

The Zionist Miracle: Dodging Decadence?

by [Friedrich Hansen](#) (June 2021)



Gefährliche Straße, George Grosz, 1918

The following observations are aimed at lifting some of the fog that surrounds the miracle behind the creation of the Zionist movement that was, in biblical parlance, “almost out of nothing”, as we were told in *Mosaic* recently. I want to draw attention to the cultural depravations of the *fin de siècle* which earned it the epithet of “decadence.” Perhaps no

one was concerned more with these issues than the physician Max Simon Nordau in his eponymous *opus maximum*, first published in 1892. Albeit a close ally of Theodor Herzl's and second to him among the fathers of Zionism, today his work is available in reprint only under the label "forgotten books." This may be partly due to its unfortunate title: "degeneration"—revealing a contamination with the determinist biologism of late 19th century Europe. It should be remembered that before the Holocaust biologic biases, today castigated as wholesale racist by revisionist reasoning, was pretty much a bipartisan prejudice, shared equally between the left and the right of the political spectrum.

Yet only Max Nordau has come under attack lately in the Australian weekly "Quilette" by one Jared Marcel Pollen who predictably took issue with the title "degeneration." He accuses Nordau of racism, today's highly inflated currency of hate-contaminated liberalism, chastising his writing as "the lowest order of pseudo-Darwinist cultural criticism."[\[1\]](#) It is hard to avoid the thought that the woke crowd is trying to cancel a Zionist hero posthumously. Yet Pollen overlooked that in his essay "Decay of Lies" Oscar Wilde himself, like so many other, uses the word "degenerated" while referring to decadent newspapers. Nordau for his part ostracised Wilde's cult of genius, lies, and madness as decadent as it emerges from essays of Wilde like "The Decay of Lies." Nordau also rejected Wilde's snobbish preening and anti-social vices such as the denunciation of charity towards the destitute. The latter exposes Wilde's own social-Darwinist inclinations.

Contrary to Pollen's judgement Nordau's book is extremely resourceful not only regarding the copious historical material and descriptive detail but also with respect to its analytical depth. It therefore deserves our careful attention. What strikes me as fascinating if at times disconcerting is that many of the spiritual and cultural features in Nordau's account look very familiar to those of

our own time. Most alarming is the transition of antisemitism from the right of the political spectrum to the left in the wake of the sexual revolution of 1968—in some regards a replay of the 1890s. The backdrop for this is the decadent “organic” (biological-holistic) turn at the end of the 19th century which has transmogrified the enlightenment and its poster child “Jewish emancipation” into sexual identity politics. Like race, gender transitioned from the particular to the universal. Therefore, transpiring from this “organic turn” is the observation that antisemitism and decadence are often bed fellows because both tend to blur the categorical distinction between biblical (spiritual) liberty and modern (carnal) liberalism, which is equivalent to that between guilt and shame culture.

Biblical liberty in the words of the late Rabbi Sacks is “responsible self-restraint.” It was established by Rabbinic Judaism through the internalization of shame in late antiquity which enabled intellectual reflection and repentance. Modern liberalism after Freud became increasingly averse to self-restraint due to his principled rejection of guilt. If we look beyond Europe over the span of two millennia, the gap widened between authentic, Oriental guilt culture and its organic mimesis, called Occidental visualized Christianity. Its concept of divine incarnation comes along as a mix of guilt and shame culture and is prone to projective hate. Waves of relapsing anti-Semitism emerging from this historical trajectory caused various replays of the first Jewish Exodus from Egypt. The most famous occurred in Western Europe in 1492 and in Eastern Europe during the 1890s. A recent outbreak of Jew hatred in the Anglosphere is pouring out of university campuses, like in Weimar Berlin. For instance, each year on March 15 the anti-Semitic hate feast of BDS targets Israel on campuses all over the West.[\[2\]](#) Sadly it does not stay there and is spreading into the general public as is suggested by two new books: *Jews Don't Count* by David Baddiel, and Tuvia Tenenbaum's *Taming the Jews*.[\[3\]](#)

While in the late 19th century a triad of racial identity politics, civilizational decay and surging antisemitism would elicit the Zionist Exodus, today the prejudice of gender identity, sexist deprivation, and romantic naturalism are driving the vilification of Israel. This is why the new liberal cancelling of Nordau matters, not least for hitting a Zionist. While he was educated in the traditional Jewish way, as he grew up Nordau became a naturalist and atheist, which he remained for the rest of his life. He duly embraced scientific Darwinism but not its politicised socialist variety, as Pollen wants us believe.

Born in Budapest in 1849, he moved to Paris with his mother in 1890. There he first met Theodor Herzl and became his family doctor. It didn't take long for Nordau to join the Zionist project and become Herzl's most important collaborator. He also was the principal author of the influential "Declaration of Basel." As a gifted speaker and organizer he quickly became the backbone of the Zionist movement. During the first half dozen Zionist Congresses in the 1890s Nordau served as deputy to Herzl and after the latter's premature death in 1904 he took over the presidency. As a principled political Zionist, Nordau fought for nothing less than a full-fledged Jewish state in Palestine.

If we compare the decadence of *fin de siècle* with today's woke culture we cannot overlook the fact that in the past these cultural pathologies engulfed the European continent and were mostly rejected in the Anglosphere while today we are seeing exactly the opposite. This was pointed out recently by my colleague Conrad Black, former owner of the London Telegraph, commenting in the *New York Sun*.[\[4\]](#) No doubt Europa is faithful to its ingrained anti-Semitic ways, given the recent decision by the International Criminal Court in the Hague to investigate Israel for war crimes. To some these false accusations seem as outrageous as the infamous Dreyfuss affair in Paris of 1894. At the time a Jewish captain was

falsely accused of treason for leaking military intelligence to France's arch enemy, Germany. The Dreyfuss affair was among several atrocious events representing the "straw that broke the camel's back" for Zionists like Nordau and Herzl. The public shock-waves issuing from the court proceedings only hardened their resolve to launch their project in Palestine.

Add to this the Kischinev pogrom of 1903 after which Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky joined the Zionist movement. He would later take over from Nordau and Herzl to become the father of religious Zionism. He named his plan for the Jewish state "Max Nordau-Plan." It was a fitting choice not least because, contrary to Hannah Arendt's defeatist portrait of Jews as pacifist and weak, Nordau promoted a fairly muscular Jewishness, rejecting the proverbial nervous Assimilationist as well as the Talmudic scholar. Instead, he would found the first Jewish sports clubs and football teams. But more importantly, Nordau together with Herzl became the architect of the miraculous ascendancy of Zionism, accomplished in just one decade.

This brings us back to the historical fact that it was Jerusalem, not Athens, which gave us the personal freedom of moral choices which in turn would then incubate most Western liberties. Biblical liberty, rejuvenated by Jewish emancipation in the 19th century, lasted for millennia but it was not the first time when during the *fin de siecle* it got in serious trouble. Thanks to the reckless sexual liberation of this decadent epoch in central Europe, group think would wax so powerful that it could quell spiritual freedom and corrupt family life. Meanwhile framed as sexual identity politics the woke culture has by now spread all over the West becoming a veritable menace since the corporate giants of Silicon Valley have jumped on the woke train.

Even the NHS-Trust for Brighton embraced woke culture for its maternity unit.[\[5\]](#) Brighton is a provincial town with a reputation for sexual libertinage nurtured over several

generations. So much so that in a sort of overreaction natural sex and its organs are now being declared taboo pretty much like in archaic cultures. NHS employees are being asked to speak forthwith of “chest”—rather than breastfeeding. Following the marginalization of fathers, even the word “mother” is not countenanced anymore. Both are being replaced by “birthing parent one and two,” kneeling to radical left demands for equalizing “non-binary” with “binary” birthing and catering to transgender disabilities. These childish policies of disconnecting biological form and function, of dismantling the institution of parenthood and adult restraint give even more leeway to feelings and sexual impulsiveness. This makes for unstable partnerships and is also likely to come with more onerous curbs on free speech. Nordau’s genuine analytic approach to decadence does still make sense today with regard to this woke decoupling of the natural link between sex and reproduction.

It certainly echoes the late 19th century collapse of Victorianism when biological and racial theories began to erode the Judeo-Christian person with collectivist group think and spurious identities, many impregnated with antisemitism. The late Gertrud Himmelfarb, a scholar of 19th century English and Jewish literature, put great emphasis on the philo-Semitism of the Victorians. In several books she argued for a return to the Victorian heritage that preceded the decadent era. She rejected Belle Epoch feminism as wisely as George Eliot, one of the most gifted 19th century British writers. In her novel *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot, her pen name for Mary Ann Evans, has given us one of the most brilliant accounts of Jewish emancipation. The novel renders liberation of identity not as the “coming out” of instincts but as a revelation of the hidden personal conscience, a narrative inspired by Jewish “biblical liberty”.

However, the opposite was soon to follow with feminist emancipation inexorably descending into the liberation of

sexual instincts. As to be expected this would also unchain human violence, revealing itself as ethnic “coming out” also known as racial identity politics. That identity politics kills the religious personality is born out by its twin group agendas: gender and race. Both are 20th century pseudo-sciences, extracted from the 19th century’s materialist reductionism. Both are collectivist ideologies that transformed the religious, unique individual into secular, conformist group types which increasingly captured the imagination of the pre-WW I masses. Unsurprisingly with these collectivist mind sets the days of tolerance were over. Gender and racial ideologies are rivals in a sensualist race to the bottom conducive of replacing the family. For both are appealing to human base instincts (power or sex) and keep undermining civilized institutions all of which depend on the deferment of gratification by our conscience, the unique virtue of biblical liberalism.

Add to this the expressionist pull in the *fin de siècle* arts and the call for abandoning conscience and traditions and we understand why emotions ruled the day ever since. Emotions are the currency of decadence as the right “feeling” keeps eclipsing reason and intellect with regard to choices informing the good life. In Germany radical gender dissociation would turn Weimar Berlin into a European Hub of sexual debauchery and the unraveling of the Christian personality. Weimar acquired a reputation for throwing the good life into disarray. This equivalent of a Copernican revolution of morals did not escape the sensibilities of many European intellectuals. It was famously Virginia Wolfe who sensed that humanity had to be invented again after the turn of the 20th century. She was married to Leonard, a pious Jew, and horrified when her sister Vanessa, married to the economist John Maynard Keynes, danced naked at a public Bloomsbury event.

Decadent performances like this had offended most of

the early Zionists hailing from Eastern Europe just like Max Nordau, who was aghast about the devastating spread of drug abuse, sexual inhibition, family failure, nihilism, and hysteria. For him as for Herzl decadence revealed itself in "worn off" Christian morality and the exposure of "bare nerves." Framed in terms of 19th century scientism these pathologies acquired notoriety under the umbrella term of "degeneration" confusingly used synonymous for mental or biological decline. This had to do with psychological displacement in the sense of making excuses for what Oswald Spengler described, just like Nordau, as Western cultural decline. Secularization inherited these rationalizations of decline from Christian theology and as a result holistic biology became popular for providing "natural excuses" for all kinds of societal disabilities—a crucial shift from religious personal guilt to secular group shame. And the Nazi's came up with the old canard of the medieval Spanish Reconquista: biological healing through racial purification.

Which brings us back to the Zionist actualization of biblical Exodus not least indicated by the uptake of ancient Hebrew. Both Herzl and Nordau were so offended by the moral insanity of *fin de siècle* decadence that they decided to leave Europe for good setting their hopes for Oriental Palestine. Yet unlike Herzl, whose premature death prevented him from seeing Zionism succeed politically, Nordau was granted the fruit of his toil with the Balfour Declaration of November, 1917. It conceded to the Jews settlement in their ancient homeland and together with institutions founded by Herzl like the Jewish National Fund of 1901, the new Jewish Exodus gained momentum. On the Continent pressure on the Jews soon became unbearable with the surging Nazi movement. Nazism succeeded firstly by empowering the petit bourgeois via racial quotas and secondly by absorbing all the hot issues of the day: social tensions, anti-Semitic resentment, suppressed nationalism, feminism, and thirdly by outmanoeuvring the communists with sexual identity by enthroning same sex top

dogs like Adolf Hitler and Ernst Röhm.

People who shun Nordau today are trying to shift the odium of extremism from gender to race alone when in truth both had their equal share in the collapse of Western civilisation known as the Holocaust. Since Nordau had the focus on the atrocities of genderism he is today being attacked for his usage of some incorrect racist terms while overlooking his extremely valuable insights in the decadent trappings of postmodernity, insights still valid today. Neither of them being observant Jews, Nordau and Herzl applied what is said about many early Zionists: "While it is true that David Ben-Gurion and other early leaders of the Zionist left were secular insofar as they were agnostic and did not observe halakhah, their ideology was deeply enmeshed with the Hebrew Bible and Jewish traditions." [\[6\]](#) Nordau is to my knowledge unique among Zionist intellectuals in literally prophesizing a genocide of six million Jews in Eastern Europe. For the obliging readers to make their own judgement on his integrity, I will quote Nordau here at length ("Degeneration," p.13):

At opera and concert the rounded forms of ancient melody are coldly listened to. The translucent thematic treatment of classic masters, their conscientious observance of the laws of counterpoint, are reckoned flat and tedious. A code graceful in cadence, serene in its 'dying fall,' a pedal-base with correct harmonization, provoke yawns. Applause and wreaths are reserved for Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, and especially the mystic Parsifal, for the religious music in Bruneaus's Dream, or the symphonies of Cesar Franck. Music in order to please must either counterfeit religious devotion, or agitate the mind by its form. The musical listener is accustomed involuntarily to develop a little in his mind every motive occurring in a piece. The modern in which the composer carries out his motif is bound, accordingly, to differ entirely from this anticipated development. It must not admit of being guessed. A

dissonant interval must appear where a consonant interval was expected . . . The tide of sound must flow on without any perceptible limit or goal, surging up and down in endless chromatic passages of triplets . . . The audience go to their concert-room in quest of Tantalus moods, and leave it with all the nervous exhaustion of a young pair of lovers . . .

Nordau also observed:

Elegant titillation only begins where normal sexual relations leave off. Priapus has become a symbol of virtue. Vice looks to Sodom and Lesbos, to Bluebeard's castle and the servants' hall of the 'divine' Marquis de Sade's Justine, for embodiments.

Given the *fin de siecle* habit of postmodern loathing of tradition, new sensations were all the rage, much of it, just like today, drawn from social engineering and decay of language. Articulate language was slipping away in "symbolism" as Nordau records: "the book that would be fashionable must, above all, be obscure . . . Ghost stories are very popular, but they must come on in scientific disguise, as hypnotism, telepathy, somnambulism . . . So are esoteric novels, in which the author hints he could say a deal about magic, Kabbala, fakirism, astrology and other white and black arts if he only chose. Readers intoxicate themselves in the hazy word-sequence of symbolic poetry. Ibsen dethrones Goethe; Maeterlinck ranks with Shakespeare; Nietzsche is pronounced by German and even by French critics to be the leading German writer of the day."

Nordau also observed how art exhibitions, concerts, and plays no longer gave enough stimulus to the snobbish consumer of culture, want of still more shocking, irritating new sensations. Most sought after were sensationalist events that combined all the arts in one, as decades earlier introduced by Richard Wagner's holistic music theatre. Nordau comments: "Poets and artists strain every nerve incessantly to

satisfy this craving." For instance, a painter portrays the dying Mozart busy with his requiem in a darkened room with a "dazzling ray of skilfully directed electric lights" on the painting while in the background an orchestra softly plays the very requiem which is just being composed. Arrangements like this are the highlight of the Bayreuth operas, concerts usually performed in a totally darkened hall where cunning attendees will find opportunities to "augment their musical sensations . . . by happily chosen juxtapositions . . . (and) hidden enjoyment of another kind."

Nordau takes all this to be symptoms of "degeneration" or decadence suggestive of an addiction to the lowest common denominator. Yet, according to Nordau's testimony, decadence affected only the elites: "The great majority of the middle and lower classes is naturally not *fin de siecle*. It is true that the spirit of the times is stirring the nations down to their lowest depths, but this minority has the gift of covering the whole visible surface of society, as a little oil extends over a large area of the surface of the sea. It consists chiefly of rich educated people, or of fanatics."

Today decadence has gone mainstream due to much more penetrating mass media and the internet. A good example for this is the apocalyptic antiracism of BLM (Black Lives Matter) whose emotional "politics of colour" amount to the biologist imitation of sexual identity. Nordau's cultural sensibilities are prescient here since he already detected the morbid taste of the earliest popular culture in the cult of "chromo," taken from the Greek word *croma* for colour. It would become his thread of Ariadne through the *fin de siecle* maze, to be taken as the Greek epitome of the postmodern penchant for mixing everything. The German philo-Hellene pagan J.W. Goethe already got his theory of colours wrong by falling into the same trap. Nevertheless, it would become the default counter-cultural and naturalist response to the biblical principle of separation. Soon enough colour was to be transmogrified into the rainbow

coalitions flagship campaign not for racial, but gender quotas based on obsessing about alleged discrimination. Sure enough anti-Discrimination amounts to nothing less than the rejection of the "sacred." This is about nothing less than "setting apart" immediacies for the deferment of which impulse must be overwhelmed by conscience.

In this context woke culture is engineering emotions by selling to minority clienteles the right to take offense, a mere collective gesture and surrogacy of the moral conscience of old. The latest clientele being extremely obese people amounting to one third of Western societies. Hence the new campaign against "fat shaming" is destined to finally replace the Jews in the rainbow coalition of victims which has come to turn against the last representatives of guilt culture, namely the Zionists. With the embrace of the most popular brand of oral indulgence after the smoking bans, identity politics is supposed to become majoritarian in the West. Yet at the same time this move pushes identity politics into a decadent direction by taking pride in the visible lack of self-control. This was anticipated by Nordau who was prescient enough to recognize the postmodern symbolism of color mix for what it is. By contrast Hebrew Scripture does not allow for any colors.

The symbolism of colour has evolved into a signature of unapologetic postmodern indulgence. It is for this reason that for quite some time now rainbow and trans flags have been adopted by Western governments as liberal populist brands. It is no accident that terms like "people of colour" have been instrumentalised as litmus tests for wokism. But far from being limited to speech codes, the infamous "colour revolutions" have brutalized and bloodied large parts of Eastern Europe and Africa. In dozens of nations LGBT has wreaked havoc by imposing gay rights and moral relativism on traditionally religious societies. After all countries behind the Iron Curtain had been proverbial for lacking colour.

Yet the decadent link between colour and sex became the face of liberal globalization, campaigns bankrolled by the oligarch George Soros. Worse still his rainbow warriors would kindle civil bloodshed in Ukraine and Georgia during the 1990s which I was unfortunate enough to witness myself in Tbilisi. These atrocities have considerably tarnished the reputation of the free West and the EU in those countries.

In light of the new politics of colour it seems timely that Israel is increasingly rejecting European decadence, the latest manifestation being the exit from woke culture via the Oriental turn in the Abraham-accord. Thanks to sterile sexual identity politics of recent decades a demographic gap has opened up between the decadent single economies of the Occident and the still family-friendly Orient. Today Israel, the Muslim world, and orthodox Jewry in the diaspora are probably the last bulwark of the traditional family, which for millennia has been the incubator of biblical personal liberty. It has carried the brunt of the scientific innovation in the West of which we see a replay in the “start-up-nation” of Israel today. Presently the Jewish state is on record of becoming a global hub of innovation. The first to benefit is the Middle East after the Arabian “Brexit” from the sclerotic Arab League. The Abraham Accord is a legacy of Donald Trump and came about only thanks to his Orthodox Jewish affiliation.

[1] <https://quillette.com/2021/02/12/oscar-wildes-utopia/>

[2] <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/17091/bds-support>