

Paul Reitter. *On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 176 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-11922-9.



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Caveat lector: this is a book about the origins of the concept and phrase “Jewish self-hatred,” rather than a psychological or cultural historical account of how, when, and why Jews began de-testing themselves.

Reitter makes original and illuminating contributions to our knowledge of the history of “Jewish self-hatred” as an idea. First, he argues convincingly that for the two writers who, respectively, invented the concept and made the term prominent, Anton Kuh (1890-1941) and Theodor Lessing (1872-1933), “Jewish self-hatred” was not a polemical or vituperative label but an affirmative idea intended to be personally and universally salvific. Second, he traces the birth of the concept to the intellectual milieu of interwar Vienna, *circa* 1921 to be more specific, correcting the current scholarly consensus that it was a product of the *fin de siècle*. Along the way, he also makes a pitch for the study of Vienna during the First Austrian Republic (1919-33), which he believes has been overshadowed by Weimar Germany in historical and literary scholarship (p. 59). According to Reit-

ter, the concept “Jewish self-hatred” first appeared in Kuh’s 1921 book *Juden und Deutsche* (Jews and Germans). Lessing then gave the term prominence with his 1930 work *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Jewish self-hatred). By historicizing the term and concept “Jewish self-hatred,” Reitter shows that it was once distinct from earlier ideas such as “Jewish antisemitism.” Less compelling to me than the contributions above is Reitter’s effort to describe the implications of the term’s origins for its uses in scholarship today.

In part 1, “Genealogical Imperatives,” Reitter’s main aim seems to be to correct the notion that Lessing’s use of the term “Jewish self-hatred” was primarily vituperative. Reitter wants to sever the connection made by some scholars and journalists between contemporary uses of “Jewish self-hatred” as a fighting phrase in debates about Zionism and the State of Israel and Lessing’s use of the concept in 1930. He surveys the misconceptions of these critics, whose reasoning seems to be that the term “Jewish self-hatred” is invoked by pro-Israel partisans to “pathologize dissent,” to

borrow the title of an article by one of them.[1] They deduce that the term was likewise used as a vituperative label against anti-Zionists or critics of Jewish nationalism in the past. Then, they conclude that because of its polemical connotation it is either extremely problematic or, indeed, somehow “bogus.” Reitter does a great service in debunking serious misinterpretations of Lessing’s idea—for example, Allan Janik’s reading of “Jewish self-hatred” as essentialist and racist (p. 12).

Unfortunately, even scholars in Jewish studies and related fields have failed to understand the history of the term “Jewish self-hatred” and the meanings that Lessing attached to it. To correct this, Reitter answers two linked questions: Why did Kuh invent the term “Jewish self-hatred” and why did Lessing choose to use it in his book ten years later? According to Reitter, using the term “Jewish self-hatred” was a deliberate turn away from several earlier notions. In a survey of “precursors” to Kuh and Lessing, Reitter begins with the philosopher Lazarus Bendavid (1762-1832) who, in 1793, described Jews as suffering from an excess of self-contempt (p. 18). He also mentions Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), who analyzed the shame she experienced about her Jewish descent. By the mid-nineteenth century, German Jewish middlebrow novelists were warning readers that acculturation without due caution could lead individuals to crippling “*Selbstverachtung*” or “self-contempt” (p. 21). Jewish writers around the turn of the century introduced the concept of “Jewish antisemitism.” Orthodox polemicists against Reform and assimilation as well as writers such as Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), Karl Kraus (1874-1936), and the early Lessing himself played with the notion in the years between 1880 and 1914. Scholars such as Sander Gilman and Shulamit Volkov who have written about Jewish self-hatred have tended to interpret Lessing’s 1930 book as continuous with the earlier discourse around Jewish antisemitism and self-loathing (p. 34). According to Reitter, however, the term and concept “Jewish self-hatred,” adopted by Kuh and

Lessing only after the First World War, represented a decisive break with this earlier discourse. Reitter argues that Lessing deliberately chose the phrase “Jewish self-hatred” rather than earlier terms, such as “Jewish self-contempt,” because he wanted to describe a concept that had an “affirmative message” (p. 36). Lessing’s work *Jewish Self-Hatred* was actually a kind of self-help book, seeking to aid Jews in curing themselves from self-loathing (pp. 37-38). Reitter makes the fascinating and persuasive argument that Lessing derived this way of thinking about “Jewish self-hatred” from Kuh, the Viennese “satirist, eroticist, expressionist, feuilletonist, activist of sorts, and celebrated public speaker” (p. 38).

As previously mentioned Reitter argues that the concept “Jewish self-hatred” first appeared in Kuh’s 1921 book, *Juden und Deutsche*. For Kuh, “Jewish self-hatred” indicated “a sort of messianic promise” rather than a “self-abnegating outlook” (p. 40). Reitter claims that Kuh, from his post-WWI vantage point, saw “Jewish self-hatred” as a productive because it was potentially anti-nationalist. Soon after the publication of this book, Kuh’s friend Max Brod (1884-1968) used the term in the first volume of his 1922 work *Heidentum, Judentum, Christentum* (Paganism, Judaism, Christianity), on p. 207. In 1927, Arnold Zweig picked it up in his *Caliban oder Politik und Leidenschaft* (Caliban or politics and passion), on p. 199. Lessing, in his 1930 book, then popularized the term.

One problem with Reitter’s narrative is that Kuh did not employ the exact phrase “Jewish self-hatred” (“jüdischer Selbsthaß”) in the book, as Reitter acknowledges. Reitter locates the “birth” of the concept of “Jewish self-hatred” in Kuh’s “explicit, oppositional juxtaposing of ‘jüdischer Antisemitismus’ (Jewish antisemitism) and the novel phrasing, ‘Selbsthaß’ (self-hatred) ‘of Jews,’ by which Kuh meant, at times, ‘the Jews’ special self-hatred,’ a reasonable translation of which would be ‘Jewish self-hatred’ (p. 128, n. 3). Although skeptics may rush to paint Reitter’s claim here as

a contortion, his claim that Kuh coined the concept seems to be strengthened by two further data, buried in a long endnote (ibid.). One, the Viennese Jewish writer Karl Kraus (1874-1936), who had used the phrase “Jewish antisemitism” several decades earlier, first referred (derisively) to “Jewish self-hatred” in response to Kuh. Two, using the Google Books Ngram Viewer recently developed by Jean-Baptiste Michel and Erez Lieberman Aiden, Reitter found that although “*Selbsthaß*” ... was still an uncommon word in Kuh’s day ... the use of the term was growing more widespread” (p. 128, n. 3).[2]

I had some difficulty understanding how Reitter viewed the implications of his work. Reitter seems to imply that once the history of the concept has been properly uncovered, scholars should be able to use the term “Jewish self-hatred” more freely. What remains elusive throughout the essay, however, is the referent of this signifier. It is not clear, to begin with, what kind of practices Kuh and Lessing had in mind when they envisioned an affirmative kind of “Jewish self-hatred.” How would its substance and form be different from the “Jewish antisemitism” or “Jewish self-contempt” that Kuh and Lessing rejected with the new term? More importantly, when scholars have written about “Jewish self-hatred,” they have often used the term to refer precisely to “Jewish antisemitism,” which, of course, has its own history as a concept. Are they really using the term “incorrectly”?

To put the matter differently: almost all of the subjects of Sander Gilman’s *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986) lived and wrote at a time before the term “Jewish self-hatred” existed. Should Gilman have used a different phrase to describe these cultural expressions? Or should he have reserved “Jewish self-hatred” only for the kinds of practices which resembled the affirmative and redemptive sense of “Jewish self-hatred” *avant la lettre*? On these questions, I found Reitter’s essay elusive and content to stay at the level of suggestion.

Some of my confusion about the ultimate payoff that the genealogy is supposed to provide resulted from the structure of the book. Though Reitter has crafted beautiful sentences, the arrangement of the paragraphs sometimes leads the reader into the wilderness. Part 1, which begins on p. 5, only arrives at its thesis on p. 35. A promising tangent about conceptual history (pp. 16-17) asks questions but is too ambiguous for the reader to answer them. Likewise, parts 2 and 3, with their extended biographical treatments of Kuh and Lessing, do not include enough signposts to guide the reader toward Reitter’s thesis. I was also disappointed about some imprecisions in the apparatus. Most glaringly, a long endnote to the introduction (pp. 128-129, n. 3), which contains crucial information about Kuh’s first use of the concept “Jewish self-hatred,” does not include a page reference to Kuh’s book *Juden und Deutsche* where the discussed passage occurs.

Despite the minor misgivings above, I highly recommend Reitter’s essay both for the light it shines on interwar Jewish intellectual culture in Vienna and for its intervention in the study of Jewish self-hatred. From now on, any scholar interested in using or critiquing the term must reckon with Reitter’s findings.

Notes

[1]. W. M. L. Finlay, “Pathologizing Dissent: Identity Politics, Zionism and the Self-hating Jew,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 2 (2005): 201–222.

[2]. The Google Ngram Viewer can be accessed at <http://books.google.com/ngrams/> (last viewed July 25, 2012). For a scientific description of the project by the developers and a host of collaborators, see J. B. Michel et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” *Science* 331, no. 6014 (2011): 176–182. Published online on December 16, 2010: <http://sciencemag.org/content/331/6014/176.short>. I was pleased to see Reitter’s use of this tool but hope that subsequent uses of it by scholars will include

a citation to the *Science* article in which Michel and Aiden explain their approach. Unfortunately, I was unable to replicate Reitter's conclusions using the Google Ngram Viewer. The graph produced by a search for "[Selbsthaß](#)" looks ambiguous to me. Furthermore, entering "[Selbsthass](#)," with a double "s" (rather than the "s-sharp" or "Eszett" letter) produces quite a different picture.

(Jews and Germans)

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