In modern America, the Jewish Question is an anachronism. Thankfully, Jews in the United States are not an oppressed minority whose future in the country is contested by the American intelligentsia. However, in 1840s Germany, the Jewish Question captured the attention of two prominent thinkers: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx. Bauer proposed the “political emancipation” of Jews in Germany, which first required Jews to distance themselves from their religion and to seek to incorporate themselves into an atheistic, secular state. Marx used his response to Bauer as an opportunity to create a distinction between “civil society,” or the realm of private life, and “political society,” or the realm of public life. Having done so, Marx used anti-Semitic rhetoric to link Judaism to egoism and “huckstering” in an effort to show that Judaism strengthened “civil society” at the expense of “political society.” Marx therefore concluded that Judaism was inherently antithetical to the communist project of economic liberation from capitalism.

Bauer initiated the two thinkers’ philosophical discourse by arguing against Jewish demands for political equality as it was currently being presented. Bauer began by arguing that the secular state was the source of all political discrimination. Like Marx, Bauer was a social revolutionary who believed that the emancipation of all people required the complete transformation of society. In this new society, Bauer believed, all people would exist as liberated equals. It is in this context that Bauer responds to Jewish demands for political equality. He argues that, by demanding equality as Jews, the Jews in Europe are in fact seeking to preserve sectarian conflict between themselves and Christians. They can be liberated only as individuals and not as Jews, because to specifically liberate one group of religious adherents only preserves sectarianism and works against the establishment of a free and human state. Bauer pointed out that the Jews could only be demanding equality from two groups of people: if they were asking free and liberated people for equality, they should first prepare themselves for their own liberation by abandoning their religious beliefs; and if they were asking Christians for their liberation, they were asking Christians to first put aside their religious prejudices and therefore to cease being authentically Christian. In either case, it was necessary for Jews to cease being religiously Jewish—if they were appealing to Christians, how could they ask one group to put aside religious prejudices without putting aside their own, and if they were appealing to free and liberated people, who had overcome the need for religion at all, how could they insist on clinging to their own religious sentiments?

Bauer therefore argued that the Jewish Question could only be solved if Jews abandoned the religious aspects of their identity and joined in the effort to secure the liberation of all peoples. He identified many forms of oppression with the relationship between Christianity and the state, and argued that true “political emancipation,”
not just for Jews but for all people, could only be brought about through the complete secularization of the state.

In his essay “On the Jewish Question”, Marx responds to Bauer’s prescriptions while putting forth some of his core philosophical tenets. Marx uses this essay primarily to draw a distinction between “political society” and “civil society,” a distinction which he uses to criticize Bauer’s ideals of “political emancipation.” In making this argument, Marx fleshes out Industrial-era anti-Semitic stereotypes in an attempt to grapple with his society’s underlying issues. Because his argument is so deeply based on anti-Semitic conceptions of Judaism, specifically an association of Judaism with egoism and “huckstering,” Marx’s assessment of the “Jewish Question” is not applicable to other minority groups or marginalized religious identities.

According to Marx, egoism lies at the core of “civil society.” Firstly, Marx separates society into “political society” and “civil society.” He defines “political society” as a shared sphere where man “regards himself as a communal being.” Marx separates this from civil society, or essentially the private sphere, where man is “in his most intimate society.” Marx argues that modern liberal states have moved man from the “political” into the “civil” sphere. At the core of this transformation is the liberal, right-enshrining constitutional law, which Marx argues is the foundation for egoism. Marx states that because man is considered a “sovereign being, not species-being,” society has been atomized into a jumble of millions of individual entities: “Liberty, as a right of man, is the separation of man from man.” The logical result of this is competition, self-interest and, in the end, egoism. Marx goes so far as to say that “The rights of man are simply the rights of the egoistic man,” because when laws separate humans from each other and make them focus on their individual rights and needs, they naturally breed egoism. Egoism is so ingrained in civil society that simply “the security of the state is the assurance of its egoism.”

The most glaring and egregious example of this is the relegation of religion from its privileged position as a tool of state power into a “strictly private affair.”

However, Marx does not hold, as Bauer does, that separating religion from the state apparatus has the effect of weakening religious practice. In fact, privatized religion has only strengthened man’s “real religiosity.” Neither Bauer nor Marx believed that religion could be a part of the final liberation of mankind; nonetheless, Marx disagreed that the separation of religion from the state was an appropriate prerequisite to the liberation of mankind more generally.

Marx instead believed that the historical separation of religion from the public sphere had forced people to practice their religions within the privacy of “civil society,” thus intensifying religious practice while weakening the bonds between people in “political society.” Even religion, a fundamentally communal exercise, is reduced to the private and perverted by egoism in liberal civil society.

Marx viewed Jews with suspicion because he associated them extremely heavily with egoism. He discerns in Judaism “a universal anti-social element of the present time, whose historical development, zealously aided in its harmful aspects by the Jews, has now attained its culminating point.” Marx stresses that Judaism’s “anti-social element” has its origins in its historical development, and that its egoism has ascended to a dominating status in modern liberal constitutional states: Judaism “reaches its apogee with the perfection of civil society.” Marx further associates the egoistic character of Judaism with its reliance on legal codes and law, which, like the enshrinement of constitutional rights, has the effect of isolating individuals further into “civil society.” Marx states that “Jewish Jesuitism [...] is the relationship of the world of self-interest to the laws which govern this world.” Judaism’s reliance on the law, in the form of the Torah and the Talmud, its foundational texts, show how egoism, derived from law-sanctioned narcissism, is unique to Judaism’s theological foundations. Meanwhile,
Marx theorizes that Judaism’s “civil” character emerged during the feudal era, when “all elements of civil life such as property, the family, and types of occupation had been raised, in the form of lordship, caste and guilds, to elements of political life”. Because Jews were a separate and downcast minority, they were excluded from the then-“political” society, and were forced to adapt in “civil society”. There, Jews took on the characteristics of all men who enter in civil society: “self-interest, greed and egoism”. Due therefore both to its legal character and its development during the feudal age, Marx associated Judaism directly with egoism.

It is important to note that, for Marx, even after liberal states guarantee freedom of religion, the dominant religion (which, in the case of the West, is Christianity) actually grows in strength. Marx states that “The perfected Christian state calls itself atheist”; in America, the “state continues to evangelize” as those who are not Christian are increasingly marginalized, and religion takes on a more aggressive, capitalistic manner. For Marx, this type of Christian-dominated liberal state gives rise to “civil society.” Marx states that “only under the sway of Christianity, which objectifies all national, natural, moral and theoretical relationships, could civil society separate itself completely from the life of the state”. Here, Marx shows how Christian values are necessary to creating a “civil society”.

The fact that a Christian state supposedly most effectively establishes Marx’s detested “civil society” as the foundation for all human interaction only serves to heighten Marx’s distress regarding the Jewish question. Because Judaism is so historically interconnected with Christianity, Marx believed that Jews had an undue influence on society. Marx states that “Judaism has existed alongside Christianity because it constituted the religious criticism of Christianity and embodied the doubt concerning the religious origins of Christianity”, and that “Judaism has perpetuated itself in Christian society”. Because only Christian values can create the modern liberal state and Christianity has its origins in Judaism, Judaism can easily re-integrate itself into society and spread its egoistic “civil” and “legal” nature. Thus, not only is Judaism a highly egoistic religion with an innate drive towards the propagations of “civil society,” but Jews also hold an undue sway over society due to their historical association with Christians.

Huckstering is another crucial element to Marx’s critique of “civil society.” For Marx, ownership of property is a key element of civil society’s obsession with money. Marx says that even if property is suppressed, “the state none the less allows private property [...] to act in its own fashion [...] to manifest their particular nature”. Clearly, private property is both established and cherished in the liberal constitutionalist state. Furthermore, because liberty enables men to “enjoy and dispose as one will, one’s goods and revenues, the fruits of one’s work and industry,” people are “equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad”. This societal atomization engenders egoism (as explained above), which, with property, makes people focus entirely on their own goods. This in turn causes men to fetishize their private belongings. Marx makes clear the fact that the obsession with which people aggressively pursue the acquisition of property is enshrined in liberal laws. The “consummation” of this state results in the elevation of money or the way that the value of property is measured, to the status of a “world power”. What emerges is huckstering, or the relentless pursuit of money, as a key characteristic of liberal society.

The example of “Captain Hamilton” (a reference to Thomas Hamilton) is telling: according to Marx, “in his view, the world is no more than a Stock Exchange, and he is convinced that he has no other destiny here below than to become richer than his neighbor.” Marx also argues that “in North America [...] Christian preaching has become an article of commerce, and the bankrupt trader in the church behaves like the
prosperous clergyman in business.” Even religion has been commercialized in American liberal society, as the relegation of faith to “civil society” results in its tainting by the forces of huckstering and greed. Monetization of all facets of “civil society”, along with the freedom to covet property, is the incarnation of huckstering, the driving force of capitalism.

Marx ties Judaism to huckstering on explicitly anti-Semitic grounds. He plainly states: “What is the profane basis of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly god? Money.” Marx states that Money is “the expression of Jewish self-interest and egoism”; the egoism inherent in Judaism logically results in huckstering. Furthermore, the Jewish obsession with money underscores Marx’s criticism of modern civil Christian society because (as previously discussed), Judaism is both the predecessor and successor to Christianity. Just as Judaism was imbued with egoism and huckstering during the feudal era, Jewish property-worship has re-integrated itself into Christian society and is in fact the root cause of “civil society’s” problems. Marx labels capitalist North America as an expression of “the effective domination of the Christian world by Judaism”; he states that “Christianity issued from Judaism. It has now been re-absorbed into Judaism.” Since its integration into the Christian liberal state, Jewish huckstering is therefore not only unique to Judaism as a religion but also central to the idolization of property in modern “civil society.”

Marx is clearly going further than Bauer: he suggests not only the abolition of religion (as Bauer does) but also the abolition of civil society’s drive towards profit, or, as we see it today, modern consumer capitalism. Marx’s extension of Bauer’s prescription shows his antipathy to the modern system of economic incentives (which some anti-Semites blamed on Jewish bankers). Marx’s response to the “Jewish Question” demonstrates his deeply anti-capitalistic tendencies, and for that reason should be considered alongside his greater works such as Das Kapital and the Communist Manifesto. However, it is also based on explicitly anti-Semitic thinking, which links Judaism with egoism and “huckstering” as Christianity’s “evil twin.” Both Bauer and Marx disdained the role of religion in society, but Marx did not believe as Bauer did that religion could easily be removed from society in order to pave the way for the economic liberation of all people; for this reason, Marx viewed those Jews seeking political equality with far more skepticism than did Bauer. While Bauer’s proposal to remove all vestiges of religion from society is radical, Marx’s proposal to overturn the current civil and economic order is world-beating, and lies at the core of his other arguments concerning political theory.

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