

Sandrine Sanos. *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. xi + 369 pages. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7457-4.

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Aesthetics, Politics, and Abjection: Gendered Fantasies of Race and Nation among 1930s French Far-Right Intellectuals

The intellectual far right in 1930s France sought to reimagine national belonging by challenging what they saw as pervasive moral degeneration and a crisis in a national sense of masculine sexuality. These challenges involved articulating an exclusionary, even violent, antisemitism, and scholars have long debated precisely how to account for the political choices and rhetorical strategies mobilized by far-right writers and journalists from the period. In this lucid and thoughtfully argued book, Sandrine Sanos argues against prevailing historiographical and literary approaches to the work of far-right intellectuals and journalists in 1930s interwar France. Specifically, she challenges scholars who have conceived of interwar far-right politics as thoroughly determined by the “shameful” homosexual longings of its most ardent practitioners. She explains that scholars have unduly privileged biographical readings that view antisemitic political commitments as pathological outcroppings of “deviant” homosexual and homosocial obsessions and desires. For Sanos, antisemitic fantasies of national regeneration in interwar France cannot be tied simply to the “perverted” masculinity of leading far-right figures. Her study focuses instead on the ways in which gendered discourses of sexual perversion became central themes in what she calls the “aesthetics of hate” developed by far-right thinkers.

Drawing on the literary and political writings of such figures as Lucien Rebatet, Robert Brasillach, Thierry

Maulnier, Maurice Blanchot, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Sanos convincingly demonstrates that “we must take more seriously the ways in which the tropes of heterosexual deviance, sexual perversion, and abject homosexuality helped mark the bounds of the male citizen and the meaning of public letters in French history” (p. 203). These tropes, she explains, actually constituted the ideological foundations of interwar far-right thought and as such they were explicitly mobilized by intellectuals writing for publications like *Je Suis Partout*, *Combat*, and *L’Insurgé*. The figures Sanos analyzes in *The Aesthetics of Hate* emerged from early twentieth-century right-wing nationalist and monarchist circles and took inspiration from Charles Maurras, the leading figure in reactionary and antisemitic politics from the turn of the century. One of the book’s goals is to show how these intellectuals formed a loosely knit movement bent on redefining Frenchness (in the face of what they perceived to be social “abjection”) according to a political grammar that united discourses of gender, race, and sexuality (p. 4). Sexuality was a key category for the writers Sanos analyzes, as they called for a renewed French heterosexual masculinity (and, hence, a renewed sense of French citizenship) over and against the “unmanly” bodies of Jews and colonized subjects who were often coded as homosexual. As she puts it, “the appropriate gendered and sexual underpinnings of the social order” had become unmoored after the experience of the First World War and the embrace of modernity, and far-right intellectuals

sought to “restore” stable sexual identities as moral foundations for national regeneration (p. 29). Thus the figures Sanos studies were obsessed with well-regulated gender roles, denunciations of sexual “deviance” (which tended to be linked with Jews, communists, and foreigners), and the restoration of a whole masculine self that had been torn asunder by sexual difference.

Central to Sanos’s argument here is the idea that far-right thinkers sought political responses to the tense and fraught social climate of 1930s France in the realm of aesthetics. Art and literature (and aesthetic form as such) provided these figures with potential avenues for regenerating and demarcating anew a corrupt and degraded social body that had been beset from without and from within by democratic and “foreign” (i.e., Jewish) intrusion. This claim explains why she aims to avoid narrowly historicizing the movement she seeks to define; instead, she ties historicizing readings to close consideration of “the narrative and rhetorical strategies [far-right intellectuals] developed in their journalism and in their literary writings” (p. 6).

As she points out in her introduction, the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics that frames her study owes less to what Walter Benjamin referred to as fascism’s aestheticization of politics than it does to Jacques Rancière’s theorization of how the overlapping of aesthetics and politics provokes new “distributions of the sensible;” she rightly highlights how Rancière’s work foregrounds aesthetics as politics and how this emphasis helps to define “the common of a community” (p. 7). This is precisely the problem that haunted far-right thinkers in the interwar period who were obsessed with renewing or recreating a bounded masculine self and, by extension, a bounded national community in response to the excesses of modern life. This theoretical point is an original and timely contribution, given how Rancière’s work has succeeded in drawing the attention of many critics back to the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Yet Sanos only devotes a paragraph of her introduction to this observation, which nonetheless undergirds the theoretical thrust of her project. One cannot help but feel that this underdeveloped discussion of Rancière is a missed opportunity, since its pertinence seems to demand a more sustained and in-depth engagement. Additional fleshing out of this point might reveal more clearly how far-right intellectuals’ turn to aesthetics for political solutions generated new “ways of doing and making,” in Rancière’s terms, that “intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”[1]

The creation of new forms of visibility in particular seems crucial for Sanos’s study, since the far-right figures and publications she examines sought to make perceptible a pathological Jewishness (embodied by socialist Léon Blum, leader of France’s Popular Front government) that they felt was responsible for the abjection of France’s social body. Since Sanos views her project as a contribution to both the historiography and literary theory of far-right politics in France, drawing out her reading of Rancière a bit further would have been especially revealing.

The book’s chapters engage a variety of themes and figures, offering an intellectual genealogy of the 1930s far-right movement; a contextualization of the “crises” caused by modernity to which far-right journals responded by calling for a renewed sense of virility that would restore order and boundaries to a (masculine) national subject that had been decentered; and a synthetic analysis of how the far-right press polemically and even violently negotiated their fixation with the French nation’s “abjection.” The discourse and thematics of abjection thoroughly permeated the thought and written work of figures like Maulnier and Rebatet, and the figure of the “Jew” served to embody an abject national modernity that had to be transcended via a turn to aesthetics and the “rigorous order” of form (p. 113).

Two of Sanos’s strongest chapters are given over to extended studies of individual writers, Blanchot and Céline, respectively. In the first of these, she historicizes Blanchot’s interwar journalism, viewing his early far-right and antisemitic work as born of a contingent and problematic historical moment and situating her reading of his early career in response to the work of scholars who have retroactively dismissed or minimized the content of his far-right writing. She makes a similar analytic move in the following chapter on Céline, reading his antisemitic pamphlets as continuous with his literary work (especially *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [1932]) and as a piece of the “cultural discourses of difference and otherness” embraced by “the intellectual and literary far right” (p. 162). In both of these cases, Sanos reads canonical literary figures against the grain, illuminating provocative continuities between their 1930s writing and later literary production and, through careful historical exegesis, laying bare their intellectual and political affinities with the interwar far right more broadly.

Her chapter on Céline deals in part with his racist and hygienicist conception of social contamination, highlighting how colonial interaction with race and blackness in Africa caused his protagonist in the pamphlet,

Bagatelles pour un massacre (1937), to grow acutely aware of pervasive Jewish influence on an abject society at home in France. This observation reflects another key element of Sanos's argument, namely, that far-right figures in interwar France racialized Frenchness within the nation by linking strident denunciations of Jews to colonial ideologies that were enacted abroad in the empire (particularly, in Africa). This is an especially fascinating and provocative point; however, whereas she deals with it at some length in her reading of Céline, at other moments in the book she brings it up only briefly, and it remains unclear precisely how meaningful this turn to questions of empire was for members of the antisemitic French far right. This aspect of her argument is handled most directly in a several-page subsection of chapter 6 (on representations of race in the journal *Je Suis Partout*) that takes up how the journal approached the problem of colonialism. She points out that Martinican writers René Maran and Paulette Nardal actually produced articles for *Je Suis Partout's* colonial affairs page, but she does not go so far as to synthetically historicize the unlikely and paradoxical relationship with far-right intellectuals that these figures must have experienced. Since Sanos refers to this aspect of her argument throughout the book, one expects a fuller and more synthetic treat-

ment of the ways antisemitism was articulated through a racialized colonial grammar than what is actually provided. Such an idea merits extended attention, especially since discourses of race were so central to far-right intellectuals' collective senses of masculinity and nationality.

The Aesthetics of Hate is nonetheless a rich, well-researched, and well-documented study that succeeds in complicating historical and literary approaches to what Sanos rightly identifies as the far-right ideological confluence of aesthetics and politics in interwar France. She evinces a keen sense of the debates in the field as well as of her work's place in relation to them, which lends the book and her writing a sense of scholarly self-awareness that makes for engaging reading. Sanos's analyses of journalistic and literary "fantasies of abjection" avoid the pathologizing logic against which she argues and instead shed convincing light on "a particular aesthetics where young far-right intellectuals reimagined nation, race, and bodies articulated in a gendered and sexual discourse of male identity, citizenship, and civilization" (p. 14).

Note

[1]. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13.

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