

Zeev Sternhell, 1935-2020

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Zeev Sternhell was a historian of nationalism who demolished the myth of French “immunity” to fascism. His focus on the history of ideas allowed him to trace the genealogy of France’s home-grown far right — yet proved less able to understand the social forces that powered fascist movements across the continent.

Zeev Sternhell’s position in the contemporary intellectual landscape was something of a paradox. He renovated the study of fascism and, more generally, of intellectual history. But he also recognized his deep roots in an “old” historiographical tradition which many would have no problem terming obsolete. In methodological terms, this professor of political science at the University of Jerusalem was a declared conservative. The historiographical currents that emerged over the last five decades were of no interest to him, except insofar as they produced regressions that deserved the most intransigent of critiques.

For Sternhell, social history was guilty of ignoring the autonomy of ideas; in his view, the Cambridge School’s founders Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock — preoccupied with contextualizing political philosophy on the plane of language — were lost in the torments of particularism and relativism. Hence, the “linguistic turn” was nothing but a form of irrationalism, the contemporary version of an old obscurantism in revolt against the Enlightenment.

The models which Sternhell counterposed to these dangerous tendencies — Ernst Cassirer, Raymond Aron, and [Arthur Lovejoy](#) — were themselves a little dated. The first two were “militant” historians and philosophers engaged in an intellectual battle clearly inspired by classical liberalism. The third had schematized a conception of the history of ideas as a dialogue between timeless thought categories (unit-ideas) that could cross eras, languages, and cultures — a claim few today are prepared to defend.

Yet for Sternhell this was a “peerless tool” for [interpreting the experience of human societies](#). For him, democracy, liberalism, nationalism, communism, and fascism were above all “ideas” and their material, social, cultural, and political history secondary and derivative. To use an adjective that did not belong to Sternhell’s own vocabulary, ideas are “performative.” This method always inspired his work. As we shall seek to demonstrate, he placed it in service of an ambitious critical project, as he sought to expose the ideological hinterland behind the modern forms of domination. Despite certain evident limits, the results were often fruitful. Here lay the paradox of a scholar who could revitalize history writing by deploying an old-fashioned conceptual arsenal.

Against French Exceptionalism

For more than three decades, Sternhell explored the history of French nationalism. When he was preparing his PhD thesis at Paris’s Institut d’études politiques (IEP) in the mid-1960s, Vichy was still a taboo. The political historiography of contemporary France was dominated by René Rémond, one of the IEP’s best-known figures, whose [thesis on the “three Rights”](#) had been made canonical.

According to Rémond, since 1789 France had known a Legitimist, a Bonapartist, and an Orléanist

right, but not a *fascist* right. The first emerged from the counterrevolution and continued across the nineteenth century, from Joseph de Maistre to Charles Maurras. This was a reactionary right nostalgic for the *ancien regime* and drenched in Catholicism. The second was authoritarian: from Bonaparte to General de Gaulle via Napoleon III and Marshal Pétain, it cut its path through all the various hues of conservatism, proclaiming itself guardian of the nation. The third was technocratic, favoring a modernization that respected order and social hierarchies. This latter made its appearance in 1830 with Louis-Philippe and recurred throughout France's political regimes, up till the post-Gaullist Fifth Republic.

In this constellation, there could be no trace of fascism. For Rémond, in France fascism was never anything but an import, rootless and without a future, the movement of a few minor fanatics that appeared during the German occupation, briefly made a lot of noise but was quickly marginalized and isolated. In this view, Pétain's regime was a peculiar blend of these three Rights rather than a variant of fascism. Written in the 1950s, his work substantially ignored the history of antisemitism, one of the pillars of French nationalism since the times of the Dreyfus Affair. [Long-commonplace](#), its fundamental thesis postulated a France that had been historically "immune" to fascism.

Sternhell was among the first to expose this myth, subjecting it to a systematic critique and ultimately overthrowing it entirely. In 1972 he published a biography of Maurice Barrès (drawing on his dissertation) in which he presented the nationalist writer as a protofascist ideologue. Barrès had abandoned the cosmopolitanism and socialism of his youth during the Dreyfus Affair, coming to embody a radical, subversive nationalist turn. The writer from Nancy had gone beyond simply denouncing "decadence" — the *fin-de-siècle* obsession of "cultural pessimism" — and oriented toward a new synthesis between the conservative tradition (a certain romanticism, the rejection of progress, authoritarianism, respecting hierarchies, aristocratic anticapitalism) and modernity.

The cult of the leader and of youth, the myth of blood and soil, hatred for bourgeois values, and racial antisemitism, marked out a new type of irrationalism that pointed toward the creation of a sort of alternative modernity. Barrès did not look to the past but projected himself into the future. He rejected democracy in order to transcend it through an authoritarian order, not to restore the *ancien regime*. His eulogization of virility, brute force, and national vitality brought him closer to Ernst Jünger than to Joseph de Maistre or Louis de Bonald. He did not join the main anti-republican and anti-Dreyfusard movement *Action française* precisely because his nationalism went further than counterrevolution. His antisemitism went beyond economic and religious anti-Judaism *à la* Drumont; his racism had already assimilated the codes of social Darwinism.

The Revolutionary Right

A few years later, Sternhell systematized this interpretation in [La Droite Révolutionnaire](#) (1978). In this work, late nineteenth-century France appeared as the real crucible of European fascism, the [result of the synthesis](#) of a Right that had abandoned its aristocratic conservatism to become populist, and a Left that had ceased to be Marxist and republican and instead combined with nationalism. Nationalism was the magma in which these different currents mixed — from the antisemitism of *Action française* and Drumont to the eugenics of Georges Vacher de Lapouge and Gustave Le Bon, and from the populism of the Cercle Proudhon to the anti-republican and antidemocratic irrationalism of Georges Sorel. The model had thus been established.

Over subsequent years, Sternhell devoted various works of his to studying the ideological revisionism that had turned certain left-wing currents toward "national" socialism and then the ultimate embrace of fascism: "The national socialism without which fascism would never have been born emerged in the 1880s, and the tradition perpetuated itself without break, up till the Second World War." Fascism, Sternhell continued, "thus made its appearance before the Great War, without

having any direct relation with it." In short, it was the Dreyfus Affair, with its legacy of militarism, anti-republicanism, anti-liberalism, and antisemitism, that had made it possible. Over the 1930s, fascism would "impregnate" almost all French nationalism.

Between the riots of February 1934 and the advent of the Vichy regime, Sternhell argued, fascism was not restricted to subversive movements like Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français, Henri Dorgères's "greenshirts," or Marcel Déat's "neo-socialism," nor to a few fanatical writers like Louis Ferdinand Céline, Robert Brasillach, Lucien Rebatet, or Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. Sternhell included in this vast galaxy [Henri de Man's "planism"](#) and the political sociology of Robert Michels for whom the popular classes were unable to self-govern and would thus always be dominated by some elite, thus proving democracy impossible. But the fascist melting pot had yet more diverse ingredients: Sternhell included Georges Valois's populist socialism, Édouard Berth and Georges Sorel's irrationalism, and even the populism of Thierry Maulnier and Emmanuel Mounier.

For two decades, the Jerusalem historian was at the center of an extensive international debate, an aptly titled [Sternhell Controversy](#) which today appears as one of the high points of the reinterpretation of fascism. If rarely accepted in their entirety, his theses gradually gained legitimacy: no one before him had reconstructed French nationalism's intellectual genealogy through such an in-depth and complete panorama. Many historians criticized Sternhell for mounting a teleological interpretation which made fascism descend in linear, almost ineluctable fashion from the crisis of liberal democracy and the reaction against the Enlightenment at the end of the nineteenth century. Others expressed a certain skepticism toward an interpretation that, in radically inverting the traditional thesis of French "immunity," instead made France the very paradigm of fascism. And was it possible to generalize this interpretative model?

The vision of fascism as the product of the encounter between a revisionist left and a revolutionary right doubtless finds some [significant analogies in the genesis of Italian fascism](#), as some of Sternhell's disciples have shown. Indeed, the fusion between Mussolini's national socialism, Sergio Panunzio's revolutionary syndicalism, the radical nationalism of Enrico Corradini and Alfredo Rocco, the irredentism of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Giovanni Gentile's spiritualism, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurism realized at the end of the Great War looks like a reinvention (with a few variations, in a more chaotic situation) of the ideological cocktail that had already been shaken together in France during the Dreyfus Affair.

Sorel's role in the debates preceding the birth of Italian fascism reveals an analogous mechanism of ideological production. But this model finds no equivalent in the other countries subjected to the fascistization of Europe during the 1930s. Certainly not in Spain, where fascism ultimately took the form of National-Catholic Francoism, abandoning the modernism of the early Falange; nor in Portugal, where it would be difficult indeed to find any left-wing matrix for Salazarism. Certainly not in Austrian clerical fascism, of Christian-social but not socialist matrix, nor in the fascistizing nationalisms of central Europe — particularly vigorous in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia — which would instead assume the traits of "occupation-fascism" during the Second World War.

But most importantly, this model finds no equivalent in Nazism, whose origins should instead be located in *völkisch* ideology, biological racism, and reactionary modernism — at loggerheads with any form of syndicalism or Marxist revisionism. What is sometimes defined as the "Nazi left" — Gregor Strasser's current, tending to accentuate nationalist discourse's "anticapitalist" rhetoric — did not in fact emerge from the Left, and it was in any case eliminated in 1934 during the Night of the Long Knives. "National-Bolshevism" — a movement which counted among its inspirers Ernst Jünger's less famous brother Friedrich — advocated an encounter between pan-Germanists and Slavophiles, but it was never taken seriously either by the Nazis or the German left.

So, there seems to be reason to doubt Sternhell's model. Can we really consider paradigmatic a fascism which, unlike its European homologues, was always minoritarian — and which took power only over the brief period between 1940 and 1944, amid the contingent circumstances of the German occupation? At times, Sternhell recognized the limits of his approach: in order to defend the idea that fascism had French origins he was compelled to exclude Nazism from it, on the pretext that its ideology was totally based on biological determinism. Nor did his model concern itself with the [now-canonical difference between ideologies, movements, and regimes](#).

Yet fascist ideology has not always been embodied in mass movements, and these movements have not always managed to conquer power or transform into regimes. Fascism did not occupy such a major place in twentieth-century history due to an ideological synthesis devised by Maurice Barrès and Jules Soury in nineteenth-century France — rather, its importance owed to the social and political cataclysms which spread across the continent thanks to the seizure of power by Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco. Sternhell's refusal to consider the impact of the Great War on European thought thus denied him a decisive criterion for understanding the birth of fascism, its spread, and its metamorphoses within extremely diverse national and cultural contexts. Only a defender of the most traditional history of ideas — ideas as a chemically pure distillation of thought, with a life of their own and as the exclusive generators of world history — could adopt such a purely "platonic" conception of fascism.

The Anti-Enlightenment

Nonetheless, the tenacity, the breadth, and the depth of Sternhell's research did produce fruitful results. In demonstrating that there was a French fascism, he cast doubt over many clichés and encouraged a useful revision. Gradually, the model of the "three Rights" was abandoned and the existence of a French fascism universally acknowledged. In an intellectual climate principally marked by the public expression of the Jewish memory of deportation and, in parallel to this, the rise of the Front National, the "Sternhell Controversy" became an essential moment of the "[Vichy Syndrome](#)" — a mutation of collective memory and a transformation of historical consciousness. If today Marshal Pétain's "national revolution" is no longer seen as an accident but as the landing point of French nationalism's long voyage — not its inevitable endpoint, but at least a coherent one — we largely owe this to Sternhell (as well as some other historians like [Robert Paxton](#) who began to consider Vichy an outcome and not only a *parenthesis*). It was thus the most traditional history of ideas that renovated the historiography on fascism in France. This marked an immensely important shift in terms of the public use of history.

Once the polemics on fascism had calmed down, Sternhell expanded the horizons of his research, studying the history of conservative thought in Europe between the French Revolution and the end of the twentieth century. To his eyes, modernity — whose matrix lies in the Enlightenment — is a contradictory process marked by a permanent, irreducible opposition between rationalism and its enemies. In other terms, the history of modernity cannot be unbound from the history of the anti-Enlightenment, its *pars destruens*. The concept of anti-Enlightenment (*Gegenaufklärung*) goes back to Nietzsche, and it has been in common usage in Germany since the end of the nineteenth century, long before it was schematized by [Isaiah Berlin in his studies on the Counter-Enlightenment](#).

Just as he had done for the notion of fascism, Sternhell proposed a broad definition of the anti-Enlightenment, able to encompass multiple variants. Unlike Berlin, for whom the spiritual father of the anti-Enlightenment was the apocalyptic and mystic Johann Georg Hamann, the "Mage of the North," Sternhell attributed the founding role to Vico, author of *La Scienza nuova* (1725), which tore down Cartesianism and instead upheld a cyclical vision of history. Anti-Enlightenment would become a political ideology at the end of the eighteenth century thanks to the fiery prose of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, the two great enemies of the French Revolution. Burke rejected the Rights of

Man in the name of the ancient rights of the British aristocracy; the “rights of Englishmen” had a historical and concrete character, unlike the abstract discourses of the *philosophes* who postulated a “universal” humanity. De Maistre rejected the 1789 Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen in the name of a timeless, unchallengeable, and sacred power, incarnated by the king and the public executioner.

In this transitional era, it was Johann Gottfried Herder who reached a coherent synthesis between anti-rationalism, relativism, the nascent ethnic communalism, and historicism. The German philosopher abhorred the idea of a world governed by reason, and to universalism he counterposed the singularity of each culture. Similarly, he opposed individual rights in the name of a mystical conception of languages and national communities; he championed historicism — in the sense of a providential conception of history — against the constructivism of a society of free individuals as masters of their own destiny. According to Sternhell, Herder represented “the first link in a chain that led to the disaggregation of the European world.”

Around the mid-nineteenth century, a second movement appeared, less apocalyptic in tone but likewise anti-rationalist and anti-universalist in its principles. It took shape around figures like Thomas Carlyle, Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, and the German “cultural pessimists” (Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck) who began to inject the poison of social Darwinism, racism, and antisemitism into the magma of conservative culture.

The third movement arose toward the end of the century: first heralded by Nietzsche, it made its appearance in France with the anti-Dreyfusards and in Germany with the “conservative revolutionaries.” A great enemy of modernity, Nietzsche was an “[aristocrat of thought \[who\] did not go down into the street.](#)” His successors, conversely, rediscovered the militant radicalism of the counterrevolution. Their diagnosis of the decline of the West pointed to a redemption through nationalist revolt; their rejection of cosmopolitanism fed on the exaltation of “roots,” the myth of blood and soil. Yet, according to Sternhell, this third anti-Enlightenment wave is not reducible to fascism — i.e., its radical version. For it also included conservatives like Benedetto Croce and Friedrich Meinecke, who would in the 1930s and 1940s express a passive, moderate antifascism.

Anti-Communism

After 1945, the anti-Enlightenment underwent a further metamorphosis as it donned the vest of Cold War anti-communism. For Sternhell, its main representative was Isaiah Berlin, a leading figure in the “White emigration” in Britain. A liberal-conservative and open admirer of Vico and Herder, Berlin violently hated the French Enlightenment and especially Rousseau, in whose work he saw the crucible of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. [Berlin’s famous distinction](#) between the “negative” liberties of the modern world (those concerning the protection of individual property and prerogatives) and the “positive” ones of the past (oriented toward public action and the defense of the common good) did no more than reformulate an anti-Enlightenment postulate: namely, the rejection of the principle of equality, in the name of an anti-universalist relativism. [Sternhell counted alongside Berlin](#) such representatives of American conservatism as Irving Kristol and Gertrude Himmerlfarb, [author of a violent pamphlet against the French Enlightenment thinkers](#), together with anti-communist historians Ernst Nolte and François Furet.

Sternhell’s historicization of conservatism is an admirable, fascinating *tour de force*. And yet it leaves many questions unanswered. As the name itself indicates, the anti-Enlightenment was a reactive phenomenon, presupposing the Enlightenment before it, but Sternhell never clearly defines this latter. In his book, it is simultaneously both omnipresent and impossible to grasp. Sternhell exalts the “Franco-Kantian” matrix of the Enlightenment, without forgetting its English and Scottish ramifications, from John Locke to Adam Ferguson and David Hume. But that’s it. We get the

impression, reading this book, that the Enlightenment ended in 1784 with Kant's famous essay "Was ist Aufklärung?" and then there was nothing left to do except defend its legacy.

Some passages seem to indicate that this was an essentially liberal current of thought, directly proceeding from Locke and Montesquieu to Raymond Aron and Leo Strauss (the same Strauss who defended classical philosophy against the modern decadence that began with the Renaissance and continued with the Enlightenment, and who is today considered one of the inspirers of American neoconservatism).

Indeed, for Sternhell, just as fascism entered the stage of history even before the Great War, the anti-Enlightenment could assume its own coherent intellectual and political profile without waiting for the French Revolution — [contrary to what many other historians claimed](#). Interpreted in this teleological perspective, the seed of the contemporary totalitarianisms would appear to have been planted already within the original anti-Enlightenment, in particular in Herder, who was "[the first to undermine the self-confidence of Western civilization, a phenomenon that was to have disastrous results in the twentieth century](#)." According to Sternhell, Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment stand counterposed to one another, as two monoliths. To his eyes, there are no shades of gray between this opposed pair, which together paint a history of political thought in black and white.

Yet such schematism leaves the reader skeptical. For one, this vision seems to deliberately overlook everything in Enlightenment history which does not make up part of the genealogy of liberal democracy. Sternhell pays no attention to the "[radical Enlightenment](#)," which emerged in the Netherlands with Spinoza around a half-century before Locke's *Treatise on Civil Government* (1690). This current did not seek to naturalize property and the state or to justify a pact between faith and reason within the terms of the existing monarchies. For the supporters of Spinozism, the Enlightenment assumed a tone that was atheist, republican, and collectivist in tendency; it questioned big land ownership in the name of the common good and a collective sovereignty within which individual liberties were inscribed. As well as republicanism, Sternhell's reconstruction also overlooks Marxism, the main mid-nineteenth-century attempt to renovate the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, his line of argument does irresistibly turn our thoughts to György Lukács's 1954 *magnum opus* on [The Destruction of Reason](#), in which he formulated in Marxist terms an analogous (and likewise unilateral) teleology of Western irrationalism. In some passages in his book, Sternhell defines anti-communism as one of the privileged forms of anti-Enlightenment during the Cold War, but does not develop this interesting hypothesis further.

Yet Sternhell is almost totally blind to the contradictions that run through the history of the Enlightenment itself. In his apologetic vision, the "[dialectic of Enlightenment](#)" is just a myth, or even a new form of dangerous relativism. The transformation of Western rationalism into a mechanism of domination, cut off from any emancipatory project — a problem that runs through the work of many contemporary thinkers, from Max Weber to the Frankfurt School, Günther Anders, and Zygmunt Bauman — seems to be of no interest to him. We can of course consider fascism "an exacerbated form of the tradition of counter-Enlightenment" and Nazism "a total attack on the human race." But nor can we ignore their cult of modern technology and science. Just as we cannot forget the links attaching the Enlightenment tradition to Stalinism — which explicitly laid claim to its legacy — or liberal democracy's relationship with colonialism and the atom bomb, or indeed the ecological consequences of "control" over nature by a reason-become-technological rationality. In the twenty-first century, we no longer have the right to read Condorcet with the innocence of his contemporaries. Sternhell avoids addressing these questions, or dodges them by simply affirming that such turns were alien both to "[the spirit of the Franco-Kantian Enlightenment and that of the English and Scottish Enlightenments](#)." This is rather too cursory a manner of confronting the problem.

Contextualizing Zionism

It was inevitable that the historian of European nationalisms would decide, sooner or later, to mount an analysis of Zionism. Unlike his parents, Sternhell survived World War II and the Holocaust; he spent the war years in his home country of Poland, hidden by a Catholic family, and moved to Israel aged sixteen, in 1951, after a six-year spell in France. A representative of the Zionist left, who favored the dismantling of the Jewish settler-colonies in the Palestinian territories, he was himself active in Israeli political life. The history of Zionism interpellated him as a citizen even before it interested him as a scholar. In his view, "Israel's existence is not just a political question. It is something much more profound, which we could define as a return by man to humanity and dignity." On these grounds, he considered himself a "classical Zionist."

On this terrain, the intellectual's political engagement interfered with the historian's judgements — whatever Sternhell's efforts to maintain a critical distance. Applying the same analytical criteria he had adopted to interpret European nationalisms, this time to the history of Zionism, he lucidly recognized its "Herderian" and "tribal" matrix. A movement born in late nineteenth-century central Europe in response to the crisis of liberalism and the blockage of the emancipation process, it necessarily reflected the culture of its time. The socialism of the founding fathers (Berl Katznelson, Aron David Gordon, and David Ben Gurion) was a superficial vest under which there beat the heart of a vigorous and combative nationalism. Some Zionist ideologues like Hayim Arlosoroff and Nachman Syrkin openly drew inspiration from the German nationalism of Oswald Spengler and Moeller van den Bruck, while Martin Buber defended a mystic conception of Jewish "blood." On the basis of the hermeneutics Sternhell had deployed in his first works, this would largely have sufficed to catalogue these intellectuals in the anti-Enlightenment milieu alongside Barrès, Maurras, and Spengler, if not even in the fascist camp.

Yet in this case, our historian discovered the virtues of contextualization, grasping a fundamental difference between the two currents: German nationalism celebrated a politics of imperial conquest, whereas Zionism sought a political solution to the problems of a persecuted people. In other words, while Zionism doubtless emerged as a variant of tribal nationalism, this was the tribal nationalism of an oppressed people. In a more recent essay, Sternhell presented Theodor Herzl as an "assimilated liberal Jew" whose nationalism took its cues from an "intuition of genius": he had "[understood the danger that hung over the Jews of Europe as soon as the liberal order began to totter.](#)" In this reading, antisemitism "was only one aspect of the great battle against the Enlightenment" that dominated the twentieth century. Opposite to Herder, Herzl became a fighter for the Enlightenment in struggle against antisemitism, and Sternhell reconciled himself with Zionist providentialism. What remained difficult to prove, however, was the "Franco-Kantian" rationalism of a nationalist ideology that asserted its own legitimation by appealing to the Bible.

This historical reconstruction leaves open many questions that go beyond a rather questionable teleology, itself born of hindsight (and when Herzl published the *Jewish State* in 1897 no one could have predicted the Holocaust). Zionism wanted to build a Jewish national society *without Arabs*. Its origins are not to be exclusively located in the hierarchical, anti-Enlightenment racism of the nineteenth century (at least not in the socialist Zionists' case). But they should also certainly not be identified with a republican conception of the nation as an open political community, which would not be delimited by ethno-religious frontiers. There is no doubt that Israel — in its quality as a "Jewish state" — presents characteristics far more "Herderian" than they are "Franco-Kantian." Sternhell recognized that the 1967 war "created a colonial-type situation" — but did not admit that the current contradictions of Israeli society existed already upon the state's foundation in 1948.

This portrait of Zeev Sternhell, who died on June 21, 2020, was originally published seven years ago. At the end of his life, he had strengthened his criticism of Netanyahu and Israel's occupation of the

Palestinian territories, paying the price of a growing isolation and even stoically resisting the threats of the nationalist far right. This great historian of nationalism, of fascism, and the Enlightenment, however, never acknowledged the need to turn his critical weapons against the tradition of the Enlightenment itself. Not in order to reject it but, on the contrary, to recognize its contradictions, its ambiguities, and its abuses — which, in some cases, had nothing to envy even the most reactionary practices. He has already found a significant place among the greatest historians of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His moral integrity and political engagement deserved respect and admiration. Despite our divergences, we learned a lot from his works. In his own spirit, honest and empathetic criticism is the best tribute we could pay to his memory.

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