

Anti-Semitism and Socialism A Reply to Gorelick

written by mayfirst | March 9, 2009

Letter from: David Finkel

AS FAR AS CAN BE DISCERNED from Sherry Gorelick's review of Mario Kessler's *On Anti-Semitism and Socialism* (*New Politics*, No. 43, Summer 2007), neither Professor Gorelick nor Kessler appear to be aware of two essential sources on the subject, which I would like to bring to readers' attention. *The Marxists and the Jewish Question. The History of a Debate, 1843-1943*, by the Italian Marxist Enzo Traverso (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994) covers the difficult history of European Marxists' efforts, far from fully successful, to comprehend what "The Jewish Question" was about. The one-sided assumption that Jewish life and religion were a historical anachronism, something that would naturally disappear with the end of their specific economic function in the development of capitalism, also implied that the medieval legacy of Jew-hatred would vanish as well. It wasn't only the fact that the Jewish population in Eastern Europe was a distinct though non-territorial nationality that was obscured by this theorization. The possibility of a new and even more virulent, racist revival of Jew-hatred — anti-Semitism — was also overlooked by thinkers and parties who envisioned an inevitable evolution toward socialism. In the Russian context, Traverso emphasizes the contribution of the Bundist leader Vladimir Medem, who argued that genuine international solidarity was not antagonistic to the consciousness of specific nationalities, but arose from their development and mutual recognition. (It should be remembered, however, that the Bund's split from the all-Russian socialist movement arose from the Bundists' unacceptable demand for a monopoly on the organizing of Jewish workers.)

On these matters Kessler appears to cover similar territory, and from what I've seen of his work his specific contributions on the politics of East German Communism are important. However, regarding Karl Marx's writings "On the Jewish Question" and his purported anti-Semitism, Professor Gorelick has it almost all backwards and completely wrong. For a full unraveling of this all-too-conventional mythology it is essential to consult Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution. Volume I: State and Bureaucracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), specifically Chapter 5 ("Implementing the New Direction," on the Jewish emancipation controversy) and the appendix Special Note A, "Marx and the Economic-Jew Stereotype."

The first critical point missing in Prof. Gorelick's discussion is what Marx's debate with the Hegelian "leftist" Bruno Bauer was about: Marx was fighting for full political and civil rights for Jews, which Bauer opposed. For Marx, this was quite consciously a cornerstone of the struggle to separate religion from the state — to make religion a private matter having no bearing on citizenship — and in turn part of the struggle for democracy. (This is what Draper means by "the new direction," i.e., the recognition that the struggle for socialism runs through, not against the battle for democracy — in short, what led Marx to Marxism.) Bauer's position against "Jewish emancipation" rested on two shifting arguments. First, as a "left" posture he proposed that it wasn't just Jews who needed political emancipation, but everyone who needed emancipation from religion in general. After Marx disposed of this drivel, Bauer presented the view that Jews and Judaism were a particularly evil "huckstering" entity that didn't deserve rights. It shouldn't be surprising that Bauer shortly evolved from left-Hegelianism to a reactionary and anti-Semitic politics. It was against this view that Marx, although employing the Hegelian rhetoric from which he hadn't quite yet "emancipated" himself, argued in "On the Jewish Question" that Jewish "huckstering" was now part and parcel of "Christian" (i.e. bourgeois) society. In short, demonizing Jews in the name of Christian superiority was a bankrupt argument. By pulling out quotations along these lines without reference to the

politics of the debate or the confusing contemporaneous terminology, post-facto commentators constructed the absurdity of Marx's "anti-semitism" and even, in a vague rendering of the self-hating Jew smear, a myth that "Marx's personal biography predisposed him to anti-Semitism."

The second critical point is that what we would now consider abusive references to the Economic-Jew stereotype were universal in the discourse of the 1840s. This was true not only among people who didn't like Jews and Judaism, but equally so among gentiles who liked and admired Jews, and among Jews themselves — including, in particular, Jewish proto-nationalists like Moses Hess, the progenitor of Zionism. Draper documents this reality with full details that can't be reviewed here. The fact that this view of Jewish history and economic functioning was warped, and that it was already dissolving via class differentiation among Jews and the general development of capitalism, doesn't negate the fact that it had some historical basis in the emergence of capitalism from feudal Europe. But as Draper stresses (KMTR v.I, p. 608): "The real issue of the time had nothing to do with the use of language about Judaism based on the universally accepted Economic-Jew stereotype. The real Jewish question was: For or against the political emancipation of the Jews? For or against equal rights for Jews? "This was the Jewish question that Marx discussed, not the one that dominated the minds of a sick society a century later."

That Marx disliked religious Judaism — a medieval rabbinic Orthodoxy through which religious authorities (with state approval) exercised a quasi-totalitarian, even Taliban-like control over Jewish communities — is beside the point. A growing sector of middle-class German Jews were rejecting it as well, turning to the new movement of Reform Judaism; but as Marx had no interest in Jewish affairs per se he wouldn't have paid much attention.

According to Professor Gorelick, Mario Kessler criticizes Marx's inattention to the rise of racist anti-Semitism in Europe and the 1881-82 Russian pogroms, and the emergence of a Jewish labor movement in Eastern Europe; but this is anachronistic as these developments emerged either after his death or in the final year of Marx's life when his health gravely deteriorated. It is hardly surprising that Engels took up these subjects vigorously in the following decade. No doubt Karl Marx failed to anticipate twentieth century genocidal Nazism (only a tiny handful of people, like the poet Heinrich Heine, had an instinctual premonition of such possibilities), as well as relativity theory, quantum dynamics, nuclear weapons and global warming. Nor could he imagine that his 1843 polemics on Jewish emancipation would someday be read through the prism of late 20th and early 21st century identity politics. I don't see how he can be severely faulted on these counts.