

BOOK REVIEW

The Jewish Question

A Marxist Interpretation

BY ABRAM LEON

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A classic to return to the roots of Jewishness



A member of the Jewish community is seen at ceremony marking the 76th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, 2021 in the Bundestag (lower house of the parliament) in Berlin. (Photo by Tobias SCHWARZ / AFP)

Abram Leon was 24 when he wrote a remarkable book from the Marxist perspective on the history of the Jewish people and causes of anti-Semitism.

Abram Leon, whose real name was Abraham Wajnsztock, was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. A few months earlier he had been arrested by the Gestapo in Brussels and deported to Poland. He died in the gas chambers of the death camp.

Leon was born in 1918 in Warsaw. His parents, of Jewish origin, emigrated to Palestine, returned to Poland, and in 1928 moved to Brussels. At a very young age, he joined the Revolutionary Communist Party and in 1941 became political secretary of its Belgian section. It's no accident that a year later he published *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*.

The book had two related objectives. The first reviewed the possibilities for the extension of the 1917 revolution to Western Europe. The second focused on the history of the Jewish people and their hoped-for role in the revolutionary process, while attempting to shed light on the reasons for anti-Semitism in its various aspects.



Hundreds of Jews, in Poland participating in “March of Life” in the former Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, visited the former camp on Thursday, April 15, 2004. Efe/Mirosław Trembecki

Faithful to the Marxist tradition, Leon starts from a materialist premise. To explain the role that Judaism has played in the history of humanity, its economic role, and the reasons for hatred toward Jews, Leon says, it must be understood that “consciousness doesn't determine being, being determines consciousness.”

In other words, the ideology of Jew-hatred is simply the result of a distorted conception, sustained throughout different periods and in different ways, of the role Jews have played in various social and economic systems.

The book was published in French in 1946, after Leon's death, and translated into several languages, including English and Spanish. It was published for the first time in Argentina in 1953, in a translation by David Etkin [actually Carlos Etkin]. Almost seventy years later, Pathfinder Press has published a Spanish translation edited by Martín Koppel.

These facts help explain specific features of the present edition. As if they were layers of onion, three short pieces precede the original text, placing Leon in context and noting the dilemmas faced in a series

of translations and adaptations. In 1942 the manuscript circulated like a hot poker, appearing as a declaration calling for class consciousness and for taking action.

Six years later, after World War II ended and the world was divided into two great blocs, the book took another path. Successive versions sought to improve the order of the contents and polish the text. Photos and illustrations were added. The current edition also includes explanatory maps and extensive footnotes.

The eight chapters that make up the original book focus on a single theme: Jew-hatred can only be explained from the starting point of historical materialism. The dialectical method, taken from Marx and Engels, is anchored in the real conditions of life. The book, therefore, starts from the “real Jew, that is to say, the Jew in his economic and social position.”

What have relations been like between Jews and Gentiles? What economic and political arrangements were established in each era? What role has endogamy [marriage within a specific group] or exogamy played in each case? Why and how have processes of assimilation occurred?

The first chapters take up classical epoch. In describing the differences and reasons for the rise and fall of each of the empires, León emphasizes their type of economic organization. Ancient societies did not allow for the unlimited development of their economies. Their model could be better understood as a cycle—virtuous or vicious according to the perspective of the analysis—that eventually reaches a limit in the accumulation of goods.

In this context Jews enjoyed some protection from the landed aristocracies in their role as merchants and moneylenders, so long as the system didn't collapse. The great expulsions from Europe—from France in the twelfth century and from Spain and Portugal three centuries later— reflect the crises of these models.



Wrought-iron inscription “Arbeit macht frei” [Work makes you free] from the entrance of Auschwitz, 2005. AFP PHOTO / JANEK SKARZYNSKI.

The shift from a demand economy, typical of the Middle Ages, toward a supply economy, more related to the development of industrial societies beginning in the eighteenth century, changed the role of Jews in local and global economies. Leon warns, however, that apart from specific characteristics of capitalism, Jews haven't been able to escape the role of scapegoats for economies in crisis.

While the earlier chapters address the causes, the later chapters emphasize the consequences, especially since they were written with Nazism as a backdrop. Ideology—seen by Marxists as a fog that conceals material relations—invests the Jew with a corrupt essence, making them the perfect scapegoat to explain the political and economic crisis of the mid-twentieth century.

The obvious solution, for Leon, is socialism. Socialism implies overcoming inequalities while allowing an opening to the world beyond nationalisms.

That events have taken a different course only confirms the materialist thesis on which the entire book is based. If, in the words of Marx, history is made by generations riding on the backs of other generations under specific conditions, this book is testimony to and a diagnosis of an era, and, at the same time, a manifesto against any determinism.