

# H-Net Reviews

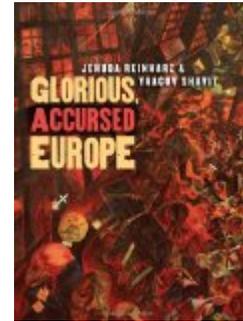
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jehuda Reinharz, Jacob Shavit. *Glorious, Accursed Europe*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010. 316 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-843-6.

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## The Jewish Encounter with Modern European Thought

The other night, searching the Web for I no longer remember what, I came upon a YouTube video, filmed on November 11, 2011, that documented a flash mob dancing in Jerusalem's Mamilla Mall (a pedestrian-only, posh shopping district) to the song, "Pitom Kam Adam." [1] The dancers were, not surprisingly, mostly wearing T-shirts and blue jeans, and would not have looked out of place in New York, London, Paris, or Berlin. About two-thirds of the way into the clip, the camera panned to belly dancers descending an outdoor staircase, wearing "authentic" belly-dancing garb. Viewers would probably be struck by the odd combination of "East" and "West," and might very well reflect on Israel's sense of which cultural world it should belong to. Later that evening, I read a relatively recent opinion by Jacob Neusner, explaining his return to Reform Judaism. Neusner wrote of "two categories of Judaic religious systems in existence today: self-segregationist and integrationist." [2]

These two quite recent and superficially quite different pieces pose problems for, and questions of interest to, the Jewish world; namely, what is the nature of Judaism, or at least what should be its relationship to the surrounding intellectual world; and should (at least Israeli) Jewish cultural identity be seen as Western or Eastern?

*Glorious, Accursed Europe* makes clear that these are not new questions or problems for the Jewish world. It tells the story of European Jewish thinkers' sometimes admiring, sometimes scornful, often horrified vision of

the culture of Europe from the Haskalah to the present. In its broadest outlines, the story is neither new nor surprising. The undiscerning reader will learn that in different eras, different Jewish thinkers had sometimes wildly different reactions to contemporary thought. Jehuda Reinharz and Yaacov Shavit's contribution lies in their moving our knowledge from this trite, sketchy—indeed, useless—understanding to one that is detailed, substantive, and subtle. Their ten-chapter work gives us a thinker-by-thinker analysis of the best—and worst—that the world of European ideas had in store for the Jews.

As the authors remind us in their introduction, "Europe" struck Jews as both a relatively unified cultural zone and a collection of sometimes extraordinarily different nations. In the periods from the French Revolution forward, Jewish thinkers had to confront this dual reality from their own, rather fractured, set of identities. Ought they elect to be Europeans, or Germans, or French, or any of the other national possibilities? Perhaps these identities already had meaning. Or, would they be better off abandoning the whole, perhaps misbegotten, experiment? It is to this long-running debate that the book turns.

Chapter 1 investigates the Jewish discovery of Europe. Jewish thinkers were left to wonder whether they were fully partners in or members of this civilization, or mere sojourners in a strange, hostile land. This dichotomy is developed in chapter 2, which focuses on the nineteenth century. Even as one group of thinkers

extolled the possibilities of this pinnacle of civilization, others worried about the growing threat of intellectual anti-Semitism, which they saw as a symptom of Europe's moral decline.

Anti-Semitism and Jewish intellectuals' reactions to it dominate much of the remainder of the book. Indeed, the title of chapter 3, "The Accursed Century—Europe as an Ailing Culture," indicates how the authors will explore Jewish intellectuals' cultural pessimism and the coming war. As the book pushes forward, it explores the emergence of the modern European Jew and of modern Zionism—rooted in European thought while arguing for self-imposed exile from the continent. We then move into the more recent past of the twentieth century. Jewish thinkers debated anti-Semitism's importance, arguing over whether it was a central pillar of European culture, an incurable disease, or a regrettable, but ultimately secondary, phenomenon.

At this point, in the work's final third, the focus shifts to Palestine (ultimately Israel). The terms of the debate changed, but the debate's roots are still recognizable. Emigrant Jews argued over whether their new/old land was Eastern or Western, and which was preferable. Finally, the book concludes with a discussion of Israeli discourse on the United States and whether Europe has been defanged.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Reinharz and Shavit are extremely good at showing which Jewish thinkers felt attracted to or repelled by European intellectual currents in any given decade or era. They explore all of the seemingly mind-numbing variations of Europhilia and Europhobia in great detail. Indeed, if this work has a weakness, it is in the structure of the chapters, which have a certain sameness to them, appearing to be a catalogue of those who are happy with European thought in any given moment, and those who are not. This is not a book which one will relish reading through from start to finish. However, as a kind of encyclopedia of responses with an extremely useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources, it is unsurpassed. When readers have finished, they will have moved beyond old generalities to a finely detailed portrait of Jewish intellectuals wrestling with European culture, their own Western heritage (such as it was), and the moral implications of it all. This is a fully satisfying work, and belongs on the bookshelf of every scholar of the modern European Jewish experience.

#### Notes

[1]. "Flash Mob Jerusalem Hora," You Tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7CoevDV3wo>.

[2]. "Returning to Reform," *Jewish Daily Forward*, November 25, 2009.