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Sandrine Sanos, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2013. xi + 369 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8047-7457-4.

Review by Mary Ann Frese Witt, North Carolina State University.

The past two decades have seen considerable scholarly production by both historians and literary critics on the subject of far-right and fascist ideologies in France and their relation to culture.[1] Arguing that historical scholarship has paid insufficient attention to literary analysis and aesthetics and that literary scholars have not sufficiently fleshed out historical context, Sandrine Sanos, a historian at Texas A&M, proposes in this work to pursue a more synthetic approach by offering contextualized readings of both literary and journalistic writings by fascists and other far-right intellectuals in 1930s France, a period that she feels has been neglected because of the emphasis on the Vichy period. The figures she discusses include not only well-known writers and intellectuals such as Robert Brasillach, Thierry Maulnier, Lucien Rebatet, Maurice Blanchot and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, but also lesser-known journalists and editors such as Léon Daudet (son of Alphonse), Jean de Fabrègues, Jean-Pierre Maxence, and Pierre-Antoine Cousteau.

Far-right intellectuals have traditionally been seen as falling into two major groups: the Catholic followers of Charles Maurras known as the Jeune Droite, working in the journal *Combat*, and fascist and Nazi sympathizers associated with the journal *Je suis partout*. While also analyzing nuances and differences associated with other journals such as *L'Insurgé*, *Journal des débats*, *Aux Ecoutes*, and *La Revue du XXe Siècle*, Sanos maintains that all of these groups shared fundamental common values and themes. These include anti-Semitism, reactionary French nationalism, a belief that current, republican France is decadent and contaminated (with particular hatred focused on the figure of Léon Blum), a defense of colonialism, and a belief in the realm of the aesthetic, particularly French literature, as a form of transcendence and a political force that has the potential to save the nation. These themes find their expression in a language using tropes of gender, sexuality, and race. Thus woman, or the attribution “female,” often signifies a form of contamination, while the pure (uncircumcised) male subject stands for the strength of the nation within its proper boundaries. The “sublime” aesthetics proposed by the far right is thus an aesthetics based on hatred of everything “foreign.”

Most of the chapters are centered on themes and/or writings in various journals, but two—chapters four and five—each focus exclusively on one author, Blanchot and Céline respectively, discussing their journalism but also, to some extent, their fiction. The logic of the book’s organization is not entirely clear to me and creates a certain amount of unnecessary repetition. Sanos’s claim to give equal weight to aesthetics and literary analysis with historical narrative is somewhat unfounded. In fact, the book falls primarily into the genre of intellectual history. This said, the author covers an impressive amount of material, including journalistic and literary writing, as well as cultural and political history, and incorporates all of the major scholarship on the topic, as well as some gender and postcolonial theory.

Perhaps the most interesting and most original of the many points closely and meticulously developed by Sanos is her analysis of the ways in which colonialist, racist, anti-Semitic, gender-based, and aesthetic

ideologies worked together. After World War I, Paris became not only the capital of Modernism, including new freedom in lifestyles as well as in the arts, but also a haven for colonial subjects from Africa and the Caribbean, including an important number of intellectuals who would found the *négritude* movement. The new interest on the part of Parisians for African art (led by Picasso), for jazz, and for the American singer Josephine Baker, was labeled “Negrophilia.” This phenomenon, along with an increase in immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, threatened the new right’s conception of Nation and Frenchness. A fear of the dissolution of boundaries prevailed in their writings. They saw the French citizen as a heterosexual male whose legitimate boundaries were in danger of being transgressed, not only by foreigners and other races but by feminization, including homosexuality.

The French “Nation,” as opposed to the political state, depended on an almost mystical bonding on the part of legitimate citizens. The idea of a colonial humanism or the *mission civilisatrice* meant that the French Nation was destined to be a great imperial power, but also that its colonial subjects had to be kept within their proper place. Massis wrote on the necessity of the “defense of a Christian and humanist West” led by France (p. 58). “Asia,” or the antagonist of the West, included for the far right not only peoples from that continent but also Germans, Slavs and Jews. Maurras, for example, was as anti-German and anti-Protestant as he was anti-Jewish. French fascism, as it developed in the 1930’s, was more influenced by Italian ideologies and the rise of Mussolini than it was by Nazism. Brasillach at that point called for a Latin fascism. France, like Italy, was to inherit the glory of the Roman Empire. The Italian influence is, however, insufficiently discussed in the book. Maurras had also distinguished between French and German anti-Semitism, claiming that Germany, and not France, had inherited Gobineau’s racial anti-Semitism. The French variety, on the other hand, was an *antisémitisme d’état*.

The distinction continued into the 1930s. German culture was based on irrational myth; French civilization was a product of reason. The Germans were Romantic (therefore “feminine”); the French, classical. Whereas the Germans believed in racial superiority, the French saw culture and civilization, not race, as that which defined Frenchness. Therefore, the argument seems to go, French anti-Semitism was “rational,”—a matter of maintaining the proper boundaries of the authentic Nation—rather than irrationally racist. When it comes to defining exactly how culture defines the French, however, the arguments appear to be anything but rational. Brasillach, for example, opposing innate knowledge (*savoir*) to abstract knowledge (*apprendre*), maintained that whereas an authentic Frenchman, having absorbed culture as his birthright, could be illiterate, a foreigner, no matter how much he had learned about French culture, could never be truly French. By the 1940s, Brasillach had, of course, come to embrace the German form of racial anti-Semitism.

The authentic nation was, for Maurras, not a political entity but a work created and unified by classical aesthetic criteria. Sanos traces the development of this notion in far-right thinking through the 1930s. (She might also have considered the influence of Mussolini’s notion of the state as a work of art.) Influenced by Jacques Rancière’s writings on aesthetics and politics, Sanos claims that she does not intend to follow Walter Benjamin’s famous definition of fascism as the aestheticization of politics, but rather to explore how aesthetics functions as politics within both the Catholic right and the fascist communities. Whereas Maurrassians such as Thierry Maulnier maintained that only neo-classical works could represent an authentically French aesthetic, others, including Daudet, Massis, and Brasillach, were interested in the possibilities of modern and even avant-garde literature. Céline and Blanchot, according to Sanos, epitomized the political aesthetics of writers on the right. Both envisioned a sublime realm of beauty in contrast to the abjection of current French society: a transcendence that would enable the recovery of the authentic self and the authentic nation.

Whereas Blanchot embraced the sublime, Céline fictionalized its opposite, the abject. Blanchot eventually moved from the anti-Semitic right to the anti-colonial left, but Céline, in Sanos’s view, conflated a defense of colonialism based on a notion of racial superiority with anti-Semitism. Céline wrote in *Bagatelles*: “The semite, who is truly a negro, is a perpetual beast in tam-tam.”[2] Reversing

the proper order of colonialism, the “Negroid Jew” was insidiously attempting to colonize France, corrupting the French male body either as female or as homosexual and contaminating the metropolitan nation. Both Céline and Blanchot, although modernist, even precursors of postmodernism in their aesthetics, joined the neo-classicists in a nostalgia for wholeness, purity, regeneration and the sublime in contrast to present abjection and dissolution caused by “the foreign.” They were thus exemplary of the “aesthetics of hate.”

The concern with French “abjection,” as Sanos convincingly shows, became a major theme in far-right political aesthetics. One of the most interesting chapters is the third one, “Will we get out of French Abjection?,” which demonstrates how Léon Blum—or rather, the right’s construction of a figure called “Léon Blum”—became a crystallizing point for the aesthetics of hate. It was after the 1936 victory of the Popular Front that the far-right intellectuals began to see their country not just as decadent, but as abject. Blum, in their vision, was Jewish, thus foreign and effeminate, as well as socialist, democratic, and capitalist, all attributes antithetical to their vision of the French nation and empire and the pure male subject. Articles in *Combat*, *L’Insurgé*, and *Je suis partout* portrayed Blum as a corrupt agent of foreign powers (perhaps even working for Germany!), either anti-art or too aesthetic, an effeminate homosexual or a seducer of French women, in any case an agent promoting abjection, in opposition to both the authentic French nation and its colonial mission. The Popular Front’s democratic policy on racial equality was seen as a danger to the principles underlying Western civilization. An artificial legal republic was undermining the authentic nation. According to Thierry Maulnier, France had become abject because it was itself colonized by foreigners, and thus had become unable to impose law on its colonial subjects. France’s empire was crumbling while Italy’s was being born.

Although Sanos argues that the various far-right groups were on the whole unified in their approach to aesthetics as politics, she also maintains that around 1938 they split over whether or not to embrace fascism. It was at this time that *Je suis partout* became more violent in orientation and that Brasillach embraced a more racist form of anti-Semitism. The journal continued to conflate anti-Semitism with pro-colonialism, but it also maintained as a regular contributor a writer from Martinique, René Maran, who had won the Prix Goncourt in 1921 for *Batouala*, termed “a true Negro novel.” [3] Although Maran was critical of certain aspects of colonialism, he did not challenge its fundamental mission. Other colonial subjects contributed articles on the beauties of exotic islands and the Algerian desert. Such aesthetic creations permitted the joys of an “ethnographic gaze” portraying happy and docile “natives” enjoying the benefits of French civilization. What could disturb this peaceful co-existence? The Jews! Jews, according to *Je suis partout*, were now invading the colonies. Arabs in particular, as everyone knew, were “naturally” anti-Semitic. Thus the invasion of Jews in Arab lands might lead to a revolution. It followed that Jews should no longer be French citizens, but rather “legal aliens.” This change of status would help to solidify the entity of “Greater France.” Borders and boundaries are still crucial elements of an aesthetic politics of exclusion.

Although Sanos makes reference to a uniquely French fascism, mentioning its concern with aesthetics and its defense of a French civilization with Latin roots, she does not clearly define it. She might have looked at the young fascist poet Jean Turlais, for whom fascism was “surtout une esthétique” [4], as well as the influence of Italy. Her goal, however, was not primarily to distinguish among movements on the right but rather to point out their many commonalities, primarily in the area of aesthetics as politics. This, in addition to analyzing the imbrications of the discourses of anti-Semitism, colonialism, and gender in far-right ideologies and politics, she has masterfully accomplished.

NOTES

[1] These include works by Mark Antliff, David Carroll, Richard Golsan, Alice Kaplan, Paul Mazgaj, Jeffrey Mehlman, Robert Paxton, Mary Ann Frese Witt, and Richard Wolin.

[2] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Denoël, 1937), p. 186; cited on p. 173.

[3] René Maran, *Batouala* (Paris: A. Michel, 1965).

[4] Jean Turlais, "Introduction à la littérature fasciste," *Les Cahiers français* 5(May 1943): 25.

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