Mercurians and Apollonians

"This masterwork of interpretative history begins with a bold declaration: **The Modern Age is the Jewish Age -- and we are all, to varying degrees, Jews.**

The assertion is, of course, metaphorical. But it underscores Yuri Slezkine's provocative thesis. Not only have Jews adapted better than many other groups to living in the modern world, they have become the premiere symbol and standard of modern life everywhere.

Slezkine argues that the Jews were, in effect, among the world's first free agents. They traditionally belonged to a social and anthropological category known as "service nomads," an outsider group specializing in the delivery of goods and services. Their role, Slezkine argues, was part of a broader division of human labor between what he calls Mercurians -- entrepreneurial minorities -- and Apollonians -- food-producing majorities.

Since the dawning of the Modern Age, Mercurians have taken center stage. **In fact, Slezkine argues, modernity is all about Apollonians becoming Mercurians -- urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. Since no group has been more adept at Mercurianism than the Jews, he contends, these exemplary ancients are now model moderns.**"

"At different times and in different places, there were tribes -- ethnic groups -- that specialized exclusively in providing services to the surrounding food-producing societies. They include Roma-Gypsies, various so-called "Travelers" or "Tinkers," the Fuga in Ethiopia, the Sheikh Mohammadi in Afghanistan, and of course the Armenians, the Overseas Chinese, the Indians in East Africa, the Lebanese in West Africa and Latin America, and so on. I call them all "Mercurians," as opposed to their "Apollonian" hosts.

... "Apollonian" societies, the way I use the term, are societies organized around food production, societies that consist mostly of peasants, plus various combinations of warriors and priests who appropriate peasant labor by controlling access to land or salvation.

... "Mercurians," the way I use the term, are ethnic groups, demographically complete societies, that do not engage in food production, but live by providing services to the surrounding Apollonians.

In the modern world, Apollonians have to become more Mercurian -- more Jewish, if you will; but Apollonian values, peasant and warrior values, essentially, live on, of course. …

I distinguish between the majority of Mercurians, including Gypsies, who engage in small, non-literate pariah entrepreneurship; and those, like the Jews, who specialize, among other things, in the interpretation of written texts. With the rise of the modern world, the Gypsies have continued to ply their trade in the diminishing world of folk oral culture, while the Jews have gone on to define modernity.

In any case, the ways in which Mercurians and Apollonians regard each other are similar wherever one looks.

... The Overseas Chinese too are supposed to be clever -- too clever, perhaps. You can call on the usual anti-Semitic list: they are aloof, devious, unmanly, and so on. This is the way Apollonians describe Mercurians throughout the world.

And of course one could interpret these same qualities in a positive light. "Cunning" and "deviousness" may become "intelligence" and "a general commitment to the life of the mind." … Mercurian views of Apollonians tend to be negative too: "soulfulness," "courage," and "earthiness" may become "stupidity," "belligerence," and "uncleanliness."

In other words, the oppositions mind/body, intelligence/physicality, impermanence/permanence, non-belligerence/belligerence remain the same and are agreed upon by everyone involved. Everyone knows which traits are associated with which group; the difference is in the interpretation. …

One could say that Israel, and Zionism generally, is an attempt to abandon traditional Jewishness for the sake of Apollonianism with a Jewish face, as it were. …

Israel has been transformed from an attempt to get away from the ghetto into a new kind of ghetto, which is the only place you can say certain things. …

A central part of my argument is that the modern world has become universally Mercurian. Mercurianism is associated with reason, mobility, intelligence, restlessness, rootlessness, cleanliness, crossing boundaries, and cultivating people and symbols as opposed to fields and herds. We're all supposed to be Mercurians now, and traditional Mercurians -- especially Jews -- are better at being Mercurian than anyone else."