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The Uniqueness of the American Jewish Experience

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This paper addresses the fact of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Hebrew Union College on the eve of the two-hundredth anniversary of our own country. I want to speak of uniqueness, of the uniqueness of the American experience, of the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, and of the intersection and the fusion of the two as we commemorate the Bicentennial of our country and the Centennial of our College.

What is the uniqueness of the American experience? If one rummages through the long history of humankind, and seeks to categorize the various modes which humankind have designed to govern themselves, and the systems which they have fashioned to maintain and to assure their survival, we discover that there are a very limited number of these systems. Indeed, they can be reduced to four.

The first of these systems I shall call pre-capitalist traditional. The second I shall call nation-state capitalist. The third I shall call operational Marxism. The fourth of these systems I shall call the developmental capitalist. Of these four systems, three of them have proved to be cyclical, while only the fourth system—the developmental-capitalist—is unique, is counter-cyclical.

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The first of these systems, namely the pre-capitalist traditional, is characterized by ruling elites who are motivated primarily by the drive for political, military, and ecclesiastical power. They are not preeminently concerned with economic growth and development. For them the economic sectors are secondary. These monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical elites treasure wealth, but they themselves are not the wealth creators. They consume wealth; they luxuriate in wealth; they extract wealth created by others; but they themselves have no inner drive to pursue profit for its own sake. Their major compulsions, their overall ambitions, lie elsewhere. They are driven to exercise power as emperors; they enjoy warfare and military splurges; or, as in the case of ecclesiastical elites, they may be very concerned with the spiritual domains of this world and of the world to come. These elites delight in the pomp and pageantry which go hand in hand with these kinds of pursuits.

Such pre-capitalist traditional societies, irrespective of their distinctive differences, go through a seemingly inexorable cycle. They follow a trajectory of an upward trendline of economic growth and development until it peaks out and then turns downward. This peaking-out occurs with such inexorability because traditional governing elites are, as pointed out above, motivated by noneconomic drives. They thus fail to make the kind of investment in technological innovation, particularly in agriculture, that would provide for sustained economic growth. A point therefore is reached where economic growth peaks out, and a trendline sets in which ultimately leads to disintegration and collapse.

This trajectory, although seemingly inexorable, does not trace a straight line, but moves upward with downward loops, and moves downward with upward loops. But however looping the line may be, no pre-capitalist traditional society has ever sustained economic growth as a normative pattern, or escaped the grip of the cyclical trap.

II

The second system, nation-state capitalism, is a system which began to emerge only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is an economic system which must be sharply distinguished from all precapitalist systems because the leaders in these emergent capitalist

societies were entrepreneurs; they were businessmen; they were individuals who were concerned with profits; they were persons driven to accumulate and augment wealth so as to be able to reinvest. They were committed primarily to making their wealth grow; and wherever this economic system gained a strong beachhead and secure salient, it generated changes so radical that they ultimately dissolved and broke up the old traditional societies by spinning off convulsive revolutions and unseating the old traditional ruling elites.

The first of these grand capitalist revolutions occurred in Holland in the sixteenth-century Revolt of the Netherlands. The second of these occurred in England with the Puritan Revolt in the seventeenth century, while the third of these occurred in France with the French Revolution of 1789.

Following each of these revolutions, society was restructured, rearranged, and reorganized in such a way that the old ruling elites, the old ecclesiastical nobility, the old aristocracy, even the old monarchy, were not totally and completely phased out. There was a dominant kind of reorganization of the structure of society so as to commit its ruling elites, whatever their composition might be, to the principles of capitalistic development and the opening up of continuous economic growth which capitalistic development made possible, but there was no total dissolution of the power and governing prerogatives of the monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical elites.

At the outset it seemed that perhaps this breakout of a new economic system might carry with it the means by which the cyclical grip might be broken, and the cyclical trap sprung. For unlike the previous precapitalist traditional systems, whose ruling elites were not committed to economic growth and development, the new governing elites were committed to the augmentation of wealth as a prime concern. The Industrial Revolution, in fact, generated such fantastic wealth that one could extrapolate an upward trendline culminating in the equivalent of the Messianic Age.

And yet that hope, that anticipation, which seemed so well grounded at the turn of the century, and which found poetic expression in Tennyson's dreams of a parliament of man, an end of war, and the new kind of world being foreshadowed by the Victorian Age, was rudely dashed when World War I brought the capitalist nations of

Western Europe into bitter armed conflict and an exhausting, agonizing, and brutalizing war, which not only left millions and millions dead and maimed but plunged postwar Europe into a basic, long-run downward trendline as sharp as any displayed by pre-capitalist and traditional societies. Cyclicity had again won out. If traditional societies, pre-capitalist societies, were condemned to a trajectory, nation-state capitalist societies were seemingly no less condemned.

III

The third system, which emerged at the end of World War I, was operational Marxism as exemplified by the Soviet Union. This was a peculiar and unique kind of system. It certainly was not pre-capitalist. In fact, it was an uprising against pre-capitalism. But it did not follow the model of the grand, classical, capitalist revolutions. The Bolshevik Revolution was proclaimed as a revolution of the proletariat and the peasants; it was led by a very new kind of sophisticated political elite, the Bolsheviks.

The Bolshevik Revolution was unique in this sense: not only did it develop a new kind of leadership, but it seemed to have no cycle at all. By this I mean that it was a kind of system which started out as a failure, and was incapable of rising very much on its own beyond the low point at which it had begun. To the degree that the Soviet Union did make headway, it was only because from time to time it gained access to Western technology to build its factories, and to Western granaries to ward off famine.*

When we reflect on these three systems, each in its own way underwrites a tragic view of human destiny. It seems to confirm the sad vision of the Greeks, especially as portrayed in the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was condemned for all eternity to push with great effort a rock, again and again, to the top of a mountain only to have it plunge, each time, to the very bottom. No matter what and how

*For the absolute dependence of Soviet technology on Western imports and models, see Antony C. Sutton's three-volume *Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development* (Stanford, Calif., 1968, 1971, 1973). Cf. also Herbert E. Meyer, "Why the Russians Are Shopping in the U.S.," *Fortune*, February 1973, pp. 66-71, 146-48. Without the succor which the West has provided, and is providing, the system would have careened violently to its doom.

desperate the effort of human beings may be (so the myth would have us believe), the moment of towering success is the most dangerous moment of all. It is precisely at that point that one can anticipate the downward plunge.

IV

There did, however, emerge a highly unique economic system which gives every evidence of breaking through the cyclical trap. It is an economic system which need not go through this inexorable trajectory. This system developed solely and uniquely in the United States. And since this system is not identical with, although it does resemble, the nation-state capitalism of Europe, I call it developmental capitalism.

In what way does developmental capitalism differ from nation-state capitalism? In the first place it differs in the way it began. The American venture from the outset was a capitalistic enterprise. This was the only country which knew no other kind of economic system. What was transplanted to its shores was the new, innovating capitalistic mode which in Europe was developing within older, traditional, pre-capitalist societies—convulsing Europe to its foundations, tearing it apart with revolutions which gave birth to a hybrid form. It was a hybrid because it fused the traditional elites with the newly emergent entrepreneurial elites. It was also a hybrid because it meshed the capitalist system with the territorial, sovereign nation-state system of the pre-capitalist age. Before there was any capitalism in Europe there had been a territory of France, a territory of Germany, a territory of England, a territory of Italy, a territory of Spain. No matter how often these territories changed hands, no matter how many times they may have been added to or subtracted from, they nonetheless were represented as separate, distinct sovereign enclaves. Consequently, when the capitalist revolutions occurred in Europe, not only did this hybrid of an unfinished revolution emerge, but the capitalist revolutions in these countries were contained by the sovereign territory in which the revolution had taken place. As a consequence, instead of a single continental capitalism, there emerged Dutch capitalism, English capitalism, French capitalism, Belgian capitalism, German capitalism, Italian capitalism, etc. The capitalist revolutions had not

dissolved the sovereign territorial nation-states; they had only restructured them.

Not so in the United States. The American Revolution was a unique revolution. It was not a revolution against pre-capitalism. Hence it did not conform to the capitalist revolutions in Europe. The American Revolution was a revolution against an already confirmed capitalist nation-state enclave. The colonists did not rise up against the Britain of Elizabeth or James I, but against the Britain as restructured by the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The American Revolution was indeed unique. It was a revolution against a nation-state committed to imperialism, a state seeking to maintain for itself a monopoly over the innovating and industrializing sectors of capitalistic growth and development by condemning the colonists to the production of cheap primary commodities. Britain also sought to preserve for itself the lion's share of the carrying trade. The American Revolution was thus an uprising not only against an already existing capitalist nation-state, but a capitalistic nation-state which was imperialistic. And since Britain served as the model for the other European capitalist states, we can refer to the European capitalist systems as nation-state imperialist, in contradistinction to the developmental-global capitalism which emerged exclusively in the United States.

What then was the nature of the American Revolution? The essential nature of the American Revolution was the charting of a path for capitalist development which would lead beyond the nation-state to a continental system of autonomous, nonsovereign states. The unique promise of the American Revolution was confirmed by the American Constitution when the Founding Fathers refused to view the nation-state and nation-state sovereignty as the optimal instrument for economic, social, political, or any other kind of development. Indeed, there was a commitment to a Federal Union, consisting of non-coercive state autonomies, enjoying the right of variation and differences of personal and regional life-styles, yet without any concomitant right to exercise violence against nonconforming sovereign territorial enclaves.

By virtue of this major revolutionary decision, capitalism developed in the United States without nation-state barriers. This development

proved that the expansion of territory *per se* required no proliferation of coercive sovereignties as the Americans moved from coast to coast. Indeed, when this assumption was challenged by the southern states with their claims to inherent rights to independent national, coercive sovereignty, a bloody Civil War was fought to disallow this option for all time.

The outcome of this decision was momentous. At the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the very moment when the nation-state systems of Europe were moving into imperialism, the American system broke through to a new stage of economic development, namely, the stage of mass production. The American system was the only system to transform the automotive industry—and the other industries soon to follow—into a mass production industry.

V

No nation in Europe entered this stage of development until the end of World War II. The reason for this is not hard to find. Nation-state enclaves offered only limited domestic markets. But the mass production of the automobile required wide markets, markets sustained by workers whose real wages and standard of living were going up, and by farmers whose income was likewise on the rise. Only such wide and deep markets could support the mass production of high-cost end products such as the automobile.

Such markets did not exist in England. They did not exist in France. Nor did they exist in Germany. In these countries, capital flowed into imperialism and into underdevelopment. By contrast American capital moved into development. The outcome was remarkable. By moving into the stage of mass production as represented by the automobile industry, profits and wages rose in the wake of the heightened productivity which followed on the linkage of worker to more and more efficient machines.

Added to this was another remarkable and unique feature. In all the countries of the world—and Europe is no exception—the farming class is the most traditional, the most reactionary, and the most resistant to change. To this day farming in most of Europe is still, by American standards, extremely backward; it is still a labor-intensive

industry. In the United States, by contrast, from the very beginning, agriculture became a technological frontier; and, at this moment, it is the most technologically advanced sector of the American economy. This commitment to technological innovation enabled the American farmer, who would normally have had limited capacity for increasing his yields, to produce such agricultural abundance that he was able to supply food for growing populations both here and abroad.

This breakthrough to a new level of economic development is a unique achievement of American capitalism. This uniqueness subsequently allowed the United States to move to an even higher level when, at the end of World War **II**, the American economic system began to move steadily from an industrial to a post-industrial society—the first post-industrial society in the history of humankind. This recent breakthrough was made possible by the discovery, utilization, and application of knowledge—not merely technological knowledge, but knowledge of the most abstract general laws of nature itself.

The day on which $E=MC^2$ was translated into the technological processes which yielded the atom bomb, the age of post-industrial development was ushered in. For once the general and abstract laws of nature could be utilized for the creation of technological innovations, innovations began to be ticked off, as in the computer industry, in generations of three to four years. The most amazing kind of achievements occurred, such as the landing of men on the moon. Unbelievable vistas for tapping knowledge to create all the resources which we need were opened up. Indeed, we are at this moment going through that bitter, painful transition from a dying industrial society—polluting, depleting, and exploiting—to a society whose resources are created out of the laws of nature—nonpolluting, non-depleting, and liberating.

VI

So much for the uniqueness of the American experience. Now let us deal with the uniqueness of the Jewish experience. The Jews have had a very remarkable history. It is an unbroken history that goes back 3,500 years or so. It is also a remarkable history because we Jews began as semi-nomads, but find ourselves today literally on the developmental frontier. That in itself would be uniqueness enough. But

in addition, the history of the Jews is the experience of a people whose history has always been played out within the matrix of larger civilizations and within larger cultures even during those brief times when Jews enjoyed independence. But, since the Jews did not enjoy independence for most of their history, they lived out their history in societies dispersed throughout the Western world and beyond. They were thus exposed, as a minority people, to the consequences of cyclicism, and to the vulnerability of a minority to suffering precociously as each society entered the downward stage of its trajectory.

Briefly put, in the pre-modern, pre-capitalist cycles, the Jews enjoyed integrative relationships in all host societies as long as the trend-line was moving upward. So soon as the trendline went downward, however, the Jews found themselves, even before the rest of the population, deprived of their wealth, pogrommed, humiliated, and in many regions even expelled. That was the experience of the Jews in all pre-capitalist societies.

Jewish experience with nation-state imperialist capitalism went through an equivalent trajectory. Following on the heels of the extension of capitalism into the Netherlands, England, and France, Jews were permitted to resettle; and following on the triumphant march of capitalism in Germany, Jews on the eve of World War I were well on the way to integration. Indeed German Jews looked forward with great anticipation to the day when Germany would be the model for the rest of the world as to how the talents of the Jews could contribute to the prosperity and the creativity of a great nation. The German Jews glowed with pride as their Germany became the pacemaker of Western civilization. And then the collapse: first the Treaty of Versailles and its catastrophic aftermath. Then, after a few years glimmering with hope, the shattering depression, with a third of the German work force unemployed as the economy reeled toward chaos. Reaping the harvest of despair, Hitler was swept into power as he flayed international Jewry for grinding Germany into nothingness. Capitalizing on his triumph, Hitler stripped Jews of their citizenship, imprinted on them the stamp of racial inferiority, reduced them to , nonhuman status, and condemned them to extermination.

We thus find that the Jews have indeed had to bear witness to the tragedy bred by cycles, and they have had to bear this witness in an

even more painful way than their fellow victims. Jews were lifted up again and again to the pinnacle of anticipation, and yet at the pinnacle, doom was just over the precipice. It was as though God had chosen the Jews for disaster, and had selected them to confirm the tragic vision of the Greeks, were it not for the confluence of the uniqueness of the Jewish experience with the uniqueness of the American.

VII

In the course of their experience with pre-capitalist societies, Jews found themselves, for the most part, deprived of the right to own land. Landowning was generally a monopoly of the dominant ruling elite. As a consequence, the Jews became an urbanized people in the Diaspora. Since they were a minority and could not exercise military power or effective sovereignty, Jews did not develop military, political, or grand landowning elites. The Jews, in contrast to their host societies, looked to a scholar class for leadership. Hence, learning and knowledge became the highest value cherished by the Jews of the Diaspora: first in pre-capitalist societies, and then in nation-state imperialist societies.

Consequently, when Jews came to the United States, they came to this country as a nonpeasant class, and they came in vast numbers at the end of the nineteenth century, when industrial growth was rampant. They came over to this country as an urbanized class, but not primarily as proletarians. They therefore did not seek out land to farm; and they did not seek out the factories. They avoided becoming proletarians, even though many Jews, in order to earn a living took up employment in the textile industry. Whereas the non-Jew looked on the factory as a liberating step upward, the Jews viewed going into a factory as a move downward. Hence Jews were proletariat-resistant. They did not take pride in being proletarians; they did not want their children to be proletarians. And in seeking a way out of the proletariat, Jews took advantage of the free educational system which was then developing in the United States in a unique kind of way. Since they did not allow their children to go into the work force at an early age, the generation which followed were nonfarming and nonproletarian.

Jews at the time were not aware of the wisdom of their decision. They could not know then that the knowledge sectors of the economy

were to become the cutting edge of the American economy, were to usher in the first post-industrial society in history, and were to energize a spiral of development.

This spiral of development is, in fact, the most unique achievement of the American system, for it makes possible an endless, boundless outward-moving frontier, pushed forward every three to four years, as new knowledge generates generation after generation of innovating technological processes.

This frontier renders imperialism obsolete, since the high profits of the innovating sectors of the American economy allow for the transfer, to societies on the lower levels of the spiral, of the technologies which, for the United States, have been displaced by higher technologies. Such transfers allow, in turn, the recipients, the European Common Market and Japan, to release their former high technologies to societies on the level below them, and so on and on until even the most wretched of the earth are drawn onto the upward-moving spiral. Whereas nation-state imperialism hoarded technologies, developmental capitalism diffuses them.

The United States has thus generated a unique economic profile; one in which the farming population forms only about 4 percent of the working population, in which the proletariat is literally withering away, and in which the upward surge is into the service sector, and within this sector, preeminently in the knowledge of industry. This precocious profile is succinctly expressed in the educational index: approximately 40-45 percent of all college-age youth in the United States go to college, whereas no more than 15 percent of all college-age youth go to college in even the most advanced countries of Europe.

Yet when we turn to the Jews of the United States we discover an even more precocious profile than that of the American people as a whole. Jews are hardly to be found at all in farming. They are almost completely out of the blue-collar working class. Instead they are concentrated more and more in the knowledge sectors of the economy. About 19 percent or more of all college professors are Jewish. And when the educational index of American Jews is calculated, a staggering 80-85 percent of Jews of college age go to college. By virtue of earlier experiences of the Jews which depeasantized them, urbanized them, and elevated knowledge to the highest level of value, Jews set-

ting in the United States drifted into those sectors of the American economy which were to become the most innovating and which were to spin off a developmental frontier which offsets the need for cyclical collapse.

VIII

I think now you can discern the uniqueness of the American Jewish experience. The unique experience of the Jews within pre-capitalist systems had prefitted them for the unique thrust of the American capitalist system. It pressed the Jews onto the developmental frontier, a frontier which is enabling humankind to spring the cyclical trap. For the developmental frontier spins off a spiral of development which, in time, will elevate all humankind to a level of humane existence. And the Jews of the United States are on the cutting edge of this possibility. Fulfillment, not tragedy, may indeed be our destiny.

From the aspect of eternity, is it not truly remarkable that on the one-hundredth anniversary of our College and the two-hundredth anniversary of our country, we should be exclaiming "What hath God wrought!" For long, long ago, in the earliest pre-capitalistic experience of the Jews in the ancient Near East, our forefathers of biblical days offered a unique interpretation of their experience. Restored to their land by the Persian emperor, and allowed to live in it only by his sufferance, gifted leaders in Israel promulgated the Pentateuch which proclaimed that God is One, and the universe His creation. This God had brought into existence a world teeming with diversity, and He had capped His creation with a human individual—male and female He created them. And this individual was given the opportunity to enjoy Paradise unearned, but on one condition: that the individual foreswear knowledge. This Adam and Eve refused to do. They were thereupon thrust into history, where, through the refinement of knowledge, the free choice of good over evil, human beings might regain Paradise, a Paradise earned. And lest the teaching of Genesis be lost, God singled out Abraham to father a people to nurture these teachings through cycle after cycle, and trajectory after trajectory. Each failure mocked their faith, and seemed to cry out, "Your God has doomed you to tragedy. You are the living witnesses testifying to the truth of the myth of Sisyphus."

The Jews nonetheless persisted in proclaiming that there would yet come a day when the sword would be beaten into ploughshares, when equity and justice would reign, and when each individual would see God's image in the visage of his neighbor—a hope belying all which experience was teaching.

But a day did come when, on these shores, a unique breakthrough occurred and a spiral of development was spun off. Here human beings began to tap the mind of God, as they successfully translated the laws of nature into liberating technologies. A collaboration between God and humans had been launched. Drawing on the infinite creative power lodging in the laws of nature and nature's God, we shall, in time, create whatever kind of world we should like to have. Paradise lies just beyond the horizon, on the edge of the developmental frontier, if we but freely choose good, and freely reject evil.

The Jews of America are on this frontier because they clung to their faith that God did not doom humankind to primeval chaos; that if Israel were but steadfast, God would be steadfast; that if a way were found through knowledge to attain felicity, God would not thwart us. Pain, suffering, bewilderment did not ever, for the Jew, spell out an irreversible tragedy. And our faith is now about to be vindicated.

At this moment of rededication of our seminary, a seminary which one hundred years ago was founded in the faith that the Jewish people were unique and that the American nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the principle that every individual is worthy of equality and justified in seeking happiness, was unique among the nations of the earth, shall we not proclaim along with the watchword of our faith which has preserved us, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," another watchword for the years to come, "Forward to Genesis."