the Greeks. But this experience of survival, as a first passive approximation, in reality contains an activity, a politics of perseverance in adversity, a way to “endure” beyond the announced destruction. It sketches the lineaments of a politics that it will be necessary to reconstruct. Exhuming the historical *a priori*²⁷ of this Jewish politics, which successive eras have, it seems, little altered, entails—this should be stressed—consequences for the way in which we understand politics in general. We automatically make the continued existence of political entities conditional upon a spatial base and the power of command that is the power to edict laws and the power of decision. The modern idea of sovereignty further accentuated these traits, sometimes arousing the reprobation of the Jewish fact, such as in Spinoza, who concludes in the inexistence of the Jewish nation, and unanimous surprise before the spectacle of the perseverance of this people, whom Rousseau described as expatriates.

Now that the idea of sovereignty in Europe has itself become blunted under the assault of two world wars, that it is gripped by a doubt that sometimes verges on discredit, a wave of romanticism has seized hold of this Jewish anomaly so as to celebrate it. But this view obscures the fact that perseverance in exile has been and is supported by a knowledge of stable prefiguration, which is characterized by having always maintained a relation with sovereignty

²⁵ See the correspondence between Alfred Schutz and Eric Voegelin: Gerhard Wagner et Gilbert Weiss (eds), *A Friendship that Lasted a Lifetime. The Correspondence between Alfred Schütz and Eric Voegelin*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2011.

²⁶ Kurt Flasch, *Prendre congé de Dilthey. Que serait un néohistorisme en histoire de la philosophie ?*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1988, p. 78.

²⁷ “This *a priori* is what, in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true” (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Pantheon, 1970, Chapter VII).

that is not only *frustrated* but also *ambiguous*, beyond the profound transformations that the idea of sovereignty has undergone in Europe.

Since the Jewish mechanism consisted in sheltering the *Gastvolk* in the protective shadow of the sovereignty of the host-country, the current situation indeed exposes the Jewish experience to an unprecedented state of affairs. The Jews seem to have molded themselves, with the birth of the state of Israel, into the nation-state model from which they had kept themselves at a distance. Incomprehension as to the form of this Jewish sovereignty, which took the name of “state of Israel,” logically follows. For this state, in fact, extends the traditional mechanism of survival in exile rather than annulling it by slipping into the nation-state form.²⁸ Frustration and ambiguity are, however, too negative and nebulous ways to describe this mechanism. On the basis of the salient traits of the rabbinical exegesis of the Esther Scroll (ME, *Megilath Esther*), we will thus attempt to confer on it a positive form which, although never explicitly expressed, continually informs the experience and the practice of the diffracted political body. We will name this curious political construction *the axiomatic of the guardian*—an axiomatic that traverses history by nestling for better or for worse within the forms of sovereignty in Europe.

The notion of writing a global history by practicing a symmetrical anthropology is one often professed today, but it is clear that this effort is not always taken to its logical conclusion. This book can thus be read as an attempt to re-examine our own political tradition up to its most contemporary expressions, through the description of an archaic, paleo-political conceptuality that traversed it while also molding itself to it. If it appears judicious to reconsider this *Sonderweg*, this is not because it took a “special path,” an alternative to the common European political path, but because, perplexed, it kept its sovereign politics in reserve and laterally contrasted its irresolution vis-à-vis the certainties of the politics of Europe. Indeed, this runs through to the present day: to the new uncertainties of modern politics, it contrasts its constitutive irresolution.

²⁸ This point brings us again to the important contribution of Ismar Schorsch, “On the History of the Political Judgement of the Jews,” dans *From Text to Context. The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*, Hanover, Brandeis University Press-University Press of New England, 1994, p. 118-132.