

The Jewish Question between Malek Bennabi and Karl Marx: A Comparative Analytical Study

Mokhnane Tarek ^{1*}

¹ Full affiliation, Tarekamin07@yahoo.com,

Centre for Scientific and Technical Research on Arid Regions(CRSTRA)Biskra ,(Algeria)

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Abstract:

This paper explores the Jewish Question through a comparative lens focusing on the works of Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi. While Marx addressed the issue from a materialist and political perspective—critiquing capitalism and the limitations of bourgeois emancipation—Bennabi approached it as a civilizational dilemma rooted in colonial narratives and ideological control. Both thinkers share a critical stance toward the politicization of religious identity, yet they diverge significantly in their epistemological foundations, historical contexts, and interpretative frameworks. Employing a comparative analytical methodology, this study examines how the Jewish Question serves as a prism for broader debates on power, emancipation, and identity.

Keywords: Jewish Question; Karl Marx; Malek Bennabi; emancipation; identity politics; colonial ideology.

* Corresponding author

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Jewish Question" has historically occupied a central place in philosophical, political, and theological discourse—particularly in European modernity and its entanglements with nationalism, secularism, and capitalism. Within this contested field, two major intellectual figures from disparate epistemological traditions—Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German philosopher and pioneer of historical materialism, and Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), an Algerian Muslim thinker and founder of the theory of "colonizability"—offer contrasting yet intersecting readings of the issue. While Marx's seminal essay *Zur Judenfrage* (1844) critiques the liberal notion of political emancipation and explores the socio-economic dimensions of Jewish identity within bourgeois society, Bennabi's intervention—primarily in *The Question of Ideas* and *The Ideological Struggle in Colonized Countries*—frames the question within a broader civilizational and ideological critique of colonial modernity, Zionism, and the instrumentalization of religion for geopolitical purposes. This article addresses the central research problem: *In what ways do Marx and Bennabi differ or converge in their interpretations of the Jewish Question when viewed through their respective philosophical, historical, and ideological paradigms?*

Three hypotheses underpin this investigation: first, that Marx's analysis is grounded in dialectical materialism, locating Jewish identity within capitalist structures and bourgeois individualism (Avineri, 1968; Löwy, 2006); second, that Bennabi approaches the Jewish Question as a symbolic and strategic site within the ideological arsenal of colonial powers, particularly in the context of Zionist expansion and Muslim decadence (Zemni, 2006; Arkoun, 1994); and third, that both thinkers reject the reification of religious identity as a political instrument, albeit through radically different ontological frameworks.

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to analyze Marx's philosophical framing of the Jewish Question and its relationship to his critique of liberal democracy and capitalism

(Tucker, 1978; Colletti, 1972); (2) to excavate the epistemological foundations of Bennabi's reading of Zionism, religion, and civilization (Nacib, 2010; Bouzar, 2004); and (3) to conduct a comparative analytical synthesis that places both thinkers in critical dialogue, revealing underlying affinities and tensions.

Methodologically, the study employs a comparative analytical framework that foregrounds both primary sources—Zur Judenfrage for Marx and *La Lutte idéologique dans les pays colonisés* and *Le Problème des idées dans le monde musulman* for Bennabi—and a broad corpus of secondary literature from political theory, postcolonial studies, and Islamic philosophy. The research also draws on critical works by Edward Said (1978), Talal Asad (2003), Slavoj Žižek (2009), and Wael Hallaq (2014), alongside scholarship on Jewish identity and Zionism by authors such as Hannah Arendt (1968), Shlomo Sand (2010), and Ella Shohat (2006). This interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced understanding of how the Jewish Question functions not only as a historical dilemma but also as a prism for examining the ideological configurations of modernity, identity politics, and power.

2. Significance of the Study and Its Timeliness

This study holds particular significance as it revisits the "Jewish Question" through a comparative and critical lens, drawing on the intellectual contributions of Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi—two prominent thinkers who approached the issue from distinct yet complementary perspectives. Marx critiqued it within a materialist and political framework, while Bennabi analyzed it as a civilizational and ideological construct shaped by colonial narratives. In an era marked by growing identity-based conflicts and the instrumentalization of religion for geopolitical agendas—especially in the context of Zionist discourse—this study offers a timely reassessment of how religious identity is politicized and mobilized.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the current global climate, characterized by intensified debates on emancipation, power, and cultural hegemony. The

resurgence of religious nationalism and the normalization of political alliances with Israel demand a renewed analytical framework that challenges dominant narratives. Revisiting Marx's critique of bourgeois emancipation alongside Bennabi's insights into ideological colonialism enables a deeper understanding of the structural and symbolic dimensions of the Jewish Question.

Numerous studies have examined the Jewish Question, focusing on its religious, political, and socio-economic dimensions. Scholars such as Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, and Shlomo Sand have explored Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the rise of Zionism from philosophical and historical angles. In the Islamic context, thinkers like Edward Said and Muhammad Asad have addressed the implications of the Jewish Question in post-colonial discourse. However, few studies have juxtaposed the Marxist and Islamic civilizational critiques in a direct comparative framework. This study, therefore, fills a gap in the literature by offering an original synthesis that bridges Western materialist critiques and decolonial Islamic thought.

Thus, this research is not merely a historical or theoretical comparison; it actively contributes to contemporary academic discourse on the intersection of religion and politics, and the dynamics of post-colonial identity and resistance. Its relevance extends beyond the intellectual domain to the pressing sociopolitical realities of today.

3. Theoretical Foundations of the Jewish Question

3.1 Karl Marx's Critique of Political Emancipation

In his 1844 essay *Zur Judenfrage* (On the Jewish Question), Karl Marx critiques the notion of political emancipation proposed by Bruno Bauer, who demanded that Jews abandon their religious identity for full civic integration. Marx argued that political emancipation in a bourgeois society did not equate to human emancipation. He identified Judaism not as a racial or spiritual essence, but as an expression of a capitalist ethos. In this

context, Marx posits that the emancipation of society from Judaism is essentially the emancipation from capitalism.

3.2 Malek Bennabi and the Civilizational Critique of Zionism

Malek Bennabi's engagement with the Jewish Question transcends theological or purely political explanations, situating the issue within a broader civilizational framework. In his seminal work *The Ideological Struggle in Colonized Countries* (La Lutte idéologique dans les pays colonisés), Bennabi reinterprets Zionism as a modern ideological construct that strategically instrumentalizes Judaism to achieve geopolitical and colonial ends. He asserts that Zionism, far from being a mere ethno-religious movement, constitutes a form of cultural imperialism that penetrates the consciousness of postcolonial Muslim societies through subtle mechanisms of psychological domination and symbolic violence.

Bennabi critiques what he terms the "intellectual invasion" — an insidious form of neocolonialism that operates not through direct military occupation but via the dissemination of hegemonic narratives, especially those which reshape historical memory and ethical judgment. In this light, Zionism becomes part of a wider system of ideological control that seeks to neutralize resistance and fragment the cultural identity of the ummah (Islamic community). For Bennabi, the key to understanding the Jewish Question is thus not theological, but epistemological and civilizational: it lies in exposing the ideological apparatuses that fabricate legitimacy for occupation, exclusion, and epistemic disorientation in the Muslim world.

Moreover, his critique is anchored in his broader theory of civilizational cycles, where he contrasts the productive vitality of historically ascendant civilizations with the passivity of colonized societies trapped in a state of *colonisability*. In this paradigm, Zionism symbolizes both a symptom and a tool of Western dominance, exploiting the intellectual vacuum in Muslim societies to entrench geopolitical asymmetries. Accordingly, Bennabi calls for a

revival of *Qabiliyyat al-'Umrān* (civilizational receptivity) through ideological liberation and a reclamation of epistemic sovereignty.

This approach places Bennabi at a unique intersection between anti-colonial theory, Islamic reformism, and political philosophy — echoing elements of Gramsci's cultural hegemony, Fanon's colonial alienation, and Sayyid Qutb's ideological resistance, while remaining distinct in its civilizational framing. His critique is not simply a denunciation of Zionism per se, but an invitation to re-evaluate the ideological substratum upon which postcolonial subjugation is built.

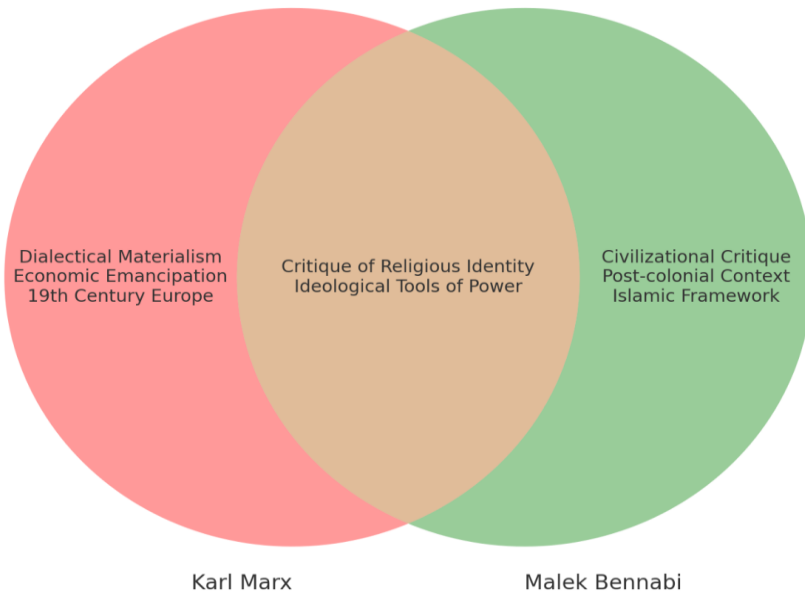
Source: Author's elaboration based on Bennabi (1958, 1961); see also Ghorbal (2003), Boukhobza (2011), and Arkoun (1992).

4. Comparative Analysis of the Two Perspectives

Based on Figure 1, the comparative analysis between Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi reveals a profound divergence in their approaches to the Jewish Question. Marx, grounded in historical materialism, interprets the issue through the lens of political emancipation and economic structures, viewing Judaism as a symbol of capitalist alienation and proposing human emancipation through the abolition of religion and the bourgeois order. In contrast, Bennabi adopts a civilizational framework, linking the Jewish Question to the broader context of postcolonial identity crises and the ideological domination exerted by Zionism. While Marx situates the problem in 19th-century Europe's struggle between civil society and state, Bennabi situates it in the Muslim world's confrontation with modernity, colonialism, and cultural subjugation. Figure 1 illustrates this conceptual shift: Marx's analysis centers on class and secular liberation, while Bennabi focuses on symbolic power, cultural resistance, and the necessity of intellectual reform within Muslim societies. This contrast highlights how both thinkers, though rooted in different epistemologies, address the interplay between religion, identity, and socio-political transformation.

Fig.1. comparison of Marx and Bennabi on the Jewish

Comparison of Marx and Bennabi on the Jewish Question



Source: compiled by the researcher

4.1 Common Ground and Divergence

Despite their divergent intellectual genealogies and historical milieus, both Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi engage critically with the instrumentalization of religious identity—albeit from markedly different angles. Their works converge on a central premise: religion, once detached from its spiritual essence and appropriated by systems of power, becomes a tool of domination. Yet, the modalities and logics through which each thinker articulates this skepticism are informed by their distinct philosophical foundations, socio-historical contexts, and political concerns.

Karl Marx, operating within the rationalist-materialist tradition of 19th-century Europe, constructs his critique within the matrix of political economy. His seminal essay *Zur Judenfrage* (On the Jewish Question) does not simply question Judaism as a religion, but

interrogates the social and economic structures that enable the fetishization of money, private property, and individualism. For Marx, Judaism represents not a theological system per se, but a socio-symbolic configuration deeply entangled with bourgeois ideology. The "Jew," in Marx's critical lexicon, becomes an allegorical figure for the capitalist spirit—a symptom of alienation in a commodified world (Marx, 1844; Avineri, 1968). Thus, his skepticism toward religious identity lies in its potential to mask class interests and divert attention from material conditions of oppression.

By contrast, Malek Bennabi's critique is embedded in the postcolonial condition of the Muslim world, where identity and religion are not merely ideological categories but lived realities shaped by the trauma of colonization and the crisis of cultural authenticity. For Bennabi, Judaism—particularly in its Zionist articulation—functions as a geopolitical ideology interwoven with colonial logics and Western cultural hegemony. Unlike Marx, who universalized the condition of alienation through capitalism, Bennabi contextualized ideological domination within the asymmetry between the *shahada* (witness of divine transcendence) and *istighrab* (occidentalism), or the subaltern's internalization of Western paradigms (Bennabi, 1954; 1961; Arkoun, 1992).

The divergence becomes more pronounced when examining the ontological premises of each thinker. Marx's atheistic materialism leads him to view religion as a superstructural epiphenomenon—a reflection of economic realities rather than a constitutive force in its own right. Bennabi, however, affirms a metaphysical and moral dimension to religion, particularly Islam, which he sees as a potential engine of ethical renewal and civilizational rebirth. While Marx seeks emancipation through the negation of religion as alienation, Bennabi seeks emancipation through the *reconstruction* of religious consciousness, free from both dogmatism and colonial distortion.

Yet, their shared ground is nonetheless significant: both thinkers expose how religious

identity, when politicized, can be mobilized to entrench systems of domination—whether through capitalist commodification or colonial ideology. Both offer a structural critique of how identity is shaped, weaponized, and rendered functional for hegemonic systems. This critical stance allows us to read them dialogically: not in terms of opposition, but as complementary in diagnosing different modalities of subjugation—economic in the case of Marx, civilizational in the case of Bennabi.

Furthermore, both thinkers anticipated the ways in which religious identity could be reframed in modernity—not as a site of spiritual belonging, but as a symbolic currency manipulated in ideological conflicts. Whether in Marx’s critique of bourgeois liberalism’s failure to transcend religious segregation, or Bennabi’s reading of Zionism as a colonial mythos, both thinkers alert us to the dangers of reducing identity to a political instrument.

In sum, while Marx deconstructs the socio-economic myths underpinning liberal secularism, Bennabi unmask the ideological operations of colonial modernity. Their divergences lie in metaphysics and method, but their shared critical ethos constitutes a fertile ground for rethinking the nexus of religion, power, and identity in both Western and Islamic contexts.

4.2 The Political Instrumentalization of Identity

Both Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi, though shaped by distinct historical and epistemological contexts, offer converging critiques of the political instrumentalization of religious identity. For Marx, religion functions as an ideological veil that legitimizes bourgeois domination, with Judaism—stripped of its theological content—symbolizing the commodification and alienation inherent in capitalist society (Marx, 1844; Löwy, 2005). Religion, in his view, consoles the oppressed while simultaneously naturalizing their subjugation. In contrast, Bennabi, writing from a postcolonial Islamic perspective, interprets Zionism as a modern form of imperialism that mobilizes historical grievances and religious narratives to

justify settler-colonialism in Palestine (Bennabi, 1961). He highlights how Zionism fuses myth, memory, and political power to legitimize occupation and displace indigenous populations, exposing the complicity of symbolic systems in geopolitical domination. While Marx critiques how liberal capitalism manipulates religious identity to obscure class antagonisms, Bennabi warns against the vulnerability of colonized minds to ideological infiltration—what he calls “colonizability” (Bennabi, 1954). Despite differing focal points—European liberalism for Marx and postcolonial Muslim societies for Bennabi—both thinkers underscore the dangers of fusing identity, power, and ideology, where sacred narratives are co-opted to serve hegemonic projects. Their insights remain relevant in a contemporary world where religion and ethnicity are increasingly politicized, reminding us that behind every mobilized identity lies a deeper structure of domination, control, and symbolic violence.

Table 1: Comparison of Marx and Bennabi on the Jewish Question

Criteria	Karl Marx	Malek Bennabi
Philosophical Framework	Dialectical Materialism	Civilizational Epistemology
Context	19th-century Europe	Post-colonial Muslim societies
Main Focus	Political and economic emancipation	Ideological and cultural liberation
Critique	Judaism as capitalism	Zionism as ideological colonization
Solution	Human emancipation	Rebuilding civilizational awareness

Source: compiled by the researcher

5. Religion, Identity, and Capital – Comparative Analysis

The present study examines the intersection of religion, identity, and capital in the thought of Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi, highlighting a focused point of comparative analysis. In Marx's framework, Judaism is not primarily a religious or theological phenomenon, but a socio-symbolic expression of capitalist relations. Jewish identity, in this sense, functions as a metaphor for money, exchange, and bourgeois individualism. Religion is therefore analyzed as a superstructural element that conceals class exploitation and perpetuates alienation. The role of capital is central, as Marx links the emancipation of humanity to the transformation of economic structures and the overcoming of capitalist alienation.

In contrast, Bennabi situates Jewish identity within a broader civilizational and ideological context. Zionism combines religious identity with economic resources and geopolitical strategy, functioning as a tool for ideological domination and cultural influence in colonized societies. Religion, particularly Islam, is seen as a civilizational force capable of ethical and intellectual renewal, in contrast to the way identity is instrumentalized for domination. Capital is inseparable from ideology in Bennabi's analysis, as economic and symbolic power work together to shape consciousness and maintain hegemonic structures.

Although their epistemologies and historical contexts differ, both thinkers converge analytically on the instrumentalization of identity within systems of power. Marx approaches this through the lens of socio-economic transformation, whereas Bennabi emphasizes civilizational renewal and ideological liberation. Focusing on this specific intersection of religion, identity, and capital allows for a rigorous and methodologically coherent comparative analysis.

Table02: Comparative Summary – Religion, Identity, and Capital

Criteria	Karl Marx	Malek Bennabi
Religion	Superstructural epiphenomenon; Judaism symbolizes capitalist alienation	Civilizational force; Jewish identity instrumentalized for ideological domination
Identity	Socially constructed within capitalist relations; symbolizes bourgeois individualism	Instrumentalized in colonial and Zionist projects to legitimize power
Capital / Economic Dimension	Central: Judaism metaphorically linked to money and economic relations; emancipation requires overcoming capitalism	Intertwined with ideology: Zionism combines identity with economic and geopolitical power
Analytical Focus	Concealment of class exploitation through identity and religion	Instrumentalization of identity for ideological and civilizational control
Solution / Emancipation	Socio-economic transformation; human emancipation	Civilizational renewal; intellectual and moral liberation
Shared Intersection	Critique of instrumentalization of identity within systems of power	Critique of instrumentalization of identity within systems of power

Source: compiled by the researcher

6. Methodology

This research employs a comparative analytical methodology grounded in a qualitative hermeneutic approach to examine the ideological constructions of the Jewish

Question in the works of Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi. Rather than pursuing a broad or exhaustive comparison, the study deliberately limits its analytical scope to a specific and manageable axis: the political and ideological instrumentalization of religious identity. This focused approach allows for a rigorous comparison between two thinkers operating within fundamentally different epistemological frameworks.

The study is guided by three interrelated methodological components:

• **Primary Sources**

At the core of this inquiry lies a close textual analysis of Karl Marx's seminal essay *Zur Judenfrage* (On the Jewish Question) and Malek Bennabi's key writings, including *The Question of Ideas* and *The Ideological Struggle in Colonized Countries*. These foundational texts are examined within their historical, political, and intellectual contexts. The analysis does not attempt to synthesize Marx's materialism with Bennabi's civilizational epistemology; instead, it adopts a controlled juxtaposition that respects the internal coherence of each framework while comparing how each conceptualizes identity as a functional element within systems of domination. Special attention is paid to Marx's materialist critique of religion as a socio-economic abstraction and Bennabi's diagnosis of ideological colonization and cultural alienation.

• **Secondary Literature**

To contextualize and critically mediate the comparison, the study draws on a selected body of secondary academic literature in political philosophy, critical theory, and postcolonial studies. Secondary sources are used not as a synthetic bridge between Marx and Bennabi, but as interpretive tools that clarify the epistemological limits and conceptual vocabularies of each thinker.

Authors such as Edward Said, Talal Asad, Étienne Balibar, and Hamid Dabashi serve as critical interlocutors in framing debates on identity politics, secularism, colonial ideology, and symbolic power.

• Analytical Tools

The study employs discourse analysis to examine how each thinker constructs religion and identity within their respective critiques of power. This includes attention to key conceptual binaries such as emancipation/alienation in Marx and colonization/liberation in Bennabi.

<u>In parallel, symbolic analysis is applied to identify how religious identity operates as a political signifier rather than a theological essence.</u> This approach enables the researcher to uncover the structural functions of identity in ideological systems without reducing the analysis to doctrinal or normative claims.

Moreover, the methodology is informed by comparative intellectual history, which emphasizes the genealogies of ideas and their socio-historical embeddedness. <u>This perspective prevents essentialist readings and allows each thinker to be analyzed within the specific historical conditions that shaped his critique—19th-century European capitalism for Marx and postcolonial Muslim societies for Bennabi.</u>

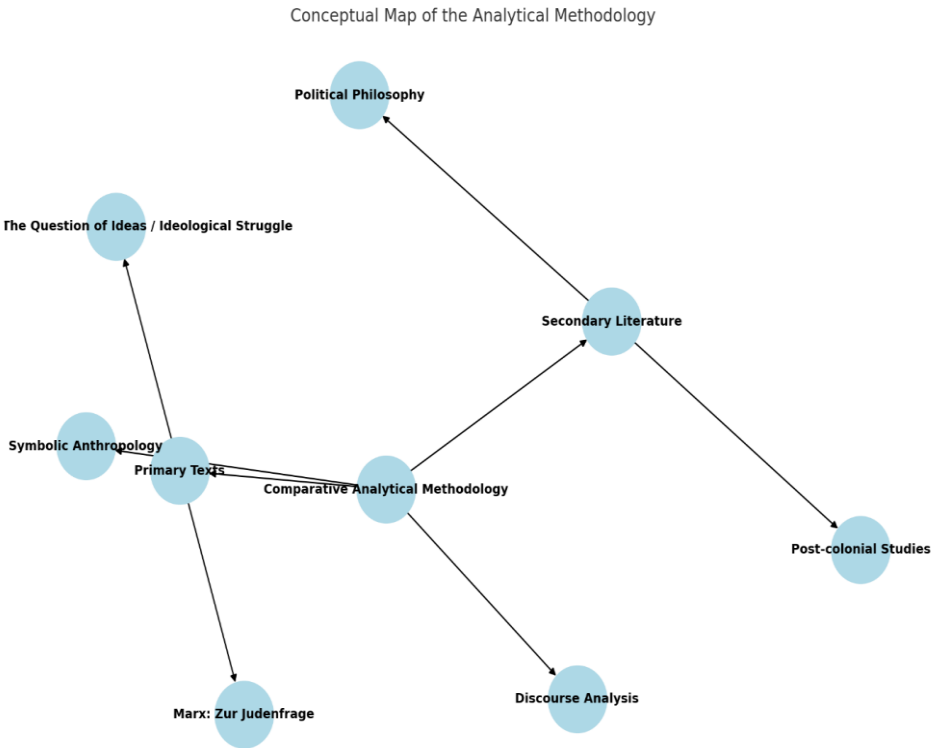
A conceptual map is provided in the appendix to illustrate the analytical logic of the study.

The map outlines the precise axes of comparison: (1) historical context, (2) epistemological premises, (3) the ideological function of religion, and (4) identity as a political instrument.

Ultimately, this methodological design aims not to reconcile divergent epistemologies, but to place them in critical dialogue. By maintaining analytical boundaries while focusing on a shared problematique, the study offers a coherent and methodologically defensible comparison that contributes to

contemporary debates on religion, identity, and power.</u>

Fig.1. comparison of Marx and Bennabi on the Jewish



Source: compiled by the researcher

7. CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth comparative exploration of the Jewish Question through the intellectual frameworks of Karl Marx and Malek Bennabi, revealing how two thinkers—separated by time, geography, and ideological backgrounds—engaged with the same problematic from distinct yet illuminating angles. Marx, writing in the 19th-century European context, approached the Jewish Question through the lens of historical materialism and political economy, arguing that true human emancipation requires the

abolition of economic alienation and the secularization of political life. He saw religion not as the core issue, but as a symptom of deeper socioeconomic contradictions embedded within capitalist society. On the other hand, Bennabi, situated in the mid-20th-century postcolonial Islamic world, framed the question within a civilizational and ideological paradigm. For him, Zionism represented a form of modern imperialism, driven not only by political interests but also by symbolic domination and myth-making. He viewed the Jewish Question as part of a broader colonial strategy to restructure the consciousness of the colonized, using identity and religion as tools of control. Thus, where Marx critiqued the structures of bourgeois liberalism, Bennabi analyzed the mechanisms of cultural subjugation and ideological hegemony in the postcolonial era.

This comparative analysis has shown that while both thinkers were critical of the instrumentalization of religious identity for political ends, their conceptual starting points, analytical tools, and historical concerns diverged significantly. Marx sought emancipation through socio-economic transformation, whereas Bennabi emphasized the need for intellectual and civilizational renewal in the face of colonial modernity. Methodologically, the paper adopted a comparative analytical framework that not only facilitated the juxtaposition of two complex thought systems but also allowed for the extraction of deeper insights into how the Jewish Question functions as a discursive site where issues of power, identity, memory, and resistance intersect.

The analysis demonstrates that the Jewish Question is not a static historical problem, but a dynamic concept that continues to inform contemporary debates on nationalism, secularism, colonialism, and symbolic violence. In conclusion, this study contributes to the cross-cultural understanding of political and philosophical thought by bridging Western Marxist critique with Islamic postcolonial theory. It invites further interdisciplinary research into how shared global problems—such as the manipulation of identity, religious othering,

and ideological domination—can be approached through plural epistemological lenses. The enduring relevance of both Marx’s and Bennabi’s perspectives underscores the need to engage critically with inherited concepts, not only to understand past injustices but also to imagine pathways toward more equitable and emancipated futures.

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