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Stuck in a revolving door : secularism, assimilation and democratic pluralism

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Transit I: To the Proustian Pluriverse

The following two chapters are founded on the assumption that a critical rethinking of Jewish assimilation in nineteenth-century France—or the process which has been interpreted as such—is important for an assessment of the moral legitimacy and practical wisdom of (re)introducing a liberal-assimilationist discourse in the European context. I will try to contribute to such a rethinking by scrutinising the ways in which assimilation's practical and discursive effects appear in Proust's oeuvre, and particularly in his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*], which was written between 1909 and 1922.¹ This novel allots a central place to the position of the Jews in the early French Third Republic (1870-1940), often in relation to the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906).² Several political philosophers, among them Hannah Arendt, commented on Proust's oeuvre when they sought to understand the nineteenth-century roots of what Walter Benjamin called the 'highly precarious structure of assimilation' of the French Jews (Adorno and Benjamin 1999 [1940]: 329), and what Theodor Adorno, more radically and after Auschwitz, called the 'failed [gescheiterte] emancipation' of the European Jews (Adorno 1994 [1954]: 98).

¹ Proust's oeuvre was written approximately between 1890 and 1922. The first notes and 'cahiers' for the *Recherche* are rewritings of his earlier work *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

² In this Affair, a Jewish captain in the French army was falsely accused of treasonous connections with the Germans after the traumatising Franco-German War of 1870-71. I will later provide a more detailed account of the Dreyfus Affair.

By commenting on Proust's representation of patterns of assimilation and on some of these earlier interpretations, I seek to obtain a clear and nuanced view of the vicissitudes of the 'emancipation' project of the French Jews, particularly with regard to the exclusionary tendencies that they were confronted with in the context of the Dreyfus Affair. In relation to my critical notes on Morawska and Joppke's distinction between liberal and nationalist assimilation discussed in chapter two, I will first examine the relation between assimilationism and the risk of nevertheless being confronted with segregationist or exclusionary tendencies, and second, scrutinise how homogenising or liberal the pressures actually were at the time. What did these pressures imply for the relations between individuals, societal groups and the state, and for the opportunities for individuals to perform both as members or participants in specific social groups and as citizens? Here it will turn out that the crucial problems were often related to the ways in which the 'secularisation' and modernisation of Judaism had been motivated in Enlightenment discourses, and to the practical effects of these discourses on intercultural relations, mainly among Catholics and Jews, in the course of the nineteenth century.

Reading the novel in the context of memory

Tracing the 'modern' origins of citizenship and its corollaries 'emancipation' and 'assimilation,' could make us aware of certain proclivities in the history of these concepts that tend to be forgotten in sociological and political theoretical discourses on migration, and that may provide us with an important genealogy to the contemporary debates on ethno-religious diversity. However, I will not proceed by drawing immediate historical analogies between assimilationism in the French Third Republic and contemporary debates on assimilation, or between contemporary liberal discussions of citizenship and the dominant concept of republican citizenship in nineteenth-century France. The nineteenth-century French concept of citizenship was a reflection of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, based on an abstract divide between the particular (the private) and the general (the public), and, as such, was far less differentiated than today's concepts and practices of citizenship.

Instead of tracing immediate analogies, I would like to invite the reader to test out what I call the 'recognisability' of Proust's representation of experiences of assimilation.³ I suggest that this recognisability embodies the qualities of a

³ After previously publishing some of the following material as articles, it struck me several times that many readers, with very different backgrounds, academic and non-academic, reported that they had imagined or sensed analogies with present-day situations for immigrants, particularly Muslims.

historical metaphor. In a reflection on 'the abuses of memory' in the context of the memory of the Shoah, Tzvetan Todorov (1998) has pleaded for a comparative use of memory in which historical events are not read in a literal way, but, without denying the singularity of the event, in an exemplary, metaphorical way.⁴ One of the objectives of such a reading is to 'draw a lesson' from the comparison. I would like to add to Todorov's proposal that reading metaphorically not just produces analogies from which we can draw a lesson intellectually. A metaphorical interpretation of historical events touches on important moral-affective layers of our experience as well. Thus, it can modify our insight in more significant, and perhaps more effective ways than mere intellectual argument.

Here, a preliminary remark should be made. The affective layer in historical metaphor is especially attendant when we associate the Jews' pre-war circumstances with the contemporary circumstances of immigrants from other backgrounds, because of the moral charge present in any reference to the experiences of the European Jews and because of the exceptional cruelty and systematicity of anti-Semitism, which was particularly vigorous in Third Republic France.⁵ I bring up the memory of Jewish assimilation in France not to relativise the particularity of Franco-Jewish history or to moralise contemporary normative views of immigration which 'dare' to mention assimilation as a normative option. Suggesting that assimilationism would inevitably lead to final exclusion or even extermination would be to suggest a structural causality in history and to neglect the many factors that produce its contingencies. However, I do think that we should dare to associate the history of French nineteenth-century assimilation with the contemporary resurgence of assimilation and strong concepts of integration as (latently) normative concepts,

⁴ Theories of cultural memory have emphasised that the structure of memory itself is metaphorical; we can never retrieve events in their singularity. Memory always involves a complex relation between personal experience, cultural representation, and shared histories. It depends on re-articulations and re-enactments, and its performative dimensions of transmission and testimony entangle it with present-day political interests. 'The mode of memory is *recherche* rather than recuperation. The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not (...) the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependant on some past event or experience' (Huyssen 1995: 3; see also Baronian, Besser and Jansen 2005).

⁵ For example in the works of the Édouard Drumont and Urbain Gohier, which remain exceptional in their systematic hatefulness towards the Jews and which we should distinguish from contemporary xenophobic theories about Muslims—or Jews, for that matter (for analyses of the work of Drumont, see Winock 1998; Birnbaum 1993). However, in a lecture to the Dutch Society of Romanists on April 16, 2005, Esther Benbassa told the audience that a doctoral student in her department, who recently wrote a thesis comparing contemporary critiques of 'Islam' with these old-fashioned anti-Semitic theories, argues that there are in fact many analogies between the two, although the continuous association of the Jews with money forms an exception.

and, as we will see, also with certain aspects of secularism.

What may make us less critical towards contemporary tendencies of assimilationism is a certain (quite understandable) focus, when it comes to Jewish history in Europe, on the Shoah and the subsequent projection of the Shoah back into the past, as if it constituted the unavoidable direction of this history. The nineteenth century, which produced the origins of the violence, then seems far removed from today, because it produced horrors so awful that we cannot imagine anything similar occurring in contemporary Europe.¹⁰ However, focusing on the French nineteenth century itself, we may be able to recognise a lot more, both ideologically and affectively, than we would expect, and I think that we can learn important lessons from such a comparison.

Ronald Schechter (2003) has recently argued, specifically with regard to the historiography of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France, that we should be careful about projecting the Shoah back onto European history. Borrowing a term from the literary historian Michael Bernstein, Schechter warns against the 'teleological' presentation of Jewish history as one of 'victims-in-waiting' (2003: 4). He argues that the position of 'the collective victim of past crimes' may lead to an 'imagined separation' that runs the 'risk of ghettoising the Jews' (2003: 260). However, I am not convinced that, as Schechter proposes, we could methodologically 'forget/*shachoch*' rather than 'remember/*zakhor*' the Shoah for the moment of our rereading of post-revolutionary Jewish history in France in order to develop a less teleological interpretation (2003: 3). Such a method of momentary forgetfulness—even if it were possible, which I doubt—may lead to a reification of the Shoah and its isolation from the history (or histories) that preceded it. In this sense, it mirrors the overly singular use of memory criticised by Todorov. Moreover, it leads to an isolation of the period under scrutiny. A different methodology, which I try to pursue, would be to allow ourselves to trace a repetitive experience when studying the nineteenth-century French history of emancipation. In practically everything we read, we sense, on the one hand, the direction the future will take, but, on the other hand, by reading carefully, we can also trace the many moments of contingency and complexity that make it impossible to imagine the Shoah as the single terrifying *telos* of this history. This may lead us to the thesis that it was a risk which actualised itself because of specific circumstances, and that, consequently, we must study the nineteenth century with this in mind.

¹⁰ On the problematics of a moral pedagogy based on the 'lessons' of the Shoah, see Ido de Haan (1998) in an essay on Steven Spielberg's feature film *Schindler's List*. A decontextualised pedagogy of the Shoah may cause us to neglect to analyse the processes that led to the Jews' exclusion, and prevent us from becoming sensible to comparable risks in the present (see also de Haan 1997). Benbassa stressed the same point in the lecture mentioned in the previous footnote.

There are good reasons for remembering the ambivalent history of assimilation particularly in the French context, because of the continuities in the ways in which France has dealt with its minorities from the start of the Republic onwards. This continuity has been analysed by historians of Franco-Judaism such as Birnbaum (1998) and Benbassa (2003), whose views I will discuss in the course of the following chapters. They suggest, in different ways, that the memory of the ambivalence of Franco-Judaism is crucial for an evaluation of the Republic's suggested neutrality, also in relation to present-day debates about neutrality in the context of Islam. The most important reason is that it enables us to bring to light how the causes of French anti-Semitism lay not exclusively in the right wing's refusal to accept the Republic, but also in the *historical dynamics leading to fanaticism on the sides of both the Catholic Reaction and the Republic*. It makes it possible to understand that not only the explicitly anti-Semitic Catholic proponents of the restoration of the Christian state, but also the putatively neutral republican state itself (or rather, the process of centralisation judged necessary to achieve it), played a role in creating the 'highly precarious structure of assimilation' of the French Jews—and eventually, with all the differences between the diverse countries taken into account, also more generally of the European Jews.

This insight has been summarised, somewhat too radically and in a way that will be nuanced in the chapters to follow, by the French philosopher and sociologist Shmuel Trigano, when he wrote that

l'antisémitisme français du XIXe siècle, puis du XXe siècle, a ses sources (secrètes) dans la République du XVIIIe siècle, dans le mythe républicain, révolutionnaire, dans le principe même de la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen; j'ajouterais: malgré soi (...) L'antisémitisme se salira les mains, ce que jamais ne fit la République mais ce qu'elle rendit possible abstraitement et en principe (Trigano 1982, quoted from Birnbaum 1988: 47, page reference to Trigano is missing in the quote).

[nineteenth-century and, subsequently, twentieth-century French anti-Semitism has its (secret) sources in the eighteenth-century Republic, in the republican, revolutionary myth, in the principle of the Rights of Man and the Citizen itself; I would add: in spite of itself (...) Anti-Semitism got its hands dirty, something the Republic never did, but which it made possible in the abstract and in principle (my translation).]

Following Schechter's criticism of a teleological reading of French-Jewish history, we might object to Trigano's interpretation. To argue that the Republic contained the sources—'abstraitement et en principe'—of twentieth-century

anti-Semitism, is quite a teleological interpretation. Schechter explicitly mentions Trigano, who considers the Jews of post-revolutionary France 'hostages of the universal', as one of the representatives of the teleological interpretation of Jewish history (2003: 4). My hypothesis, to be explored in the following chapters through reading Proust, is rather that the central problem lay in the position that the Jews, as a minority, came to occupy within the dynamics of the struggle between the Republican and the Catholic Reaction in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

However, analysing the ambivalence of Franco-Judaism nevertheless offers an important lever for a critique of the suggestion that a certain Islamophobia in today's France is only a product of the nationalist extreme right wing, rather than also of the Republic itself. In this sense, I think Asad is correct in suggesting that 'the attempt to shift the entire question of "anti-Semitism" to the "social danger of Islamism" (...) has the comforting effect of diverting attention away from the historical prejudice against Jews in the Republic and away from the more general problem of unity in a modern secular state' (Asad 2004: 3). In this context, the chapters on Proust are also a preparation for the chapters on *laïcité*, where I will discuss the ways in which contemporary liberal secularism continues and redirects the problems of assimilation and Franco-Judaism.

The Proustian prism

A specific reason for reading Proust's work, already brought up in the introduction, is that it helps us to acquire an insight into the subjective and intersubjective ambivalences of assimilation, which may affect our evaluation of its political and moral merits at a convoluted level. The literary character of his work, and his deployment of intertextuality and metaphor in particular, makes it possible to study the complicated social and political effects of the 'ideal' of assimilation in a way that includes its effects on social imaginaries. Proust's work enables us to acquire an insight into multi-levelled effects of assimilation(-ism) in such a way that it does not remain strictly tied to the specificities of the historical situation it represents. I do not mean to suggest that we can abstract any essential or transhistorical concept of experiencing assimilation from my reading. Yet, Proust's presentation of the discursive effects of assimilation's societal and political promises may lead us to recognise aspects of assimilation that are not entirely bound up with the specific historical situation of nineteenth-century France, and to develop a more critical attitude toward present-day proposals for liberal assimilation.

The *Recherche* is structured as a long first-person narrative by a protagonist who is identified as Marcel only twice within the novel's 3,000 pages. For the sake of the liveliness of my account of Proust's work, I will write 'Marcel' when referring to this protagonist at the moment of experience, and 'narrator' when alluding to him writing his memoirs/memories. Please note, however, that the use of the name 'Marcel' does not imply that I read the novel as a first-person narrative, even a fictionalised one, by the author Marcel Proust. The novel makes no attempt to give a realistic account of the life of a person, not even an imagined one—it in fact follows an explicitly anti-realistic, perspectivist poetics.⁷ 'Marcel' is an extremely passive character entirely adapted to the necessities of the Proustian procédé of memorial writing between sense experience and reflection. This also makes it impossible to neatly distinguish between Marcel and the narrator. Moreover, though the narrator sometimes interweaves essayistic, objectifying moments of reflection, which at first sight appear to halt the narrative, these essayistic moments are always imbricated in a certain narrative structure that places them in a social perspective (Descombes 1996). In the chapters to follow, we will see that Proust constantly undermines these 'theoretical' passages by introducing others that contradict them, and by enclosing them in narratives that reveal the social desires which give them their diverse directions.⁸

As far as the relationship of the novel to history is concerned, here too the narrative and its requirements, rather than the wish to provide a historical account, determine the shape of the novel (Kristeva 1993; Hassine 1996). Proust was particularly fascinated by the structure of the fairy tale, which features social reversal and sudden change instead of the presumed continuity and causal structure of natural and positivistically understood historical 'reality'. This does not mean, however, that the novel's structure is a-political or a-historical; rather, Proust regularly suggests that historical reality, at certain moments, shares characteristics with the fairy tale. The novel mimics Proust's philosophical take on human history, which, against the realism and positivism dominant in the French nineteenth century, is sensitive to the contingencies and discontinuities of history and society. This becomes particularly evident from his reflections on the temporal structures of social change in the Dreyfus Affair.

Very briefly summarised, the Dreyfus Affair, crucial to Proust's view of history, unfolded as follows. In October 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, was accused of high treason; he was said to have procured military information for the Germans. His family was one of the many Jewish

⁷ A poetics which had been developed by Proust himself in his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which opposed the French writer Sainte-Beuve's arguments for realism.

⁸ Mieke Bal (1997) has extensively and subtly studied the complicated movements and standstills of these desires.

families that originated from Germany. They had lived on the border in Alsace for decades already, and then, after emancipation, gradually advanced socially and moved to Paris. From the beginning it was clear that the evidence on which the accusation of Dreyfus was based was unreliable, but it took five years for Dreyfus to be released from Devil's Island, where he was exiled and badly maltreated. Only after twelve years of struggle on the part of his family and an increasing number of so-called Dreyfusards was his innocence finally established, in 1906.

The fact that Dreyfus was Jewish played an important role in the suspicions cast upon him. Dreyfus himself was convinced of this from the moment he was accused. After the first interrogation, he was said to have cried out: 'My only crime is to have been born a Jew!' ([apocryphically?]⁹ quoted in Burns 1992: 123). The anti-Semitic press, headed by Édouard Drumont, revealed Dreyfus's Jewish identity on November 1st, before any details about the precise accusation had become available. However, the role of anti-Semitism was never acknowledged by the army and the government, and it was not made into an aspect of the struggle by his family and lawyers. This made it difficult to address it, even after the Affair had grown into a major political row throughout France. It also made it especially difficult to be a Dreyfusard when one was Jewish, as this invariably incurred the accusation that one was only a Dreyfusard because of group ties—an accusation that the army and government would never extend to themselves, for they always retained a pretence of strict neutrality.

In the context of the Dreyfus Affair, Proust often compares society to a kaleidoscope, both in his letters and in the *Recherche*. In reflecting on the Affair, the narrator writes that when Marcel was a toddler, no worldly salon dominated by the aristocracy would ever have received a Republican, let alone a Jewish Republican. A few years later (at the time of his first communion), this was very different and Jews, who were identified with Republicans in general, were admitted into high society. But then, after the Dreyfus Affair started, everything changed once more. The narrator writes:

Mais, pareille aux kaléidoscopes qui tournent de temps en temps, la société place successivement de façon différente des éléments qu'on avait crus immuables et compose une autre figure. Je n'avais pas encore fait ma première communion, que des dames bien pensantes avaient la stupéfaction de rencontrer en visite une Juive élégante. Ces dispositions nouvelles du kaléidoscope sont produites par ce qu'un philosophe appellerait un

⁹ I never encountered this phrase in French accounts of the Affair, and Burns is a little negligent with regard to his references in other places as well.

changement de critère. L'affaire Dreyfus en amena un nouveau, à une époque un peu postérieure à celle où je commençais à aller chez Mme Swann, et le kaléidoscope renversa une fois de plus ses petits losanges colorés. Tout ce qui était juif passa en bas, fût-ce la dame élégante, et des nationalistes obscurs montèrent prendre sa place (Proust 1989: I, 507-08).

[But, like a kaleidoscope which is every now and then given a turn, society arranges successively in different orders elements which one would have supposed immutable, and composes a new pattern. Before I had made my first Communion, right-minded ladies had had the stupefying experience of meeting an elegant Jewess while paying a social call. These new arrangements of the kaleidoscope are produced by what a philosopher would call a 'change of criterion'. The Dreyfus Affair brought about another, at a period rather later than that in which I began to go to Mme Swann's, and the kaleidoscope once more reversed its coloured lozenges. Everything Jewish, even the elegant lady herself, went down, and various obscure nationalists rose to take its place (Proust 1996: II, 103).]

This reflection is not just the fanciful interpretation of history by a novelist concerned with adapting historical reality to the needs of his creativity at the expense of 'realism', as some critics have suggested (Hassine 1996). Rather, it is the projection back into the novel of the experience of the contingency and fairy tale-like structure of certain historical moments, in opposition to a positivistically understood causal structure of history. In a letter from 1906, when Dreyfus had finally been officially rehabilitated, Proust develops the following reflection:

Il est curieux de penser que pour une fois la vie—qui l'est si peu—est romanesque. Hélas, depuis ces dix ans, nous avons eu tous dans nos vies bien des chagrins, bien des déceptions, bien des tortures. Et pour aucun de nous ne va sonner une heure où nos chagrins seront changés en ivresses, nos déceptions en réalisations inespérées, et nos tortures en triomphes délicieux. Je serai de plus en plus malade, les êtres que j'ai perdus me manqueront de plus en plus, tout ce que j'avais pu rêver de la vie me sera de plus en plus inaccessible. Mais pour Dreyfus et pour Picquart, il n'en est pas ainsi. La vie a été pour eux 'providentielle', à la façon des contes de fées et des roman feuilletons. C'est que nos tristesses reposaient sur des vérités, des vérités physiologiques, des vérités humaines et sentimentales. Pour eux, les peines reposaient sur des erreurs. Bienheureux ceux qui sont victimes d'erreurs judiciaires ou autres! Ce sont les seuls humains pour qui il y ait des revanches et des réparations! (Proust 1989: VI, 159, et note 3, quoted from

Fraisse 1996: 331).

[It is strange to think that life, for once, even if only a little, is like a novel. Alas, during these ten years [of the Dreyfus Affair], all of us have known plenty of pains, deceptions, and tortures in our lives. And for none of us there will be an hour at which our pains will transform into joyful drunkenness, our deceptions into unexpected actualisations, and our tortures into delicious triumphs. I will be more and more ill, I miss those I have lost more and more, and everything that I could have dreamt of in life will become increasingly inaccessible. But for Dreyfus and for Picquart, it is not like that. Life has been 'providential' for them in the way fairy tales and feuilleton novels are. This is because our miseries are founded on truths, on physiological truths, on human and sentimental truths. For them, the pains were founded on errors. How happy are the victims of juridical or other errors. They are the only ones for whom revenge and reparations are possible! (my translation)]

The fascination for the 'Romanesque' and its fairy tale structures, however, needs a qualification. It does not at all imply a benign or naïve view of society or history, but rather the contrary. This insight has been incisively formulated by Malcolm Bowie, when he wrote that 'this novelist who places himself inside a subjectivity and on the margins of the political world is able to represent politics as a cruel dreamlike charade' (Bowie 1995: 132).¹⁰

In my comments on the *Recherche*, I follow its fairy tale aspect by retelling the story as if the characters portrayed actually existed and as if the novel gives an account of their history. I do so on purpose. Permitting ourselves to follow the narrative and to interpret it somewhat over-realistically makes it possible to combine theoretical reflection with the immersion into the imaginative aspects of historical experience to which Proust introduces his readers. We lose this when we force our readings to constantly reflect our consciousness of the novel's constructed character and of the 'différences' between theory, history and narrative.

¹⁰ For his exploration of the time structures of sudden change, reification, repetition and its cruelties, Proust was inspired by the narrative structure of the *Arabian Nights*, in which the sultan's compulsively and daily repeated murder of his mistresses can only be ruptured by the stories of Shéhérazade (see Van Leeuwen 2005). I will return to this aspect of cruelty in chapter seven, which traces Proust's rewriting of the fairy tale of the 'Red Shoes' in the context of Swann's experiences at the time of the Dreyfus Affair.