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Communities Are Complicated; Indeed, They May Not Even Be Communal

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My old friend Daniel Boyarin has raised, not for the first time, the problem of whether one can imagine what he calls "an ethical form of Jewish collective continuity." He strikes out against the notion of such a "Jewish" ethical continuity seeing it having been negated in the present discussion, the negation driven by two arguments, "[Christian] supersessionism" on the right and "territorial nationalism" on the left. Whether it is possible "to inform prejudice against collective Jewish continuity is perhaps mitigated when Jews per se are obviously the objects of collective discrimination, and correspondingly exacerbated when Jews as a collective appear to be 'powerful' or 'secure.'" Anti-Semitism or the "model minority."

Here we might begin to see what I perceive as the central difficulty of Boyarin's argument—you might have noticed it yourselves: he speaks of a "Jewish collective continuity"; I speak of "'Jewish' continuity." Boyarin recognizes this construction of the "Jew" in his understanding that these stereotypes can be of the Jew as victim or as manipulator. Or indeed as his speculation of whether there could be a "highly contingent possibility of an ethical collective existence against state Zionism and against assimilation (called cosmopolitanism)." But this does not relieve his argument of the problem that these are not simple binaries, but rather the presence within and beyond any given, self-limited definition of the "Jew" of competing symbolic registers that define the authentic as opposed to the simulacra. Each constituted community creates their own authentic or inauthentic "Jews," and therein lies the problem.

Let us rather layer his understanding of the constitution of the "community" of "Jews" he desires out of the meanings of "community," not merely in its communitarian formulations by a Amitai Etzione or a Charles Taylor, but rather it is structuring of another, and for me, more compelling reading of the emergence of the national state, one that is vital to my understanding of both the history of Zionism as well as the simultaneous existence of complementary or

competing models of a "Jewish" community in the diaspora. Here the political theorist Benedict Anderson is helpful. In his widely cited *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he argues that communities as such arise when the national state becomes so large or so defuse that a symbolic register, the flag, the leader, language, race, or indeed, health and illness come to be the focus of the newly constituted symbolic community.[1] Anderson's now classic formulation holds that the very concept of the nation arises in the Enlightenment at the moment when there are no longer uniform symbolic networks, such as the divine right of kings, to define the national community. The symbolic nature of such new communities must seem as "natural" as did the older systems. Anderson writes, "in everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen. In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage, and birth-era—all those things one cannot help. And in these 'natural ties' one senses what one might call 'the beauty of *gemeinschaft*.' To put it another way, precisely because such ties are not chosen, they have about them a halo of disinterestedness" (47). This is a symbolic rethinking of John Rawls' notion of "social unions," in his *Theory of Justice*, in which individuals complete themselves, for good or for ill, by joining or constituting such communities. And I would argue that Boyarin's notion of "an ethical community" is one of the givens for his sense of what is a "natural" component of "an ethical form of Jewish collective continuity." "Ethics" is shorthand for *my* understanding of positive moral action; sadly, that has been argued on both sides of the "moral spectrum," by Carl Schmitt as well as Hans Küng.

Like Anderson, William Bloom stressed that "national identity ... is that paradigm condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with the national symbols—have internalized the symbols of the nation—so that they may act as one psychological group when there is a threat to, or the possibility of the enhancement of, these symbols of national identity."[2] But Bloom also recognizes that as much as we identify with certain symbols, we also defined ourselves against other symbolic registers as we are "in a state of permanent competition with its international environment" (74). Here Bloom makes it clear that he is writing about the constitution not only of the nation-state but also of the very idea of a community in the post-Enlightenment era. Such nation-states incorporated into them, sometimes forcefully, other communities, such as the Jews, while denying that there could ever be a multicultural nation, a nation that was both symbolic in one register but incorporating other competing registers. Competing symbolic networks thus enable a citizen to shift codes from within to without any given identity.

Enlightenment thinkers, such as J. G. Herder, in his Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind, denied that there could ever be a multicultural or multilingual nation, a nation that could incorporate other, competing symbolic

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), 19.

[2] William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52.

vocabularies, thus enabling a citizen to shift symbolic codes.[3] (Herder really hated the Swiss confederation as its very existence defied his own logic!) When an individual or a group is confronted with such inherent contradictions, when two symbolic systems defining identity clash, or seem to clash, the resulting double bind, as Gregory Bateson noted more than half a century ago, seeks alternative explanations. It is the identification with the collective, no matter how contradictory the responses nor how heterogenous such a collective actually is, that is at the center of this process. It is a flight into the symbolic realm rather than an act of rational choice.

Sigmund Freud's understanding of the wellspring of mass psychology and its construction of difference through the drawing of symbolic boundaries can also be of help unravelling this problem of simultaneous symbolic codes in which all of us exist defining who or even better what is "Jewish." In his 1921 essay, he began with the claim that had long been established in the psychological literature of the late nineteenth century concerning collective behavior that "a group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it." But what he adds is that collectives "think in images, which call one another up by association (just as they arise with individuals in states of free imagination), and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable agency" (68). These images are the core of the symbolic vocabulary that both Anderson and Bloom gesture toward. Hatred is at the core of such images, but its wellspring is fear. "A group impresses the individual as being an unlimited power and an insurmountable peril. For the moment it replaces the whole of human society, which is the wielder of authority, whose punishments the individual fears, and for whose sake he has submitted to so many inhibitions" (83). What motivates the collective is a fear that now has a clearly definable source. That such fear comes to be what Jacques Lacan, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, labels the symbolic register, that "aspect of experience whereby signification is introduced as distinct from representation. Representation requires resemblance, whereas signification rests on difference: At its most basic level it rests on the absence of the object named, on the difference between word and thing, and on the differences among words."[4] It is difference that generates the images of stranger and familiar to cause and effect. The symbols of difference, simultaneously imaginary, symbolic, and real, imbricate actual human beings. They form our "ethical" relationship with those living in a world seen as existing in and through a world of images.

If we then address the constitution of communities and states, we can understand that they are inherently contradictory, containing within them "subgroups" constituting various symbolic registers that define "their" nation. And that these registers are not only fluid but of necessity respond to the other internal and external registers into which they come in contact. It is not so much that the individuals in these communities "code switch," but they borrow and shift their registers based on momentary needs and functions. Boyarin sets up a

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[3] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London: J. Johnson, 1800), 658.

[4] John Muller, "Lacan's Mirror Stage," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 5 (1985): 233–52, esp. 233.

binary between "state Zionism and against assimilation (called cosmopolitanism)." Neither, he states, has the possible of being able to be understood as an "ethical community."

If we are to look seriously at "Jews," however defined, in the farthest reaches of the diaspora, we must also understand the paradigmatic idea of Jews as a people destined or condemned to be scattered throughout the world. One key to this is to comprehend the grand narratives about the mundivagant Jew, which from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century focused on the double strand of a positive or a negative image of mobility.[5] The Jews were the litmus test for this in German-speaking central Europe: were they "aliens," a beneficent or at least a malleable population because they were mobile, or were they "predators," a threat to established or evolving national identity because of their mobility. But their mobility was assumed: Jews could never be "rooted" or even, autarkic. They could only be marginal and dependent. Boyarin recognizes this. This discourse, with all of the ambiguities on both sides of the issue, was reflected in the idea of a cosmopolitan versus a nomadic people. And both were either given or denied any ethical basis depending on how this was framed. And the Jews, from the St. Augustine's reading of the "Old Testament" to the present, were taken as the exemplary cases for each position.

Over and over again, cosmopolitanism and its sister concept nomadism have taken on quite different meanings when their referent is the Jews. Once this litmus test is applied, both cosmopolitanism and nomadism are clearly revealed as symbolic manifestations of the anti-Semitic stereotype, which associates Jews with capital. Such a history of the cosmopolitan points toward the ambivalence of these very concepts when applied in the present day to specific categories of social and geographic mobility, whether these refer to the Jew, the asylum seeker, the migrant, or the undocumented immigrant. The marginal and excluded of Enlightenment Germany may have transmuted into the global citizen of the twenty-first century in some instances, but the aura of the corrupt and corrupting, of the rootless and the transitory, of the foreign and the unhoused always remains beneath the surface and shapes the sense of what it means to be cosmopolitan and global. And as such it impacts upon the self-image of those so defined.

The universal claim of globalization and its surrogate cosmopolitanism is that all human beings share certain innate human rights, including the free movement of peoples across what are seen as the superficial boundaries of nation, class, race, caste, and perhaps even gender and sexuality.[6] The tension between the universal and local meanings of *cosmopolitanism*, however, originally arose in the Enlightenment, as did the common use of the term itself.

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[5] See, for example, Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider, "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda," *British Journal of Sociology* 57 (2006): 1–23, as well as their "A Literature on Cosmopolitanism: An Overview," *The British Journal of Sociology* 57 (2006): 153–64. Recently David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013) has raised the question of the projection of such spectral qualities on to the stereotype of the Jew.

[6] Tim Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

The Jews as an abstraction and as a social reality come to be the litmus test in the Enlightenment through which these notions' potential and difficulties can be analyzed.[7] When cosmopolitanism is examined under this lens, we have a double focus: first, the role that the abstraction "the Jews" played in formulating theories of the acceptability of, or dangers in, the movement of peoples beyond and across national boundaries and, second, the response of actual individuals who define themselves as Jews to such attitudes and meanings. This is a forerunner of what the British scholar of geography, Ulrike Vieten, calls the "novel form of *regional cosmopolitanism* [that] is underway in Europe."[8] But it has deeper historical roots. As the meanings of all of these concepts (cosmopolitanism, boundary, Jews, as well as capital) shift and evolve, so too do the responses of those generating them and seeing them as applicable or inapplicable to their particular circumstances as these shift over time and in various contexts.

Boyarin refuses to see the simple fact that all of his binaries have the potential for being ethical or divisive; all are means of defining communities from within and from without through variant means of defining the "Jew"—yes even the cosmopolitan Jew—whose "assimilation" (I would rather be less pejorative and say acculturation) had and has a huge ethical mandate from the Enlightenment to the present moment. That it also could be unethical is a given: as all human beings, no matter their sense of community, never abandon the ability to critique and thus transcend or overhaul the symbolic regime in which they live. Boyarin thus employs a straw "cosmopolitanism, the kind that seeks to deracinate deep and important differences in *Lebensformen* between different human groups and somehow always advances a universal morality that is consistent with the mores of the dominant political and ethnic group." This he takes from Césaire's response to Sartre; but remember that it is also Sartre who, at more of less the same moment, in *Réflexions sur la question juive*, is creating his own image of the "Jew" as the perpetual victim without true agency. Difference remains a central problem, but who is drawing the boundaries and how they define the object is always central to such an undertaking. Boyarin's problem is with the "universal," but the reality is that every such a notion of the universal, as Boyarin shows, is itself parochial and functional. The central problem with using *Négritude* as an answer to cosmopolitanism is that rather than being an alternative, it simply registered the code switching demanded in the colonial (and I may add the postcolonial) world of Francophonie. (Let me note that I made the exact same argument about Anglophone writing in sub-Sahara Africa in regard to Wole Soyinka's work.[9]) The analogy is not to the "natural" code-switching ability of the "Jews" but rather to diasporic (or to borrow a term, *overseas*) Israelis, who have a valuable code-switching skill to sell, their command of spoken Hebrew. If French was (and is) the common coin of *Négritude*, not the indigenous languages

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[7] Sander L. Gilman and Cathy Gelbin, *Multiculturalism and the Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[8] Ulrike M. Vieten, *Gender and Cosmopolitanism in Europe: A Feminist Perspective* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 7.

[9] Sander L, Gilman, "Wole Soyinka and Brecht—Creating the other within the World of Words," in *Wahlverwandtschaften-Elective Affinities: Edith Ihekweazu in Memoriam*, eds. Willfried F. Feuser, Marion Pape, and Elias O. Dunu (Bayreuth, Germany: Boomerang Press, 1993), 41–56.

of Africa, then modern Hebrew is the common coin of the new "Jewish" world. I need not show why this is equally problematic, connected as it is with the history and ideology of Zionism and its on-going role within contemporary institutional Judaism, no matter what its ideology. For *Négritude*, read by Boyarin as a positive expression of identity, is a continuation of the political tool as French has had as a national symbolic from the age of the Sun King to the present. Francophone expansionism begins in France proper, ask the people in Brittiany or the South, well before its function in the age of colonization beyond Europe. And it furthered the employment of "real" French speakers, pace Charles de Gaulle speaking in New Orleans in 1960, advocating for the teaching of "real" French to the "benighted natives" of Southwestern Louisiana. The fact that today major writers and thinkers in Africa, such as Nicéphore Soglo (Benin), Adly Mansour (Egypt), and Paul Biya (Cameroon), are *énarques* continues this claim.

Code switching is cosmopolitanism, and it is a claim of access to higher culture. (The Romans insisted that their children learn Greek. And this became a constant source of employment for Greek scholars as real as that for modern Hebrew speakers in diasporic Jewish communities.) Too many variables to even begin to a layer "ethics" on to one model of community formation or another. The sad truth of Boyarin's claim is that *all* communities, parochial or cosmopolitan, lay claim to perpetuating the ethical lives of their inhabitants (except the ones they don't like and those they label "unethical").

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