

Opponent's review of the Doctoral thesis "The Myth of the Hebrew Sea: An aspect of the Zionism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky" by Adam Coman

Shlomo Avineri once wrote that socialist Zionism was the only collective project in human history that conceived emancipation as a socially downward movement: the sons and daughters of the East European Jewish petty-bourgeoisie were to embark on their journey to Palestine in order to become peasants and workers; inhabitants of the "shtetls" (i.e. "small cities") were to become rural people. That was, of course, only the project. The second and third *alya* notwithstanding, the majority of European Jews who settled in Palestine during the 20th century (the story of Oriental Jews is, of course, another matter) were rather looking for and often getting the middle class jobs and positions. This should not make us dismiss the ideals of Socialist Zionism as the castles in the sky. Their utopian appeal was an important spring of grass-root mobilization without which the Zionist project would have never gotten off the ground. As the founders of Zionism, both on the Left and on the Right, knew, myths and symbols are sometimes more important in politics than reality and rational considerations. In order to understand the productive interplay of the two sides in the Zionist enterprise, it is important to study not only the myths of Socialist Zionism, that was hegemonic until the 1970s, but also counter-myths of the Zionist Right led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

Adam Coman's dissertation provides a valuable contribution to that task. He claims that the center of the counter-hegemonic project was occupied by the myth of the Hebrew sea the conquest of which competed symbolically with the conquest of the land as it was preached and implemented by the Socialists. Making the ancient Hebrews siblings of the Phoenicians and Carthagians played several functions whose relevance and concrete forms varied according to the changing historical circumstances. One of its crucial effects was that it countered the "exceptionalism" of Socialist Zionism that was pointed out by Avineri: if the Jews were to return to their ancient position of a people that shared in the maritime trading empires of Phoenicians and Carthagians they would become merchants rather than peasants. Hence, Jabotinsky's Revisionism could appeal to those struggling East European Jews who dreamt of social promotion to the respectable middle class position and, therefore, stayed unimpressed by the radical egalitarianism of the Zionist Left wingers.

As Coman persuasively shows another important function of the myth of the Hebrew sea was to liberate the Jews from the association with the Arabs, "living in the desert", and, more generally, with other Oriental races. As a Mediterranean people the Jews were closer to Italians or French than to Arabs or Turks. Jabotinsky tried to actualize the supposed closeness to Europeans by promoting "Mediterranean" pronunciation of the Hebrew (as opposed to the Oriental one, that was closer to Arabic) and, for some time, even the Latinization of its script (which was also promoted by the son of Eliezer Ben Yehuda Itamar Ben-Avi). In connection with the contention of Victor Bérard about the Phoenician origins of *Odyssey*, the association of the ancient Hebrews with the Phoenicians placed the Jews in the very center of the Western cultural heritage. It allowed also to re-evaluate the status of the Jews as a typical middleman minority: it made possible to dispose with the usual defensive explanation of the over-representation of the Jews among merchants as an effect of their discrimination that forced them out of other jobs and positions. In other words, the myth of the Hebrew sea allowed to accept the trading as part of the identity inherited from the ancient times. It helped also reverse the negative judgment of reactionary Anti-Semites such as Werner Sombart about the leading role that Jewish traders and financiers supposedly played in the emergence of modern capitalism. Jabotinsky made a compliment out of the insult. Last but not least, the myth of the Hebrew sea allowed Jabotinsky to avoid a complete break with the diaspora which was the core of the project of Socialist Zionists.

Despite of some continuity between the New Hebrew who was to emerge out of the Zionist enterprise and the modern exilic Jew, Jabotinsky's project was nevertheless a project of a thorough re-construction of the Jewish identity. Coman stresses Jabotinsky's care about the cultural transformation of young Beitar activists and students of the Civitavecchia Naval Academy: Jabotinsky insisted on the changes of the details of everyday behavior, the postures of the body, the manner of speech etc. Coman describes Jabotinsky's project as a sort of civilizing mission: coarse and backward East European Jews were to be turned into perfect Westerners of a Mediterranean (as opposed to Nordic) kind. Coman's analyses of this aspect make us see Jabotinsky as a unique case of somebody who viewed Zionism not only as a political and cultural but also – and more specifically – aesthetic project. Unlike Socialist Zionists whose “new Hebrew” was defined mainly by the content of what he was doing Jabotinsky's “new Hebrew” was defined mainly by the form or style.

My first question, therefore, is, whether, precisely in this respect, Jabotinsky is not the true inheritor of Theodor Herzl who, notoriously, cared about seemingly insignificant and merely “formal” things such as that the delegates of the Zionist Congresses dressed-up. At one point, Coman claims that, alongside form, Jabotinsky understood the importance of the crucial importance of the myths and symbols. But is this not the staple of Herzl's biographies as well? It may have had to do with the fact that both men were attracted to dandyism in their youth and that they had planned literary carrier before they embarked on the political one. (Famously, Gorky regretted Jabotinsky's change of heart as a great loss for the Russian literature.) The tendency of Jabotinsky to “aestheticize the politics” (W. Benjamin) is born out by his admiration of D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume that Coman mentions.

Which brings me to *the second question*. While referring to Jabotinsky's high appreciation of myths in politics the author refers to Zeev Sternhell's thesis that such a tendency is one of the origins of European Fascism. On the other hand he convincingly shows that despite his defense of Mussolini's Italy and his insistence on the differentiation between fascism and Nazism, Jabotinsky – unlike some of his followers such as Abba Ahimeir – was not a fascist. What is, then, the author's take on Sternhell's thesis?

The third question pertains to the circumstances of Jabotinsky's changed attitude towards Judaism as announced during the founding congress of the New Zionist Organization in Vienna in 1935. The author provides a nuanced account of Jabotinsky's new position but does not offer possible reasons for Jabotinsky's change of heart. Should they be looked for in the evolution of Jabotinsky's personal world-view (related, for instance, with his aging) or, rather, in the new situation after the final breakdown of any hope at the reconciliation with DBG as negotiated in London Agreements?

I consider Coman's dissertation to be an outstanding contribution to our knowledge of the Revisionist Zionism and recommend it for the defense.

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