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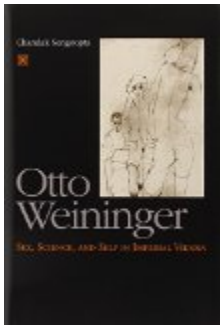
**Chandak Sengoopta**. *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000. ii + 239 pp. $29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-74867-2.

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## Recontextualizing Bigotry

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On June 29, 1903, Gertrud Bäumer (1873-1954), a prominent activist of the German bourgeois women's movement, wrote to Marianne Weber (1870-1954), the wife of Max Weber (1864-1920), that a book had come out just recently, a book "in the guise of scholarship" that in her view was "nonsense and more than that, but with method." Bäumer felt that the only answer to this book could be a scholarly one, since "battles with a feminist club" would not help at all.[1] The book that so infuriated Bäumer was Otto Weininger's (1880-1903) notorious *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung*, which together with Paul Möbius' (1853-1907) *Uber den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (1900) is commonly cited as a cautionary example of a misogynist vision of the world dressed up as scientific fact. Weininger's widely read and discussed book, its contents, its author, its scientific achievements and deficiencies as well as its historical context, is also the main subject of Chandak Sengoopta's study. However, while Bäumer was furious, Sengoopta approaches Weininger's work with scholarly detachment. The study examines Weininger's use of science, analyzes the text in full by closely reading it, understands it in detail by sorting out the various strands of discourse running through it, and thus embeds it into the context in which it is rooted. This allows the text to appear as what it is, i.e., a "melange of science, bigotry, philosophy, personal anxiety, and cultural politics" (p. 156), a melange, however, made up of some of the most significant intellectual currents of the age. Sengoopta, in this highly informative study, convincingly shows that *Geschlecht und Charakter* is a "serious, comprehensive, and emotionally charged ideological critique of modernity in general and of women's emancipation in particular" (p. 1).

In reconstructing the discursive universe in which Weininger moved, Sengoopta sketches out a very colorful portrait of a "scientistic epoch" in which the "voice of science was heard with great respect" (p. 30). Bäumer's comment can serve as a case in point; although she characterized *Geschlecht und Charakter* as "non-sense," she knew that feminists had to take the book seriously because it had the aura of scholarship and scientific proof. That is why Sengoopta has a point in arguing that the question of whether Weininger was a scientist or a pseudoscientist, a bigot or lunatic, is really not that interesting when it comes to answering the question of which biographical, scientific, cultural and ideological contexts produced this book and why it made an impact in its times and well beyond. The main achievement of Sengoopta's study is that it makes this highly complex and diverse context out of which *Geschlecht und Charakter* grew and in which it functioned come alive again.

The book has eight well and precisely written chapters. It starts out with an account of Weininger's short and tragic life based on the fragmentary and unclear evidence that has been handed down to us. Chapter Two identifies some of the most significant intellectual and cultural currents of the great crisis culture of fin-de-siecle

Vienna. It starts out with the political and social situation in the multi-fragmented Austro-Hungarian monarchy, moves on to the developments in the fields of physics, psychology and philosophy, then turns to the emergence of feminist activism in Central Europe and ends with the highly controversial question of "Jewishness" as it was debated among anti-semites and assimilated Jews. Sengoopta argues that Weininger felt threatened by these new developments because they suggested the dissolution of the Self, they blurred gender lines and they made notions of identity problematic. Sengoopta interprets Weininger's espousal of Kantianism as away to escape from contemporary scientific psychology. According to this study, Weininger championed Kant because the latter had argued that the Self, as the true source of human autonomy and subjectivity, existed and was intelligible through introspection.

Chapters Three to Seven deal with *Geschlecht und Charakter* itself. In them Sengoopta reads the text closely, identifies the recurring general themes, uncovers substantive and methodological inconsistencies, and traces influences and origins of Weininger's thinking. Chapter Three analyzes the general structure of *Geschlecht und Charakter* and some of its basic ideas. The fundamental aim of Weininger's book was to analyze the biological, psychological, cultural, and ontological meanings of masculinity and femininity. Sengoopta is absolutely right in stressing *Geschlecht und Charakter* is about both male and female nature and psychology. The one cannot be understood without the other. Sengoopta sees Weininger's book as "an attempt to construct an autonomous Aryan male subject and to deny autonomy and subjectivity to Woman and the Jew" (p. 8). Most important for understanding Weininger is his conviction that individual human beings never belonged exclusively and totally to one sex but possessed elements of both sexes; all individuals were morphologically androgynous. Although Weininger argues for the principle of biological intermediacy in the first part of his book, the second part of *Geschlecht und Charakter* announced that, psychologically speaking, every human being was either male or female, and Weininger's whole argument basically consists of this tension between biological intermediacy and psychological dualism. "Weininger's woman," Sengooptawrites, "was constructed largely in biomedical terms, whereas his ideal-typical Man was a psychological and philosophical construct"(p. 52). For Weininger, only men were complete and fully autonomous subjects, while he understood women to be exclusively passive sexual objects. He believed that all logical thought and ethical behavior originated in the intelligible ego. Accordingly, an unethical or illogical being did not possess an intelligible self. He considered women to be amoral and alogical beings, and from this Weininger concluded that they did not possess an intelligible self. Weininger also claimed that women were ontologically insignificant, or to quote Sengoopta: "Ontologically, the relationship between Man and Woman was the Aristotelian one of form and matter. Woman was pure, unindividualized matter, on which Man conferred form… This absolute lack of significance, according to Weininger, was the cosmic significance of Woman" (p. 60-61). Tied into this psychology of the sexes were anti-Semitic reflections, and Sengoopta nicely works out the feminization of Judaism in *Geschlecht und Charakter*.

This biological and psychological analysis leads into a general diagnosis of the age with important political implications. Weininger's consciousness of epoch was defined by the conviction of living in "the most Jewish and the most Feminine of Ages" (p. 63); his pathology of modern culture revolved around Judaism and Feminism. The feminist movement had brought about a crisis in conceptions of male identity, and Weininger did his best to defend the idea of male superiority. He defined emancipation as equality of spiritual and moral freedom between men and women, and he declared that a woman' s desire for such freedom and her capacity to handle it responsibly were grounded in her masculine element. The feminine element had neither the need for this inner freedom nor the ability to use it (p. 48). This position had implications for Weininger's stand on the "Jewish Question." Weininger, who was of Jewish descent himself, identified Jewishness as a cultural disease. However, he was not, as Sengoopta points out, a biological racist but a"cultural anti-Semite" (p. 43), following the Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) line on Jews as enemies of Germanic culture. Sengoopta is at pains to reconstruct the whole complexity of Weininger's thinking and refrains from applying undifferentiated conceptions like "anti-Semitism" or "Jewish self-hatred" (p. 44).

Since Chapter Three outlines the basic lines of Weininger's argument, Sengoopta runs into quite a few redundancies and annoying overlaps in the following four chapters that deal with special thematic aspects of *Geschlecht und Charakter*. Sengoopta now moves away from closely reading the text and places some of Weininger's thoughts into traditions of medical and scientific thinking. This is very informative but also demanding for those readers who are not familiar with the

history of medicine, since Sengoopta only very briefly summarizes the medical doctrines and scientific theories that served Weininger as sources. Chapter Four provides a detailed analysis of Weininger's hypothesis of sexual intermediacy. Chapter Five deals with Weininger's surprisingly unorthodox stand on homosexuality, which he did not understand as a disease or a developmental anomaly, but as something innate. Chapters Six and Seven contain detailed analyses of Weininger's theories of hysteria and maternity with both fields illustrating Weininger's belief in the "ontological nullity of Woman"(p. 103).

The final Chapter Eight turns to the responses to Weininger, sketching out the incredible diversity of reactions to *Geschlecht und Charakter* that caused a stir only after its author had committed suicide. While it had great impact on cultural critics and literati - Karl Kraus (1874-1936) championed Weininger and August Strindberg (1849-1912) even thanked him for having solved the "Woman Problem" - it obviously failed to impress the philosophers, with the striking exception of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1954). Biologists and physicians reacted quite critically to the book, but they did not find any serious deficiencies in Weininger's scientific knowledge.

Weininger's work and biography is anything but unknown, and yet there has been no sufficiently comprehensive attempt to explore *Geschlecht und Charakter* as awhole and to place it into the diverse and highly complex contexts of fin-de-siècle science, medicine, philosophy and culture. Sengoopta refrains from applying simplifying, all-or-nothing categories like "modernity," "reactionary," "anti-Semitism" and "racism," "feminism" and "anti-feminism." Although he does not hide his own ideological and political standpoint towards the quality of Weininger work, Sengoopta does not portray Weiniger as a one-dimensional bigot or a pseudoscientific lunatic. Weininger was part of the fin-de-siècle debates on gender and sexuality, and these debates were as complex and contradictory as Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter*. Sengoopta makes productive use of discourse analysis without making language absolute. He insists that there is a biography behind the text and that the strands of Weininger's discursive universe have identifiable origins and addresses. True believers in the "linguistic turn" might deplore this, but Sengoopta's conscientious study, which, besides reading Weininger's text closely, works in a broad amount of literature from various fields, makes a strong case for the point that discourses are inseparably tied to the political, social, economic and cultural context of an age that cannot be identified with its linguistic representation.

Endnotes

[1]. Gertrud Bäumer, *Des Lebens wie der Liebe Band. Briefe.* Ed. Emmy Beckmann, Tübingen, Germany: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag Hermann Leins, 1956, p. 15.

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