

Red Thread in the Warp of History: Anti-Semitism

Like “genocide,” the term “Anti-Semitism” is of relatively recent origin, but the phenomenon is not. The essays in this section contribute to the study of anti-Semitism in its earlier as well as its nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations.

Julius Lester explores the intertwined history of racism and anti-Semitism as rational dimensions of our civilization. “Anti-Semitism and racism are two of the organizing principles of Western civilization,” he asserts. He is quick to remind us, however, that rational thought is not necessarily moral, and can serve evil purposes. The fusion of racial and anti-Semitic ideologies in Nazi Germany has deep roots in the Christian world, and Lester sketches the emergence of the early modern conceptions of man out of the sacred world of medieval Christianity, pointing to many of the markers that indicate “the unholy wedding of humanism with the degradation of Africans, Jews, women, Incas and Aztecs.”

In the modern period, Lester argues, the new and enabling ingredient is capitalism. “Racism became a cornerstone of modern Western civilization because by suppressing Africans, women and Jews, European man suppressed in himself the human attributes which most threatened that brave new world he was building, a world in which the economic mode changed from feudalism to capitalism.” In a powerfully sweeping concluding section, Lester then goes on to link this development with the emergence of the evils of the twentieth-century, which exemplify what Hannah Arendt called the “thoughtlessness” of monstrous injustices, including the effects of slavery, anti-Semitism and the life denying assaults on humanity they entail.

We turn from Lester’s overview to **Frederick A. Busi**’s study of anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century France. Busi focuses on the thought of Henri-Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux (1805-1876), identifying numerous factors that can be seen as precursors of later anti-Semitic manifestations. Among them are the economic, religious, and racial features of Gougenot’s career that came to be embodied in his main publication in 1869, *Le Juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peuples chrétiens*. Busi shows how Gougenot came to the pessimistic view that Jews, refusing to convert, would need to be exterminated like rats or “noxious microbes...bent on destroying Catholicism.”

In ways that would become all too familiar later, Gougenot blamed the Jews for myriad ills afflicting France. “What Gougenot did, Busi writes, “was to achieve a clever union of official church and state anti-Jewish animosity with more assertive forms of Judeophobia which could easily be connected to the extreme forms of anti-Semitism.” Gougenot died in 1876, but anti-Semites were borrowing from his work even before then, and by the time of the Dreyfus affair in 1894, his influence was widespread, manifesting itself, for example, in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the vitriol of the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, to justify what Gougenot called “our necessary violences”

against the Jews.

Robert Schwartzwald is also concerned with France, through a study of the career of Father Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954), whose exemplary refutation of anti-Semitism stands in sharp contrast to the historical strain that Busi traces. Father Couturier's commitment to spiritual and intellectual liberty led him to work with artists for their genius, not their religion. As his life and the century progressed, he came to realize that "a culture of anti-Semitism [was] central to France's own undoing: this and not some presumed Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy, is at the heart of the moral bankruptcy that leads to the collapse of the Third Republic." Schwartzwald follows the evolution of Father Couturier's views from their early rural origins, through his involvement with the Action française and his rejection of it in the face of its collaboration with Hitler's demands.

Father Couturier arrived in New York City in January 1940 and spent the war years in North America. In Quebec in the early 1940's, Schwartzwald writes, "Couturier was particularly effective in helping shift sympathies among Catholics away from Vichy to the Free French by insisting upon the Nazi travesty of Christian principles." And in New York, having suffered rejection by his Dominican brothers, he still refused to succumb to the diminishment of prevailing stereotypes. Father Couturier maintained his Christian integrity by recognizing the potential fascist or racist in each of us and by acting in accordance with his choice of justice over authority and audacity over security. His life stands in sharp contrast to the ideologies of anti-Semitism that preoccupy the other essays in this section.

Susan Shapiro turns our attention to the history of a stereotype, the eternal, wandering Jew, Ahasverus as "a living corpse," an uncanny image. She begins by reminding us of a paradox, that the very success of Jewish assimilation fed the fantasy of perfidious, secret Jewish power. The representation of the Jew remains "unheimlich," unhomey, having no resting place. Taken up by such figures as the Hegelian Karl Gutzkow, the Wandering Jew is understood in both in negative terms, as the doomed rejecter of Christ, or in a positive reading, as pointing toward a final conversion to Christianity. The figure of the Wandering Jew is also taken up by Zionist writers, such as Leo Pinsker and Moses Hess, for whom the establishment of a national home will end the submission to Judeophobia that relegates the Jew to ghostlike status within European cultures.

Shapiro then goes on to outline the manifestations and transformations of the image of the uncanny Jew in the twentieth century. In Freud's 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," the image of the Jew is absent, and Shapiro argues that this absence indicates Freud's transformation of the image into his theorization of the place of the maternal and the death instinct in the experience of the uncanny. Freud thus reads "the uncanniness of the Jew into the very structures of the unconscious within everyman." Finally, in a condensed reading of French critical theory, Shapiro focuses on what Pinsker called the "inseparable companions,"

Judaism and anti-Semitism, questioning the responsibility of Jewish thinkers who take up such volatile images as the “Jewish Uncanny.”

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