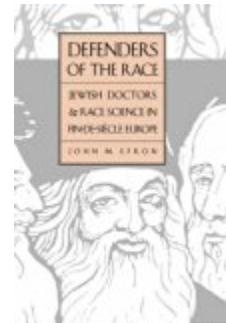


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John M. Efron. *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors & Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1994. xi + 255 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05440-8.

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As is well known, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the heyday of “scientific” racism. In this interesting, timely book, John M. Efron sets out to “study the labors of...Jewish intellectuals who...attempted to create a new, ‘scientific’ paradigm and agenda of Jewish self-definition and self-perception” (p. 5). These Jewish physicians, ethnographers, and physical anthropologists used the methods of race science and stood them on their head to show that Jews were not deserving of the prejudices aimed at them.

Efron goes about this task by exploring German, British, and varieties of Jewish race science. According to Efron, German race science centered on Jews as the “essential other,” a position very different from that of British race science, which treated Jews as fully assimilable. In response, Jewish race scientists created ethnographic images of Jews that would challenge the negative stereotypes employed by “scientific” antisemites.

After the first two chapters, which set up the models of German and British race science, Efron devotes the rest of the book largely to examining the theories of various Jewish race scientists. In doing so, he tries to differentiate among the Jewish thinkers in an attempt to show the variety of approaches possible within this model.

The significance of *Defenders of the Race* is closely tied to its strengths. The book clearly and unequivocally shows a racial “science” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that valorizes Jews rather than demonizes them. The author’s careful research rescues from obscurity a number of long-forgotten tomes and tracts that show this alternative view. In Efron’s words, “To accept the proposition that historically the Jews were involved in a colonial relationship with Christian Europe is to also

recognize that the labors of Jewish physical anthropologists were an attempt at reversing the European gaze” (p. 3). In order to justify this statement, Efron argues that “the categories of ‘empire’ and ‘colonized’ need to be expanded to include groups such as Jews, who do not fit neatly into the traditional paradigm of empire, as that term is understood by anthropologists and historians” (p. 3).

The very interesting framework that Efron proposes allows for some intriguing questions. For example, Efron’s invocation of the “gaze” presents an interesting possibility for the author to explore some overarching theoretical issues. As used by Efron, “gaze” is a term borrowed from Michel Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*. Unfortunately, it is neither explicated nor revisited in the body of the work. Nor does Foucault appear in the references or in the index. Indeed, well researched as this book is, it is strikingly under-theorized considering the work that Foucault and his followers have done on the history of medicine and the human sciences. As an example: in discussing the belief of Elias Auerbach, a Berlin physician of the early twentieth century who believed that Jews had maintained their racial purity, Efron states that “his zeal in defense of that theory shows that his Zionism impinged on his science” (p. 139). In Foucauldian terms, it is hard to see this as at all surprising. Indeed, it is difficult to argue that any scientific work would be untainted by contemporary discourses.

Efron also makes a number of assertions and decisions in the book that could be more fully discussed or justified. For example, he refers to the Jews as nineteenth-century Germany’s most significant minority, even though they formed only one percent of the

population (p. 16). This opens more questions than it answers. What does Efron mean by most significant? How did German race scientists view Jews differently from Poles (numerically far greater at the time)? He devotes one chapter apiece to two Jewish race scientists, Joseph Jacobs—ostensibly the first Jewish race scientist—who worked in the British national context, and Samuel Weissenberg, a Russian whom Efron claims was the first truly “scientific” of the scientists (p. 91). I was left wondering whether these men were representative of their respective generations. In other words, how many Jewish race scientists were there? What were the various approaches that they used?

The book also contains a plethora of unsupported assumptions and categories of analysis. As an example of the former, Efron dwells on what he sees as the complexity of Zionist race science (p. 124), while seemingly viewing “scientific” antisemitism as a very simple phenomenon rather than as a complex variable deserving of analysis. I wonder at the disparity. Indeed, Efron himself states that “Auerbach’s hypothesis, built on the mystical premise that there existed a Jewish racial instinct whose effectiveness had ensured racial exclusiveness and therefore Jewish racial purity, was reminiscent of much of the German *voelkisch* literature being disseminated by

nationalist (and often antisemitic) groups” (p. 136).

Efron’s categories are also troubling; in footnote 63 to chapter six, he claims that “Rathenau’s Jewish self-hatred comes through when he directs his readers to have a good look in the mirror at ‘your unathletic build, your narrow shoulders, your clumsy feet, your sloppy roundish shape.’” The term “Jewish self-hatred” is unscholarly. It is an insult, not a useful category of analysis. This is all the more troubling in a book seeking to show the complexity of categories used by Jewish race scientists.

Efron’s work is an interesting contribution to the history of the language of race in the nineteenth century. It examines in detail a literature that has been largely forgotten, but which forces questions about some easy assumptions historians have made about “race science.” Nonetheless, it has a number of problems and leaves much work for other historians to do in examining the language and “science” of race in the years before and after the First World War.

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