

3. Learning from history: young Jewish men's reactions to anti-Semitism and immigrant youth in contemporary France

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This paper is based on a surprising and stimulating crossing point of two seemingly disparate areas of research: immigrant Muslim youth in contemporary France and the painful history of the Jewish youth age-group in early 20th-century central Europe and its responses to anti-Semitism. The meeting point of these two areas, could help generate answers to the following burning question: how can France create an inclusive programme whose mission would be “participation through identity formation”; a programme that respects cultural difference and that could show sensitivity to the special needs and cultural make-up of the estranged generation of young, male immigrants, especially from Muslim countries?

My starting point is the Jewish young male response to the rise of a pathological and obsessively perverse phenomenon that had marred an entire age: modern anti-Semitism in Europe which grew in grotesque proportions from the 1870s and culminated in genocide in the 1940s.¹ The 19th century was the age of modern, secular anti-Semitism in European societies. Not that hatred and persecution of the Jews and of Judaism were entirely new phenomena; on the contrary, for good reason it is known as the oldest hatred, for it is as old as the Christian Church itself and its complicated relationship to Judaism.² However, up to the age of the Enlightenment in the 18th century this attitude, which expressed itself in massacres, expulsions and blood libels, was religious in its rhetoric. Religious intolerance against a defenceless minority was the problem, and the mainstream solution favoured by the Catholic tradition as well as the Lutheran Reformation was also conceived in religious doctrine: conversion, even coerced conversion, sometimes by way of torture or under the threat of abduction. With the advent of the modern age and the emancipation of the Jews into the European nations in whose midst they lived, the Christian claims waned and made way for secular, though no less intense manifestations of hatred and exclusion. During the 19th century, in the age of modern nationalism, it was claimed that the Jews, in their specific otherness, were foreign, alien and as such, an obstacle in the European nations' path to consolidation along desired national or ethnic boundaries. The presence of the Jews was perceived as destructive. It interfered, so it was claimed, with the accomplishment of national cohesion which was necessary for the creation of an “authentic” national culture. The defeat, in spirit at least, of the

liberal ideal of assimilation and “integration as equals” generated among the new and rising Jewish intelligentsia in central and eastern Europe a wave of nationalist self-understanding as of the 1880s, Zionism being but one of its varieties.

But the most important development that concerns us today was the coincidence of the turn of anti-Semitism, since the mid 19th century, to the pseudo-scientific discourse of racism, and the rise of the age of youth in Europe. This evolved from the last third of the 19th century and culminated in the rise of youth as a self-conscious cultural, social and as of the end of the First World War, political power.³ Racist anti-Semitism did not concern itself with religious difference, with ethnic difference or with differences in patterns of economic activity but with biological difference. Along with the crystallisation of race as a pseudo-science, not only claiming that human society was made up of distinct races, but also claiming that some races, notably the Nordic race, were superior and meant to rule other races. Along this line some influential racists maintained that the Jews were inferior, devoid of creativity and deformed physically and mentally. Many students in universities enthusiastically adopted an active exclusion of Jews. Campuses such as the University of Vienna gradually became racist in flavour, inciting hostilities and clashes between fraternities which since the 1880s were defined along ethnic lines, the German fraternities excluding Jewish or Slavic students from their midst, using the most abusive and hateful racist justifications.⁴

A radical turning point in European history toward the human body, especially the male body and its deficiencies, occurred as of the 1890s. Of primary importance was the well known physician Max Nordau's widely circulating theory of degeneration that haunted Europe as of 1892, the year of its publication, claiming that as a reaction to the urbanisation of European society with its fast pace, the Europeans had become mentally disturbed, their nerves had been shattered and they needed physical and mental reform.⁵ It was this theory along with the racist attacks on the inferior Jewish body and soul that elicited the most eager response from the Jews to reform themselves. As a response to Nordau's degeneration theory we see the rise of health and fitness awareness all over Europe. For example, the invention of the Olympic Games by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, which first took place in 1896 in Athens, reflected this new awareness. Few people know that de Coubertin's primary intention was to reform what he perceived as a deficient French male body in comparison with the English or Dutch youth whom he saw as athletic, fit and immersed in sport activities.⁶ Thus, exposing French youth to English or Dutch youths in an international sports event would encourage them to become more physically fit. Nordau, who became the second most politically active Zionist after Theodor Herzl and the leader of the World Zionist Congress after the death of Herzl in 1904, specifically applied his theory to the Jewish male youths and their bodies. Thus, according to his brand of Zionism which was the mainstream Zionism of his day, in Palestine, perhaps only in Palestine, Jewish youths could be reinigorated and transformed into “muscle Jews”.⁷

As of 1895 we see a mushrooming of Jewish gymnastics clubs all over central Europe. Later on we see the rise of youth movements, all devoted to this attention to athleticism and physical fitness. The call for physical and mental reform was received most keenly among Jewish youth.⁸ Anti-Semitism also transformed itself into a corporeal hatred of the other. It was to this corporeally oppressive and depressive nature of the anti-Semitic mood in Europe that the young generation of male Jews responded most keenly to. Rationalising the effects of the Jewish life in exile as responsible for physical and mental deformity and degeneration, many

young Jews set out to seek the reform of body and soul, notably in the framework of Zionist activism, in order to metamorphose into tanned and muscular objects of beauty and fitness. The corporeal dimension of exclusion was the most hurtfully perceived by this young generation for many decades and, I would maintain, is still a potent power among young Jews today.

I would like to turn now to the problem of the disaffected young Muslim youths in contemporary France. I do not wish to draw simple historical parallels in my discussion. Rather my intention is to draw conclusions that are based on this comparison. The first point of comparison is the corporeal dimension of exclusion. In the Jewish case I would claim it was objective, imposed from outside by means of hateful and distorted images. In contemporary France I would claim it is subjective, that is, corporeal difference is, most visibly maintained by those who ultimately feel excluded. The majority of my interviewees in the north-eastern neighbourhoods of Paris feel and behave differently than their colleagues of the same age cohorts who are more “veteran” in France. The most crucial aspect of their subjectively felt exclusion by French society is concerned with their bodies and a corresponding mental difference. As in the case among the Jewish youth one hundred years ago, this is the most sensitive dimension of the experience of exclusion. Religious difference or difference in economic standing and the petty racism they entail in France, I would assert, are of great consequence no doubt, but when it comes to adolescent males these are secondary in importance.

Regardless of how open and tolerant contemporary French society may be to otherness, it is still all too clear to immigrant adolescents and young adults that if they wanted to really belong, really fit in, really be accepted, they need to adapt to some norms of physical appearance and to certain modes of behaviour to which many of them actively resist. Generally, in the framework of French tolerance, otherness in tastes, social and political views or religious practices are all accepted or contested in the framework of its republican values and its most powerful agent – the educational establishment. When it comes to the French public however, a permanent sense of inhospitality is reported by young immigrants. We can call it *petit racism*. On that level of social and cultural interaction where stereotypes play a major role, if certain views, attitudes and forms of behaviour and self-presentation are detected, they mark an immigrant as other, foreign and unpopular.⁹

The most potent source of unrest in France involves the predicament of adolescent males and young adults of immigrant Muslim descent which dramatically erupted last year.¹⁰ It is here that society must place its barometers as this particular social and cultural age group is the one where insult, disappointment and frustrated aspirations are the most likely to erupt violently. The question is then, how do French immigrant youths feel different from their more “veteran” French peers? Beyond the well-known and all too important differences in cultural proficiencies, gaps in social and economic standing and disadvantages in access to sources of prosperity, or blocking of prospects of social mobility, I would like to shed light on one aspect of difference that is rarely discussed at all. This difference is corporeal and has to do with one’s gendered body and mental makeup, as they are acted out by young male immigrants, and the way in which it is perceived by the general society around them. This corporeal difference is perhaps also marked by ethnic visibility but much more importantly than that, it is produced by gendered self-fashioning, self-understanding and a particular gendered behaviour.

Even an untrained observer of young people in France of middle and high school age would detect a stark difference between the gendered self-fashioning of adolescents of immigrant descent and their more “veteran” French peers. The longer one has lived in French society, regardless of whether his or her family immigrated from Spain, Portugal, Italy or eastern Europe, the more integrated one is over time into what we can call the French way of life, a way of life that evolved very dynamically over the 20th century. We cannot get into the historical background of the particular transformation that I would like to discuss in detail, mainly because we do not know enough about it, but the following observation seems to me to be valid: the normative French model of masculine behaviour, as it developed over decades, very similarly to other societies in western Europe, has become in recent decades softer than previous middle-class and working-class models. It has become relaxed, less extreme in its outward manifestations and the personal self-understanding which it reflects. I claim that it directly responds to the rise of the co-ed situation in Western urban society where boys and girls are encouraged to mingle freely and with a great measure of equality, and also to the way in which generational relations have evolved in the West, particularly within the family.

The more a young male immigrant is integrated into contemporary French society, the more likely he is to wish to adopt this softer, non-macho masculine self-fashioning. In addition, and as a part of this perhaps Europe-wide self-fashioning, he will relate to women and femininity along increasingly egalitarian lines. For him, a girl of his age is less of an object and more of a subject. Now, this perception may seem to both Europeans and non-Europeans as a more or less permanent characteristic of the West, perhaps one of the most accepted components of the image of the West in its own eyes, as well as its image by non-Westerners. However, this condition has seen its own evolution. It is related to how relations between the sexes and between generations in the realm of family and school have evolved in the middle class's path to modernity in the past one hundred and fifty years.

If a young immigrant adopts this softer masculine model, and this by all means occurs, he could proceed to take part in another enormously important aspect of young people's lives in France, that is, an egalitarian relationship, in principle at least, hopefully romantic, that involves emotional sharing between a boy and a girl of similar ages in mixed society. Because of cultural and religious reasons, such a relationship with immigrant girls from a traditional background is not conceivable for many. Beyond one's economic standing, which nowadays manifests itself in consumer gadgets, or social distinction, which manifests itself for example in one's neighbourhood, from an adolescent male perspective one badly wants to have a girlfriend, that is the most French thing to do. It must be noted, and this came out again and again in my interviews, that in order to attract the romantic attention of a young girl, one first has to renounce a more accented masculine code and acquire a softer self-fashioning. Unless in marginal social settings such as in actual gangs where macho manliness is demanded and attracts the attention of a particular type of young women, the softening of one's masculinity is crucial if one wants to be involved in a romantic relationship.

But there is an added dimension to the obstacle that prevents young, non-European immigrants to integrate themselves into the normative male-female sociability pattern that so characterises young, contemporary French people. Certain non-middle class, even anti-middle-class cultural codes that somehow originate

in class background or can be traced to what is thought to be the desirable masculine codes in the countries of origin, impose an excessive masculinity. The need for such a contrarian self-fashioning further exacerbates exclusion because it betrays a conservative, traditional division of gender roles. Thus, in an age that is selectively inspired by the achievements of historical feminist struggles, a young French woman would normally view macho gender self-fashioning with disdain. She may not want to associate with a hyper-masculine friend who, she may fear, will not respect her wishes for equality, something she has been used to throughout her life.

We should not underestimate the anxieties that the new, softer masculinity provokes in non-Western newcomers, who see right through it, many of whom reject it. Indeed, some contemporary cultural critics share this anxiety, not unlike the ones that plagued the last decades of the 19th century in Europe. These critics have pointed out nothing less than the decline of men in the West to the point of becoming tomorrow's "second sex" with no reversal in sight, or in Lionel Tiger's words: "the chronicle of the decline of men and the ascendancy of women."¹¹ Observing American society since the 1950s the poet Robert Bly detected the rise of the "soft male" in the 1960s as a response to what males were doing in Vietnam: "The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle ... He's a nice boy who pleases not only his mother but also the young woman he is living with."¹²

This decline is reflected in and is due to the disappearance of male initiation rites in modern times, a phase in a young male's life where he proceeds from the realm of his mother and father to the adoption of a second father or a "second king". In this realm, according to Bly, the young male learns from his mentor how to be a man, how to show leadership and so on. With an emotionally demanding relationship to their mothers and with the absence of this institution of mentoring, males in the modern West have become confused, sometimes angry and they lack not only skills but also values of productive manliness. I assert that the immigrant male adolescent youths in France have detected this process and have unconsciously determined it to be a predicament. If we speak about diversity, this is their most visible and blatant assertion of otherness. The normative masculinity provokes a profound anxiety in them, and so, their gender self-fashioning as an interactionist, non-essential form of behaviour. The social demand that challenges men not to lose their manliness is anxiety provoking. Thus men, young and old, immigrant or not, and even gay men, with their overdeveloped muscles, cling to, and maintain their sense of manliness at all cost, whatever that variety of manliness may be. The macho manliness that is so visibly produced by young immigrant males has unfortunate results: it further marginalises young males who adopt it from being accepted into the mainstream society. Their sense of foreignness is thus intensified by loads of daily rejection.

However unfortunate the consequences of this cultural reaction may be to a smoother integration into French society, one of its aspects contains a beneficial and creative potential. A pivotal component in the particular construction of masculinity among young Muslim male immigrants in France is their gravitation to male-bonding sociability.¹³ In simple terms, even though it is always their fantasy to have a girlfriend, in reality they either do not know how correctly to attract the romantic attention of a young girl in terms of the codes of behaviour they need to act out, or they do not wish to dilute their performance of masculinity, which they know is necessary for this purpose. The result is that the young male immigrant



group is intensely devoted to male-bonding with their peers. Contemporary research into immigrant male sociability and the formation of urban gangs in the USA shows that this tendency may be imported from traditional, possibly rural patterns of normative homosocial sociability. Certainly, they characterise normative social patterns both in non-Western societies as well as pre-modern Europe.¹⁴ And then, they may arise out of the bewildering social situation which young immigrants find themselves in the throes of the depressing *banlieues*. Young males are pushed towards this particular form of solidarity, which, when combined with extreme alienation, shatter personal experiences, and the lack of esteemed role models further pushes a small number of teenaged immigrants to join delinquent gangs.

Modern liberal societies in the West have a very limited and often distorted understanding of this intense form of bonding. They tend to see it as a menace. Throughout the 20th century in European history there transpired a long process by which the violent thorn was pulled out of this potentially violent form of sociability. Thus, according to the sociologist Norbert Elias (1986), violent male-bonding in the European past has been effectively sublimated into competitive sports and other non-violent outlets.¹⁵ As opposed to rising conservative voices who call for the breaking of the backs of riot-prone young immigrants in France, is there an alternative solution that would rather serve to empower, by giving a sense of direction to the enormous, possibly task-oriented energies that attract these young males toward each other? Could an institution be created that would effectively harness and channel these powerful energies to some meaningful identity-giving activity?

I would claim that the answer to this question is yes. This institution is none other than a compulsory universal civil service for young people in France which should be re-introduced. If managed correctly it could become monumental in creating participation along somewhat voluntary lines (people could volunteer to serve in particular units that they are drawn to). Based on the military model, for the time being obsolete in France, a universal, civil-service duty would entail many benefits including personal development and employability as it should provide vocational training which is also an identity giver. Such compulsory civil service must recruit all French youths. If managed correctly, special attention to immigrant identities could be given, thus creating a sense of belonging and an activity that generates collective memories for one's entire life, not to speak of friendships and connections.

Because of the intense male-bonding experience of immigrant youths, which in my opinion is but a temporary social fact that may disappear in a few decades, this framework is ideal mostly for them. The key to the success of such formations lies in the cultivation of organic, charismatic and somewhat older unit leaders who themselves come from immigrant backgrounds, but nonetheless demonstrate a commitment to republican values. I strongly believe that if such a grassroots leadership is cultivated, the rank and file recruits will embrace it and follow it without the use of even the least coercive measures.

The rather recent introduction of young women into battle units in the USA or the Israeli military has shown that young women can also take part successfully and rewardingly in such units so that there is no misunderstanding between the concept of male-bonding and the possibility of women taking part in it as equal peers. It is my contention that because this formation is based on a particular type of intense sociability and camaraderie, in this framework, immigrant youths

can get to know women as equals and relax their attitudes toward them much better than in school or in the streets. This could well be a starting point to meeting the crisis of living together that the recent riots have demonstrated.

To conclude and tie back my discussion to the Jewish response to anti-Semitism one hundred years ago, the Zionist movement also made use of male-bonding as a human energy that can be harnessed and channelled to task-oriented missions. This was a major characteristic of central European societies in general, especially in the German case. Male-bonding spontaneously manifested itself in the youth movement phenomenon. There is no way we can understand this particular period of modern German history without the role that the rise of the youth movements played in subsequent decades. So is the case in Jewish history. In France today, spontaneous male-bonding is only occurring in order to commit riots. These energies should not be crushed by law enforcement. Rather, they should and could be effectively harnessed, while at the same time pulling out the violent thorn.

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-----> Endnotes

1. The literature on anti-Semitism is vast, but see the following for a good introduction: J. Katz (1980) *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism 1700-1933*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press; P. Pulzer, (1964) *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press; and an important classic J.-P. Sartre (1995) *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*. New York, Schocken Books.
2. J. Parkes (1963) *Antisemitism*. Chicago, Quadrangle.
3. See W. Laqueur (1962) *Young Germany. A History of the German Youth Movement*. New York, Basic Books.
4. See the first chapters of A. Koestler (1952) *Arrow in the Blue: An Autobiography*. New York, Macmillan.
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6. E. Weber (1970) Pierre De Coubertin and the Introduction of Organized Sport in France. *Journal of Contemporary History*. 5, No. 2, pp. 3-26.
7. M. Stanislawski (2001) *Zionism and the Fin-de-Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism From Nordau to Jabotinsky*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, pp. 74-97.
8. T. Presner (2007) *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*. London, Routledge.
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10. See an excellent analysis by A. Lentin (2005) *The Intifada of the Banlieues* at opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/intifada_3037.jsp.
11. L. Tiger (1999) *The Decline of Males: The First Look at an Unexpected New World for Men and Women*. New York, St. Martin's Griffin. See also R. Bly, (1990) *Iron John: A Book about Men*. New York, Vintage.
12. R. Bly (1990) *Iron John: A Book about Men*, p. 4.
13. On male-bonding see L. Tiger (1969) *Men in Groups*. New York, Random House; G. Volger and K. Welck (1990) *Männerbande, Männerbünde, Zur Rolle des Mannes im Kulturvergleich*. Cologne, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde.
14. On male groups in late medieval France see J. Rossiaud (c. 1978) Prostitution, Youth, and Society in the Towns of Southeastern France in the Fifteenth Century. In R. Forster and O. Ranum (eds) *Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society. Selections From the Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilizations*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1-45.
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