Writing Assignment One: “On the Jewish Question”

The Jewish question is a controversial topic that was debated for centuries. It deals with how Jews should be classified and treated within everyday society. One writing on this topic, Karl Marx’s “On The Jewish Question”, is one of the most criticized writings of all time. It has been interpreted to be a piece of Anti-Semitic literature that inspired Hitler and countless radicals alike. History has decided that the proposed solution to the Jewish question was the Holocaust, but this was not what Marx intended when writing this piece. Following a common theme in our readings so far, “On The Jewish Question” was written in response to another piece of literature. In this case, Karl Marx was responding to an essay written by Bruno Bauer. Throughout this piece, Marx dissects several excerpts of Bruno’s, points out the flaws in his thought process, and offers up what he considers to be a more logical approach to the problem.

Bauer’s essay contains many aspects that Marx agrees with, but one key feature that Marx addresses is Bauer’s failure to investigate the relation of political emancipation to human emancipation. To me, political emancipation is when all within a state are treated as equal. With such a divide between Jews and Christians, the only way to achieve this is to denounce religion. By eliminating divisions in our society, such as social class and religion, we will all be free under the law. Human emancipation, on the other hand, is a much more difficult concept to achieve.

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his “own powers” as social powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. (Marx)
These species-beings that Marx mentions is a prevalent concept within communism. To me, it seems that these species-beings do not work for their own self-interest, but rather than work in the interest of the collective group. Only when humans lower their guard and work to help their neighbor will human emancipation be achieved. Marx argues that the Jewish question has unique approaches within different states. In a Christian State, the Jew finds himself in religious opposition to the state. A constitutional state approaches this question in a different manner. Instead of being a theological question, the Jewish question is a question of constitutionalism. Here, it becomes a question of the flaws and incompleteness of political emancipation which still retains remnants of a theological stance.

North America is an exception to the theological attitude. “Only in the North America states – at least, in some of them – does the Jewish question lose its theological significance and become a really secular question” (Marx: On The Jewish Question). In a nation such as this, the question loses its theological attitude and it becomes a secular question. Marx points out the fact that it is here, in a country of complete political emancipation, that religion thrives. This strengthens his argument that religion does not contradict a state as it does in Germany. “It is possible, therefore, for the state to have emancipated itself from religion even if the overwhelming majority is still religious. And the overwhelming majority does not cease to be religious through being religious in private” (Marx: On The Jewish Question).

Marx takes a unique stance on liberties. In his eyes, liberties and the right of men do more harm than good. By establishing these rules, Marx believes that governments have perpetuated the idea of self-interest and built up further borders to emancipation. Not only do they do this, but they are paradoxes within themselves. In order to achieve these freedoms, Marx points out that you must possess the items being discussed. The freedom to private property states: “The right of property is that which every citizen has of enjoying and of disposing at his discretion of his goods and income, of the fruits of his labor and industry.” (Article 16: Constitution of 1793). To garner this freedom, one must possess goods and income. If one does not possess the items being discussed, the freedom does not
apply to said person. This paradoxical element of the rights of man strengthens Marx’s argument regarding the faults within the rights of man. For the rights of man, there is an emphasis placed on the individual, but not his relative position within society. By placing an emphasis on “his goods and income” and “the fruits of his labor and industry”, a message has been sent to readers that they must act in their own self-interest. In order to accumulate as much property as possible, you must compete with your neighbor in any way you can. Not only does that create divisions within our society, but it serves as an invisible guide that all men unknowingly follow. “None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society- that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community” (Marx). Rights may give us freedom, but the freedom to do what? In the end, these rights encourage us to shut ourselves out from society. We are encouraged not to work with our neighbor to achieve good, but to compete with him in order to accumulate wealth and possessions. Marx does not believe that freedom to private property can emancipate us. Instead, he believes that freedom from property will give us the emancipation that we have been seeking. When we ditch the wealth and property that we have accumulated out of our own self-interest, Marx believes we will break down the present barriers in our society and become our more authentic selves.

The second part of this piece, at first glance, appears to be very Anti-Semitic. I believe this to be the case, but I also acknowledge the fact that there is a deeper meaning behind the language being used. In this segment, Marx elaborates on many Jewish stereotypes that have been discussed in class. The main stereotype discussed is the Jew’s financial prowess. He argues that Jews have freed themselves as a direct result of their financial influence and the control that money has over all of us. “The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner, not only because he has acquired financial power, but also because, through him and also apart from him, money has become a world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations” (Marx: On The Jewish
Question. Since money is a constant in life, Marx argues that Jews have found a way to intertwine the spirit of their religion within a Christian nation which complicates the emancipation process. To emancipate the Jews, you have to emancipate mankind from Judasim. To Marx, the Jews only have one god. This is the god of practical need and self-interest: money. Money not only controls our existence, but Marx argues that it robs the world of its intrinsic value. By assigning a dollar value to an item, we rob it of its true worth. With their true god, the bill of exchange, and their self-interest, Jews have been able to successfully con the rest of society. In the end, I believe that Marx is perpetuating Jewish stereotypes as an avenue to criticize capitalism. At the heart of it, these Jewish stereotypes apply to all of society. He suggests that the only way that man can truly emancipate itself is to do away with the rights of man. These rights of man, including individualism, religion, and private property, serve as borders to complete human emancipation. Communism, in its purest most unadulterated form, emphasizes the discontinuing traits. By freeing society from these concepts, humans will finally be able to break down the barriers that limit their full potential.

“On the Jewish Question” is a unique work that makes one question their current place in the world. By questioning basic human elements, such as the rights of man, and pointing out the flaws in their logic, Marx develops an effective argument that we do not need freedom of things, but rather we need freedom from them. We need to have the freedom to explore our most basic human instincts without having ideas propagated onto us. We need to be able to develop coherent thoughts that are unadulterated by concepts such as religion, money, and self-interest. These concepts may give us identity and purpose, but they have created rifts in our society since the beginning of time. This work may be appear to be Anti-Semitic, but I believe that the Jewish Question pertains to something much deeper than what the Jew’s place in society is. The Jewish Question is a question of the current state that the world is in. By exploring the Jewish Question, one is able to notice the faults in our society, what is holding us back, and what we need to do in order to get the most out of what we are given.