

The Disappearance of Émile Zola: Zola, Dreyfus and the struggle against antisemitism

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French writer Émile Zola (1840-1902) is known as one of the foremost champions of literary naturalism, which dedicated itself, with inevitable strengths and weaknesses, to the faithful reproduction of immediate reality.

Zola's many novels, especially such works as *Germinal* and *Nana*, provoked outrage in the political, military and religious establishment and other reactionary quarters in Europe, where his works were regularly denounced as "vile," "abominable" and "pornographic." The books also made him a celebrity and greatly admired in his own time.

Zola the novelist, journalist and playwright is equally recognized for the role he played in fighting to clear the name of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish French army officer who was falsely accused and convicted of treason in 1894. Zola's lengthy open letter *J'accuse (I Accuse)*, issued in January 1898, proved decisive in mobilizing opposition to the antisemitic frameup of Dreyfus.

More than 125 years later, the Dreyfus Affair continues to resonate. This is due, first of all, to the persistence of antisemitism and the growth of the ultra-right and the fascist danger. Second, it is no small matter that false charges of "antisemitism" have been leveled against principled left-wing opponents of the Israeli Zionist regime, its 76-year record of ethnic cleansing and occupation, and the genocide that has been taking place in Gaza for almost 10 months.

The contemporary context makes *The Disappearance of Émile Zola: Love, Literature, and the Dreyfus Case*, a slim volume published a few years ago, of particular interest (Roman Polanski's film *J'accuse*, 2019, is another expression of the continuing interest in the Dreyfus case). The author is Michael Rosen, known mainly for children's books, and professor of children's literature at the University of London. His book is an account of the nearly 11 months Zola spent in self-imposed exile in Britain, from July 1898 to June 1899, after his conviction for libel in connection with *J'accuse*.

There are three main strands in this narrative. First, obviously, the Dreyfus case itself. Second, the complications of Zola's life, specifically the unusual ménage à trois, incorporating his wife Alexandrine, with whom he had been together since 1864, and his seamstress mistress Jeanne Rozerot, with whom he had two children, his only offspring. And finally, a fresh and very significant examination of Zola's views on broader issues, including socialism and the rise of political antisemitism in France and elsewhere during this period.

Dreyfus was convicted of treason and sentenced to exile under brutal conditions on Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guiana on the northeast corner of South America. Zola soon drew the conclusion that Dreyfus was innocent and that the conviction was the result of forged documents. He threw himself into the defense campaign, arousing the fury of powerful sections of the French ruling class. *J'accuse* was published with the intention of provoking a libel suit, enabling new evidence to be brought forward. The libel suit was successful, however. Zola was fined, stripped of the Legion of Honor, and sentenced to one year in prison. At

the urgent insistence of his attorney and close associates, rather than surrendering for his prison sentence he reluctantly fled to London in the summer of 1898.

Zola did not expect to spend that long away from France, from his loved ones (although visits were arranged) and from the wellspring of his creative life. He followed the progress of the case from afar, impatiently awaiting conditions under which he could return.

The account of Zola and his complex relationship with the two women in his life is recounted by Rosen, as any truthful account of his life no doubt requires. The particulars during the time of Zola's "disappearance," however, including a close examination of the correspondence between the novelist and his wife and mistress, are laid out in somewhat unnecessary detail.

The affair with Jeanne, who had been working as a servant to Alexandrine, began in 1888, and their children Denise and Jacques were born in 1889 and 1891 respectively. Alexandrine only found out about the relationship in November 1891, at which point relations at first became explosive and Zola's marriage appeared in jeopardy. Alexandrine slowly adjusted to an arrangement in which Zola would spend the afternoons with his mistress and children. By the time of Zola's exile, things were on a more even keel. As Rosen writes, the "domestic arrangement...reached a degree of tranquility." The women drew closer to one another, especially after Zola's death.

In June of 1899, Dreyfus's original conviction was quashed, and Zola returned to Paris. Dreyfus was convicted for a second time a few months later. The officer, who had already spent more than four years in exile under horrific conditions, agreed to accept a guilty plea in exchange for a pardon, even though he maintained his innocence.

Finally, in 1906, Dreyfus was completely exonerated and restored to his post. He lived another three decades, until 1935. Zola, however, was unable to witness the vindication of both Dreyfus and himself. He died in September 1902, the victim of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by an improperly ventilated chimney at his home. Rosen, along with many others, thinks it at least possible that this death was not accidental, but rather caused by sabotage by fanatical anti-Dreyfusards. In 1908, Zola's remains were interred in the Pantheon, a recognition of his courageous defense of Dreyfus as well as his literary achievements.

In recounting Zola's role in the Dreyfus case, this book raises many issues of great historical importance, including the role of political antisemitism in France, the birth of Zionism and the role of the socialist movement.

The rise of modern political antisemitism in the last third of the 19th century emerged from the growth of the class struggle, which, especially after the example of the Paris Commune of 1871, raised a potentially revolutionary threat to capitalism. Antisemitism, based largely on elements of the middle classes, served the aim of developing a mass base for the defense of capitalism against the socialist movement, and of dividing the working class.

The forces of reaction demagogically pointed to the prominent role of Jews in finance in an effort to divert the anger of the petty bourgeois masses away from their actual enemy and onto the Jewish population as a whole. The antisemitism of the Dreyfus era did not disappear following his exoneration. It reemerged in the 1930s under conditions of the Great Depression, alongside the rise of the murderous Nazi dictatorship in Germany. The Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime in France assisted in the deportation of tens of thousands of French Jews to Auschwitz during the Second World War. Rosen explains, in his Postscript, that one of his great-uncles, Oscar ‘Jeschie’ Rosen, was deported on the same day as Dreyfus’s granddaughter Madeleine Dreyfus Levy.

It is not coincidental that the Dreyfus case took place at precisely the same moment as the birth of Zionism. Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist Theodor Herzl, living in Vienna at the time, observed the frameup of Dreyfus and drew the conclusion, both from the Dreyfus case and the general growth of antisemitism in Europe, that it was impossible for the Jews to attain equality and full citizenship rights, and that the solution lay in the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State)* in 1896, and the World Zionist Organization held its first congress in 1897. Zionism was from its outset a project of the Jewish bourgeoisie, directed against the working class and hostile to socialism and the goal of social equality.

The growing socialist movement took up the fight against antisemitism and other attempts to divide the working class. As David North noted in *The Myth of “Ordinary Germans”: A Review of Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, the German Social Democracy, which had been founded with the assistance of Marx and Engels and was the most powerful contingent of the international socialist movement, took the lead. “Aside from democratic principles and moral considerations,” North writes, “the Social Democratic Party saw the association of anti-Semitism with demagogic anticapitalist rhetoric as an attempt to disorient the working class and subordinate it to the political representatives of the middle class.”

The French Socialists, though weaker than their powerful German counterparts, played an important role in the Dreyfus case. Jean Jaurès, the leading French Socialist who had become convinced of Dreyfus’ innocence and in September 1898 had published a lengthy book, *The Proof: The Dreyfus Affair*, visited Zola in London in March 1899.

Jaurès was in London to attend a conference called by the Social Democratic Federation. The author quotes Jaurès in a report from *The Times*: “It was absurd to believe that there could be universal peace under the present capitalist system, which was itself based upon letting loose war throughout the world and encouraging strife among the working classes. Socialism was their only hope in the direction of true peace.”

The author reports on Zola’s own political views, as expressed in a long interview he gave, a few months before he started his exile in London but after the publication of *J’accuse*, to an Austrian-born London-based journalist, Max Beer. After the Russian Revolution, Beer joined the German Communist Party. The following exchange from 1899 is particularly significant:

Beer: I do not impugn your power of observation. It is, as all the world knows, very comprehensive; and your studies are painstaking, sincere and scientifically correct. You will, however, permit me to say that your observation of Jewish life did not go far enough. You had no opportunity of seeing the whole of it.

Zola: During these last few months of anguish, I thought a good deal of the Jewish question. And I had good reason for it, too...My novels might surely give the impression that I regarded the Jew chiefly as a money-mongering and luxury-loving human being. My recent struggle, however, taught me that there are many Jews

who belong to quite another category. There are in human history some factors more potent than race or religion.

Beer: Economic ones!

Zola: Precisely...

Beer: There is no Jewish question at all, but there is a struggle between the owners of the means of production and the owners of labour-power. This struggle knows neither race nor religion. It is a struggle going on, consciously or unconsciously, in the whole civilized world. Abolish this antagonism and Dreyfus trials will be no more.

Zola: You are, of course, pointing to socialism.

Beer then pointed to, in the newspaper article publishing his dialogue with Zola, an extract from the French author’s last novel, *Truth*, which he calls “perhaps an echo of” his interview: “There were really no Jew questions – at all; there was only a Capitalist question – a question of money heaped up in the hands of a certain number of gluttons and thereby poisoning and rotting the world.”

Famously, Zola also wrote on another occasion, “Whenever I delve into any topic, I come across socialism.”

Zola’s comments on antisemitism—his refusal to see the world in simply racial or religious terms—reads today as an eloquent condemnation of Zionism and other forms of identity politics. The Zionist regime claims the “right” to speak for all Jews and to regard those, including Jews, who oppose it as “antisemites.” In fact it is proceeding in the same manner as and in solidarity with the actual antisemites, and openly working with the most reactionary forces all over the world.

As far as identity politics and racial politics, the same class logic can be seen. Black nationalists and their supporters take the opposite view from Zola, who correctly insisted that “there are in human history some factors more potent than race or religion.”

Zola was a courageous figure, a man who numbered among his friends some of the most progressive cultural figures of 19th century France. These included, as Rosen explains, the pioneering photographer Nadar (Felix Tournachon) (1820-1910), who inspired Zola to take up photography as a serious hobby; and two of the most progressive painters of the Impressionist or post-Impressionist eras, Édouard Manet (1832-1883) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). He had known Cézanne since childhood.

Zola was not a Marxist—in fact, he was interested in the theories of Fourier, the French utopian socialist of the mid-19th century, and watered-down versions at that. But he was certainly sympathetic, as the best of his novels reveal, to the plight of the working class, and he was an opponent of obscurantism and reaction. His collaboration with Jaurès played a major role in the eventual exoneration of Dreyfus and in the struggle against antisemitism, and in the way he fought racial and religious hatred he has much to teach us today.



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