



Photos taken by Marion Kant of an open air exhibition in Philadelphia, 2019

# Then in What Sense Are You Jewish?

Marion Kant

PRIMO LEVI: I had an argument with a believer ...

FERDINANDO CAMON: You're not a believer?

LEVI: No, I never have been. I'd like to be, but I don't succeed.

CAMON: Then in what sense are you Jewish?

LEVI: A simple matter of culture. If it hadn't been for the racial laws and the concentration camp, I'd probably no longer be a Jew, except for my last name. Instead, this dual experience, the racial laws and the concentration camp, stamped me the way you stamp a steel plate. At this point I'm a Jew, they've sewn the star of David on me and not only on my clothes.

CAMON: With whom did you have that argument?

LEVI: ... he's the one mentioned as "the assistant" in the "Potassium" story... he came to see me after my release to tell me I was clearly one of the elect, since I'd been chosen to survive in order for me to write "Survival in Auschwitz" (the autobiographical book Levi wrote in 1947). And this, I must confess, seemed to me a blasphemy, that God should grant privileges, saving one person and condemning someone else...

CAMON: Meaning that Auschwitz is proof of the nonexistence of God?

LEVI: There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God... (Levi 2003, 51).

This short exchange summarizes the tensions around the conceptions of being Jewish. These tensions are not new. Today, as we are facing a further deterioration of values and instability of identity on the one hand and a quest to secure our individual and communal identities on the other, we should confront, as Levi did, the question of 'being Jewish'.

Levi's summary points to three of the main themes in question regarding modern Jewish existence: religion versus the secular,

the national versus the individual and election, that is, belonging to a "chosen people" whose existence and identities are justified with religious, national or secular rationalizations. These dynamics between religious, secular and national identities emerged in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. For 200 years, from 1789 to 1989, we, the people in European and Western countries, have lived in the Age of Enlightenment, with ideas in practice which have been defined by the principles of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (freedom, equality and brotherhood); they are also the ideas articulated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776. We have lived in the age of reason, with the assumption that progress marked the future of civilized society; that facts, the sciences, proof, evidence and reasonable argumentation guided human existence rather than irrational beliefs, blind devotion, or popular superstition; we relied on legal frames and rational jurisdiction. The Enlightenment brought us the concept of emancipation of individuals, the concepts of the rights of man, the rights of the citizen – it brought us the "Jewish Question" and the "Women's Question". The "Jewish Question" and the "Women's Question" are the names given to the debates that ran through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and that stand for problems concerning the status and place of Jews and women in society. These questions were condensations of social issues put into striking formulations; the names circumscribe those two groups that would demand emancipatory rights for themselves after the promise of liberty and equality. As a direct consequence of taking rights for individuals seriously and of abolishing the rights of the corporate bodies of the ancient regimes, particularly those of religious institutions, Jews and women began to test just how much equality and liberty could be bestowed on them and how a society

facing radical change would be able to cope with the extension of civil, social and political rights.

As a result of the possibility to claim a new civil status for groups heretofore ignored, two more major ideologies emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century alongside the liberalism of the republic: Marxism with its vision of liberating the oppressed working people, the proletariat, and nationalism with its racial theory that saw its chance in liberating the forgotten and suppressed national entities in Europe. Both ideologies emerged as reactions to the rationalism of the enlightenment; both were extensions of revolution as well as counter-revolution and they projected their grand visions of future societies onto a dynamic and explosive social reality. (In addition, both can substitute for conventional religions). They integrated scientific methods into their philosophies and politics and managed to justify their utopian visions in such a way that both could be turned into mass movements. They both also were built on the interpretation of rights: Marxism on the right of economic justice as well as opposition to social and economic inequality and nationalism on the right of national self-determination and the recognition of difference rather than a blanket statement of sameness. Both also integrated the "Jewish Question" into their projections: if Jews were prepared to understand their class status and work towards the abolition of economic inequality, then they too would be liberated and be equal in a society striving towards total equality. As one of several results, many Jews became attracted to this ideal of social justice in action as it offered them that public space that they had not been able to gain. They would no longer be condemned to be second or third-class citizens of the bourgeois world; they could articulate their own liberation. Many became engaged, the Bundist movement is one example, the early Zionist movement in its socialist incarnation another. Social democracy, socialism and communism had such a high proportion of Jews involved in their theoretical articulation and practical realization because a restricting and restrictive Judaism could be left behind.

Nationalist ideologies, on the other hand, never made such promises; they are built on exclusion. Jews were the people without land and without roots; they could never become part of the pure and true people of a specific geographical area. They could never 'belong'; blood and soil let culture blossom and Jews had no soil, thus no culture of their own. They would have to remain separate and therefore without the same rights as those who could claim ancient and original roots. Nationalism's romantic background, just as the origins of the independent, autonomous self that acts on the assumption of agency and free will, grew from that set of "negative dialectics", as Adorno and Horkheimer called them, that turned enlightened universalism and universal equality into their opposites. But socialist as well as nationalist identities were corporate - they were group, i.e. class or community bound. Liberal ideologies, on the other hand, emphasised opportunities to be taken by the individual.

The promises of the Enlightenment did not lead to the harmonious and free world that was envisioned in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Regardless of all the rights that were acquired over the past 200 years, we never reached that ideal state of human harmonic interaction and

equilibrium that would end war, want and wretchedness. Instead of social and economic equality, inequality and corruption have spread. In fact, the "negative dialectics" brought about the culmination of nationalism and racism in Nazi Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the elevation of the most extreme inequality imaginable to state doctrine and as its result, the extermination of European Jewry. Religion and nationalism have returned with a vengeance.

In one way the "Jewish Question" seemed solved in that Jews in 1945 were either murdered or destined to withdraw from the project of assimilation, acculturation and integration into the societies of European modern, industrialized countries. The choices that Emancipation had forced upon the new citizens of Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries became a plague again: self-identity as well as publicly imposed or communal, corporate identities and the attempt to navigate between extremes. That was particularly relevant for those Jews who took the promise of Emancipation seriously as well as for the art of movement: Emancipation offered the Jewish self a new body that could move, that had to move differently in social spaces, metaphorically as well as literally, physically. But dialectically and paradoxically, the multi-dimensional self would henceforth feel the urge to condense itself into a core identity, a struggle, that of course can only bring about a clash of identity imaginations - not clarity but quest. External and communal pressures to conform would be matched by internal desires to freely choose one's concept of self. And just as much as self-identification in relation to publicly imposed identity clashed, the identity of the self also entered into a tension-laden relationship to that of the group. For Jews, this was a threefold tense negotiation: the internalized self-struggling to become intelligible, the self in opposition to the harmony within the group to which the self supposedly belonged and the perception of characteristics externally imposed or expected from self and group. These tensions, in the end, were insoluble, and these tensions are haunting us today ever more.

The emancipated Jewish body was forced to react and appropriate social spaces and needed to coordinate internal, private self-conception with its public, that is its political and social experiences and the perceived identities it was supposed to have or display. In the beginning of this process of "freedom from self-incurred tutelage" (Kant, 1784) the Jewish body had to negotiate between the pull back to religious adherence, to the corporate conception of Jews legitimately Jewish only within the rabbinic interpretation of life, or the move towards the freedom to leave the ghetto that had held the body within a confined, separate social space. But the ghetto too produced a specific mentality and resided within the body as mental power; the ghetto could become the symbol of the conservation of security and tradition rather than freedom. This Jewish body [initially and primarily the male Jewish body] thus had to constantly choose: it had to confront the problem of social or external versus self-perceived or internal identity and conceptions of being Jewish.

The Jewish body would have to prove itself as Jewish human being as well as citizen of a state or a nation or, in Kantian terms, as a private and public Jew. That would apply to the Jewish artist as well. This apposition of private and public has entered our language and

our consciousness; it has helped us to articulate the boundaries of the self and the boundaries of the modern condition. A Jew would have to observe Mosaic religious principles – privately, at home in the private sphere – yet also, and at the same time, be the democratically minded citizen of a state and publicly conceal those markers of religious adherence that are also markers of difference and distinction.

It is within this juxtaposition of public and private that we see one of the first serious problems emerging for the Jews after enlightened thought was institutionalized in the *Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in August 1789 through the French Revolution. Jews now entered into double loyalties: to their religious communities with their customs and habits as well as to the states or republics within which they lived. Immediately, species/universal human being and public/private perceptions began to clash. Jews found themselves newly imprisoned by precisely those conditions that were supposed to guarantee freedom. With the strengthening of the nation state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of, for instance, France, Germany and Italy, another layer of identity added itself to the already complicated relationship of allegiance to the state. Nationality and extreme nationalism with their tendencies toward ethnogenesis made Jewish integration into the European nation states more difficult as the Jews, perceived as an always alien nation would never be able to fulfill concepts of purity of roots, origin and belonging that nationalists postulated within racial ideologies. Marxism, an economic determinist social model, attracted so many Jews in the later 19<sup>th</sup> c, particularly in Eastern Europe, because “it eliminated racial or national distinctions and argued that international class struggle defined modern human existence.” Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish Jewish woman, could therefore lead the German communist movement and envision a socialist future for Russian or French workers.

Judaism, as all religions, is based on corporate identity that the religious observer has to internalize and as such it reduces the individual to the believer and member of the religious community – religious laws and the corporate form of religious organization demand the whole human being and do not allow the private/public separation that the modern state mandates. The modern individual as citizen is required to deny the corporate nature of religion and subvert or hide identifiers of religious loyalties. These identifiers are usually attached to the body and are material representations of ideas and principles such as the Christian cross, the monk's or nun's habit, the *chador* or *burqa* [enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions], the Jewish *yarmelka* or *kippa* [skull cap] and the orthodox Jewish women's *sheitel* [wig], etc. The contemporary debate on wearing the *burqa* is merely one example of how this debate plays out today. The *burqa* is not a fashion choice, it is a requirement for Muslim women to wear as a sign of religious adherence, just as Jewish orthodox men or women have to indicate adherence to their religion through clothing. The emphasis of individual rights in the revolutionary context of 1789 made this tension between the citizen and the corporation manifest and it asserted its own rights over it.

Religious identity can never be only a personal, individual matter; religious organization requires corporate, communal frameworks.

The demand to make the practice of religion a private activity lead to the insoluble paradox that religion can never be entirely private and always calls for the extension of the private into the public sphere. Yet demonstration of religious observance is supposed to be confined to the private sphere and not intrude into the public sphere of state institutions. That, of course, also necessitates the perpetual re-definition and drawing of boundaries of private, public and state spheres.

The arts were immensely important agents in the interpretation of Emancipation. Ballet, as part of the performance arts, was a social intervention that allowed the articulation of the new, bourgeois self as well as its refutation. It is hardly surprising that the theatrical European stage was conquered by Jews, who recognised that it was the perfect space to discuss all matters relating to Emancipation and liberation – to the point that Leopold Jessner in the 1920s asked whether the German theatre was a Jewish invention and had been completely 'Jewified' (Jessner, 1923). The theatre, and ballet in particular, as a public institution became an ideal place to challenge the boundaries of being 'Jewish'.

The ballet *Giselle*, first performed in Paris in 1841 might not be a work most will associate with Jewishness or Jews. Yet the story of a dancing young woman who dies because she is betrayed by her beloved was written by one of the most prominent German Jews: Heinrich Heine, who embodied the difficulty of Jewish Emancipation like no other writer. The story of *Giselle* is about a fatal attraction, about Emancipation gone wrong and a society that could not tolerate a woman articulating and liberating herself through dance.

Heine analyzed religions, new and old, so that he could understand the choices that the new age enforced: “Yes, I repeat the words...: freedom is a new religion, the religion of our age. If Christ is not the God of this religion, he is still one of its high-priests, and his name shines consolingly in the hearts of its children. But the French are the chosen people of the new religion, the first gospels and dogmas were penned in their language. Paris is the New Jerusalem, and the Rhine is the Jordan which separates the land of Freedom from the land of the Philistines” (Heine, 1887, 79).

Heine explored the Christian and Mosaic religions but also pagan belief systems, and their legacies. He examined the process of blending these belief strands together and demanded that humanity abandon Judeo-Christian asceticism and the cult of suffering, pain and redemption through denial of the physical, and return to a more liberated, hedonistic, body-orientated culture that remembered Greco-Roman pleasures. He developed these ideas in his literary works, but above all in his ballet libretti, among them the tale of the *willis*, the abandoned brides who are punished for refusing to submit to social norms.

Heine was the author who made his audiences aware of the 'Jewish Question' – because he was a Jew, and the 'Women's Question' – because he recognised the similarities and social dynamite that both social problems contained. He examined Emancipation through his writings on movement and the moving body which contained a most important insight: emancipation was only then

complete when it liberated body as well as mind. His fascination with the physicality of Emancipation could therefore find in ballet and movement an ideal art form. Heine's movement aesthetic was not specifically Jewish, it was the postulation of freedom for those who had not acquired it yet and it was conceived by a deeply conflicted German Jew, battling over the meaning of Jewish Emancipation. Giselle, therefore, is as much Jewish as she is not Jewish at all.

This discourse on Emancipation, full of hatred and animosity, found its expression in the anti-Semitic interpretation of the argument of the people without land and without an authentic culture that composer Richard Wagner advanced (Wagner, 1850/1869). For him and nationalist Germans like him, Jews could never be creative and were condemned to borrow, steal and imitate. The German-Jewish dispute of the 1850s played out directly between artists: Heinrich Heine, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Giacomo Meyerbeer and Richard Wagner: Jews by their religious, and according to Wagner, their innate biological nature as well, had betrayed art and therefore had to be deprived of German nationality – and the ability to create art.

Many of these arguments still haunt us. We are caught ever more between the fracturing that individualization as process of modernization brought about and the pull towards a secure return to a communal fold, be that a national, religious or ethnic community setting. But can you be both at the same time – a highly authentic individual and part of a religious, i.e. corporate community held together by corporate principles? The individual versus the community, the individual as private as well as public being: these are the insoluble contradictions of modernity. We cannot escape them, just as Heine or Levi could not. But the art of movement can embody the cultural and political conditions of a society rather than only reflect individual desires. It can take political responsibility, act as contemplative agent and explore positions and solutions.

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