

Presentation of the FMS fellows seminar

Introduction

My project began with the observation of an under-theorization of the experience of contemporary antisemitism in philosophy. To fill this gap, I turned to Francophone Jewish readers of Sartre, “Jewish Sartrians”, who all stated at least three things: the Jewish experience cannot be reduced to antisemitic acts as Sartre seems to be saying in *Réflexions sur la question juive*; however, Jewish experiences of antisemitism should be described thanks to existentialist conceptuality; finally, one should elaborate an ethics of Jewish liberation in reaction to fill the void left by *Being and Nothingness*.

Given the vast body of past and present literature devoted to antisemitism in history, sociology, and political science, it may seem surprising to return again and again to *Réflexions sur la question juive*. However I believe Jewish readers of this book still have much to offer. Among them, I have focused on Albert Memmi, Robert Misrahi, Benny Lévy, and Emmanuel Levinas. One could also have included André Gorz or Claude Lanzmann.

My project thus lay at the intersection of intellectual history, phenomenology, and political philosophy. I will now present some of the work made during my postdoctoral research.

1. A history of Jewish critical readings of *Réflexions sur la question juive*

I began by compiling a list of the various reviews and articles written by Jewish intellectuals in France and abroad, from 1947 to 1967, paying particular attention to the commentaries of intellectuals such as Wladimir Rabinovitch, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Raymond Aron. This allowed me to note the widespread and lasting influence of the *Réflexions* on authors from different disciplines and political beliefs.

I also observed an ambivalent gesture: on the one hand, the recognition of the relevance of Sartrian descriptions and how his public stance mattered a lot after the Holocaust; on the other hand, very quickly, a number of criticisms that would become

classic: ignorance of Jewish history, unconscious reproduction of anti-Semitic tropes, a Marxist approach reluctant to grasp the specificity of the Jewish people, the failure to take the Holocaust into account, etc... From this general observation, I turned to the four main figures of my project by identifying the texts where they accomplish, each in their own way, the same dialectics: *thanks to Sartre, against Sartre, beyond Sartre*.

I work primarily on Memmi's *Portrait d'un juif* and *La Libération du juif*, as well as on his novel *La statue de sel* and his sociological investigations into the "Judéité" of French Jews in the 60s. Memmi repeatedly praised Sartre's analysis but maintained, and I quote, that "it was necessary that this undertaking be attempted by a Jew, that it be conducted from within, starting from a point of convergence with Jewishness¹." Memmi very astutely describes the stereotypical prejudices that he groups under the name "myth of the Jew." For him, "the mythical portrait of the Jew prepares and completes his *concrete oppression*²."

In France, Misrahi is essentially known for his Spinozist studies and his philosophy of freedom and happiness. For my project, I rely mainly on his early book, *La condition réflexive de l'homme juif*, the article "L'antisémitisme latent" as well as an autobiographical short story written in 1947 published in English in 1949, entitled "The Sign," which recounts the first day he wore the yellow star. The dialogue with Sartre is omnipresent in all of these works.

I did my PhD on Levinas. Here, I study in particular his "Quelques réflexions sur une philosophie de l'hitlérisme", his *Carnets de captivité*, his text "Être juif," and his articles on Sartre. From the 1930s onward, Levinas developed a phenomenology of "being Jewish" constituted by antisemitism, based on his own experience as a Jewish prisoner of war. For Levinas, Jewish being is characterized by "an inescapable chain to our body."³

Finally, regarding Benny Lévy, I focus on *Hope Now*, his famous interviews with Sartre, where he aimed to describe "what Jewish reality could be like from the inside",

¹Albert Memmi, *Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 624.

²Albert Memmi, *Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 543.

³Emmanuel Levinas, "Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism", *The unforeseen events of history*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994, p. 38.

as well as *Le nom de l'homme. Dialogue avec Sartre, Être juif* and *La cérémonie de la naissance*.

Including these writers into the same constellation, some of them being rarely studied, was also a way of writing a new history of the philosophy of anti-Semitism in France.

2. Philosophical Jewish descriptions of the lived experience of antisemitism

In addition to material drawn from sociology, microhistory, testimonies, memoirs and fiction written by and on Jews after the Holocaust, I relied on several strong insights gleaned from my four authors to develop what I have called a *critical phenomenology of antisemitism*.

Its task is to describe how antisemitic acts, such as insults or stares, are constituted, to show how these acts shape the everyday experience of Jewish people, and to demonstrate, through the suffering they engender, their unjust and violent nature.

These descriptions aim to support the fight against antisemitism by offering conceptual clarifications, descriptions of injustices to be denounced, and a foundation for a broader affective solidarity that extends beyond Jewish identity alone.

I therefore initially focused on antisemitic acts such as contemptuous gaze, verbal abuse, and physical aggression. I then sought to describe not the effect of antisemitism itself, but rather how it is constituted, pre-consciously, by prejudices, a populist worldview, and certain structural antisemitic patterns (*Gestalten*) in France.

Among these, I identified discriminatory prejudices, stigmatization of minority norms, what we called secondary antisemitism, suspicion of “double allégeance”, memory competition, and finally, the ordinary and systematic denial of antisemitism.

Returning to Levinas's phenomenology of Jewish being and Memmi's portrait of a Jew, I examined how anti-Semitism configures the ordinary experience of targeted individuals by producing affects of feeling chained to oneself, terror, self-shame, hypervigilance and insensitivity, as well as a traumatized relationship to time and forms of split consciousness, self-control and affective community.

3. Towards an ethics of Jewish liberation and the fight against contemporary anti-Semitism

The phenomenologies of Jewish existence that I study are inseparable from different ethics of Jewish liberation. This liberation must be understood as an abolition, both individual and collective, of the discrimination, persecution, and injustices inflicted by antisemitism. It takes on either a socio-political meaning (in the work of Memmi and Misrahi) or a more strictly ethical and messianic meaning (in the work of Levinas and Lévy).

I speak of an “ethics of Jewish liberation” because it is a matter of clarifying the norms and principles that must guide a liberationist process that is not reducible to legal and formal emancipation. These ethics are developed from the real and lived situation of Jews, in their experience of antisemitism, in their social position, in their diasporic relationship to Israel, and confronts the problems of universality in the form of assimilation, dispersion, integration, and humanism.

I still need to investigate their philosophical and sociological sources, as well as a number of conceptual tensions that structure their thought: such as the universal and the particular, lived experience and social position, Jewish sovereignty and national minority, integration and self-emancipation. It is to the study of this third axis that I am devoting myself today.