

ASSIMILATION AS A LOGICAL ISSUE

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1. Introduction

This¹ paper is part of a much broader research project whose object is assimilation, that is, the process through which, from the Enlightenment onwards, a large proportion of the Jews of Europe focused their actions and ambitions, both collectively and individually, on approximating as closely as they could the culture and identity of the majority population of the countries where they lived.

Usually the first question which arises when we consider a possible topic of research concerns the significance of the issue we would like to know more about. The second question concerns the methods we might employ to reach some sort of understanding of the issue we are interested in.

What is the point of studying assimilation? The first answer, obvious enough to be trivial, is that the process of assimilation is a crucial factor in the eliminationist antisemitism with which the process itself tragically came to an end. The specificity the Shoah, the reason why it is actually an unprecedented and unique historical event, does not lie in its quantitative or ethical peculiarities, but in historical ones: it lies the fact that it was the unforeseeable and catastrophic outcome of a process, lasting for almost two centuries, which should have led not simply to a different or to an opposite outcome, but to making such an outcome impossible, indeed inconceivable. And, consequently, in having demonstrated the failure of this very process.

I am not a historian. My fields of research are literary theory, psychology, the methodologies orbiting around radical constructivism and social constructionism, queer theory, and rhetorics. As a consequence, my interest in assimilation is not historical in nature, and any insight I may possibly contribute to its understanding will not be historical in nature. This preliminary acknowledgement is reflected both in the reasons for my interest and in my choice of methods. What I am interested in researching are the reasons for the failure of the assimilation process not from a historical viewpoint but from a *logical* one. And the reason why I want to understand them is not only my intense interest in the history of European Jews over the last two hundred years, but the significance of the issue of assimilation to any multicultural society, and therefore to today's world in general: Auschwitz is not only in the past; it might actually also be in the future, as long as we will keep harbouring the perniciously misguided belief that the end of co-existence can be pursued through the logically unsound means which over nearly two centuries have built the foundation of the delusion of assimilation.

The nature of my interest dictates the tools I will be using, but is also, in its turn, the resultant of a number of experiences and encounters among which the most important are those with those very same tools, which hail from a number of methodological orientations developed in the social sciences over the last half century.

The logical form of interpersonal relationships in the broadest sense (from the family, to society, to the forms in which cultures develop) can be investigated through a number of methods, each in its own way yielding interesting and productive results, from systems theory, to Membership Categorization Analysis, to positioning theory, to culturology. The preliminary step for their application to the case we are concerned with here is the construction of a model which, over and above the myriad fascinating historical, geographical, social, and cultural variables and variations, can, in a way, lay bare the ele-

¹ Throughout this paper, "they" and related pronouns are used as gender-neutral singular, as has been the case in English for about six hundred years: see MERRIAM-WEBSTER 2019, *Word of the Year: They*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year/they>, last accessed October 2020.

mentary logical form of the assimilation process. The model I singled out was *imitation*. I believe that the logical essence of assimilation lies in its being an imitative process, one in which a social group, and the individuals who belong to it, model the most diverse features of their identity, and of its expression, on those of another group. Of course my choice of model is in no way original: for instance, one of the most influential historians of German Jewry, David Sorkin, states that «German Jewry's subculture [...] borrowed its major elements from the majority middle-class culture in an effort to integrate and gain rights, consciously striving to avoid distinctiveness».²

Any construction of a theoretical model has momentous and inevitable methodological consequences; among the most significant consequences of my choice to model assimilation as an imitative process is that of making relevant to its analysis a number of important theories developed in widely different fields with the specific aim of accounting for the functioning and the implications of imitative processes, first of all Gérard Genette theory of hypertextuality and René Girard theory of mimetic desire.³

My interest in the logical form of the assimilation process is, as far as I know, completely idiosyncratic. However, an in-depth analysis of the relevant literature (however incomplete, because both of its formidable extension, and of the difficulty of accessing a number of contributions) led me to an interesting insight. Defining the position of assimilated Jews as “paradoxical” and “contradictory” is a historiographical commonplace; such a definition, if it is to be assumed to have a meaning, obviously does not hark back to a historical, political, or sociological field of enquiry, but states, unambiguously even though implicitly, that one of the most conspicuous, and most consequential, peculiarities of the assimilation process lies in the *logical* nature of the situations which arise from it. That no-one so far should have been moved by this unanimous and ubiquitous characterization to apply to the analysis of assimilation conceptual tools established with the express purpose of accounting for paradoxes in human relationships may seem rather incredible, but appears to be the truth.

2. Three paradoxes of the “assimilation deal”

The fundamental determinant of the assimilation process, and therefore the starting point for any analysis of the psychological, interpersonal, social, and political situations which arose from it, is the motivation from which it started, the “unwritten contract of emancipation” which Sorkin summarizes as «rights for regeneration»:⁴ in order to achieve emancipation, that is, the recognition of their civil rights, the Jews had to reconstruct themselves in the canonical and normative form of the subject of rights in post-Enlightenment societies, that is, deliver the most painstaking and convincing imitation possible of the manners, of the competences, of the interests, of the occupations, and of the ideals of the educated bourgeoisie which made up the backbone of those societies. In what follows I will be able to outline only a small number of the logical and relational paradoxes which could not help but arise from this situation.

To start with, an implicit but absolutely binding clause of the “assimilation deal” stipulated that the success or failure of the Jews's imitative efforts should be judged not by the Jews themselves, but by the non-Jews, that is, by those who had promised to grant them the full enjoyment of rights in case of success. This fundamental premiss has a number of consequences which are logically paradoxical, and

² D. SORKIN, *The Transformation of German Jewry 1780-1840*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 181 n. 7.

³ For the relevance of hypertextuality to a theoretical understanding of assimilation see C. DELL'AVERSANO, *Literary Theory and the Jewish Condition: Assimilation as a Hypertextual Practice*, «Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC», 14 (December 2018), www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=407; I have presented an argument proposing a revision of Girard's theory of mimetic desire in the light of the structure of the situation of assimilation in the 2019 Colloquium on Violence and Religion, “Imagining the Other” and am now reworking the presentation into a paper intended for publication in «Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture».

⁴ SORKIN, *Transformation*, p. 4.

psychologically, socially, and politically devastating; in this paper I will only have room to briefly outline three of them.

2.1 *Judges vs. redeemors; essentialism vs. performativity*

First, this relational situation leads to a short circuit between two roles which are logically incompatible, not only because they cannot both be played by the same subject at the same time, but also, and above all, because the action of one should make the other permanently obsolete, which however does not happen: the role of judge and the role of redeemer. A judge may convict or acquit, but both these possibilities exist within the broader category of judgement, while the hallmark of the redeemer's action is precisely to make this very category obsolete, *removing* the redeemed from judgement through the *erasure* of their guilt. The logical structures of the relations underlying the two roles are exactly opposite. The problem with assimilation is that, because the two roles coexist in the same subject, both of them as prerogatives which they are not prepared to give up, *the erasure of guilt can by definition always be revoked*: "You (Jew, but of course also homosexual, woman, black, immigrant...) are equal (that is, redeemed) *if and only if* (judgement) X". The practical problem, which is a direct consequence of the logical one, is that, even when condition X is fulfilled, this does not lead to the achievement of real redemption and of true equality: what happens is, rather, a paradoxical phenomenon: the content of X, that is, of the conditions for the equality of the group which is to be assimilated, is continuously modified according to the whim of those who are unconditionally equal, since this is for them the only way not to have to give up the role of judges (which is a foundational hallmark of their identity), which is what they would have to do if they ever uttered a final sentence of redemption; as a consequence, the category of judgement never ceases to be operative, and the redemption (as history has sadly shown) is always provisional.

The paradox arises essentially from the fact that the same subject (the non-Jew who sets themselves up as a model for the Jew to imitate) occupies at one and the same time two logically incompatible positions, one *inside* and one *outside* the field in relation to which judgement is to be passed; indeed, their being outside, as an impartial judge, is conditioned on their being inside, since the only foundation of the unique authoritativeness which makes it apparently reasonable that they should take up the position of judge of the outcome of the attempt at assimilation is the fact that *they are the object which is being imitated*. The problem lies in the fact that in this case the qualification to take up the role of judge does not lie in the premiss of impartiality, which in all cultures is assumed by common consensus to be a necessary prerequisite to the exercise of judgement, but (again, paradoxically) on its very opposite.

This double and contradictory status which the non-Jew ascribes to themselves in the relationship with the Jew (object of an imitation which by definition involves them personally, and at the same time supposedly impartial judge of the result of that very imitation) is matched by an equally contradictory model of the stakes of the whole assimilation process: identity. The very possibility of proposing the path of assimilation to the Jews should rest on the acceptance of the fact that its outcome will be defined by the impossibility to distinguish Jew from non-Jew, and therefore by the obsolescence of the two categories and, consequently, of the role of judge which pits them one against the other. The state of the world which the assimilation process should bring about would be a situation in which Jews and non-Jews have access to national identity *without distinction*, and in which therefore it is theoretically possible to envision not only a situation in which the Jew has a right to tell the non-Jew, being taken seriously, "I am as much of a German as you are", but also, possibly, "I am more of a German than you". Such a situation is well known never to have occurred; and the reason is, of course, a further paradox: that the identity category of Jewishness is endowed with a double, and a contradictory, ontology. On the one hand a performative one, which is the only one which can make it possible to conceive of the assimilation deal, even before it can be proposed: a Jew is someone who is made such by their actions, and if an individual or a group stops performing the unseemly and uncivilized behaviours which the Enlightenment worldview considered typical of the Jews, they will free themselves of the stigma which is attached to the Jewish condition. But on the other hand the ontology is an essentialist one: Jew and non-Jew are defined not by what they do, but by what, before and more fundamentally than any behaviour or attitude, they *are*; their essences

are distinct irrespective of any behaviour, and cannot be altered by a change in behaviour.⁵ The paradox arises from the irreconcilable contradiction between two incompatible ontologies, one performative and the other essentialist: the perspective of an essentialist ontology on a social process which can only be legitimised by a performative ontology has the effect of transforming the performative felicity⁶ of assimilation into the need to defend the purity of an *ontologically* defined original from attempts at imitation which are *by definition* fraudulent, and therefore reprehensible.

It may be interesting as an aside to observe that a basically inevitable psychological consequence of this relational structure, whose influence both on social history and on the personal vicissitudes of whole generations should not be underestimated, is that someone who anticipates the possibility of receiving from others *both* judgement *and* redemption will often, when they believe they might receive redemption, only receive further judgement (history is rife with examples of rights granted to the Jews only to be immediately voided of any actual significance); but what is worst is that, of course, the mechanism of judgment comes to be introjected, so that the person awaiting judgment judges themselves, according to criteria which may well be even more rigid and ruthless than the ones others might employ.

2.2 *Persons vs. things*

Second, as we have just seen, assimilation is an action of which whoever carries it out is not the subject: in the assimilation process, the Jew imitates non-Jews, but it is always someone else (a non-Jew) who decides whether they have successfully assimilated, that is, whether their imitative performance is pragmatically successful; this, of course, has an exact parallel in any transition from a social state of minority to a higher one, such as, for instance, in initiation or in the induction into a professional order, with just a tiny difference: once initiation has been achieved, or the board exam has been passed, unless someone commits rather outlandish crimes, one remains an adult, a doctor, or a lawyer all their life, whereas in the case of assimilation, as we have seen, the redeemer can turn back into a judge at any time, which means that its pragmatic outcome remains forever retractable. This permanent retractability of assimilation keeps the Jew in an everlasting state of minority, the consequence of which is a further logical paradox: the more one seeks to act in a certain way in order to be recognized as a *person* (that is, as the subject of rights in the bourgeois national state), the more, by these same attempts, one shows that one is, in fact, a *thing*.

It may be of interest to outline in some detail *how* exactly this happens. First of all, the Jews show themselves willing to radically redefine their own identity according to the whim of non-Jews (this is the essence of assimilation, as witnessed by the extreme – although unfortunately, significantly, far from final... – step the process, conversion); this implies a) that the non-Jew is entitled to have the last say on the Jew's identity, and this permanently positions the Jew as a commodity on whose quality the buyer is called upon to judge (that the commodity might judge the buyer is, of course, *a priori* unthinkable); b) that the Jew is not, *first and foremost in their own opinion*, the bearer of any autonomous value: the best any Jew can do is to imitate the non-Jew in the most convincing way possible; in this sense eliminationist antisemitism does not constitute an unpredictable and devastating outcome of assimilation but rather a necessary logical precondition of the assimilation process: from the very outset of the process it is clear to all concerned that “the only good Jew is a dead Jew”, that is, the Jew who has managed to eradicate from themselves any vestige of Jewishness, however defined; the only difference (of crucial pragmatic relevance, but of limited logical import) lies in the fact that at the beginning of the assimilation process the principle was only applied metaphorically, while in the end its literal meaning prevailed.

⁵ This is the reason why the assimilated Jews' behaviours are categorized as *imitation*; some important implications of this categorization will be explored in detail in the second part of this paper.

⁶ “Performative” is used here in the sense which Austin gave it in *How to Do Things with Words*; the study of «*the things that can be and go wrong*» (italics in original) with performatives makes up a major part of Austin's theory, which he labels «the doctrine of the *Infelicities*»: J. AUSTIN, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962, pp. 14 ff.

2.3 *Imitation as disconfirmation*

We have seen that assimilation is not a co-constructed social event because its reality is determined by *only one* of the parties involved; and the reason is that the party in question does not recognize the existence of any other subject beside themselves, since such an acknowledgement could only take place as the consequence of a *conclusively* positive outcome of a judgement which, as we have seen, actually always remains provisional and retractable, since the roles of judge and of redeptor both constitute permanent and vital components of the self-definition of the subject who utters the judgement, which they are accordingly not prepared to give up. The third, deadly serious, paradox, which I would like to dwell on arises from some consequences of this premiss. The fact that the other party (who, not unreasonably, perceive themselves as a subject) is, to the party who is to issue the judgement, only an object, logically entails that they do not have any say in either in their own self-definition, or in the social construction of their actions; the redeptor/judge has the power, final and absolute (since the definition of the situation does not contemplate the existence of another subject who might limit it) to disconfirm all their actions, both by considering them as never having occurred, and by attaching to them a meaning, arbitrarily and wantonly chosen, which is the opposite not only to the one which the doer attributes to them (since the doer is not a subject, they have no right to a viewpoint of their own on the matter), but also of the one which should be ascribed to them by mere logic. An example of the way this power has been employed in a strategic and systematic way, with invariably devastating results, is the way anti-Jewish propaganda has always presented the concept of “imitation” as a hallmark of Jewishness.

3. *Paradoxes of imitation*

I will devote the rest of this paper to exploring in some detail a number of logical peculiarities of the imitative situation and of its impact, not only from a historical perspective, but first and foremost from a theoretical one, on the assimilatory situation that is, on any situation; in which the recognition of the rights of the members of a group is made contingent on their willingness to assume the canonical and normative form of the subject of rights in a given social context.

3.1 *Defusing similarity: “imitation” as apparatus*

First of all, I would like to spell out some absolutely basic implications of the logical structure of “imitation”; precisely because they are so fundamental, they are, so to say, hidden in plain sight, making their consequences normally impervious to awareness and analysis. Exactly like the logical relation of equality, the logical relation of similarity is by definition symmetrical: if A is similar to B, B is necessarily similar to A. This purely formal premiss, however apparently neutral, has a number of potentially unsettling existential, psychological, social, and political consequences which it may be useful to expound in some detail: if I observe that X is similar to me, this inevitably means that I too am similar to X; this has the potential to undermine a number of fundamental beliefs concerning both myself (my uniqueness, my individuality, my originality...), and my relationship with X.⁷ How can I manage to defuse the necessarily symmetrical structure of the logical relation of similarity, with all its far from negligible potential for de-

⁷ Which, as René Girard’s enlightening theory of double mediation clearly spells out, is quite likely to be strained and fraught to begin with: «Ce jeu de paume diabolique symbolise parfaitement le caractère réciproque que prend l’imitation dans la médiation double. Les joueurs sont opposés mais semblables, et même interchangeable car ils font exactement les mêmes gestes. La balle qu’ils se renvoient l’un à l’autre figure le va-et-vient du désir entre le sujet-médiateur et le médiateur-sujet. Les joueurs sont des partenaires, c’est-à-dire qu’ils s’entendent, mais pour la mésentente seulement. Personne ne veut perdre et pourtant, chose étrange, il n’y a plus, dans ce jeu-là, que des perdants : [...] Chacun, nous le savons, rend l’Autre responsable du malheur qui l’accable. C’est bien ici la médiation double, pour tous cause égale de souffrance; c’est le conflit stérile

stabilization? The answer is as simple as it is effective: through the apparatus⁸ of imitation. If the reason why X is similar to me is because they are *imitating* me, I am entitled to regard myself as the sole and legitimate owner of something X does not possess, and this changes the very logical nature of the relationship, from symmetrical to asymmetrical.⁹ I need no longer come to terms with the acknowledgement that there is something I have in common with X (whom I may find despicable, revolting, or loathsome), because the similarity between us has nothing whatsoever to do with *me*: it says absolutely nothing about my own nature or essence, but is solely an *artifact* ensuing from X's *completely unilateral* action; an action to which I can, incidentally, ascribe any negative qualities which I may regard as the hallmarks of X's nature, deeming it as despicable, revolting, or loathsome as the subject who carries it out. The asymmetry which imitation bestows on the symmetrical relation of similarity turns similarity into a sort of *theft*: if the reason X and I are similar is that X is imitating me, not only are X and I no longer "really" similar, but I am the original and X is the copy; my qualities are innate and natural, my rightful birthright, while X's, however apparently indistinguishable, are nothing but a *fraudulent* attempt to *usurp* that birthright. As a consequence, the more similar to me X appears, the more *this very similarity* denounces them as sly and untrustworthy, and makes my superordinate, indeed incomparable, position so strong as to be unassailable. The fundamental work accomplished by imitation as an apparatus is therefore *not* at all *assimilation* but, on the contrary, *dissimilation*: its most basic pragmatic implication is to assert a difference which is, paradoxically, all the more crucial and essential the less obvious it is perceptually, since the *same signifier* comes to be associated to *opposite signifieds* depending exclusively on whether the sender is the "original" or the "imitator": if the sender is the original the signifier has its customary and obvious meaning; but if the sender is the imitator the signifier loses its meaning, whatever it may be, and, through a dumbfounding gesture of semiotic sleight-of-hand, comes to be regarded exclusively as evidence of the derivative, deceptive, and fraudulent nature of the sender. Therefore the apparatus of imitation works by radically subverting even the most obvious and unambiguous perceptual evidence: what imitation states, by virtue of its very logical structure, and therefore in terms which cannot be questioned or argued with, is "even though you may not be able to spot a difference, indeed, *the more so, the less able you are to spot a difference, the difference is all there is*".

3.2 The social meaning of "imitation" according to Harvey Sacks

The social aspects of imitation, and the social significance of the concept of "imitation" itself, have been the object of unsystematic but absolutely original consideration by the inventor of conversation

dont ne peuvent jamais se dépendre ces libres associés que sont cependant les joueurs», R. GIRARD, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 1961, pp. 251-252.

⁸ Foucault defines the apparatus (*dispositif* in French) as «une technique générale d'exercice du pouvoir, technique transférable à des institutions et à des appareils nombreux et divers. Cette technique constitue l'envers des structures juridiques et politiques de la représentation, et la condition de fonctionnement et d'efficacité de ces appareils. Cette technique générale du gouvernement des hommes comporte un dispositif type, qui est l'organisation disciplinaire dont je vous ai parlé l'an dernier. Ce dispositif type est finalisé par quoi? Par quelque chose qu'on peut appeler, je crois, la "normalisation". Cette année, je me consacrerai donc non plus à la mécanique même des appareils disciplinaires, mais à leurs effets de normalisation, à ce vers quoi ils sont finalisés, aux effets qu'ils obtiennent et que l'on peut mettre sous la rubrique de la "normalisation"», M. FOUCAULT, *Les Anormaux. Cours au collège de France 1974-1975*, Gallimard, Paris 2012 pp. 117-118. That imitation has normalization as its most fundamental objective will be evident from what follows: as my argument will show, its ultimate strategic purpose is to keep at bay the "encroachment" of the "imitator" on the "legitimate" social prerogatives of the "original".

⁹ This is of course both the result and the purpose of the first and most renowned theory of imitation in the history of Western culture, Plato's: it is worth noting that in *Cratylus* 432 a-d Socrates clearly spells out that *difference*, and not similarity, is the hallmark of imitation, since a perfect reproduction of all the peculiarities of an object would not be an imitation of that object, but would duplicate the object itself.

analysis, US sociologist Harvey Sacks. I would now like to focus specifically on Sacks's extraordinarily enlightening analysis. In his *Lectures on Conversation*, Sacks connects the issue of imitation to that of the definition and boundaries of the concept of full-fledged member of a social group, who is the "natural" subject of rights. The very first issue Sacks raises is, in its seeming naivete, mind-blowingly deep: «How is it that some behavior is seen as 'imitation'?»

One of the central things that seems [*sic*] to be involved is this: When one normally deals with the activities of a Member, apparently one takes it that they have a right to do some class of activities, and that when one engages in making out what they're doing, one takes it that what one sees them doing is what they're doing. 'Imitation' seems to involve a way of characterizing some action which somebody does when they're unentitled to do that class of action. [...]

So imitation becomes a category which involves the construction of a parallel set of knowledge for those unentitled Members, where it doesn't happen that as they do something one finds that there is 'the doing', but as they do something one finds that they are able to imitate. One doesn't see that thing which would, by reference to the category 'knowledge and capacity' be taking place; [...] one sees [an imitation].¹⁰

The social function of the "imitation" category is therefore that of denying the right of an individual or of a group (Sacks mentions the examples of Blacks and of children, but Jews will do just as well) to perform an action which they are perfectly able to perform, as witnessed at very least by the fact that *they are actually performing it*; and to deny it in a way which is all the more effective and irrefutable since the denial does not depend on a judgement, which may always be argued against or revoked, but is grounded in the spontaneous and indubitable immediacy of perception: «One doesn't see that thing which would, by reference to the category 'knowledge and capacity' be taking place; [...] one sees [an imitation]» (my italics).

Through this resemantization of perception, the category of imitation radically undermines the pragmatic significance of the actions to which it is applied; and this pragmatic voiding is one of its most important social functions: to label an action as "imitation" means to suspend the use of the categories which would normally be applied to its social management, and to make other categories relevant:

There are obviously a variety of things involved in seeing an imitation being done. For one, for example, when one sees an imitation, one apparently has an occasion for observing the technique with which some action is done, and considering the technique as to, for example, how close it looks to the ways of doing the activity that one does with that action. [...] Where there may be few occasions otherwise for observing the technique; one simply sees that somebody has done something. And of course adults with respect to children are constantly engaged in marveling at the technical proficiency of a young child, without ever treating it that they're doing the thing that they're technically able to do.¹¹

One of the most immediate and most momentous consequences of the marginalization of the pragmatic significance of the "imitator"'s behaviour is that attention is obsessively focused on its technical quality: "observing [...] and considering the technique" whereas, for behaviours which are not categorized as "imitation", "one simply sees that somebody has done something"; therefore the "imitator" is basically always under scrutiny. As a consequence of this feature of the imitative situation, the role of "judge" is always relevant, and this leaves no place for the action of a hypothetical "redeemer". But the permanently suspended judgement on the imitator does not concern only their technical proficiency, but extends to the whole of their social personality: at the deepest level, what the label "imitation" radically questions are the felicity conditions of their social behaviour as a whole:

there is apparently a situation involving the incompetence of the doers to claim that they are performing the given action. Their relevant set of activities are seen, at best, as proffering such an action, where one can accept it if one pleases, or not – apart from whether it's done well. One might put it roughly that we had something

¹⁰ H. SACKS, *Lectures on Conversation*, ed. by G. Jefferson, 2 vols., Blackwell, Oxford 1992, vol. I, pp. 69-71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 479-480.

of an inverse to category-bound activities, where there are some activities, otherwise doable by anybody, which for some category of persons are not doable by them, no matter how well they can “pull it off”.¹²

The “imitator’s” actions are, so to say, entrusted to public charity: society is at liberty to decide, according to its whim and arbitrary discretion, whether or not to consider them as valid; and this decision is always retractable, since an action which is performed by someone who is not entitled to do so has the statute of an illegitimate possession: «one thing further about imitation is that no matter how many times one does the activity, no matter how well one does it, it’s never a possession; it’s always borrowed». ¹³ And, as is the case for all illegitimate possession, the issue of the way it was acquired is considered of the highest interest:

One of the things that is present with actions seen as imitated, is that one seeks to see where they got it from. [...]

[O]ne is unsatisfied until one comes up with some “how they got it” explanation, and that involves only finding someone who is entitled to do the thing, and for that someone who is entitled to do the thing, it’s quite irrelevant to seek to find how they came to do it.¹⁴

The – extraordinarily telling – example Sacks presents is that of a Black slave and of his white master, reared together since childhood:

The adult Negro slave does something, it’s seen as an imitation, and it’s explained by virtue of the fact that “they learned it from the masters”; how is it that his same-age master learned it is no issue. [...]

What I’ve said so far means that when you see yourself seeing somebody doing an imitation, you could get a good sense of the ways that the categorizations you use will enormously control your perceptions of what’s happening. You see, right off, “an imitation”. [...] You’ll see it even though you don’t know the person who’s doing it. And you’ll be happy with an explanation that they learned it from their parents, though you’ve never seen their parents, though they may do it better than their parents. That means you’re dealing with something quite powerful and orderly. If you don’t see an imitation, a whole set of the questions you ask and find yourself able to solve, do not get raised at all.¹⁵

And the reason why they do not get raised is that the social function of these questions is precisely that of exercising control on the possibility of marginal individuals or groups to display their ability to act in a way which is absolutely indistinguishable from the way full members act:

“Negroes and children are great imitators”. There are some extraordinary things about that kind of an assertion, and for one, it’s perhaps related to [...] “who owns reality”, and what the import of owning it or not owning it is for some category of person who are apparently not entitled to be seen to be doing some given action, which they technically are perfectly able to do. That is to say, the notion that, say, an adult Negro is a “terrific imitator” is to say that what he’s doing can hardly be distinguished from that thing which, if someone else were doing it, would be seen as the real thing. But he’s not to get it seen as the real thing, but as an imitation of it. Which is explained by the fact that he’s very good at imitating.¹⁶

Sacks’s sharply rational analysis lays bare the circularity of the argument, which is the circularity of prejudice. «[O]wning [reality]» means to find oneself in the position to decide of the way categories are defined and used: for each category of person there will be compulsory, permissible, and forbidden activities: and the people who will dare to trespass into the field of activities which are forbidden to their

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 479-482.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 479-482.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 479.

categories will be dealt with through the use of the category “imitator”. One interesting consequence of this is that (as Sacks implies when he quotes the cliché that «“Negroes and children are great imitators”», a cliché which is of course every bit as widespread and as pernicious in antisemitic propaganda) what is needed in order to categorize an action as “imitation” is not knowledge of the action, but of the identity of the doer. For the antisemite, *anything* the Jew does which contradicts the antisemite’s prejudices on “Jewish nature” is “imitation”.

Sacks’s conclusion are particularly relevant to the issue of imitation and assimilation:

I take it that “imitation” is one of the basic categories one wants to focus on when one talks about the phenomenon of ideology. Because it makes noticeable that there are a whole range of things that these persons obviously can do, which are by and large not seen as things they can do in the sense of things that a Member can do, and the addition of capacities is treated as more things that can be imitated. And that’s an extremely interesting kind of blindness, if you want to put it that way. It shows you the power of this procedure because it’s apparently a perfectly consistent and reasonable way to talk, and the materials are thus never shifted over to be seen as “they can do those things”. In rather more abstract terms, we can come to see a way in which such categories as “imitation” and “phoney” provide us with something very central, in that they serve as boundary categories around the term “Member”.¹⁷

Sacks’s analysis does not simply make the ideological thrust of the category “imitation” perceptible, but spells out in detail the exact features of its functioning; the first and most interesting of these is its being, in a phrase of Sacks himself, “protected against induction”:¹⁸ the use of the category produces «an extremely interesting kind of blindness», since not only the actions the “imitators” are able to perform are discounted, but any extension of their abilities is dismissed as an extension of their proficiency *as imitators*; this theoretical point is borne out by any examination, no matter how superficial, of the staples of antisemitic propaganda, where the viciously paranoid attack on the Jews’ “imitative abilities” becomes more and more central, and more and more violent, as more social roles and contexts become open to them, and as their indisputable successes, far from being considered sufficient for a definitive verdict of equality, are simply used as evidence of their extraordinary *imitative* abilities.

Sacks’s theory and the history of assimilation therefore agree in asserting that there is no way that someone who has been labeled as an “imitator” can show that they actually belong to the category of people who are entitled to perform a given action, and whose right to perform it should therefore be recognized. And this impossibility is not accidental, since the only reason the category “imitation” exists at all is to act as a boundary around full-fledged members of a social group: «such categories as “imitation” and “phoney” provide us with something very central, in that they serve as boundary categories around the term “Member”».

Sacks’s conclusion have a foundational significance for the situation of assimilation. As we have seen, the «quid pro quo of rights for regeneration»¹⁹ presented the Jews’ most painstaking imitation of the majority culture as a necessary and sufficient condition for emancipation; however, Sacks’s consi-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-71.

¹⁸ «The fact that some activities are bound to some categories is used, then, in a tremendous variety of ways, and if somebody knows an activity has been done, and there is a category to which it is bound, they can damn well propose that it’s been done by such a one who is a member of that category. [...] I’m not going to deal with the problem of exceptions, although it’s dealable with and there are some very nice things about it; I’m just not in a position right now to lay it out. It is the case, though, that exceptions just don’t matter. That’s easiest to see by seeing that the first Negro and the first ten Negroes you know, can be seen by you to be exceptions to what you know about Negroes. It’s not the case that exceptions involve any change in what you know about the category’s members. For all the categories that have such kinds of characteristics as that there are a bunch of activities bound to them, exceptions don’t matter. It’s built in that there are exceptions, and they just don’t affect what you know. You know that category does the following, and you know that there are exceptions, and they do not involve you in modifying what you know. I talk about that as: All these categories and the things that are known about them are “protected against induction”», SACKS, *Lectures*, vol. I, p. 180.

¹⁹ SORKIN, *Transformation*, p. 4.

derations make it possible to discern in this deal, which on the surface might appear, if not fair, at least reasonable, the marks of a most insidious paradox. If the social significance of imitation as a category is to circumscribe, and to define by contrast, the category of full-fledged members of a social group, it is obvious that making a form of imitation the condition for membership of that very same group (which is, as we remarked, the essence of the emancipation project, and of the deal which it offered the Jews from the Enlightenment onwards) excludes, on a purely *logical* basis, any possibility that this optimistic project might ever come to fruition, since, as we have seen, imitation is, first, an apparatus which works to ensure not assimilation but, on the contrary, *dissimilation*, and, second, has as its fundamental categorial effect that of circumscribing and constituting *the opposite* of the category of full-fledged membership of a social group, and therefore can never and under no circumstances be part of its definition. The attempt to define the category of subject of rights through that of imitation gives rise, for a change, to a paradox: one of many which marked the social, psychological, and existential condition of European Jews between the Enlightenment and the Shoah.

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SUMMARY

This paper is an attempt to take seriously the ubiquitous use of the word “paradox” to characterize the condition of assimilated Jews by outlining a few of the logical, as opposed to the historical, peculiarities of the “assimilation deal”, summarized by David Sorkin as “rights for regeneration”. Use of the methodological tools of a number of disciplines of the social sciences shows that the logical peculiarities of the path outlined for the Jews ensured that they would never reach equal status with full-fledged members of society, and consequently exposes the “assimilation deal” as intrinsically fraudulent and destructive.

KEYWORDS: Assimilation of European Jews; Harvey Sacks; Membership Categorization Analysis.