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A Pathologically Abnormal Situation: Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux and the [Im]Possibility of an Anti-National Jewishness

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Abstract: This paper examines the diasporist French Jewish political group, Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux, founded in 1967 “to promote a diasporic Jewish existence without subjugation to the synagogue or to Zionism”. In contrast to either an assimilationist model which demanded the acceptance of French national identity in the public sphere, or a Zionist model of Jewish nationalism, the Cercle offered a model in which the state of exile and diaspora becomes constitutive of Jewish identity, positioned as an alternate mode of being-in-the-world defined against white Christian European nationalism. Yet to expose the historically constructed, socially contingent nature of European nationalisms that claim the status of organic and natural, the Cercle had to imagine a particular narrative of the historical construction of Jewishness, and this social constructionism conflicted with the almost ontological, metaphysical status they wanted to accord to Jewish exile and otherness. Thus the Cercle failed to imagine an anti-national model of Jewishness, but this failure sheds light on larger fault lines in the possibility of a Jewish politics. The paper concludes that the Cercle’s imaginal diasporic Jewishness tries to enable the articulation of other forms of minority identity, suggesting that this failure may nonetheless prove politically productive.



Citation: Swanson, Joel Howard. 2022. *A Pathologically Abnormal Situation: Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux and the [Im]Possibility of an Anti-National Jewishness*. *Religions* 13: 1018. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111018>

Academic Editors:
Paul Mendes-Flohr and
Malachi Hacohen

Received: 24 September 2022

Accepted: 22 October 2022

Published: 26 October 2022

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Keywords: Zionism; anti-Zionism; France; Jewry; Six-Day War; diaspora; diasporism; nationalism; historiography; historicism; Jewish politics; exile

1. Introduction: Memory as Model

In his *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg introduces the titular concept to argue against a vision of collective memory of historical and national traumas which would conceive of the realm of remembrance as a resource characterized by scarcity, by an assumption that “the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence” (Rothberg 2009, p. 3). In contrast to such a competitive, zero-sum model for the memorialization of collective traumas, Rothberg envisions a collective memory in which certain paradigmatic historical memories, here the memory of the Shoah, serve as vectors through which other historically marginalized communities may articulate and represent their own histories, providing shared cross-cultural archives of memory that enable other communities, such as those of postwar decolonization movements in the Global South, to draw upon a shared grammar of memory (Rothberg 2011, p. 544). The goal would not be to level direct comparisons between the Shoah and other forms of collective trauma, either in the form of equation or hierarchization, but to affirm the preeminent role the Shoah has played in enabling the construction of our understandings of historical trauma in the West while also radically decentering the “discursive sacralization of the Holocaust that legitimates a politics of absolutism” (Ibid., p. 540). Here Auschwitz and the Shoah necessarily function as both a universal grammar and as wholly particular, incomparable historical negatives experienced by a singular, particularist community.

This paper aims to employ the political and historiographical writings of the diasporist French Jewish political group Le Cercle Gaston Crémieux as a test case to think through the limits of such a model of historical memory that would be both wholly universal and wholly particular, especially regarding representations of Jewish history. Founded in 1967, the Cercle aimed “to promote a diasporic Jewish existence without subjugation to the synagogue or to Zionism”. In contrast to the French assimilationist model which demanded the relegation of Jewish identity solely to the private sphere, or a Zionist model which called for a Jewish nationalism to compete with French nationalism, the Cercle offered a model in which the state of exile and diaspora becomes constitutive of Jewish identity. Borrowing from Jewish intellectuals such as Franz Rosenzweig (Marienstras 1986, pp. 31–40, especially p. 39), thinkers from French national minorities such as the Breton and Armenian diasporas (Marienstras 1975a, especially p. 11), and Native American thinkers in the United States, the Cercle aimed to position Jewishness as an alternate mode of being-in-the-world defined against Christian European nationalism, and to offer the Jewish diaspora as a productive historical paradigm for other diasporic communities. Yet to expose the historically constructed, socially contingent nature of European nationalisms that claim the status of the organic and natural, the Cercle had to offer a particular narrative of the historical construction of Jewishness, and this social constructionism conflicted with the almost ontological, metaphysical status which they accorded to Jewish exile and alterity. Thus the Cercle failed to construct an anti-national model of Jewishness, but this failure sheds light on larger fault lines within the possibility of a Jewish politics of memory.

2. Background: Zionism, the Six Day War, and the Assertion of a Jewish Public Identity in France

In 1967, spurred in part by a wave of public sympathy among centrist French intellectuals and politicians toward the state of Israel in the wake of the Six Day War, many French Jews began to assert a public political identity as a collective people for the first time in their lives (see Cohen 1995, p. 7). This public identification with the nation-state of Israel, which took the form of widespread demonstrations in support of the embattled state and the formation of new political and cultural organizations designed to mobilize French Jewish support for Israel and its policies (Ibid., pp. 7–8), represented the end of what French sociologist Claude Tapia has termed “an old tradition of neutrality and discretion associated with French Jewry” and the emergence of a newly assertive public identity (Tapia 1986). As French historian Pierre Birnbaum notes, “the Six-Day War marked an important moment in the resurgence of Jewish community feeling” (Birnbaum 2000, p. 218), and French Jewish leaders consciously understood this resurgent communal identity, as a radical break from the position of Jewish identity within the French public sphere since the days of the Revolution. Writer Richard Nollier dramatized this break in a June 1967 column in *Le Monde*, writing that “after centuries in the ghetto”, French Jews in the wake of the Six Day War “know what they represent”, because “for the first time, the Jews as Jews have their territory, their citizenry”.¹ No longer would French Jews have to hide their Jewish identity in order to enter the public sphere. For the first time, the success of the state of Israel would enable them to be publicly, proudly Jewish.

Central to this French Jewish self-understanding was a particular narrative of the history of the modern nation-state, and the redefinition of the essence of Jewish identity in relation to historically contingent concepts of modern citizenship. According to this particular historical narrative, sketched in several publications and essays by members of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux,² nineteenth and early twentieth century French Jews had accepted a bargain of emancipation according to which Jewish ethno-religious and national identities would be redefined on purely private, confessional religious grounds, even if this necessitated “bending certain facets of Jewish law to fit the bill” (Hammerschlag 2018a, p. xii). When Napoleon mandated the establishment of the Jewish consistories in 1808, he offered the Jewish community of France a clear set of terms. French Jews were to submit to French state authority, under the administration of a quasi-governmental body modeled

after the bodies used to administer the French Protestant community, and in return they would receive equal citizenship rights and no longer be subject to legal restrictions (Hyman 1998, p. 22). As Paula Hyman has pointed out, while this reorganization of the French Jewish community provided new commercial, educational, and political opportunities for individual Jews, it also represented “a radical redefinition of Jewish rights that eliminated Jewish communal autonomy” (Ibid., p. 23). As Martine Cohen of the *Groupe de Sociologie des Religions et de la Laïcité* explains, Jewish identity “was reduced to a religious dimension”, and in consequence “the collective dimension of Jewish identity was renounced” (Cohen 1995, p. 5). Likewise, Esther Benbassa has argued that one of the fundamental differences between Jewish emancipation in France and in Germany or Austria was the stronger barrier between public and private spheres in post-Revolutionary France, which meant relegating Jewish identity to the private sphere and attempting to render “ethnic and religious elements” of the tradition “dissociable” (Benbassa 1999, p. 125).

If one accepts the broad outline of this particular historical narrative of French Jewry, it is perhaps unsurprising that for many years French Jewish rabbis and community leaders wholeheartedly rejected the ideology of political Zionism, an ideology premised upon the assertion of Jewish ethnic nationhood and the belief that the normalization of the Jewish political status in the modern European nation-state could only be achieved by the formation of a separate nation-state, outside of Europe entirely. If the French Jewish model of emancipation demanded the wholesale denial of the ethnic and national sides of Jewish identity in favor of a strictly religious understanding of Jewishness, the transformation of the Jewish people into what one French rabbi termed “Frenchmen of the Israelite faith” (Lazare 1948, p. 89), then this emancipatory model simply could not be reconciled with the tenets of political Zionism. Thus “French Jewry, almost to a man, rejected Zionism until after the creation of the State of Israel” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 11). One 1907 article in the French Jewish journal *L’Univers Israélite* summed up the community’s position on French Jewish identity by writing, “The history of Judaism is the history of a progressive denationalization... Where [the Jews] live, there is their fatherland... Let us be Jews above all, and faithful to the spirit of Judaism. But the spirit of Judaism, as it is reflected in its history, is the condemnation of Zionism” (as cited in Hyman 1998, p. 132). Zionism meant a return to an understanding of the Jews as a separate sub-national entity within the community of nation-states, an understanding of Jewishness which the establishment of the consistorial system had supposedly eliminated in favor of a definition of Judaism in mere “confessional terms, as a parallel faith to Catholic and Protestant Christianity”.³ Zionism meant an essentially Jewish national politics, whereas French republicanism demanded that all political programs be articulated in terms of the French nation alone.

For more than a century, then native-born French Jews “recoiled from a Zionist ideology that undermined their own identity as French citizens and Jews” (Hyman 1998, p. 133). French Jewish community leadership devoted extensive funding and resources to efforts to educate the wave of impoverished Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in how to be proper French citizens of the Jewish religion. Naturally, this civic education meant downplaying “ethnicity as an acknowledged component” (Ibid., p. 132) of Jewish identity in favor of a French republican model of universal French citizenship, as well as teaching these immigrants to discard their attachment to particularist political ideologies such as Zionism, ideologies which would only feed the prejudices of right-wing nationalists who argued that the Jews would never truly think of themselves as French (Ibid., p. 135). To the extent that Jewish values could be defended within this intellectual framework, they had to be expressed as the epitome of French republican values, articulated as a particular instantiation of a universal ideal. French Jews thus “promoted a communal self-definition that emphasized the harmony of French and Jewish values” (Ibid., p. 54), and sermons, speeches, and writings from leading French Jewish community leaders sought to portray the French Jewish community as possessed of “wholehearted devotion to France and to the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution” (Ibid., p. 54). Berr Isaac Berr, who served as a Jewish community representative during the Revolution, insisted that French and Jewish

values were in complete harmony, and that “we can be both faithful Jews and good French citizens”.⁴ Later, Rabbi Zadoc Kahn, who served as the chief rabbi of France at the end of the nineteenth century, identified Judaism as one of the sources for modern liberal political principles such as religious tolerance and liberty, principles “which have become the foundation of the French law”.⁵ Jewish values were for Rabbi Kahn completely in consonance with the values of the French Third Republic, both preaching “the love of God, love of men, cult of work, and devotion to the fatherland” (Kahn 2018, p. 28). The survival of Judaism was essential for the modern French state because Judaism already represented the same universalist values which the modern French nation was now working to embody in its polity, those “eternal truths that have their expression in Judaism and that we consider as our *raison d’être* in the history of humanity” (Ibid., p. 23). If Jewish values were to have a continuing place in the politics of the modern French state, it could only be as an ideal exemplar of universalist values that must ultimately transcend the bounds of Jewish culture.

This picture of the development of French Jewish identity meant that the rise of public expressions of Zionism in the wake of the Six Day War posed a sharp challenge to the dominant model for understanding Jewish identity in France, which Martine Cohen has termed the “denominational or ‘Israelite’ model” (Cohen 1995, p. 7) and which French rabbi and historian Simon Schwarzfuchs denotes through his distinction between the ethno-religious identity of *juif* and the religious confessional identity of *israélite* (see Schwarzfuchs 1990). The growing identification and support of French Jews with the state of Israel in the late 1960’s coincided with extensive immigration to France by Jews from the former French North African colonies of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria in the wake of the anticolonial wars, Jews who had far weaker intellectual and emotional commitments to the French republican model of universal citizenship and privatized religious confession. Turkish-born French scholar and politician Esther Benbassa argues that these Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish immigrants held “a conception of Judaism that regarded it as something much more than a practice confined to the private sphere—as something that included every aspect of social life, and so stood apart from the confessional and integrated conception held by native Jews” (Benbassa 1999, p. 187). This confluence of circumstances thus produced a newly emboldened “Jewish identity . . . fully assumed and asserted collectively” (Cohen 1995, p. 7). As Martine Cohen has argued, while right-wing nationalists had argued for a division between French and Jewish identity, which undermined the possibility of Jewish commitment to the French republic and to French citizenship, since the first moment of Jewish emancipation, the wake of the Six Day War represented the first moment when French Jewish institutions themselves proudly claimed such a division, asserting for the first time “the feeling of a gap between Jewish and French identities” (Ibid., p. 8). Whereas previously Jews had felt the need to deny their differences in order to counteract anti-Semitic nationalist arguments, the success of the state of Israel on the world stage, combined with the sense that French Jews now had a home to escape to in the event that conditions in France deteriorated, led to a reevaluation of the always fraught negotiation between French and Jewish identities, and a new sense that these overlapping identities were not always congruent.

As Joan Beth Wolf has argued, “Unlike during the years before World War II, when Jews blinded by their faith in assimilation had failed to recognize their indelible difference, contemporary French Jewry would announce that difference unequivocally” (Wolf 1999, p. 116). The utter failure of the universalist model of French citizenship to protect French Jews under the Vichy regime only seemed to underscore the need for a new Jewish politics premised upon Jewish difference and Jewish nationhood as essential to Jewish identity. French Jews found such a new politics of essential Jewish difference in their identification with the state of Israel. So intense was French Jewish support for Zionism in the wake of the Six Day War that a study conducted in 1967 found that almost half of French Jews were actively considering making *aliyah*, and more than ninety percent said they were concerned about the future of the state of Israel (Hyman 1998, pp. 203–4). While in the years prior to

the Six Day War, more than half of French Jews felt that “the destruction of the State of Israel would have no consequence for the situation of the Jews of the world”, after the war, this number dropped to only five percent (Ibid., p. 204). It is not an exaggeration to say that for many French Jews, the newly asserted public French Jewish was synonymous with political Zionism, and that postwar French Jewry “have embraced the *ideology* of political Zionism with the zeal of converts and have transferred to it their chauvinistic French patriotism” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 11). French sociologist Dominique Schnapper has written that after the Six Day War, “the only common denominator uniting French Jews was the various forms of solidarity with the Israel” (Schnapper 1995, p. 41). Whereas previously French Jewish politics tried to assert an absolute congruence between Jewish interests and the French state as a whole, after 1967 the Zionist state of Israel came to displace the republican state of France as the locus for French Jewish political identification.

This reassertion of a public, collective Jewish identity along ethnic lines posed both unique challenges and opportunities for left-leaning secular Jews. On the one hand, for leftist Jews who rejected the confessional understanding of Judaism as a set of religious laws and rituals to follow, and who did not see the synagogue and the prayer book as the locus of their identity, a reasserted ethnic and national understanding of the essence of Jewishness offered possibilities for reclaiming a Jewish identity not defined on purely religious grounds. Yet on the other hand, French leftists had traditionally been among the most strenuously committed to the universalist model of French citizenship and to subsuming claims to ethnic and national difference in favor of political arguments premised upon the rhetoric of universal human rights, so that left-wing Jews were historically devoted to “the Republic and their belief in progress” (Wolf 1999, p. 8). Moreover, some left-leaning secular Jews were uncomfortable with the construction of “a purely benevolent Israel” (Wolf 2004, p. 55) in French Jewish circles in the wake of the Six Day War and the ensuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. These trends meant that anti-Zionist French Jews, whom sociologist Sylvie Korcaz estimated at about four percent of the French Jewish population in 1969 (Korcaz 1969, p. 196), found themselves at odds both with the consistorial network that had dominated French Jewish life for well over a century, and with the newly emergent politicized Jewish identity that crystalized around support for Zionism and the state of Israel (Wolf 1999, p. 106).

It was against this backdrop that Richard Marienstras established the Cercle Gaston Crémieux in 1967, in order to “promote a diasporic Jewish existence without subjugation to the synagogue or to Zionism”. Marienstras, a Polish-born scholar of Shakespeare and Elizabethan theater, lost his faith in the universalist model of French citizenship as a means to secure the safety and belonging of the Jewish people early on in life, fighting in the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France when he was only a teenager (Hammerschlag 2018b, p. 137). Marienstras’s disillusionment with French republicanism led him to embrace a collective Jewish politics, and in the years after the war he worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, fighting for political asylum for Jewish war refugees in British Mandatory Palestine (Ibid., p. 137). His work for the committee ultimately led him to emigrate to Palestine himself for a time, and at the age of twenty he fought for the newly-formed state of Israel in the War of Independence (Ibid., p. 137). Yet his growing disillusionment with the newly formed state led him to reject Zionism as well, and to call for a form of Jewish political identity that escaped from what he saw as a false binary choice between the rejection of all public Jewish politics that characterized prewar French Jewry, and the hegemonic political Zionism that characterized French Jewish politics by the late 1960’s.

The founding manifesto of the Cercle thus argued that the immediate reaction of French Jews to rally around the state of Israel was not in itself the source of the problem, but was in fact a natural and unavoidable reaction to “a certain diffuse and residual consciousness of the historical and cultural dimensions” of Jewish identity.⁶ Such a “residual consciousness” of Jewish national identity was for Marienstras perfectly natural among Jews, as it was a more honest expression of the true cultural essence of Jewishness than

was a purely religious understanding of Judaism. The Zionists, unlike the French assimilationists, at least understood that nationhood and ethnicity were essential to Jewish identity, and that Jewishness could not be reduced to a mere privatized religious confession. Thus diaspora Jewish support for Zionism was to be seen as all but inevitable so long as it remained the only Jewish politics that did not deny the possibility of a public, national Jewish politics entirely, “for Zionism, in the immediate present, is the only Jewish *political* option which has even partly succeeded” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 14). But it was just as natural that such consciousness of Jewish national identity, and the political forms which this consciousness assumed, provoked a backlash among non-Jewish French leftists, who feared that any expression of a politics of Jewish solidarity merely “played into the hands” of those on the right who had long suspected French Jews of harboring “double loyalties” (see Note 6).

In the face of a left which saw all expressions of subnational ethnic solidarity as retrograde and suspect, and of a French Jewish community which thought such ethnic solidarity could only be expressed through Zionism, the founding manifesto of the Cercle demanded a third option, and boldly declared that:

It therefore appears to us necessary to affirm that all claims to difference are not necessarily racism; that problems of individual, national, and cultural identity are complex and cannot be resolved dogmatically; that it is a misinterpretation of the facts to constrain Jews who proclaim themselves as such to choose between the synagogue and Zionism; that the diasporas constitute for Jews a unique mode of existence that a long past has rendered natural, advantageous, and venerable and which has maintained the best of the Jewish universalist tradition; and that the diasporas, like other minorities, must be among those encouraged . . . to “preserve their cultural values”. (Ibid., p. 56)

The Cercle thus proclaimed its pride in the Jewish diaspora, not as a state to be overcome through either assimilation into universal French citizenship or through the ending of the exile with the establishment of the Jewish state, but as essential to what Jewish identity has meant throughout history. This essential diasporism represented a radical new claim for the positive, generative value of Jewish difference, outside of the framework of the nation-state. While Eastern European groups such as the Jewish Labour Bund had called for a culturally autonomous, non-Zionist, secular Jewish politics in the decades leading up to the Second World War, such diasporism was virtually unknown in a French context, and had been seen by the French Jewish community as an unfortunate relic to be expunged among Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the name of assimilation to French republican values (Hyman 1998, p. 125). Within the French context, Marienstras’s call for a renewed Jewish diasporism had few obvious precursors (Ibid., p. 205).

Yet in calling for new possibilities of Jewish diasporic politics that understood the Jewish people as a nation, and not merely as a confessional religion, without also maintaining that such Jewish nationhood could only be expressed through the nation-state of Israel, the chief ideologues of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux did not merely adumbrate new possibilities for French Jewish politics and identity in the present. Rather, they radically rewrote the previously accepted narrative of the French Jewish past, and of its place within broader Jewish history. Historiographical writings by Marienstras and his Cercle cofounder Pierre Vidal-Naquet, the eminent historian of ancient Greece, complicate the entire narrative according to which nineteenth and early twentieth century French Jews were forced to disavow all Jewish political programs such as Zionism that necessitated a Jewish identity in the public sphere. The scholars and intellectuals of the Cercle wrote a history of Jewishness that characterized the logic of French republicanism as promoting the nation-state as the dominant unit of political organization, reinforcing the Zionist conclusion that such a state is the only possible answer to the Jewish question. As a means of contesting this narrative, the Cercle’s historiographical writings instead portrayed the concept of the nation-state as a foreign model imported into Judaism from external sources from as far back as Hellenic times, pointing to parallels between modern Zionist myths and the collective myths of

the Greek and Roman Empires. In so doing, the Cercle not only challenged the historical myths upon which Jewish identity is constructed, but offered a subtle challenge to the founding national myths of French identity, as well. The writings of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux thereby expose the way in which all understandings of community history are inherently political, and the impossibility of separating history from normative nationalist mythmaking.

3. The Claim to Difference: Toward a Politics of Diasporism

In his book *Être un Peuple en Diaspora*, which may be read as a sort of mission statement for his larger Jewish ideological project, Richard Marienstras critiques both traditional left and right-wing politics as incapable of solving the Jewish question in Europe in either a politically sustainable or an ethical fashion. The nationalist right, of course, demanded the eradication of national Jewish identity in the name of ethnically homogeneous nation-states. As Rogers Brubaker demonstrates, the nationalistic right-wing vision of the nation-state that emerged in the nineteenth century was committed to an ideal premised upon “a series of congruencies—of territory and citizenry, state and nation, polity and culture, and legal citizenship and ethnocultural nationality”, even if in practice these congruencies “are seldom, if ever, fully realized” (Brubaker 2010, pp. 61–78). The visible persistence of the Jew as a distinctive ethnocultural nationality thus posed an undeniable challenge to this idealized congruency between the ethnic peoplehood of a particular territory and the modern nation-state constructed upon it, a challenge which could only be resolved by eliminating the Jews as a minority nation. At a more moderate level, this elimination could take the reputedly civilized form of assimilation through religious conversion to Christianity; at its most extreme, of course, such eliminationist right-wing logic reached its awful endpoint by justifying the extermination of six million Jews as the “final solution” to the problem of the persistence of the Jews into modernity as “a collective in which an ethnic and national element has never ceased to exist” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 9). If the right-wing vision of the nation-state cannot tolerate the existence of minority nations whose loyalty to that state might be suspect, then such minority nations must be stamped out, no matter what the terrible cost. Marienstras concludes that “the murderous character of state nationalism” was thus at least implicitly present from the very dawn of the modern nation-state (Ibid., p. 14).

In contrast to the rhetoric of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state that characterizes the nationalist right, the European left has historically portrayed itself as committed to a model of the nation-state based upon universal ideals of liberal citizenship, regardless of the nationality and peoplehood of the individuals claiming this citizenship. But in asserting a model of citizenship that only makes room for the individual citizen and the nation-state that grants this citizenship, without any space for intermediary cultural communities or other mediating structures, the left winds up recapitulating the very logic of the eliminationist right, subsuming the lived reality of Jewish peoplehood beneath a concept of the state that must ultimately suppress Jewishness entirely. According to the progressivist view of human history adopted by Marxists and other left Hegelians, “with the progress of enlightenment—capitalism first, then socialism—the Jews as such will disappear, bound as they are to superstitions which are destined for the dustbin of history” (Ibid., p. 10). Thus the left may claim that its universalism offers greater legal protections for the Jews than does the ethno-cultural particularism of the nationalist right, but these legal protections prove utterly empty if they cannot make space for the most distinctive elements that constitute the essence of Jewish life, “these symbolic universes by which men recount *how* to live, *how* to talk to one another, and where they inscribe cumulatively the history” of their cultural memory (Ibid., p. 8). Jewish liberation can only be hollow if it must come through the elimination of the essence of Jewish peoplehood.

As Marienstras explains, the state of France has served as the paradigmatic model of this left-wing eliminationism in the name of Jewish emancipation, precisely because of

its purportedly progressive decision to become the first modern European nation-state to grant equal citizenship rights to its Jews:

This choice, put before an infinitesimal proportion of Jewry in 1790 and 1791, is of capital importance, for it has served as the model for liberal and Marxist thinking on the subject. The prestige of the French Revolution was so great that it was impossible to conceive, for the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe, any other desirable fate but assimilation. Very soon the French Jews were offering themselves as an example to the rest of the world The “solution” to the “Jewish question” must be integration or assimilation. (Ibid., p. 10)

While the French Revolution opened new opportunities for French Jews in the short term, in Marienstras’s reading, its real import was to establish the nation-state as the sole political entity with the legal authority to regulate and normalize the status of minority communities, and in so doing the revolutionary government actually betrayed the communities it was supposedly liberating. By empowering the nation-state as the sole guarantor of minority rights, the Revolution in fact legitimated the very majoritarian entity with the power to suppress minority rights. Marienstras contends that in the name of supposedly progressive ideologies, “the state made use of the ideologies to camouflage its fundamental imperialism” (Ibid., p. 11), an imperialism that is all the more pernicious because it is codified into a legal structure that maintains its facial neutrality, and so disguises the exercise of raw power underlying these structures. Marienstras thus sees the legacy of the French Revolution as dangerous for Jews, as “it has given humanity a body of law more deadly than the oft-denounced ‘bourgeois legality,’ for its rules are respected by bourgeois states and self-styled revolutionary states alike” (Ibid., p. 11). Because the French revolutionary leaders could not imagine any framework besides the modern nation-state through which to secure the emancipation of national minorities, they in fact established a template through which “licence is given to the majority in the state to deal with national minorities as it thinks fit” (Ibid., p. 11). Thus the strategy adopted by many nineteenth century French Jews, to defend the position of Jewishness within the modern French state by identifying Jewish values with French republican values, could do naught but empower a state legal structure that could ultimately be employed to suppress Jewish identity entirely. If the liberal vision of minority emancipation can only be secured through the nation-state, then it necessarily means ceding power to the very institutions that can later be turned against these same minority communities.

This supposedly enlightened, progressivist vision of a citizenship built upon liberal ideals of legal equality, of “a world where cultural entities are gradually reduced to each other, and where everybody can absorb in equality—that is to say, uniformity—the benefits” of state citizenship (Ibid., p. 8), in fact parallels the right-wing model of ethnic citizenship more closely than the liberal would dare admit. The right cannot tolerate the persistence of national minorities which undermine its vision of the state as an organic social unity, but the left denies these minorities any relevant legal status in the public sphere in a way that must ultimately end up effacing all difference into the single figure of the assimilated citizenry. Marienstras concludes that “the ideologies of the right, when they do not totally reject the minority, teach them to disappear in the unitary mass of the nation; the ideologies of the left . . . advocate . . . that these differences are cultivated only discreetly, out of sight” (Marienstras 1986, pp. 31–40). Different political ideologies may proclaim different ideals as their end goal for the nation-state—an organic model of imagined unity between ethnic peoplehood and statehood for the right-wing nationalist, formal legal equality on an individual basis for the liberal republican, a classless society where vestigial cultural differences are overcome for the Marxist—but the end result is always a restriction of the possibility of cultural difference.

Marienstras points to the awful parallels between the logic of right-wing and left-wing eliminationism by equating fascism and state Communism:

The minorities were flattened in capitalist Europe and the Soviet Union alike The idea that “there can be no nations within the bosom of the one nation”,

which is explicitly or implicitly the basic charter of the Nation-state, was generally translated into reality. For the Jews, assimilationist pressures were intensified throughout Europe. There is no point in describing what happened in Germany. In the Soviet Union a multiplicity of Jewish cultural and community organisations were created and encouraged between 1920 and 1935 But with the start of the Cold War, the axe fell. The Jewish minority in the Soviet Union was literally decapitated, and the measures taken show that it was ethnocide in the strict sense of the word. (Marienstras 1975b, p. 13)

Marienstras proceeds to delineate the awful extent of the Soviet violence against the Jews, reminding his readers that “over four hundred members of the Jewish intellectual elite were arrested and liquidated” (Ibid., p. 13). Notably, this Soviet violence against the Jewish people did not only take the form of the literal executions of Jewish people, but the forced suppression of Jewish culture, those most visible markers of the elements of Jewish difference which the Soviet state had failed to eliminate in the name of what Lenin termed “the international culture of democracy and the workers’ movement throughout the world”.⁷ Thus in the course of the mass state violence against Soviet Jews which took place between 1949 and 1952, “nearly all Yiddish publications were closed down”, and “the last Jewish schools in Vilna and Kaunas were closed” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 13). These acts of cultural abolition were not merely incidental to the mass murders which they accompanied, but were rather an essential part of the homogenizing logic of statehood itself; if it had proven impractical to literally murder all of the Jews within one’s territory, as the Nazis had shown just a few years earlier, then the Soviets would have to settle for suppressing all of the cultural institutions which could maintain and transmit any coherent sense of essential Jewish nationhood. The Soviets had defeated the regime that had so menaced the Jews of Europe in the name of right-wing ideals, only to turn on their own Jews in the name of left-wing ideals immediately thereafter, because the “fundamentally imperialist and ethnocidal character” (Ibid., p. 14) of the nation-state simply cannot reconcile itself to the Jew.

If one accepts Marienstras’s fatalistic conclusion about the possibility for Jewish liberation as a minority community within the political framework of the nation-state, then it is obvious why one would conclude that political Zionism constitutes the only viable long-term solution to the Jewish question, and indeed Marienstras does not dismiss this answer out of hand. If nation-states must invariably suppress and persecute their minority communities in the name of some larger ideal of unity, then perhaps the only answer is for the Jews to construct a nation-state of their own, a nation-state in which they themselves constitute the numerical majority rather than a national minority as in Europe, and where Jewishness itself is elevated to the level of the unifying ideal in the name of which the state suppresses difference. In a fundamental sense, Zionists echo the claims made by anti-Jewish nationalists, for Zionists are “in unison with majoritarian thinking about the Jews . . . they specify a univocal existence in the bosom of the Nation-state as ‘natural’ and the existence of a minority as ‘unhealthy, unnatural, artificial’” (Ibid., p. 14). In short, the Zionists accept that they have lost the argument about the possibility of minority life within the framework of the majoritarian nation-state, and rather than futilely fighting a losing battle, they argue for a Jewish future on the same terms as the most virulently anti-Jewish nationalists. Despite the violence inflicted upon them in the name of the nation-state, such Jews cannot imagine a political framework outside of “the Nation-state as the norm of collective existence”, and so they echo anti-Jewish arguments about the Jewish diaspora, believing “that the existence of groups which do not constitute a state is . . . pathological” (Ibid., p. 14). Marienstras acknowledges the obvious appeal of such an argument, and he concedes that in the wake of the Holocaust, when the great powers of Europe seemed to have definitively closed the book on the possibility of a living Jewish life in diaspora, faith in the success of the Zionist project “is literally all that is left” to the survivors of the decimated European Jewry “if they are not to despair for the future of their identity” (Ibid., p. 14).

In light of his acknowledgment of the emotional appeal of Jewish state nationalism after what he euphemistically terms “the catastrophe” (Ibid., p. 14), one might thus assume that Marienstras would ground his arguments against political Zionism on the suppression of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim difference in the name of Jewish state unity. One might expect that Marienstras’s opposition to Zionism would assume the form of arguing that in embracing state nationalism, Jews repeat the nationalist gesture of assuming an organic unity between their own peoplehood and their land, a gesture which ended with so many Jewish corpses spread across Europe. Marienstras does not deny this argument against Zionism, and he admits that no past persecution in Jewish history should be taken to “authorise the Israeli government’s policy of annexation, ignoring the Palestinian people” or to “do away with the political and moral difficulties that arise from the use of violence” (Ibid., p. 17). Yet interestingly, despite these brief expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people as a similarly suffering minority group repressed by a majoritarian state, fears about the impact of Jewish nationalism upon non-Jewish minorities living within the territory claimed by the state of Israel do not constitute the crux of Marienstras’s claims against Zionism. Marienstras is not primarily worried that Jewish nationalism suppresses the differences of national minorities within the state of Israel. Rather, his concern is primarily with the means by which political Zionism suppresses Jewish difference. In Marienstras’s telling, in the name of constructing a nation-state to protect the embattled Jewish people from eliminationist threats imposed by other nation-states, of both the left and the right, Zionism actually inflicts the greatest eliminationist violence of all against the Jews.

4. Paradoxical Survival: Unity and Multiplicity in the Diaspora

The fact of Jewish survival in exile across two millennia is for Marienstras a testimony to the seemingly paradoxical state of diaspora Jewry, a paradox which in fact constitutes the greatest cultural strength of the Jewish people. On the one hand, the Jewish people have developed an immense diversity of cultural practices as they spread across the globe, so that the Jewish diaspora is characterized by “the absence of a common language, customs, or institutions” (Ibid., p. 15). Diaspora Jewish communities have adopted elements of the customs and cultures of their surrounding nations, leading to cultural and linguistic hybridities such as Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, cultural forms that simultaneously maintain the boundaries between the Jews and the other nations while demonstrating that these boundaries are also porous and undefined. Yet at the same time that the diasporas “have adopted the ways of life languages and customs of the lands in which they have taken root”, these diasporas nonetheless “recognise one another’ among themselves” (Ibid., p. 16). The Jewish people possess an essence that incorporates multiplicity, which Marienstras terms “a fundamental permanence” (Marienstras 1986, p. 36).

Thus the Jewish diaspora remains both diffuse and unified, displaying great cultural diversity while simultaneously affirming some ineradicable essence of Jewish identity that has not been effaced by dispersion or persecution. As cofounder of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux Pierre Vidal-Naquet described it, “an abyss separated the ‘assimilated’ Jews of France, Italy, and Great Britain from the Jews of *Yiddishland*, a linguistic, cultural, and national abyss; and yet something also unified them, so that the Dreyfus Affair resounded from Paris to Moscow and the Beilis Affair⁸ from Kiev to London” (Vidal-Naquet 1996e, p. 116). This paradoxical state of being one and many, unified and yet divided against oneself, is for Marienstras the hidden cultural strength of the Jewish people, and the diasporas testify to the fact that “the Jews have survived for so long in history, not *despite* dispersion but *because of* dispersion” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 15). Political Zionism, in the name of saving the Jews from the nation-state, forgets the defining essence that has enabled the Jews to survive in diaspora, for “however strong the destructive will of a nation, it has never been entirely successful because a part of the Jewish totality has always been outside its grasp” (Ibid., p. 15).

This Jewish totality is a paradoxical unity that contains within itself myriad elements that cannot in fact be unified. This paradoxical totality is crucial for Marienstras's argument, as he explains that the Jewish diaspora cannot be understood except through the unending dialectical tension between "such and such of its components" and its totality, a totality which encompasses diversity without subsuming it (Ibid., p. 15). This paradoxical state of a totality that incorporates particularities is what "gives proof of a permanence" to the Jewish people (Ibid., p. 15). Marienstras cites eminent German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, noting that for Rosenzweig, the Jewish people cannot be multiple peoples, for this would undermine their stable identity, but they cannot be a singular people either, for "paradoxically . . . a singular people is a people among others" (Marienstras 1986, p. 39). Marienstras uses Rosenzweig to argue that a singular people can only attain its identity by drawing external boundaries to divide and distinguish itself from all other peoples, but this means that in trying to maintain cultural independence, a singular people is fully dependent on the outsiders that it supposedly rejects, defining itself purely negatively in relation to other communities or nations from which it wants to remain separate. Thus, whereas peoples that define themselves by territory remain at the mercy of political borders governed by other nations, "the Jewish people is a 'unique' people which includes borders within itself" (Ibid., p. 39). By embodying their borders internally and not externally, the Jews show themselves to be divided even in their unity, a tension which can never fully be overcome.

It is this paradoxically generative tension of singularity and multiplicity, fracturing and wholeness, which political Zionism cannot abide. By adopting a historical myth of unified totality according to which the Jews have always been one nation in exile from its homeland, always in a temporary state of dispersion from the one territory where every Jew belongs, Zionism inflicts violence against the reality that the Jews constitute "diverse peoples, who are today becoming aware of the irreplaceable character of their history and culture" (Marienstras 1975b, p. 17). Thus does Zionism constitute "an ethnic closed shop" (Ibid., p. 17), in defiance of the fact that it is precisely the Jewish openness to elements of surrounding cultures that has enabled Jewish survival and cultural resiliency. Indeed, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet writes, it is in fact the very encounter with outside sources which enabled the Jews to survive for millennia in exile, for "the Jews became the 'people of the Book' when this Book was rendered into Greek" (Vidal-Naquet 1996a, p. 59). In the narrative of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux, it was only by assimilating elements of non-Jewish philosophy and thought that the Jewish people were able to reinterpret and rewrite their own relationship to their textual tradition in a manner that enabled it to survive in the absence of the physical Temple and the homeland.

The principal ingenuity of Jewish life, according to Marienstras, therefore lies in its cultural contribution of "a way of life that assumes participation in a double culture", a double that remains in productive tension without ever being reconciled.⁹ If the right-wing state erases Jewish cultural identity in the name of ethnic homogeneity, and the left-wing state erases Jewish cultural identity in the name of universal ideals that transcend ethnic particularity, then the Zionist state constructs a false mythos of Jewish unity, an "ideal reconstruction of the entire culture" (Marienstras 1975b, p. 18), which in fact erases the lived realities of the diverse Jewish diasporas. Marienstras explains that "it is not generally possible to discover a group culture in the characteristics manifested by one individual or several" (Ibid., p. 18), but this is precisely the mistake that Zionism makes, asserting a single essentialized culture for every Jew that cannot but deny the lived realities and particularities of the many diasporas that together constitute world Jewry. While the Jewish diaspora is defined by its hybridity, "its faithful attachment to multiple cultural entities" (Ibid., p. 18), the Zionist state must assert a singular, majoritarian ideal of the Jew. In this way, the Zionist state parallels the majoritarian French state that has tried to suppress Jewishness by declaring that "it was one's destiny to be French, it was *natural*" (Ibid., p. 19). In the place of an assertion of natural Frenchness that was supposed to supersede Jewishness, the Zionist state constructs a myth according to which the essence of Jewish

identity has always already belonged to a singular Jewish culture, forgetting that in fact all cultures are artificial constructions, that “all cultures are voluntary” (Ibid., p. 19). All cultures represent reconstructions laden with ideological assumptions, and the true dangers come when nation-states forget this fact and try to portray themselves as rooted solely in an objective reading of history.

The generative possibilities of the diaspora, therefore, come from the very impossible position of the minority Jew existing in a majoritarian state, a position marked by “a provocative otherness” (Ibid., p. 20). This Jewish otherness becomes for Marienstras the grounds for a new political possibility which comes from questioning the very artificiality of the nation-state as a unit of political organization at all. Through their very obstinate will to survive as a national minority in exile, as a singular and yet diverse people that both is and is not one nation, the Jews testify to the cracks that underlie the supposed stability of the nation-state as the dominant political paradigm. The Jew constitutes nothing less than “a counter-type, formidable by the very fact of his existence”, an existence which forces the nation-state to confront its very powerlessness to achieve the unity which it seeks (Ibid., p. 20). The Jew marks the point at which state power fails, the visible reminder that “at the very heart of the totalitarian endeavor, that the dominant system was powerless to monopolise discourse on its world” (Ibid., p. 20). Thus, in the place of seeking political normalization through the formation of yet one more nation-state, Marienstras calls for the Jews to join together with other subnational diaspora communities such as the Breton and Armenian diasporas, creating a community of national minorities who lack stable nation-states of their own. He explains that the only factor blocking this cross-cultural diasporic solidarity is the refusal of some Jews to accept their status as a permanent minority (see Ibid., p. 17). Yet if these diasporic communities were to commit themselves to a shared political program of asserting their difference, their simple survival would constitute a political program in itself, a declaration that “what is subversive is the simple determination to survive in a manner deemed unacceptable by the majority” (Ibid., p. 20).

In this way, the survival of minority diasporas in the face of a state whose very logic demands their eradication may become a marker of the limit of the nation-state, and a grounds for imagining new political possibilities beyond the “exaltation of the Nation-state as the only form of normality” (Ibid., p. 21). Diasporic survival constitutes nothing less than “the struggle against the centralised Nation-state . . . a State that transforms citizens into subjects, producers into cogwheels, public servants into agents of power, and the majority culture into an instrument of propaganda and domination” (Ibid., p. 21). Diaspora thus becomes the political basis for “the struggle for a better society . . . waged against the State as it exists today” (Ibid., p. 21). Simply surviving as a diasporic Jew, or Breton, or Armenian, and maintaining the shared cultural memory of essential Jewish peoplehood, becomes for Marienstras a radical political act. The Jewish diaspora becomes a paradigmatic model for a broader diasporic politics, as “far from being an anomaly, [the Jewish Diaspora] is a model that other minorities across the world are in the process of adopting” (see Note 6).

By modeling a form of national identity whose rights and survival are not secured solely by the legal framework of the nation-state, the particular and unique history of the Jewish people challenges the strict dichotomy between right-wing particularism and left-wing universalism that has been so detrimental to the Jews on both sides. The particular, contingent cultural memory of the Jews becomes a model for an international diasporist politics, a politics that joins together unique cultures from unique backgrounds and vantage points in a shared project of imagining new political possibilities beyond the state. In a nod to the Diaspora nationalism that preceded him, Marienstras approvingly cites the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, who established “a typology of the nations . . . which goes from the tribal group to the politico-territorial formation and which ends with the ‘spiritual nation’ . . . which is the most evolved and most accomplished form of the nation, to which the Jews have already come” (Marienstras 1986, p. 37). In Marienstras’s reading of Dubnow, the paradox of maintaining unity in multiplicity parallels the paradox of being a nation without nationhood, a spiritual nation that transcends the political. For Dubnow, this status

of a nation that is not a political nation transcends the binary of universal and particular, so that individual cultures may serve as exemplars of universal ideals. Diaspora nationalism thus models a politics in which multiple communities to “build up their solidarity on something different from political slogans . . . to say ‘we’ despite the majoritarian system in which every individual is a monad before the state” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 19).

Yet Marienstras does not go so far as to argue that Jewish diasporic existence is somehow more natural than the Zionist existence, for indeed it is the very state of naturalization itself which the diaspora calls into question. If the nation-state is premised upon the myth of a shared, homogeneous history that links together people and territory, past and present, then the diaspora reveals that all such claims to natural status are necessarily constructed myths. As the Jew living in France can lay partial claim to both Jewish and French identity without fully inhabiting either, she reveals that all people possess the capacity to “fundamentally modify their cultural position, re-establish their . . . history” (Ibid., p. 19). Diasporic existence denaturalizes the capacity of any national myth to assert its claim as binding truth over a people or nation, revealing that all national histories constitute a founding mythos constructed in the present based upon contemporary political needs. As Marienstras explains, while the mythos of the nation-state is premised upon the belief that shared cultural unity precedes and grounds the feeling of belonging to a nation-state, in fact the order is the other way around, that the assertion of a belongingness to the artificial political entity of the nation is what makes possible the construction of the national mythos, so that in fact the nationalist must “dream of this feeling of belonging before passing on to the stage of cultural reconstruction” (Ibid., p. 19). The failure of the diaspora to understand itself as part of this shared cultural mythos upon which the nation-state is constructed reveals that in fact the mythos is itself an arbitrary construction, and that the distinction between those groups included within this mythos and those excluded from it is never as clear or definitive as the nationalist might wish. It is just this project of denaturalizing the foundational myths of the nation-state that historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, a cofounder of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux, undertakes in his revisionist exploration of Jewish history and cultural memory.

And here one finds a striking inconsistency between the positions taken by the two leading intellectuals of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux, an inconsistency which points to greater fault lines in the Cercle’s political project. The figure of the Jew must function as both universal and particular, both the bearer of her own particular history and as a universal paradigm for other sub-national diasporic communities to articulate their own “counter-states” against the hegemony of the nation-state (Ibid., p. 20). Marienstras explicitly calls for an alliance of the Jews with other sub-national diasporic communities in France, and in so doing, he adumbrates a multidirectional memory, as the Jewish example of what he terms “subversive survival” functions as a sort of inspirational paradigm for other minority communities to articulate their own paradoxical historical survival against a French state which sought to absorb and erase them (Ibid., p. 19). Similarly, Cercle cofounder Pierre Vidal-Naquet drew an explicit comparison between the multidirectionality of Jewish memory with French colonial violence in the Maghreb, writing, “I personally entered the fight against the Algerian War and specifically against torture . . . with a constant point of reference: the obsessive memory of our national injustices—particularly the Dreyfus Affair—and of the Nazi crimes of torture and extermination” (Vidal-Naquet 1992, p. 127. as cited in: Rothberg 2009, p. 195).

Yet Vidal-Naquet’s own historiography marks the limits of this essentialist reading of Jewish Otherness. Marienstras is quite explicit that he sees Jewish Otherness as a state that exceeds the contingencies of the history that birthed it, an almost ontological state that characterizes Jewishness from its very origin, describing the Jew as the one who “in every exclusive system is the Other” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 20) and who is, in his words, “in essence . . . condemned by history” (Marienstras 1986, p. 34). No political program may efface this otherness, because it essentially marks the Jew from the very beginning of their history (Marienstras 1975b, p. 20). But such an essentialist understanding of history as an

absolute that possesses the capacity to condemn, a clear evocation of Hegel, conflicts with the reading of Jewish history advanced by Vidal-Naquet, a reading explicitly intended to denaturalize and, one might argue, *de-essentialize* the Zionist historiographical paradigms of the Cercle's day, by pointing to the way in which all Jewish historical narratives are constituted through contingencies, fragments, and imaginaries.

5. "Myth Hems the Real": History as Mythmaking

As a historian specializing in the study of ancient Greece, Pierre Vidal-Naquet was often attacked for lacking adequate scholarly training to address the history of ancient Israel and early Judaism. For example, Jacob Neusner, the famous American scholar of Jewish studies, wrote that a book of Vidal-Naquet's historical essays displayed "a mere smattering of Jewish knowledge and still less of Jewish learning", and claimed Vidal-Naquet had likely never once "opened a text of Judaism, and the footnotes suggest he has not" and that his writings on ancient Israel display "an astounding lack of learning about the history of the first century" (Neusner 1998). Kirkus Reviews conceded that Vidal-Naquet's historiography showed him to be "a fine Jewish historian—for an authority on ancient Greece" (Kirkus Reviews 1996). Anne Raulin wrote that Vidal-Naquet's work on Judaism was really less interested in history as such than in "memory as being one of the basic features of the relationship of Jews with the world", and that if he insisted on writing on subjects unrelated to his academic specialization in ancient Greece, he should stick to "denouncing French army crimes during the war in Algeria" (Raulin 1984, p. 325).

This allegation that Vidal-Naquet permitted his own personal ideological predilections to get in the way of historical scholarship recurred often in critiques of his work; for example, Alex Derczansky wrote that Vidal-Naquet's work could only be appreciated if one put aside "all the reluctance that we may have to fully subscribe to his ideological choices" (Derczansky 1981, p. 177). Michaël Löwy argued that as the work of "engaged researcher who believes in certain values", Vidal-Naquet's historical work should be seen more as literature than as actual historiography, pointing to the scholar's "Jewish irony" which gives his works "a certain literary quality" (Löwy 1992). Doris Bensimon noted that as an "historian of ancient Greece" and an "engaged intellectual", Vidal-Naquet's ventures into the history of ancient Israel were truly motivated not by genuine historical inquiry, but rather by "criticism of the policies of the Israeli government" (Bensimon 1981). And Jacob Neusner went so far as to attack Vidal-Naquet's affiliation with Judaism itself, claiming that the assimilated Frenchman was less a Jew than a "secular leftist", and that his only interest in ancient Israel lay in his desire for "a way of comparing the ancient zealots with the Zionists, and of condemning both" (Neusner 1998). The combined portrayal of these critiques is apparent. As a historian of ancient Greece, lacking adequate scholarly grounding in the history of ancient Israel, Vidal-Naquet's historical writings on Israel and early Judaism were not truly works of history at all, but were examples of eisegesis, of reading modern ideological preoccupations into ancient history.

Certainly one may dispute Vidal-Naquet's specific historical claims and conclusions, and even his basic qualifications to discuss ancient Israel at all. He himself readily acknowledged his scholarly constraints, identifying himself as "not an Orientalist" (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 37) and writing that "knowing neither Hebrew nor Aramaean, at least I will be conscious of my limitations" (Ibid., p. 38), and that he was "equally conscious of the enormity of the effort that must be undertaken if one wishes simply to become acquainted with the issues at stake" as a non-specialist (Ibid., p. 38). Yet what I wish to suggest is that such critiques of Vidal-Naquet's historical work on ancient Israel make the mistake of reading his work as neutral scientific scholarship, to be judged by the standards of objectivity of Rankean historiography. Vidal-Naquet himself contended that even if the historian "should try to come as close as possible to the event as it genuinely occurred, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, to use Ranke's formula", he must also concede that such an accurate account of the event remains unattainable except as an idealized heuristic guideline, and thus that "the truth must be postulated, as Kant postulates the thing-in-itself, without

hoping to attain it" (Vidal-Naquet 1996b, p. 27). Indeed, in reading Vidal-Naquet's work in conjunction with Marienstras's writings on diasporism and the Cercle Gaston Crémieux, what I wish to suggest is that Vidal-Naquet's work should not be taken as objective history at all, but as a self-conscious polemical tool to expose the ways in which all nation-states rely on mythmaking in the guise of history to justify their contemporary ideological projects. Indeed, in arguing that his background as a scholar of ancient Greece qualified him to cast a new lens on Jewish history, Vidal-Naquet contended that working on ancient Greek tragedy and mythology "taught me not to take contemporary myths literally, no matter who had developed them" (Vidal-Naquet 1996f, p. xxi).

Perhaps, then, what Vidal-Naquet is doing in his historical scholarship is not attempting to reach a state of objectivity through purely descriptive history, but rather exposing the impossibility of escaping normative value judgments in modern re-readings of history, even if these value judgments come cloaked in the guise of analytical, Rankean historiography. Nationalist mythmaking should thus not be seen in simple binary opposition to objective history, but as a necessary and unavoidable part of the entire historical endeavor, for "myth is not opposed to reality as the false to the true; myth accompanies the real and, if I dare say so, myth hems the real" (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 46). This "hemming of the real" shows that history cannot be accessed outside of the mythical discourses constructed around it in modernity, that "the facts, even if they are archaeological, are in any event only accessible through discourse" (Ibid., p. 46). In so doing, Vidal-Naquet's historical writings expose the fissures in all historical narratives, revealing that all nation-states rest upon the unstable foundation of a self-consciously fabricated mythos.

6. Statehood and Foreignness: Debating Modern Politics by Debating History

To take one example of how Vidal-Naquet deploys what ostensibly appear as historical writings to expose the way in which all history is a form of mythmaking, consider his account of the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the decisive event of the First Jewish-Roman War. This siege led to the burning and destruction of the Second Temple, and it thus played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Jewish diaspora. Citing Tacitus's *Histories*, Vidal-Naquet points to the seemingly curious fact that even facing the imminent destruction of their city, the Judeans were unable to unite to face a common enemy, that instead the encircled, beleaguered capital city was characterized by "the curious division among the besieged inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Vidal-Naquet 1996d, p. 3). According to the ancient Roman historian Tacitus, there were at the time "three different leaders, and three armies" in Jerusalem, and rather than unite in defiance of the Romans, "it was upon each other that they turned the weapons of battle".¹⁰ In short, far from functioning as a story of "Jewish unity" (Vidal-Naquet 1996d, p. 3) in the face of an implacable foe, many historical accounts of the Siege of Jerusalem actually emphasize Jewish division and even civil war.

As Vidal-Naquet points out, according to the accounts of the Siege offered by both Tacitus and Josephus, the prospect of the imminent loss of Jerusalem only exacerbated existing internal tensions within Israelite and Judean cultures, leading to "outbreaks of internal Jewish strife" (Ibid., p. 5). Yet this account of the fractious, disunited state of the Jewish people facing an existential threat to their political sovereignty is by no means universally accepted, despite the textual evidence to support it, and it conflicts with the account offered by many modern Israeli historians of the period, such as Yitzhak Baer. According to Baer, the internal Jewish civil war "is just a Roman invention" (Ibid., p. 5) intended to discredit the Jews, when the truth is that "the Jews formed a unanimous front in defense of their way of life" (Ibid., p. 5). In support of his thesis, Baer demonstrated that the scenes of Jewish internal conflict depicted by Josephus and Tacitus are closely influenced by Greek literary sources such as "Aristophanes, Thucydides, or Plato" (Ibid., p. 5), and Baer contends that this shows that these accounts are not accurate retellings of the historical record, but are rather later literary reconstructions drawing on fictional sources, motivated by the strategic need to undermine Jewish solidarity in order to further divide and weaken the rebellious Jewish forces (Baer 1971, cited in Vidal-Naquet 1996d). Baer contends that the

literary similarities between Josephus and Tacitus prove that Josephus's account "is utterly unreliable since it is plagiarized from classical Greek writers" (Feldman and Hata 1989, p. 389). Thus Baer and his intellectual followers dismissed Josephus's account of internecine Jewish tensions as ideologically motivated, and "accepted the Talmudic tradition describing this event as the more reliable and preferred source than that by Josephus" (Mor 2016, p. 434).

Baer's argument for Jewish unity during the Siege of Jerusalem has been influential in Israeli historiography of the period, despite criticisms that he fails to demonstrate conclusively the literary parallels between Josephus and Tacitus, and that "the mention of passages definitely showing the influence of Thucydides or Polybius is very small" (Ibid., p. 389). Vidal-Naquet, however, is less interested in critiquing Baer's historiographical methodology than in excavating the ideological motivations underlying Baer's dismissal of Josephus as himself ideologically slanted, and in showing that Baer's reading is motivated by a tendentious Zionist ideology concerned with constructing historical mythologies of Jewish military resistance to outside rule. Vidal-Naquet thus argues that the internal divisions among the Jews of the period "can be denied only in the terms of an ideology that excludes their very existence", which is to say the ideology of contemporary political Zionism (Vidal-Naquet 1996d, p. 5). To argue against Baer's thesis, Vidal-Naquet points to the wide array of ideological, religious, and cultural groups that existed in Judea during the period, identifying in particular "Galilaeans and Idumaeans . . . regional oppositions . . . Sicarii, disciples of Judas the Galilaeen, and Zealots centered around the Temple, possible also Essenes, ideological oppositions" (Ibid., p. 7). Yet in addition to this fractious parade of diverse and often conflicting communities that collectively comprised the Jewish residents of Judea, Vidal-Naquet emphasizes the large number of Second Temple Jews who were not living within the Roman province of Judea at all during the period, but rather in diaspora even before the war, spread as far afield as Egypt, Pergamum, Rome, Miletus, Cyprus, Damascus, and many other locales (Ibid., p. 7). These Jews were far enough from Jerusalem that they likely took little notice of the political and military events transpiring there, and in most cases these diasporic Jews were more Hellenized and cosmopolitan than the Jews of Judea. These early diasporic Jews most likely perceived their safety and interests as more closely yoked to the pluralism and religious toleration of the empires in which they dwelled than to the result of the war in faraway Judea (Ibid., pp. 7–9). Thus there is no reason to assume the state of imagined Jewish unity upon which Baer's historical thesis is premised.

Yet what Vidal-Naquet is doing here is not simply disputing the historiography of Yitzhak Baer, historiography which he sees as more accurately an expression of contemporary Zionist politics than of accurate readings of the source material. Rather, he is constructing an alternate mythos of the Jewish people, one that grants diaspora and dispersion an integral place in the essence of the Jewish people even prior to the destruction of the Second Temple. If Yitzhak Baer's myth of Jewish unity legitimates the case for a unified Jewish nation-state, then Vidal-Naquet's myth argues that diaspora has always been an essential part of that story, and that "the Diaspora began within Palestine itself" (Ibid., p. 8). Even prior to the destruction of the Temple, there were, says Vidal-Naquet, diasporic Jews who had more pluralistic and cosmopolitan values than did the Jews of Judea. As evidence for this claim, Vidal-Naquet points to Philo's account of a delegation of diasporic Jews who came before Caligula, and who in the process defended unique Jewish customs such as abstaining from pork not solely on the particularistic grounds of the Sinaitic covenant, but on claims for "a value that is more universal", an argument for cultural pluralism and tolerance (Ibid., p. 14). As Vidal-Naquet describes, these Jews were "diplomats and men of culture", and they argued that in a diverse and pluralistic empire, "Laws vary by peoples" (Ibid., p. 14). These Hellenized Jews, who articulated their defense of their culture upon universalist grounds, were for the Zealots defending Jerusalem every bit as much the enemy as were any Roman soldiers; Vidal-Naquet tells us that "zeal is directed, certainly, against the foreigner, but it is directed still more sharply against the Hellenized Jew" (Ibid.,

p. 9). Nor did these distinctions between Hellenized Jews and Zealots map cleanly onto a binary distinction between Judea and diaspora, for “there were the Jewish Jews and the Hellenized Jews: those of Caesarea, those of Galilee. Hellenism was present within the Essenian movement and there are Greek documents to be found at Masada” (Ibid., pp. 12–13). Vidal-Naquet rejects the simplistic narrative according to which the Jewish people were characterized by “a people deeply faithful to its traditions but covered on top by a superficial Hellenized stratum” (Ibid., p. 12). According to this narrative, “there were the Jews, and there was something else”, yet in truth, “what complicates things . . . is that this ‘something else’ also was Jewish” (Ibid., p. 12). The Hellenized Jews, like the diaspora itself, are as much a part of the essence of early Judaism as are the Zealots in Judea and the other factions defending Jerusalem. To write these Jews out of Jewish history is a normative ideological decision and not an analytical or descriptive one.

Thus there is no basis to make the normative claim that Hellenized Jews were in some way “less” Jewish than the Zealots defending Jerusalem, for the Jews of the day were divergent and disparate in ways that complicate simply binary distinctions between “more” and “less” Jewish at all. One cannot even say that the Jews who were more skeptical of the authority of the Judean state were more lax in their Jewish observance and more influenced by Hellenic cultures than those who accepted this authority, for Johanan Ben Zakkai, a Jew who famously embraced the authority of the emperor and “allegedly greeted Vespasian with the cry of ‘Vive Domine Imperator’” did so according to the stories not because he was a Hellenized Jew who welcomed Roman rule, but in order to separate Judaism from political statehood entirely, “to found Judaism as a religion separated from its State” (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 43). Once again, Vidal-Naquet’s narrative underscores the immense diversity of Jewish political beliefs and religious practices of the day, and resists a simple binary division between loyal Jewish Zealots who resisted Roman rule and lax Hellenized Jews who accepted it. In narrating the stories of this contradictory *mélange* of Jewish communities, with often conflicting attitudes towards pluralism and toward the centrality of Jerusalem and the Temple within Jewish life at all, Vidal-Naquet is thus constructing a counter-mythos to the Zionist mythos of historians such as Yitzhak Baer. In Vidal-Naquet’s mythos, the diaspora is every bit as essential an element in the Jewish story as is Jewish statehood. Diaspora is relocated into an earlier time period within Jewish history, and in so doing, Vidal-Naquet portrays diasporic existence as no more or less natural than any other mode of Jewish being. Where the Zionist wants to portray diaspora and dispersion as states of temporary dislocation from the natural Jewish state of unified statehood, Vidal-Naquet’s counter-history thwarts our capacity to state that one mode of being Jewish is more essentially Jewish than another.

Indeed, Vidal-Naquet goes further than simply denaturalizing the accepted Zionist historical narrative according to which diaspora is the unnatural state and Jewish statehood the natural, and argues that in fact statehood itself is a foreign model imported to Jewish culture from the Hellenic world. As he argues, “when the Maccabees reconstituted the State¹¹ in the second century B.C.E., they could not help but imitate an already existing model. Whatever their intentions might have been in setting up this State, the unavoidable model was that of a Hellenistic kingdom” (Vidal-Naquet 1996f, p. xx). The Maccabees, of course, were famous for their desire to return to what they perceived to be a purer form of Jewish practice, uncorrupted by Hellenic influences, yet in order to effect this forced religious revival, they needed a model to organize and govern their newly established Hasmonean kingdom after they successfully overthrew the Hellenic Seleucid Empire. The Hasmonean rulers thus constructed “the image of a pure State, an ideological State that would apply and enforce the rules of Jewish law”, but to establish and govern such a state, this ideological image “collided with realities that obliged it to seek compromises” (Vidal-Naquet 1996d, p. 10). One such compromise was the importation of the Hellenic model of imperial statehood, a model premised upon the need to stitch together a unified government out of a culturally diverse and disunited territory. Thus “in contrast with these various forms of Judaizing conquered territories”, the Hasmonean rulers adopted a

policy of “enlarging the territory of the State without chasing out the inhabitants, all the while accepting a diversity of populations as a constitutive element of that State” (Ibid., p. 11). This model of Hasmonean statehood constituted nothing less than “the creation of a Seleucid State on a smaller scale” (Ibid., p. 11). The historical irony is readily apparent. In order to successfully Judaize their newly conquered territories, the Hasmoneans needed a mode of governance, and they found the only plausible such mode of governance in the model of imperial statehood introduced by the very Hellenic empires which they were trying to overthrow and escape. In the name of escaping Hellenism, the Hasmoneans actually Hellenized Judea at an even higher level.

If Yitzhak Baer’s historical narrative of Jewish unified statehood in the face of Roman aggression constitutes a founding mythos for the Zionist state, then Vidal-Naquet’s narrative of statehood as a Hellenic invention and of diaspora as essential to the history of the Jewish people from the early days reinforces the political program laid out by Richard Marienstras and the other leaders of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux. Marienstras wanted to argue for an understanding of Jewish culture which saw diaspora as the essential and unique cultural and political contribution of the Jewish people, and which saw modern Zionist models of statehood as the attempt to assimilate foreign influences into Judaism, and Vidal-Naquet constructed a Jewish historical mythos which supported these normative claims. Indeed, Vidal-Naquet himself pointed to the obvious parallels between the ancient Hasmoneans and the modern Zionists, as two political movements which sought to escape Jewish assimilation but in so doing wound up adopting non-Jewish models of sovereign statehood. Just as the Hasmoneans had to rely upon “the unavoidable model . . . of a Hellenistic kingdom”, so too did “the pioneers who created the modern State of Israel” need to “fit themselves into a context that was all the more difficult as it contained an unmistakably colonial dimension” (Vidal-Naquet 1996f, p. xx). If the Jews, then, are to embrace their historical uniqueness and shirk foreign influences, it must come through embracing diaspora and not through the importation of foreign models of statehood.

A similar argument that Jewish historiography cannot be seen outside of the context of modern ideological myths can be seen in Vidal-Naquet’s writings on Masada, the fortified rocky plateau in the Judean Desert which was famously besieged by the Romans from 73 to 74 C.E., ending with the mass suicide of the Sicarii faction defending the fortress, led by Eleazar ben Ya’ir (Vidal-Naquet 1996b, p. 23). As Vidal-Naquet points out, this famous suicide narrative is based exclusively on the account of Flavius Josephus, our only authority on the events. Yet Josephus’s retelling should hardly be taken as a reliable account, given that Josephus himself opposed the Jewish revolt and saw the tragic events at Masada as “a penultimate episode in a revolt that was, in his view, a terrible mistake . . . above all contrary to the will of God and to the will of the notables in Jewish society” (Ibid., p. 22). Josephus saw the revolt against Roman rule as a grave mistake doomed to end in tragic failure, but once it began he reluctantly accepted a post commanding the Jewish forces in the Galilean city of Jotapata. When it became obvious that Josephus’s forces could not prevail, they “therefore had to decide whether to surrender or to die, since fighting was out of the question. Josephus decided to surrender” (Ibid., p. 29).

Josephus’s account of his decision to surrender at Jotapata must therefore be read as necessarily self-serving, driven as it is by a desire to defend himself against charges of cowardice that might be leveled against him for his decision to surrender and to survive. Therefore, Josephus constructs a narrative according to which Jewish tradition is hostile to suicide, and the very act of choosing to commit mass suicide which Eleazar ben Ya’ir ordered at Masada becomes a foreign importation from Greek culture:

Life and death. At Jotapata, Josephus pleads in his own name against suicide, which guarantees at the very least that, *in his own view*, the Jewish tradition is hostile to suicide. At Masada, Eleazar, using arguments emanating from a very tangled Greek philosophy (stretching from the Orphics to the Stoics), pleads in favor of suicide. The arguments answer one another. To commit suicide is to deliver the soul, it is to allow the soul to have with God that immediate commerce

it lacks in life, except in sleep. “Why pray, should we fear death if we love to repose in sleep”. Eleazar makes his own the old identification of *soma* with *sēma* (the body is a tomb). At Jotapata, on the contrary, Josephus explains that the soul and the body are closely connected and even are related In both cases, it is of little importance that the vocabulary and the argumentation are really borrowed not from the Bible but from Greek philosophy. The important thing is that Josephus invokes Moses, “the wisest of lawgivers”—which, of course, Eleazar does not do. (Ibid., p. 30)

In Vidal-Naquet’s reading, Josephus’s impassioned speech against suicide at Jotapata and Eleazar’s impassioned speech in favor of suicide at Masada were both influenced primarily by Greek philosophical assumptions, but Josephus at least attempted to justify his position on Jewish grounds, which Eleazar did not do. It is not hard to detect the obviously self-serving motivations for Josephus’s retelling. The only account of Eleazar’s speech at Masada counseling suicide comes from Josephus, who had a simple and straightforward interest in portraying suicide as a Greek idea imported into Jewish culture from outside.

Suicide is premised upon a division between body and soul, so that the soul may live on after the body dies, but this soul-body dualism is foreign to Judaism, which has historically assumed a much stronger link between body and soul. In contrast to this concept of suicide as Greek, Josephus’s speech to his forces at Jotapata invoked the Biblical prophet Jeremiah, who famously counseled Israelite surrender to Babylon in order to survive and do God’s will;¹² in so doing, he thereby located surrender as internal to the Jewish tradition. Vidal-Naquet explains that “Josephus, in invoking Jeremiah, to whom he compares himself, proclaims that surrender is the way of life” (Vidal-Naquet 1996b, p. 31), and that “Josephus’s model is clearly Jeremiah, the prophet of defeat and capitulation . . . Jeremiah called upon the people and the king to surrender Jerusalem without a fight to the Assyrian enemy” (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 40). Eleazar’s speech in defense of suicide is thus known only through the retelling of a likely biased narrator who had every reason to portray suicide as foreign to Jewish culture and to defend his own decision to surrender as more authentically Jewish.

The irony, of course, is that this act of mass suicide at Masada, which is only known through the account of a chronicler who opposed the decision, has become to the modern Zionist an icon of exactly the opposite ideological valence of what Josephus ascribed to it. If Josephus saw suicide as an assimilated Greek idea, based on a Hellenic dualism of body and soul that is unknown within Judaism, the modern Zionists have made the suicide at Masada a symbol of resistance to foreign assimilation, of Jewish defiance of foreign enemies. Vidal-Naquet explains that this Zionist mythologization of the Masada narrative, which can be demonstrated in the fact that many Israeli soldiers take their oaths of service at the site, is in fact “the creation—lived as a re-creation—of the State of Israel”, a modern nation-state which was determined “to make of this rock . . . one of the mythical sites in the National Memory” (Ibid., p. 53). Yigael Yadin, the Israeli archaeologist and politician who excavated Masada from 1963 to 1965 (Ibid., p. 53), did not even attempt to separate his scientific archaeological work from his normative ideological commitments; Yadin wrote an ostensibly analytic and scholarly book about Masada which “along with an abundance of archaeological documentation . . . also contains numerous items of no scholarly merit, notably the photo of new Israeli tank-crew recruits taking their oath at Masada” (Vidal-Naquet 1996b, p. 21). Yadin wrote in his supposed work of scientific scholarship on Masada that the rock has been “elevated . . . to an undying symbol of desperate courage, a symbol which has stirred hearts throughout the last nineteen centuries” (Yadin 1989–1991, p. 201). But as Vidal-Naquet points out, Yadin’s own account betrays his attempt to establish Masada as an enduring symbol of Jewish military bravery throughout “nineteen centuries” of exile, for as Yadin himself acknowledges, “the site was rediscovered only in 1838 by the American travelers Edward Robinson and E. Smith”, at a time when this rock was no more than “one rock among others, which the Arabs called Qasr As-Sebbeh” (Vidal-Naquet

1996b, p. 22). Our modern understanding of Masada is thus a Zionist reconstruction and not an accurate historical account.

Moreover, in addition to Yadin's deliberate rewriting of the history of the Masada site as an object of pilgrimage and veneration for diaspora Jews, Yadin simply glosses over the fact that the only account we have of the mass suicide comes from ideological opponent Josephus. Yadin argues that the modern reader should believe Josephus's account because of its "gripping description of what took place on the summit of Masada on that fateful night in the spring of 73 A.D.", and that Josephus must have produced such a gripping account of a suicide which he ostensibly opposed because of "pangs of conscious or some other cause which we cannot know" (Yadin 1989–1991, p. 15). Here the irony of the Masada narrative adopted by Yadin and other political Zionists becomes especially clear. Yadin wants modern readers to accept uncritically the account of the mass suicide at Masada offered by Josephus, but he wants moderns to do this in the name of an ideological interpretation that is precisely the opposite of the reading given to the event by the only surviving source that we have of that very event. Where Josephus wanted to portray the mass suicide as an act of Greek culture influencing Jewish history in a particularly dangerous and tragic fashion, Yadin wants us to see Masada as the ultimate anti-assimilatory act, of Jews defending their own homeland so bravely that they were even willing to go to their deaths. Yadin's only account for the events at Masada come from a narrative which cannot support the ideological valence he is so determined to give to these events. As Vidal-Naquet remarks wryly, "wishing with all his might to make the excavations coincide with the narrative, Yadin has been led to forget what the latter actually says" (Vidal-Naquet 1996b, p. 28).

Vidal-Naquet likens Yigael Yadin's archaeological work, supposedly performed in the name of scientific scholarship, to other attempts to use archaeology to construct modern nationalist myths:

That archaeology conducted in a country that is at once youth and old—Theodor Herzl's *Alt-Neuland*—should be tainted by, nay, completely impregnated by nationalism is not exactly a big surprise. An example that fully parallels this one is that of Greece, the Greece of the *megali idea*, the Great Idea. The famous Greek numismatist J.N. Svoronos, for example, was asked by the Venizélos government to establish the Hellenic character of Macedonia—a disputed area if there ever was one—by means of the indisputably Hellenic character of the coinage of the ancient Greek cities located in this province. (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 54)

Thus, in exposing the constructed nature of the Masada mythos, Vidal-Naquet is performing a double reversal, reinscribing Yadin within the very Hellenic Greek heritage which his nationalist account of the Masada suicide was so determined to deny. Josephus attributed the suicide to Greek influences to defend his own decision to surrender at Jotapata as more authentic to Jewish tradition. Yadin, in the name of modern political Zionism, portrayed the suicide at Masada as the ultimate anti-assimilationist gesture, a rejection of Hellenic influences in the name of Jewish sovereignty. Vidal-Naquet, by likening Yadin's modern normative use of archaeology to a similar effort by prominent Greek archaeologist and numismatist J.N. Svoronos to construct a modern Greek historical claim to Macedonia, forces Yadin back into conversation with Hellenic sources once again, revealing the Israeli Zionist's nationalist mythmaking of the Masada suicide to be every bit as assimilationist, every bit as influenced by non-Jewish models of statehood and martyrdom, as Josephus claimed it to be in ancient times. Vidal-Naquet thus concludes that nationalist mythmaking is "a type of modernity that wears an archaistic mask . . . Masada is not a memory resting on an ongoing tradition but instead a modern myth created by Zionism" (Vidal-Naquet 1996a, p. 58). This modern myth, of course, parallels the modern myths adopted and legitimated by every other modern nation-state, for "whether it is a matter of establishing one's more or less direct descentance from Noah, of identifying with Plato's Atlanteans, or of mystifying the memory of the Bretons, the Goths, the Gauls, or the Franks, from the Middle Ages to Modern Times myth surrounds the birth of today's nations" (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 54). Political Zionists may claim that their ideological

project is motivated by a rejection of assimilation, but in fact their anti-assimilationist narrative is built on the same mythmaking history as are all other nation-states. Truly the Zionists succeeded in making of Israel a “nation among the nations” after all.

7. Conclusions: History as Cultural Memory

If all history contains a normative element, if all historical scholarship contains an element of mythmaking necessitated by the ideological demands of the modern nation-state attempting to naturalize its own constructed past, then the task of the historian is radically rewritten. The task of the historian becomes not the task of somehow reaching an unattainable state of objective scholarship, a demand for “the ‘pure fact,’ in which they cannot help but become stuck since the facts, even if they are archaeological, are in any event accessible only through discourse” (Ibid., p. 46). Rather, the task becomes to use the construction of counter-myths to expose the fictive nature of all nationalistic historical myths, and in so doing to adumbrate new political possibilities. If Vidal-Naquet’s work fails as objective Rankean history, as many of his most vituperative critics have charged, then this is because history itself must confront its failings as a discipline, must acknowledge that “even when they seek to eliminate . . . ideological deformations and delusions, historians always write . . . in the present” (Ibid., p. 38). If all history is ideologically inflected and distorted, despite the best efforts of the historian, then the task of the historian is to play with these normative biases, to construct counter-myths to expose the mythical nature of all history. This, I wish to suggest, is what we might see the Cercle Gaston Crémieux as performing through its work, using an alternative mythos of Judaism to undermine the stability of all nationalist myths, be they the nationalist myths of France that justified Jewish privatization and assimilation, the nationalist myths of Germany that justified Jewish extermination, or the nationalist myths of Israel that claimed to recover some essential ideal of Jewish statehood from its deformation and loss during millennia of exile.

Vidal-Naquet himself suggests that he understands his project in these terms, not as straight historiography, but as an exploration of the impossibility of doing history that remains uncorrupted by normative notions of cultural memory:

When, after the great movement of emancipation got under way during the nineteenth century, Leopold Zunz founded the “science of Judaism”, he set it on foundations that today we would label “positivist”, that is to say entirely separated from memory. Throughout that century and during a large portion of our own, memory and history have in some respects taken separate paths. History distrusts memory; it even builds itself up *against* memory Sixty years after Proust, it is high time that we began to integrate memory into history. This does not mean, of course, that we should give up trying to separate truth from falsehood; it means simply that man is not to be identified with the instance he is living and that it is as temporal being, a being endowed with memory, that man’s integration into historical discourse should henceforth take place. *Zakhor*, Remember; the slogan again takes on contemporary relevance. (Vidal-Naquet 1996a, p. 60)

If memory as a collective gesture of constituting one’s own past through the contingencies of one’s personal memorialization, which Rothberg identifies as a process “that has been mediated through networks of communication” (Rothberg 2009, p. 15), is integrated into historical memory, then history can no longer make claims to a stable essence at all, but becomes a multidirectional process, in Vidal-Naquet’s words, of subjectively and contingently “writing in the present” (Vidal-Naquet 1996c, p. 39). The individual Jewish actor, with all of her memories and contingencies, becomes the site of historical investigation. If diaspora may be seen as a call to reorient the spatial and temporal understanding of the historical essence of Jewishness away from Palestine and the modern state of Israel, then this would not mean a reorientation back toward a European nation-state such as France, but rather a new possibility of imagining “a France wiped off the map” (Marienstras 1975a, p. 11), a future unbounded by the limitations of the nation-state entirely. This would entail

writing radical new myths, recovering histories unbounded by nationalist mythmaking, and it is this infinitely generative possibility of a new counter-mythos—drawn from Jewish history without being bound to the past, influenced by the history of the Jewish encounter with nation-state while imagining possibilities beyond it, particular to Jewish history while also seeking alliances with other diasporas—that the Cercle Gaston Crémieux adumbrates in its work.

And herein, I wish to suggest, lies the failure of the work of the Cercle Gaston Crémieux to offer a full-fledged example of the sort of multidirectional memory which Rothberg articulates in his work, even as they clearly strove to do so. By integrating communal memory into the historiographical enterprise, as Vidal-Naquet strove to do, the Cercle demonstrated that all history essentially “becomes the place and the stake . . . of a fight or a struggle between memory and oblivion” (Marienstras 1986, p. 31), a struggle which necessarily involves viewing all historical records as socially constructed within the present. Vidal-Naquet’s work strives to demonstrate that Zionist historiography is every bit as constructed and ideological as is diasporist history, and therefore to denaturalize all claims to stable, essentialist narratives of Jewish history. And yet as we have seen, Marienstras often falls back on the language of essential Jewish Otherness, of a figure who maintains, in his words “essentially a role of confrontation” against the homogenizing tendencies of the nation-state, in order to offer Jewish diasporism as a counter-example that may enable other minority communities to articulate their histories of survival (Marienstras 1975b, p. 20). For the Cercle’s Jews to serve as both universalist model for “the other deculturalised minorities” (Ibid., p. 19) and as guardians of a highly particularist culture that has survived attempts to expunge it, the figure in whom “universal history is shattered” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 39), then the Jew must be both essential and constructed, both ontologically Other and absolutely historically constructed.

And yet, there is perhaps a way in which this very paradoxical state of the Cercle’s Jew, a figure who can never resolve their own internal contradictions and escape from what Marienstras describes as a “pathologically abnormal situation” (Marienstras 1975b, p. 14), may yet prove politically productive. I thus close with a brief anecdote. In the 1980’s, French president François Mitterrand appointed Marienstras to a government commission designed to investigate and improve the conditions of ethnocultural minorities within the French state. The commission’s final report, among other policy changes, recommended offering government-subsidized education for the first time in minority languages such as Breton, Corsican, Catalan, and Occitan, and the report cited the memory of the persecution of the Jews under the Vichy regime as a reason why France should adopt such a change (Safran 1985). Marienstras was by all accounts pleased by this outcome, and yet for all his efforts, he was unable to convince the commission to endorse Yiddish-language education as part of the minority cultural patrimony of France (Ibid., p. 53). The history of the Jewish diaspora, it seemed, enabled him to articulate a historical memory of Vichy persecution that articulated new rights for other non-national minority communities in France—but not, it seems, for his own community. Perhaps the Cercle’s Jewish memory was so multifaceted and multidirectional that it could not be contained even within the Jewish people themselves.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Nollier, Richard, in *Le Monde*, as cited in: (Wolf 1999, p. 104).

² See, for example, Richard Marienstras’s statement in his essay “The Jews of the Diaspora, or the Vocation of a Minority”, that “The prestige of the French Revolution was so great that it was impossible to conceive, for the million of Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe, any other desirable fate but assimilation. Very soon the French Jews were offering themselves as an example to the rest of the world . . . The ‘solution’ to ‘the Jewish question’ must be integration or assimilation. So they vehemently rejected any national dimension or recognition of a Jewish nationality”.

- ³ Hammerschlag, “Introduction”, p. xiv.
- ⁴ Berr Isaac Berr, as cited in: (Wolf 2004, p. 12).
- ⁵ “qui sont devenus le fondement de la loi française” (Kahn 1875, p. 293).
- ⁶ Cercle Gaston Crémieux, “Historique et Principes Généreaux”, as cited in: (Wolf 2004, pp. 56–57).
- ⁷ Lenin, as cited in (Marienstras 1975b, p. 11).
- ⁸ The Beilis Affair concerned a Russian Jew, Menahem Mendel Beilis, accused of ritual murder in Kiev in 1913, resulting in a high-profile criminal trial in the waning days of the Russian Empire.
- ⁹ Cercle Gaston Crémieux, “Historique et Principes Généreaux”, as cited in (Wolf 2004, p. 57).
- ¹⁰ Tacitus, as cited in: (Ibid., p. 3).
- ¹¹ The Maccabees were a group of rebel Jewish warriors in the second century BCE, who seized control of Judea from the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire. They founded the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty, which briefly ruled Judea as an independent kingdom. The Maccabees were characterized by their zeal for Jewish independence and their desire to return to what they saw as a more “pure” and “uncontaminated” form of Jewish practice, which meant purging their kingdom of Hellenic influences and persecuting Hellenized Jews.
- ¹² See: Jeremiah 38, pp. 17–18.

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