



Mitchell B. Hart, ed. *Jews and Race: Writings on Identity and Difference, 1880-1940*. The Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought Series. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. xxxix + 281 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-716-3; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-717-0.

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Taking Seriously the Jewish Engagement with Racial Thought, 1880-1940

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it became all but impossible to talk about Jews as a race, because the discourse of race itself—once as widespread among social scientists as it was among right-wing political activists—had been contaminated by the stain of Nazism. It is certainly this association that has made us forget so utterly and so profoundly that many Jewish social scientists based in a number of different places (Germany, Poland, the United States, Great Britain, and France) did in fact engage various types of racial science between 1880 and the Holocaust. Some Jewish social scientists wrote works of physical anthropology that asserted that Jews were biologically distinctive; others engaged eugenics, arguing that the Jewish race was facing “degeneration” because of racial intermixing; and some Jewish physicians studied “Jewish diseases” (hysteria, diabetes). One author included in the present volume even studied “Jewish cranial weight.” Confronted with this material, it is easy to imagine why it has been swept under the rug. In the wake of the Holocaust, the Jewish engagement with racial hygiene, eugenics, and racial nationalism can easily seem misguided and embarrassing.

And yet as editor Mitchell B. Hart aptly demonstrates in this fascinating new primary source reader, there is much for students of Jewish intellectual, social, cultural, and even political history to learn from reading this literature. First is the fact that the discussion about race was clearly very widespread. It was also diverse. The discussion included Zionists as well as assimilationists; apologists for the race as well as some who rejected race as complete fiction. Hart’s collection reflects the range of disciplines and perspectives involved in the discussion quite well. Designed for course adoption, the collection as a whole raises fundamental questions about the origin, the meaning, and the legacy of these ideas themselves, as well as about the historical context(s) in which they were

articulated, which was clearly transnational. Readers discover first of all that even as it was hotly debated among Jews, race discourse was a powerful tool for understanding Jewish identity at a certain moment in time, and for asking questions about the Jewish past and the Jewish future. As such, any student of Jewish thought needs to take it seriously. Indeed, as Hart puts it beautifully in his introduction, “It is insufficient, to say the least, to label this material ‘pseudoscience’ or ‘pseudoscholarship’ as if that explains anything that is not already obvious. It certainly does not help us understand how and why so many highly educated individuals embraced these ideas over such a long time and in so many places” (p. xvii). Hart himself is one of the most important of the growing number of historians doing excellent studies of the Jewish engagement with racial thought, having previously published two books on different aspects of it (*Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* [2000] and *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine* [2007]).^[1] What is most exciting about this new reader is that it allows students to examine the sources themselves, seeing firsthand how modern Jews engaged this potent discourse.

Following an excellent introduction by Hart, *Jews and Race* is divided into six sections reflecting different disciplinary approaches and different emphases of the arguments. All of the selections were written by individuals who publicly identified as Jews, or published in journals identified as “Jewish.” With a few important exceptions (such as the work of the American physician and anthropologist Maurice Fishberg), most of the material included was previously unavailable in English, translated here from German and French. Of the material published originally in English, most is not already readily available for classroom use. The important work of the anthropologist Franz Boas is not included, for example, since it is already

easily available.

The first section is devoted to general overviews that, in one way or another, engaged and responded to the scientific discourse of race that was so prevalent at the time, and attempted to use it to understand the Jews. This section is particularly useful for defining the racial concept, which focused on physical characteristics, such as skin tone, eye color, and head shape, and correlated those characteristics to something so elusive as “character.” History emerges as a central explanatory mechanism for constituting races; we see that for most of these thinkers, defining a Jewish race involved a form of historical explanation of migrations and cultural behavior in the past. And yet for all their similarities, we see different positions emerge among the thinkers. While some found it a useful way to talk about Jewish distinctiveness, self-preservation, and sometimes even Jewish virtue (such as Fishberg or the German Zionist Arthur Ruppin), others rejected it as untenable scientifically (such as the French orientalist Isidore Loeb or the German physician Fritz Kahn).

The second section focuses on works of physical anthropology. The selections make it clear that race was a critical category of analysis within that discipline, and that it was thus necessary to use it in order to study Jews. And yet, given the great diversity among Jews across the Diaspora both physically and culturally, the texts show what a struggle it was for these social scientists to use race-based analysis to talk about a diasporic people. The struggle of course only made these scholars assert that Jews were a particularly interesting case for analysis, though here too, the fundamental question of whether the Jews could really be considered a unified race seems never to have been settled fully.

The third section presents works in the field of medicine and biology. As Hart points out in his brief introduction to the section, scholars working in this area relied heavily on statistics from government agencies for their work, another great example of how Jewish race science represented a response to a broader discourse being imposed on the Jews in this period. In this field, such scholars as Fishberg, the German Felix Theilhaber, and the American Abraham Myerson asserted that it was through medicine, rather than anthropology, that questions about the Jewish race were best answered. They were particularly interested in why Jews were more or less prone to some diseases rather than others, and looked for the answer in biological, cultural, and religious practices, as well as the history of antisemitism, which according to Myerson, explains the high rate of nervous

illnesses among Jews.

The fourth section, entitled “Economy and Society,” contains excerpts from the work of social scientists interested in Jewish occupational patterns and Jewish criminality. The selections about Jews and capitalism by Fishberg and Ruppin show Jewish scholars grappling with popular perceptions of Jews as a commercial people, a notion given weight in scientific circles by Werner Sombart, either by rejecting the notion that Jews are by nature a “commercial people” (Fishberg) or embracing it as a positive thing (Ruppin).

The fifth section focuses on writings about intermarriage and conversion, which already in this period of increased acculturation and social interaction with gentiles was clearly a source of great concern. Although some scholars, including Ruppin, were quick to point out that fertility among the intermarried was lower than among Jews or Christians, these selections suggest that the period was filled with a sense of crisis about the future of the Jewish “race” in this era of great social change.

The final section, entitled “Politics, Polemics and Apologetics,” is in many ways the most interesting because the multifaceted political stakes of Jewish racial thought are the most apparent. On the one hand, there is a certain apologetic strain here, in which scholars responded to antisemites by asserting the superiority of the “Jewish race” in a language more commonly used to attack Jews. But in addition, there is clearly a passionate intra-Jewish debate happening here as well. Zionists—motivated by a secular nationalism that rejected the religious definition of Jewishness—used racial terms to define Jews and to describe them as facing a crisis for which national awakening would be the only solution. On the other hand, others rejected this perspective forcefully. These included assimilationists, such as Simon Wolf and Julian Mack, who testified before the Dillingham Commission of 1907-11 in the United States Congress, asserting that Jews were not a race and should not be considered as such for the purposes of immigration. Interestingly, even some Zionists rejected a racial definition of Jewishness. Robert Weltch’s text is interesting in this regard, since it rejects a racial basis for Zionism and instead asserts a purely spiritual basis for it, claiming that “Zionism is enthusiasm” (p. 253).

As I hope this brief exposition of the texts presented here shows, this volume will be of great interest for Jewish studies classes at all levels. The texts will give students a new way to think about how Jews confronted many of the most important issues they faced in the critical years of modernization. What is at stake here is how

identity was reconceived at a time of increasing secularization and social mobility, how Jews responded to antisemitism, how Jews used and reformulated new ideas that they encountered in the process of acculturation, and what anxieties they expressed over those changes. As series editors Eugene R. Sheppard and Samuel Moyn write in the book's foreword, Hart's volume "helps expand the meaning of 'modern Jewish thought'" beyond the "great thinkers" that we usually study to new domains, such as statistics, medicine, and anthropology, in fruitful and fas-

cinating ways (p. ix).

Note

[1]. In addition, see John Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). The present collection contains an excellent bibliography of scholarship on the subject for further research.

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