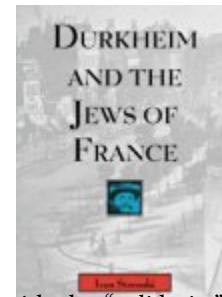


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Ivan Strenski. *Durkheim and the Jews of France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. ix + 215 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-77723-8; \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-77724-5.

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Historians of fin-de-siecle France may be surprised by Ivan Strenski's self-consciously polemical work, *Durkheim and the Jews of France*, which, despite its emphatic historical argument, is not really addressed to historians. Rather, Strenski is primarily concerned with refuting the claims of those sociologists and Judaic scholars who have, in a handful of articles written since the 1970s, posited a close relationship between Durkheim and his "Jewishness." Strenski does not assert that Durkheim remained independent of his Jewish upbringing and education, but quite reasonably insists that such Jewishness be understood in its historical specificity rather than by reference to an ahistorical Jewish essence. Thus does Strenski admit the influence of a certain style of "concrete" Judaism upon Durkheim's intellectual development and socialization: "This was a Judaism of puritan, ascetic, antimessianic, antimystical religious practices encouraged by the training at the rabbinical school of Troyes" (p. 88). Self-consciously applying a "Durkheimian" approach to Durkheim, Strenski's overall project is continually to reinsert the sociologist into the context of learned French Jewish culture at the end of the nineteenth century, and this he does quite well.

A chapter entitled "Why Society? French Nationalism and the Body of Judaism," challenges those who consider Durkheim's emphasis on society as being explainable purely by reference to a Jewish sense of collectivism. Strenski correctly points out how assimilated French Jews subscribed to bourgeois individualism rather than any collective ideal, a tendency that partly explains the relative silence of Parisian Jews faced with the antisemitism of the Dreyfus Affair. For many this renunciation of any specifically "Jewish" social status represented a means of affirming membership in the French nation. Rather, the societist impulse behind Durkheim's

work had much more in common with the "solidarist" philosophy of many republicans than with anything promulgated by specifically Jewish groups. While Strenski is of course correct on this point, this is hardly news to historians already familiar with the work of William Logue, Christophe Charle, and many others who have commented on Durkheim's location within republican politics (and whose contributions are surprisingly absent in this study). Rather, this scholar of religious studies seems especially concerned with chastising sociologists for not being historians, or, at the very least, for failing to historicize properly.

In the chapter called "Reinach's Modernism, Durkheim's Symbolism, and the Birth of the Sacred," the author refutes the notion that Durkheim's symbolic approach to religion sprang from his Jewish upbringing, citing instead the "argumentative context" of religious modernists with whom the sociologist and his team interacted. Represented by such scholars as Louis-Germain Levy, James Darmesteter, and especially Salomon Reinach, the Jewish branch of religious modernism rejected the literal interpretation of sacred texts and endeavored to liberalize French Judaism, which since 1870 had been dominated by orthodoxy. Largely secured through his popular study *Orpheus*, Reinach enjoyed considerable renown as a spokesperson for this liberal position; but for the Durkheimians Reinach was a man to be both admired as a kindred spirit and resented as a competitor. As Strenski convincingly reveals, the Durkheimians went to great lengths to distinguish themselves as scientists against the popularizing Reinach despite the fact that the two concurred in their views on religion.

Throughout the text Strenski conflates Durkheim with the Durkheimians, maintaining that their work was

“radically collaborative and collective” (p. 14). Aside from the debatable nature of this contention (are scholars like Durkheim and Lucien Levy-Bruhl or Celestin Bouglé really interchangeable?), it leads to some odd developments in the text, such as the chapter entitled “How Durkheim Read the Talmud,” that focuses almost exclusively on the work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss rather than Durkheim. Unlike Reinach or some other assimilationists, Strenski claims, Durkheim did not denigrate Talmudic Jews in his works, but read the Talmud within the context of the progressive scholarship generated by the group called Science du Judaïsme (a French version of the older German Wissenschaft des Judentums). Above all, the author maintains that by defending the concrete Jews of his day Durkheim did not lapse into the sort of subtle antisemitism manifested by some modernizing Jews who resented the influx of their Eastern European coreligionists in the late 1880s.

In the final and perhaps most interesting chapter Strenski considers the influence of the Indologist Sylvain Levi on the intellectual formation of Hubert and Mauss, the latter having dubbed Levi his “second uncle.” As Strenski shows, Levi was an Indologist who took advantage of the widespread racial elements of his field (i.e., the search for Aryan roots on the subcontinent to suggest the non-Jewish origin of western civilization) in order to enter into dialogue on the Jewish question: “just like the Aryanists, Levi could dichotomize Aryan and Jews by speaking *of* one thing (the Jews) while speaking *with* another (India)” (p. 126). Many of the central ideas of Durkheimians like Mauss and Hubert can thus be traced to Levi’s politicized Indology, from their societist view of religion to their positive conception of the sacred.

Despite his demand that Jewishness be explored within definite historical contexts, Strenski does not consider the Jews of France as a racial group, which is nevertheless how they were often perceived and perceived themselves at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather, Strenski’s Jews are defined primarily by their religious allegiance to Judaism, which not only makes it difficult to approach those who eschewed religion, but bypasses altogether the impact of codes of masculinity and medical discourses on contemporary representations of Jewish cowardice, effeminacy, and nervousness. Failing to consider Jews within these mainstream fin-de-siècle contexts allows the author to present ideals like patriotism in fairly unproblematic terms, such as the assertion of martial prowess in articles written on “the Jewish soldier” around 1915. For Strenski such essays represent attempts by Jews to fit themselves into the national war

effort, when in fact articles like these appeared in Jewish periodicals throughout the 1890s (especially during the Dreyfus Affair) in response to widespread assumptions that Jewish men were by nature effeminate and potential liabilities in times of war. While it is unlikely that Durkheim remained unmoved by such widespread and powerful stereotypes, they cannot be addressed through the conceptual scheme adopted in this study.

This lack of attention to the Jewish body also allows Strenski to simplify the problem of Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose customs and bodies (in the eyes of many contemporaries) bore the signs of everything assimilated Jews had endeavored to overcome. Though Bernard Lazare is singled out as a Jewish antisemite who opposed assimilated “Mosaic Israelites” to “Talmudic Juifs” (p. 106), Strenski fails to consider how a large component of hostility toward Eastern Jewry revolved around perceptions of their physically “degenerate” condition as well as opposition to their religious traditionalism. Most importantly, this view allows Strenski to praise Durkheim for his defense of Talmudic Jews while downplaying the sociologist’s own periodic references to the shortcomings of the Jews generally. In short, by viewing Judaism as the fundamental way of defining the Jews of France, Strenski can neither account for the pervasiveness of racial thinking under the Third Republic nor propose a more nuanced definition of what “Jewishness” entailed in European culture at the turn of the century. Perhaps some consideration of the work of Sander Gilman, Jay Geller, and Daniel Boyarin would have added some complexity to this rather one-dimensional view of the Jewish condition. At the very least the work of such scholars may have provided Strenski with examples of how one can confront the problem of Jewishness without necessarily having recourse either to essentialism or sociological reductionism.

On a final (and admittedly pedantic) note, this book could have benefited from more careful editing and greater attention to style. For instance, major figures are sometimes introduced in detail on one page only to be reintroduced (in even more detail) a few pages later. There is also an annoying repetition of quotations throughout the text. These redundancies and Strenski’s own sometimes annoying argumentative tone could have been corrected and tempered before the book went to press.

These reservations aside, Strenski’s study nevertheless makes many good points and in general represents a useful contribution to the field. Some specialists

in Jewish studies and historians of fin-de-siecle France may welcome this book for the valuable information it presents on little known Jewish scholars of the period. Others may be put off by the author's sometimes irritating polemical style and tight focus on a specific set of concerns rather than a broader and more nuanced consideration of Jewishness at the fin-de-siecle. While sociologists and Judaic scholars predisposed to essentializing the Jewishness of Durkheim should find a useful correc-

tive in this work, they may be left wondering why an entire book (albeit a slim one) was devoted to a project that may have been more effectively accomplished in a well-placed journal article.

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