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The Resort to *Geistpolitik*:

Two of Buber's Early Theological-Political Debates

Cedric Cohen-Skalli

P R E C I S

This essay aims to shed new light on major features of the early Zionist construction of a Jewish political space. Revisiting two early debates of Martin Buber (1878–1965) with Max Nordau (1849–1923) and Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), the essay points at the limitation of the Zionist political construction for a later articulation of the Jewish and Palestinian complexity in a shared or divided land. Theodor Herzl's understanding of Zionism as a strictly political and economic apparatus was brought to a historical and ideological debate at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901 between the young Buber and the faithful associate of Herzl, Nordau. Against Nordau's prioritization of the productivization of Jews, Buber developed in his famous speech on "Jewish Art" the necessity of a cultural and spiritual elevation of Jews. In 1916, in the middle of World War I, Buber's cultural notion of Jewish national regeneration in Eretz Israel set the backdrop for another debate and clash, this time with the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen.



Against *Phantasterei*: The Machine of the *Judenstaat*, 1896

In the preface to his 1896 *Judenstaat*, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) defended his manifest against accusations of utopianism, presenting himself as an engineer making use of “a driving force already at work in reality”:

An interesting book, *Freiland*, by Dr. Theodor Hertzka, which appeared a few years ago, may serve to mark the distinction I draw between my

conception and a Utopia. His is the ingenious invention [*eine sinnreiche Phantasterei*] of a modern mind thoroughly schooled in the principles of political economy, it is as remote from actuality as the Equatorial mountain on which his dream State lies. *Freiland* is a complicated piece of mechanism with numerous clogged wheels fitting into each other; but there is nothing to prove that they can be set in motion. Even supposing “*Freiland* societies” were to come into existence, I should look on the whole thing as a joke.

The present scheme, on the other hand, includes the employment of an existent propelling force [*Treibkraft*]. In consideration of my own inadequacy, I shall content myself with indicating the cogs and wheels of the machine to be constructed, and I shall rely on more skilled [mechanics] than myself to put them together.¹

Herzl distinguished between the *Phantasterei*, the fantasy of the utopian mind or spirit, whose major flaw is its complexity and practical unviability, and the technological minimalist rationality of his project, which is not defined as a personal creation but as a first prototype open to improvements by “more skilled mechanics than” himself. Following this sharp contrast between the failed utopian spirit and the technological solution, Herzl defined the existing force he intended to use as such:

Everything depends on our propelling force. And what is that force? The misery of the Jews [*Die Judennot*]. Who would venture to deny its existence? [*Wer wagt zu leugnen, daß diese Kraft vorhanden sei?*] We shall discuss it fully in the chapter on the causes of Anti-Semitism. Everybody is familiar with the phenomenon of steam-power, generated by boiling water, which lifts the kettle-lid. Such tea-kettle phenomena are the attempts of Zionist and kindred associations to check Anti-Semitism. I believe that this power, if rightly employed [*diese Kraft, richtig verwendet*], is powerful enough to propel a large engine and to move passengers and goods: the engine having whatever form [people] may choose to give it.²

Herzl compared his *Judenstaat* to a nineteenth-century machine capable of transforming the *Judennot*, the modern distress of the Jews, into a

¹ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, tr. Sylvie D'Avigdor (London: R. Searl, 1936), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*

political and economic driving force. The novelty of Herzl's attitude toward the *Judennot* is his shift from "Abwehr" to "Verwendung," from defense to utilization. The outcome of this mobilization and rationalization of Jewish misery is the construction of an apparatus. This machine, which is always open to a better-engineered design, shall impose on the Jews' present chaotic attempts, financial and otherwise, to cope with the *Judennot*, a new, ordered movement: Jewish immigration to Palestine and the constitution of a modern national economy. The machine or apparatus envisioned by Herzl is further described as follows:

The plan, simple in design, but complicated in execution, will be carried out by two agencies [*zwei große Organe*]: The Society of Jews and the Jewish Company.

The Society of Jews will do the preparatory work in the domains of science and politics, which the Jewish Company will afterwards apply practically.

The Jewish Company will be the liquidating agent of the business interests of departing Jews [*die Liquidierung aller Vermögensinteressen der abziehenden Juden*], and will organize commerce and trade in the new country.³

The machine is clearly divided into two functions: first, a new political organization of Jews, and, second, a business undertaking. The machine is designed to articulate the politicization of the Jewish Diaspora with a new rational *Judenwanderung* from Europe to Palestine, an articulation made strictly according to economic and political principles—and, of course, in opposition to the *Phantasterei* of the utopian spirit.

In his opening speech at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901, Herzl congratulated the Zionists for having already succeeded in building the machine that would bring about the Jewish State:

We, delegates of the Congress, have accomplished our first task. We have been like mechanics [*Mechaniker*], who had to install a power station. We have constructed the machines, which can transform force into electricity. We also laid the transmission cables in places often previously inaccessible. Thus, we have brought to completion our humble work. The heart of our

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

power station was this Congress, this representative assembly of all those who are scattered throughout the world, a Jewish tribune.⁴

Herzl compared the spread of Zionist cells in the Jewish Diaspora to power stations and electrical networks built in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to Herzl, within a few years, Zionist activism had succeeded in transforming the old networks of the Jewish Diaspora into a modern political association, which, with the connections of the Zionist Congress and its different geographical branches, prefigured the future State of the Jews. Aided by the metaphors of power stations and electrical networks, Herzl indicated that, by spreading Zionism to the entire Jewish Diaspora, conditions had been created to transform the natural force of modern Jewish misery into “electricity,” that is, into a productive energy and a political manifestation, the Jewish State, which would be the focus of the growing admiration of Jews and Christians alike. Did not Herzl famously write so in his *Judenstaat*? “Now, I am of the opinion that electric light was not invented for the purpose of illuminating the drawing-rooms of a few snobs, but rather to solve under its light some of the problems of humanity [*bei seinem Scheine die Fragen der Menschheit lösen*].”⁵

Physical or Intellectual Elevation of the Jews: The Debate between Max Nordau and Martin Buber at the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901

Following the above description of Herzl’s understanding of Zionism as a strictly political and economic apparatus, we can turn now to the historical and ideological debate that took place in December, 1901, at the Fifth Zionist Congress between the young Martin Buber (1878–1965) and the faithful associate of Herzl, Max Nordau (1849–1923).⁶ This debate will provide us with a first example of what I term the “resort to *Geistpolitik*.”

⁴ *Stenographisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des V. Zionsisten-Congresses in Basel*, 26., 27., 28., 29. und 30. Dezember. 1901 (Vienna: Verlag des Vereines “Erez Israel,” 1901), p. 7; my translation.

⁵ Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 14.

⁶ On the historical and biographical context of the debate, see Dominique Bourel, *Martin Buber, Sentinelle de l’Humanité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015), pp. 41–117; see also Gilya Gerda

The second day of the Fifth Zionist Congress, December 27, was devoted to questions of “the physical, spiritual, and economic elevation of Jews” [*Fragen der körperlichen, geistigen und wirtschaftlichen Hebung der Juden*].⁷ This day of discussion was a concession made by Herzl to a group of Zionists associated with Buber and Chaim Weizmann, who were fighting for the inclusion of spiritual and cultural dimensions in Herzl’s narrowly defined political Zionism, as seen above. Herzl agreed to this concession, but he ensured that his closest associate, Max Nordau, opened the day of discussions.⁸ The second day was thus organized as follows: In the morning, Nordau spoke in defense of prioritizing a physical and economic elevation of the Jews.⁹ In the afternoon, Buber tried to convince the Zionist Congress, and especially its leaders, of the need for a cultural, artistic, and spiritual elevation of Jews; he intended to achieve this goal with a speech on Jewish art. Body and soul or spirit, political Zionism and cultural or spiritual Zionism—these were the two poles of the debate that day.¹⁰

By sending his closest associate to speak first, Herzl intended to deliver a clear message to Buber’s and Weizmann’s faction. This is the message with which Nordau concluded his speech:

As for the question of spiritual elevation [*die Frage der geistigen Hebung*], I do not even want to dwell on it. All that has been said on the subject is empty and vain speech, as long as the precondition for a serious and complete education of the people, namely money, is lacking. Naturally, if we had the resources of the Jewish community and the capital of the Jewish foundations, which today are dilapidated or even used against the interests of the Jewish people, we could already create brilliant educational institutions . . . But I do not want to waste my time with “when” and “if” fantasies [*Mit Phantasien über “wenn” und “falls” will ich aber keine Zeit verlieren*].¹¹

For Nordau, as well as for Herzl, forcing the Zionist movement to invest in the cultural and spiritual sphere was both a historical mistake and a

Schmidt, *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

⁷ See *Stenographisches Protokoll*, pp. 99–171.

⁸ See Bourel, *Martin Buber*, pp. 74–77.

⁹ See *Stenographisches Protokoll*, pp. 99–115.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 151–169.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114; my translation.

danger. The Zionist movement had first to transform the body of the Jews and their skills. Indeed, Nordau's entire intervention, which was based on the results of a statistical study of the current economic conditions of the Jews, led him to deduce the following famous thesis:

We are a people of *Luftmenschen* and educated proletarians [*Bildungsproletariat*]. We live from hazards and miracles. We have no reserves for tomorrow nor capital for today . . . We are the slaves of the host peoples for whom we are forced to work, since we are not able to satisfy our needs on our own. We are tolerated only under the condition that we are willing to consent to the labor of a slave, who is remunerated much under his value.¹²

In the eyes of Nordau, the Jewish people could only come out of their poverty and sordid physical state if they ceased to be dependent and, rather, acted as independent and rational economic actors in their own national land. But, to reach this Zionist goal, the Zionist movement would need to transform and expand, while already living in the Diaspora, the bodies and the working abilities of the Jewish population. This transformation would have to happen through physical work that would equip them to become productive economic and political actors in the future state of the Jews. Nordau thus opened the day of discussion of the physical, spiritual, and economic elevation of the Jews with a harsh suspicion and rejection of their "spiritual" elevation, in order to increase and improve the efficacy of the Zionist machine.

In the afternoon, Buber countered Nordau's prioritization of Jewish productivity over spiritual considerations. This is the way he began his speech:

Honored delegates, today Dr. Max Nordau spoke to you on the question of cultural amelioration of the Jewish people in a way that made a most painful impression on my friends and me. And may I point out that my friends and I represent a good portion of the young generation of Zionists . . . Dr. Max Nordau declared that it is irresponsible and dreamy [*Leichtfertigkeit und Phantasterei*] to debate the issue of spiritual amelioration here . . . Are we then not like human beings who see nerves and muscles, bones and veins in a human organism but do not recognize the soul?¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 107; my translation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 151; translation in Gilya Gerda Schmidt, *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist Writings of Martin Buber* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), pp. 46–47.

The extremely “painful impression” made by Nordau’s speech upon Buber and his friends came from Nordau’s resistance to include any spiritual dimension in his projection of the new Zionist apparatus. In their view, the purpose of Zionism was to transform Jews from being repulsive *Luftmenschen* into becoming productive economic agents who could eventually oversee an immigration process that would lead to the progressive construction of the State of the Jews.

Following this harsh response to Nordau, Buber advanced arguments in favor of a cultural, artistic, and spiritual elevation of Jews in his famous speech, “Jewish Art.” I would like to classify this as a resort to *Geist* and *Geistpolitik*. By this term, I mean a response to a technopolitical threat to Jewish identity and flourishing by recourse to a transcendental dimension, namely, the spiritual component of Jewish existence. In this innovative text of cultural Zionism, Buber unfolded the idea of a common redemption of Jews and *Eretz Israel* through the resettling of Jews in their natural environment, as well as by the renewed artistic connection between the soul of the Jews and the beauty of the Land of Israel:

For thousands of years, we were a barren people. We shared the fate of our land. A fine, horrible desert sand blew and blew over us until our sources were buried and our soil was covered with a heavy layer that killed all young buds. The excess in soul power that we possessed expressed itself in exile merely in an indescribably one-sided spiritual activity that blinded the eyes to all the beauty of nature and of life . . . We were robbed of that from which every people takes again and again joyous, fresh energy—the ability to behold a beautiful landscape and a beautiful people . . . The very thing in which the true essence of nation expresses itself to the fullest and purest, the sacred word of the national soul, the artistic productivity, was lost to us.¹⁴

For Buber, only the return of Jews to their land could create the condition for their spiritual and artistic adaptation to their environment—an adaptation that was impeded in exile, resulting in Jewish cultural degeneration. *Eretz Israel* then becomes the necessary natural space in which Jews could regain their national and aesthetic articulation with nature, creating the possibility for a spiritual regeneration of Jews. Yet, if *Eretz Israel* were

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153; translation in Schmidt, *The First Buber*, p. 48.

defined at this early stage of Buber's career as the exclusive space in which Jews could regain their body and their totality, then spirit is not only the outcome of the Zionist return to Palestine but also its most necessary preparation and anticipation, in sharp contrast with Nordau's vision. In the face of the restrictive nature of the Herzlian Zionist machine, Buber resorted to a neo-romantic concept of *Geist*, understood as an essential bond between soul and nature, which alone could realize the urge of the spirit to externalize itself and then to reappropriate its own projection through works of art and aesthetic experience.¹⁵

**“Religion und Zionismus”—“Begriff und Wirklichkeit”:
The 1916 Debate between Buber and Cohen during World War I**

Buber's notion of spiritual regeneration in *Eretz Israel* reappears in the context of another political debate, this time with the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918). In his article “Religion und Zionismus,” published in 1916 during the First World War, Cohen violently attacked Zionist war politics, which, for him, dangerously instrumentalized the “increase of national feeling” and the growing Antisemitism in the Reich:

. . . instead of the reserve lieutenant, steps in what is now the great sensitivity for the national difference, whose mitigation is considered impossible. And the faithful Jew, who wishes to remain with his children in his German fatherland, who believes with all his religious and patriotic soul in the historical idealism and optimism, who hopes for the improvement of the political and moral norms in accordance with the principles of modern culture, freedom of conscience and mutual respect of religious confessions, and who therefore loves his fatherland as much as his religion—since faithfulness is the unity of his being [*Treue bildet die Einheit des Wesens*]¹⁶—this dreamer is mocked and despised by Zionism.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a discussion of Buber's early understanding of Jewish art, see Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 99–126.

¹⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Kleinere Schriften VI*, ed. and tr. Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002), p. 213; my translation. Also see Hartwig Wiedebach, *The National Element in Hermann Cohen's Philosophy and Religion*, tr. William Templer (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012); and Frederick C. Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 300–349.

Criticizing how Zionists identify “religion and ethnicity [*Nationalität*],” Cohen continued:

the exponents of Zionism have made clear more than enough (and their literature is full of this provocative cynicism) that the pantheistic outlook is superior to the religion of the transcendent God. Nevertheless, the Jewish race bears in its own vitality the mark of holiness in itself. Such a life force represents a mystical moment—and what is religion if not mysticism?

If Zionism equates religion with ethnicity, we are then justified in claiming that we, non-Zionists, do not consider religion as disconnected from ethnicity. We just do not consider them identical: we make of ethnicity the anthropological instrument for the reproduction of religion.¹⁷

While acknowledging a limited, but essential, role to family and ethnicity, Cohen accused the Zionist project of “a Jewish home in Palestine,” of creating a new political tension within Jewish modern existence:

I cannot acknowledge a true political reason for Zionism. On the contrary, I must see in it an offense to the patriotic feeling of those who, according to their conscience and heart, view their country as a fatherland. The ambiguity of the Zionist solution makes the whole of Zionism into a sheer and incomprehensible untruthfulness.

Truthfulness is indeed the human foundation of religiosity. Jewish wisdom makes, even for God, truth the seal of divinity. When truthfulness [*Wahrhaftigkeit*] is injured by the political fundamental determination [of Zionism], religiosity remains bereaved of orientation.¹⁸

By introducing the possibility of a Jewish national home in Palestine to the political horizon of European Jews, Zionism severely interfered with the process of Jewish identification with their European states. As a result, Zionism produced a tension and a duality which, for Cohen, was ruining the very possibility of a true articulation of Judaism and modern European states or empires, this articulation being the only Jewish access to modern truth, according to Cohen. Following his line of thought—or, rather, his fear—Judaism should be understood as a historical and teleological harmonization of ethnicity, religion, modern states, and the future states-federation aiming

¹⁷ Cohen, *Kleinere Schriften VI*, p. 214; my translation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216; my translation.

at the universal harmony between the unique God and messianic humanity. Such harmonization would be possible only through the progressive idealization of the Jewish and German spirit in their collaboration within the German Reich, within science and culture.¹⁹

According to Cohen, this common ideal perspective is ruined by Zionism:

... the religious dividing wall between our messianic Judaism and Zionism [*Scheidewand zwischen unserm messianischen Judentum und dem Zionismus*]
 ... Even if one tries to find a mediation, an equalization between the two, one must at least be careful not to distort the messianic idea of God. Without hope of messianic humanity, there is no Judaism for us. He who reserves Judaism in its fundamental doctrine to the Jewish people is denying the unique God of the messianic humanity. We acknowledge only the chosenness of Israel understood as a historical mediation driving toward the divine election of humanity.²⁰

Geist, spirit, is defined not only by its ideality and its role in ethical, political, scientific, and religious idealization but, first and foremost, by its projection into the future and by its universal or imperial extension.

Opposing Cohen's articulation of ethnicity, religion, and state toward a messianic ideality and, above all, toward the assimilation of Jews within the German Reich, Buber once again unfolded his new concept of Jewish ethnicity and Jewish spirit in his 1916 article, "Begriff und Wirklichkeit," resorting for a second time to *Geistpolitik* against the state:

No, esteemed professor [Hermann Cohen], nationality cannot be defined through the concept of fact of nature. Nationality is a historical reality and a moral task . . . Nationality is a reality of spirit and ethos in a twofold sense: a reality of spirit and ethos in history which, since it does not serve its Idea as an anthropological instrument for its reproduction, but as the body and a human bearer of this Idea, which always seizes anew this Idea and transforms it, thousand times changing it and conserving it pure in all these features, losing it and himself and recovering it and himself in a sacred outburst of energy, reaching this Idea again and giving it a new

¹⁹ A famous formulation of these ideas is to be found in the essay, "Deutschtum und Judentum"; see Cohen, *Kleinere Schriften V, 1913–1915*, ed. and tr. Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), pp. 465–560.

²⁰ Cohen, *Kleinere Schriften VI*, p. 217; my translation.

birth—this is the meaning of ethnicity. Moreover, all this is transplanted into our personal lives, in each of us, in my life, as destiny and a task to accomplish.²¹

For Buber, the dynamic and historic relation of the Jewish people to their carnality, environment, and fate should replace Cohen's concept of ethnicity as "an instrument for the reproduction of religion," as well as Cohen's conception of religion as a means for political assimilation of Jews within modern Western states. Yet, by developing a pantheistic equation of ethnicity, land, religion, and spirit, Buber actually removed from his new concept of Israel and Jewish spirit all possible political articulation with other ethnicities—revealing a fatal lacuna in political as well as cultural Zionism.

Conclusion

We have seen two historical debates in which Buber resorted to *Geistpolitik*, the first time against the constructivist engineering of the Jewish State, and the second time against the spiritual and idealist justification of Jewish messianic assimilation within the German Reich during World War I. In both cases, Buber's *Geistpolitik* was a retreat full of anxiety before the two faces of modern states: the Machine and the Abstraction. Yet, Buber's retreat toward an ethos of realization and intensification of life in the natural-divine environment of the Land of Israel tended toward a more immanent form of communal life, both missing a political articulation with other ethnicities and challenging political institutions from within. It bore in germ many dangers of Israeli politics today.²² Israel, understood as the outcome of a constructivist engineering of modern Jewish distress or as the natural-divine environment in which Jewish ethos could blossom, is missing a political articulation with Palestine, the name for the other history and possibility for this land.

²¹ In Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum*, with a translation by Robert Weltsch (Cologne: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1963), pp. 283–284; my translation.

²² After World War I, Buber developed a more nuanced and critical approach to Jewish nationalism in his 1921 speech, "Nationalismus." See Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum*, pp. 309–319.

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