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IN DEFENCE OF LIBERAL ZIONISM

To begin with, there are two observations to be made. First, the reader should be warned that this review of Gabriel Piterberg's *The Returns of Zionism*, a work by a convinced anti-Zionist, has been written by a Zionist who is no less sure of himself.[1] I have done my best to read Piterberg's book with objectivity and an open mind, but if this review had been written by one of the anti-Zionist writers quoted at length by Piterberg, it would clearly have been very different. Secondly, I should make clear that whatever reservations and criticisms I may have, Piterberg's book is one of the most interesting works on Zionism by a militant anti-Zionist that I have read for a long time.

The aim of *The Returns of Zionism* is clear, and Piterberg does not hide it: the total de-legitimization of the Jewish nation-state founded in Palestine. A quarter of a century ago, this idea had a certain novelty; it aroused curiosity, especially as Zionist historiography was characterized by conformism, not to say an antiquated and dusty quality; but since then the anti-Zionists have established their own conformism and become stuck in its mire. At the same time, Israeli historiography has liberated itself from many of its traditional weaknesses, very comparable to those of the French or German historiographies of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, the extreme politicization of anti-Zionist discourse and its considerable exposure in the media have not benefited research. One could say that, like post-modernism, anti-Zionism has aged badly. But if works whose aim is the de-legitimization of the Jewish national movement and the State of Israel are legion, Piterberg's is distinguished by its high intellectual standard and the general culture of the author. This does not mean that he succeeds in avoiding the usual faults of the

genre; but if he does not discover America, his book has sufficient merit to deserve an in-depth critical reading.

War and settlement

With great honesty, the author announces his intentions from the start, and the first sentence of the work gives the flavour of the whole:

> This book is the product of a realization. I grew up in an affluent part of Israel which is strewn with labour Zionist cooperative settlements. The region is called Emeq Hefer. What I came to realize was that underneath Emeq Hefer lay—erased and buried—Wadi Hawarith; and that my joyful and privileged childhood and young adulthood in Emeq Hefer were inextricably intertwined with the destruction of Wadi Hawarith and the removal of its previous inhabitants.

This way of proceeding is not unusual among Israelis, both those who live in the country and those who have decided to leave. There are innumerable young and not-so-young Israelis who have found at a certain point in their lives that the Jewish national rebirth has demanded an exorbitant price from the Arabs. A small number have taken the path adopted by Piterberg: for them, the injustice towards the Palestinians, who have been partly expelled from their country, can never be expiated, except perhaps if the Jews of Israel accepted the extinction of Zionism, gave back the lands confiscated after the War of Independence, reconstructed the 350–400 Arab villages destroyed in the war and agreed to become a minority in an Arab-Palestinian state. According to Piterberg, they are cosmopolitan humanists, worthy descendants of Hannah Arendt, whereas all the Zionists, whether left-wing or right-wing, by definition belong to the colonialist camp. True to his ideas, Piterberg has waged an all-out intellectual war against Zionism, and battles are fought on every page of the work under review.

The thesis of this work is unambiguously stated: Zionism is bad in its nature and principles and not only in its results. Zionism is a colonialism, not a simple radical nationalism: even in its left-wing version, it is a colonialist nationalism. Whites from Europe came to subjugate an indigenous people and, having reduced it to servitude, they finished off the task by 'ethnic cleansing'. The term is, of course—as in the work of Ilan

[1] Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel*, London and New York 2008. Henceforth *RZ*.

Pappé whose influence on Piterberg was determinant—an evocation of Radovan Karadžić's Bosnia. As in a Greek tragedy, the outcome of the drama is known in advance. Piterberg sees 'ethnic cleansing' as integral to Zionism—to the logic of its programme—not, as most Zionists would see it, as a by-product of the long and difficult 1947–49 war launched by the Arab States against the founding of the Jewish State. This war plays only a minor role for Piterberg; but one is led to understand that the same thing would have happened in any case. A reader whose only source of information was *The Returns of Zionism* would never guess that the Jewish community in Palestine lost one per cent of its population in the war. By way of comparison, the Second World War cost the United States about 0.32 per cent of its population, the United Kingdom lost 0.95 per cent, and France (including the Jews deported to the east) 1.35 per cent. The fact that most of the indefensible actions, assassinations and expulsions which sowed panic among the Arab population were local initiatives—as in the most infamous case, Deir Yassin, perpetrated by militants of the radical right-wing fringe, near Jerusalem—does not interest Piterberg. In the same way, he attaches no importance to the fact that there was never a policy of organized expulsion. Most Arabs, especially in the north of the country, did not move, and today Israeli Arabs constitute 20 per cent of the population.

Nor does Piterberg show any awareness of the fact that, if the Palestinians feared the Jews, the Jews feared the Arab armies that invaded Palestine on 15 May 1948. Today it is difficult to imagine that the Syrian army that came down from the Golan Heights was stopped only at the last barbed-wire entanglements of Kibbutz Degania in the Jordan Valley, or that the Arab Liberation Army was defeated at Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek, on the main road between Haifa and Jenin. The road to Jerusalem was cut. The Jordanian Arab Legion conquered the Jewish Quarter of the city, destroyed it and expelled its inhabitants. The Arab Legion also won the battle of Gush Etzion to the south of Jerusalem, and laid waste to its Jewish settlements. The Egyptian army suffered heavy losses, but succeeded in penetrating the Israeli lines of defence as far as today's town of Ashdod, some 35 kilometres from Tel Aviv. This war, in which the fate of the two communities in Palestine, the Jewish and Arab, was played out, resulted in endless brutalities and disasters. But for Piterberg this does not explain anything: according to him, Zionist ideology was from its inception a murderous colonial idea; the project of 'ethnic cleansing' was the inevitable result.

An exploration of 'myths, politics and scholarship', *The Returns of Zionism* has by its own admission neither an overall stated thesis which it proves, nor a straightforward narrative. Instead, a set of inter-related arguments are advanced in successive chapters, which consider the contrasted approaches of Herzl and Lazare; theorizations of 'settler colonialism'; the contributions of Mandate-era Jewish scholars in Jerusalem, notably Scholem; and post-1947 Israeli culture and politics. Before we look at it, however, I must express my disagreement with the author's method. In his introduction, Piterberg declares his non-adherence to 'the conventions of academic writing': his book 'disregards the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" literature and sources', since the themes of his study—'foundational myth, literary imagination or historical consciousness'—are 'constructed abstractions' and hence, in his view, 'it is intellectually untenable to argue that current or past scholarly writing on these themes stands outside them'. He is as good as his word: making a deliberate choice, he has adopted the easy solution, which is to dispense with primary sources. Academic writing has its rules to which one may subscribe or which one may disregard, but I cannot agree with him. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is a fundamental one. History, political science and sociology, the disciplines with which Piterberg is concerned, already have enough inherent weaknesses without deliberately adding a major error that can be easily avoided.

Lessons of the Third Republic

The first chapter is an intellectual and methodological microcosm of the entire book. Piterberg shows how Theodor Herzl, the sovereign settler, was opposed to the conscious pariah Bernard Lazare. For Piterberg this 'bifurcation' is the *Ansatzpunkt* of modern Jewish political thought. Piterberg admires the humanistic and cosmopolitan anti-Zionism of the pariah Lazare, which paved the way for Hannah Arendt.[2] At this parting of ways,

> Lazare cleaved to an anarchist-revolutionary nationalism, which was meant as a foundation for a universal humanist project, whereas Herzl propounded a bourgeois settler's nationalism, intended to create a Jewish state in a territory inhabited by non-white natives.

[2] cf. Bernard Lazare, *Job's Dungheap: Essays on Jewish Nationalism and Social Revolution*, New York 1948. Arendt's essay on 'Herzl and Lazare' can be found in *The Jewish Writings*, New York 2007, pp. 338–42.

But how did the assimilated Jew Herzl become a nationalist—or, according to Piterberg, a colonialist? He was prepared for it, if not predetermined, by his environment and his intellectual affinities. Piterberg argues that Herzl belonged to the school of the great enemies of the liberalism, humanism and cosmopolitanism of his time: the Austrian racial nationalism of Georg von Schönerer and Karl Lueger. Here Piterberg depends on the authority of Carl Schorske in his essay 'An Austrian Trio' in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*.[3] However, Herzl was not a Jewish Schönerer for one basic reason: whereas the Austrian 'gangster, philistine and aristocrat' (Schorske *dixit*) was trying to bury liberalism, Herzl was only drawing conclusions from this pan-European campaign in order to enable the Jews to survive the storm he saw approaching. Schönerer awaited this storm like a deliverance; Herzl feared that the Jews would be its first victims. If he could have saved liberalism, Herzl would have remained what he was: an assimilated liberal Jew who thirty years later would have landed in Dachau or in Auschwitz.

Piterberg insists that the Dreyfus Affair was not the starting-point of Herzlian Zionism. The Jewish captain's fate left scant impression on the Viennese journalist: Herzl mentioned the condemnation of Dreyfus in his articles, but no more than that. This, according to Piterberg, proves that the roots of political Zionism are to be found in radical, racial nationalism and the anti-rationalist mass politics of Lueger and Schönerer; Herzl was nothing else than the Jewish variant of these two Austrians, a product of that pre-Nazi Vienna which was the breeding ground of so many disasters. In short, what this Jewish Lueger–Schönerer founded was a murderous nationalism which, half a century later, culminated in the 'ethnic cleansing' of 1948–49.

In my opinion, Herzl's evolution and the interpretation that should be given to his thought are quite different.[4] The correspondent of a great liberal newspaper, Herzl spent the years 1891–95 in Paris and was immediately confronted with the first major crisis of liberal democracy. Herzl knew what every cultured Jew understood: namely, that the fate of the Jews depended on the fate of the liberal and emancipatory society that had emerged from the French Revolution of 1789. In Paris he was in the capital of the most advanced liberal society in Europe. The Third

[3] *RZ*, pp. 30–2.

[4] The most recent and probably the most interesting intellectual biography is Shlomo Avineri, *Herzl,* Jerusalem 2007.

Republic, despite many justified criticisms, particularly on the part of the labour movement, had nevertheless established a regime that was the envy of the whole continent. There was universal male suffrage, parliamentary government, freedom of the press, liberty of trade-union organization, free education at all levels, from nursery school to post-graduate studies, accompanied by a series of scholarships which allowed particularly gifted poor children to live in secondary boarding-schools at the expense of the state.

However, behind this brilliant façade lurked a profound intellectual and political unease that came to a head at the end of the 1880s. In January 1889 when, in a partial election, the nationalist General Boulanger was triumphantly elected deputy for Paris, it seemed that the regime was about to be swept away in the forthcoming legislative elections. When he arrived in Paris two years later, Herzl knew that although Boulanger had committed suicide, and Boulangism had failed in its intention of destabilizing the regime, a powerful popular current of opinion had enabled a few Boulangists, in alliance with certain elements of the Blanquist extreme left, to sweep seats in the poorer quarters of Paris. A modern 'national and social' party had made its appearance, some of its leaders using a Lueger-type language which Herzl detested, both as a liberal and as a Jew.

Indeed, the Boulangist movement, which reminded Herzl strangely of his experiences in Vienna, marks the birth of political anti-Semitism in France. Some of the important Boulangists—Édouard Drumont, Henri Rochefort, Maurice Barrès and others—waged fierce anti-Semitic campaigns in Paris and the provinces. In 1886, Drumont published *La France juive*, which became a tremendous best-seller, followed in the next six years by four more classics of anti-Semitism. Legions of other publications were hitting the street, including Gustave Le Bon's three best-sellers, published between 1894 and 1898, which were translated into sixteen languages and constitute one of the most influential indictments of the rights of man, liberalism and democracy: *Psychologie des foules, Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* and *Psychologie du socialisme*. In 1892 Drumont founded the great anti-Semitic daily, *La Libre Parole*: its belligerent style and campaigns against parliamentary corruption, particularly at the time of the Panama scandal, made its anti-Semitism appear a form of socialism. Drumont and other anti-Semites of his time were in the tradition of the left-wing anti-Semitism of the Blanquist Gustave Tridon, Alphonse Toussenel and Auguste Chirac; they

were influenced by Ernest Renan, foremost French intellectual and one of the most prominent enemies of democracy, whose *Histoire générale des langues sémitiques* had been published in 1855. His work also displayed a clear anti-Semitic bias. *La Revue socialiste*, for its part, praised Drumont's achievement. Anti-Semitism became, as Barrès said, the 'popular formula' par excellence, permitting all good Frenchmen, of all social classes, to come together in national unity. It thus became a political tool of the greatest importance. The French Right used it up to the end of the Second World War, and with the Vichy racial laws it was flaunted as a way of opposing the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The Left was able to rid itself of anti-Semitism after the Dreyfus Affair and the relative Marxization of French socialism in the early 1900s, but the Right clung to it throughout the 20th century.

A cultured journalist with an enquiring mind, Herzl drew the appropriate conclusions: the liberal order in Western Europe was tottering and emancipation was endangered even in the country where it had been invented. He realized that the rejection of liberal democracy, the appeal to national sentiment in opposition to it, and the manifestations of anti-Semitism were all part of the same phenomenon. This was the great lesson his Parisian experience taught him. Piterberg attaches much importance to the fact that Herzl hardly mentioned the first Dreyfus trial of December 1894, but the fact is that nobody really paid any attention to it apart from the Captain's family and friends. Bernard Lazare believed in his innocence because he had been convinced by the Dreyfus family, but in the public sphere there was no reason at that time to cast doubt on military justice. The Dreyfus case only became the Dreyfus Affair in 1898, when it became clear that the elementary rules of judicial procedure had been violated, and that the defendant had been charged on the basis of a secret dossier, of which he had no knowledge, containing evidence fabricated in army headquarters. That is when Jean Jaurès took it upon himself to convince the Marxist leader, Jules Guesde, to come to the assistance of the bourgeois officer in the name of universal values. Until then, the socialists, when they did not show outright Boulangist sympathies, like Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue (something that Engels complained of bitterly), had kept themselves outside the bourgeois coalition which defended the regime. That is why the Affair, as it developed into a major crisis of liberal democracy, cannot be understood without taking into account the long Boulangist crisis that preceded it and the anti-Semitic agitation throughout the 1890s. This was the atmosphere

that Herzl imbibed during his stay in Paris, when he came to the conclusion that if anti-Semitism could cause a tidal wave of popular feeling in the country that pioneered human rights, where the Jews constituted barely 0.25 per cent of the population, the future of the Jews in the whole of Europe was at stake.

Herzl already had a deep knowledge of German nationalism and anti-Semitism. The publicist Wilhelm Marr, who probably invented the term 'anti-Semitism' in 1879, was followed by Heinrich von Treitschke, Julius Langbehn and Paul de Lagarde. What he did not know was that there was also a French version of *völkisch* nationalism. He considered it self-evident that notions of *Blut und Boden* had profoundly influenced German culture; but that a comparable form of nationalism, codified by Barrès at the time of the Dreyfus Affair as that of *la Terre et les morts*, formed an integral part of French culture was a revelation which was to have a crucial effect on his thought. The discovery that the same phenomenon of rejection of the Jews existed in France, a country whose history was as different as could be from that of the German-speaking countries, cast doubt on all the achievements of the Emancipation, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He concluded that *völkisch* nationalism and its counterpart, anti-Semitism, were general European phenomena. At the same time, like all of Europe, he saw the rise of state anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire, which now clearly sought to rid itself of its Jews: from the 1880s there began a Jewish exodus to the United States, in which millions of people took part until that country closed its gates in the 1920s. Half a century before the Shoah, Europe thus began to vomit up its Jews: bodily in Eastern Europe, ideologically on both sides of the Rhine.

Herzl's utopia

Herzl was not the only person to realize that in a *völkisch* society the Jews, however assimilated, could never find a place; they could survive only in the society of the *ancien régime* or in the liberal, open, post-1789 society of citizens. Nobody would have been happier than Herzl if the definition of the nation given by Diderot and d'Alembert was still applicable—'people who live in a certain territory bounded by certain frontiers and obey the same government.'[5] This enlightened vision of the collectivity, based on a logic which made the *Encyclopédistes* reject anything which smacked

[5] See the entry for 'Nation' in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Lausanne 1781, vol. 44, p. 221.

of unreason, did not survive the first years of the French Revolution. It was swept away by the revolt against the Enlightenment, by Herder's organic vision of the nation and cultural determinism, by Burke's conservative nationalism, and later by the German nationalist revival and the Napoleonic Wars. This conception of the nation represented the heroic attempt of the men of the Enlightenment to overcome the resistances of history and culture, and affirm the autonomy of the individual: at the end of the 19th century it was dead and buried. What emerged from the ruins of the Enlightenment was the idea of a tribal society, tightly grouped around its racial core, its churches and cemeteries, in which the Jews would not only always be a foreign element, but their rights as men would be worth no more than the paper they were written on.

In this context the Herzlian utopia, liberal to the point of naivety—see his *Altneuland*—was no less rational than the socialist blueprint of his time; and it is to his utopia that we owe the fact that, in 1945, 500,000 Jews lived safely in Palestine instead of disappearing in Europe. Contrary to Piterberg's opinion, Herzl did not reject rationalism in politics, and his style of leadership 'with a strong taste for the grand gesture' did not make him into an acolyte of Lueger and Schönerer. (The style of Jaurès, was not very different.) The founder of political Zionism was not a political thinker or a great writer or dramatist. He was an excellent journalist who had an intuition of genius: he understood the danger that hung over the Jews of Europe as soon as the liberal order began to totter, and that anti-Semitism was only one aspect of the great battle against the Enlightenment; and he realized the immediate need to set up a political programme and provide the tools for its implementation. Herzl's sense of urgency was such that he was willing to accept any territorial solution—in Africa, South America or the Sinai Desert, on the borders of Palestine—provided that it would allow the Jews to become an organized community capable of ensuring itself a future.

Arendt, rightly admired by Piterberg, though not always for the right reasons, implicitly recognized Herzl's initial intuition half a century later:

> Not only did loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights; the restoration of human rights, as the recent example of the State of Israel proves, has been achieved so far through the restoration or the establishment of national rights . . . The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.[6]

[6] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* New York 1966, p. 299.

Here Arendt went a step further. According to her, Burke, writing on the 'rights of Englishmen', already feared that the principle of natural and inalienable rights or, in other words, abstract rights, 'the right of the pure savage', would reduce civilized peoples to the state of savages. Because only savages possess nothing except their quality of being human, men cling to their nationality:

> Burke's arguments therefore gain an added significance if we look only at the general human condition of those who have been forced out of all political communities. Regardless of treatment, independent of liberties or oppression, justice or injustice, they have lost all those parts of the world and all those aspects of human existence which are the result of our common labour, the outcome of the human artifice.[7]

A second major event took place in Herzl's lifetime: the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, in which 49 people were murdered at the gates of Europe (Kishinev today is the capital of the Republic of Moldova). In many respects, this event, followed by the disturbances of the years 1904–05 in which 19 more Jews were assassinated in Kishinev, constituted the starting-point of the Second Aliyah, the wave of immigrants who were to found the Jewish labour movement in Palestine and govern the State of Israel until the end of the 1960s. Self-defence groups were set up at that time virtually everywhere: in the section of Poland under Russian rule, in the Ukraine and in White Russia. In one of the self-defence groups in Warsaw formed by young socialist-Zionists there was a certain David Gruen, better known as Ben-Gurion.

A knowledgeable scholar like Piterberg would surely agree that, in Europe where the ground trembled as it never had since 1848, Jewish nationalism was first of all a defensive reflex. This nationalism did not spring fully armed out of Herzl's head, nor was it born with the first Zionist parties. Herzl and his successors in the salons and antechambers of the mighty of the earth—no less than the militant youths who were to leave for the conquest of Palestine—were simply giving, in contact with the other nationalisms of their time and place, a concrete political expression to Jewish identity. As everywhere in Eastern Europe, national identity was a Herderian identity: historical, cultural, linguistic, religious. In all these countries, peoples defined themselves through the same basic characteristics: the language of the people, the church in

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[7] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* p. 300.

which they worshipped, their common past with its former glories, real or mythical. For all of them, and the Jews were no exception, nationality in the sense of citizenship had no significance in the multi-national empires of Russia and Austria–Hungary. Herzl felt that France, representing the emancipated West, resembled Austria far more than Austria could ever resemble France. His stroke of genius was precisely this: he discerned the future direction of 20th-century history.

Settler colonialism?

Here we reach a turning-point. Piterberg attempts to show that Zionism is nothing other than a tribal nationalism of the most rigid, disastrous kind: not a nationalism like, for example, the Czech or Polish nationalisms of Herzl's time or the different kinds of Arab nationalism today; and worse than the nationalism of *Blut und Boden*. It is 'both a Central-Eastern European national movement *and* a movement of European settlers.' In order to situate Zionism in the colonialist tradition, Piterberg places himself within a Marxist 'superstructure', which is perfectly legitimate but nevertheless requires an explanation. Piterberg gives his reasons clearly. Seeing that it is 'problematic to compare the colonization of Palestine with other settler societies in terms of land, labour and certain institutions', he calls for 'the interpretation of ideological, scholarly and literary texts', since 'it can be shown that these texts express typical settler consciousness and imagination.' Hence the 'axis' around which the book revolves is 'the Zionist foundational myth, which has three manifestations: the negation of the exile, the return to the land of Israel and the return to history'. Piterberg goes on: 'This book argues that the myth is inexorably national and settler-colonial, specific and comparable, shaped by European ideational currents and the reality of colonial strife.'[8] The implication is that Jewish nationalism can never evolve; the harm caused by Israel can never be repaired. This idea underlies the whole argument. For Piterberg, there can be no solution except for the end of the Jewish state. Any other nationalism can transform itself, but the only future for 'settler colonialism' must be the total disappearance of the state it produced.

Two comments in response to this. First of all, a colonization that is not comparable to any other colonial society in its social and economic

[8] *RZ*, pp. xii–xiii.

structures cannot be called a colonization. If Mandate-era Jewish Palestine was not based on any of the characteristic features of a colonial society—the exploitation of a native work-force; the confiscation of the natural riches of the country; a monopoly of political power that created two different classes of inhabitants, citizens and others who had no rights—it could not have been a colonial society. The truth was rather the opposite: in order to build a nation, the Jews of Palestine formed themselves into a self-sufficient and closed society. The cult of manual labour and the necessity of creating an infrastructure for the reception of new immigrants helped to prevent the emergence of exploitative relationships.

Second, the question of 'superstructure'. One could very easily set against Piterberg's interpretation of his chosen literary and ideological texts other interpretations and texts that prove precisely the opposite. It is no accident, for example, that Aharon David Gordon, the most important Jewish nationalist ideologist of the 20th century, is ignored here. Gordon, the prophet of the labour movement, was a Herderian nationalist who regarded the nation as a living organism, not a collection of citizens, and was violently anti-Marxist. But he detested every form of exploitation and what he called 'parasitism': that is, living by any other means than through one's own labour. Yitzhak Tabenkin, also a nationalist and anti-Marxist, was one of the founders of the kibbutz movement in the 1920s and of the Greater Israel movement in 1967. Tabenkin favoured conquest, but he loathed colonialism and wanted to live in a communist community. Like many others, he failed to see that the conquest of the West Bank would, for the first time in the history of Zionism, create a colonial situation. These examples could be multiplied at will.

The founders of Israel, the young people who came to Palestine a few years before and after the First World War, never hid their intentions. The aim of Zionism was the conquest of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. Berl Katznelson, the labour-movement ideologist, never thought there could be any doubt about it: 'The Zionist enterprise is an enterprise of conquest', he said in 1929. And in the same breath: 'It is not by chance that I use military terms when speaking of settlement.' In 1922 Ben-Gurion had already said the same: 'We are conquerors of the land facing an iron wall, and we have to break through it.'[9] That is why the Jewish Labour Movement was never a socialist movement like the

[9] Quoted in Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism and the Making of the Jewish State*, Princeton 1998, pp. 151, 21.

others, nor was the Histadrut ever a trade-union organization like the rest. The Labour Movement was mobilized to build the nation; for the sake of national unity it abandoned any real intention of changing society. Equality was not an aim as such. The social services—at that time perhaps the most advanced in the world outside the Soviet Union—were those required by the worker, conceived as a soldier in the great army of conquerors of the land, for a people that needed a home more than any other national community in Europe.

The conquest of the land was thus an existential necessity. Zionism was a stringent nationalism, a radical nationalism; but to claim that the arrivals were white settlers driven by a colonialist mind-set does not correspond to historical reality. The overwhelming majority—the Polish Jews in the 1920s, the German Jews in the 1930s, the displaced persons after the Second World War and the end of the British Mandate—came because they had nowhere else to go. The same applies to the immigrants after 1948, forced out of the Arab countries as a result of the founding of the State of Israel. To speak of a colonialist mentality in their case is absurd. The institutions set up in the inter-war period aimed at ensuring Jewish autonomy in all areas, rather than subjugating the Arabs of Palestine or expelling them. As proof of his theory of colonialism, which is somewhat antiquated and hardly credible outside fiercely anti-Zionist political circles, Piterberg can only offer what he considers to be the 'logic' of an ideology and a movement, to which ethnic cleansing is claimed to be integral.

Piterberg's use of the term 'plantation agriculture' is equally tendentious. The term immediately evokes the Confederacy, or sugar cultivation in the Caribbean. To compare the few villages founded in the final years of the 19th century—the First Aliyah—in which new immigrants, or Jews who had decided to leave the wretchedness of the Jerusalem Orthodox community, tilled the soil with difficulty, to the plantations of the New World, is not historical sociology but illusionism. These Jewish families enjoyed a standard of living often inferior to that of the Palestinian peasants surrounding them, and were only saved from the necessity of abandoning their fields through the intervention of the French Rothschilds. The Arab peasants who worked in these first villages, the *moshavot*, were salaried workers who lived in the neighbourhood. It was the failure of this small-scale private agriculture that led to the founding of the kibbutz and the *moshav*. Collective or semi-collective agriculture was the result of a search

for a solution suited to the needs of the time, and not the consequence of an ideological decision.

Zionist thinkers

Also interesting is the way Piterberg sneers at the poverty of Zionist thought. Every scholar has the right to choose the writers he prefers, but to give the historian and, particularly, biographer Anita Shapira the status of 'the Princess of Zionism' and 'a foremost Zionist Israeli thinker' is somewhat extravagant.[10] One wonders if the choice of Shapira was not made precisely in order to denigrate Zionist thought and scholarship. Professor Shapira belongs to the traditional school of Zionist historiography, which has had its day. Full of weaknesses, the chief of which is its conformism, the work of this school today arouses, if anything, a sense of discomfort. But Shapira never claimed to be a thinker, and that is why she has such an important place in Piterberg's book. If one concentrates on Shapira, one can overlook the social-democratic philosopher Nathan Rotenstreich, who died in 1993, or Jacob Talmon, the liberal historian deceased in 1980, to whom Shapira's generation, which is also mine, owes a great deal. In our time, Piterberg hardly mentions intellectuals such as the historian of ideas Shlomo Avineri, or the jurist Amnon Rubinstein, who, like others, have made a tremendous effort to maintain a balance between the particularistic values of nationalism and the universalistic ideals of classical liberalism. The attempt to formulate a secular Judaism by Yirmiyahu Yovel and Menachem Brinker is of comparable significance for an understanding of Israeli intellectual life. And it is strange that a book which declares itself from the start a study in 'superstructure' should virtually disregard the development of Zionist thought from the end of the 19th century. It is undoubtedly more convenient to pour out one's sarcasm on Shapira than to come to grips with Ber Borochov (1881–1917), whose attempt to create a synthesis of Marxism and nationalism is as significant as that of the Austro-Marxists, if not more so.

The only major exception here is Gershom Scholem, the founder of Kabbala studies and a German Jew *par excellence*, whom Piterberg considers a genius. In his view it was Scholem who gave the Zionist 'foundational myth' its final form as a return to history. Whatever the

[10] *RZ*, pp. 110, 194.

definition of a genius, there is no question about Scholem being a great scholar; but Piterberg's point here is to establish a clear connection between Scholem and Carl Schmitt, through their common use of 'political theology'. Well, German Jews have been as much German as they were Jews, and their Jewish nationalism was nourished by German nationalism. But not all German nationalists were Nazis: Meinecke, following Ranke, was a Bismarckian nationalist; Thomas Mann turned anti-Nazi when he realized the state of degradation to which his nationalism had brought him and his country; but Schmitt was perhaps the most important Nazi thinker. In this way, Piterberg can map out the path from Herzl, the Zionist Lueger–Schönerer, to Scholem, the anti-universalist, Zionist Carl Schmitt.

In Piterberg's discussion of Hebrew literature, the focal point is one of its most interesting and important figures, Izhar Smilansky. Piterberg has great difficulty in deciding whether Smilansky belongs to the Zionist side, or to the already post-, if not anti-Zionist, camp. If Smilansky is portrayed as a relatively acceptable Israeli, it is because in his 1949 novella, *Khirbet Khizeh*, he portrayed the expulsion of Arabs and the destruction of their villages in the War of Independence. It is 'ethnic cleansing' immortalized in a classical work of Israeli literature; for Piterberg, something beyond price. But Smilansky was also in 1958 the author of *Yimei Tziklag*, a magnificent novel that bequeathed to posterity the other side of the picture: the epic of the War of Independence. He also wrote 'Midnight Convoy', about the final convoy which broke through the Egyptian lines to supply the *kibbutzim* of the Negev, symbol of the victory that ensured the creation of the State of Israel. For the Israelis, Smilansky's work represents both aspects of the reality: on the one hand, the barbarism of the war and the endless calamities it generated; and on the other, the heroism it gave rise to, which in turn enabled the establishment of the Jewish State. Similarly, from the beginning the two peoples were, and still are, within their rights. The Jews had, and still have, the right to a patch of soil of their own. The Palestinians had the right to resist, and still have the right to freedom, independence and compensation.

There is no extended discussion here of Haim Yosef Brenner, arguably the greatest Hebrew writer of all time and Zionist *par excellence*, assassinated near Tel Aviv in 1921. Brenner does not interest Piterberg because he died a quarter of a century before the war of 1947–49. Again, one may like or dislike Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, 'the two high priests

of current Hebrew Literature'.[11] But to make Oz the living symbol of the 'transformation of a colony of settlers into a settler nation-state' is quite another thing.[12] Yehoshua and Oz are two very different writers, but they have their Zionism in common, which for Piterberg is enough to place them in the same inferior category. Yitzhak Laor, a great poet, is accepted because of his post-Zionism which Piterberg sees as the first in a flight of steps leading to anti-Zionism. David Grossmann, a marvellous writer, is one of the harshest critics of the occupation of the West Bank and of the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. As a Zionist, he holds no interest for Piterberg, despite the fact that he mentions his *Yellow Wind* and *Sleeping on a Wire*.[13] On the other hand, young Oz Shelach, grandson of the poet Yonatan Ratosh, who has left Israel and stopped writing in Hebrew, is a beginner who has yet to prove himself. But he is treated as a giant, the symbol of the future that Piterberg grants the Zionists. For Shelach, the Hebrew language 'has a built-in ideology that I am not comfortable with'.[14]

Like Piterberg, Shelach considers himself a purist. He will live in the suburbs of Los Angeles and write in English, while the Zionists who for forty years have militated in favour of ending the occupation, granting the national rights of the Palestinians, and the creation of a Palestinian State next to Israel in its June 1967 borders, deserve nothing but scorn. They are the ones who 'shoot and cry'. Piterberg ridicules the whole Israeli peace camp, all those who think that the conquest of the land up to 1949 was a necessity, and therefore just, while the colonization after 1967 created a colonialist situation that has to be urgently ended by a retreat from the occupied territories. He holds that Israel can only obliterate the original sin of its birth by disappearing. *The Returns of Zionism* does not claim to preach to readers outside the circle of the converted. It is an intelligent, learned and skilful polemic by a well-equipped academic, but, all things considered, it is a polemic that Gabriel Piterberg has given us, and it is as a polemic that his work will be read.

[11] *RZ*, p. 99. [12] *RZ*, p. 228. [13] *RZ*, p. 228.
[14] *RZ*, p. 194.