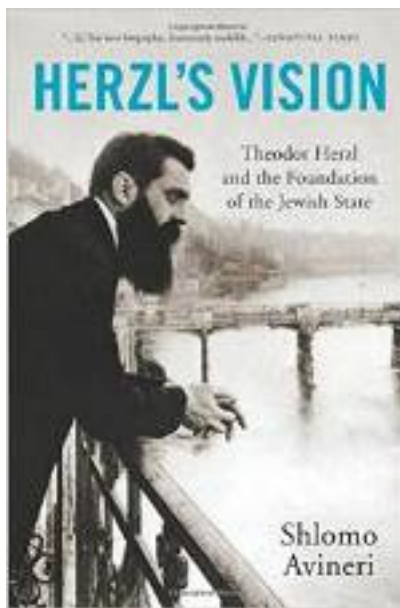


## The Experiential Development of Theodor Herzl's Vision

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**Shlomo Avineri: Herzl's Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State. Translated by Haim Walzman. Katonah, NY: BlueBridge, 2013. 304 pp. \$22.95 (cloth)**



Shlomo Avineri offers his readers a biography of Theodor Herzl that in his characterization is a *Bildungsroman* (a novel of [character] formation). This means, according to its Germanic model of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre* (1795-96) (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) as well as Goethe's autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*, 1811-33), that the changes in personality and ideation of Herzl will be tracked within the specific "deeds" that shaped him over his mature years of Zionist activity. Goethe's works are an analogue in this regard, respected by both Herzl and Avineri. Indeed, Avineri's self-characterization of his narrative intentions squares with Herzl's own understanding of his experiential self-development, as Avineri makes evident in telling selections from the writings and especially the diaries of Herzl. Both the biographer and Herzl himself evidence a deep respect for Germanic culture in its most humanistic tradition, the tradition that probed the development of personality.

Avineri underscores Herzl's focus on specific meetings with political leaders, both European and Near Eastern, as the chrysalis for his self-development from journalist to political-social-economic visionary of the Zionist movement. Herzl, the journalist, brought his craft of "what, where, when, why, and how" to each encounter with the power of person and place, and so generated sufficient facts even in failed efforts to realize his short- and long-term goals to improve upon his next effort. Herzl's persistence is a major theme in Avineri's text, and that persistence is inherent in his journalistic profession. Herzl, a successful journalist for the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse*, was able in his very professional persona to read motives, and even more important elicit engagement with the people he sought to influence.

The first chapter in Avineri's book is the strongest example of Herzl's self-development through

chains of human encounter—one contact leading to another—where failure was but a stepping-stone to an enhanced next encounter. Only through such personal events could Herzl's persona as reporter become that of a public leader. The very language of meetings with authority, as well as the gestural nuances, required a personal reeducation. The positioning of this chapter violates the chronological sequence of Herzl's taking up of the Zionist idea, but it characterizes the "learning through encounter" that is the main theme and strength of Avineri's text. In this initial chapter, we are plunged as a reader into the meetings in 1898 with the German foreign minister of the time, Bernhard von Bülow, and through his offices, Herzl's encounters with the Emperor Wilhelm II himself.

The second chapter offers a broad survey of Europe and the Jews from the French Revolution until Herzl's birth. As I will elaborate below, it does not sufficiently contextualize the dramatic cultural movements for Jews and non-Jews from the time of Herzl's birth until his death—a political-economic-ideational contextualization that Avineri intuited was necessary, but that is not adequately carried out in its scope or depth. The third chapter launches us into the career that will make Herzl a Zionist leader. We are introduced to his professional life as a *Neue Freie Presse* reporter in Paris. There, his coverage of political events brought him into the Dreyfus affair from its inception. Avineri stresses with a masterful eye for detail the staged development of Herzl's ideation concerning Dreyfus. The subsequent chapters continue this chronological account. Avineri throughout is unflinching in this consistent approach to Herzl's life—the self-development through experiential encounter.

The first chapter, however, is emblematic of Avineri at his best. Herzl's meetings with Wilhelm II bring to mind Karl Jaspers's testimony to the greatness of those who create the masterworks that change culture, those who are of their time, yet rise above it in their very ability to shape the forms of their time to some degree: "The greatest phenomena in the history of man's spiritual evolution are, as transition, simultaneously conclusion and commencement. They stand between the old and the new as truths that are originally valid only at their particular place in history."<sup>[1]</sup> Certainly, Avineri offers us Herzl's vision of Zionism as a commencement. Avineri imparts to us the "greatness" of the Jewish political-social-spiritual evolution generated by Herzl's vision, even in his failed attempts which were part of Herzl's learning curve. Avineri ends the first chapter with these sentences: "Herzl's failure with the German Emperor, as with other world leaders, was an inseparable part of the Zionist idea's entry into the world arena.... It was a glorious failure that produced impressive results. This book tells the story of how Theodor Herzl, combining a visionary idea with practical action, fashioned the policies and institutions that paved the way for the Jewish state" (p. 26). Practical action, as subsequent chapters further develop, requires knowledge of the "what, where, when, why, and how" of the increasing complex of ideas and practical positions among Jews and non-Jews; among Germans, Turks, the English, and Austrians; and indeed among all the Western and non-Western nationalities that had to be addressed by Herzl as an emergent leader of a world cause.

Avineri fails to sufficiently locate Herzl in the "transitional" period, especially in Europe, in which he acted. Indeed, Herzl's short life was arguably in the greatest transitional period of Western culture since the ancient Greek movement from monarchy to democracy in the fifth century BC. Born in 1860, Herzl matured in the new democracy introduced in the next few decades throughout all Western nations. If Aristotle was correct, and the human is a *zoon politikon* (political animal), then the changes and tenor of Western culture in these years was greater for the majority of peoples than since the ancients. Democracy came to the North-German Confederation and, albeit somewhat limited in its income level, to the Austrian Empire in 1867. The Jews of Germany and Austria were given full citizenship in that year. By his death in 1904, even heads of state, such as Wilhelm II of Germany and Franz Joseph of Austria, sought to address effectively the growing demands of the common people politically, socially, and economically—at least from their points of view. The Jewish question had become increasingly important as their new freedoms created a "backlash" among non-Jews. Thus such unexpected meetings as that of Herzl and Wilhelm II

occurred as well among persons from diverse levels and stations of society that had before these societal changes kept individuals within their separated milieus. To be an effective leader, one had to comprehend many levels of one's political-social-economic context, and speak accordingly—either directly or through one's agents. Herzl became a keen student of every level of society and their spokespersons from aristocratic monarchs through the blue-collar Jewish milieus he met across Europe. His journalistic training made him more adept than most in this attention to the varied voices he encountered. Avineri could have offered more depth and detail of these democratic changes, and the economic and ideational movements that paralleled them. Avineri's lack of comprehensive secondary sources into the life and times of Herzl indicate perhaps his own lack of focus on these issues. Five secondary sources on Herzl are offered in a final bibliography (one misspelling the author's name), and no secondary sources on the Austrian, German, or European events of Herzl's time are given.

Herzl's own "models" for leadership are thus not sufficiently developed from the personalities with whom he interacted with or observed in his time. We are given the people, but not an adequate account of the institutional norms of authority, which informed the voices of these people. Each of us develops "comportment" norms of behavior with its expectations from what is normal in the institutional realities of our milieu. Jacques Kornberg, in his biography of Herzl, speaks of Herzl's admiration for the state building of Otto von Bismarck. He emphasizes from his reading of Herzl's diaries and, more importantly, his praxis, that Herzl like Bismarck preferred decision making by a leader that was prior to and apart from the will of the people he would lead. This habit of mind is central to the "cameralist" approach to governance still practiced by aristocratic authority in the years of Herzl's life.<sup>[2]</sup> Full democracy for men was not granted in Austria until 1907, yet even then the Roman law tradition and 1867 constitution secured final executive authority for the emperor. This was the "comportment" model of an executive leader imbibed by Herzl. Herzl evidences in his diary his aristocratic pretensions as an enlightened state builder. He wrote on July 5, 1895: "If there is one thing I would like to be, it is a member of the old Prussian nobility." He followed this thought on July 9 by quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the decisive power of the prince to resolve public policy: "If I were a prince or legislator I would not waste my time telling what ought to be done; I would do it or keep silent."<sup>[3]</sup>

Herzl's ideas of state building and governance changed toward the "cooperative democracy" which increasingly marked his praxis at the Zionist congresses, and is articulated clearly in his model for the Jewish state-to-be, *Altneuland*, but his cooperative design of the sharing of power among individuals and organizations of the future Zionist state is nonetheless a product of his own "cameralist" constructs as well as praxis within the Zionist movement. Perhaps one of the greatest character traits of Herzl was his ability to wrestle with his inherited models of cameralist leadership toward the complex, democratic promise of interdependent voices in their equal authority. More of this "Bildung" in Herzl, with even more attention to his diaries, citing pages that can be consulted by his readers, would have improved Avineri's biography in the very spirit he intends. Avineri's text is well written, it flows with intelligence in its pace as well as its organization. However, it is not a scholarly book that might guide those who would inquire in more depth and detail into the life and times of Theodor Herzl.

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[1] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 244.

[2] See Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 166-167.

[3] Theodor Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Raphael Patai, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Herzl Press and Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 1:196, 198.

Mark Blum is Professor for Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History at the Department of History, University of Louisville. His areas of specialization are: German and Austrian cultural history since the enlightenment and modern historiographical theory.

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