

3-20-2009

## “God will not remain silent”: Zionism, Messianism and Nationalism

Etienne Balibar  
*Universite Paris Nanterre (Paris X)*, ebalibar@uci.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Balibar, Etienne (2009) "“God will not remain silent”: Zionism, Messianism and Nationalism," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol7/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [library.uasc@umb.edu](mailto:library.uasc@umb.edu).



***“God will not remain silent”***  
**Zionism, Messianism and Nationalism**

**Etienne Balibar**

*University of Paris, France*

---

ebalibar@uci.edu

**Abstract:** The essay takes advantage of recent publications by Jacqueline Rose, Idith Zertal, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, which with different methodologies address the same “psycho-political” nexus of nationalism and messianism commanding the structure of Zionism, before and after the emergence of the State of Israel. It seeks to assess the uniqueness but also the typical character of the ideological process and the narrative constructions through which an experience of persecution and victimhood becomes transformed into a consciousness of legitimate domination. Following the reviewed authors, the essay also emphasizes the importance of the controversy between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt whose works, in their very opposition, remain crucial sources of intelligibility for the tension of the theological and the secular in the politics of the Zionist State.

At a moment when the expropriation of the “occupied territories” by Israel has practically voided of its content the hypothesis of two states in Palestine by destroying and fragmenting the country in seemingly irreversible fashion, and when the conflict as such has largely lost its autonomy within

the context of a regional war marked by the confrontation between U.S. imperialism, its allies and its diverse opponents (Islamist or otherwise), what purpose can possibly be served by new analyses of the constitution of Zionism? There would seem to be an abysmal gap between the complex histori-

---

Etienne BALIBAR, born in 1942, is Emeritus Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy at the University of Paris 10 Nanterre (France) and Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine (USA). Among his recent publications are *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), and *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton University Press, 2004). Forthcoming are *Violence and Civility* (Columbia University Press) and *The Proposition of Equaliberty* (Duke University Press). This article is a review essay of the following three books: 1) Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Princeton University Press, 2005; 2) Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Cambridge University Press, 2005 (translated from the Hebrew by Chaya Galai; original title: *Death and the Nation*), which will be quoted here in the French edition: *La nation et la mort. La Shoah dans le discours et la politique d'Israël*, translated by Marc Saint-Upéry, Editions La Découverte, 2004; and 3) Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et souveraineté. Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée bi-nationale* [Exile and Sovereignty: Judaism, Zionism and binational thought], translated from the Hebrew by Catherine Neuve-Eglise, La Fabrique, 2007 (preface by Carlo Ginzburg). [Translator's note: The author reviewed the second and third works mentioned in French translation; quotations from all three—few in number—are thus retranslated from the French and all page references refer to French editions.]

cal and theoretical references these analyses propose, the distance they establish with respect to stereotypes, and the starkness of the choices that a century of wars, violence, diplomatic maneuvers and false political solutions offers in the end to the parties to the conflict: elimination or “transfer,” in the short term, of the Arab populations with the exception of a few zones of concentration and surveillance, or, in the longer term, of the Jewish populations, at the price of a massive new emigration. Or, first one and then the other.<sup>1</sup>

And yet such analyses are important in many ways; I am convinced that it is always worthwhile to take the time to conduct them and discuss them. First of all, they reveal the internal contradictions of an ideology and a policy which, under given conditions and a given balance of forces, has contributed like very few others to “making the history” of which we today are the subjects, wherever we may be in the world. We can of course use them as polemical arguments against given actors, but one can also see in them an indication of potentialities of division that crystallized in the past and could do so again if circumstances lend themselves to such an outcome, i.e., as a means contributing to avoiding the worst. The rise of critical thought in Israel—sometimes referred to as a whole as “post-Zionist”—within the small minority that truly opposes the settlements and seeks to act in concert with the Palestinian resistance, is indeed impressive. At the same time such analyses open pathways for comparison between an “extreme” and even unique case, and a multiplicity of state formations that also

represent associations—of very different sorts—between “messianic” and “national” components, in a synthesis that is more and more problematic today. On the one hand, then, the idea is to bring out, against appearances, the indetermination lodged in the heart of a determined *situation*. On the other hand, the idea is to contribute to a comprehensive reflection on the forces and representations implicated in the changes on our cosmopolitical horizon. In both cases, we must recognize the capacity of the past to act in the present, by applying as much rigor as possible to the understanding of its powers.

This is the perspective in which I would like to discuss three recent works on Zionism—a notion which continues to dominate the “common sense” of perceptions of the Jewish question and its entanglement with the history and the functions of the state of Israel. Despite the difference of the positions they take on key points, they all challenge the idea of a separation (*coupure*) between the religious and the political and they all bring out, in Israel’s trajectory, a history which is not “sacred” but rather a history of the powers of the sacred in the secular world and its effects on those very actors who make use of it. All three books have the added interest of articulating in timely fashion an astonishing intellectual conjuncture which has seen successive convergences and oppositions between the critique of the idea of a “Jewish state” in Palestine, the defenders of an alternative, “cultural” Zionism and the partisans of a cosmopolitanism rooted in the Jewish experience of exclusion, the most striking episode of which was the confrontation between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt just after the latter published her “report” on the Eichmann trial.

<sup>1</sup> Regarding my own hypotheses on this matter, see the article I wrote with Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond: “Guerre en Orient ou paix en Méditerranée?”, *Le Monde*, August 19, 2006; the non-abridged version is available at this address: <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3232,36-804577,0.html>. In English, see “A Mediterranean Way for Peace in the Middle East,” *Radical Philosophy*, November 2006.

## I.

The first book to which I refer does not come from Israel, even though its author has multiple relations with that country: Jacqueline Rose’s *The Question of Zion*, which came out of a series of lectures delivered in 2003 at Princeton University.<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter (“The Apocalyptic Sting”), Rose examines the messianic foundations of political Zionism by drawing inspiration from the now classic though still controversial analyses by Gershom Scholem of the history of the Kabbalah and Jewish messianism.<sup>3</sup>

It was Scholem himself who, shortly after he moved to Palestine, brought about a rapprochement between Zionism and Sabbataiism, in which he saw the two “political” moments of the history of the Jewish people in the modern era. The “historical” character of redemption in Jewish messianism (as opposed to the Christian idea of salvation in another world), associated with the hope for an end to persecutions endured in exile and during the enslavement of Israel, engendered a revolutionary ideol-

ogy which Scholem calls “utopian” and “apocalyptic.” This ideology, the result of an “intense messianic expectation,”<sup>4</sup> represents the messianic age as the moment of a “final confrontation of Israel with the Nations,” a conflagration with a cosmic significance whose cataclysms form the condition of the national renaissance. To this representation of the role of violence in history (which also became an element of Marxism), identified with the suffering of “giving birth,” a particular tradition from the Kabbalah adds a specifically antinomic dimension: the messianic era is not only that of the reunification in divinity of parts of the world that has been “broken” since the creation; it is also—with a view to “hastening the end”—that of an inversion of the law or its realization through its transgression (“it is by violating the Torah that one accomplishes it”), a specific form of “the activism [which takes] utopia as a lever in the aim of establishing a messianic kingdom”—however undecided the figure of the messiah himself may be.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionalist and rationalist Judaism (Maimonides) has always vigorously resisted this revolutionary conception, which Scholem did not hesitate to see as a “circuit of mutual influences” of Judaism and millenaristic Christianity.<sup>6</sup> But the episode of the rise, recognition and apostasy of the “false messiah” Sabbatai Zevi, the repercussions of which were immense in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Jewish communities as well as in the Christian world, confirmed this idea in spectacular fashion. “Redemption through sin” here forms the “political” bond between the charismatic power of the messiah and the hopes of the people, leading to the auto-dissolution of its traditions and giving rise to a nihilistic conception of destruction as the path to redemption.<sup>7</sup> Scholem himself saw in this episode a first

<sup>2</sup> The translation of this work was refused by an important French publisher. Jacqueline Rose, professor at the University of London, is also the author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Virago, 1991, Virago; the collective work *Why War: Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein*, Blackwell, 1993; *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Essays on Psychoanalysis in the Modern World*, Chatto, 2003; and an introduction to the new English translation of Freud’s essays on “mass psychology,” Penguin Classics, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> By Gershom Scholem, see in particular, in French: *Le messianisme juif. Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme* (Calmann Lévy, 1974) (in which one finds the essay on “redemption through sin” [English title: *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*]; and *Sabbataï Tzevi, le messie mystique 1626-1676*, Verdier, 1990 [English title: *Sabbataï Zevi, the Mystical Messiah*]. The most complete presentation in French of the intellectual career of Scholem is that of David Biale: *Gershom Scholem. Cabale et contre-histoire*, Editions de l’éclat, 2001 [in English: *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Harvard University Press, 1979].

<sup>4</sup> See *Le messianisme juif, op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139 ff., et *Sabbataï Tzevi...*, op. cit.

manifestation of Jewish nationalism and its projects of liberation—an anticipation of Herzl's Zionism. As a result, he never ceased to warn against the “messianic” identification of the return of exiled Jews to Palestine with redemption; he sought to “neutralize” the apocalyptic dimension of messianism without liquidating it altogether, by keeping the political moment, having to do with national, state and territorial structures, separate from the spiritual moment, and by staking out a mystical interpretation of the redemption as re-establishment of the unity and harmony of the world.<sup>8</sup> He defines this separation in many writings, in particular during the years when he was associated with Martin Buber, Rabbi Judah Magnes (founder off the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and other intellectuals living in Palestine and belonging to the Brit Shalom movement, which fought Zionism's rallying to the vision of conquest advocated by Jabotinsky and his “revisionism.” The most remarkable of these is a letter to Franz Rosenzweig in 1926, in which he expresses his worry over the consequences for sacred language, but also for the collective consciousness and the future of Jews settled in Palestine, of the transformation of Hebrew into a national language: “God will not remain silent,” he writes, meaning that despite the apparent secularization of language, the apocalyptic powers implied in invoking of sacred narratives will tend to realize themselves, whatever the obstacles and the human price.<sup>9</sup>

Jacqueline Rose uses Scholem's notion to interpret the historical trajectory of Zionism from the writing of Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* (1902) up to the foundation of the state of Israel as “Jewish state” in Palestine (1948) and the current situation of occupation and progressive destruction of

<sup>8</sup> On the subject of the “neutralization of messianism” in Scholem, see Biale, op. cit., p. 132 ff.

Palestinian society. She sees in this history the realization of the *antinomic* element of messianism transformed into program of political action, both destructive and self-destructive. The analogies between the manic-depressive personality of Sabbatai Zevi and that of Herzl serve as leverage for her argumentation, which has not failed to provoke controversy.<sup>10</sup> However, the essential contribution lies in the relationship she establishes between two questions: that of the national territory as a “land of redemption” ascribed to the people by revelation or by history, but contingent upon a never-ending process of appropriation, always “insufficient”; and that of the collective narcissism that tends to transform all “foreign bodies” into enemies and to turn a people of victims into a people of oppressors. Rose develops her thought with the help of psychoanalytical notions (using Freud, Bion, and Lacan) of collective identity and defense mechanisms against the reality it engenders. Everything revolves thus around the patterns of extreme violence and their imaginary elaboration. The myth of Palestine as a “land without people”—an act of denial which can affect either the physical presence of “nomads” (who are in fact peasants), or the legitimacy of the historical settlement of Arabs in the “land of

<sup>9</sup> Most of the political interventions by Scholem between 1916 and 1974 are translated in the collection *Le prix d'Israël*, Editions de l'Eclat, Paris, 2003 [in English: *Messianic Mystics*, Yale University Press, 1998]. The letter to Rosenzweig, unknown for a long time, also plays a central role in the much more critical analyses of Raz-Krakotzkin, who stresses that it is through a “typically messianic interpretation of the situation” that Scholem “warns against the messianic danger hidden by secularization (*laicisation*)” (*Exil et souveraineté*, p. 133). Krakotzkin's “ambivalent” relationship, according to Carlo Ginzburg, with the work and personality of Scholem, is influenced by the critiques by the new generation of Kabbalah specialists of his “national” conception of older messianism (see Moshe Idel, *Messianisme et mystique*, Paris, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> See in particular the exchange with Shalom Lappin in the online journal [www.democratiya.com/review.asp?reviews](http://www.democratiya.com/review.asp?reviews).

the Bible," or the national identity of the Palestinians—must be forced to fit reality against the "evil powers" that resist it. At the same time, the historical reality of anti-Semitism and its traumatic culmination in genocide is turned into the conviction that the victims of Zionism are in fact its persecutors.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, any manifestation of hostility becomes a threat of annihilation (physical annihilation but also symbolic: degradation and collective "shame," expressing the powerlessness of the Jews, as the Shoah was presented for a long time in Israel), against which all means are justified and even sanctified ("every soldier in the Jewish militia is an actualization of the messiah").<sup>12</sup>

The heart of this analysis is thus a psycho-political reflection on the way in which anti-semitism has come to constitute not only—as Herzl never tired of repeating—the objective ally of Zionism, by destroying illusions of assimilation and persuading Jews that persecution is the only destiny outside "their" nation-state, but also the projective structure (*schème*) of a melancholic conception of self in which the group sees itself (while also fearing to see itself) as absolute victim, object of the murderous hatred of an Other that is both omnipresent and radically evil. This conception of the collective identity avoids any calling into question of one's own politics and allows one, in advance, to attribute any criticism to hostility. It is obviously not the only possible conception, although in certain circumstances which "liberate" the antinomic element of the unconscious itself, it is per-

<sup>11</sup> Rose refers here to the key article by Edward Said (to whose memory her book is dedicated), "Zionism from the point of view of its victims" (1979).

<sup>12</sup> This formula was used by the socialist leader Shmuel Yavne'eli in 1918, quoted by Rose, p. 150. The theme of "national shame" is also analyzed by Idith Zertal. It is incorporated by Krakotzkin into a much more general framework of the abjection of the "exiled" Jew, a notoriously insistent element in the formation of the Israeli national character.

haps irresistible. That is why Rose attributes essential importance, at the heart of her book, to the alternative advocated by the "spiritual" current of Zionism, founded by Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzberg),<sup>13</sup> in whom she sees not only a precocious source of inspiration for a critique—aiming at Herzl—of exclusive nationalism which makes the prior occupants of the promised land invisible, but also—in anticipation of *Freud's Civilization and its Discontents* and in continuation of a rabbinic tradition—the initiator of a "clinic" of melancholic identifications, which would liberate the collective consciousness from grief and from the cruel injunctions of the ancestors.<sup>14</sup>

## II.

The relation to ancestors, treated with a completely different method, is also the subject of Idith Zertal's work *La nation et la mort. La Shoah dans le discours et la politique d'Israël*, which seems to me to have received up to now insufficient or biased attention.<sup>15</sup> Zertal takes an interest as an historian in the constitution and the functions of collective memory, drawing on the works of Maurice Halbwachs and, among more recent scholars, Benedict Anderson and other historians of national culture. In her conclusion she converges with the positions of Hannah Arendt, which she attempts to adapt to the current conditions of Israeli politics.

The main portion of the work is a de-

<sup>13</sup> Before 1933, Scholem too identified with this current. He wrote: "I am, in this respect, a religious Ahad-Haamist." See *Le prix d'Israël*, p. 163. See also D. Biale, op. cit., p. 40 ff., 171-175.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, cit., p. 96 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Author of many studies of the history of the state of Israel and emigration to Palestine, Idith Zertal was professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Interdisciplinary Center of Herzliya. She currently teaches in Basel. Her most recent work, written with Akiva Eldar, is *The War Over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007*, Nation Books, 2007.

tailed study of the way in which a whole set of commemorations and educational institutions constructed and incorporated the notion of a “crucial and exclusive link” between the memory of the Shoah and Israeli defense policy.<sup>16</sup> The perverse effect of this notion was to inscribe at the heart of collective consciousness an equivalence between the Arab world (and today, more and more, the Muslim world) and a new Nazism, as hammered home in the discourse of the political and military elite (with the exception of Rabin before he was assassinated) and largely adopted by public opinion.

It should be noted here, to preclude shrill protests, that Zertal does not contest (any more than does Rose) the idea that Israel has enemies, nor that these enemies wish for or fantasize about Israel’s elimination.<sup>17</sup> Nor does she contest the fact that, as early as the period of the Yishuv and during World War II, certain Palestinian leaders imagined an alliance with Nazism against the “common enemy”<sup>18</sup> and that revisionism or negationism (Holocaust denial) are broadly encouraged today in the Arab and Islamic world. That is not the problem she addresses, however; what she does treat is the *endogenous* construction of a collective self-image<sup>19</sup> through the superimposing, via certain symbolic events, of two systems of representations—one of

which reconstructs ancient or recent history while the other interprets politically the contemporary period—which constantly draw on each other in configuring reality in order to delegitimize and dehumanize the enemy. It would not be forcing the meaning of Zertal’s argumentation to define as its motive, not an underestimation of the importance of the Shoah in Jewish consciousness and contemporary history, but rather a revolt against the instrumentalization and even the banalization of the Shoah,<sup>20</sup> which deprive it of its historical reality and dispossess its victims while promoting its imagined imminence in a completely different political conjuncture—thereby rendering the violence and crimes of the present invisible and inconceivable, given the effect of disproportion.

Her analysis reveals the articulation among several moments. The first concerns the fiction of a chain of heroic sacrifices for the nation beginning long before the proclamation of independence, the war of 1948 and the appropriation for *Eretz Israel* of the European model of the sacred bond between “land and blood,” with the difference that the mission in Palestine is to create, displace and defend the frontier against an *internal enemy*. The model invoked here is the resistance to the death of the settlers of Tel Hai in Upper Galilee against their Arab assailants in 1920.<sup>21</sup> With two other key examples—that of the exaltation of the insurrection in the Warsaw ghetto (1943) presented as a “Zionist com-

<sup>16</sup> On the institution of the “exclusive link” between the memory of the Shoah and the site of Jerusalem by the Yad Vashem law, and its relation to other policies regarding “places of memory,” see Zertal, p. 120. On the reticence of certain Shoah survivors, see p. 130 ff.

<sup>17</sup> This point is particularly important regarding the Nasser regime’s propaganda in the days preceding the attack of June 1967, presented as a case of legitimate preventive defense. See Zertal, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 144 ff., in particular concerning the contacts sought by of the Grand Mufti Hadj Amin Al-Husseini.

<sup>19</sup> Sociologists of Luhmannian inspiration would employ here the category of “*Selbstthematization*” or “self-characterization.” See Ulrich Bielefeld, *Nation und Gesellschaft. Selbstthematizationen in Frankreich und Deutschland*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> On “the long processus of banalization of the Shoah,” see p. 88, 156, etc.

<sup>21</sup> In the extended version of the mythical narrative, which ties modern episodes to Antiquity (the destruction of the Second Temple, the revolt of Bar Kochba and the battle of Massada), this chain makes it possible to legitimate the idea of a national and territorial identity that go back a millennium, in which the diaspora represents little more than a “non-history” or a tragic parenthesis prior to reconquest. Raz-Krakotzkin discusses the fiction of the revolt of Bar Kochba and its opposition to the rabbinic tradition in *Exil et souveraineté*, p. 100 ff.

bat for the honor of Israel"<sup>22</sup> and that of the tragedy of the *Exodus* as managed by the leaders of the Jewish Agency in order to influence the debates within the UN Commission in 1947—we move to a second and even more sensitive question, that of the selection in Israeli policy among testimonies and even among persons (i.e., survivors). This leads up to a discussion of the way in which the state-led construction of memory represses what it considers "shameful" from the standpoint of the "new man" and constructs scapegoats among the victims themselves, while exonerating certain veritable collaborators.<sup>23</sup>

What emerges, in Zertal's striking expression, is a "memory without subjects" (p. 121), a "mixture of appropriation and exclusion" (p. 36), the ideological thrust of which is to construct a "civic religion" (p. 82) and to "purify" Israel itself of the "Jewish shame" represented by the ignominious death of powerless victims (p. 91, 115).

Without restoring to the survivors their right to expression, of which the state (but also, secondarily, the army and the settler organizations) took on the role of "certified heirs" (p. 237), the officializing of the cult of the Shoah dead, of which the Eichmann

trial in 1961 constituted a key moment, nonetheless represented a significant shift. The Shoah is no longer categorized as a sign of degeneracy and "passivity" of the ghetto Jew as opposed to the "new man" embodied by the Zionist pioneer; it is transfigured into a founding event of the national renaissance and the negative sign of Israel's chosenness, which guarantees *a priori* the holiness of its objectives and the (in particular military) means used to the achieve them.<sup>24</sup> Its "unique" character is no longer discussed—as it still was at the time of the Biafra war—but proclaimed and sanctified. Once again then, and on a much greater scale, a situation is systematically read in the shadow of another, thus instituting a collective psychology of angst which exceeds all the particular circumstances that might nourish it (regional wars, suicide bomb attacks, the Palestinian demand for a "right to return"), and resulting in an Israeli self-consciousness as a "refuge nation," placed permanently under the sign of extermination. "In this universe where all meanings are inverted and all projections permitted" writes Zertal, "the conquered peoples become conquerors; persecutors are turned into the persecuted, criminals into victims, and this upside-down world is sanctioned thanks to the supreme hallmark of Auschwitz."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Zertal, *op. cit.*, p. 36 ff. Following others, Zertal stresses the fact that the most prominent surviving leader of the revolt of the Warsaw ghetto, Marek Edelman, always opposed this transfiguration of the insurrection into an episode of "Zionist" heroism, and more generally the idea that the creation of the state of Israel represented not only an historical consequence, but the very "meaning," revealed *a posteriori*, of the Shoah (see p. 47 ff.).

<sup>23</sup> This occurred in particular as a result of a 1950 law "against war criminals and the authors of crimes against humanity" present in Israel itself: see Zertal, p. 83 ff. In practice, the law targeted Jews, themselves Shoah survivors (such as former *kapos* and room supervisors in the concentration camps) but ended up exonerating notables who had negotiated with the Nazis in the name of the *Judenräte* of central Europe. The law resulted in the scandal of the Kastner trial (1952), for which Ben Gurion conceived the Eichmann trial as a symbolic reparation (p. 112 ff.).

<sup>24</sup> According to Zertal, who follows Arendt on this point, but also other historians (including the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who was quite sympathetic to Israeli objectives), the trial was conceived strictly in this perspective.

<sup>25</sup> Zertal, p. 268-269 ("L'ange de la mort d'Auschwitz"). Let us recall that Edward Said, who swam against the current in his own camp, called for the Palestinians and Arabs to take this psychology into account and, beyond this, to make of the Jewish genocide and the rights it entailed (which did not include in his view the right to dispossess others) one of the conditions for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. See *The Question of Palestine* (London, 1981); *The Politics of Dispossession* (London, 1994).



### III.

Under these circumstances one can understand why Hannah Arendt, expressing herself “as a Jew” in her report and interpretation of the Eichmann trial, while refusing all group affiliation,<sup>26</sup> provoked a scandal which continues to this day. After having published in Hebrew, for the first time, Arendt’s letter to Scholem which he had promised to have published with hers, Zertal devotes a long chapter to this apology for free thinking (*Selbstdenken*, in Lessing’s expression) against “the catastrophe of political messianism,” and draws inspiration from it in her conclusion. In her view, and above and beyond the criticism of the great historian’s failure to keep his word, this polemic is exemplary of the way in which the current which had believed in the utopia of Jewish-Arab understanding became divided between a cultural nationalism, powerless to dissociate itself from mythical extrapolations from history despite having studied its genealogy methodically, and a “world citizenship” for which the essential political problem to be resolved is how to achieve the historical conditions for coexistence between different demands for self-determination, mutually antagonistic and yet equally and unconditionally justified.

The Scholem-Arendt controversy also occupies a central place in the third work we are examining here, Amnon Raz-Kra-

<sup>26</sup> Her controversy with Scholem attests to this. This controversy turned on “love for Israel” vs. “love for the Jewish people” (*Ahavat Israel*), to which she counterpoises not the “love of humanity” but that of individuals and friends. See *Les origines du totalitarisme, suivi de Eichmann à Jérusalem*, Gallimard 2002, p. 1342 ff. (in English: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken, 1951), as well as G. Scholem, *Fidélité et utopie. Essais sur le judaïsme contemporain*, Calmann Lévy, 1978, p. 213-228. On Arendt’s conception of the “Jewish question” before and after the Eichmann trial, see Martine Leibovici, *Hannah Arendt, une Juive. Expérience, politique et histoire* (preface by Pierre Vidal-Naquet), Desclée de Brouwer, 1998.

kozkin’s *Exil et souveraineté. Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée bi-nationale*.<sup>27</sup> However, against the background of the common friendship with Walter Benjamin which each of the two had in some way incorporated into their thought, this controversy is re-examined from the standpoint of the “political theology” which undergirded the construction of the state of Israel and its colonial expansion out to the (undetermined) limits of the Biblical *Eretz Israel*. Here, then, is a third perspective that cuts across and displaces the two previous ones.<sup>28</sup> It is impossible here to account fully for a work so worthy of discussion (which we hope will occur), stunning in its erudition and its theoretical ambitions. I will first indicate the meaning the author attaches to the notion to which he refers in his title, and then concentrate my remarks on three plurithematic points.

Krakotzkin takes care to distinguish what he calls “binational thought” from any particular institutional solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the form of one or two states. As outlined in the interwar period by Buber, Magnes, Scholem and Arendt, and as it survives today in Israel among the minority that struggles for the rights of Palestinians, it consists first of all in an effective recognition of the presence of the Arabs, in the midst of which Jewish communities have always lived, as the first residents of the land of Palestine; secondly,

<sup>27</sup> The author is senior lecturer in history of Judaism at the University of Beersheva. Several of his previous publications are about Catholic censorship and the transformations of Jewish thought it brought about in classical Europe.

<sup>28</sup> The close exchanges between Scholem and Benjamin on theology and the philosophy of history, (up to the “Theses” of 1940, submitted to Arendt and published by her) are the subject of a book by Eric Jacobson: *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, 2003. See also Michael Löwy, *Avertissement d’incendie. Une lecture des thèses “Sur le concept d’histoire,”* Paris, 2001 [in English: *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the concept of History,”* Verso, 2006.

it refers to the idea that "the rights of Jews and Arabs form a whole" such that one cannot make democracy progress without "treating simultaneously both facets,"<sup>29</sup> which requires reasoning no longer in terms of exclusive sovereignty but rather limited or shared sovereignty. Finally—and this is a knottier problem—it affirms that for the Jews themselves "Palestine is a country of exile," as it has become for the Palestinians, in such a way that there is no eschatological identification possible between the "return" of the Jews to Palestine and the construction of a state in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> Binational thought thus constitutes both an "intellectual and moral reform" and a political methodology in today's situation, whose outcome cannot be predicted.

In this perspective, the first thesis of the book is that the distinction often acknowledged in Israel between a "secular" camp and a "religious" camp is meaningless. It was secular nationalism, and socialism in particular, predominant at the time of the state's founding and in charge of its policies for decades alone or in coalition, that carried out the "secularization" and the conservation of theological-political schemas, sacralizing national symbols (the flag with the star of David reproducing a prayer shawl), making the Bible the absolute reference for the representation of borders, and making Israel a chosen land which could only be appropriated by the Jews. Krakotz-

<sup>29</sup> Raz-Krakotzkin, p. 209.

<sup>30</sup> This is tantamount to criticizing the notion, inscribed in the Israeli constitution, of a state which is "democratic" because it is "Jewish" (and for Jews exclusively). This idea of the "land of exile" is tied to a "secular" elaboration of the religious tradition for which the land of Israel does not constitute the place or the instrument of salvation but rather that place where the Jews attempt to continue to "live in exile," as long as all humanity is not yet liberated from slavery or oppression. It converges with the critique of statism in Benjamin and the opposition pointed out by Arendt between the position of the "parvenu" and that of the "pariah." See p. 199-201.

kin sums up this "inverted secularization" with a witticism: "God does not exist, but he promised us this land." This theology, denied and yet omnipresent, associates in close combination the political aspect—the absolutization of the national state form—with an apocalyptic religious deviation<sup>31</sup> with respect to the idea of the human condition as exile, seen as the ethical and mystical foundation of Judaism, in correspondence with the prohibition on "hastening the end."<sup>32</sup> As a paradoxical consequence, we must look for the opponents of political messianism among the religious thinkers and parties who oppose the idea of the Israeli territory as a holy land, rather than among the self-proclaimed "secularists."<sup>33</sup>

The negation of exile, this time in a directly historical sense, is at the heart of Krakotzkin's critique of the "orientalism" (in the sense of Said) that according to him pervades the self-images and the cultural policies of the state of Israel. The paradox is that a nation born of persecution of the Jews in Europe conceives of itself (starting with the writings of Herzl) as the vanguard of the Europeanization of the Middle East; and that, in turning against itself—not without extreme ambivalence—the system of "stigma" invented by orientalism, that nation comes to hunt down ferociously, in its history, cultural traditions and ethnic composition, everything that evokes "otherness" with respect to the models of community developed by European nations and colonial empires. This "delocalized" orientalism, "projected" out of its place of

<sup>31</sup> This is so because it actually reaches the point of preferring self-destruction to the sharing of the land: see the passage on the "Samson option" and the taboo on naming the Israeli nuclear weapon, p. 152 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45 ff., 197 ff.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196-203 (with reference to Baruch Kurzweil and Yeshayahou Leibowitz). The nationalist religious parties are nevertheless in the forefront of the colonization of the occupied territories.

origin, holds naturally for the systematic negation of the rights and the very existence of the Palestinian Arabs and for the representation of Islam as a backward and fanatic religion. But it holds as well for the symbolic violence to which the “oriental” Jews are subjected and the erasure of Judeo-Arab culture, in both its popular and its learned guises, despite its ties to the great moment of renaissance of medieval Judaism in Yemen, Baghdad and Cordoba.<sup>34</sup> What a paradox for a state building itself in the Middle East, and of which—leaving aside the 20% of Israeli Arabs—nearly half the Jewish majority population has origins in Yemen, Iraq and North Africa! Greater still is the paradox concerning the way in which, in denying a specifically Jewish conception of historicity (as Benjamin attempted to retrieve it in combination with another messianism) in favor of a “grand narrative” of state modernization, the dominant discourse in Israel presents Jewish history of the past millennium, under conditions of diaspora, essentially as a long, negative parenthesis and an experience of alienation from the collective identity. The construction of the new man thus becomes not only an instrument for “eradication of the past,” but also the process by which the stereotypes of European anti-Judaism are assimilated and ratified.

At the most advanced point of his critique, Krakotzkin, developing an intuition of Scholem against Scholem himself, then

<sup>34</sup> Krakotzkin speaks of “forced de-Arabization,” p. 83. He draws in particular on the work of Gil Anidjar, philosopher and historian who studied with Derrida and author of *Our Place in Al-Andalous: Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters*, Stanford, 2002; *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, Stanford, 2003; and most recently, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, Stanford, 2008. Israeli suppression of the Judeo-Arab element at the heart of its own historic identity is the obverse side of the fantasized discourse of “Christian” Europe which placed the Jew and the Arab, at least since the Renaissance, in the position of absolute enemies, both internal and external, forming a single enemy at a deeper level.

argues in favor of the thesis that the “secularized political theology” guiding Israeli policy is not so much the effect of an internal deviation of Jewish messianism but the result of its own impregnation with specifically Christian schemas, from the appropriation of Protestant principles of literalist reading and exclusive authority of the Bible to the use of extermination as a theophanic founding moment, a sign of God in lay history, via the representation of the “end of exile” as an “entry into history” in the progressive and positive sense of the term.<sup>35</sup>

It is against such an inversion of perspectives, which is much more alienating than the “degeneration” to which it claims to put an end, that Krakotzkin invokes the Benjaminian idea of a history of redemption as a “history of the defeated” (or, in the language of Arendt, the “pariahs”).<sup>36</sup> This history is by no means purely speculative since it opens in his view the possibility of exercising *political responsibility* for the consequences, for others and for oneself, of the Zionist conquest—a responsibility on which depend the chances, which in truth are very tenuous, of not paying collectively the heaviest price.<sup>37</sup>

To conclude, I would like to stress two problems that clearly call for further reflection. One point in common between the analyses of Rose, Zertal and Raz-Krakotzkin, which the very divergence of their methods brings out even more strongly (and even violently), is the pervasive presence of anti-semitism and the profundity of the deferred effects that its internalization never ceases to produce in the self-con-

<sup>35</sup> See in particular chapters I (“La négation de l’exil dans la conscience sioniste”) and II (“Le retour à l’histoire”). Scholem discusses in particular the relations between Jewish messianism and Christian millenarism in *Sabbatai Tsevi*, op. cit., p. 105 ff.

<sup>36</sup> See in particular chapter VII: “Arendt, Benjamin, Scholem et le binationalisme.”

<sup>37</sup> This responsibility is carefully distinguished from culpability: see p. 206 ff.

sciousness or *Selbstthematisierung* that is indissociable from the Israeli national construction. It will no doubt be admitted that no form of identification with Judaism and with Jewishness (*judéité*)—and we know that there are more than one—can emerge unscathed. The traumatism of the Shoah, transmitted from generation to generation, adds to it a dimension of inevitability which is difficult to resist. But the situation is qualitatively different for Israeli national consciousness because the relationship of the "self" to the "Other" (the foreigner, the enemy) becomes the object of an institutional construction, a political "appropriation," and this construction takes place under conditions of colonization, and thus a "vital" denial of the condition of oppressors on the part of former victims (or rather their heirs, which is not the same thing). Everything thus occurs—as an effect of the "perverse debt," in Zertal's expression—as if Sartre's formula ("it's anti-semitism that makes the Jew") had found its deferred realization: it is anti-semitism that constructs Jewishness (*judéité*) for Israelis, both in the definition of what they reject as foreign to them and of that with which they identify. The supremely ambivalent category of "victim" paradoxically joins together the two aspects.

The resulting practical consequence is twofold and of course does not concern only the Jews or the Israelis. First of all, it is important to explore in more depth, as Hildberg, Arendt and Poliakov had all begun to do in different ways, *the nature of the historic ties between anti-semitism and extermination*, since these ties are by no means logical or linear. Further, it is essential to place a merciless ideological struggle against current forms of anti-semitism (in both the East and the West) on the agenda of any attempt to contribute to a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the "neutralization"—insofar as possible—of nationalist messianism, because the latter

draws nourishment from any circumstance in which the real provides opportunities to confirm its imaginary. This implies no necessity of giving in to the blackmail to which any critical examination of Israeli history and politics is exposed. The difficulty arises from the fact that anti-semitism is of course used tactically by Israel but also forms, in a much deeper way, an unconscious basis of its identity, associated with the discourse of Zionism from its origins, which obstacles and refutations do not weaken but instead reinforce.

At another level, the analyses of our three authors pose anew a complex but crucial question: in what sense is the ideological formation referred to here as "nationalist messianism" or sacralization of the nation by the "angel of death" specifically Israeli? Could it not be that a part of the fascination exercised by Zionism, in the West or elsewhere, on the minds of people who have no particular sympathy for colonization, but who may on the other hand be attached to a "civic" or "republican" conception of the nation and its particular manner of combining universalism and communitarianism, egalitarianism and exclusion, comes from the fact that Israeli nationalism brings to an extreme point (and even to a breaking point) an ideological formation that is not—or not entirely—unique to it? At a time of general questioning of the combination of messianism and nationalism—which is more or less indissociable from the translation of an historical identity into state policy and attaches itself, according to the circumstances at hand, to the ideas of "civilizing mission," "elect nation," "land of resurrection" where the new man is born, or "nation victim of history" (France, U.S., U.S.S.R., Poland, India, Iran, etc.)—the particular case of Israel appears as the stronghold of a certain image of sovereignty and as the place where it is (always and already) in the shadow of death.<sup>38</sup> The very Spinozian formula of Rabbi Haim Grodzinski quoted by Krakotzkin—"Israel

is a state like any other”—takes on a different meaning.<sup>39</sup> It calls for a more complete investigation into everything that the couple formed by the land of the ancestors and sacrificial patriotism, exacerbated by Israeli nationalism, owes in fact to the European history of nationalisms (including Maurice Barrès!). It further calls, of course, for investigation into the fact that this history has never ceased to reactivate and exploit Biblical models—and here we encounter the “circuit of mutual influences” of which Scholem spoke. Finally, it demands of us that we pose the problem of the specificity and the singularity (the uniqueness, if one prefers) of Jewish history in Israel and outside Israel, not in terms of essences or identities but in terms of internal relations and othernesses, in the past as in the present. All states are “like the others” but no national history is “like another,” since it reflects within it all the others.

---

<sup>38</sup> One will find, I believe, an idea of this sort implicit in certain recent writings by Jean-Claude Milner: see *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*, Verdier, 2003, in particular § 55, p. 97 ff.: “In truth, there is only one real obstacle [to the expansion of European “peace,” synonym of “unlimited society”]... and that is the existence of a state named Israel. For Israel presents itself as a limited whole, in the form of a nation-state, claiming secure and recognized borders. Such language is reputed to be intrinsically warlike...”

<sup>39</sup> Raz-Krakotzkin, *cit.*, p. 111, 199. This formula is all the more striking to me since during the period of perestroika, when the philosopher Lucien Sève asked me in a falsely naïve way (and with real anxiety) what I thought of the U.S.S.R., I replied exactly that: “It’s a state like any other...”