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Assimilation and Its Discontents

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Steven Aschheim's most recent collection of essays, *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans, and Jews* provides an immensely valuable contribution to the evolving literature on acculturation, assimilation, German-Jewish identity and memory, and the broader topic of European cultural and intellectual development from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. Resulting, one suspects, from the author's personal struggles with his own identity, the work both expands upon and examines more thoroughly some of the themes begun in Aschheim's 1982 dissertation.[1] Whereas his earlier work focused more explicitly on the often problematic place of the *Ostjude* in both German and German-Jewish life, Aschheim's latest compilation of essays offers a much broader analysis of the issues which occupied both German and German-Jewish society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] As he notes in the preface, "[t]his work explores flashpoints of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century relationship between European culture, German history, and the Jewish experience. Here was a complex triangular encounter that proved to be of immense historical import" (p. ix).

A close reading of the essays contained in *In Times of Crisis* reveals several recurrent themes: Aschheim's fascination with post-modernism and its impact on historiographical trends in intellectual and cultural history; his acute awareness of the dangers of ethnocentrism in historical analysis; repeated calls for an integrative approach to cultural and intellectual history, one that does not exclude apparently contradictory trends, but rather considers them as part of a broader dialectic; and a plea to continue to struggle with the extremity of events such as the Shoah, rather than resort to simplistic, reductivist explanations. Aschheim's approach throughout is to view historical development in dialectical terms, always seeking opposites–*Deutschtum* and *Judentum*; Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Nordau; Saul Friedlaender and Martin Broszat–and then building remarkably persuasive arguments based upon the commonalties within the opposites. Taken as a whole, this collection challenges common perceptions and forces the reader to rethink vital developments in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European history.

Aschheim's collection is organized into four parts: "The Crisis of Culture–Then and Now"; "(Con)Fusions of Identity–Germans and Jews"; "Understanding Nazism and the Holocaust: Comparing Models and Radical Paradigms"; and "Historians, History, and the Holocaust." As the title indicates, each of the essays that makes up part 1, "The Crisis of Culture–Then and Now," confronts the present relevance of key fin-de-si=cle, Weimar, and National Socialist era debates. As such these essays establish many of the themes which Aschheim develops throughout the remainder of the essays.[3] For example, Aschheim examines the antagonism between Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Nordau, focusing in particular upon the diametrically opposed concepts of "degeneration" advanced by each man at the turn of the century.[4] Aschheim concludes that, far from being polar opposites, the two men were actually "key participants, both as makers and beneficiaries, in a wider nineteenth-century discourse.... [which] cut across the ideological spectrum" (p. 9). Both men used the language of "degeneration" and "degeneracy" to describe a civilization under attack, while ironically both retained a commitment to the fundamental concept of "civilization." Turning to the present, Aschheim reminds us that, despite Nordau's lack of recognition today, his positivist humanism remains as profoundly important as Nietzsche's extreme relativism. Aschheim's analysis of Nietzsche is developed more fully in "Thinking the Nietzsche Legacy Today." Here Aschheim's interest in historiography and the impact of post-modernism becomes more obvious. He argues that Nietzsche's thought remains acutely relevant today, not so much for the content of that thought,

but for the ways in which the ideas bequeathed by Nietzsche have allowed successive generations of thinkers to see and express their own struggles with modernity. Though each generation's interpretation of Nietzsche is profoundly different, the paradigms which he created will remain eternally useful.

Part 1 continues with Aschheim's essay on radical Weimar theory and the role therein of several leading German-Jewish intellectuals, such as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. A broad overview of the similarities and contradictions among these theorists ends with Aschheim summarizing the key issue with which each of these thinkers struggled–their own relationship with, and place in, the rapidly modernizing world of the 1920s. Aschheim concludes that these thinkers "still speak to us because the unease with 'modernity' (however understood) and its characteristic cognitive modes has never really been fully alleviated and because these (Jewish) thinkers, imbued with humanizing impulses, provide redemptive clues to understanding–and perhaps transcending–a still homogenizing and reductive age" (p. 43).

This first section concludes with an overview of Nazism and the Holocaust in contemporary culture, touching on both the *Historikerstreit* and the legacy of the Shoah in Israel and in the Diaspora. To Aschheim, the *Historikerstreit*, despite the destructive elements of Ernst Nolte's depiction, made clear the lack of a comparative historical perspective on the events of the Shoah. "The *Historikerstreit* did not raise a genuinely historical question but it did highlight the moral functions and extra-historical nature of the discourse of National Socialism and its genocidal impulses" (p. 45). The remainder of the essay traces the evolution and implications of the "extra-historical" nature of the Holocaust and its increasingly common use and misuse as a metaphor of ultimate evil. Mindful of the dangers inherent in such a metaphor, Aschheim concludes that scholars of Nazism and the Shoah must be doubly careful "not to allow the trivializing, shoddy use of the analogy while at the same time remaining open to the possibility that genocide … can recur and may in fact be recurring at present" (p. 56). The themes raised within this chapter reappear and are analyzed at length throughout the remainder of the collection.

The second part of this collection, "(Con)Fusions of Identity–Germans and Jews," begins with what is arguably the most direct and keenly observant essay. "Excursus" is a reflection on Aschheim's own childhood memories and experiences as he grew up in South Africa, the son of German-Jewish refugees. Here the complexities and ambiguities of identity and memory are made strikingly clear. As described, Aschheim's childhood experiences foreshadow the preoccupations that would fill his adult life and his scholarship. For example, on the subject of his own German-Jewish identity, Aschheim writes that his parents after fleeing Germany eschewed all things German–even rejecting reparation money. However, his childhood home was filled with German classical music and poetry. The author comments further that "I always took my father's 'Germanness' for granted.… It was only years after his death that I discovered he was born an *Ostjude*, a Galizianer who had come to Kassel as a small boy and, like so many others, elegantly combined these two inheritances!… I learned all this as I was completing my dissertation on the problematic interdependencies between Eastern and Western Jewish identity" (p. 62). Here one sees clearly the interchange between Aschheim's public and private life and the early development of the themes which underlie both this volume and his earlier works.

The problematic question of assimilation is raised once again in chapter 6 which looks at the case of Moritz Goldstein, a turn-of-the-century Zionist who was among the first to advocate the creation of a separate Jewish culture within Germany, in reaction to what Goldstein perceived as the continuing refusal of Germans to recognize the prominent role of Jewish intellectuals in the creation of German culture. Goldstein's advocacy of a sharp separation between Germans and Jews brought immediate condemnation from German-Jewish liberals and from the Jewish author, Ernst Lissauer, who wrote that Goldstein's struggle with German-Jewish duality could be simply resolved: "either 'become German' or … 'leave the country"' (p. 67). Aschheim concludes that it was debates such as these–which would touch upon the very nature of *Judentum*–which continued and exacerbated the fundamental tensions between German and Jew. However, in the short term, particularly during the Weimar era, the work of Goldstein and others did have a number of positive consequences, including the flourishing of high-quality Jewish journals such as Martin Buber's *Der Jude*.

The antagonistic relationship between Hannah Arendt and the State of Israel forms the basis for the next chapter. Here Aschheim demonstrates how Arendt developed her then-controversial concept of the "banality of evil" and how, in her depiction of the *Judenraete*, she began to blur the distinction between perpetrators and victims. Arendt's tense relationship with Israel stemmed

both from these essential concepts and, more generally, from her refusal "to insulate or grant absolute privilege to Jewish history and suffering despite her emphasis on the radical novelty of the exterminations" (p. 85).[5] Aschheim sees tremendous value in revisiting Arendt's methodology and the paradigms she developed, particularly in Israel today. This should not be read as an argument in favor of canonizing Arendt; in fact Aschheim warns explicitly against any uncritical reading of her work. It is, however, a reminder that controversial topics must be revisited with the more mature and self-critical eye which he believes optimistically that the passage of time affords.

The essays in part 3, "Understanding Nazism and the Holocaust," return once again to the evidently insoluble debates on German exceptionalism, the place of the Shoah in history, the Sonderweg Thesis, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the Goldhagen controversy. Here again Aschheim tends to look for a middle ground between the extremes, often demonstrating that there are substantial commonalties among historians no matter how diametrically opposed they appear to be on the surface. Following Jeffrey Herf and his mentor George Mosse, Aschheim argues against the Sonderweg Thesis (the idea that Germany's historical development was in some ways aberrant or peculiar in contrast to the other nations of western Europe) albeit in a somewhat different manner than critics such as Blackbourn and Eley.[6] He contends that "the experience of Germany was indeed 'normal' in the sense that it was exposed, more or less, to the same stresses and problems that confronted the other modern, bourgeois nations of Europe. At a certain level at least, history is obviously about uniqueness, distinctiveness, and yet diverse *Sonderwege*.... But in addition, German 'reality' was shaped, in no small measure, by its own perceptions, myths, stereotypes, and ideologies. People everywhere create their reality as much as they respond to it" (p. 121). Blackbourn and Eley are rejected not because of the central thrust of their argument–that Germany did in fact make a transition to modernity–but rather, because they omit the centrality of uniquely German myths, stereotypes, and ideologies.

Turning to Arendt's *The Origins* Aschheim again raises the issue of the Sonderweg, pointing out that Arendt had also dismissed any notion of Germany peculiarity, arguing instead that "[t]he real trouble ... lies not in the German national character, but rather in the disintegration of this character" (p. 127).[7] Arendt's paradigm is, according to Aschheim, explicitly and dangerously Eurocentric, presupposing that a "civilized" society, such as prewar Germany, could not produce such an uncivilized regime. The further implication of this paradigm is that subsequent genocides outside the European continent seem somehow more understandable, even expected, given the lower level of development in these areas. Arendt's paradigm, nonetheless, retains merit for Aschheim, if only as a reminder of how painfully difficult it was to conceptualize the Holocaust in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite their Eurocentrism, Aschheim makes clear that Arendt's theses were meticulously researched and argued, a point which he explicitly contrasts to the work of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, the subject of several subsequent essays. Initially Arendt and Goldhagen provide the radically opposed interpretations which Aschheim is then able to dismantle. Both interpretations of German culpability–Arendt's and Goldhagen's–suffer from similar weaknesses: oversimplification and a degree of ahistoricity. However, Aschheim believes that future historians will benefit tremendously by the tension created by these two paradigms. Ultimately this will lead to a more nuanced, historical interpretation.

The concluding essays in part 4 of the collection–"Historians, History, and the Holocaust"–are focused on the contributions of two men: George Mosse and Saul Friedlaender. It is evident from his discussion that Aschheim absorbed much of Mosse's philosophy into his own scholarship. The essay on Mosse focuses upon the degree to which he was ahead of his time with respect to cultural studies, as well as the interplay between the private and the public in his scholarship. This generally laudatory chapter is a useful reminder to historians of the continuing value of Mosse's work, particularly his ability to view cultural developments with an eye to broader changes taking place both across Europe and on an individual level. One might have expected, however, that Aschheim would address more explicitly Mosse's detractors in order to produce a more balanced commentary on his mentor. Turning to the essay on Friedlaender, it becomes evident that Aschheim is not an uncritical supporter of his conclusions, in particular the insistence on "the absolute nature of the exterminations, the singularity of the total drive against the Jews" (p. 178). As such Friedlaender remains bitterly opposed to those, such as Ernst Nolte and Joachim Fest, who sought to historicize the Nazi era in general and the Shoah in particular. Aschheim, however, again argues for a middle ground between total uniqueness and complete equivalency. "Would it be unreasonable to argue that the 'Final Solution' was a secular, human event that occurred at a particular, identifiable time and place and that–while always keeping the radical and unprecedented dimen-

sions of the event clearly in mind–it should be equally amenable to the rules and methods that govern the increasingly refined and self-reflexive practice of historiography in general?" (p. 191). This final chapter concludes, nevertheless, by noting the essential value of Friedlaender's work and the important contribution he continues to make to the interpretation of Western, German, and Jewish history.

In Times of Crisis has few scholarly flaws. The collection seems to gain strength as one reads each successive part. The book is impeccably documented and indeed the endnotes make for particularly interesting reading quite apart from the text. Even if one is unfamiliar with Aschheim's earlier works, the collection remains accessible. Nonetheless a substantial summative chapter, either at the beginning or the end of the essays, would further underscore and elucidate the author's primary concerns. Furthermore, though the book was obviously deliberately organized, one might benefit by beginning with chapter 5, for it is here that the author's voice speaks most succinctly, making evident the over-arching concerns that motivated this collection of essays. In the past Aschheim has been accused of using "dense and somewhat arcane prose," and speaking to a very limited audience.[8] While some of these essays are clearly targeted at a scholarly audience, well informed on key historiographical issues in European history, the casual reader should find value in Aschheim's insightful analyses of the main themes.

On the negative side there is a degree of verbatim repetition among the essays, in particular of quoted primary source material. Though Aschheim acknowledges this in the preface, and it does to a degree serve to underscore major points, a more thorough editing of the quoted material would be beneficial. This is, however, a fairly trivial objection in light of the greater value of the work to all scholars concerned with European cultural and intellectual history. The appearance of the collection is also timely given recent developments in the historiography of the Shoah. In particular, Aschheim's constant rejoinder to historians to continue to struggle with complex, perhaps insoluble problems is worthy of notice. Ever the optimist, the author reminds us of the significant value of historical debate, even if our conclusions are necessarily imperfect. As such this is a thought-provoking collection of essays for both students and scholars concerned with this challenging era in European history.

Notes

[1]. Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). Aschheim's own struggles with his identity are addressed explicitly in the autobiographical chapter 5.

[2]. A distinction which Aschheim makes and analyzes at length throughout the essays.

[3]. Given the importance of these themes to the remainder of the collection, I have chosen to concentrate in some detail on these four chapters. I have also elected to approach the book on a chapter-by-chapter basis in order not to miss any of the major themes Aschheim develops.

[4]. Degeneration for Nietzsche was symbolized by the rise of liberal bourgeois culture; for Nordau it was epitomized by signs of its breakdown.

[5]. Arendt had written that "[h]uman beings simply can't be as innocent as they all were in the face of the gas chambers (the most repulsive usurer was as innocent as the newborn child because no crime deserves such a punishment)" (quoted in Aschheim, p. 85).

[6]. Aschheim wrote his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Mosse at The University of Wisconsin and currently holds the Mosse Exchange Professorship at Wisconsin-Madison.

[7]. Here Arendt's argument echoes closely that advanced by Victor Klemperer who viewed the Nazis as "un-German," although Aschheim does not explore this parallel.

[8]. Arnold Krammer, "Review of Steven E. Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises*, *Historian* 60:2 (Winter 1998), p. 419.

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