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Review of Sven Fritz, *Houston Stewart Chamberlain: Rassenwahn und
Welterlösung. Biographie*

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SVEN FRITZ, *Houston Stewart Chamberlain: Rassenwahn und Welterlösung. Biographie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2022), xvi + 873 pp. ISBN 978 3 506 76067 8. €49.90

The question of the origins and continuities of modern antisemitic thought in Central Europe, from the second half of the nineteenth century to National Socialism and the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, has been raised time and again for decades, not least in the hope of identifying ideological and political precursors of the Hitler regime and explaining how the fringe National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was able to seize power in Germany just over ten years after it was founded in post-First World War Munich. While it is generally accepted that pioneers of racial thinking like Arthur de Gobineau and populist politicians like Karl Lueger, the antisemitic mayor of Vienna, contributed to a new political style that fused authoritarianism with racism and antisemitism and thus challenged the liberal standards of the time, things become more controversial when these thinkers and politicians are not discussed in isolation but seen as representatives of a particular and influential wing of the educated middle classes—in the German lands, the nationally minded *Bildungsbürgertum*.

Born in Britain, educated in France and Switzerland, and later Germanized, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927) was one of those nationalist thinkers who became very popular in German-speaking Central Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, but whose writings are nowadays only read by specialists in intellectual and cultural history. The historian Sven Fritz has now published a comprehensive political and intellectual biography of the man, which is based on his Ph.D. thesis and comprises almost 900 pages. At first, one might wonder about the necessity of such an elaborate undertaking, not least because Fritz is by no means Chamberlain's first biographer. Only a few years ago, in 2015, the renowned German political scientist Udo Bermbach published a comprehensive biography, and in the English-speaking world Geoffrey G. Field's seminal 1981 study *Evangelist of Race* remains relevant.¹ While these and other earlier

¹ Udo Bermbach, *Houston Stewart Chamberlain: Wagners Schwiegersohn – Hitlers Vordenker* (Stuttgart, 2015); Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York, 1981).

studies have already provided meticulous analyses of the intellectual world of Chamberlain and his entourage, this new book attempts to put the political activist and ultranationalist himself centre stage. In doing so, Fritz refutes all attempts to categorically separate the highly cultured best-selling author from the sordid world of populist and nationalist politics. Unlike others before him who lamented that Chamberlain was unjustly appropriated by the National Socialists after his death, Fritz aims to show that his protagonist was not only an ideological mastermind but also a political leader of the German *völkisch* right who—together with Richard Wagner's widow Cosima, who from 1883 onwards successfully managed the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth—spread antisemitic hatred in Europe, paving the way for worse to come.

At the beginning of the book, the author takes his readers on a tour of Chamberlain's former house in Bayreuth. The city administration has turned it into a museum—not for its controversial former resident, however, but for the novelist Jean Paul, who lived in the city from 1804 until his death in 1825. While the museum occupies the ground floor of Wahnfriedstraße 1, Chamberlain dominates the floor above, where—inaccessible to the public—his personal papers as well as his extensive private library of about 12,000 books are stowed away. These personal papers were first organized in the 1950s by retired psychiatrist Wilhelm Einsle, who, as director of the Erlangen sanatorium and nursing home, had been implicated in the murder of disabled people during the Nazi period. (But that is another, if not entirely unrelated story.) The extensive collection of Chamberlain's papers provides the core archival material for Fritz's study, allowing him to reconstruct in detail not only Chamberlain's networks, but also his journalistic and political initiatives.

The introduction is followed by seven chronologically structured chapters. The first of these informs readers about the biography of the young Chamberlain, the son of Royal Navy Rear Admiral William Chamberlain and his wife, the Scottish aristocrat Elizabeth Jane Hall. As his mother died before his first birthday, Chamberlain, a sickly and introverted child, was educated mostly on the Continent. In his autobiography, he stated that England remained a distant and foreign country to him. It was the discovery of Richard Wagner's music

and thought that led the young man in his early twenties to identify with what he regarded as the cultural heritage of Germanness and its alleged civilizing mission. 'The decisive turn in my life was to become German', Chamberlain wrote once he was established (p. 65), and while this was certainly a self-stylization, it is equally true that from the 1880s onwards his thinking and political actions were shaped by Wagner's agenda, which the eager student quickly embraced. Antisemitism was an essential part of this programme.

How the radicalization of the young Chamberlain took place is shown in an impressively detailed third chapter, which also introduces the reader to the strategic thinking and concrete business activities of Cosima Wagner as the new head of the Bayreuth Festival. Their acquaintance turned out to be a win-win situation: Cosima, who was then working tirelessly to elevate the festival and her husband's oeuvre to a national asset, quickly came to appreciate the loyal and like-minded Chamberlain and used him to help her enterprise achieve wider popularity and international recognition. For Chamberlain, whose initial academic ambitions had failed, his work for the festival and his personal friendship with Wagner's widow provided a meaningful purpose and a sense of belonging that he had long missed.

After several years promoting Wagner's music and philosophy in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, where Chamberlain had begun to make a modest name for himself as a writer and cultural critic, he finally decided to move to Bayreuth and quickly became an indispensable member of his new surrogate family. Fritz takes great pains to show that the Wagnerian world in the Franconian province was marked not only by the cult of genius around Richard, but also by obsessive antisemitism. The many examples he provides are as impressive as they are shocking. Musicians of Jewish descent were systematically not cast and often atrociously defamed in order to keep the Wagner temple on the Green Hill free of any 'Israelite admixture' (p. 107) and to set an example to the rest of the country that it was possible to exclude Jews from public life as a means of achieving 'Germanic regeneration' (p. 110). Chamberlain shared and propagated such beliefs. As early as 1888, he noted that 'every intelligent and upright German' would know that the country was at risk of 'complete moral, intellectual,

and material ruin' thanks to the 'Jewish supremacy' and their alleged parasitic existence at the expense of all other peoples (p. 132).

It was only logical that Chamberlain's breakthrough as a writer came with an extensive (and cleverly marketed) book on the life, works, and philosophy of Richard Wagner. This was first published in German in 1895, with an English translation available in 1900. The fourth chapter gives us a detailed reading of Chamberlain's interpretation of Wagner, which closely follows what he had discussed with Cosima and other self-styled Wagner exegetes in the previous decade. Despite (or perhaps because of) its racial undertones, Chamberlain's book was well received, even beyond the inner circle of Wagnerites. Its success opened the door to societal recognition and further book contracts. In 1899, Chamberlain published his most commercially successful book, the highly influential *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, a racial history of human civilization from its beginnings to 1800, in which he advanced the idea that the 'Aryan race' was at the core of all human progress and that its contemporary embodiment was the Germanic peoples.

The content and the reception of this book are the focus of the fifth chapter, which argues that both publications—the book on Wagner and *Foundations*—should be seen as complementary. Through them, Chamberlain provided an explanation of the world that not only promised to make the latest scholarship accessible to a wider educated readership, but was also directly political. He built on ideas also propagated by other writers of his time, such as Julius Langbehn with his extremely successful, culturally pessimistic novel *Rembrandt als Erzieher* ('Rembrandt as Teacher'), but radicalized them in light of contemporary fears of degeneration. Chamberlain advocated a flexible concept of race, in the sense that he regarded every human being as the product of a racial mixture. This enabled him to claim that the national purity he desired could be achieved through racial 'cleanliness' and racially informed reproduction. He was, however, less a scientifically driven eugenicist than a racist cultural philosopher with a biopolitical agenda. At the heart of the problems of modern civilization, he believed, was the 'Jewish menace'. The Germans were called to deal with the Jews in a way that would not only 'purify' and thus liberate the German nation, but also set an example for the world.

The success of this message was immediate and long-lasting. The first 2,500 copies of *Foundations* sold out on the day of publication; by 1917, the book's total circulation exceeded 100,000 copies.

The last three chapters trace Chamberlain's career as a controversial commentator on political and current affairs after 1900 in over 400 pages. By the turn of the century, Chamberlain's antisemitic and racist world view was fully formed, with *Foundations* providing a kind of intellectual cornerstone for his thinking. Consequently, Fritz from now on focuses less on his subject's intellectual development and more on his contributions in the political sphere, which were made behind the scenes via personal letters to influential people and publicly through shorter essays and newspaper articles. In doing so, Fritz takes his book beyond a typical biography to offer a broad panorama of nationalist and antisemitic ideology in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the sixth chapter, he shows how such racial thinking increasingly reached important figures, including Kaiser Wilhelm II. Chamberlain's influence is difficult to measure, however, at least until 1914. During the First World War, which is dealt with in chapter seven, Chamberlain became further radicalized, but his concrete influence probably diminished—due to the general radicalization of German nationalism, but also because his writings increasingly exhausted themselves in repetition. Nevertheless, according to Fritz, he managed to become 'one of the most prominent war propagandists' (p. 578), fully sympathizing with the far-reaching war aims of the pan-German movement and writing in the most chauvinistic terms about Germany's opponents, especially his native Britain. Chamberlain also claimed that the war would serve as a source of heroism and genius for Germany by the million, which would fundamentally transform the nation. Countless letters he received from soldiers testify to the impact his writings had at the time.

From 1917 onwards, Chamberlain's health deteriorated sharply. Devastated by the German defeat and the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy, he spread the stab-in-the-back myth and began to search for a new leader of a future *völkisch* coalition movement. It did not take long before his attention was drawn to an up-and-coming politician and brutal antisemite named Adolf Hitler. On 30 September 1923, Hitler visited Chamberlain in Bayreuth, who a few days later wrote

a personal letter to his guest thanking him for giving him new hope for the future of Germany. Chamberlain subscribed to the NSDAP newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* and followed the party's development closely until his death in early 1927, being kept regularly informed by Winifred Wagner, Cosima Wagner's daughter-in-law and a close friend of Hitler. He also became a member of the NSDAP in January 1926, shortly after the party ban was lifted.

Fritz highlights the many parallels between Chamberlain's political writings and the programme of the Nazi party and thus sees him as part of the direct vanguard of National Socialism. This assessment is not entirely new, but is based on the most comprehensive and careful analysis to date of Chamberlain's political interventions, his writings, and their public reception from the 1880s onwards. Sven Fritz has written an important book. His biography of Chamberlain is a powerful reminder not only that intellectuals can be seduced by political power, but that they sometimes even lead the way by shaping world views and formulating political concepts whose impact only unfolds over time.

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