Struggles within Enlightenment: Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question

The principle of modern states has enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfilment in the self-sufficient extreme of personal particularity while at the same time bringing it back to substantial unity and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself. The essence of the modern state is that the universal should be linked with the complete freedom of particularity and the well being of individuals. (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*)

… you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then you now appear to need my help
(Shylock, Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice*)

Equivocations of Enlightenment

The intellectual and political revolutions of the eighteenth century provided the springboard for the ‘long century of Jewish emancipation’ that followed. They triggered the lifting of legal barriers that restricted where Jews could live, what professions they could enter and what schools they could attend. In turn, the upshot of these legal reforms included the geographical mobility of Jews from villages and small towns to the major cities of Western and Eastern Europe – Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, London, Paris – and the social mobility of Jews from small traders and middlemen to the professions, business, arts and sciences. Bit by bit, one step forward and one back, with all manner of local and national variations, the universalism intellectually articulated in the
eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and politically actualised in the American and French Revolutions, set in motion processes that allowed the Jews of Europe to enter the modern world. Enlightenment universalism thus prepared the way for the abolition of the old order in which Jews were designated a separate ‘nation’ within their various host societies, permitted to have their own religious and legal institutions, and yet subjected to all manner of occupational, fiscal, residential and political discriminations. The subordinate status of Jews had left most Jews in poverty, vulnerable to external persecution from the Church, state and people, and dependent internally on their own rabbinical and financial elites. The Enlightenment project was to bring this old order to an end and integrate Jews into society as autonomous human beings of a certain faith or indeed of no faith at all.4

This was the emancipatory face of Enlightenment universalism. Its repressive face was to prepare the grounds for the long gestation of modern antisemitism that occurred in the nineteenth century. Universalism was wielded as a stick with which to beat Jews by the simple device of representing Jews as the enemy of universalism. In the Enlightenment, these two faces of universalism, that of Jewish emancipation and that of the so-called ‘Jewish question’, were bound tightly together.

In a perceptive essay on Enlightenment and the Jewish Question (1932), Hannah Arendt caught very well the ambiguities of Enlightenment universalism as far as relations to Jews were concerned. She observed that even ‘our great friend Dohm’ – she was referring to Christian von Dohm whom she described as the ‘outstanding advocate’ of Jewish emancipation in Prussia – put forward an idea of emancipation that was ‘the source of a great deal of mischief’.5 To illustrate what kind of ‘mischief’ Arendt had in mind, she quoted a passage from Dohm’s 1781 text on The Civic Improvement of Jews:

It would be better if the Jews, along with their prejudices, did not exist – but since they do exist, do we really still have a choice from among the following: to wipe them off the face of the earth; … or to let them remain in perpetuity the same unwholesome members of society they have been thus far; or to make them better citizens of the world.6

Dohm opted not to wipe the Jews ‘off the face of the earth’ or to leave them the ‘same unwholesome members of society’ but for the third option: to ‘make them better citizens of the world’. The ‘mischief’ Arendt identified was that ‘from the start the Jew became the Jew’ – an abstraction removed from the lives of actual Jews. The superficially innocent use of the definite article in statements about ‘the Jews’ turned out to be not so innocent at all.7 The use of the phrase ‘the Jews’, as in ‘the Jews killed Christ’, has a quite different connotation from a sentence without the definite article, as in ‘Jews were involved in killing Christ’,
which no longer attributes to the category of ‘the Jews’ guilt for this action even if it recognises that some Jews were involved. In the use of the definite article what is at issue is the abstraction of ‘the Jews’ as a homogeneous collectivity or a collectivity with an essential nature even if individual Jews could be treated as ‘exceptions’. Arendt read Dohm’s text as the product of a liberal, reforming consciousness prepared to wager that ‘even the Jew is a human being – the most improbable thing of all’, and prepared to treat the emancipation of Jews as a ‘test case for human rights’ in the sense of testing whether even the Jews could be improved by a regime of equal citizenship. Arendt maintained that this way of thinking about Jewish emancipation was common in the Enlightenment and destined to turn ‘advantage into disadvantage when economic assimilation … turned an oppressed and persecuted people into bankers, merchants and academ- ics’. She wrote:

Friends became foes once they were forced to observe that living Jews were not universally oppressed … the heirs of the Enlightenment, who had insisted on emancipating the Jews along with the rest of humanity, … now accused the Jews of turning emancipation into a privilege they demanded for themselves and not for all oppressed peoples … former friends finally became antisemites themselves.8

We might add that when ‘the Jews’ were later presented within the antisemitic imagination as still more harmful after emancipation than they had been before, this was taken as proof that the corruption of Jews was not the result of the oppressive conditions to which Jews were subjected but of the unchanging nature of the Jews themselves. Arendt observed that the idea of a ‘solution to the Jewish question’, which the Enlightenment deployed in support of political emancipation, was to become the conceptual ground on which modern antisemitism was built. As she put it, ‘The classic form in which the Jewish question was posed in the Enlightenment provides classic antisemitism its theoretical basis’.9 Even in Dohm, the champion of Jewish emancipation, the assumption was that there was a ‘Jewish question’ and that Jewish emancipation could only be justified in terms of ‘solving’ it.

If we consider more closely Dohm’s essay Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews (Über die Bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden), we find a powerful argument for the political emancipation of Jews posed in terms of solving the Jewish question.10 As Dohm saw it, the role of government was to ‘mitigate the mutually exclusive principles’ of the various groups, religions and classes that constitute society, ‘so that all the single notes are dissolved in the great harmony of the state’. He maintained that the basis of good government was for members of different social groups, religions and classes to ‘consider their separateness as secondary and their role as citizen primary’. Following this line
of argument, Dohm wrote that ‘if actually in the faith of today’s Jews there should be some principles which would restrict them too strongly to their special group and exclude them from the other groups of the great civil society’, the answer was not to persecute them further, which would ‘only serve to confirm them in their opinions’, but to improve their status.

Dohm acknowledged the force of the old accusations laid against the corruption of the Jews: they entertained ‘such bitter hatred of all who do not belong to their tribe’ that they were unable to look at them ‘as members of a common civil society with equal rights’; they manifested such ‘lack of fairness and honesty in … commerce’ and acted in ways so ‘harmful to the welfare of the rest of the citizens’ as to render it ‘justified to issue restrictive laws against this nation’; they showed ‘exaggerated love … for every kind of profit, usury and crooked practice’ as well as ‘antipathy against other religions’. Dohm did not deny the corruption of the Jews, only the conclusions drawn from it. His response was to point out the error in the reasoning of those opposed to Jewish emancipation: ‘one states as cause what in reality is the effect’. Dohm explained Jewish corruption in terms of ‘the hard and oppressive conditions under which the Jews live almost everywhere’ and held that it was ‘very natural that these conditions cause the spirit of the Jew to lose the habit of noble feelings … to debase him in his activities … to choke every sense of honour in his heart’. He argued that ‘everything the Jews are blamed for is caused by the political conditions under which they now live’ and that ‘any group of men, under such conditions, would be guilty of identical errors’. He put it in material terms: ‘every kind of occupation and trade has some special effects on the way of thinking and the moral character’ of those who practice it. Concerning Jews who ‘had been forced for many centuries now to live on commerce exclusively’, he concluded:

Is it surprising that the spirit of this occupation became entirely their spirit … ?
Love of profit must be much more vivid in the Jews because it is the sole means of survival for them … If this reasoning is correct, then we have found in the oppression and in the restricted occupation of the Jews the true source of their corruption. Then we have discovered also at the same time the means of healing this corruption and of making the Jews better men and useful citizens.

Dohm’s Enlightenment credo was that improvement in the civil status of Jews would improve the Jews:

The Jew is even more a man than a Jew, and how would it be possible for him not to love a state where he could freely acquire property and freely enjoy it, where his taxes would be not heavier than those of other citizens, where he could reach positions of honour and enjoy general esteem? … The Jew will not be prevented by his religion from being a good citizen, if only the government will give him a citizen’s rights.11
Dohm concluded that it was up to ‘us’, presumably Christians, ‘to induce the Jew to feel humanly by proving that we have such feelings ourselves. In order to heal him of his prejudices against us, we first have to get rid of our own’.

Dohm was by no means alone in justifying Jewish emancipation in terms of solving the Jewish question. In the French Enlightenment, for example, Abbé Gregoire (1750–1831), who actively supported abolition of slavery as well as Jewish emancipation, still justified the latter in terms of enabling the ‘moral and physical regeneration of Jews’. There were Jews who shared this perspective. Isaac Berr (1744–1828), one of a group of six Jews from Alsace Lorraine who came to the Assembly in Paris to defend Jewish emancipation, wrote to fellow Jews in 1791 that it was the start of a process in which ‘we’ (in this case Jews) must ‘work a change in our manners, in our habits, in short, in our whole education … and divest ourselves entirely of that narrow spirit of Corporation and Congregation in all civil and political matters’. In 1789 Comte Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, arguably the outstanding supporter of Jewish emancipation in France, stood up for the civil and political rights of Jews before the National Assembly on the grounds that emancipation would serve to remedy the corruption of Jews – visible economically in the practice of usury, and politically in the practice of acting as a ‘nation within the nation’:

Usury … so justly censured is the effect of our own laws. Men who have nothing but money can only work with money: that is the evil. Let them have land and a country and they will loan no longer: that is the remedy …

The Jews have their own judges and laws … that is your fault and you should not allow it. We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals … It is repugnant to have in the state an association of non-citizens and a nation within the nation’.

Clermont-Tonnerre did not say that Jewish emancipation should be dependent on Jews abandoning their Judaism in favour of the single identity of French citoyen, but that the subordinate status of Jews as a ‘nation within the nation’ had to be superseded in the name of egalitarian universality and that the idea of treating Jews as a ‘nation’ at all had to be rejected as ‘repugnant’. This idea was to become a hostage to fortune when the ‘repugnant’ idea of forming a Jewish nation was turned into a movement and an actuality.

Arendt was certainly right that formulation of the Jewish question in Enlightenment thought acted as a conceptual foundation for the antisemitism to come, but wrong to insist on the unanimity of the Enlightenment and downplay its plurality and capacity for social learning. Within the consciousness of Enlightenment figures with a reputation for lack of sympathy to Jews, we find surprising ambivalences. Sometimes they were expressed through the mouths of fictional characters to convey an empathetic representation of Jews and Judaism standing
up for universal principles of justice in contrast with a cruel and broken Christianity. In 1761 Voltaire, whose comment that 'biblical Jews' were the 'most detestable people on the earth' is regularly quoted by historians of anti-Semitism, authored a powerful protest against the Inquisition, delivered through the mouth of a fictional Rabbi of Smyrna. The 'Rabbi' called for universal recognition of 'all the children of Adam, whites, reds, blacks, greys' as fellow human beings and condemned an auto-da-fé in Portugal in which, Voltaire wrote, a Jesuit, two monks, two Muslims and thirty-two Jews were burned to death. Concerning the condemned Jews Voltaire's Rabbi had this to say:

What was their crime? Nothing other than that of being born [Jews] ... Can you believe that while the flames devoured these innocent victims, the Inquisitors and the other savages chanted our own prayers? The Grand Inquisitor himself intoned the makib of our good King David, which began with these words: 'Have pity on me, O my God, according to your great mercy' ... Thus these pitiless monsters invoked the God of mercy and kindness, the forgiving God, while committing the most atrocious and barbarous crimes ... by a contradiction as absurd as their fury is abominable, they offer to God our makibs, they borrow our religion itself, while punishing us for having been brought up in our own religion.15

Like a ventriloquist who puts his better self into the voice of his dummy, Voltaire intoned, through his Rabbi, a powerful protest against the double standards of the Christian Church and its projection onto Jews of the cruelty that it itself demonstrated.

We find similar ambivalences in Montesquieu. He is quoted by historians of anti-Semitism for a comment in Persian Letters that 'You can be sure that wherever there is money, there are Jews' and for another in The Spirit of the Laws that 'commerce passed to a nation covered with infamy and was soon distinguished only by the most frightful usury, monopolies, subsidies, and all dishonest means of acquiring money'. He also adopted, however, the guise of an anonymous Jew to remonstrate against the burning of a ten-year-old Jewish girl in an auto-da-fé in Lisbon:

You put us to death, who believe only what you believe, because we do not believe all that you believe. We follow a religion, which you yourselves know to have been formerly dear to God. We think that God loves it still, and you think that he loves it no more: and because you judge thus, you make those suffer by sword and fire, who hold an error so pardonable as to believe that God still loves what he once loved. If you are cruel to us, you are much more so to our children; you cause them to be burnt because they follow the inspirations given them ... You would have us be Christians, and you will not be so yourselves. But if you will not be Christians, be at least men: treat us as you would, if having only the weak light of justice which nature bestows, you had not a religion to conduct ... If you have this truth, hide it not from us ... The characteristic of truth is its
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triumph over hearts and minds, and not that impotency which you would confess when you would force us to receive it by your tortures … if any one in times to come shall dare to assert that in the age in which we live the people of Europe were civilized, you will be cited to prove that they were barbarians; and the idea they will have of you, will be such as will dishonour your age and spread hatred over all your contemporaries.16

Through the mouth of this fictional Jew, Montesquieu attacked the false universalism of Christians whose own claim to humanity was premised on projecting inhumanity onto the Jews. These passages from Voltaire and Montesquieu raise the question of what the torture and murder of Jews in the name of Christianity says about Christians themselves. They indicate the presence of an internal struggle within Enlightenment thought: it was both immersed in the muddy waters of the Jewish question and it opened up the space for emancipatory ways of thinking that were fiercely critical of the status quo.

The great cosmopolitan philosopher of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant, undoubtedly reflected the wider prejudice against Jews to be found in the Enlightenment when he opined that for Jews ‘all estimation of other men, who are not Jews, is totally lost, and goodwill is reduced merely to love of their own tribe’, and cast doubt on the prospect of converting this nation of ‘Palestinian swindlers’ into productive citizens.17 Kant’s contraposition of universalism to the Jews was in line with other equally stereotypical comments on non-European peoples in his Anthropology. However, Kant had some ‘second thoughts’ in the wake of the French and Haitian Revolutions concerning the terrible injustices non-Europeans suffered at the hands of European colonialism: second thoughts, we may speculate, provoked in part by learning about the actual revolts waged against the existing state of injustice (like that of the Black Jacobins in San Domingue), in part by engaging in dialogue with those who actually belonged to the groups suffering from prejudice (as Kant did with the Jewish Enlightenment figure, Moses Mendelssohn), and in part by embarking on new intellectual voyages (like his studies in the last decade of his life into the cosmopolitan development of the system of right in what became his Metaphysics of Justice). He did not express similar second thoughts about Jews, but he developed close relations with individual Jewish scholars and took a relatively liberal position on Jewish emancipation.18

Kant’s legacy was split between those who accentuated his anti-Judaism and those who applied his cosmopolitanism to Jews. Among those who emphasised the Jewish question, David Michaelis cited as obstacles to Jewish emancipation a religion that kept Jews from ‘intermingling’ with others and that cast serious doubts on their political loyalty. Johann Gottlieb Fichte opposed Jewish emancipation on the grounds that the Jews acted as a ‘state grounded in the hatred of the entire human race … a powerful hostile state that lives with all others in constant warfare … spreading through almost all the lands of Europe and terribly oppressing its citizens’. Fichte was an enthusiast for the universalism of the
French Revolution but his vista of universalism was paired with a vision of winning the war against the Jews – whether through the guillotine or by some other means.  

The emancipatory face of Kant’s cosmopolitanism signified that all exclusions, of which the exclusion of Jews was one, had to be justified according to the normative expectation of equal freedom of all human beings. Kant gave expression to a powerful logic of inclusion that enabled struggles for recognition to be waged by the excluded classes themselves and their allies. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Enlightenment voices that were most critical of the Jewish question were also Jewish voices. The Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), a pivotal figure in the dissemination of Kant’s philosophy, made a deep and passionate case for severing the links between Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question far more radically than Kant had been able to do. He had solicited Dohm’s essay Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews and had registered his approval of a work that meant that ‘the Rights of Man are beginning to be taken to heart’. He also wrote, however, that he looked forward, for ‘that happy time when attention will be given to human rights in all their proper compass’. His concern was that Enlightenment had ‘not trodden down all the tracks of barbarism in history’, including barbarism toward Jews, and that ‘prejudice’ was continuing to put ‘obstacles in the way of our civil admission’. Mendelssohn rejected the notion that Jews needed ‘improvement’ or that there was anything in the observance of Jewish law that was not compatible with the imperatives of philosophical universalism – except, that is, the coercive force the old order had wrongly endowed Jewish councils with as the property of Jewish juridical autonomy. Once this system was overcome and unrestricted freedom of religion introduced, Jewish difference was no obstacle to the unity and diversity of humankind. Mendelssohn maintained that all special restrictions on Jews and all special privileges of Jews must be ended, whether or not they enabled amelioration in the behaviour of Jews, and repudiated Dohm’s contention that the Jews were not yet fit for the full citizenship implied by a bar on their entry into the high ranks of the civil service and military. If ‘civil union’ required abandoning the Jewish way of life, Mendelssohn argued, ‘we must rather do without civil union’. Dohm had not made support for Jewish emancipation conditional on the improvement of Jews but he did present emancipation as the sine qua non of ‘improvement’. Mendelssohn called on Jews to remain ‘stiff-necked’ in the face of any pact that demanded abandonment of ‘harmful’ Jewish laws and customs in return for emancipation, and drew parallels between the prejudices of those who once sought to transform Jews into Christians and those who now sought to transform Jews into ‘useful citizens’. He not only defended the social utility of usury, an offence with which Jews were so often charged, but he also put forward as a universal principle the credo that no one should be considered ‘useless’ – not the ‘pauper’, not the ‘cripple’ and not...
Mendelssohn’s stress on the universality of Jewish Law appeared to Kant as a backward, heteronomous step compared with his own stress on the moral autonomy of all rational human beings, but it was Mendelssohn who revealed the very real danger embodied in the idea of Christian supersession: that ‘the Jews’ were being turned into the personification of all that was going wrong in Europe at the time.25

The meaning of Enlightenment and the equivocations of the revolutionary tradition

What do the equivocations shown by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Dohm and Kant, the anti-Judaic prejudices shown by Michaelis and Fichte, and the critiques developed by Mendelssohn and Ascher signify for our understanding of Enlightenment’s relation to Jewish emancipation and the Jewish question? It is one of Enlightenment debate rather than unanimity. We should be wary of an overly critical reading of Enlightenment universalism we find arising from some sources. For example, in a chapter of Anti-Judaism entitled ‘Enlightenment Revolts Against Judaism’ David Nirenberg puts his emphasis on the common anti-Judaic typifications that kept recurring among the philosophers: abuse of money, disposition to cruelty, intolerance toward other peoples, unthinking obedience to the law, obstinate defence of particularism, resistance to the universality of the Christian world-religion, etc.26 The intellectual historian of antisemitism, Arthur Hertzberg, concludes his study of The French Enlightenment and the Jews on a similar note with the judgment that ‘modern, secular anti-Semitism was fashioned not as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the Revolution, but within the Enlightenment and Revolution themselves’.27 The American sociologist, Jeffrey Alexander, comments on the ‘failure of universalism’ indicated by the ‘endemic inferiority’ projected onto the Jews by Enlightenment philosophers.28 The French sociologist, Shmuel Trigano, comments that the Enlightenment philosophers treated Jews as ‘hostages of the universal’.29 The British sociologist, Victor Seidler, declares that within the terms of Enlightenment universalism Jews were expected to give up their Jewishness as part of the price of emancipation: ‘if they were to remain as Jews it would be in the private sphere alone’.30 Arendt, as we have seen, focused in her early essays on Enlightenment’s affinity to the Jewish question at the expense of its emancipatory potential. The inclination of these judgments has been to draw strong conclusions about the pitfalls of Enlightenment universalism. They are partially justified but do not capture the whole. Enlightenment was certainly neither fixed nor homogenous in its attitudes.

In practice, the Enlightenment logic of universality could be declarative rather than actual, but it represented a huge step forward for a European tradition, which had, since the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, taken for granted the duality between public law inside Europe and colonial domination outside Europe, and
which had, since the Alhambra Decree of 1492 expelling Jews from the Iberian Peninsular, taken for granted the duality between public law for ‘Europeans’ and exceptional status for those deemed to be ‘oriental’. The same universal principles of equality that appeared in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were then invoked by the Black Jacobins of San Domingue, who fought for their own emancipation from slavery with the Marseillaise on their lips, joined forces with French revolutionaries in the Society of the Friends of Blacks including Mirabeau and Talleyrand, and lobbied successfully for the abolition of slavery to be included in the 1793 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The same universal principles were invoked by Jews, be it under different circumstances, who protested against the refusal of revolutionary deputies in France to grant them equal rights in December 1789 because of their alleged ethical failings, and who lobbied more successfully for the right to Jewish emancipation in 1791. The development of universalism was not only a ‘Western’ phenomenon, far from it, but in the West it set in motion legal and political demands that went far beyond its own original terms. The universal constitutional principles developed in eighteenth-century revolutions were marginalised, betrayed, distorted and reversed but nonetheless survived as resources of resistance. They signified that the rights of man and citizen belonged to everyone, that the violation of the rights of one particular group of people should be treated as a violation of the universal rights of all, and that those who spoke in support of rights spoke for the whole society and not only for one group within it.

It is an observed paradox of emancipation that prejudice is never far behind. Alexis de Tocqueville argued that a paradoxical relation existed between slave emancipation and social discrimination in the United States. He observed that racial prejudices were stronger in the north where slaves were emancipated than in states where slavery still persisted, and that as black people became citizens in northern states they were also prevented from participating in civic life. The more legal arrangements erased distance between black and white, the more whites recreated distance for fear of blending with those they saw as ‘inferiors’. It was in the emancipated north, he argued, that skin colour became the criterion on which social distancing was based, whereas in the south (where social status was legally defined in terms of a master–slave relation) proximity was tolerated under the control of the masters. In the case of Jews, we have seen that emancipation was in part a legal process by which states removed civil and political disabilities restricting Jewish minorities, and afforded Jews equal civil and political rights. It was also meant to be a social process that demanded that Jews should no longer be regarded as intrinsically alien but be accepted as an integral part of society. It was theoretically possible for these two processes, legal and social, to come together and reinforce one another. The countervailing tendency, however, was to breed a mood of resentment within French society that focused on the injustice of treating ‘inferiors’ as equals, the dangers of treating ‘aliens’ as citizens, and the harm that came of rendering Jews less distinct and less visible.
Ressentiment was expressed from different ends of the political spectrum based on the notion that the ‘improvement’ of Jews should have been made the precondition of emancipation or that the harmfulness of Jews was proving unchangeable. Arendt characterised the problem of social recognition thus: ‘society, confronted with political, economic and legal equality for Jews, made it quite clear that none of its classes was prepared to grant them social equality, and that only exceptions from the Jewish people would be received’.

The equivocations of Enlightenment thought were mirrored in revolutionary practices, whose failure to find solutions to the social, national and democratic questions they faced, opened up a space within the revolutionary tradition itself for the Jewish question to show an increasingly ugly face. Arendt’s much misunderstood analysis of the French revolution can in this context be revealing. She argued that a solution to the social question was urgent since no revolution was possible where the masses were weighed down by poverty. The Jacobins made herculean efforts to solve this problem but the political means they employed proved ‘futile’ and ‘dangerous’. In their ‘compassionate zeal for the poor’ they sought to transform les malheureux into les enragés by blaming their misfortune on those they saw as having betrayed the trust of the people – venal military leaders, corrupt political leaders, foreign agents, unprincipled speculators – whom they designated ‘enemies of the people’ or ‘enemies of humanity’. Arendt argued that a solution to the democratic question was equally urgent in a society previously subjected to monarchical absolutism. Again, the Jacobins made efforts to solve this problem but their conception of revolutionary democracy was reduced to a uniform and homogenised image of ‘the people’ as a ‘multi-headed monster … always in the right’, in which the value of individuals was judged by the extent to which they subsumed their individuality to the ‘will of the people’. This way of thinking about revolutionary democracy subordinated the vibrant public life the revolution had once generated to a world of increasingly universal suspicion in which responsibility for setbacks was attributed to those accused of putting their private interests before the interests of ‘the people’. Finally, Arendt argued that a solution to the national question was needed. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen affirmed the inalienable dignity of every individual human being no power on earth could deny, but it derived all rights from the nation and blended its conception of universal rights with the duty of unconditional obedience to the nation that granted these rights. At the dawn of the Revolution, decrees were passed granting French citizenship to resident foreigners; foreign societies and newspapers were encouraged; support was offered to foreign revolutionaries; and foreign ‘benefactors of humankind’ (including Tom Paine, William Wilberforce and Mary Wollstonecraft) were awarded honorary citizenship. This spirit of hospitality was not to last. The fate of Tom Paine, the man who signed himself ‘humanus’, is indicative: he was impoverished, imprisoned and finally expelled. The rights of citizens and foreigners became a matter of indifference compared with the survival of the state.
Our argument is that the failure of revolutionaries to find answers to these pressing social, democratic and national questions paved the way for their replacement by the singular ‘question’ of who was to be held culpable of betraying the revolution. The answer to this question was not necessarily ‘the Jews’, but the question itself rendered the revolutionary tradition vulnerable to the conspiracy thinking that became the hallmark of the Jewish question. It would be wrong to conclude that the modern revolutionary tradition reinforced the ‘failures of universalism’ already evident in the Enlightenment, but this does not mean that the seeds of a reconfigured Jewish question were not present within it.

Notes

1 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1820]), 124.
2 Shylock, Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 106–114.
3 In 1791 the French National Assembly annulled all legal barriers to citizenship ‘affecting individuals of the Jewish persuasion’. It meant that Jews, in principle, could secure civic integration without the quid pro quo of conversion to Christianity or the provision of special, financial services to the state. See Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson, *Paths of Emancipation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.
4 Key dates in the uneven process of Jewish emancipation were that of British Jews 1866; Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Empire 1867; Italian Jews 1870; German Jews 1871; Swiss Jews 1874; Russian Jews 1917; and Polish, Romanian and Baltic Jews 1919. This list of dates does not reveal, however, the dance of death played between the granting and withdrawal of rights to Jews.
5 Hannah Arendt, ‘Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1932]), 3–18; emphasis in original. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979 [1951]), 12.
6 This passage is quoted in ‘Antisemitism’ in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 64, but should be treated with some caution since we have as yet been unable to locate this passage in Dohm’s writings.
7 See the insightful discussion of the term ‘the Jews’ in Berel Lang, ‘On the “The” in “The Jews”: From Grammar to Anti-Semitism’, *World Zionist Organization*, 9 October 2015, www.wzo.org.il/index.php?dir=site&page=articles&op=item&cs=3130&clang=eng (accessed 9 October 2015).
8 Arendt, ‘Antisemitism’, 63.
9 Arendt, ‘Antisemitism’, 64.
10 Christian von Dohm, *Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews* (1957 [1781]), http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdfs/15_TheJews_Doc.3_English.pdf (accessed 15 July 2015). There are no page numbers in the electronic edition.
11 For discussion of the Jewish Question in Germany see Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and
Enzo Traverso, *The Jews and Germany*, trans. Daniel Weissbort (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

12 According to Grégoire, Jews were to be cleansed of their particularity and ‘melted into the national mass’. Abbé Grégoire, *An Essay on the Physical, Moral and Political Reformation of the Jews* [1789], extract in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49–53. See Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France 1715–1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), ‘Introduction’.

13 Cited in Jay Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 73.

14 Cited in Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 155–158.

15 This quotation is drawn from Voltaire’s ‘The Sermon of Rabbi Akib’ and cited by Paul Berman in ‘Jews, Muslims, Liberals, PEN Boycotters Beware: Voltaire is Laughing at You: Is the Enlightenment Philosopher Having a Moment?’ *Tablet*, 1 May 2015, http://tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/190669/pen-boycotters-voltaire (accessed 2 May 2015). Voltaire’s text is available in G. K. Noyer (ed.), *Voltaire’s Revolution: Writings from His Campaign to Free Laws from Religion* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2015).

16 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, XXV, 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 351–352.

17 Kant, *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Louden; introduction by Manfred Kuehn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100.

18 Pauline Kleingeld, ‘Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 57 (229), October 2007: 573–592; Robert Bernasconi, ‘Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race’ in Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (eds.), *Reading Kant’s Geography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 291–318.

19 Fichte wrote: ‘I would see no other way to give the Jews civil rights than to cut off their heads in one night and put others on them in which there would not be a single Jewish idea’. Gottlieb Fichte, *Contribution to the Correction of the Judgments of the Public on the French Revolution* [first published 1793], quoted in Jonathan Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 140.

20 On the universalism of the Enlightenment and revolutionary tradition see Hauke Brunkhorst, *Critical Theory of Legal Revolutions: Evolutionary Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 9–57; Robert Fine, ‘Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism: Western or Universal?’ in David Adams and Galin Tihanov (eds.), *Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism* (London: Legenda, 2011), 153–170; and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). It was a disgrace that the non-European world was treated as a sphere of occupation, expropriation and expansion and excluded from the protection of the European law of nations. Imperialism presupposed the difference between the rule of law in the home country and ‘the merry dance of death and trade’ in colonised territories, immortalised in Joseph
Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The reverse side of *Ius Publicum Europaeum* was the transformation of the rest of the world into the property of European sovereigns and corporations. As Arendt observed, ‘the agents of the force of expansion felt no obligation to man-made laws. The only law they obeyed was the law of expansion’ (Arendt, *Origins*, 215). The practices of imperialist-minded businessman ‘whom the stars annoyed because he could not annex them’ were to be internalised in the European world (Arendt, *Origins*, 144).

21 In a universalistic vein, the socialist Leon Blum inverted antisemitic imagery when he wrote in the 1930s, that ‘the Jews’ religion is justice’. See Pierre Birnbaum, *Léon Blum: Prime Minister, Socialist, Zionist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

22 See Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 139–144. Feiner quotes from Moses Mendelssohn’s ‘Preface’ to his German translation of Ben Israel’s *Vindiciae Judaeorum* [1782].

23 See Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 178. Feiner quotes from Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism* (Boston: Brandeis 1983). To Dohm’s contention that aspects of the old order of Jewish legal autonomy should be maintained, including powers of excommunication held by rabbinical leaders, Mendelssohn demanded immediate removal of all rabbinical powers to enforce religious discipline. Jewish reformation was not to be imposed under duress but it was to be an autonomous process of self-emancipation.

24 Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 143. See also Jonathan M. Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), ch. 3 ‘Mendelssohn’s Jesus: The Frustrations of Jewish Resistance’, 91–136.

25 The Jewish reformist, Saul Ascher, similarly maintained that the emergent political anti-Judaism of his time, delivered from the lectern rather than the pulpit and from the perspective of secular rather than Christian universalism, shared the same premise, the need for Jewish improvement, but was still more sinister than that which preceded it. Who would have thought, he wrote in relation to Fichte’s anti-Judaic polemics in his *Contribution to the Correction of the Judgment of the Public on the French Revolution*, that ‘decapitation would have found followers in Germany who want an entire nation to be improved by such an experiment’. He saw that for Fichte ‘the Jew’ is the first bone of contention in every society – the hydra that destroys everything in its path’ (147). Ascher inverted the old Christian hierarchy, by presenting Judaism and not Christianity as the basis of a genuinely universal religion, and along with Mendelssohn challenged the denigration of Judaism central to the Kantian image of modernity and idea of progress. See Hess, *Germans, Jews and Modernity*, ch. 4 ‘Philosophy, Antisemitism and the Politics of Religious Reform: Saul Ascher’s Challenge to Kant and Fichte’, 137–168.

26 David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The History of a Way of Thinking* (London: Head of Zeus, 2013).

27 Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: The Origins of Modern Antisemitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 7.

28 Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, 459–548.

29 Shmuel Trigano, *La République et les Juifs après Copernic* (Paris: Presse D’aujourd’hui, 1981).
30 Victor Seidler, *Shadows of the Shoah: Jewish Identity and Belonging* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

31 See C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1938]); and Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Hegel and Haiti’, *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (4), 2000: 821–865.

32 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). In his sociological study of the caste system in India, Louis Dumont also traces how legal distinctions between masters and slaves were replaced by racial distinctions recreating hierarchy in egalitarian societies. Louis Dumont, ‘Caste, racisme et stratification’ in *Homo Hierarchicus: Le Systeme des Castes et ses Implications* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

33 The term ‘antisemitism’, coined by a journalist Wilhelm Marr in 1871, became the banner under which opposition to Jewish emancipation was given ideological expression. See Marr, *The Victory of Judaism over Teutonism* (1879). See Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany*.

34 Arendt, *Origins*, 56.

35 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1963]), 222; 114.

36 See Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 4; 86.

37 Arendt, *Revolution*, 94. Arendt’s account of the dialectics of revolution had much in common with that of Hegel, who repeatedly returned to the philosophical significance of the French Revolution in his philosophical writings, including *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 [1807]), *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, and *Philosophy of History* (London: Dover, 1956). See Robert Fine, *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001), 61–78.

38 See Florence Gauthier, ‘Universal Rights and National Interest in the French Revolution’ in Otto Dann and John Dinwiddy (eds.), *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution* (London: Hambledon, 1987). The turn against foreigners, inaugurated in the Terror, was a significant aspect of the rolling back of democracy, which continued into the Napoleonic period. See Isser Woloch, ‘The Contraction and Expansion of Democratic Space during the Period of the Terror’ in Keith Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Pergamon, 1994).

39 See Julie Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 154–167.

40 Jews generally benefitted from the Revolution, but faced discrimination and some persecution during the Terror and then under Napoleon. In 1808 Napoleon’s *décret infâme* reduced, postponed or annulled all debts with Jews and restricted where Jews could live. Ten years later these restrictions were abolished. See Bernard Harrison, *The Resurgence of Antisemitism: Jews, Israel and Liberal Opinion* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 163–172; Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews*, ch. 5 and ch. 6; Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Napoleon, The Jews and the Sanhedrin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Patrick Girard, *La Révolution Française et les Juifs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989).