

Interpretation

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Engaging with various scholars, Astrid von Busekist, a professor at Sciences Po Paris, has interviewed Quentin Skinner and Richard Sennett and has translated Anglo-American texts of political theory into French, including Michael Walzer's article "Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism," Roger Scruton's *Conservatism*, and most recently Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit*.¹ In *Justice Is Steady Work*, Busekist converses with prominent political theorist Michael Walzer, professor emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, about his life experience, political activism, and theoretical writing. A holistic Walzerian approach to theoretical and practical politics emerges out of his arguments and action throughout his long career.

Originally published in French under the title *Penser la justice: Entretiens avec Astrid von Busekist*, the book aims at introducing francophones to Walzer's political interventions both within and outside the academic world. *Le Monde* received it, with a piece by journalist and public intellectual Nicolas Weil, as a guide for the French progressive Left, which has by now abandoned both Marx and religious inspiration.² That Franco-Jewish reaction should

¹ Roger Scruton, *Conservatism*, trans. Astrid von Busekist (Paris: Albin Michel, 2018); Michael Sandel, *La Tyrannie du mérite: Qu'avons-nous fait du bien commun*, trans. Astrid von Busekist (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021). Von Busekist's interviews with Skinner, Sennett, and Walzer can be found, respectively, in *Raisons politiques* 67, no. 3 (2017): 185–203, doi:10.3917/rai.067.0185; *Raisons politiques* 79, no. 3 (2020): 93–104, doi:10.3917/rai.079.0093; and *Esprit*, no. 10 (Oct. 2019): 121–30, doi:10.3917/espri.1910.0121.

² Nicolas Weil, "Penser la justice: Michael Walzer ou la gauche biblique," *Le Monde*, March 7, 2020.

not surprise the reader, as Walzer declares his ambition to present a political theory for the Left and to create an international network of active leftists. The title *Justice Is Steady Work* itself, Walzer indicates, refers to a view of political affairs from the left (166, 170). The word “steady,” however, points to a nonrevolutionary element in Walzer’s thought, linked to his preference for small and modest theories over big and pretentious ones (4–8, 46, 120, 128, 168–70). On one hand, Busekist claims that Walzer is not a conservative (4, 14). On the other hand, she highlights his appreciation of the cultural conservatism of Leo Strauss and his students (126). In any event, Walzer used to urge his colleagues, friends, and students to write for *Dissent* and similar intellectual journals “because...the left needs activist citizens” (116). In order to oppose oppressive regimes, he proposes to support “the people I call ‘comrades abroad,’ *the international left*—dissidents and all the dissident organizations...we can offer both moral and material assistance” (88).

Accordingly, he tells Busekist about the friends he has acquired in Israel: “Our friends from the 1970s (July and I were together on most of our visits to Israel) are our friends still...they came from all the left parties...they were all at odds with the post-1967 euphoria and against the settlements...Starting in the 1980s, we acquired an entirely new set of Israeli friends, not all of them leftists” (104). This coalition’s goal is to “support the embattled Israeli left as it struggles to oppose the occupation of the West Bank, end the siege of Gaza, and hold open the possibility of two states” (167). To Walzer’s credit, he does not pretend to be the objective political philosopher. His left ideology led him to write his senior thesis about the English Puritans. Manifesting a rare modesty among scholars, Walzer confesses: “I was a lefty who wanted to write about revolutions. My French was terrible, my Russian was non-existent, so I was left with the English revolution” (27).³ The ideological impetus to his life’s work is not concealed; it is mostly, though—as we will see—not always, celebrated.

In nine chapters, an introduction, and a concluding section, the book expounds different facets of the Walzerian worldview. Students of political theory tend understandably to approach Walzer first as a theorist, and then as a politically engaged intellectual. Being a Jewish thinker is merely a bonus in Walzer’s career. However, in reviewing and elucidating some of the messages

³ The same linguistic difficulty comes into view when he says, “Biblical scholarship is so vast, and the scholars are so erudite; you have to know six ancient languages, and here I am, I’m reading the Bible in English” (147). Another instance of Walzer’s modesty is his admitting not being able to read Kant’s and Hegel’s “long books” (127).

of this book, I will suggest inverting the Walzerian order into *Judaism*, *politics*, and *theory*. On this account, I propose to rearrange the chapters accordingly:

- a) Chapters 1, 6, and 9 (“Who Are You Michael Walzer?,” “Israel Palestine,” and “*In God’s Shadow* and *The Jewish Political Tradition*”) fall mainly under the category of *Judaism*.
- b) Chapters 2 and 3 (“Political Activism, Civil Rights, and the Anti-War Movement,” and “*Dissent*”) fall under the category of *politics*.
- c) Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 (“Thinking about War,” “Cooperation and Multilateralism: Nations, States, Sovereignty,” “Political Theory,” and “*Spheres of Justice*”) fall under the category of *theory*.

What follows will be limited mainly to the first category.

Judaism is the well from which sprang the emotions, commitments, and ideology of the young Michael Walzer. That is one precious insight provided by the book, thanks to Busekist’s search for the biographical background of Walzer’s politics. “How has your childhood and your early education influenced and nourished your adult life as an American, Jewish, and public intellectual?” she asks. Walzer replies: “We should start in the Bronx” (17), and after tracing the origins of his parents and grandparents, he recounts: “I was born in 1935 in the Bronx. We were living on the Grand Concourse in a huge apartment building with a large courtyard, almost entirely Jewish.... I went to an elementary school... and to a Cheder in the afternoon.... [Later] my parents... hired a private Hebrew tutor.... He taught me the prayers.... I was eight” (18). In 1944 the family moved to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and its Jewish community, which was plainly Democratic (19, 21). Michael’s parents were “kind of Popular Front leftists,” who regularly read left-wing journals, exposing the young Michael to socialist and Zionist ideas (20); they were active members of Johnstown’s Reform Beth Zion (the House of Zion) congregation and friends of Rabbi Haim Perlmutter and his wife (19). Perlmutter pushed Reform Jews toward “traditional service” and being “strongly Zionist,” and so is implicitly portrayed here to stand for two core principles of Michael Walzer’s own thought: tradition and Zionism.

Later, Perlmutter arranged a full tuition scholarship for Michael at Brandeis, a Jewish university with a left-wing faculty, which provided “a good education, chiefly Marxist education, but not only that” (24). A left-wing tendency was ubiquitous on the campus, and it was “a natural move” for the students “as leftists” to join the civil rights movement (25, 43). His parents,

whose friends were all Jewish and who “never set foot in a home of a non-Jew,” living in “an entirely enclosed adult community,” were satisfied: “At Brandeis I would meet only Jewish girls,” he laughs (26, 24). We find Walzer opposing in the name of “Jewish self-respect” a proposal to build at Brandeis three chapels for Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. It did not make sense to him to build two chapels for non-Jews who, in his estimation, made up only five percent of the university population. “You shouldn’t be bending over backwards as if to prove that you are Jewish but not too Jewish,” he explains (25).

Following his parents’ footsteps, Michael had always been a Zionist. He celebrated his bar mitzvah by reading *Ki Tisa*, the biblical portion of the week, in 1948, “a year of high emotion,” only eleven weeks before the establishment of the State of Israel (19, 102, 156). The thirteen-year-old was critical of Moses’s command, after the sin of the golden calf, to kill the idolatrous Israelites (Exod. 32:26–28). His first academic article, published in the *Harvard Theological Review*, analyzed the role that this biblical story has had in the history of political literature, in medieval and modern times, to justify a variety of religious and political persecutions (156). Already in his young mind, he judged this action of Moses to be immoral. Despite his initial refusal, Michael eventually did read those verses in the synagogue (20). Identifying this moral problem and deciding to ritually read the text nonetheless were early signs of how Walzer would wrestle with the Jewish tradition: through interpretation, not repudiation.

In his writings Walzer puts a lot of effort into tracing and articulating protoliberal, secular, and democratic ideas within the Jewish political tradition—arguably sophisticatedly. Recognizing this feature of his thought, Busekist rightly asks: “I wonder whether there is some ‘wishful thinking’ on your part? Isn’t the ‘almost democracy’ of ancient Israel exactly what you want to discover?” (148–49, 11–12). Here Walzer’s reply is, surprisingly, no. “Mostly the position I stress in my own interpretation is very far from my own political position” (149). Elsewhere he writes that his series *The Jewish Political Tradition* “is in no way apologetic.”⁴

This is perhaps the only moment when Walzer refuses to admit what he affirms of his political theory in general: “I think of my academic engagement as a continuation of my political engagement”; and again, “Each of my books has a political purpose” (117, 119). A hint is nevertheless given in the discussion of the great danger that Walzer finds in the religious revival in

⁴ Michael Walzer, “The Political Theory License,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 8.

Israel. He goes so far as to harshly accuse large numbers of religious Israelis of reflexively hating non-Jews, an unsubstantiated claim (152, 110). As a cure, however, he proposes that it is morally and *politically* necessary for Israeli seculars to engage with religion appreciatively. They should be “studying the old texts and arguing from them and with them,” rather than repudiating religion altogether (152–53, 162, 117). In other words, the problem will be solved by liberalizing the orthodox Jews, a goal he explicitly shares with the late David Hartman, who had endorsed the idea of the multivolume project *Jewish Political Tradition* (160). Is this not an exact description of what Walzer denies he is doing in studying the Jewish political tradition? Walzer claims that, unlike political scientists, political theorists have a license to promote their political views in their academic work (116). Why does he not claim the same license when interpreting the Jewish tradition?

Busekist cites—without providing the source or context—a self-definition of Walzer as an “American political scientist who happens to be a Jew” (37). If we learn anything from this book, it is that neither is true. American he surely is. Political science, however, he believes is not a discipline, and its scientific part he abhors (24, 31). More importantly, far from being a side note to his life’s work, the Jewish tradition is rather constitutive.