

**Michael Mack.** *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses.* University of Chicago Press 2013. 237 pp. \$46.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780226500942); \$29.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226500966).

Here is the bottom line of the book: the question that drives the book is, Why were the Nazis hate-obsessed with Jews and why did the Nazis engineer the genocide of the Jews now known as the Shoah or Holocaust? This is the enigma not only for Jews, but for all humanitarians and humanists. The question and its answer do not arise explicitly until the concluding chapter. The book answers that Nazism is a product of Enlightenment reason, ‘the unreason of reason,’ and more generally a product of the fundamental philosophy and values of western civilization.

One may find this explanation too general, too vague, and even too metaphysical in that it cannot be logically countered by the examination of specific historical events that occurred prior to the rise of Nazism. However, let that not be an obstacle to the reader's appreciation of the book's special insight into the nature of German philosophical Idealism—the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel and their followers. Even more specifically, let not the reader be deterred by the vague condemnation of the west and the Enlightenment that forms the general framework for the book. Those thinkers who see themselves as inheritors of the Enlightenment—its hope for reason and tolerance—might overlook the book's analysis of German Idealism and its critics. One embedded in the philosophical heritage of the Enlightenment might miss the book's explanation of how German Jewish intellectuals, from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig, Freud, Levinas and Benjamin, among others, attempted to subvert the philosophical framework of German Idealism.

The book's basic idea is that German Jewish intellectuals used the language and style of the German Idealist philosophical framework to develop an historical and conceptual outlook that turned that framework upside down to root the intellectualist framework in the earth of daily life. The author calls this turning of the tables by the grounding of thought in the particularities of lived experience, the development of *counter-histories* and *counter-narratives*. The reader might spot a dilemma here: the very attempt to develop counter-histories and counter-narratives presupposes the framework it counters. Thinkers are inevitably bound by a necessity of thinking within the framework they attempt to subvert, and so unwittingly support and reinforce the framework. I return to this dilemma at the end.

The book has two theses and thus two parts. The first thesis, in ‘Part One: Narratives,’ is to explain how German Idealism is inherently anti-Jewish. The second thesis, in ‘Part Two: Counter-narratives,’ is to explain how Jewish-German thinkers have turned German Idealism on its head and subverted the anti-Jewish philosophy inherent in German Idealism.

The first thesis—the transcendentalism and anti-materialism of German Idealism developed in Kant's conceptions of knowledge, reason, transcendental dialectics, the thing-in-itself, and especially, reason as exemplified in the Categorical Imperative—argues the following: German Idealism condemns the Jewish concern with ritualistic practice, bodily matters, life in the here and now, or in more contemporary terms, making a living and living a life, as beneath dignity. It almost goes without saying that the life of mind cannot be understood by Jews according to the German Idealism of Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel and their acolytes.

A strong objection to this argument is that anti-Jewish attitudes are really incidental to German philosophers who developed and expounded Idealism. The anti-Jewish attitude of German

Idealist thinkers are merely a cultural inheritance or cultural bias of the general anti-Jewish attitudes, and anti-semitic blood libels spread by Christians. The last pogrom due to the blood libel was instigated on July 4, 1946 in Kielce, Poland—but this does not indicate that Polish logic is somehow anti-Jewish. Furthermore, such attitudes descended from medieval civic and social institutions that permitted Jews to live and work in Christian lands under various restrictions in ghettos and with evictions and forced resettlement until even today. The book dispenses with that rotten tomato in its Introduction by expounding on Marx's essay 'On the Jewish Question' (15 ff). However, one resistant to this reply may offer this rebuttal: Kant said what today would be considered anti-Indian in the following attempt at a joke from the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*: 'An Indian at an Englishman's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale opened, and all the beer turned into froth and flowing out. The repeated exclamations of the Indian showed his great astonishment. Well, what is so wonderful in that? asked the Englishman. Oh, I'm not surprised myself, said the Indian, at its getting out, but at how you ever managed to get it all in.'

Kant's joke is intended to illustrate the dynamics of humour and how the dynamics of humour functions similarly to the dynamics of aesthetic judgement—except that the former issues in laughter and the latter issues in disinterested delight. However, it is too bad that Kant imbibed the general cultural biases of the Europeans of his time. But that is all it is—a cultural bias, and not some form of anti-Indian philosophy. Kant and German Idealism is no more anti-Jewish than it is anti-Indian or even misogynist, let alone misanthropic. Just because German Idealism denigrates the material, the emotional, and the self-interestedness of the ego, does not logically imply (nor presuppose) anti-Semitism, nor misogyny, nor misanthropy.

The book has a response in its theory of *pseudotheology*. The short of the argument from *pseudotheology* is that the overall philosophical structure of German Idealism in all its varieties is implicitly shaped by Christian theology—the material world requires a redemption that can come only in the future (in the Kingdom of Ends, or when Reason, transcendental thought, becomes immanent). Mainstream Jewish theology rejects any change in the status of the material world as governed by natural law in the future Messianic era, and hence, Judaism contains a fundamental error according to German Idealism. Extract the *pseudotheology* from German Idealism and German Idealism dissolves into nothingness.

Even Wagner, who was the father of Romanticism, adapted the *pseudotheology* of his German Idealist predecessors: 'In Wagner's anti-Semitic imagination, as in Kant's, Hegel's Feuerbach's, and Schopenhauer's, the Jews exemplified the principle of heteronomy—be it called utilitarian or egoistic. It is always the Jews who are blamed for an orientation toward the 'goods of this world.' Even though the paradigm of world redemption shifts its focus from reason to art, the anti-Semitic aspect of German transcendental thought also determined Wagner's racism, and here too, the immutable resides in religion rather than in biology.' (69)

Here enters the response of Jewish-German intellectuals, and the second thesis of the book that German-Jewish intellectuals used the framework of German Idealism to subvert German Idealism. Starting with Mendelssohn, German-Jewish intellectuals aimed to subvert German Idealism by promoting alternative histories (*counter-histories*) and alternative philosophies or conceptions (*counter-narratives*) of reason, ethics, matter, and even the transcendent: 'By attempting to undermine the hegemony of idealist philosophy in German intellectual culture, Mendelssohn anticipated

the work of German Jewish writers (Heine, Graetz, Freud) in the latter half of the nineteenth century' (86).

Freud's critique is powerfully outlined and summarized in this book, and should be read first if the reader wants to have the immediate satisfaction of the *pleasure-principle* in the intellectual enjoyment of a cutting argument: 'Kant depicted Christ as a revolutionary .... Freud advanced an ironic inversion of this revolution. In his account the Jews liberate themselves from a tyrannical rule .... His [Freud's] is a prophetic kind of Judaism. It thus represents the opposite of a community that is enslaved to the compulsive rule of priests ... Finding their core identity in this prophetic search, the Jews are the true enlighteners, practicing enlightenment beyond the superego, beyond despotic rule' (152). Furthermore, 'a Kantian indifference to the external world turns out to be psychotic, whereas the Freudian reality principle ... guides one along the path to a rational way of action .... Thus Freud unveiled the etiology of psychosis ... in Kant's moral philosophy .... Kantian transcendentalism and its political and pseudoscientific revisions end up as pathological fantasies' (153). Enough said: German-Idealism is no less psychotic than Nazism and their wish-fulfillment of leaving everything in the hands of an Ultimate Father Figure—whether disguised as Transcendental Reason or as the Fuhrer.

I now return to the dilemma I outlined earlier: How can we escape the hold of philosophies that inherently are anti-realist and anti-rationalist at the deepest level where rationality involves learning from life in the real, physical, day to day world? When the leading intellectuals of a time, such as the German Idealist philosophers, formulate the basic concepts of a field in terms of an anti-rationalist and anti-realist framework, where one form of phobia is replaced by another, or one form of psychosis is replaced by another, can we somehow find a reality-treatment, an intellectual tunnel, that will allow us to break through such a prison of thought of action? The attempt to subvert the framework from within must fail plain and simple. Remember that the Jewish intellectuals discussed in this book, including Freud, had a deep Kafkaesque ambivalence towards their own Jewish heritage: though they had an inner pride about their heritage, they unwittingly imbibed the myths and slanders in the anti-Judaism of the general culture when attempting to become more German than the so-called authentic German intellectuals of their day.

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