Priest or Jester? Jacob L. Talmon (1916–1980) on history and intellectual engagement

Arie Dubnov

History Department, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 91905 Israel

Available online 19 February 2008

Abstract

This essay provides a general introduction to the special number on Jacob L. Talmon (1916–1980). The essay sketches the outlines of Talmon's intellectual biography, beginning with his study of the origins of totalitarian democracy, moving through his analysis of nationalism and political messianism, and ending with his study of the ideological clash of the 20th century. The essay raises the question of whether Talmon should be seen as a thinker wishing to defend existing traditions (i.e. a "priest"), or as a radical anti-authoritarian skeptic (i.e. a "jester"). Moreover, being both an anti-nationalist liberal, and a zionist at the same time, Talmon, the essay shows, was aware of the fact his own stance was problematic and at times even paradoxical. The last section of the essay presents the seven essays, which are included in the special issue.
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Keywords: Talmon, Jacob Leib (1916–1980); Totalitarian democracy; Political messianism; Israeli intellectuals; Zionism

I

The late Israeli historian of ideas, Jacob L. Talmon (1916–1980), was famous for many years primarily for coining the terms "Totalitarian Democracy" and "Political Messianism", and for writing a trilogy encompassing the whole of the Europe's experience with revolutions from 1789 down to his own time. The new terms Talmon coined, which became almost historiographical buzzwords, were also combined with a very passionate prose, which made Talmon's historical narrative compelling, and turned his trilogy into an impressive indictment against revolutionary ideologies and the crimes committed in their name. The Dutch historian of ideas Frank Ankersmit counted him as one of the 20 greatest historians of the 20th century. Next to historians as Arnold Toynbee, Johan Huzinga, Fernand Braudel, Lewis Namier, and Henri Pirenne, Talmon was described by Ankersmit as writing a convincing apologia for human liberty, which belongs to the liberal-conservative tradition of political theoreticians like Locke, Montesquieu, Burke, Constant, and Tocqueville.[1] Yehoshua Arieli, Talmon's close colleague, described him as "an interpreter of the modern world", "possessed by a never-ceasing urge to size up intellectually to penetrate empathically the world of

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E-mail address: amdubnov@mscc.huji.ac.il

[1] F.R. Ankersmit. "Jacob Talmon." (*Historici van de twintigste eeuw*, 15), *Intermediar* (12 May 1980) 59–67, reprinted in E.H. Kossmann et al. (Eds.). *Historici van de twintigste eeuw.* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1981) 297–314. I would like to thank Prof. Ankersmit for providing me the English translation of his essay.

man, to capture its spirit and aspirations and understand its dilemmas and perplexities".[2] In Talmon's vision of history, Arieli found "a return to the classical conception of the uses and value of the study of history, as *magistra vitae*, as a medium of gaining not only knowledge but self-knowledge, of becoming acquainted with 'philosophy teaching by example' and to be confronted by the experience of humanity".[3]

And indeed, there was a direct link between Talmon the historian, aiming to uncover the philosophical roots of the 20th century ideological rivalries, and Talmon the critical intellectual, who used the historical perspective both for the interpretation and for the criticism of the political affairs of his time. A very Talmonian duality—consisting of fascination with philosophers and intellectuals, and at the same time of a great suspicion towards these producers of ideas—was revived in recent years. After long years of neglect, Mark Lilla returned to Talmon's ideas in 2001 in the aftermath of his book *The Reckless Mind*, in which he tried to explain what causes intellectuals, who should be most alert to the ills of autocracy, betray the ideals of freedom and independent inquiry and turn into "philotyrannical intellectual[s]".[4] Unlike those who explain the 'philotyranny' of thinkers as a product of over-rationalization and a yearning to generate the Platonist king-philosopher utopia, Lilla argued, Talmon provides us with a much better explanation, by focusing "on the force of the irrational in human life, not on pretensions of reason" and by showing that "new religious fervor and messianic expectations with which modern democratic ideas became infused" can explain "how the modern democratic ideal became a bloody tyrannical dream in the 20th century".[5]

The identification of the secular Messianic urge of modern thinkers provided the underlying theme for Talmon's historical investigations. Charmed by philosophers, Talmon was well aware of the fact that his heroes, instead of being protectors of human dignity and individual liberty, can provide sophisticated justifications and cruel rationalizations for oppression and autocracy. This narrative also made the intellectuals a group that should be treated with suspicion: for if modern ideologies were essentially a translation of old religious yearnings into secular and political frameworks, then the intellectuals, who were functioning as modern priests, were also responsible for this conceptual laicization. Very much like Karl Popper, who blamed philosophers for providing excuses for dangerous dogmatism,[6] or Leszek Kolakowski,[7] who distinguished in a famous essay between "Priests"—that is thinkers who defend existing traditions and fortify paradigms—and "Jesters"—who are radical skeptics who try to refute absolutism, conservative traditionalism and monism—Talmon also tried to describe a paradoxical duality in the role and political function of the intellectual.

Writing more than a quarter of a century after Talmon's death, the participants of this special issue try to examine the duality Talmon found in other thinkers in his own thought and intellectual activity. Paraphrasing Kolakowski's typology of "Priests" and "Jester" we might ask whether Talmon himself was a "traditional" intellectual who aimed at creating bulwarks for existing traditions and fortifying the hegemonic paradigms, or a critical-skeptic motivated by anti-dogmatism. In order to try and answer this question the various writers participating in this volume examine Talmon's thought in retrospect and in a historical context, by referring to his interpretation of Fascism, Bolshevism, Revolution, Zionism, and Nationalism.[8] If in previous years discussions of Talmon's historiography focused on the question of the usefulness and applicability of his

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[2]Yehoshua Arieli. "J.L. Talmon—an intellectual portrait." *Totalitarian Democracy and After: International Colloquium in Memory of Jacob L. Talmon, Jerusalem, 21–24 June 1982.* Ed. Y. Arieli et al. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Magnes Press, 1984) 2, 1.

[3]Ibid, p. 3.

[4]Mark Lilla. *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics.* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001) 197.

[5]Lilla. *The Reckless Mind*, pp. 200, 201.

[6]Karl R. Popper. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I: *The Spell of Plato* and Vol. II: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath.* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 [5th edition]).

[7]Leszek Kolakowski. "The Priest and the Jester." *The Modern Polish Mind, An Anthology.* Ed. Maria Szczepanska Kuncewiczowa. (New York, 1963). The essay was originally published in 1959 and should be read against the Cold War background and especially Kolakowski's own experience at the period, as someone who was still not disillusioned with communism but already starting to revise some of the orthodox Marxist axioms of his youth.

[8]The majority of the papers are based on lectures given at a conference titled "Jacob Talmon and Totalitarianism Today: Legacy and Revision", which was held at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in December 2006. I would like to thank the Israeli Academy and the Mosse Program in History for helping to fund this conference.

theses and historiographical concepts,[9] the papers of this issue examine Talmon both as a historian and as a historical agent. They review his biography, discuss him as an engaged intellectual, and explore the conceptual ties and tensions arising from his combination of liberalism with Zionism, and also explore his similarity to and relationship with other intellectuals of his time.

II

Born in 1916 as Ya'akov Leib Fleischer to a traditional Jewish family in the Polish border town of Rypin, Talmon was given the opportunity to gain a close and intimate knowledge of both Orthodox Judaism and Polish nationalist sentiments from an early age. It seems that despite occasional bursts of anti-Semitim young Fleischer and his family, like many other Polish-Jews, also shared the hopes for political independence with their Polish neighbors after years of German occupation and instability. This all-too-brief golden age period, as Ezra Mendelsohn described it,[10] was portrayed by Talmon in retrospect in a short autobiographical sketch he wrote short time before his death: "in this situation of being unwanted and beleaguered, their existence precarious, provisional, untenable, Jews developed apocalyptic feelings, fearing a catastrophic denouement or praying for a salvationist solution", he wrote. Using the vocabulary he himself coined in later years, he described the particular condition of Rypin's Jews' as pushing them towards increased political awareness an even radicalization. "They [the Jews] were caught between two Messianic flames, one blowing from Moscow, the other from Jerusalem, the vision of world revolution and the myth of the nation".[11] When studying at a Polish Gymnasium, Talmon remembered himself as being "attracted by the patriotic, Romantic, mystical Polish poetry of the XIXth century", that was also grounded in Polish Catholicism. This even lead him to what he would later describe as "my very painful crisis of religious faith and at the same time doubt [sic.] when I was experiencing the crisis of puberty, I was under strong spell of Catholic influences".[12] Not much later, maybe also as an attempt to reconcile between the conflicting political and existential desires, he became attracted to *Ha'shomer Ha'tzair* (lit. *The Youth Guard*), a youth movement which sought to combine Zionist and socialist ideologies.[13] Unfortunately, an autobiographical sketch he wrote as an 18 year old, which he sent to the 1934 autobiography competition conducted by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Vilna, was lost during the war.[14]

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[9]See in particular Y. Arieli et al. *Totalitarian Democracy and After* and Zeev Sternhell (Ed.), *The intellectual revolt against liberal democracy, 1870–1945: international conference in memory of Jacob L. Talmon.* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1996). See also the discussion of Talmon in George Kateb. *Utopia and Its Enemies.* (London: Collier-Macmillan, Free Press of Glencoe, 1963). Talmon's concept "Political Messianism" also provides the conceptual spine for Hans Otto Seitschek's *Politischer Messianismus: Totalitarismuskritik und philosophische Geschichtsschreibung im Anschluß an Jacob Leib Talmon.* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh, 2005). Nonetheless Seitschek's study is regrettably very unreliable on factual and especially biographical details. On general considerations regarding the utility of the term totalitarianism and its use see Walter Laqueur. "Is There Now, or Has There Ever Been, Such a Thing as Totalitarianism?" *Commentary* (October, 1985) 29–34; Ernest A. Menze (Ed.), *Totalitarianism Reconsidered* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1981). See also Abbott Gleason. *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998) as well as Noël O'Sullivan. "Visions of Freedom: the Response to Totalitarianism." *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century.* Ed. Jack Hayward, Brian Barry, and Archie Brown. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[10]Ezra Mendelsohn. "Introduction: The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars-Myth and Reality." *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars.* Ed. Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, and Chone Shmeruk. (Hanover, NH: Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1989).

[11]Excerpts from an autobiographical sketch Talmon sent to F.R. Ankersmit, as quoted in Ankersmit "Jacob Talmon" (see footnote 1 above).

[12]Ibid.

[13]The movement's ideology combined the ideas of the Marxist-Zionist Ber Borochov (1881–1917) with those of the German educational reformer Gustav Wyneken (1875–1964) as well as Baden Powell (founder of the Scout Movement) and the German *Wandervogel* movement. By the late 1920s, there were already four *kibbutzim* (collective settlements) founded by *Hashomer Hatzair*, which banded together to form the *Kibbutz Artzi* (lit. *Nationwide Kibbutz*) federation and the movement also formed a political party, advocating a bi-national solution in mandatory Palestine with equality between Arabs and Jews. On *Ha'shomer Ha'tzair* in Poland and Palestine see Eli Tzur. *Before Darkness Fell: Hashomer Hatzair in Poland and Galicia 1930–1940.* (Sde Boker Campus: The Ben-Gurion Research Center, Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006) [Hebrew], Rina Peled. *"The New Man" of the Zionist Revolution: Hashomer Haza'ir and his European Roots.* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved and The Koebner Center for German Studies, 2002) [Hebrew] as well as a special issue of the journal *Israel Studies* 6.2 (2001).

[14]From a short informative article, which appeared at the Vilnus YIVO Institute's Newsletter we learn that young Fleisher won the sixth place in the competition. See "Resultat von der koncurse auf der bester autobiographie von a Yiddischen yungtlechen", *Yedies von*

After immigrating to Palestine in 1934 young Fleischer began to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which had been founded only 10 years earlier. History was studied under the German–Jewish medievalist Richard Koebner (1885–1958), who modeled the historical training in the newly established department in a way, which resembled the traditional German historical training he himself received in Berlin and Breslau. Koebner also began to develop a historiographical method, which was very alert to philosophical and semantic aspects, which would later be known as *Begriffsgeschichte* (History of Concepts).[15] This historiographical approach was never adopted by Talmon systematically, but nevertheless colored his historiography. In 1939, a short time before the war broke out, Fleischer left to Paris to begin his Ph.D. at the Sorbonne, a project he was forced to continue on British soil due to Nazi occupation of France.[16] Together with the future mathematician Abraham Robinson (1918–1974), Fleischer was forced to escape in autumn 1940 from occupied France to London, where he witnessed the Blitz. It was probably during his years at Cambridge and the London School of Economics that he had gained intimate knowledge of, and became highly impressed by the British liberal tradition. At that time, he also began his life long friendships with figures such as the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, the renowned Polish–Jewish–British historian Lewis Namier, the Jewish–British political thinkers Harold Laski and Isaiah Berlin, as well as T.E. ("Peter") Utley, Richard Tawney and many others. London, in many ways, became his second spiritual home after Jerusalem, and it was there that his original project, to write a dissertation on religious late-medieval history,[17] quickly turned into a fascination with modern intellectual history. By the time Fleischer returned to Mandatory Palestine, he had not only decided to Hebratize his name to Talmon, but also drafted the outline of a three-volume project, to which he was to dedicate the next three decades of his life. The objective of the trilogy was great, but clearly manifested: to uncover the roots of 20th century ideological clashes, from the time of Rousseau to his own age.

The first volume of his trilogy, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*,[18] helped Talmon gain his world reputation. Published in 1952, less than a year after Hannah Arendt published her book on the origins of Totalitarianism,[19] Talmon offered his readers a very different analysis, describing a "great schism" between two radically different attitudes towards politics and democracy, which he called "liberal democracy" and "totalitarian democracy". The essence of the latter type of democracy was its reliance on a definition of liberty not as the absence of coercion of the individual but as participation "in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose".[20] Philosophically speaking "totalitarian democracy" was, in Talmon's view,

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(*footnote continued*)

Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut 1:50 (January 1935) 9 [Yiddish]. I would like to thank Mr. Ido Bassok for providing me with this reference. The autobiography, probably written in Polish, was already sent from Jerusalem. The remaining autobiographies which were sent to the YIVO competitions of 1931, 1934, and 1938/39 were transferred after WWII to the YIVO Institute headquarters in New York, but Fleischer/Talmon's biography was never found in the collection, either because it was lost or misplaced. On the YIVO competitions see Marcus Moseley, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Michael Stanislawski. "Introduction." to *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*. Ed. Jeffrey Shandler. (New Haven, London, 2002) and Michael Steinlauf. "Jewish Politics and Youth Culture in Interwar Poland: Preliminary Evidence from the YIVO Autobiographies." *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*. Ed. Zvi Y. Gitelman. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003) 95–106.

[15]See Talmon's recollections of Koebner "The character of Professor Michael Koebner." in Talmon, *The Riddle of the Present and the Cunning of History*. Ed. David Ohana. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute), 287–290 [Hebrew]. On Koebner's historiographical approach see Koebner's paradigmatic essay "Semantics and Historiography." *The Cambridge Journal* 7:3 (1953) 131–144. Koebner later tried to apply his own method in his study of the concept "Empire" in Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt. *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964). On Koebner's historiographical legacy, see Yehoshua Arieli. "History and Historical Consciousness in Richard Koebner's Thought." *The History of the Hebrew University*, vol. I: *Origins and Beginnings*. Eds. Shaul Katz and Michael Heyd. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1997) 541–574 [Hebrew]. See also Edward Peters. "'Settlement, Assimilation, Distinctive Identity': A Century of Historians and Historiography of Medieval German Jewry, 1902–2002." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97.2 (2007) 237–279, esp. 251–253.

[16]See Malachi Hacohen's contribution to this volume as well as Joseph Warren Dauben. *Abraham Robinson: The Creation of Nonstandard Analysis: A Personal and Mathematical Odyssey*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) [Chapters 3–4]. I would like to thank Malachi Hacohen for providing me with this reference. In Britain Talmon received much help from Norman Bentwich, a great supporter of the Hebrew University, who also did much to aid scholar refugees.

[17]J.L. Flaiszer (Talmon). *The doctrine of Poverty in its religious, social and political aspects as illustrated by some movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*. (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1943).

[18]Talmon. *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952). Published in the US under the title *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952).

[19]Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Meridian Books, 1971 [Orig. 1951]).

[20]Talmon. *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 2.

based on a conceptual incommensurability, an "incompatibility of the idea of an all-embracing and all-solving creed with liberty".[21] The problem, in other words, was not that the value of liberty was absent from the minds of the totalitarians but that they misunderstood it. The erroneous philosophical conceptualization, Talmon believed, eventually lead the noble dream to turn into a catastrophic tragedy.

In order to describe the mechanism which explains how post-revolutionary "democratic nations are menaced" and develop "new species of oppression" Talmon borrowed many of his ideas from Tocqueville. But not less significant was his novelty in describing the French Enlightenment thinkers, headed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as radicals who not only provided the philosophical justification for Jacobin terror but who were in fact also forerunners of Bolshevism and Stalinism.[22] Talmon considered Rousseau, more than anyone else, an anti-liberal democrat who made totalitarian democracy possible. Opposite to liberals, argued Talmon, Rousseau did not assume politics "to be a matter of trial and error". Rousseaunian vision of politics, based on the idea that "*La volonté générale êst toujours droite* [The general will is always upright]", offered a new ideal that became essential for totalitarian democracy—that there is "a sole and exclusive truth in politics".[23] Hence, Rousseau's "lawgiver" (*législateur*) was interpreted by Talmon all too similar to George Orwell's 'Big Brother' and Stalin's 'engineers of the human soul'. It was the idea of *volonté générale* in particular, Talmon believed, that became "the driving force of totalitarian democracy".[24]

Talmon's first book made a timely appearance. The Talmonian description of a dialectic transformation of ideals of freedom and democracy into coercive totalitarian tools offered postwar political scientists, historians and sociologists a very different analysis of modern authoritarianism than the one offered by Arendt or the German leftwing anti-totalitarian group of thinkers William David Jones examined in his studies.[25] Almost all classic postwar studies of totalitarianism—such as those of Carl J. Friedrich, Zbingniew Brzezinski, Leonard Schapiro, Benjamin Barber, and even Karl Dietrich Bracher—had to take account of Talmon's thesis and embraced, at least partially and selectively, some of his ideas.[26] Many disagreed with the professor from Jerusalem but even his opponents from the Left, especially in Britain, could not ignore him. "Talmon and I

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[21]Ibid., p. 253.

[22]On Tocqueville see Melvin Richter. "Tocqueville and French Nineteenth-Century Conceptualizations of the Two Bonapartes and Their Empires." *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism.* Eds. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 83–102, and for Talmon's use of Tocqueville see Talmon. *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy,* p. 257, Y. Arieli. "Jacob Talmon—an Intellectual Portrait" Eds. Arieli et al. *Totalitarian Democracy and After,* pp. 5–6 and Gleason, *Totalitarianism,* pp. 113–120. On Talmon's problematic interpretation of Rousseau see Jose Brunner. "From Rousseau to 'totalitarian democracy': The French Revolution in J.L. Talmon's historiography." *History and Memory* 3 (1991) 60–85, Martin Jay. *Marxism and Totality: the adventures of a concept from Lukacs to Habermas.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984) 42; Julia Simon-Ingram. "Alienation, Individuation, and Enlightenment in Rousseau's Social Theory." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24:3 (Spring, 1991) 315–335, esp. p. 331, n. 17. Interestingly, much of the arguments used by French intellectuals of the non-Communist Left between 1975 and 1984 beare much resemblance to Talmon's critique of totalitarianism. See Michael Scott Christofferson. *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s.* (NY: Berghahn Books, 2004).

[23]Although Talmon pointed his arrows directly against the Kremlin when describing totalitarian democracy, from his references to Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) we may also assume that he had fascism and Nazism in mind as well. See in particular Talmon's endnotes to Section 3 of his introduction to *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (esp. pp. 263–264), in which he develops the distinctions between right and left wing totalitarianism, and between Hobbes, whom he considered to be offering a justification for despotic dictatorship, and Rousseau, the father of totalitarian democracy. Talmon refers to Schmitt's *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes* (1938; *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, tr. George Schwab (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996)) in the endnote section, describing him as "the main theoretician of the National Socialist philosophy of law" (*Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 263). Interestingly but not coincidentally, in Leo Strauss' writings from the same period one can find a very similar reading of Rousseau as providing the basis of "totalitarianism of a free society". (See Strauss. *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies.* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959) 51. Given the fact Strauss, very much like Talmon, not only thought of the recent past but also read Rousseau while having Carl Schmitt in mind, makes the similarity quite understandable. On Strauss' reading as mediated by Schmitt see Heinrich Meier. *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss : The Hidden Dialogue*, tr. J. Harvey Lomax. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[24]*Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 1–2, 31, 6.

[25]William David Jones. *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism.* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999); William David Jones. "Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism: Franz Borkenau's Pareto." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53:3 (July–September 1992) 455–466. The key figures Jones examines are Karl Korsch, Max Horkheimer, Franz Borkenau, Otto Kirchheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Richard Löwenthal. Much of this "lost" tradition is reflected in Seymour Martin Lipset. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics.* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960).

[26]Carl J. Friedrich and Zbingniew Brzezinski. *Totalitarian dictatorship and autocracy.* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1956 [second revised edition appeared in 1969]); Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis and Benjamin R. Barber. *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views.* (New

found ourselves arguing about the nature of democracy and the Jacobins in the French Revolution'', Eric Hobsbawm wrote in his autobiography. "[We] respected each other, though we disagreed on most things, notably Zionism".[27] The respect was, it seems, mutual. For despite the fact Talmon was a fierce anti-communist, it was he, Hobsbawn suspects, that suggested to George Weidenfeld that Hobsbawm, who was already a well-known member of the communist party, write a volume on *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848.*

III

Talmon further developed his thesis in his second volume, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (1960),[28] which was later accompanied also by *Romanticism and Revolt* (1967).[29] Making the term "messianism" the focal point of his discussion Talmon made the theological roots, rather than republican and early liberal ones, the essential sources of socialism and nationalism.[30] "Totalitarian Messianism" argued Talmon "postulates an all-embracing exclusive doctrine, which is held to offer a binding view on all aspects of human life and social existence, including religion, ethics, the arts".[31] Moving from the revolution of 1789 to that of 1848, the blamed thinkers were now not Rousseau and pre-revolutionary *philosophes* but the nineteenth century's utopian thinkers such as of Saint Simon, Fourier, Marx, Lamennais, and Mazzini. More sensitive to the theologico-political dimension of totalitarianism, here again Talmon described how philosophical rationalism was transformed into a vision of redemption, which became a trap and yoke of servitude. Not only ideals of social equality but also visions of national emancipation were easily developed into utopias.

Several commentators mentioned the resemblance between Talmon's thesis and Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, which connected messianism and persecution driven by apocalyptic fanaticism to 20th century totalitarianism.[32] Although in some aspects the shift towards political messianism helped Talmon to continue and further develop his totalitarian democracy thesis, there is also a level in which the two theses come into conflict. That is especially if we understand totalitarian regimes as representing a radicalization of the aspiration to reconstruct society rationally and artificially, and think of the messianic urge, which characterized the nationalist utopias that Talmon described, as being part of a general religious and esthetic reaction to the over-rationalization of the Enlightenment. In other words, was the messianic option so appealing to revolutionaries and nationalists alike because it could counter balance the over-rationalized, dry "disenchanted" world that Enlightenment, secularization and modernity created, or was it motivated by a secularized, anti-mystical zeal that was part of modernity and not its contradiction? Talmon never addressed this question or tried to resolve the tension, probably because he assumed "over-rationalized" totalitarianism and quasi-mystical messianic politics could be understood to enter into a *dialectical* relation in this dimension, or because he thought that the common denominator of totalitarianism and political messianism was

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(*footnote continued*)

York: Praeger, 1969); Leonard Schapiro. *Totalitarianism.* (London: Pall Mall, 1972); Karl Dietrich Bracher. *Die Totalitäre Erfahrung.* (Muenchen: Piper, 1987). See Abbott Gleason, Totalitarianism [Chapter 6].

[27]Eric Hobsbawm. *Interesting Time: A Twentieth-Century Life.* (London: Allen Lane, 2002) 185. Very much like Hobsbawm, the influential Canadian Leftist political thinker C.B. Macpherson (1911–1987) also respected Talmon's work. See Macpherson. "The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy [Review essay]." *Past and Present* 2 (November 1952) 55–57.

[28]Talmon. *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase.* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960).

[29]Talmon. *Romanticism and Revolt: Europe 1815–1848.* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967).

[30]The idea of "secular messianism" appeared in the first volume of Talmon's trilogy, but was developed conceptually only in the subsequent writings. See also Talmon, "Prophets and Ideology: The Jewish Presence in History," in the collection of his writings, J.L. Talmon. *The Riddle of the Present and the Cunning of History*, pp. 13–26, especially pp. 17–18 [Hebrew]. Michael Heyd utilized some of Talmon's concepts, trying to move from Jewish messianism to early protestant utopian thinking, in his "Christian Antecedents to Totalitarian Democratic Ideologies in the Early Modern Period", in Arieli et al. *Totalitarian Democracy and After*, pp. 86–95. Fania Oz-Salzberger offers some critical notes on the subject in her essay on "The Jewish Origins of the Modern Republic", *Azure*, vol. 13 (Summer 2002).

[31]Talmon. *The Nature of Jewish History: Its universal significance.* (London: The Hillel foundation Annual Lecture, 1957) 8.

[32]Norman Cohn. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary messianism in medieval and Reformation Europe and its bearing on modern totalitarian movements.* (London: Mercury Books, 1957). Alain Besançon's 1977 study of the Gnostic and metaphysical origins of Leninism also bears some resemblance to Talmon's study, although while Talmon had in mind Jewish messianism, Besançon thought of Christian Gnosticism. See Besançon. *Les Origines intellectuelles du Léninisme.* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1977).

essentially *psychological*, as both nationalists and revolutionary fanatics take upon themselves very similar chiliastic characteristics.

Be that as it may, in *Political Messianism* and his later studies Talmon made it clear that he believed that the nationalist ideal was potentially no less threatening than Bolshevism. If nationality refers to a peaceful, even noble sentiment, nationalism and xenophobic chauvinism, that is the pathological extremist versions of the same sentiment, can have devastating effects. Fichte's doctrine of the German nation and the *Urvolk*, Mazzini's idealization of the *Risorgimento* as creating *Roma Terza* (a "Third Rome"), and Mickiewicz's romantic idealization of Poland as the Christ among the nations were examples he used frequently. These were meta-historical, messianic and salvation-yearning visions, which were exclusive and not less dangerous and illiberal than the Leftist creeds. A direct line, Talmon believed, permeated with the Judaic idea of a holy nation of priests, to modern nationalist movements with its ideology of the chosen people. Despite being a keen Zionist, Talmon valiantly added Moses Hess, the prophet of modern Jewish nationalism, to the list, which included Fichte, Mazzini, and Mickiewicz. Zionism, in other words, was to him not essentially different in its psychological basis and spiritual Messianic fervor from other quasi-eschatological European national movements. The historian of Zionism Anita Shapira summarized this Talmonian conviction adequately: "scratch the empiricist surface of a Zionist leader a little and you will find a quiveling Messianic faith which breaks forth in moments of crisis or in moments of what Talmon called 'historical breakthrough".[33]

Talmon's interpretation of nationalism in general and Zionism in particular as what later scholars called "political religion"[34] became central not only in his historiographical writings, but also in his writings as a publicist and a leading intellectual.[35] On this issue we find another fascinating duality in Talmon's writings. On the one hand Talmon praised Theodor Herzl for avoiding making metaphysical connection between the national revival and the workings of universal history, and similarly admired Chaim Weizmann's sense of pragmatism and almost complete lack of teleological or theological rhetoric. On the other hand, since the 1950s, and more dominantly after the 1967 Six Day War, Talmon identified clear symptoms of what he considered to be a dangerous messianic mythologization operating in Israeli politics and society. He was forced to acknowledge the fact that Zionism, his cherished and beloved movement, was not free of religious underpinnings. Considering nationalism to be a craving for self-assertion, Talmon feared that messianic rhetoric would catalyze a similar degeneration of this ideal into self-surrender.

The beginning of Talmon's suspicion can probably be located, as David Ohana, Michael Keren, and others have shown, in the 1950s debate between David Ben-Gurion, and the Hebrew University's skeptical intellectuals. Ben-Gurion was never tired of sermonizing on the Messianic vision of the people of Israel, while the group of Hebrew University's professors, headed by Talmon and Nathan Rotenstreich and including their teachers such as Shmuel Hugo Bergman, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and others feared that this was a thick cover for authoritarianism and an alarming sign of "corruption" (*seuv*) of Zionist ideals.[36] The debate

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[33]Anita Shapira. "Zionism and Political Messianism", in Shapira, *Walking towards the horizon* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1989) 13 [Hebrew]. I would like to thank David Ohana for providing me with this quote.

[34]Recent literature on "political religion" includes Roger Griffin (Ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism, and Political Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Emilio Gentile, Politics as religion, tr. George Staunton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Roger Griffin (Ed.). "Fascism as Political Religion." *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990) 229–251, David Bates. "Political Theology and the Nazi State: Carl Schmitt's Concept of the Institution." *Modern Intellectual History* 3 (2006) 415–442.

[35]Much thanks to Talmon's influence, historians of Zionism began to address this question. See Shapira, "Zionism and Political Messianism" (op. cit); David Ohana. *Messianism and* Mamlachtiut: *Ben Gurion and the Intellectuals between political vision and political theology*. (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 2003) [Hebrew]; Shmuel Almog, "Messianism as a Challenge to Zionism" and Israel Kolet, "Zionism and Messianism" in Zvi Baras (Ed.). *Messianism and Eschatology* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1984) 419–432, 433–438 [Hebrew]. See also Christoph Schmidt. "Gershom Scholem's political theology", *Theory and Criticism*, 6 (1995) [Hebrew]; Yotam Hotam. *Modern Gnosis and Zionism* (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 2007) [Hebrew]; and Hanan Haber. *Captives of Utopia. Essay on Messianism and Politics in Hebrew Poetry in the Land of Israel between the Two World Wars* (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 1996) [Hebrew].

[36]Michael Keren. *Ben-Gurion and the intellectuals: Power, Knowledge, and Charisma.* (Delkab, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983) [Chapter 2]. Ohana, *Messianism and* Mamlachtiut, esp. Chapter 2 [Hebrew]; Yaakov Shavit. "Messianism, utopia and pessimism in the 1950: considering the criticisms of the 'Ben-Gurionist State.'"*Iyunim Bitkumat Israel—Studies in Zionism, the Yishuv and the State of Israel. A Research Annual*, 2 (1992) 56–78 [Hebrew]; Yehiam Weitz. "The intellectuals' involvement in the Lavon affair." *Zion* 64:3 (1999) 349–377, esp. 367–370 [Hebrew]; Shlomo Aronson. *David Ben-Gurion, The Renaissance Leader and the Waning of an Age.* (Sde Boker

reached its climax in 1961. Ben-Gurion, fearing the intellectual opposition, met with the group several times, and declared:

> I, unlike Prof. Talmon and contrary to Prof. Rotenstreich, believe in Messianism, not in the sense our forefathers believed [but] I truly believe that we could and should become a chosen people (*Am Sgula*), or else—we shall not become a nation (*Am*). This is our historical destiny … we have the necessary characteristics for becoming the chosen people… All my life I am a devoted to this belief of mine, and there are also proofs in our history for this belief, in the history of our people in the past as well as in our age….[37]

Talmon's reply to Ben-Gurion was clear and bold: "'Sin is crouching at your door'. The role of the intellectuals is not to serve as a band that plays according to the rhythm of the marching people, but to serve as warners standing at the gates, equipped with moral sensitivity…".[38] He feared that Ben-Gurion used Messianism as an excuse for unlimited use of power. He favored neither Ben-Gurion's vision of redemption nor his association of this vision to the Zionist melting-pot ideology, and thus developed a very ambivalent attitude towards the politician he himself considered to be the greatest Jewish leader in modern times.[39] Ben-Gurion's leadership, we must add, was not authoritarian, but based primarily on charisma, and Talmon's criticism clearly came from within the Zionist camp. Nevertheless, the ambivalence he developed allowed him to become one of the first Israeli intellectuals to openly criticize Ben-Gurion's policy during the Lavon Affair scandal, which ultimately contributed to Ben-Gurion's resignation from the Government and to Talmon's resignation from serving as Ben-Gurion's official biographer.[40] In the historical essays he wrote about Zionism after the Lavon Affair Talmon began ascertaining a complex dialectical relationship, which was both synergistic and antagonistic, between Zionism, which offered a vision based on a rejection of traditional Jewish religion, and the Jewish Messianic conviction which has been co-opted by modern Zionism.

It is hard to separate Talmon's biography from his analysis of Zionism and political messianism. Not coincidentally, it was in *Min ha-Yesod* (lit. *From the Foundations*), a short-lived liberal journal Talmon established together with his colleagues Nathan Rotenstreich, Yehoshua Arieli and others, that he reflected retrospectively on his own youth in the Polish *shtetl*, describing and himself as "caught in a cross-fire from two sides: the Messianic fire from Eastern Europe and the fire of Zionism from *Eretz-Israel*".[41] In his writings on the Jewish component in revolutionary movements Talmon began to associate traditional Jewish Messiah yearnings with revolutionary fanaticism, which he interpreted as modern and secular messianism. Nevertheless, following the 1950s and 1960s debates, he could no longer separate the religious cravings from modern nationalism.

Here, Talmon was caught between conflicting desires. On the one hand he made the criticism of messianism his trademark as a critical intellectual. In the name of moral sensitivity, humanism and liberalism, Talmon was willing to jeopardize his prestige and enter a debate with Ben-Gurion, the Arch-Priest of Jewish nationalism. On the other hand, he was a devoted Zionist who found it hard to separate Jewish nationalism from its mystical and religious roots. Zionism was part of his emotional commitment and therefore Talmon found it

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(*footnote continued*)

Campus: The Ben-Gurion Research Center, Ben-Gurion University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 44–48 [Hebrew]; Avi Bareli, *MAPAI in the Beginning of Independence, 1948–1953* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2007) [Hebrew].

[37] Protocol of Ben-Gurion's meeting with professors E. Aurbach, S.H. Bergman, J. Talmon, S. Yizhar, J. Katz, N. Rotenstreich, and G. Scholem on March 29, 1961, as quoted in Ohana, *Messianism and Mamlachtiut*, p. 152 (my translation and addition, AD).

[38] Ibid, p. 164. Talmon paraphrased here from Genesis, 4:6, from the story of Cain and Abel.

[39] Talmon even contemplated for long time the option of writing a biography of Ben Gurion. See Ohana, *Messianism and Mamlachtiut*, pp. 337–341.

[40] Talmon. "The Lavon Affair—Israeli Democracy at the Crossroads." *New Outlook* 4 (March–April 1961) 23–32; Talmon, "The 1961 Affair", Letter to the editor, *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 January 1961, p. 4, and see also Talmon's attack on Ben-Gurion was printed in Ha'aretz on December 30, 1960. The Lavon Affair, named after the Israeli defense minister Pinchas Lavon, was the name given to a scandal which broke out in 1960, as Ben-Gurion clashed with Lavon during an attempt to thoroughly investigate a failed secret Israeli operation in Egypt in summer of 1954. See Eyal Kafkafi. "Sharett and the Lavon Affair: A Tale of Belated Recognition." *Zionism*, vol. 23 (2001) 331–352 [Hebrew].

[41] Talmon. "Socialism and Liberalism", *From the foundations*, 1962, pp. 32–33 [Hebrew]. Quoted in Ohana, "Introduction: Talmon and the dialectics of secular messianism" in Talmon, *The Riddle of the Present and the Cunning of History*, p. xvi. On *Min ha-Yesod* group see Avi Bareli, *MAPAI in the Beginning of Independence*.

hard to serve as a jester, mocking the national ideology. We may even suspect that in his decision to Hebraize his last name from Fleischer to Talmon he was hinting towards this complexity, for the new name he took upon himself was taken from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it encapsulates a symbolic meaning for it refers to a family who returned from the Babylonian Exile to become the gatekeepers of the new Temple.[42] Talmon, well aware of the biblical connotations, probably considered himself the modern equivalent of the family who returned to the Promised Land from Babylonian captivity. But what was the Temple he was thinking of? Here we can only speculate. It would be only plausible to assume that the new Temple he was thinking of was the Hebrew University itself. Not far behind Ben-Gurion himself, Talmon also envisioned the university as voluntarily taking an active part in the nation building. In his view, the university was not an insular institution serving the narrow political and practical needs of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish population of Mandatory Palestine) and later the young State, but an organ that he hoped would turn the State of Israel into the spiritual gravity center of the Jewish people in the 20th century.[43] Talmon was acutely aware of the fact he was a member of a new stratum of intelligentsia which Anthony Smith called "the new priesthood of the nation".[44]

IV

The paradoxical positioning of the critical intellectual *vis-à-vis* the national movement was deepened as the years passed. If in the speeches of a socialist like Ben-Gurion's the Messianic motif was used mainly rhetorically, to emphasize solidarity and to function as a mobilizing myth in the building of a young nation, a very clear and bold sacral and transcendental Messianic ingredient became more influential in Israeli politics in the 1970s, especially with the rise of *Gush Emunim* (lit. *Block [of the] faithful*) movement, who offered its supporters a mix of right-wing Zionism and religious moralism which became the presiding spirit in the settlement movement in the occupied territories. The followers of *Gush Emunim*, argued Talmon, "depicted the victory in the Six-Day War as the birthplangs of the Messiah and the beginning of redemption and saw the new conquest of the territories as the finger of God, so that the vision of 'renewing our old days of old' and God's promises were coming true in their entirety".[45] He considered them "a lunatic fringe", but was gradually forced to acknowledge their great impact on Israeli politics, especially after Menachem Begin became Prime Minister in 1977 and launched an aggressive campaign of settlement building in the West Bank. His career as a social critic, which began with a bold accusation of Ben-Gurion, now forced him to confront the followers of Rabbi Kook. The fact Begin's government channeled the new messianic energies towards the building of settlements was considered by Talmon to be extremely dangerous. Referring to the Palestinian population Talmon wrote to Begin that "the combination of political subjection, national oppression and social inferiority is a time bomb". The open letter to Begin was written in March 1980, 3 months before Talmon's death.[46] He was well aware of his reputation and prestige as an academic priest when writing the letter. "We are facing a situation in which the rule of law and order is on the verge of collapsing" he wrote. This phenomenon, he added, "makes a mockery of the dream of the revival of Jewish sovereign independence".[47]

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[42]For the biblical Talmons, see Ezra 2:42 and Nehemiah 7:45 and Nehemiah 11:19 as well as Chronicles 9:17.

[43]See Talmon's contributions to "A discussion of the University's role in the past and in the present" (held at the Hebrew University in April 1964), pp. 27–43 [Hebrew], as well as in the symposium on the academic freedom held in January 1967: *On academic freedom*. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 6–17 [Hebrew], quoted and discussed in Uri Cohen, *The Mountain and the Hill: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006) 189 [Hebrew]. See also the discussion on the role of the university in Neve Gordon, and Gabriel Motzkin. "Between Universalism and Particularism: The Origins of the Philosophy Department at Hebrew University and the Zionist Project." *Jewish Social Studies* 9:2 (2003) 99–122.

[44]Anthony D. Smith. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 157–161.

[45]Talmon. "The motherland is in danger. An open letter to the historian Menachem Begin from the historian Jacob Talmon". *Haaretz* 31 (March 1980) 15, 21 [Hebrew]. Reprinted in Talmon. *The Riddle of the Present and the Cunning of History*, pp. 261–284 [Hebrew]. See also the last section, titled "The Six-Day War in a Historical Perspective" in Talmon. *The Age of Violence*. (Tel-Aviv: Am-Oved, 1975) 294–396 [Hebrew].

[46]Talmon. "The motherland is in danger", p. 271.

[47]Ibid., pp. 263–264, 268.

The metaphysical and almost cosmic dimension of Messianism that characterized totalitarianism was now replaced with nationalistic chauvinism which joined a very particular, isolationist, kind of Messianism. Anti-Messianism became, in many respects, not only Talmon's intellectual trademark within Israel, but also part of his attempt to return to the liberal separation between religion and politics, which would rescue the "good", a-religious, original Zionist ideal.[48]

The pathos did not disappear in the last volume of Talmon's trilogy, published in the year of his death, and titled *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution*.[49] The volume, subtitled *the origins of ideological Polarization in the 20th century*, examined Marx and later Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein's theories, the Russian pre-revolutionary intelligentsia and its radicalization, the legacy of Georges Sorel and its impact on Mussolini, and concluded with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Special chapters also discussed the awakening of nationalist movements, which catalyzed the breakdown of Austro-Hungary, the revolutions of 1917 and the communist internationalism, and also what Talmon called "The Jewish side" of the story. Diabolic nationalism of the Nazis, and not only Marxism and Bolshevism, were rejected in the book for its utopian vision, which transcends the nation and turns it into a myth.

The challenge of détente and the rise of the New Left could probably explain why it was so important for Talmon to stress once again in *The Myth of the Nation* the dangers of Marxist "salvationism". Nevertheless, if in his earlier writings Talmon's explanation of totalitarianism was asymmetrical, in the sense that it focused primarily on the dangers of Leftist utopias, it was only in this book that Talmon finally brought himself to confront Fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust. In Talmon's view one would be mistaken to assume as a rule that Right-wing utopias were less sophisticated ideologically and intellectually inferior when compared to communism. He described the Nazis as motivated by crude racism and fanatical national egotism, driven to practice extermination because they were blinded by what they considered to be a Teutonic scale clash between the ideals of *Imperium* and the Jewish humanitarian ethos.[50] There was a clear connection between Hitler's despise of Bolshevism and his detest of Judaism. In fact, they were identical. Fond of Hegelian dialectics Talmon interpreted Nazism as the most extreme manifestation of "The Myth of the Nation" and therefore above all as the antinomy of "the Vision of Revolution". It was the most frantic attempt to erase the Jewish component from European civilization, a component, which Hitler saw as the very heart of Marxism and Bolshevism.

Talmon planned that his future project would focus on the history of Jews in modern times. In some of his books, as well as in his collection of essays entitled *The Unique and the Universal*,[51] he began describing the history of the Jews as particularly important, arguing that because of their unique position Jews made them "a barometer of the health and balance of a society and age".[52] The marginality of the Jews' position, Talmon argued, turned them into an exposed nerve of exceptional sensitivity. It "enables them to act as pioneers, but makes them also the first victims of any storm or disease".[53] Clearly, he was also thinking of himself when writing these words. Nevertheless, he never had the opportunity to develop these preliminary reflections.

V

Over the years Talmon's books enjoyed a mixed reception. In a way we might argue that his influence decreased from volume to volume. As much as the *Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* was influential and relevant for the debates of his times, *Political Messianism* did not enjoy the same international reputation and is read today almost solely by the group of scholars who wish to move beyond the narrow limits the term "ideology" offers and examine instead 20th century's history using the term "political theology". *The Myth of the Nation*

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[48]This also led Talmon to support, albeit hesitantly, *Shalom Achshav* (*Peace Now*), a pacifist movement established in 1978. On this issue, see Tamar Hermann. *From 'Brith Shalom' to 'Shalom Achshav': The Pragmatic Pacifism of the Pacifist camp in Israel*. (Tel-Aviv University: unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, 1989) 258–297 [Hebrew].

[49]Talmon. *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution: The Origins of Ideological Polarisation in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Secker & Warburg; University of California Press, 1981).

[50]See in particular the last chapter of Talmon's *The Myth of the Nation*.

[51]Talmon. *The Unique and the Universal: Some Historical Reflections*. (New York: G. Braziller, 1966).

[52]Talmon. *The Nature of Jewish History*, p. 28.

[53]Ibid.

and the Vision of Revolution, Talmon's last volume, was almost entirely neglected. Despite the similarity of many of their arguments, historians of the French revolution prefer François Furet's *Penser la révolution Française* (1979),[54] and interpreters of Rousseau and the French Enlightenment disliked the way in which Talmon read Jacobinism into these thinkers.[55] The whole idea that a trans-historical diallog can be established, and that we should describe thinkers as "forerunners", "anticipating" future thinkers and developments, was rejected for being nothing but prolepsis in Quentin Skinner's famous attack "meaning and understanding in the history of ideas", the unofficial manifesto of the Cambridge School of intellectual history.[56]

More generally, many have also argued that Talmon's wide brush strokes were his Achilles hill, that his analyses lacked rigor and that his remarks were many times "inaccurate, misleading of irritatingly vague".[57] *Political Messianism* was described by the Oxonian political philosopher John Plamenatz as "impressionistic", and Talmon, who "spoils his case by trying to prove too much", was described as "victim of his own style, which is apt to be loose and rhetorical", lacking "rigor, subtlety and discrimination".[58] Even thinkers like George Sabine, who accepted Talmon's basic principles and also believed that one should talk about two distinct democratic traditions,[59] felt uncomfortable with the mono-casual explanation that casts abstract ideas alone as explaining the actual power of totalitarianism and also argued Talmon "exaggerates the rigidity of the ideological relationship between totalitarianism and *any* assumption of 'natural order'".[60] The impossibility to separate Talmon's historical narratives from their normative lessons, and the fact that he emphasized he was dealing with the past from the vantage point of the present, helped Talmon enjoy wide "lay" readership. And yet it led professional historians to be more reserved. What remained clear was that Talmon's narratives, as Saul Friedländer mentioned, were characterized by their authors attempt to establish "the persistent, dynamic and imperious binding which ties past to present".[61]

The following seven articles examine this binding of indispensable ties between past and present in Talmon's work from various angles. Malachi Hacohen's "Jacob Talmon Between Zionism and Cold War Liberalism" describes young Talmon's political education and focuses on the problematic relationship between his liberalism and support of Jewish nationalism. Many of Talmon's interpreters rely on the autobiographical declaration he wrote in the aftermath to *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution*, in which he argues that as soon as 1937–1938, at the time of the Moscow trials, and when he was studying the French Revolution as a student, he already began to mediating on the similarity between Jacobanism and Bolshevism. Hacohen argues that we must be skeptical about Talmon's retrospective account, and that the origins of Talmon's understanding of Totalitarian democracy are not likely to be found in interwar years, but in post-war years. Hacohen also argues that Talmon's understanding of nationalism was historicist, romantic, and visionary in essence, and that it lived in permanent tension with his liberalism, which he described as empiricist, pluralist, and pragmatic. Hacohen considers Talmon's critique of totalitarian democracy and sympathy towards Zionism as stemming from separate layers in his soul.

Despite being an interpreter of modern Western history, Talmon did not include America in his accounts. American history is not mentioned in Talmon's writing, neither when describing the liberal system, which was

[54] Furet. *Penser la révolution Française.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). Translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution*, tr. Elborg Forster. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[55] See in particular Patrick Riley. *The general will before Rousseau: The transformation of the divine into the civic.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) as well as Riley's introduction to *The Cambridge companion to Rousseau.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Other studies that reject Talmonian reading include Judith N. Shklar. *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory.* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Carol Blum. *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the FrenchRevolution.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) and Helena Rosenblatt. *Rousseau and Geneva :from the first discourse to the social contract, 1749– 1762.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[56] Quentin Skinner. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* 8 (1969) 3–53; reprinted in (Ed.) James Tully. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

[57] H. Hearder. "Romanticism and Revolt [Review]." *The English Historical Review* 83:329 (October 1968) 858.

[58] John Plamenatz. "Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase [Review]." *Political Science Quarterly* 76:4 (December 1961) 593–595.

[59] George H. Sabine. "The Two Democratic Traditions." *The Philosophical Review* 61:4 (October 1952) 451–474.

[60] George H. Sabine. "The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy [Review]." *The Philosophical Review* 62:1 (January 1953) 147–151, esp. p. 150.

[61] Saul Friedländer. "Jacob Talmon: The historian as a fighter." *Zmanim: History Quarterly 4* (Summer 1980) 53 [Hebrew].

so dear to him, nor when criticizing revolutionary movements. Eran Shalev's "The Missing Revolution: The Totalitarian Democracy in Light of 1776" tries to explain the absence of America from the Talmonian universe. Shalev depicts the young United States' bloody war of independence, followed by the creation of a republican *novus ordo seculorum*, as fitting Talmon's revolutionary model and narrative. Only by comparing Talmon's understanding of European revolutions with the interpretation of the American Revolution offered by major historiographical schools one can understand, Shalev shows, why Talmon decided to omit America from his writings. Shalev also argues that because the American Revolution could hardly be conceived as "Rousseauian", Talmon was forced to overlook it. Thus, when focusing solely on messianic Europe Talmon made 1776 a missing revolution.

Focusing primarily on the second volume Talmon's trilogy, David Ohana, in his "J.L. Talmon, Gershom Scholem and the Price of Messianism", examines Talmon's concept of political messianism and its similarity to Gershom Scholem's interpretation of Jewish messianic trends. Ohana argues that the underlying theme of all of Talmon's historical investigations was the secular Messianic urge of modern man who presumed, in a Promethean fashion, to design not only this world but also the world-to-come. Ohana examines the relationship and intellectual exchange between Scholem, Talmon's teacher, and Talmon, arguing that the latter borrowed many insights from the former. Nonetheless, Talmon had to distinguish ancient Messianism from modern political Messianism which is monistic, secular, free from spiritual inhibitions, and characterized by a demand for an immediate settling of accounts. In conclusion, Ohana argues that both Scholem and Talmon feared the fusion of Messianism and history. Already in the 1930s they both identified communism not only as a Messianic political religion but also as revealing the deep psychological need of masses to follow myths.

The papers of Hedva Ben-Israel and Ezra Mendelsohn deal with Talmon and the nationalist predicament. In her "Talmon on Nationalism" Ben-Israel examines the type of historical explanation Talmon used in order to characterize nationalism, primarily in the third and concluding volume of his trilogy. Talmon's tendency to use the historical explanation for present predicaments is considered by Ben-Israel a method typical to his psychoanalytical approach to historical research in general. When interpreting Talmon, argues Ben-Israel, we should conceptually separate 'Messianism' from 'Salvationism' and also understand that Talmon's narrative is based on a distinction between the revolutionary visions and the nationalist ones. Total devotion to world reconstruction in accordance with socialist ideology characterized the first group of ideas. However, nationalists—especially those understanding their project in cultural rather than political terms—were treated by Talmon with more respect and empathy. Nonetheless, this positive image of national identity stands in contrast with the negative presentation of nationalism in the end Talmon's last book, where he presents the Nationalism as an irrational semi-mystical fantasy, reaching its disastrous zenith in Nazism. In Talmon's discussion of nationalism we find, therefore, a highly problematic thesis, that, Ben-Israel concludes, should be revised, despite Talmon's brilliant and captivating narrative.

Ezra Mendelsohn's "Jacob Talmon between 'Good' and 'Bad' Nationalism" reexamines and develops the problematic and even paradoxical description of nationalism, which Ben-Israel touches upon. Mendelsohn's basic premise is that we should read Talmon's theses knowing that their author was a believer in nationalism, and in Zionism in particular. Talmon's deep conviction that Jews have the moral right to establish their own national home, was checked by his awareness to the dangers inherent in nationalism, and its tendency toward chauvinism. After examining Talmon's sympathetic, but nonetheless highly ambivalent, approach towards Polish nationalism Mendelsohn analyzes Talmon's critique of Israeli ideology before and after the 1967 Six Day War, which Talmon considered to be a historical watershed. While Chaim Weizmann, the pragmatic Zionist, symbolized the "good", pre-1967 Zionism, "bad" post-1967 Zionism was epitomized by Menachem Begin's right-wing Zionist ideology.

The two last papers, by Efraim Podoksik and myself, examine Talmon's affinity and resemblance to two British political thinkers—Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) and Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), respectively. The main argument in Efraim Podoksik's paper, "Anti-Totalitarian Ambiguities: Jacob Talmon and Michael Oakeshott" is that albeit the similarity in Talmon and Oakeshott's support of liberal democracy they differed in their critique of totalitarianism. The deep differences in attitude and temperament are explained by Podoksik as stemming from different visions of modernity as a whole. Similar to many other critics of totalitarianism that fall under the category "Liberalism of Fear", Talmon was also strongly affected by the

atmosphere of a profound intellectual and political crisis in continental Europe. Thus, developing an essentially pessimist view of history, he regarded the danger of totalitarianism to be an inherent aspect of modernity itself. Oakeshott, on the other hand, felt much more secure and was more optimistic. Considering totalitarianism merely as a product of resentment, Oakesott rejected totalitarianism for being a reaction and critique, which offered no affirmative alternative of its own. Against Talmon Podoksik presents Oakeshott, who refused to accept the view that modernity was in the state of permanent crisis, as an optimist thinker, believing in liberalism of moral victory.

Lastly, my paper, "A tale of trees and crooked timbers: Jacob Talmon and Isaiah Berlin on the question of Jewish Nationalism", traces the history of the intellectual comradeship between Talmon and Isaiah Berlin which lasted from 1947 until Talmon's death in 1980, and pays particular attention to the last years of Talmon's life. I argue that the diallog between the two intellectuals operated on two levels: First, both became committed Cold Warriors, embracing and developing the anti-totalitarian discourse, which was colored by Popperian terminology and was essentially anti-Soviet. The second level of their diallog stemmed from their similar East European origin, their mutual Jewish identity, and their attitude towards the Zionist movement and the State of Israel. The two levels were not separate but conjoined commensurably. Examining Berlin and Talmon's thought from this dual perspective, I argue, can shed new light on the inner conflicts and conceptual tensions that each of them had to face and can also show that in many senses we find a parallel intellectual development in both, who rejected, for similar reasons, the ideal of liberalism as a-national cosmopolitanism. I argue that despite this similarity Talmon and Berlin present two very different concepts of liberal Nationalism and also understood the role of the intellectual in very dissimilar ways. I argue that Talmon, operating both as a 'in-house' critic of Israel Government's policies but at the same time also serving as an informal ambassador and a pleader defending his county, was forced to develop a certain duality that characterized his perception of his own role as an intellectual. In conclusion I argue that these dilemmas, that Berlin was fortunate to avoid, became especially acute in the last years of Talmon's life and also made the attempt to write a history of the Jews in modern times into an impossible mission.

In conclusion, the question of whether Talmon should be considered a jester—a critical anti-dogmatic intellectual who defies authority and its conventional hegemonic wisdoms—or a priest—a thinker of "the Establishment", protecting the traditional norms—remains open. Talmon, so it seems, tried to be a critical intellectual without leaving the mainstream. In that sense he was a friendly dissent. The attempts to untie the various Talmonian Gordian knots—between professional historian and engaged intellectual; past and present; revolutionary vision and yearning for national belonging; rational utopia and secularized politicized messianism—are bound to be unsuccessful, but are undoubtedly fascinating. It is in this way that discussions of Talmon provide a fertile ground for interdisciplinary diallog on a complex intellectual vocation. To put it in Talmon's own words, this is the essence of all historical investigations, and is exactly what turns them into existential quests:

> No historian, I believe, can be complete rationalist. He must be something of a poet, he must have a little of the philosopher, and he must be touched by some form of mysticism. The sorting out of evidence, the detective skill in discovering inaccuracy and inconsistency are of little help when the historian reaches the hard residue of mystery and enigma, the ultimate causes and the great problems of human life.[62]

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[62]Talmon. *The Nature of Jewish History*, p. 30.