Cultures of translation: East London, diaspora space and an imagined cosmopolitan tradition

By Ben Gidley

Historian María Rosa Menocal, in her 2002 book *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Christians and Jews Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, describes Andalucía under Moorish rule, when Spanish Christians, Muslims from across the Mediterranean world, and Jews who spoke an antique Judeo-Spanish, that later came to be known as Ladino, together forged a fragile space of *convivencia*, conviviality. Interwoven traditions of commentary and exegesis took root in spaces of intercultural learning in the Moorish cityscape: Greek learning was translated into Arabic and Hebrew, books were shipped between the libraries of Cordoba and Toledo and those of Baghdad and Damascus, scholars compared the fine details of Sharia and Talmudic law.

Menocal describes Golden Age Andalucía, linked to both Christian Europe and the Islamic world by 'dozens of new avenues of cultural commerce', from trade to intermarriage, as a '*culture of translation*', sustained through the translation of texts and spoken words between languages, but also through the cultivation of an intimate understanding of the cultural practices and memories of the others with whom its diverse populations shared space. Because it was a culture of translation, she argues, it was 'perforce a culture of tolerance' (Menocal 2002).

In one sense, *all* diasporic cultures constitute what the late Stuart Hall called 'cultures of hybridity': 'They are irrevocably translated… They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak [at least] two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them' (Hall 1992). But there seem to be particular diasporic formations – perhaps

the most quintessentially diasporic formations – which seem to have had a particular elective affinity for translational practices or for practices of creolisation.

Thus the concept of a culture of translation has been used, for instance, by the Portuguese historian Luís Filipe Barreto in relation to the intellectual cultures of the Portuguese empire's Asian cities in the early modern period (Barreto 1996), by Croatian writer Andrea Zlatar, who described the anti-nationalist counter-culture in the Balkans as 'a culture of translation, a culture of connection, a culture of change' (Zlatar 2001), and by Middle Easternist Sami Zubaida to describe the interstitial cosmopolitan worlds of the Ottoman empire, which he argues still tenaciously survive in some crevices of the Islamic world and its European diaspora (Zubaida 1998). Stuart Hall's own Caribbean is perhaps another example, a space in which the cultural, musical, liturgical and political traditions of Old and New Worlds are creatively translated into rooted local vernaculars, sampled or versioned, mixed and remixed, and circulated back out to other global locations.

Diasporic formations have historically been carried along shipping routes linking port cities; port cities have often been the exemplary locations of diasporic and inter-diasporic cultures of translation. London has been one such metropolis, and its East End arrival quarter has seen one of the most intense examples of this process. My own archival research, most recently as part of the ODP project 'Religious faith, space and diasporic communities in East London', has sought to capture some of the traces of this, focusing on the late Victorian and especially Edwardian peak years of Jewish migration and settlement.

In that historical moment, the East End hosted a complex web of contentious, subaltern, multi-lingual micro-public spaces. Such spaces included the street (its walls covered in what the Victorian writer Israel Zangwill (2009) called 'hybrid posters' advertising English products in Hebrew script); the street corners and parks, such as the Mile End Waste or Victoria Park, which functioned as open air debating societies free from the respectable proprieties of the bourgeois public sphere; working men's clubs, reading rooms, mutual aid associations and friendly societies, where competing political

tendencies hosted lectures and debates; and *khevres* or *shtiblekh*, the profane attics and backrooms transformed for a few hours each Sabbath into sacred spaces of prayer, religious learning and Talmudic dialogue by an improvised *minyan* (quorum) of kinsfolk or co-workers. A rich print media flourished, in English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish and German, for both local circulation and for distribution 'back home', discussing the topical issues confronting Londoners specifically *and* those engaging the global working class and/or transnational Jewish population generally.

Within this culture of translation, we can identify political currents and cultural formations which seem to have cultivated the elective affinity for a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism. One of these was the Bundists, a Jewish socialist movement who argued against the emerging Zionist project of return to the Jewish homeland, instead articulating the concept of *doykayt*, which roughly translates from Yiddish as 'hereness', a commitment to making a tolerant, just world in the here and now, in dispersion.

A second example was the Yiddish anarchist movement. An anarchist movement emerged among the migrant Jews of East London in the last decades of the nineteenth century, but in the decade before World War I it grew to be a mass movement, not only playing a major role in the political life and trade union struggles of the East End, but also in the area's cultural life. The anarchists' club – the Workers' Friend Club on Jubilee Street in Stepney Green – was the heart of the movement. The club had a library, served food, staged musical and theatrical performances, and hosted lectures. The most popular lecturer was Rudolf Rocker, a non-Jewish German bookbinder, who had come to anarchism while working as a journeyman in Paris. The poet Joseph Leftwich (1987) described Rocker:

Rocker was to all the Yiddish-speaking workers of that time… the symbol of culture. They flocked to his lectures on literature and art… he was a man who spoke to them, in their own Yiddish, of things of the spirit and the mind about which they wanted to hear.

Rocker had learnt Yiddish in the East End, but other speakers – ranging from William Morris to Peter Kropotkin – addressed their

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audiences in English, Russian, German, Polish or Hebrew.

The Workers' Friend group also published an extraordinary volume of Yiddish translations – by anarchist theorists but also international freethinkers and avant-garde aesthetes, such as the Germans Ludwig and Georg Büchner, Norwegian Knut Hamsun, American Robert Ingersoll, Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, Frenchman Octave Mirbeau, and Irishman Oscar Wilde. This body of translated work can be seen as the attempt to establish a relationship between the Yiddish ghetto and an imagined cosmopolitan tradition at the margins of European culture, a sense of a counterculture of modernity, or what Seyla Benhabib has called 'an alternative genealogy of modernity' (Benhabib 1996). The print culture of the East End – as a paradigmatic arrival city within an exemplary diasporic formation – was about more than literal translation; it valorised its own status as a culture of translation, translating between Yiddish specificity and cosmopolitan modernism, between the locality of the city and the transnationalism of radical thought. □

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