

From the Jewish Question to the Muslim Question. A Marxist look at religious minorities in 19th century and 21st century Europe.

**Por Emmanuel Guerisoni.*

Marx has a threefold objective in “*On the Jewish Question*”: to respond to Bruno Bauer’s views on the same issue; to give us his own standing on the matter of the political emancipation of Jewish populations in Germany and the rest of Europe, while at the same time defining what political emancipation means for each citizen, no matter the religion, in a modern State; and lastly, to show us how political emancipation is not enough and how actual freedom (political plus social) is accessible to all once a new, final and imperative kind of emancipation is obtained: *human emancipation*.

This paper will be divided into two parts: the first one will try to briefly review and explain Marx’s text. Particular attention will be given to the differentiation between political and human emancipation and its implications. In this section, Marx’s views on Judaism will be clarified by analyzing them on their proper socio-historical context. In the second one, an interesting and, hopefully, appropriate exercise will be put into consideration: taking into account Marx’s concerns regarding the possibility of inclusion of a religious minority into the public spheres of a secular State, the Jewish question of 19th century’s Europe will be altered into the Muslim question of 21st century’s Europe.

According to Yoav Peled the main difference between how Bauer and Marx confront the issue of Jewish emancipation is that the former one considers the problem as a theological one, while the latter does it as a sociological one (1).

Bauer affirms that not only the Jews are longing for political emancipation, meaning being recognized by the State as equal citizens; but also the rest of the Gentile population is awaiting such recognition. The State cannot emancipate Jews if it still has not emancipated the rest. The Jewry cannot obtain full citizenship if there are no citizens. In order to attain political emancipation the State has to become a secular one, not to recognize any religion as its official one and to extend freedom of religion to all of its citizens. Religious freedom would require religion’s removal from the public sphere and its “ostracism” into a private creed. This privatization of religion would eventually abolish it.

Nevertheless, Bauer does not consider the Jews capable of becoming free because he does not consider Judaism able to become a private creed. Bauer characterizes Judaism as a *religion of law* not as, like Christianity, a *religion of faith*. Being a religion based on actions and not on beliefs would completely be opposed to freedom of religion, to its own removal from the public sphere. Judaism could not become free because there is a chance that its laws would contradict the laws of the State.

Marx, instead, affirms that Jews (and Christians), in order to be really emancipated do not have to abandon Judaism in a theological way, but have to

do it in a sociological manner. Political emancipation as stated by Bauer is not the final possible form of emancipation, but it is the last possible form of emancipation within the framework of the prevailing social order. For example, according to Marx the citizens of the United States of America, which at the time was the best case of a modern secular State, still practiced, and needed to practice, their religious beliefs as private creeds. Then, Bauer was wrong; religion survived the test and did not disappear after political emancipation. As reported by Marx this happened because when religion is expelled from the sphere of public law to that of private law, religion becomes the spirit of civil society and the essence of differentiation which leads to, and presupposes, inequality. Political emancipation divides the human being into two antagonistic spheres: the *individual*, who is egoistic by nature and based in inequality and corresponds to civil society; and the *citizen*, who is based in common solidarity and equality and complements with the State. This separation can only be overcome by *human emancipation*.

Human emancipation is the final and real kind of reachable and desired emancipation by all human beings. Human emancipation would erase all deficiencies that are found in civil society: private property, insecurity and religion. Human emancipation would, then, end *social inequality*. Only then, humans would achieve real and total freedom. Only when the individual and the citizen would synthesize their antagonisms in the *species-being* would humanity be free from all its social and political constraints and a truly *democratic State* would appear. (2)

Marx's views on Judaism have been defined as anti-Semitic by several critics; but it is not the case (3). First of all, Marx was a strong advocate for political emancipation to the Jewish communities in Europe, especially in Germany, and he believed, in opposition to Bauer, that the Jewry was fully capable of becoming citizens in a secular State by privatizing their creed. Although, it has to be said that Marx, like Bauer, considered Judaism to be a religion based on laws; he did not directly consider the case if Judaism could withstand the transformation to a private form. Orthodox Jews, for example, would not become suitable for citizenship in the modern secular State. Because Marx could not resolve this argument in a direct form he chose to solve it by taking Judaism in its socio-historical context instead than in a purely theological way.

To Marx Jews have embodied the mercantile spirit in a natural economy dominated Europe (4). Jews did not choose to be merchants or entrepreneurs: feudal society limited them to those kinds of activities. They could not legally own land or be members of any corporate guild. Jews could only deal with money or goods exchange(5). Then, Jews could only be considered as bourgeois, as capitalists, as financiers. Even if, like Marx says, the Jewish mercantile particularity had already generalized through the Christian world and there was no economic basis for distinguishing between Jews and Gentiles, which allowed the Jews to practically self-emancipate by the "Judaization" of society; the general public was still perceiving Judaism as a synonymous of "merchants"(6). It is rather interesting to note that in 1850 half of all entrepreneurs in Berlin were Jews and that in 1861 58% of the Prussian Jewry was engaged in commerce and credit, while only 2% of Christians was similarly employed (7). When Marx calls for the abolition of Judaism, he is calling for the abolition of

the economic activity that was a reflection of the Jews social-historical role in society; he is calling for the end of the mercantile/capitalist elements that produce social inequality. The abolition of Judaism means the abolition of all religions through the correction of the secular defect of civil society(8).

Finally, Marx's views on the political emancipation of a religious minority and of social emancipation as the only way to end all inequalities and distinctions could be helpful in order to understand the current *Muslim Question* that is concerning much of Europe. The Muslim question is significantly different from 19th century's Jewish question. Jews were asking for the State's recognition of the same basic constitutional rights that Christians already, or were about to, benefited from. Additionally, liberal-secularists, like Bauer, were concerned about Judaism's capability to remove their religious practices from the public sphere and privatize them. According to them, it was essential for the survival of the modern secular State that its citizens should exclude their religious distinctiveness from all of their public interactions with the State or with other fellow citizens. Today, Muslims in Europe enjoy all of the individual and social rights that are recognized in each of the European Constitutions; meaning political emancipation is not an issue. It is Islam's interactions with the secular, and almost irreligious, European public spheres that has become one of the most fervent debates in the last few years.

Such debate extremely overcomes the purpose of this article, but a few points should be taken into account regarding the Muslim question and the relevance of Marx's work on the matter. Marx, just like with the political emancipation of the Jews, would not have been able to directly confront the possibility of a real privatization of Islamic beliefs, because he would have faced the same issue that arose in the Jewish question: Islam, like Judaism, is a religion of laws. As it has been said, a religion of laws will almost certainly contradict the laws of a secular State and would not be able to refrain from interrelate with the public sphere.

For example, teachers wearing a Muslim veil or turban in public schools; Muslim women wearing burqas in public facilities; the introduction of Sharia law in order to legalize social relationships within Muslim communities and in their relations with non-Muslim communities; etc., are challenges to the secular State. Several European countries are juggling between the right of freedom of religion and absolute secularism(9): France chooses to ban burqas in public spaces; the Netherlands to expel teachers from public schools that insisted in wearing veils or turbans in class; Italy to reform family law in order to stop "honor killings" among Muslim families; etc.

But like with Judaism, Marx would overcome Islam's inability to privatize its creed by arguing that such incapability is a symptom of the antagonism between civil society (the individual egoistic man) and the State (the solidary citizen) and that will never be surpassed until human emancipation is obtained.

Interestingly enough, while during the 19th century Jews were an equivalent to bourgeois and entrepreneurs, Muslims of the 21st century, on the other hand, are identified with other kinds of socio-economic characterization. Muslims are identified either as proletarians or as lumpenproletarians. Remarkably, the occupational standing of 84% of Muslims living in Germany is either blue or white collar; compared to just 40% of non-Muslims Germans (10); 20% of young non-Muslim French are unemployed compared to 50% of young French

Muslims(11); 9% of non-Muslim Dutch are unemployed, while 30% of Dutch Muslims are jobless(12); 10% of non-Muslim Belgians live below the poverty line, while 60% of Muslim Belgians are poor(13); 15% of non-Muslim British households are in poverty, but that percentage ascends to 55% when Muslim British households are considered(14). In Europe 80% of Muslim men are employed in low-skill/low-wage jobs and in routine manual and service occupations, only 45% of non-Muslim men are employed in the same kind of jobs(15). Finally, when the Human Development Index is taken into account and it is divided among the Muslim and non-Muslim population in the European countries it is evidenced that the standard of living of Muslim communities is significantly lower than that of the rest (16).

This brief and expedited socio-economic context of Muslims in Europe would be employed by Marx in order to circumvent Islam's inability to privatize its creed:

Muslims, although they live in modern secular States and enjoy political emancipation, persist in carrying on with their religious practices in public spaces, and sometimes in opposition to public laws, because they are suffering social inequality; they are suffering from not attaining human emancipation. Of course, all human beings lack of human emancipation, not only Muslims in Europe, but it is Muslims' special socio-economic situation in Europe that creates a secular deficiency from political emancipation and prevents their religion's transformation into a private creed. Jews did not have political emancipation and were, in their majority, entrepreneurs, which gave them a better socio-economic standing and allowed them to privatize their religion once political emancipation was conquered. Most of European Muslims, in contrast, are proletarians and, in worst cases, lumpenproletarians (17)and even if they enjoy political emancipation they find themselves in a position characterized by an extreme social inequality, that does not allow many of them to privatize their creed (18). Only through human emancipation and social equality they would be able to negate their religious differentiation; because in a true democratic State, a communist State according to Marx, communism itself would act as a religious belief and manner of living. That is, perhaps, how Marx intended to accomplish the abolition of all religions: by the emergence of a new politically and socially equal "religion for all human beings", that of communism.

(1) Peled Yoad; "From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation"; *History of Political Thought*; Vol. XIII, No. 3, Autumn, 1992.

(2) Marx borrows the concept of *species-being* from Feuerbach. It seems to be implied in the text, although it is more possible to be influenced by later Marx's texts, that revolution is the mean to obtain human emancipation; the mean that those who suffer from social inequality will use in order to end that suffering. Once human emancipation is reached then the democratic/communist State is at hand. Again, this is not actually said in *On the Jewish Question*.

(3) See Flannery Edward, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, pp.154-157; and Lewis Bernard, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice*, W.

W. Norton & Company, New York, 1999, pp. 112.

(4) Peled Yoad; “From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation”; *History of Political Thought*; Vol. XIII, No. 3, Autumn, 1992, pp. 475.

(5) It was this image of the “financial Jew”, embodied in the Rothschild dynasty, which begot the western anti-Semitic wave of the 19th and 20th century. See Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Benediction Books, New York, 2009; Ferguson Niall, [*The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*](#), Penguin, New York, 2009; Ferguson Niall, [*The House of Rothschild*](#), Penguin, New York, 2000; Landes David, [*Dynasties: Fortunes and Misfortunes of the World's Great Family Businesses*](#), Penguin, New York, 2007.

(6) Actually, the word “Judentum” came to be a synonymous with commerce.

(7) Sorkin David, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780-1840*, Wayne State University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 108-9.

(8) Peled Yoad; “From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation”; *History of Political Thought*; Vol. XIII, No. 3, Autumn, 1992, pp. 481.

(9) For more about the interaction of Muslim minorities and political liberalism in a Rawlsian version see Benhenda, Mostapha, “For Muslim Minorities, it is Possible to Endorse Political Liberalism, but this is not Enough”, *Journal Of Islamic Law and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2, May 2009, pp. 71-87. The article concludes that almost all Muslim minorities could and will endorse political liberalism, but many will not be able to do it because of a religious normative prohibition to reform their doctrine.

(10) “Muslim Life in Germany”, **Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, German Government**, <http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Migration/Publikationen/Forschung/Forschungsberichte/fb6-muslimisches-leben.templateId=raw.property=publicationFile.pdf/fb6-muslimisches-leben.pdf>

(11) “Muslims in Europe”, **Open Society Institute**; http://www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/muslims-europe-20091215/a-muslims-europe-20100302.pdf

(12) *Ibid.*

(13) *Ibid.*

(14) *Ibid.*

(15) *Ibid.*

(16) For example, the HDI of Spain, Italy, Great Britain, France, Germany and

Sweden are: 0,955; 0,951; 0,947; 0,961; 0,947 and 0,963 respectively; while the HDI of their respective Muslim communities are: 0,841; 0,848; 0,830; 0,850; 0,860; 0,912. Available at the European Social Survey <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/>

(17) Loïc Wacquant would call them “urban outcasts” or marginal. See Wacquant Loïc, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007; Wacquant Loïc, *Prisons of Poverty*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2009; Wacquant Loïc, *Los Condenados de la ciudad. Gueto, peripherias, Estado*, Siglo XII Editores, Buenos Aires, 2007.

(18) Certainly they are more religious than Christian and Jewish Europeans because they are perceived as a marginalized minority and in fierce competition with non-Muslim proletarians. It is civil society that enforces religious differentiation on them.

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