

# About Maxime Rodinson and his collection of essays: *Cult, Ghetto and the State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question*(1983)

After reviewing Jean-Paul Sartre's *Reflections on the Jewish question*<sup>1</sup>, I will deal here with the articles collected in *Cult, Ghetto and the State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question*<sup>2</sup>? not with the main text (*Israel, a colonial settler-state*, published separately by Monad Press, 1973) which is included in the French original version of *Peuple juif or problème juif?* that I used to write this text. I am not interested here in dealing with Rodinson's criticism of Jewish nationalism (Zionism), Israeli governments and colonialism. His critiques are carried out in a particularly incisive, subtle and thorough manner in this book, and today, many left anti-Zionists should draw inspiration from his attitude.

My point is different: I want to show to what extent French intellectuals as well as left and far left activists (including Maxime Rodinson) have always had difficulty in understanding antisemitism and the so-called «Jewish question», in contrast to other countries where at least some left scholars and activists have succeeded in going beyond the simplistic Marxist discourse on antisemitism and in providing us with theoretical weapons to fight this scourge.

The journal *Ni patrie ni frontières* and the website npnf. eu have already published several translations to illustrate this theoretical and political gap between France and other countries, featuring contributions by Marcel Stoetzler, Stephan Grigat, Werner Bonefeld, Keith Kahn-Harris, Spencer Sunshine, Thomas Haury, Steve Cohen, Olaf Kistenmacher, David Hirsh, Camilla Bassi, Andreas Peham, Eric Krebbers, Martin Thomas and Francesco Germinario. Further translations into French will follow...

One can totally agree with left «anti-Zionists» when they denounce Israel's war crimes, the exploitation and discrimination suffered by Palestinians and Israeli Arabs; one can support the right of the Palestinians to have their own state, wish for a bi-national state, a socialist Federation of the Middle East, or (even better) the abolition of all existing states in this region and elsewhere. But one must also condemn the willful blindness of many left anti-Zionists to antisemitism (an antisemitism which has been particularly deadly in France since the long torture and murder of Ilan Halimi in 2006<sup>3</sup>), and their blindness to the antisemitic viruses that abound in so-called «anti-

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<sup>1</sup> See my critique (in French) here <http://npnf.eu/spip.php?article879>)

<sup>2</sup> In French, *Peuple juif ou problème juif?* includes 7 articles plus the text called « Israel : fait colonial ? » translated *Israel, a colonial settler-state*... without the original question mark. In English, these 7 texts are included in *Cult, Ghetto and the State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question*, Al Saqsi Books, 1983. My quotes refer to the pages of the French edition and to the new preface to the French edition in 1997, not to the English edition.

<sup>3</sup> See my articles (in French) published on the website mondialisme.org in 2006 and 2007 and reproduced in the book *Question juive et antisémitisme. Sionisme et antisionisme* (2008) : «The murder

**imperialist» discourses.**

**This article therefore aims to underline the numerous ambiguities of Maxime Rodinson on what he calls the «Jewish problem», ambiguities that can be found among many left and far left militants or sympathisers today.**

As an intellectual *who «really believed in the totality of the Stalinist myths»* (p. 26), as he admits in his partial «self-criticism», and then as an independent Marxist, Maxime Rodinson has collected, in *Cult, Ghetto and the State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question*, seven articles on the «Jewish problem» (as in the French title *Peuple juif ou problème juif ?*) – and not on the «Jewish question» (as chosen by the English translation), an expression more in line with the Marxist tradition he claims to follow, but a very ambiguous formula (Trom, 2007).

A «Jewish problem»? For whom exactly? For many people, including Marxists who wanted (and still want) a **total assimilation**<sup>4</sup> of the Jews. Not only did this full assimilation never take place, but, in the middle of the 20th century a genocide eliminated about 6 million of the 15.3 million Jews who were living on this planet in 1933. Moreover, as Rodinson bitterly notes, the creation of a «Jewish», or «Hebrew», state did not facilitate the disappearance of the Jewish particularisms that Marxists dreamt and dream of implementing<sup>5</sup>.

Like most Marxists, Rodinson considered that Jewish particularisms were collapsing in the 1930s, that they «mostly lacked any cultural, social or religious basis» and «were on the way to complete liquidation». He even states that after the Second World War, «in those countries where the ‘Jewish problem’ was being liquidated, Jewish identity was maintained for many Jews who did not want it at all» (p. 149). According to him, «Judaism<sup>6</sup> was preserved by antisemitism and by political Zionism<sup>7</sup> which was its consequence»; it was preserved by the Judeocide and the creation of the State of Israel which «pushed Jews everywhere towards feelings of solidarity contributing to reinforce or reconstitute a particularism which was crumbling, and which moreover often than not lacked any cultural, social or even religious basis» (pp. 125-127). His left anti-Zionism may still appeal in 2023, just as his hostility to Jewish particularisms may appeal to supporters of «identity politics» – even though Rodinson was, in

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of Ilan Halimi and the malaise of the multiculturalist left» (2006) ; «From the Muhammad cartoons to the murder of Ilan Halimi» (2006) ; «From the murder of Ilan Halimi to the murder of Chaïb Zehaf: racism in its continuity (2006)» ; «Ilan Halimi: anti-Semitic murder or minor “news item”?» (debate with readers, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This expression is used several times by Rodinson in this collection of essays.

<sup>5</sup> The only two exceptions are the Austrian social democracy before 1914 and the Bund (Polish and Russian), but their supporters and ideas almost disappeared today. Cf. Bauer (2000) and Minczeles (1995) since the so-called «national liberation» movements **all** chose the (state) capitalist path, no matter how «socialist» their phraseology was.

<sup>6</sup> Rodinson uses here a **religious** notion (Judaism) and not an ethno-cultural one (Jewishness) – which is not an insignificant political choice.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1920s, French and German patriotic-assimilated-conservative Jews already accused Zionists of «fueling antisemitism» in their respective countries ; so this is a century-old twisted argument, even if it’s popular on the left today.

principle, a convinced universalist. Indeed, today's left identitarians are in favour of all particularisms (LGBTQIAAP+, Amerindians, Basques, Scots, Kurds, vegetarians, vegans, etc.) **except for Jewish identitarianism.**

In this collection of texts, as in his books – *Muhammad* (NYRB, Classics, 2021) and *Islam and Capitalism* (Saki Books, 2007) – Rodinson tries to advocate a rational, materialist approach, which is to his credit. He refuses to consider the religious factor as **the** essential element of explanation, and tries to disentangle all the social, political and cultural implications of the oppression of Jewish minorities. He wants to distance himself from all essentialisms and all «*philia*» (p. 308), be it «*Judeophilia*», «*Arabophilia*», «*Islamophilia*» or «*Palestinophilia*».

Militants are usually convinced that they are always on the side of Good. Wishing to be above, or even beyond, these militant passions, Rodinson is unfortunately not very convincing on certain points, as his writings (published between 1967 and 1981) tend to consider post-1945 *Judeophobia*<sup>8</sup> as a dying phenomenon. Until his death in 2004, Rodinson saw antisemitism only as a scarecrow invoked by «Zionists» and Jews to prevent criticisms against Israel, but also to prevent critiques of the reprehensible acts committed by any Jewish individual, any Jewish organization – yesterday, today and tomorrow. He thus finds the equivalence<sup>9</sup> between anti-Zionism and antisemitism «*rationaly absurd*»; he believes the denunciation of antisemitism by «*many Jewish movements*» only serves «*to throw into the hell of racial or religious hatred any criticism reaching their movement [...] and even any element of their ideology*» (p. 291).

His justified passion for justice and Reason leads him astray and risks leading his hurried readers, who are not concerned with nuances, to go even further astray. Indeed, they may classify the multiplication of antisemitic acts in the 21st century (defacement of Jewish cemeteries or synagogues; physical aggressions; murders committed by far-right militants, neo-Nazis, Islamists or Jihadists) under the fatalistic category of «*the sad social forces of human history*» (p. 296).

I do not know how Maxime Rodinson would have analysed the undeniable rise of antisemitism in 21<sup>st</sup> century France, but his way of «bending the stick» in an «anti-Zionist» and anti-«*Judeocentric*<sup>10</sup>» direction leads him to ambiguous results and absurd statements<sup>11</sup>, as we will see in this article. He was,

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<sup>8</sup> Rodinson wishes to reserve the notion of antisemitism for the description of pseudo-scientific theories and the most murderous manifestations of Jew hatred.

<sup>9</sup> If this equivalence is indeed absurd, refusing to see the many bridges that have been built between the two ideologies is particularly dangerous and harmful.

<sup>10</sup> «*Judeocentric*» is today an insult, or at least a sin, but not «*africentric*» or «*gay-centric*», as illustrated by this Canadian mainstream media : <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/gay-centric-high-school-proposed-1.972231> . This underlines one of the contradictions of the identitarian left which condemns Zionism for being «*Judeocentric*» but supports all the other «...-centric] causes.

<sup>11</sup> Thus he compares the «*sacred*» (?) significance of the French Camargue region for Gypsies (p. 303) to Palestine for Zionists, and their possible desire to create a Gypsy state (?) in the Camargue region to the Jewish will to create a state in Palestine! Similarly, in order to convince us that, «*in Islam*», the situation of the Jews was «*a hundred times better than in Christian countries*», and that relations with the other communities were «*almost egalitarian in the East*» (p. 318), he asserts Jews «*voted with their*

however, well aware of this danger himself: «*When one criticizes and fights, one is normally inclined to generalize, and some people can easily take up my arguments by extrapolating them, by going, even in an unelaborate form, down the road of essentialization*» (p. 313).

His criticism of Jewish particularisms is, however, very unpleasant, even more unpleasant than Sartre's in his *Reflections on the Jewish Question*.

#### \* **Judeophobias and antisemitism**

Indeed, Rodinson is keen to distance himself from any «*lachrymatory conception of Jewish history*» which «*has served as an essential method of social control since the time of the ancient rabbis*» (p. 278), according to the historian Salo W. Baron (1986), quoted by the author. To this end, Rodinson draws a fundamental distinction between :

- the various «*Judeophobias*» whose content varied according to place and time,
- and antisemitism, which claimed to be inspired by «*pseudo-scientific theories*» (p. 258) and thus took off in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As far as «*Judeophobias*» are concerned, which are much older phenomena than antisemitism, they are, according to Rodinson, the result of very different factors: «*ethnic essentialism*»; a more or less acute (or violent) competition between two religions or two kingdoms; rivalries between ethno-religious groups, or between the «*Jewish ethno-religious group*» and other pre-national or national groups, etc.

These «*Judeophobias*» correspond, according to Maxime Rodinson, to a «**normal, habitual level of hostility**» (emphasis added) that is always generated by «*struggles, conflicts, competitions*» between human groups driven by «*different passions and interests*» (p. 267). For the author, there is nothing extraordinary about most of these phenomena, even if he obviously finds them objectionable, irrational, and even lethal.

His desire to establish nuances as well as qualitative and quantitative differences between the various forms of Judeophobia that appeared in history is commendable. However, this nuanced attitude is never shared by left and far left militants who tend to oversimplify reality rather than present it in its most complex aspects. Such a methodological subtlety contradicts, moreover, the political objectives of these political currents: today, they want to totally **forget** about antisemitism, or even **deny** its existence, and focus only on what they call «*Islamophobia*» [Coleman, 2015a] while renouncing the criticism of all religions... except the Jewish one, of course.

In such circumstances, Rodinson's fine-grained analyses of the different forms of hostility towards Jews, as well as the ways Jews perceive them, will probably not be understood, and used by left anti-

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*feet at various times, notably under the Ottoman Empire*». He does not realize this argument can perfectly be turned around, if one takes into account the forced exile of the Jews from North Africa, Egypt, Iraq, etc., after 1948. He presents the situation in Lebanon in 1969 as an example of a perfect «*balance between [Muslims and Christian] communities*» (p. 320), a model that could have been applied to the Jews if they had respected a «*Middle Eastern or American communitarianism*» (p. 321) and had not made the mistake of creating their own state!!! Unfortunately, Lebanese history has tragically proven him wrong, as has that of the so-called «*Muslim*» countries over the last thirty years, with their persecutions of Copts, Yezidis, Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, etc. Last pearl of his polemical blooper: Rodinson affirms that «*the unconditional solidarity of many Jews in the world with Israel and its policy grants an apparent plausibility*» to the «*imagination of the forgers*» who wrote the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* !

Zionist activists today. Indeed, Rodinson spends a lot of time (too much) defining the negative effects of belonging to a Jewish minority. This leads him to present a catalogue of stereotypes which can be turned against the Jews (even if this was **not at all** the author's intention) and that can be found in left «anti-Zionist» propaganda as well as among antisemitic media.

**\* Are Jews paranoid, narcissistic and “eternal” victims?**

In his «*Typology of the different ways a minority perceives hostility*» he draws up an impressive list of analytical biases and misperceptions that members of a dominated minority may share (pp. 276-302). However, **far from applying this critique to all oppressed minorities<sup>12</sup>, he only applies it to the Jews:** «*presumption of the innocence and absolute purity of the targeted group*»; «*hypersensitivity to criticism*»; «*assumption of a mythical hostility*»; «*paranoia*»; «*mythologization of the felt hostility*»; «*ideology of untouchability*» which results in «*forming a taboo group*»; «*cosmic panekthtrism<sup>13</sup> framed by a religious ideology*» which «*reinforces ethnocentrism, superiority complex and vice versa*»; «*narcissism*», «*basic narcissistic mentality*» linked to «*panekthtrism*», «*potential pretexts for narcissistic pride*», «*over-emphasis on apologetic narcissism*», «*ethnocentric narcissism*»; «*attitude of isolation in the midst of the international community in which [Jews] are inserted*»; «*apologetic essentialism of the aggressed*»; «*Jewish essentialist myth of its intrinsic purity, innocence and superiority*»; «*myth of the Maximum Victim*», etc.

Rodinson is certainly right to oppose ahistorical interpretations: a single cause (eternal hatred of the Jews) cannot explain anti-Judaism, Judeophobia and antisemitism for three millennia. The Hebrew tribes attacked their neighbours, he explains; the Jewish kingdoms of Judah and Israel went to war with each other several times; Buddhists, Mormons, Protestants, etc., have also been persecuted in the course of history; Roma and Armenians have been victims of genocide; hatred has been unleashed at different times against Chinese, Indian, Lebanese traders, etc.

All these arguments are correct, but they do not take into account the role of social antisemitism, or social Judeophobia, during Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and under capitalism; nor the strength of antisemitic conspiracy theories and antisemitic anti-capitalism since the 19th century in the labour movement; nor, above all, the fact that, until today, antisemitism proposes a **global conception which claims to explain the course of the world**, relying, in each period, on common – but also specific – elements.

Rodinson rejects both the analyses of antisemitism proposed by Jean-Pierre Faye [1974 and 1993], which, according to him, belong to «*linguistic idealism*», and those of Horkheimer and Adorno [1947], which he reduces to the sole question of the role of the «*authoritarian personality*»; in order to do so, he brandishes a ridiculous argument (some Jews also have authoritarian personalities), which allows him to ignore the works inspired by the Frankfurt School on antisemitism. Even if some important contributions on antisemitism were published after Rodinson's death in 2004, at least in their English or French translations, today one cannot ignore the analyses of authors like Moishe Postone [2012], Werner

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<sup>12</sup> One can imagine the scandal which would blow up if any intellectual or pundit dared to apply such a strange «*typology*» to any oppressed minority!

<sup>13</sup> *Panekthtrism*: a word coined by Rodinson to designate a collective fantasy that leads a group to persuade itself (and other groups) that it is the object of universal hatred.

Bonefeld [2009, 2014], Thomas Haury [2006], etc<sup>14</sup>.

Rodinson seems at times to be resigned to antisemitism, one of «*the sad social forces of human history*» (p. 296), since Jews did not want to be fully assimilated and have insisted on perpetuating «*a Jewish entity, mostly placed in a minority and subordinate position*». And this situation was worsened, according to him, not only by Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel, but also because unrepentant «*Judeophiles*» set up the Jews as a «*Maximum Victim whose purity was proclaimed in all places, at all times and in all the individuals and groups who were attached to it*» and that, in addition, «*certain Christians*» have given themselves over to a «*mystical exaltation of the Jews*» (p. 310). To put it plainly, and to caricature his point, the Jews and their friends are largely responsible for antisemitism and thus punished for their stubborn identitarianism.

#### \* Insoluble contradictions

Unlike today's left identitarian intellectuals and even left anti-Zionists who claim to be inspired by his writings, Rodinson still defended universalist positions<sup>15</sup>, strongly inspired by his long stay in French Communist Party and his desire to remain faithful to a certain understanding of Marxism. He found himself faced with an insurmountable contradiction:

– On the one hand, he writes that a classless society is desirable and possible; he even believes that the USSR was a step forward in this direction since he states (p. 45) the Soviet State fought against antisemitism «*until 1939*» since «*the Jews who were condemned from time to time were condemned for their 'counter-revolutionary' acts, not because of their Jewishness*» (!?). This awkward reasoning is evidently put forward to avoid tackling the problem of antisemitism in the USSR. He thus «forgets» the antisemitism in the Red Army during the civil war of 1917-1921 which led to anti-Jewish violence and pogroms [McGeever 2016 and 2017] ; within the Bolshevik Party during the struggle against Trotsky from 1925 onwards, against Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1926, and then during the Moscow trials of 1936, in which thousands of Jews were tried, sent to camps and/or murdered on various pretexts (pp. 224-225). In this passage, he repeats a Stalinist argument on the virtues of Soviet nationality policy (he ignores the role of Great Russian nationalism in the USSR) and praises the creation of Birobidjan for the Jews, which he presents in an idyllic way; he conveniently denounces *the «persistent antisemitism of the masses»* in the Soviet Union, but not that of the **system**<sup>16</sup>; he is indignant at the arrival of the first Israeli ambassador in Moscow, which is said to have unleashed (!?) «*clearly antisemitic measures by Stalin*», etc. ;

– On the other hand, he is obliged to note that antisemitism continued long after the Second World War in what he has the nerve to call the «*socialist*» countries.

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<sup>14</sup> I assume that Rodinson read German since he owned more than 1000 works published in this language, as shown in this article about his archives: <https://chartes.hypotheses.org/958>. Those interested in knowing a little more about Rodinson's militant pro-Palestine activities can read Gérard D. Khoury's article : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-materiaux-pour-l-histoire-de-notre-temps-2009-4-page-28.htm?contenu=resume>.

<sup>15</sup> Thus he wrote in 1968: «*The idolatry of the group always had harmful consequences both from the specific and moral point of view*» (p. 134).

<sup>16</sup> On this subject, one can read the books by L. Rucker (2001), A. Vaksberg (1994), J.J. Marie (2009), S. Fainberg (2014) and B. McGeever (2019) and listen to Sarah Fainberg's speech; <https://www.mahj.org/fr/media/l-antisemitisme-sovietique-apres-staline>.

Like most ex-Stalinists who have remained on the «left», rather than pointing out the primary political responsibility of the Stalinist leaders (of **their own** ex-leaders) and questioning Marx's and his followers' misunderstanding of the so-called «Jewish question» (i.e., **questioning themselves**), he accuses «*the masses*» of the so-called «socialist» countries of not having rid themselves of their centuries-old antisemitism (p. 131); he blames «Zionism» for the fact that «communist» leaders abandoned their «*ideological principles*» (!) to use antisemitism for «*reactionary purposes*»; he considers that antisemitism in the so-called «popular democracies» was provoked by .... the Jews living in these countries «*who had taken a vigorous stand in favour of the Arabs*» (p. 149); Zionism is said to be responsible for the development of antisemitism in the so-called «Arab» and/or «Muslim» countries, but also in the whole Third World; and finally, it is because of Israel that the «*Arab world*» wasted a lot of «*energies and resources*» that could have been devoted to «*more constructive tasks*» (p. 150); he even asserts that this «Arab world» could have welcomed Jewish communities persecuted in Europe (!) as if certain Arab nationalist movements<sup>17</sup> had not been fascinated by Italian fascism or German Nazism: the Syrian Ba'ath; the Syrian Arab National Party; the Lebanese Maroonist Phalanges; Young Egypt; al-Futuwwa and the Iraqi nationalist putschists behind the Fahood pogrom, which killed about 180 Jews in June 1941; the radical wing of the Palestinian nationalist movement under the leadership of the Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Husseini; and the profascist tendencies of various Islamist movements. As if some nationalist officers or politicians had not bet on the Axis during the Second World War and as if the member states of the Arab League had not provoked and encouraged the departure of 700,000 to 800,000 Jews from «Muslim» countries after 1948.

This collection of essays written between 1967 and 1981 (but preceded by a preface written in 1997,

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<sup>17</sup> Historians have had heated discussions about how «Arabs» considered fascism and Nazism. The post-war national independence movements and the rise of pan-Arabism; the wars between Israel and the Arab countries; and, more recently, the 11 September 2001 attacks and the rise of the Islamist and jihadist movements (attacks that coincided with the dissemination of the pseudo theory of 'Islamofascism' [Coleman, 2016]) have led historians to revisit the relationship of «the East» with Nazi-fascism several times. To simplify, the most pro-Israel and/or conservative historians present the «Arab» populations and nationalist movements of the 1930s and 1940s as having been massively complicit with the Axis powers [Herf (2008) and Küntzel (2015) illustrate that trend]; neglecting or underestimating Arab sources, they defend, for the most caricatural of them, a fiercely anti-Muslim point of view, even if they deny having xenophobic or racist views. Others, more «left-wing» but also more «Islamocompatible», offer us a contrasted picture depending on the country. According to them, pronazi or profascist movements were generally in the minority, and a significant fraction of the intelligentsia and most of the population in the Near and Middle East, as well as in North Africa, supported the Allies, including by paying the price of blood. At the same time, they acknowledge that the young nationalist, military and civilian, leaders who established «authoritarian» regimes in the 1950s and 1960s in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, did not hesitate to boast in their speeches and memoirs that they had supported the Axis powers to bring down British and French imperialisms. For the more optimistic and less simplistic version, read Achcar [2011] and Gershoni [2014].

thus much later) condenses all the absurdities<sup>18</sup> the French left and far left have been repeating for decades.

**\* Who is responsible for antisemitism: the Jews or the antisemites?**

Even if this book also offers us, in the midst of polemical and bad faith assertions, more subtle and nuanced reflections, it contains many commonplaces that reinforce left antisemitism today:

- Israel is presented as the main if not the only responsible for antisemitism;
- Jews who feel a certain solidarity towards Israel (whether for sentimental, familial, cultural, national, religious or political reasons) are supposedly responsible for antisemitism;
- and Rodinson does not understand that Stalinism played an important role in the antisemitic and anti-Zionist discourse that became acceptable in the thirdworldist and antiracist movements<sup>19</sup>, as well in many other social movements which appeared after Rodinson's death in 2004): the Indignados/ Indignés, Occupy, Nuits debout, Yellow Vests, supporters of decolonial or intersectional perspectives and even the Kurdish struggle for independence<sup>20</sup>.

In many respects, reading this book may comfort left antisemites in their good conscience and blissful self-satisfaction, as they can read many other dubious statements. Thus, Rodinson writes that the Torah

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<sup>18</sup> Rodinson serves us a classical anti-Zionist semi-truth when he writes (p. 138) that «*Herzl himself was seduced for a moment by Argentina and Kenya*», without specifying that he conceived such eventualities only as an **intermediary** stage of «refoundation» of the Jewish people in better conditions, in preparation for a later transplantation to Palestine.

<sup>19</sup> See for example this disgusting interview of Malcolm X for Playboy in 1963 (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/pdf/050063playboy.pdf>) : « *Anybody that gives even a just criticism of the Jew is instantly labeled anti-Semite. The Jew cries louder than anybody else if anybody criticizes him. You can tell the truth about any minority in America, but make a true observation about the Jew, and if it doesn't pat him on the back, then he uses his grip on the news media to label you anti-Semite. Let me say just a word about the Jew and the black man. The Jew is always anxious to advise the black man. But they never advise him how to solve his problem the way the Jews solved their problem. The Jew never went sitting-in and crawling-in and sliding-in and freedom-riding, like he teaches and helps Negroes to do. The Jews stood up, and stood together, and they used their ultimate power, the economic weapon. That's exactly what the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is trying to teach black men to do. The Jews pooled their money and bought the hotels that barred them. They bought Atlantic City and Miami Beach and anything else they wanted. Who owns Hollywood? Who runs the garment industry, the largest industry in New York City? But the Jew that's advising the Negro joins the NAACP, CORE, the Urban League, and others. With money donations, the Jew gains control, then he sends the black man doing all this wading-in, boring-in, even burying-in--everything but buying-in. Never shows him how to set up factories and hotels. Never advises him how to own what he wants. No, when there's something worth owning, the Jew's got it. Walk up and down in any Negro ghetto in America. Ninety percent of the worthwhile businesses you see are Jew-owned. Every night they take the money out. This helps the black man's community stay a ghetto. »*

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the prefaces written by the anti-globalization activist John Holloway and the anarchist David Graeber to two anthologies of Ocalan's texts that contain fiercely antisemitic texts [Coleman, 2020].



is a «*quasi-genocidal*<sup>21</sup>» text that does not prepare Israelis for tolerance and empathy: «*Children, in particular, who have been taught in school the absolute right of their people to dominate Palestine [...] and to get rid of populations that stand in the way of this domination by iron and fire if necessary, are ill-prepared (to put it mildly) to confront in a humane way the problems necessarily posed by any cohabitation between populations having different cultures.*»

Accusing religious Jews of believing in a «*quasi-genocidal*» text suits perfectly those who denounce «Judeonazis» and «Zionazis» [Coleman , 2015b]. Rodinson voluntarily forgets to mention the Old Testament, which includes the first five books of the... Torah and is claimed by Catholics and Protestants. In these texts, violence and massacres are described with the same complacency since they are justified by «God». All the «religions of the Book» (including Islam) advocate «love» but have keenly justified wars. Rodinson remains silent on the calls for violence and murder found in the Koran against «*unbelievers*», «*infidels*», «*disbelievers*», «*idolizers*», or even members of other «religions of the Book» if they refuse to submit to the «spiritual» (i.e. military) authority of Muslims.

In short, according to Rodinson, only one religious ideology (Judaism) and one political ideology (Zionism) play an important role in today's antisemitism.

He confides that, since his youth<sup>22</sup>, he has felt a «*repugnance*» (p. 8) towards «*Jewish nationalism*», and therefore towards Zionism. Logically, he should also feel this way about all nationalisms, as it is, according to him, «*a mental illness that may be necessary [!] in certain situations*», but in this book he does not express any «*repugnance*» towards Palestinian or Arab nationalism. Indeed, he paints a very glowing picture of Arafat (this «*clear-sighted*», «*courageous, strategically intelligent*» leader, pp. VIII and IX) ; he wants us to believe that the leaders of Arab nationalist regimes were forced to adopt an antisemitic discourse after 1948, whereas the prevalence of this discourse predates that. One needs only to cite the examples of Amin al-Husseini, Mufti of Jerusalem, a central leader of Palestinian nationalism in the 1930s and later, and later a militant pro-Nazi, or the writings of Hassan al-Bana on Mussolini and Hitler.

The idea that the existence of Zionism or the State of Israel produced (and still creates antisemitism) serves only one purpose: it helps antisemites not to feel responsible for their racism, whatever Rodinson and left «anti-Zionists» may say. Moreover, to assert that Israel is responsible for antisemitism (pp. 72 and 128); that it is «*the local incarnation of the global imperialist thrust*»; that antisemitism was «*practically unknown in Arab countries*», is to acknowledge that the denunciation of the war crimes of this state would **fatally** lead to antisemitism...

Rodinson is proud of his Stalinist writings against Zionism because he considers that he was right on the essentials. But, **forty** years after his departure from the French Communist Party and after having rejected his blind faith in Stalin's infallibility, he still did not understand in **1997** to what extent his anti-Zionism structured during his long Stalinist militancy led him to make dangerous and harmful remarks.

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<sup>21</sup> This nonsense can be found in an article by Jacques Langlois in *Le Monde libertaire*, published by the Fédération anarchiste [Coleman, 2014c].

<sup>22</sup> Rodinson, who died in 2004, was born in 1915 and raised in a «*dejudaised*» and communist family, according to his own words. Both his parents were murdered in Auschwitz. He defined the Jews as «*a people who were nothing to me*» while denying them the status of a... people. He was a member of the French Communist Party for over twenty years, from 1937 to 1958.

Thus, in his preface, he claims to regret (p. 12) having made an amalgam between the definition of Jewishness according to the Zionists and that of the Hitlerites in an interview, but he repeats this amalgam twice in this book ! He «omits» to recall that this amalgam began to be formulated in the 1930s by the Communist International, but also by the German [Kistenmacher, 2006] and Palestinian Communist Parties; that it was massively used in the antisemitic trials held in the USSR and its satellites after 1945 [Crooke, 2004]; and that it was one of the central arguments of French Holocaust deniers [Coleman, 2014a] from 1975 onwards – a problem he was aware of since he mentions French Holocaust deniers in a note. And this ignoble amalgam is still present in left anti-Zionist propaganda in 2021.

With the same irresponsibility and the same concern to remain blindly faithful to the contents of an article he himself describes as «Stalinist», published in *La Nouvelle critique* in 1953, he addresses the question of the «*Haavara agreements between the Hitlerian Reich and the Jewish Agency to facilitate the emigration of German Jews to Palestine*» (p. 175) before 1939, as if Hitler had really wanted the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine<sup>23</sup>; as if he had never had the project to exterminate all Jews since the beginning of the 1920s<sup>24</sup>! Rodinson's irresponsible reflections can only feed the anti-Zionist antisemitism of the so-called «revisionist» far right (which in fact denies the Holocaust) and of the far left, which refuses to consider that the Haavara Accords saved the lives of a few thousand German Jews... A result that the armies of the two great imperialist powers at that time (the United States and the Soviet Union [Rucker, 2002]) were unable to achieve, even though they had millions of men at their disposal and a formidable military arsenal.

When Rodinson writes, «*Around its central idea, Zionism created a number of interlinked apparatuses that defend their existence and become ends in themselves like the Stalinist apparatuses*» (p. 61), this statement and comparison, even when presented with care, is as absurd as the far left and far right discourses that magnify the role of the CRIF<sup>25</sup> in France, of the «Zionist lobby» in the United States, or of the B'nai Brith, a tiny Jewish freemasonry on an international scale.

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<sup>23</sup> Apparently, Hitler hesitated about the matter after 1933. One thing was sure : he did not want to kick the Jews out to America. For the Gestapo, Palestine was a temporarily a better choice because it was closer to Germany and it would be easier «to catch them again» and liquidate them (Dawidowicz, 1975, p. 145 of the French edition).

<sup>24</sup> The *Monde diplomatique* team perpetuates this myth (Coleman, 2014b) although in *Mein Kampf* (1924) Hitler wrote in a clearly premonitory tirade : «*If, at the beginning and during the course of the war, we had just once held twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people under the poisonous gases that hundreds of thousands of our best German workers of all origins and professions have endured on the front, the sacrifice of millions of men would not have been vain. On the contrary, if we had got rid of those twelve thousand rascals in time, we might have saved the existence of a million good, brave Germans with a bright future.*»

<sup>25</sup> The «Conseil des institutions juives de France» was created in 1944. At first, it included all political and religious tendencies of the so-called «Jewish community» but it's no more the case today; its leadership has become quite reactionary and the associations it regroups do not represent more than 20 or 25% of French Jews (religious or not).

### \* An indecipherable enigma for Marxists?

Finally, while he does not grant the status of a «people» to present-day Jews, he admits there was once a Jewish people, say during the last millennium BC, and that there were even «*national insurrections*» in 66-70 and 132-135 AD.

After having been a people in Antiquity, an «*Israelite or Hebrew ethnic group*» (p. 138) or even a «*nation*<sup>26</sup>», the Jews progressively became, in a certain number of regions «*north of the Alp [mountains] and Loire [river] [...] between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries*» (p. 119), a sort of «*people-class*» (Abraham Leon), a «*caste in a world deprived of castes*», a «*pariah people*» (Max Weber) or an «*hereditary urban caste*» (Karl Kautsky) who gradually abandoned agriculture and crafts to specialise in trade. At the same time, Rodinson asserts that «*serious class divisions*» existed everywhere within Jewish communities (p. 122); moreover, he specifies that the Jews never exclusively fulfilled, at any time, and in any geographical area, intermediary functions in exchanges and that most of them were neither bankers, nor usurers, nor merchants<sup>27</sup>. Curiously, he does not mention the very large Jewish proletariat of Central Europe and Russia, whose existence runs totally counter to the theories of the «*people-class*», or of a «*caste in a world deprived of castes*». (This Eastern European Jewish proletariat gave birth to the Bund in tsarist Russia and Poland, a Bund which today's leftists portray with great enthusiasm, once its militants have disappeared.)

Rodinson seems to think that the Jews became in the 12<sup>th</sup> century a vague «*entity*», a «*human ensemble*», an «*element*», a «*group*», which was certainly «*inferiorized*», «*frustrated, bullied, persecuted*» (p. 137), but remained extremely «*heterogeneous*»; neither an ethnic group<sup>28</sup> nor a pre-nation, it was, during certain periods of its history, «*a religion with certain characteristics of an ethnic group*» but also at the same time a «*quasi-national entity in the process of liquidation for several centuries*» (p. 129), whose «*very often very thin cultural vestiges*» were «*in the process of dying out*» (p. 149)...

However, in some countries, Jews are also a «*quasi-nation*»: according to him, in the United States, African-Americans constitute a «*black quasi-nation*» facing to a «*Jewish quasi-nation*».

Given that there are 6.6 million Jews in the United States and 6.8 million in Israel<sup>29</sup> today, one wonders

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<sup>26</sup> «[...] during the Antiquity the Jews formed an ethnic group that can be justifiably called a nation according to the most common definitions of this term. This ethno-national group, constituted around the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as a single state, then as two states, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, naturally entered into the system of states of the region in which it was located» (p. 251-252)

<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he repeatedly emphasizes their so-called specific functions: «*moneylender, tax collector, rural estates manager*» (p. 258); «*usurers, stewards, tax collectors, traders*» (p. 294). Today several scholars have debunked these myths about the intimate relation between Jews and money-lending [see Mell (2019) and Fischer (2020), for example], myths spread by Marxists from Marx to Abraham Leon.

<sup>28</sup> Ethnic group is a very ambiguous notion, see Landais (2005).

<sup>29</sup> In «Self-criticism», an article written in 1981, Rodinson presents an apocalyptic vision of Israel's future, as he writes that «*the Palestinian land*» welcomes «*only a tiny proportion of the world's Jews*» (which was already wrong at the time) and that «*hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews are leaving Israel*»

what the combination of an American Jewish «*quasi-nation*» and an Israeli people (hence an Israeli nation), whose existence Rodinson does not deny, can represent from a Marxist point of view. For if «*strictly speaking, the Jews of the world do not form a people*» (p. 319), «*the Israelis, on the other hand, do not constitute a religion, but an ethnic group, a nation at least in formation*». And in another article he goes a step further : «*one can no longer question this result [of Zionism] – the Israeli nation – even if its bitter fruits may allow one to doubt, to say the least, the wisdom of this choice*» (p. 302).

On closing this book, there is only one clear conclusion to be drawn about the so-called «*Jewish problem*» analysed by the author: Rodinson admits that, for the moment, the two-state «*solution*», however unsatisfactory, is the only realistic one (he prefers a secular bi-national state), but he does not know in which Marxist category to place the Jews, an hesitation which is annoying for a theorist who prides himself on being rigorous and does not hesitate to attack other intellectuals violently.

While he distinguishes several types of Jews<sup>30</sup>, this typology used to describe a «*very disparate human ensemble*» (p. 10) does not help us to identify what «*the Jews*<sup>31</sup>» are and whether they can have any sociological or political status.

Finally, our perplexity increases when, after denying any right to «*foreign*» Jews to come and settle in Palestine in order to drive out the «*indigenous*» Arabs or Palestinians, he writes: «*The heterogeneous group formed by the Jews of the world who have remained in contact with religious Judaism until recently may be considered as an enduring collective personality, despite its profound internal renewal, continuing the old Hebrew nation and its religious ideology far from the territory of its ancient residence*» (p. 218). And he immediately asserts that present-day non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine/Israel also constitute a «*constant collective personality [...] continuing, similarly, but on the same soil, the ancient Hebrew nation*». In short, ignorant schoolchildren and fanatical adults in this region should be taught a story that begins with : «*Our ancestors the Hebrews....*». Such a formula would certainly be nicer than the religious discourses and the nationalist and racist hatreds that clash between Qiryat Shemona and Eilat via Gaza and Jerusalem, but wouldn't it be simpler to return to the good old

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(p. 72). However, the population of Israel has been constantly increasing since its creation, despite the successive wars it has waged against its «*Arab*» neighbors and the terrorist attacks on its soil. It should reach 20 million in 2065 (<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-Israels-population-to-reach-20-million-by-2065-492429>), and the Jewish component should continue to represent about 75% of the total population, i.e. about 15 million. We are far from a great demographic collapse!

<sup>30</sup> The «*religious Jews*»; the «*irreligious Jews who want to keep some link with a Jewish identity*»; the descendants of religious Jews who consider themselves as members of an ethnic-national community, even if they are atheists; the «*assimilated Jews with no interest in Judaism or Jewishness, but regarded by others as Jews*» (p. 143); and the Jews who do not know that they are Jews, as well as those around them.

<sup>31</sup> Although he aims to encompass «*all forms of [ Jewish] diversity*» and go beyond «*the classic distinction between those who are considered by others as Jews and those who consider themselves as such*» (p. 19), the mountain gives birth to a mouse. The only definition he offers is extremely vague: the Jews have been, for a whole period, a dispersed and heterogeneous group of followers of a «*religion showing certain characteristics of an ethnic group*» (p. 114) and they have become «*individuals with known ancestors following the Jewish religion without necessarily adhering themselves to it*» (p. 278).

«Proletarians of all countries, unite»?

We shall see in the following articles that Maxime Rodinson was and is not the only Marxist to be disoriented, or even «*seasick*» (as Lenin said of... Zionism), when faced with the existence of people who call themselves Jewish (culturally, religiously or nationally) and who want their specific identity to be recognised, even if this displeases non-Jews.

**Yves Coleman**, 21/12/2021, modified 17th septembre 2023

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