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Review of Theodor Lessing, *Jewish Self-Hate*

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THEODOR LESSING, *Jewish Self-Hate*, trans. Peter C. Appelbaum, ed. Benton Arnovitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 186 pp. ISBN 978 1 789 20986 0 (hardback), £110.00; ISBN 978 1 789 20992 1 (paperback), £23.95

The idea of Jewish self-hatred is certainly not a new one, neither has its meaning changed much. The term originated in Germany with the dawn of Reform Judaism, which sought to bring Jewish communal practice more into line with that of its German counterparts, and which caused a split within German Jewry as a result. The split effected further communal splintering, as groups now found an urgent need to (re)define themselves against the emergent ideology. Consequently, we see ‘Conservative’ and ‘Orthodox’ Judaism emerge in Germany as a reaction to Reform Judaism (much as conservatism found its own ideological voice only after, and as a result of, the dawn of liberalism). Thus the term is used amongst Jews themselves to denote apparent internalized antisemitism.¹ Today it is most often applied to Jewish detractors of either Israeli policy or indeed the existence of the state itself. And the title of ‘self-hating Jew’ is often lobbed against actors such as Woody Allen and Larry David, although probably both and certainly the latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, would disagree. In a now-classic episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, upon being called a ‘self-loathing Jew’ for whistling Wagner, David’s eponymous character retorts: ‘I do hate myself, but it has nothing to do with being Jewish.’²

However, it was only with the publication of the German–Jewish philosopher Theodor Lessing’s *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Jewish Self-Hate) in 1930 that the term gained widespread use. Lessing used a case study of six intellectuals who, through their own Jewish self-hatred, he believed stoked the fires of German and Austrian antisemitism. The book’s publication date is noteworthy; appearing only three years before Hitler became Germany’s chancellor, it

¹ See, inter alia, Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, 1986), 361; Antony Lerman, ‘Jewish Self-Hatred: Myth or Reality’, *Jewish Quarterly*, 55/2 (2008), 46–51.

² Larry David, ‘Trick or Treat’, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 2 Episode 3, HBO (2001).

was almost immediately included in the Nazi book-burning rituals that began the same year. Only two months after Hitler assumed his chancellorship, Lessing fled with his wife to Marienbad. It was a short-lived escape: he was shot by assassins while working on 30 August, a price having been put on his head by the Nazi regime. He died the next day, aged only 61. *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* became an underground classic, and Lessing was elevated to the status of cultural-historical philosophical clairvoyant.

It is thus perhaps surprising that this volume, translated by Peter C. Applebaum and published in 2021, is the first English translation of the work. As such, it represents a valuable contribution to the body of scholarship dealing with the phenomenon of internalized antisemitism. Applebaum's translation preserves Lessing's own angst-ridden writing style: at times clear and concise, at other times rambling and murky. Five short chapters on 'Jewish Destiny' and a 'scientific' excursus on Jewish self-hate are followed by six 'life stories' which, in Appelbaum's words, 'delve into the complex nature of German Jewish self-hate during the latter part of the nineteenth century through the Weimar Republic' (p. ix). Nonetheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the book betrays as much about Lessing's own psychological state at the time of writing as it does about the six figures whom he vignettes, and indeed this is the overwhelming feeling that the reader is left with upon completion of the volume. And therein perhaps lies the book's weakness: it all seems rather dated. Lessing's prose is characterized by a hypersensitivity and pathos that are at times simply too much for today's reader to bear. His theorizing rarely approaches the cool neutrality and scientific methodology that one would expect from a philosopher and mathematician today.

In the first chapters Lessing summarizes the situation of 'Eastern' and 'Western' Jews that are all too familiar to today's reader: the book was written in the wake of the 1929 Arab anti-Jewish riots in British Mandatory Palestine, which erupted over the question of access to the Western Wall and in which hundreds of Jews and Arabs were killed and many more injured. For Lessing, the riots proved nothing more than that the Jews were always damned to persecution. Even when 'tired of ever-repeating cycles of mass hysteria, which no nobility of

thought, culture, or action can ever reconcile', the 'oldest of all peoples [had] decided to take its destiny into their own hands' (p. 4) and return to their ancient homeland. His conclusion that '[w]hen we stand up for our own rights, they respond, "Have you not yet learned that dogged self-preservation of a special people is nothing more than treachery against universal human, *transnational* values?"' (p. 4) is indicative of the style of argumentation that he employs throughout the book. Although one might not argue with the truth of such conclusions, they are presented in a manner that is just too personal for what is supposed to be a study of a particular sociological phenomenon.

Figures such as Moses Mendelssohn, Moses Hess, Karl Marx, Heinrich Heine, Max Nordau, and Theodor Herzl (although the latter only in passing) are all mentioned in the opening chapters, but there is nothing new for today's reader to glean from Lessing's discussion, although it certainly would have been more *au courant* in 1930. And his chapter that promises a discussion about the psychology, pathology, logic, and morality of self-hate is philosophical at best, and only at a stretch. There is little scientific discussion, in spite of the chapter's title, and statements such as, 'Jewish spiritual development reveals a fateful exaggeration of the spiritually conscious over the aesthetic-religious' and 'Within the spiritually conscious life, ethical intension predominates over logical perception' (p. 21) are presented with no proof.

The six 'self-hating Jews' whose life stories Lessing tells – Paul Rée, Arthur Trebitsch, Max Steiner, Walter Calé, Maximilian Harden, and Otto Weininger – are, with the possible exception of Weininger, all but forgotten today, except perhaps in academic circles. The essay on Weininger – certainly a conflicted soul whose book *Geschlecht und Charakter*³ is still presented today in any robust discussion on racial theory – promised the most, but contributes little to any real understanding of Weininger's tragic figure. The essay on Trebitsch is the most illuminating and comprehensive. There are also glaring omissions: why, for example, Paul Rée, of whom, in Lessing's words, 'nothing . . . remains for posterity' (p. 37), and not, say, Karl Kraus,

³ Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter: Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (Vienna, 1903).

who would have provided a more interesting and multidimensional study?

All six men met early and tragic deaths, probably all by suicide (although Réé's 'shattered [*sic*] body' (p. 48) was found at the foot of a glacier, so accidental death cannot be ruled out). Lessing's implication of course is that Jewish self-hate could be internalized only so much. And such conclusions betray Lessing's main methodological weakness. In his attempt to highlight the pseudoscientific methods employed by the six 'self-hating' Jews whom he discusses, Lessing himself employs a methodology that is no less so. Perhaps all six men committed suicide as a consequence of their inability to reconcile their own Jewishness with their internalized Jewish self-hate. But Lessing's 'conclusions' can be no more than theories. Indeed, Weininger at least was likely also homosexual. Perhaps also Max Steiner, if we are to believe Lessing's cryptic claim that, as in the case of Weininger, 'newspapers indulged in vague speculations' as to the reason for his suicide, but 'only a few friends knew the truth' (p. 92). Were these men racked with Jewish or homosexual self-hate? Did one win out over the other? These are questions, one suspects, that Weininger and Steiner themselves would have been hard pressed to answer. Thus Lessing's pseudoscientific reasoning seems not only dated, but also guilty of a confirmation bias that the modern reader cannot shake off.

Rather fittingly, Sander Gilman provides an excellent introduction that contextualizes both Lessing's work and the era in which he felt compelled to write it. One wishes that Lessing himself could have read and drawn on Gilman's contribution to the volume. Paul Reitter's afterword fulfils a similar function, and is more directly critical of Lessing than either Gilman or Appelbaum. The latter's translation, it should be noted again, is first class, and his notes very helpful indeed, although they could have benefited from critical analysis of Lessing's prose in addition to providing context to his narrative.

Thus we are presented with an uneven volume. On one hand—due to the fact that it represents the first (and very good) English translation of Lessing's *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* and is well annotated with excellent contributions from Gilman and Reitter—it is a worthy

addition to the body of scholarship that deals with German-Jewish cultural history, antisemitism, and racial theory; on the other, it is a work that fails to convince due to an outdated methodology and prose style.

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