

Skepsis and Antipolitics

The Alternative of Gustav Landauer

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Romantic Politics in the Thought of Gustav Landauer and Leo Baeck

Yaniv Feller

1 Romanticism

“The word ‘romantic’ has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing,” complained the eminent historian of ideas Arthur Lovejoy in 1923. “When a man is asked”—as he was—“to discuss Romanticism, it is impossible to know what ideas or tendencies he is to talk about, when they are supposed to have flourished, or in whom they are supposed to be chiefly exemplified.”¹ Similarly, Carl Schmitt, always a stickler for definitions, lamented in his 1919 work *Political Romanticism* that the word romanticism “has been in a state of dreadful confusion for almost a century, an empty vessel filled with contents that change from case to case.”² “It is clearly absurd,” he stated, “to compile a series of things that are designated as romantic and make a list of ‘romantic’ subjects with a view to possibly deriving the nature of the romantic from them.”³ In other words, there is a confusion between the associations and the definition. It is not enough to identify certain objects, such as the moonlight, ruins, or waterfalls, as “Romantic.”

Lovejoy and Schmitt’s palpable frustration might be the result of the Schlegel brothers’ insistence on leaving the definition of the Romantic open-ended. As Friedrich Schlegel wrote to his brother August, an explication of the word would take 125 pages.⁴ Despite these reservations, which emerged in both the early nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the category is still widely used in scholarly discourse, including that surrounding Gustav

1 Arthur Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,” *PMLA* 39 (1924): 232–33; and Lovejoy, “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2, no. 3 (1941): 257–78.

2 Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 30.

3 Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 2; see also Ludwig Marcuse, “Reaktionäre und progressive Romantik,” *Monatshefte* 44 (1952): 195.

4 Quoted in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 6.

Landauer, who is often lumped under it with others such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, sometimes under the label of neo-Romanticism.⁵ This characterisation is evident in Eugene Lunn's biography, *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer*.⁶ However, Michael Löwy makes the most compelling case on the matter. He offers a concise definition of early twentieth-century romanticism, treating it not as an artistic style, but as a shared *Zeitgeist* including a “nostalgia for pre-capitalist cultures and cultural critique of industrial/bourgeois society.”⁷ In a similar vein, Yossef Schwartz emphasises the importance of this “intellectual revolution” in the late Wilhelmine era and the First World War, a period that was “marked by the infusion of religious language into secular politics.”⁸ As second-order scholarly categories, romanticism and neo-romanticism highlight contemporary cultural critical tendencies. At the same time, following Schmitt and Lovejoy, one could argue that the intellectual work that these categories achieve also obscures the contested meaning of the label “romantic.” Landauer himself, it should be noted, is at best ambivalent. In rare instances, he praises early Romantics as expressing the German spiritual equivalent of the French Revolution.⁹ Mostly, however, romanticism does not play a significant role in his thought, which should caution us from imposing it on him.¹⁰

Critics of romanticism such as Lovejoy and Schmitt had their hands full, because many of their contemporaries in the 1920s used the category of romanticism to describe a worldview and relation to the world that extends in time

5 For Buber, see Manuel Duarte De Oliveira, “Passion for Land and Volk: Martin Buber and Neo-Romanticism,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 41 (1996): 239–60; for Rosenzweig, see Ernest Rubinstein, *An Episode of Jewish Romanticism: Franz Rosenzweig's The Star of Redemption* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

6 Lunn goes so far as to use the adjective *völkisch* to describe Landauer's romantic tendencies. See Lunn, *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

7 Michael Löwy, “Romantic Prophets of Utopia: Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber,” in *Gustav Landauer: Anarchist and Jew*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Anya Mali, in collaboration with Hanna Delf von Wolzogen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 64; Löwy, *Redemption & Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe. A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Verso, 2017), 23, 28.

8 Yossef Schwartz, “The Politicization of the Mystical in Martin Buber and His Contemporaries,” in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 211.

9 Gustav Landauer, “Schleiermacher, Briefe,” in Landauer, *Philosophie und Judentum*, vol. 5 of *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Siegbert Wolf (Lich: Edition AV, 2012), 249.

10 This leads Gabriel Kuhn and Siegbert Wolf to reject the label “romantic” for Landauer. See their introduction to Gustav Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 20.

and space beyond the narrow confines of the historical Romantic movement, in fact treating it as a tendency in human soul or society. In short, romanticism is a polemical term in Landauer's time, one that raises both historical and philosophical questions. First, the many different meanings assigned to romanticism in the period require unpacking, as suggested above and as will be shown below. Second, it is philosophical because a critique of romantic experience poses a challenge to Landauer's thought and his claim that separation leads to community.

Leo Baeck, who offered a trenchant critique of what he called "romantic religion," provides a helpful perspective for exploring both questions. After a brief biographical account of Baeck, I analyse his critique of romanticism as a worldview and romantic religion in particular, thereby showing interesting parallels to Landauer, for example, in their rejection of Luther. At the same time, it is through Baeck's critique of the romantic experience that one is able to see the problem in Landauer's account of separation. In the final sections, the comparison will elaborate the role of historical communities, which, I suggest, offer a solution to the move from separation to community.

2 Leo Baeck (1873–1956): A Comparative Biographical Sketch

Today, Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck is widely remembered as the official leader of the Jews in Germany during the dark years of Nazism. Yet this is only one chapter in his biography, which shows some parallels to Landauer's.¹¹ Born in Lissa in 1873, Baeck was ordained as a rabbi in Berlin while also completing a dissertation on the reception of Spinoza under Wilhelm Dilthey at the university there. After appointments in Oppeln and Dusseldorf, he returned to Berlin in 1913, where he served as a rabbi and teacher at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. He was to live and work in the city until his forced transportation to Theresienstadt in 1943. After surviving the horrors of Theresienstadt, he emigrated to London, where he died in 1956.

Both Baeck and Landauer moved around Berlin around the turn of the century and had ties to the city throughout most of their lives. Both also had connections to Martin Buber, although Baeck's is attested only later. There is

11 For a more detailed biographical account, see Michael Meyer, *Rabbi Leo Baeck: Living a Religious Imperative in Troubled Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); and Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (New York: Macmillan, 1978). For an overview of Baeck's thought, see Albert H. Friedlander, *Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

no evidence, however, that the two ever met or read one another's work. This is not surprising given their different trajectories. Baeck came from a lineage of rabbis and spent most of his long career within Jewish institutional frameworks and as a representative of Judaism for the broader public. Landauer, by contrast, was busy creating and participating in emerging social formations, whether in the *Neue Gemeinschaft* or in publications such as *Der Sozialist*.

Their biographical difference is most pronounced in their relationship to the Great War. Landauer opposed the war, saw Germany as the aggressor, and produced antiwar pamphlets. Baeck, by contrast, was one of the first six rabbis who volunteered to serve as army chaplains, *Feldrabbiner*. His reports in Jewish newspapers from this period reveal a mixture of patriotism alongside a growing disenchantment regarding the war's prospect of bringing about a true change in the world.¹² Unlike Landauer, who paid for it with his life, Baeck did not partake in revolutionary activity in the aftermath of the Great War, but rather resumed his teaching and rabbinical duties in Berlin. During the Weimar Republic, Baeck gained more prominence as a Jewish public intellectual among Jews and non-Jews alike, publishing some of his most important essays, including "Romantic Religion," published first in 1922 and later in an expanded version in 1938.

3 Romantic Religion

"Romantic Religion" was intended as part of a larger project, which was never completed, on "Classical and Romantic Religion."¹³ In differentiating between the classical and the romantic, Baeck was following a contemporary distinction, also reflected in works such as Fritz Strich's *German Classicism and Romanticism* (1922). In what resembles a Weberian ideal-type method, Strich

12 For a selection of Baeck's war correspondence, see Baeck, *Werke, Band 6: Briefe, Reden, Aufsätze*, ed. Michael Meyer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 119–42; see also Ulrich Sieg, "Empathie und Pflichterfüllung: Leo Baeck als Feldrabbiner im Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Leo Baeck, 1873–1956: Aus dem Stamme von Rabbinern*, ed. Georg Heuberger and Fritz Backhaus (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2001), 44–59. For the function of the *Feldrabbiner*, see the anthology by Sabine Hank, Hermann Simon, and Uwe Hank, eds., *Feldrabbiner in den deutschen Streitkräften des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2013). Much has been written on Landauer's position, which led him to confrontations with many of his close friends and collaborators such as Martin Buber. See, for example, Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 243–57.

13 Leo Baeck, "Romantische Religion," in *Festschrift zum 50jährigen Bestehen der Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin* (Berlin: Philo, 1922), 3.

identifies the two worldviews as basic ideas about coming to terms with the tension between space and time, between immanence and transcendence. Whereas the classical tries to harmonise the contradictions, the romantic lives within the limits of this tension for as long as they are bound by experience.¹⁴

Baeck defines the “romantic,” using Friedrich Schlegel’s definition of the Romantic book, as “one which treats sentimental material in a phantastic form.”¹⁵ To this, Baeck adds:

Tense feelings supply its content, and it seeks its goals in the now mythical, now mystical visions of the imagination. Its world is the realm in which all rules are suspended; it is the work of the irregular, the extraordinary and the miraculous, that which lies beyond all reality, the remote hereafter of all things.¹⁶

These feelings lead to a flight into the realms of mythical stories of heroes, gods, and cosmogonies, as well as to mystical visions of the beyond.¹⁷ The romantic attempts to flee this world instead of realising it. As will become evident, Baeck sees a great danger in this attitude.

The usefulness of Baeck’s definition does not lie in its potential application as an analytical category. Although he draws his definition from the early German Romantics, its use in the essay to describe earlier periods is clearly anachronistic and methodologically questionable. If one reads it as a polemic with contemporary discourse and strands of thought, however, Baeck’s essay is useful because it utilises the category of the romantic in a way that shares similarities with Landauer’s philosophy while being critical of it. “Romantic Religion” serves as a lens through which we can see Landauer’s thought more clearly, especially in its treatment of Christianity and the notion of experience.

14 Fritz Strich, *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik, oder Vollendung und Unendlichkeit: Ein Vergleich*, 5th ed. (Bern: Francke, 1962), 24.

15 Leo Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” in Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), 189; Baeck takes the definition from the *Conversation on Poetics*. See Friedrich Schlegel, “Gespräch über die Poesie,” in Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente*, ed. Ernst Behler and Hans Eichner (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1988), 2:211.

16 Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” 189–90.

17 On these attitudes being characteristic of the Jena Romantics, see George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19–71.

4 Christianity

In Baeck's typology, Judaism represents classical religion. Christianity, on the other hand, is the exemplar of romantic religion. The founder of Christianity, the prototypical romantic religious thinker, is the apostle Paul. "What is called the victory of Christianity was in reality this victory of romanticism" based on a powerful combination—which was Paul's genius in the history of religion—of the Jewish messianic idea and pagan mystery cults.¹⁸ For Baeck, the entire history of the Church is encapsulated in this struggle between its classical and romantic roots, or between Judaism and the mystery cults.¹⁹

Baeck offers a mixed account of the Middle Ages in this regard. On the one hand, the notion of the sacrament, which is central to Catholicism, is a quintessentially romantic notion of the mystery in the world. As such, it stands in contrast to classical religion and is problematic for reasons that will be discussed below.²⁰ On the other hand, Baeck shows great appreciation for Jewish intellectual and spiritual achievements in this period. The Golden Age in Muslim Spain receives the most attention, but Baeck also does not fail to mention what he identifies as uniquely Ashkenazi achievements in Christian Europe; for example, Rashi's commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud or the piety of Hasidei Ashkenaz.²¹ On the whole, Baeck can be seen as praising Jewish life in this period while offering a twofold critique: first of medieval Christianity for being steeped in romantic elements and second of the discrimination against the Jews in medieval Christendom.

18 Baeck, "Romantic Religion," 198–99. Baeck, like many other German-Jewish thinkers, beginning with Abraham Geiger, considered Jesus to be Jewish. This position was evident from one of his earliest articles: Leo Bäck, "Harnack's Vorlesungen über das Wesen des Christentums," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 45 (1901): 97–120. For Geiger as a trailblazer in biblical scholarship in this regard, see Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); for an overview of Jewish historical research on Jesus, see Gösta Lindeskog, *Die Jesusfrage im neuzeitlichen Judentum: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, reprint ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973).

19 Leo Baeck, "Judaism in the Church," in Baeck, *The Pharisees and Other Essays* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 75–76, 79.

20 Baeck, "Romantic Religion," 220–27.

21 Most evident in postwar writings, such as Leo Baeck, *This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*, trans. Albert H. Friedlander (New York: Holt, Reinart and Winston, 1964), 265–83; Baeck, "Maimonides—Der Mann, sein Werk und seine Wirkung," in Baeck, *Werke, Band 5: Nach der Schoa—Warum sind Juden in der Welt?*, ed. Albert H. Friedlander and Bertold Klappert (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 155–56; for the German-Jewish tendency to praise the Sephardic model, see John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Landauer presents a very different historical account. In *Revolution* (1907), he describes medieval Christendom as asserting “that the world has no reality, but that our life has a goal and meaning; a meaning that goes beyond all earthly life, beyond everything that is worldly, beyond everything that is material.”²² At first glance, this is in line with Baeck’s reading of romantic religion as a flight from reality. However, unlike Baeck, Landauer gives the people’s infusion with this spirit a positive connotation, calling the Middle Ages the “only heyday of our history” and arguing that this period realised an almost ideal social structure, which contained a high degree of multilayeredness (*Schichtung*).²³ This multilayeredness is not to be understood in the feudal or structural sense, but as a “society of societies” in which all social forms “were interrelated and organized without ever creating a social pyramid or totalitarian power.”²⁴ Medieval Christendom shows the possibility of communal realisation, and the Middle Ages served Landauer as an inspiring model and precedent.²⁵

Landauer’s philosophy of history, however, precludes any attempt at a return to a glorious past. His theory of revolution suggests that each attempt at realising a utopia is bound to turn into a historical *topos* shortly after it materialises. Each new *topos* contains both the “victorious dimensions of the preceding utopia” and “the remnants of the previous *topia*.”²⁶ Post-Reformation, one can still locate and utilise the spirit of the medieval period only if one recognises that it cannot be recaptured *in toto*, but only in a fragmentary way that needs to be materialised in a radically new manner in light of the current modern conditions.

22 Gustav Landauer, “Revolution,” in Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 128; see also Gustav Landauer, *For Socialism*, trans. David J. Parent (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978), 35.

23 Gustav Landauer, *Die Revolution* (Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, 1974), 42, 51; *Schichtung* could imply social stratification. In a translator’s note, Gabriel Kuhn rightly observes that Landauer has a horizontal rather than vertical layering in mind. Nonetheless, the decision to translate *Schichtung* as “ordered multiplicity” seems to be too interpretive. I have therefore opted for the somewhat awkward “multilayeredness,” which maintains the original’s layering aspect while also hopefully avoiding the negative connotations associated with stratification in this context. See Landauer, “Revolution,” 126, 130, 178 n. 28.

24 Landauer, “Revolution,” 131.

25 For the rejection of this description on the grounds of its historical inaccuracy, see Thorsten Hinz, *Mystik und Anarchie: Meister Eckhart und seine Bedeutung im Denken Gustav Landauers* (Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, 2000), 187–91.

26 Landauer, “Revolution,” 114; Landauer believed that the decline of the Western world started around the time of the “discovery of America” (Landauer, *For Socialism*, 32).

5 Luther

I have designated the period above as “post-Reformation” in line with Landauer’s claim that the Reformation was the “one true revolution” that shaped the era in which he lived.²⁷ Despite their disparate assessments of medieval Christianity, Baeck and Landauer shared a nemesis: Martin Luther. For both, he was the one who had legitimated the absolute power of the state and princes. For Baeck, Catholicism and Protestantism alike had adopted patterns of romantic thought from Paul, but while Catholicism managed to contain Judaism within it in a way that mitigated the Romantic element of Christianity by dialectically holding to the importance of works, Protestantism was a clearer manifestation of Christianity’s romantic roots.²⁸ The affiliation between Luther and Paul was here meant as a warning. Luther was a good interpreter of Paul, which means that Protestantism’s romantic roots were strong.²⁹ When Protestantism was at its best, when it aspired for the ethical, it returned to Christianity’s Jewish roots; at its worst, Protestantism considered ethics to be nothing more than romantic playfulness, something that should be preached but not practised in everyday life.³⁰

27 Landauer, “Revolution,” 120.

28 Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” 205, 215, 262.

29 Even on the rare occasion when Baeck praises Luther, it is always with a caveat; e.g., he claims that Luther praised earthly vocational work, but that the price was ossified social stratification. See Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” 213, 216, 225. Luther is a contested figure in Jewish thought, provoking feelings between admiration and loathing. By criticising him in this way, Baeck was decidedly breaking from a strand in liberal and reform Jewish readings that praised Luther as a model to be imitated. Just as Luther broke the shackles of the Catholic Church and reformed Christianity, so the argument went, modern Jews ought to reform Judaism. For the different and opposing readings of Luther in modern Jewish thought, see Susannah Heschel, “Theological Ghosts and Goblins: Martin Luther’s Haunting of Liberal Judaism,” in *Polyphonie der Theologie: Verantwortung und Widerstand in Kirche und Politik*, ed. Matthias Grebe (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2019), 325–44; and Christian Wiese, “Let His Memory Be Holy to Us! Jewish Interpretations of Martin Luther from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 54 (2009): 93–126. In seeing a close connection between Luther and Paul, Baeck follows the Lutheran renaissance that occurred during the Weimar Republic. See James Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000); Heinrich Assel, *Der andere Aufbruch: Die Lutherrenaissance—Ursprünge, Aporien und Wege—Karl Holl, Emanuel Hirsch, Rudolf Hermann (1910–1935)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

30 For the critique of modern Protestantism, see Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” 263–65; in an earlier essay, Baeck expressed a similar critique, but suggested that if done properly, the modern Protestant emphasis on ethics was a return to Judaism. See Baeck, “Die Umkehr zum Judentum,” in Baeck, *Werke, Band 6*, 63–9.

Landauer harboured a lifelong contempt for Luther. In an early essay entitled “The Demagogues of the Reformation Period” (1895), he accuses Luther of being a servant of the princes who took the ideas of the era and put them in the service of earthly oppressive powers.³¹ In the second part of the essay—state censors confiscated the first for slandering Christianity—Landauer goes even further in his personal attack on Luther: “The demagogue Luther,” he writes, thought of himself as “a founder of religion, whom future generations, according to famous paradigms—one thinks here of Mohammad—will then place among the gods.”³² The ad hominem attacks on Luther continue in *Revolution*, where the reformer is described as a “truly obnoxious man, weak, pathetic, incompetent in all that concerned community and society.”³³

As in Baeck’s critique, Landauer’s negative portrayal of Luther examines the political dangers of the reformer’s philosophy. Luther, “this sinister man,” wielded “enormous power over his time because he represented it so fully. His demonism reflected the dismay, unpredictability, and weakness of his time,” while also transitioning into a new era, the one in which we live.³⁴ Luther’s siding with the earthly powers had historical consequences, evident in the oppression of the German Peasants’ Revolt (1525).³⁵ Landauer’s criticism of Luther brings together critiques of secularisation and the violence of the modern state. Lutheranism promised the princes the vast property of the Catholic Church—secularisation in its narrow sense—thereby giving the earthly regime substantial power.³⁶ The Reformation also promoted secularisation in a deeper sense. It brought about modernity, which stands for the loss of the shared spirit of the Middle Ages, a move to cold rationalism, and a preference for letters over symbols. The person symbolising this “stupidity of literal interpretation” is Luther with his doctrine of *sola scriptura*.³⁷

6 *Erlebnis*

Although both share a similar attitude towards Luther, the reasoning behind Baeck’s and Landauer’s critiques is diametrically opposed. According to

31 Gustav Landauer, “Die Demagogen der Reformationszeit,” in Landauer, *Philosophie und Judentum*, 137.

32 Landauer, 132.

33 Landauer, “Revolution,” 134.

34 Landauer, 137.

35 Landauer, “Die Demagogen der Reformationszeit,” 144.

36 Landauer, “Revolution,” 138.

37 Landauer, 37; for the secularisation of the world, see Landauer, *For Socialism*, 101–3.

Landauer, Luther is the disenchanter, the one who murdered authentic Christian experience. Baeck, on the other hand, sees Luther as an astute reader of Paul. In this sense, he is the reviver of romantic experience. At the heart of their disagreement is therefore the meaning of the Christian experience, and also that of experience more broadly.

In Baeck's description, Paul took from the mystery cults "the exuberance of emotion, the enthusiastic flight from reality, the longing for an experience (*Erlebnis*)."³⁸ Following a nineteenth-century tradition shaped by Nietzsche and Dilthey, Baeck discusses *Erlebnis* as a lived experience that is intense, internal, and subjective.³⁹ Romantic religion is not truly an active force in the world, because even when it looks to the outside, it is always only in relation to one's own *Erlebnis*. The world becomes a means of self-satisfaction, but not an end in and of itself.⁴⁰ Ethics, however, happens in the world, in relation to others. Egoistic romantic religion is therefore unethical.

The romantic experience is based on what Schleiermacher called the experience of "absolute dependence."⁴¹ This leads to passivity and nonaction, highly questionable ethical attitudes. Second, this notion of being already at the goal, already redeemed, whereas the world outside remains unredeemed, can lead to an unwarranted sense of superiority. In Romantic religion, an elected group is predetermined and is not responsible for the salvation of others. The reawakening of this attitude in recent times, Baeck wrote in 1922, "created what might be called racial scholasticism, [...] with its faith that this grace works through the dark abysses of the blood—this modernized *pneuma*—and gives the chosen everything, so that the finished man is once again the goal of creation."⁴² Finally, the rejection of classical religion within Christianity amounts to a repudiation of Judaism, and, by implication, of the

38 Baeck, "Romantic Religion," 196.

39 As such, it is distinguished from *Erfahrung*, which has a more objective tone, or at the very least a this-worldly connotation. Cf. Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11: "Although *Leben* can suggest the entirety of a life, *Erlebnis* generally connotes a more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience than *Erfahrung*." For the prevalence and usage of *Erlebnis* in the Wilhelmine period, see Nitzan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 53–77; Yotam Hotam, *Gnosis Moderni Ye-Tsiyonut: Mashber Ha-Tarbut, Filosofiyat Ha-Hayim Ye-Hagut Le'umit Yehudit* (Jerusalem: Magnes University Press, 2007), 31–99.

40 Baeck, "Romantic Religion," 211.

41 Baeck, 192.

42 Baeck, 207.

Jews. For romantic religions, salvation is not a goal that needs to be realised, a task in this world, but rather something passive that happens to a person.

In *Scepticism and Mysticism* (1903), Landauer uses the term *Erlebnis*—a relatively rare appearance as far as I can tell—in his discussion of Meister Eckhart, rhapsodising how the passages in which Eckhart describes his inner experiences (*inneren Erlebnissen*) are some of the most captivating in the history of poetry and literature.⁴³ Landauer's thought, as he himself attests, was heavily shaped by his translation and reading of Eckhart, who provides one of the epigrams for "Through Separation to Community" (1901), an essay on which the first chapter of *Scepticism and Mysticism* is based.⁴⁴ Thorsten Hinz offers a detailed account of the relationship between Landauer's thought and Eckhart's writings, noting, for example, how Landauer's choice of terminology, such as his decision to talk about spirit and separation, is indebted to the Christian mystic. For Landauer, the use of *Erlebnis* in this context therefore alludes to something more profound about the meaning of personal, intense experience.⁴⁵

Eckhart is more than just the intellectual backdrop for Landauer's theory. He also serves as proof that the transformation to the "spirit of the world" does not end in isolation. In "Through Separation to Community," Landauer declares that "the way to create a community that encompasses the entire world leads not outward, but inward. We must realize that we do not just perceive the world, but that we *are* the world," before adding that "the more deeply I go into myself the more I become part of the world."⁴⁶ For Landauer, separation—I would suggest that this is the intense personal experience that he finds in Eckhart's writings—is clearly the starting point, but never the end. The task, as Landauer describes it, is to prove that the isolated individual is nothing but a spectre.⁴⁷ "True individuality," the individuality that emerges from our innermost depth of separation, "is community, humanity, divinity."⁴⁸ In a letter

43 Gustav Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik. Versuche im Anschluss an Mauthners Sprachkritik* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel, 1903), 103–4.

44 Gustav Landauer, "Through Separation to Community," in Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 94.

45 Hinz, *Mystik und Anarchie*, especially 112–18; see also Yossef Schwartz, "Landauers Eckhart: Zur Säkularisation des Mystischen in der deutsch-jüdischen Kultur," in *Seelengrund auf Seinsgrund: Gustav Landauers Shakespeare-Studien und seine Übersetzungen des Meister Eckhart*, ed. Stefana Sabin and Yossef Schwartz (Berlin: Philo, 2003), 27–45; and Schwartz, "Gustav Landauer and Gerhard Scholem: Anarchy and Utopia," in Mendes-Flohr and Mali, *Gustav Landauer: Anarchist and Jew*, 176–83.

46 Landauer, "Through Separation to Community," 98.

47 Landauer, 101, 103.

48 Landauer, "Revolution," 105.

to Max Nettlau, Landauer clarifies this point and rejects the suggestion that Eckhart offers “private mysticism.” Eckhart, like all true mystics, destroys, “as fundamentally as any scepticism,” the possibility of a mere return to the ego.⁴⁹ In Eckhart, Landauer found a way through separation to community.

Separation, however, does not necessarily lead to a return to the world or a community. It is just as logical to think about the move inward as resulting in resignation towards the world, or even contempt for it. This is the crux of Baeck's critique of romantic *Erlebnis*, and it serves as a challenge to Landauer's philosophy. The rhetorical power of Landauer's argument implies that “community, humanity, divinity” are one and the same, but such an equation is hardly self-evident. Even if one concedes that from the depth of individuality emerges a shared universality (we all share the same spirit), it is not clear what role community, as a specific constellation distinguished from other communities, plays here.

In “Apologetic Thinking” (1923), Franz Rosenzweig formulates a similar critique against the universalising attempts of apologetics:

Insofar as the thinker looks into his innermost [being], he indeed sees this innermost, but for this reason he is still far from seeing—himself. [...] Yet, without further circumspection, he equates his innermost with his self and does not sense that his innermost, the more it is innermost, is the innermost of *every* human being. Thus, although he means himself, he speaks of the human being, of all [human beings]. And thus his self, the binding of the elements of humankind into the bundle that he himself is, remains a mystery to him.⁵⁰

49 Letter to Max Nettlau, 10 June 1918, in Gustav Landauer, *Gustav Landauer: Sein Lebensgang in Briefen*, ed. Martin Buber and Ina Britschgi-Schimmer (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1929), 2:245; Landauer, however, does not reject rational or philosophical reasoning. In *Scepticism and Mysticism*, only a critique of rationality—but not its rejection—delineates the border that is crossed by the mystical experience. See Hinz, *Mystik und Anarchie*, 120, 132. For the centrality of the relationship between scepticism and mysticism as a key to understanding Landauer's thought, see Libera Pisano, “Anarchic Scepticism: Language, Mysticism and Revolution in Gustav Landauer,” in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2018*, ed. Bill Rebigier (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 251–72.

50 Franz Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” in Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 108; on this complex essay, see Yossef Schwartz, “Die Sprache der Apologetik,” in *Religious Apologetics—Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Yossef Schwartz and Volkhard Krech (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 3–8; and Randi Rashkover, *Freedom and Law: A Jewish-Christian Apologetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 204–10.

Apologetics fails—or at least one type of it does—precisely where it seeks success: it cannot defend particularity because its appeal to a shared common denominator leads to a universalist position. This critique, in an essay that masquerades as a review of works by Baeck and Max Brod, can also be applied to Landauer. How does one’s innermost separation preserve particularity? How does one derive particular and local communities, as distinct from a universal humanity, from the individuation? These are central questions for *Scepticism and Mysticism*, as well as for Landauer’s entire communal project. The way to answer them goes through a reading that considers the role of historical communities.

7 Historical Communities

One of Rosenzweig’s critiques of Baeck is that the latter’s attitude to Christianity turns it into a caricature.⁵¹ As described above, there is more than a grain of truth to this accusation. However, the argument that Baeck’s apologetic move glosses over the particularity of Jewishness and Judaism by universalising them is not sustainable. In Baeck’s understanding, Jews could become—indeed *should* become—an ethical vanguard and a model community in the world.⁵² For Baeck, the existence and experience of the Jews as a particular historical community is central.

Landauer’s perception of the role of historical communities is less evident because of his emphasis on the idea of future, voluntary communities. Yet historical communities play a vital role in Landauer’s thought. Specifically, I would contend they are a condition for the possibility of voluntary communities. To be clear, my argument is not that Landauer prefers historical, pre-existing communal configurations to future, voluntary ones. Rather, in Landauer’s description, human beings have always lived in distinct, nonuniversal communal settings, and this allows him to argue for voluntary communities.

In “Through Separation to Community,” Landauer notes three forms of communities within which humans exist. First, there is the “hereditary power” of the depth of the self. Using a striking metaphor, he describes the relationship to the past as an umbilical cord that has been severed. Nonetheless, “the

51 Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” 100; on this point, see Rashkover, *Freedom and Law*, 209; and Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 120–21.

52 Leo Baeck, *Werke, Band 1: Das Wesen des Judentums*, ed. Albert H. Friedlander and Bertold Klappert (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 58–60.

invisible chains that attach our bodies to our ancestors are stronger than this.”⁵³ It is a shared biological fact: our heritage is owed to “these first humans who evolved from the state of the apes,” the *Homo sapiens*.⁵⁴ Second, there are those communities of coercive power such as the state. The third and final form is the “free momentary associations of individuals based on common interest.”⁵⁵

The same metaphor of the severed umbilical cord that attaches us to the past can be applied to historical communities. In *Revolution*, Landauer offers a threefold way of thinking about history from the Western perspective. First, there is the history of strangers, such as the Assyrians. This is not, Landauer argues, part of “our” history. Second, there is the history of one’s neighbours, whose past contact with the West shaped Western civilisation; for example, the Greco-Roman and Jewish heritage of the West as distinct from the actual history and self-understanding of the Jews or Greeks. Finally, there is the “history of ourselves,” the West, which, as explained above, reached its current apex in the Middle Ages.⁵⁶

This threefold division reveals that for Landauer, there is some value in distinguishing between different historical groupings: strangers, neighbours, and us. In “Revolution, Nation, and War” (1912), he develops this point, claiming that national consciousness can play a role in stirring the people towards social change. The French Revolution, for example, was the rise of a “self-conscious nation” that sought to defend itself both from within, against the monarchy and aristocracy, and from without, against Spain and Prussia.⁵⁷ Landauer identifies a similar tendency in other places across the globe, for example in the contemporary revolutionary national forces in Mexico.⁵⁸

The language that Landauer uses in this discussion of the nation recalls, not incidentally, his definition of socialism as “the tendency of will of united persons to create something new for the sake of an ideal.”⁵⁹ The nation, he notes, is “the particular form in which the generally human and the individually unique express themselves in a community that belongs together based on a shared history.”⁶⁰ In this sense, it has a role in the “future realisation of

53 Landauer, “Through Separation to Community,” 102.

54 Landauer, 102; he was also thinking of the nonorganic here (106).

55 Landauer, 96.

56 Landauer, “Revolution,” 124–26.

57 Gustav Landauer, “Revolution, Nation, and War,” in Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 230.

58 Landauer, 231.

59 Landauer, *For Socialism*, 31.

60 Gustav Landauer, “Zum Problem der Nation: Brief an Herrn Professor Mattieu in Zürich,” in Landauer, *Nation, Krieg und Revolution*, vol. 4 of *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Siegbert

humanity.”⁶¹ As an organic, self-emerging, and self-conscious unity, the nation shows similarities to the medieval communities that Landauer sees as a role model, and thus it has revolutionary potential.

Landauer repeatedly makes it clear that this position opposes nationalistic ideology or any support for the state. For him, nation and state stand in opposition: the nation is “beautiful, thriving, peaceful”; the state is a monster that should be abolished for the nation to truly flourish.⁶² “I separate the nation from the state,” he writes to Max Nettlau, “separate it even from the soil, and find in it its only rescue.”⁶³ To put the matter differently, the danger emerges when the state co-opts or takes over the national idea.

8 Language

Language is not the only defining or decisive feature of a nation in Landauer’s view, which is why he counts modern Jews, the Swiss, the Dutch, and the Belgians as nations.⁶⁴ However, he claims that untranslatable words, syntax, and other linguistic features can provide insights into the essence of a nation. In other words, although a nation cannot be defined solely by language, the method by which we can get a glimpse of it goes through language.⁶⁵

Language is not only a lens through which to examine the nation. It also helps to shape it. Baeck believes in the power of language, and he assigns a prominent role to German and Hebrew in his writings, especially in the post-Shoah era. When discussing Yiddish, Baeck argues that it is no more than medieval German, spoken by German Jews who then colonised the East. Although this argument can perhaps be defended linguistically, the language of colonisation exposes the fact that for Baeck—and this was a position also held by others, such as Hermann Cohen—the German language and culture was a civilising force in Eastern Europe.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Baeck’s attachment

Wolf (Lich: Edition AV, 2011), 82; see also Landauer’s letter to Emanuel von Bodman, 18 October 1912, in Landauer, *Nation, Krieg und Revolution*, 73.

61 Landauer, “Zum Problem der Nation,” 80.

62 Landauer, 80; letter to Max Nettlau, 22 January 1913, in Landauer, *Nation, Krieg und Revolution*, 76.

63 Letter to Max Nettlau, 28 January 1913, in Landauer, *Nation, Krieg und Revolution*, 76–77.

64 Landauer, “Zum Problem der Nation,” 82.

65 Landauer, 82–83.

66 Leo Baeck, “Von Moses Mendelssohn zu Franz Rosenzweig,” in Baeck, *Werke, Band 5*, 158–73. For Cohen, see Cedric Cohen-Skalli, “Cohen’s Jewish and Imperial Politics during World War I,” in *Cohen im Netz*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach and Heinrich Assel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 177–97. For the German Jews’ relationship to the *Ostjude*, see Steven

to Hebrew shows his belief that learning a language is a mean of shaping self-consciousness. Writing on the Jewish settlers in Palestine, he argues that the mere act of speaking Hebrew will lead otherwise secular Jews towards a religious life because it is the language of the Bible and that “whoever has the Bible will find religion, whether today or tomorrow.”⁶⁷

Landauer is similarly concerned with language as the means by which one lives in the world. This is evident in a short text entitled “Do Not Learn Esperanto!” (1907). Landauer, as the title makes clear, was not a fan of the international language invented by Ludwig Zamenhof. Instead of learning an artificial language, Landauer propagated the study of existing languages, but with a novel twist. He stated that before learning a foreign language, one should really learn one’s own: Germans should learn German, the French should learn French, and so on. Only later should they learn another language, not least because this will help them to gain a better understanding of their own language and its complexities.⁶⁸

Landauer’s positive attitude to historical languages, as presented in “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”, seems to stand in opposition to his critique of language as such in *Scepticism and Mysticism* (1903).⁶⁹ It is possible that Landauer changed his position, but I do not think this is the case. His consistent critique of language in *Scepticism and Mysticism* does not lead to silence, but outwards. As argued above, this is the insight he takes from his interpretation of Eckhart. This movement is meaningless without a candid expression of oneself, even if one should always be aware of the limits of language. Further evidence that this is not a change in position is the fact that Landauer consistently relies on the work of Fritz Mauthner, whose work *Language* he recommends to the reader in “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”⁷⁰ In *Language*, Mauthner offers an extended discussion of Volapük and Esperanto, arguing among other things that even if a universal language were to be adopted by all humanity, local developments would lead to the establishment of new national languages a

Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). The Jewish politics of the German language are elaborated in Marc Volovici, *German as a Jewish Problem: The Language Politics of Jewish Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

67 Leo Baeck, “Das Judentum auf alten und neuen Wege,” in Baeck, *Werke, Band 5*, 46.

68 Gustav Landauer, “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”, in Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 278.

69 For this early critique, see Pisano, “Anarchic Scepticism.”

70 Landauer, “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”, 279. Mauthner’s work appeared in Buber’s *Die Gesellschaft* series one year before Landauer’s *Revolution*.

century later.⁷¹ The emphasis is on the necessity and natural inevitability of difference. Perhaps with this in mind, Landauer writes that “total equality is not only impossible; it would also be dreadful,” because it is antianarchic; “there is nothing more important for anarchism than to delve into the depths of our mind and spirit and to explore our inner being [...] No artificial language can ever do this.”⁷² Artificial languages are unnatural constructs that will never lead to true separation. They are also useless in the move towards community, only seeming to bring people together while in fact flattening human experience.

We do not choose our native language, our mother tongue. The umbilical cord ties us to it. The first language a person learns is the one that is taught to them. It is a datum of existence similar to the biological ties to our ancestors. Language, and the primacy of the mother tongue, does not determine with whom one should associate, nor even which language one prefers to speak, but the fact of its existence cannot be denied and attempts to overcome the presence of mother tongues through artificial languages are futile and dangerous. Put differently, language is one example of a historically conditioned communal aspect that allows for the presence of difference, of communities, not a homogenous universality, even if it does not predetermine to which community one belongs or wishes to belong.

9 Conclusion: Towards Anarchic Elitism

Landauer and Baeck make for strange bedfellows. Yet as I have argued throughout this essay, they share a critique of Luther and contemporary Protestantism’s infatuation with the state. The similarity in their positions and the fact that Baeck explicitly uses the category of romantic religion to describe this attitude serve as an important reminder that the label of “romantic” was contested at the time and that it is not so easily applicable to Landauer. At the same time, Baeck’s critique of *Erlebnis* qua romantic experience raises a challenge to Landauer’s philosophy of community. A comparison between the two illuminates a possible answer from a source that is often neglected in discussions of Landauer; namely, the role of historical communities.

For Baeck, as noted above, the Jews serve as a particular community that is a model of ethics. They are a historical community that works for the greater good. This task is grounded, historically and theologically, on Jewish

⁷¹ Fritz Mauthner, *Die Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1906), 31–42.

⁷² Landauer, “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”, 277–78.

particularity; that is to say, on election and on existence as a minority among the nations.⁷³ In conclusion, I wish to highlight one further implication of such an analysis of Landauer's thought; namely, that the role that historical communities play in Landauer's thought helps to explain what can be called Landauer's anarchic elitism and his suggestion that not everybody is ready to be part of this new communal structure.

The very first words of "Through Separation to Community" refer to an "us" that sees itself as part of the vanguard. The essay also ends with another emphasis on the "gap between us, the new human beings, and the masses," even if only to say that the small established communities are being established for the sake of the whole, a position not unlike Baeck's notion of the Jewish minority.⁷⁴ That Landauer thought anarchy would have to start with the few is made clear in a letter to Paul Eltzbacher dated 2 April 1900. He questions "the belief that such a society can be established anytime soon by the men and women of today," but adds that "some people—those with understanding and good will—are able to do so now."⁷⁵ The focus on the idea of a select group for the time being is also evident in Landauer's later journalistic pieces, which express the belief that only a few can achieve the necessary position in society and establish socialist settlements and groupings.⁷⁶

There are at least two sources for Landauer's position. The first is the *Neue Gemeinschaft* (New Community), the circle around the Hart brothers of which Landauer was a member and in whose journal "Through Separation to Community" was published.⁷⁷ At the same time, Landauer's elitist anarchism also reflects a fundamental question about how revolutions should proceed. This is crystallised in the deep disagreements in Russian radical thought, specifically between Peter Lavrov and Mikhail Bakunin in the 1870s. The former preferred targeting the intelligentsia; the latter refused to wait and called upon the masses.⁷⁸ Landauer, who translated Bakunin into German and planned an

73 Baeck, *Werke*, *Band 1*, 3–4, 59–61.

74 Landauer, "Through Separation to Community," 95, 107.

75 Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 302.

76 For a concise summary of his position, see the two popular essays: Gustav Landauer, "The Settlement" and "Socialist Beginning," in Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 196–200 and 201–5 respectively.

77 This is true even though Landauer would come to reject the Hart brothers' position, among other reasons because of its lack of political impetus. See Lunn, *Prophet of Community*, 142–47. For Landauer's most trenchant critique of the Hart brothers, in particular Julius Hart, see Landauer, *Skopsis und Mystik*, 61–82.

78 Eliyahu Stern shows how this debate shaped Jewish politics in the 1870s through its corollary argument between Aaron Shmuel Liebermann and Judah Leib Levin. See Stern,

extensive German edition of his writings, is not merely following either side.⁷⁹ He seems to agree with Bakunin that the revolution cannot wait and needs to start now, while also implicitly siding with Lavrov in recognising that it will not be a mass movement, at least at first.

The distinguishing factor between the anarchist elite and the masses is not one of education, but of perspective. According to Landauer, the anarchic potential is open to anyone willing to undergo a radical inner transformation, an act that is not easy to undertake, as Landauer suggests. It is about how one relates to the state. The state caters to human desire, to its sense of belonging to a historical community, but it stops short. The masses look inwards, just like the person seeking separation, but they stop at the level of class, religion, and so on. This is what leads them to believe first in God and then in the nation-state as a cause worth dying for. The terrifying thing about the state and money, in other words, is that they are idols, worshipped by the masses, who are unable to change their perspective and transcend into an understanding of voluntary community.⁸⁰

The masses, however, are not the only ones whose perspective is wrong. Others fail from the other side of the spectrum, seeing only the abstraction and the universal without the particularity. The existence of historical communities allows Landauer to fight against the power of the state while also arguing against those we can call “Esperanto people.” Belonging to a historical community is part of our particularity as individuals, a fact noted by Baeck with regard to the Jews. It is a given towards which one should be sceptical in order to move towards a voluntary community. However, it cannot be ignored or denied. The historical community is the severed umbilical cord that still connects us; it shows that community is a possibility because it existed in the past. It is what saves the separation from collapsing into universality and what allows the possibility of a multilayered society comprised of voluntary communities.

Jewish Materialism: The Intellectual Revolution of the 1870s (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 131–40.

79 Many of Landauer’s translations were produced in collaboration with Hedwig Lachmann. See Kuhn and Wolf, “Introduction,” 45 and 60 n. 165.

80 Landauer, *For Socialism*, 132–35; for the concept of idol and idolatry as false worship, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum, paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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