

Goldschmidt and Yiddish Anarchism

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ABSTRACT: While Hermann Levin Goldschmidt didn't read Yiddish anarchists, there seems to have been a convergent evolution in their thinking. Goldschmidt's looking up to Jewish lore as a source of liberating creativity is commonly encountered in Yiddish anarchist texts. His view of action as a constant response to internal and external challenges in the struggle for an open future is developed by Isaac Nachman Steinberg on the basis of nineteenth-century vitalism. Goldschmidt's theory of anarchist individualism as willed self-limiting solidarity has a compelling parallel in Hillel Solotaroff's view of history. His use of impressionism and photography to eternalize the immediacy of human actuality is akin to Rudolf Rocker's championing of decadent literature. In both cases, the goal of anarchism is not a dictatorship of the former downtrodden, but a continuous and contradictory evolution of freedom in ever-changing contexts.

KEY WORDS: anarchism, anti-Marxism, Yiddish

The possible can be reached only by striving for the impossible. To ask for the impossible is not madness or fanaticism; it is practical work in the true sense of the word. (Karl Liebknecht, cited in Steinberg 1952: 34)

A clear yet sinuous line stretches from Yiddish anarchists,¹ who would often refer to themselves plainly as socialists, to the French *soixante-huitards*, who also liked to call themselves whatever was fashionable at the time (Maoist . . .) and whose philosophy truly can be summarized in the famous dictum: *Soyons réels, demandons l'impossible!* The main fight was against doctrinaire progressivism, that fossilized labyrinth of yesterday's tomorrows, Marxism as the *grandieze zamlung fun ekonomish-metafizishe forshstelungen un bagrifn*, the “grandiose collection of economico-metaphysical ideas and concepts”

(Rocker 1961: 160). It was Bakunin's fight the Yiddishists fought. Historically, we tend to forget that Marxism was the evil twin; so blinded are we by the real-historical victory of Bolshevism, that we leave the more promising, anarchist sparring partner—who almost won the duel, and yet was doomed to lose—in the orphanage, if not the dustbin, of history. For Marxism was blindingly seductive precisely because it was apparently so scientific, just to the taste of the nineteenth century, and that is why Yiddish anarchists fought it so fiercely. It is a blessing in this defeat's disguise that it was Eastern European Jews who took on the fight. For they knew how to read a text through the mystifications and go right down to the *takhles* of it; in many of these Jewish anarchists' families, a rabbi was at most a generation removed.

Provocative intuition is key. What Goldschmidt's rich rhetoric was enabled to do after a full century of revolutionary reflection, Yiddish anarchists sensed—more than conceptualized—over against Marxist metaphysics. Provocatively, the richness of the latter's concepts was in the Yiddish: in the unique Ashkenazi literate working class intuition that Yiddish reflection, so imbibed with both Talmudisms and Slavisms as it appears on any random page of a Yiddish newspaper, is a living, seething origin of ever new forms—ever unexpected, ever unpredictable—of cultural and political ways that embody what Goldschmidt will conceptualize as the freedom of freedom: precisely, the ongoing creation of the unexpected and the deeply revolutionary (and because of this, deeply humanistic, only not in a liberal bourgeois sense) validation of the unpredictable. Obviously, Yiddish anarchists could not gauge the historical depth of secular Jewish experience as Goldschmidt does, given that they were its pioneers; nor could they weave the Goldschmidtian verbal magic to conjure the rarefied atmosphere of his dialogue with anarchism itself, given that they were in the eye of the storm as it was happening. But the reason they are invaluable to our appreciation of anarchism is precisely that their texts speak, spontaneously, of the same impulses using the same words—words that have become obsolete or suspect or fascist, like *strength* or *will*—that Goldschmidt strives so assiduously to revive over against Marxist (or indeed liberal) pieties of commodified freedom (or, worse, commodified revolution). We will attempt to show how the pithiness of the Yiddish anarchist corpus in fact already contains all the necessary seeds for what, in Goldschmidt's work, will blossom into a poetic reflection on freedom and Jewish history.

Two main things can thus be said about Yiddish anarchists: they were at a high intellectual level thanks to the past of their Jewish texts,² and they always surprised with their take on the Messianic future. Perhaps the best doorstopper to gauge this is Isaac Steinberg's Yiddish magnum opus *In kamffar mentsh un Yid*. Published in 1952 as a melancholy but surgically precise collection of unfulfilled prophecies, it reads the pulse of the whole moribund movement as a stream of the

should-have-been's of a utopian history that didn't happen. The real, Marxist one did. "How naïve we were!" (Steinberg 1952: 5). What went wrong? Marxism was

that apparently scientific method that requires every human decision to be approved by the "laws of history." In the decisive years of its glory, though, Marxism failed to foresee world history, to master it, and to form suitable characters for it. Instead, Marxism has built a psychological and moral type of the "fighter" that has bent their own revolutionary conscience, caged the creative forces of the workers, created a caste of science priests. . . . They have confiscated the awareness of freedom from the working individual, their living conscience, their feeling of personal responsibility. They—the experts in the secrets of world history, in the iron laws of history—have daily judged about what is *possible* and what *impossible*. (Steinberg 1952: 20, emphasis in original)

The key words are character, creative forces, the individual, and personal responsibility. One of the more salient surprises at the conference that originated this essay were the Yiddish sources that explicitly took Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* as a positive starting point in building the anarchist individual for a future peaceful community, which prompted a participant to exclaim in protest: "You cannot connect Nietzsche's *Übermensch* with anarchism!" We on our side thought it was a beautiful example of a Goldschmidtian contradiction.³ For Yiddish anarchism took the initial, sunny side of the strongman—their exuberance, their unlimited potential, their ambition and shamelessness—only to tame it at the end of history, once the historical conditions for a peaceful, anarchist community had grown naturally. However, it is absolutely crucial to understand that nothing less than the strongman will do. The building blocks of an anarchist commune can never be soldiers of the party, kolkhozniks who dream of communist sheep (or tractors), they must needs be the real thing: the free and the brave in the simple sense of the word. How is that possible? Will they not oppress the weak? The revolutionary contradiction is: of course they will, and that's good for starters.

As Hillel Solotaroff (1924: 224–78) explained in his extensive recap of political history, it was crucial for strongmen to emerge from primitive tribes that lived in uniform equality and acquire dominion over the masses, and ultimately over millions as absolute monarchs, to give expression to individual initiative and striving; the individual was forged in this injustice. As society developed, however—especially in its bourgeois stage—technological progress enabled more and more single individuals to claim their freedom and express their initiative, as modern society itself became more accommodating and intent on solidarity. Personal responsibility was to develop naturally from coexistence itself over real historical time. Over against Marxist takeovers justified by supposedly scientific laws, whereby solidarity morphed into conformity and individuality into submission, the future anarchist society was to grow gradually from historical conditions, while small groups of willing individuals contributed by educating other people

to develop their creativity and solidarity until all were free and all were solidary with each other. Over against the liberal, restrictive model, where my freedom stops where another's freedom begins, anarchist coexistence was to consist in a willing self-limitation of one's freedom out of a deeply-felt solidarity for other individuals within small groups. The groups could then be federated together, but not constitute a large conglomerate, as that would ruin the emotional bond that was necessary for the model to work. Over against both Marxism and liberalism, what mattered was the freedom of freedom versus liberal proceduralism, and the freedom of progress versus Marxist obligatory stages of historical development—in one word, the freedom of contradiction in practice.⁴

How was that to be achieved? By a constant response to internal and external challenges in view of a non-metaphysical (anti-Marxist) future.⁵ The fuel for it was what Marxism (not to speak about liberalism) had stifled: the creative forces of the worker as individual, their vital strength, the energy, the will—all that the nineteenth century had extolled in its darker mood. When Bolshevism, especially after it consolidated its power (see the fate of Aleksandra Kollontai: her revolutionary work on sex before and in the early stages of the Revolution, and her backtracking under Stalin), exorcised this mythical force that had shaped both left and right and center, to tame it into the form of social-realist art, only the sunny, Khachaturian-style ballet of the betrayed revolution remained; the darker notes of, say, a Shostakovich were to lurk in the shadow until later. The paradox, of course, was that Shostakovich was the real deal, with his blend of violent upsurge and Rossini/Haydn-like facility. That is why Steinberg's work is so precious for us, because it brings home, in a rich Yiddish, the full impact of the language that was later to be unjustly appropriated by fascism and forgotten by the left until the sexual revolution: words like *rotsn* (will), *kraft*, *energie* spring up, seethe, and boil all over the place, to show us better things begotten from our darker purpose. As Steinberg (1952: 8) put it so elegantly and so untranslatably: "The socialist task is not so much to awaken the worker in the *mentsh*, but the opposite: to awaken the *mentsh* in the worker." How does one learn to be a *mentsch*?⁶

In all this, the Jewishness of it was key. For, unlike Marxists or liberals, Yiddish anarchists spoke specifically of and for Yiddish-speaking Jews. Culture was not a colorful stuffed bird to be admired in a museum for beautifying existing bourgeois realities (liberalism) or real-existing socialism (Stalinism as real-existing Marxism). Culture was an active noun, *cultura* as the tending of hot springs to create new forms of life; as in Heidegger and the more philosophically-oriented fascists, culture was the source to be dug out anew to yield form instead of the reverse. It is this crazy perspective that is so exciting in digging out Yiddish sources in a political-historical archaeology like ours: as Jacob Taubes (2003: 133, 141) put it memorably in his quip on Levinas's farce as a young man, the lines were drawn differently. Much of the undead left of today (the twenty-first century) was alive

and swarming with forces, words, and content we readily—and unjustly—identify with fascism. The goal was to forestall the “weakening of the life forces, of the social energy of the masses” (Steinberg 1952: 12).⁷ As Steinberg himself put it:

Is Jewish youth forced to just imitate the way of life of European civilized nations, just to transpose into the Jewish community the laws and customs of the surrounding world? Fortunately, it is not so! For in the Jewish nation there well up constantly creative sources; for we note the signs of creative force everywhere. (Steinberg 1952: 15–16)

We see how this works in practice most clearly in Morris Rosenfeld and Morris Winchevsky. Like Goldschmidt,⁸ Rosenfeld set out to re-read Jewish sources as not only an inspiration (or illustration), but a stage in the history of liberation (Rosenfeld 1908: 117–242), while Winchevsky, a repentant ex-Marxist in his old age, regretted not doing so, in his famous, searing collection of essays *Vos mir felt* (*What I Miss*). Rosenfeld reads the Exodus from Egypt as “the philosophy of all revolutions and all liberations”:

A great poet once said: If all world literature should be concealed and only Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* should remain, humanity would still have a rich literature. I say: If all world literature, including *Julius Caesar*, should be concealed, and only parshat *Beshalach* [Exodus 13:17–17:16] should remain, the world would still have enough to read and to enthuse about. . . .

But the Bible is greater than Shakespeare, and *Beshalach* is deeper and more exalted than *Julius Caesar*. For, while Shakespeare lets the curtain fall on the weakness of a nation, the Bible shows us how to transform the nation’s weakness into strength. For Moses . . . shows his slaves that miracles can only happen where people go . . . hand in hand with the ideal and are willing and ready to sacrifice themselves for it.

The Bible shows us the soul of a true hero, who can win a whole humanity to create a new world, a new civilization.

The hero has waited until the crisis, when the enemy is already so near behind, and the sea so near in front, that turning around will mean death, and the slave will not have any other choice but to risk, to stake his life and jump into the waves. . . .

That is, in brief, the secret of parshat *Beshalach*, the greatest world poetry of all times. You may conceal Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, and Henry George, just leave us with parshat *Beshalach* and you will not have done the world any damage. In *Beshalach* lies the mystery of the Passover in Egypt and the Passover of the Future,⁹ the Passover of freedom for all humanity, and in these few pages lies the philosophy of all revolutions and all liberations that have ever been and are to be until the end of time. (Rosenfeld 1908: 117–21)

Over against Rosenfeld's upbeat reading, Morris Winchevsky's reflection is a more melancholy one, as reflected in the resigned title of the series: *What I Miss*. In the second essay, "I Miss a Language," he pleads for the use of Yiddish in almost Nietzschean terms ("writing with one's own blood"), as Yiddish words are "pierced with daggers into human fat; engraved with swords on Jewish bones; inscribed with Jewish blood on parchment, scarred on Jewish skin" (Winchevsky 1927: 22–23). In the third and fourth essays, "I Miss a Father" and "I Miss Children," he expresses his regret for turning his back fiercely against Biblical and Talmudic traditions in his youth and relying instead on non-Jewish literary models like Rip van Winkle, only to come around in later years and advocate a return to Jewish texts in a secular reading enriched by modern philology ("The Bible with a new interpretation, but still the old Bible!"), while fully aware that this reconstructed tradition is not the real thing: his grandfather was his father's father, his grandchildren will be his children's children, but he is not his father's son and his children are not his children (Winchevsky 1927: 36). For Yiddish, even provided with its traditional Hebraisms, will not amount to more than a bad translation from German if there is no "Talmud in the Hebrew" to give Yiddish its flavor. One discovers pearls in the Talmud precisely by not approaching it religiously but nationally (Winchevsky 1927: 29–42), as a source of creativity of a nation in its fight for freedom, all the while keeping its identity, as we would say in modern terms, since we shun the pre-war terminology of "creative forces" (much is to be said about this, the dynamic flow of "creative forces" versus the static idea of "keeping identity": how it reveals the unresolved—and, we would argue, unresolvable in these terms—contradictions, the yet unfree contradictions, of our anarchism-free or anarchism-lite bourgeois present). That is the crux of the matter. As Winchevsky himself put it memorably:

I'm becoming a Jew. A Jew again. That doesn't weaken my international socialism; it strengthens it, because one who is neither a Jew nor a non-Jew, who is just human, cannot even be a true socialist [*a stam-mentsh ken afile an emeser sotsyalist nit zayn*]. (Winchevsky 1927: 32)

This then morphed into the strangest bird of all, Rudolf Rocker. A German non-Jew who learned Yiddish and actually wrote a stylish collection of essays on literature originally in Yiddish, published posthumously as *Eseyen* (1961), Rocker promoted the reading of what critics called decadent literature (and Marxist-minded critics always abhorred, both before and after the revolution), with a particular stress on the darkest and most horror-inspiring among them, like Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe. His rationale was that, over against the "economic-metaphysical ideas and concepts" of Marxism, this decadent literature was the only one to actually portray the whole truth, potential, and force of human beings¹⁰ in their inscrutable effervescence against the background of "that darker world of madness and eternal night" (Rocker 1961: 43), of which more primitive societies

knew little or nothing, as they had religious tropes as a “moral compass” to explain the dark away (44). For Rocker, the awareness of this—*pace* social-realist (and its evil twin, Nazi) art—is the real sign of progressive modernity. For this awareness was “born at the moment when humans have buried their last god, when their spirit has lost their secure compass, when they feel that in the abyss of their soul there develops something dark, alien, frightful, a second ‘I,’ which was unknown to them until then. They feel closer to the eternal enigma of life, and their soul is rattled by the unknown greatness” (45).

In other words, *entartete Kunst* is precisely the most precious tool for coexistence in an anarchist community. If we really want to “awaken the *mentsh* in the worker” and avoid deforming revolution—this challenge par excellence, which challenges itself first and foremost (another Goldschmidtian contradiction!)—into the comfortable dictatorship of the former downtrodden, we need to educate ourselves and others in the ability to read the remotest recesses of the human psyche, because it is the latter—and not purely economic relations or supposed “iron laws of history”—that will help build, continuously and always in unexpected (maybe even dreaded¹¹) ways, the human community of free individuals. For humans are unpredictable, and if given freedom to act, however solidary, they will stumble upon unexpected futures that no metaphysical doctrine, however economic, will ever be able, or called upon, to solve. That is why the Yiddish anarchist publishers, as is well known, gladly included in their offers non-socialist books (Zimmer 2015: 36), which made them something of a black sheep in the leftist fold, as non-anarchist publishers generally preferred to keep close to clearly progressivist literature. That is why Morris Winchevsky (1927: 69) justified escapist cinema and *Schundliteratur* (another black sheep of the non-anarchist left) as legitimate hobbies for the people: “Remember, they will do it, not because they don’t have a soul, but the opposite: because they have one.” Rocker himself put it programmatically in his essay on the Polish decadent author Przybyszewski:

A proper shopkeeper keeps each thing in its proper place. . . . His spiritual world is also not more than a shop, and when he sees a thing that doesn’t fit in the “proper place,” he feels uncomfortable and dreams of a catastrophe. This primitive materialism—a product of our modern shopkeeper-world—rules over the views and concepts of most people. . . . They only see the external appearance of all phenomena. . . . Under the influence of these views, our attention has been held by a purely zoological side of human beings for a long time, not only in the sciences, but in the arts. What has almost completely been forgotten is the secretive activity of the human psyche; if for no other reason, because this activity has been so difficult to classify and therefore also so difficult to control and regulate. (Rocker 1961: 73–74)

What (and who), then, was to be the anarchist individual? A strange bird. Over against all other closure-minded ideologies, it was to be a *mentsh* that was

both exuberantly self-asserting and generously self-denying, all the while nurturing his darker exuberance—from the sources of their own particular national culture and history, both the secular and the religious in the case of Jews—into a freely federated society that would not turn into a dictatorship of the former downtrodden. And that’s why it faltered, just like the sexual revolution; it was an impossible task. Human nature, as bourgeois liberals would say, simply doesn’t work that way; Marxists would add, the movement got derailed without ideological guidance from the party vanguard. However, it is an irony of history that the taming, the rationalizing, the legalizing (in the sense of: translation into legalese) of the 1970s sexual revolution led into wokeism, while the party vanguard transformed communism, over the course of mere decades, into the nationalist fascist *Führer*-society of North Korea. Both phenomena may be fascinating for sociology—not to speak about political philosophy—but freedom and solidarity they are not. Today’s tumultuous (and uncalled-for) rifts on the left regarding gender are a direct and dramatic consequence of the left’s adoption of 1980s legalism instead of 1968’s eros in its political thinking: what ’68 often clumsily (and, granted, sometimes criminally) prophesied and practiced was the effervescence of eros as a creative force that would originate its own unpredictable forms, not the 1980s model of the legal contract and prefabricated “identities.” A similar development happened within Marxist Communism: as the original anarchists predicted—and as Goldschmidt’s reflections imply—the corporate model of the Communist Party morphed into Stalin’s nationalism and the mummification of Lenin, and from there (again in a clear yet sinuous line) down to the present xenophobia, racism, ultranationalism, and veneration of a god-king that we see in North Korea.

Anarchism simply—we do revel in this word: “simply,” yet it is fully in accord with the subject matter—had a better claim. But anarchism was also—simply—too good to be true. And it was too true for its own good. The impossibility and yet the necessity of it we view as another sad, but also arrestingly beautiful, Goldschmidtian contradiction.¹²

But only a more successful realization of freedom, and that alone—which, instead of forbidding anarchism from pursuing its course, would have to surpass it along its own trajectory—can, in good conscience, remind anarchism that it too falls short of freedom, despite the fact that its will to be the fulfilment of freedom constitutes the essence of its greatness and the basis of its renown. (Goldschmidt 2020: 83)

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NOTES

1. For this essay, we have purposely chosen texts that, to the best of our knowledge, are available only in Yiddish and thus not easily accessible to non-Yiddish readers. Yiddish anarchist authors often wrote, or had their work posthumously published, in other languages.
2. See Goldschmidt's (1994a: 157–79) in-depth reflection on this, unrelated to Yiddish but relevant to our discussion, in "Vom Lehrhaus."
3. See Goldschmidt's (2000: 85–104) own, extensive treatment of the *Übermensch* theme in "Die Sackgasse des Übermenschen."
4. See Goldschmidt's (2020: 92–94) "Limits of freedom—in freedom!," for the willing self-limitation of the individual's freedom out of a deeply-felt solidarity for other individuals.
5. As Goldschmidt (2020: 75) says succinctly: "But anarchism is not the kind of upheaval that conspires against the power that outrages it, and against which it rebels, merely so it can rise to power itself; it is, rather, outrage and insurrection as such, and that means revolt rather than revolution."
6. See Goldschmidt's (2020: 88–92) "Freedom despite liberation" and "Freedom despite freedom" to see how one responds to internal and external challenges as a *mentsh*.
7. Compare this with Goldschmidt (1994b: 67) speaking of "d[ie] auf keinen derartigen Preis und Abweg [der Entartung] angewiesene eigenständige Kraft . . . von der aus das Judentum die Jahrtausende schöpferisch meistert."
8. See especially Goldschmidt (2020: 87–88). Goldschmidt (1994a; 1994b; 1997; 2000) devoted roughly half of his *oeuvre* specifically to Jewish themes. See in particular his biblical readings in "Zum Reich!" (Goldschmidt 1994a: 77–105).
9. The Messianic times, the ultimate redemption.
10. In a similar vein, Goldschmidt shows how Impressionist painting, photography, and sociology played a similar role alongside nineteenth-century anarchism: "By opening themselves up to the 'impression' of the nearest, most contingent details of nature, the *impression* of the world was to be vindicated in the here and now, and by the splendor of their art, they would offer irrefutable testimony that being open can indeed be enough. . . . Also bear witness to the thousandfold right and unalienable truth of every feeling without exception, even the most 'fleeting,' no matter how or where it stirred. . . . Entrust themselves instead to the human world, to the uncertain origins and pathways of its flows. . . . What is actual, that which alone embodies the reality of life"; in one word, that which is left "unaccounted for" by the "prescribed orders" (Goldschmidt 2020: 76–77).
11. Goldschmidt (2020: 91–92) speaks insightfully about the dread of freedom.
12. See Goldschmidt's (2000: 101) moving words from his essay on the *Übermensch*: "Daß es den Übermenschen letzten Endes gar nicht geben kann, ebensowenig wie den Untermenschen, und daß nicht einmal das Wort Unmensch wirklich zutrifft, weil der Mensch unabänderlich ein Mensch bleibt, er bejahe, steigere und heilige sein Menschentum, oder er verneine, verrate, schände dieses Menschentum, bildet keine Beruhigung, geschweige denn einen Trost."

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