

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's review of *L'antisémitisme éclairé. Inclusion et exclusion depuis l'Epoque des Lumières jusqu'à l'affaire Dreyfus/Inclusion and Exclusion: Perspectives on Jews from the Enlightenment to the Dreyfus Affair*, eds. Ilana Y. Zinguer and Sam W. Bloom.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (August 2004), No. 80

The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol4reviews/vol4no80Sepinwall.pdf>

August 18, 2004

Norman Ravitch
ravitchn@bellsouth.net

Comment on the Sepinwall review of the book on Antisemitism:

It is sad to find the authors of the essays in this collection, as well as the reviewer, continuing the unfruitful distinction between religious and secular anti-semitism. There is less there than meets the eye. In early modern Spain the successful conversion of masses of Jews in the 14th and 15th centuries led to concern that there were too many conversos, the result of which was the invention of crypto-Judaism among the converted. Ben-Zion Netanyahu has shown that there was little crypto-Judaism among the converted and that this new menace was invented to create yet another barrier to the integration of the New Christians into Catholic Spanish society. Baptism had for once worked too well for the anti-semites. Now they needed an emphasis on purity of blood.

Voltaire may have hated Jews but there is little doubt that his own Christian roots had as much to do with his hatred as rationalistic and deistic criticism of Jewish religion. His chosen target Blaise Pascal is usually considered a philo-semite but his traditional attitude towards the Jews favored the dead biblical Jews and certainly not the stubbornly un-Christian live Jews of his day. Napoleon himself, as rationalistic as he could be, worried that the Jewish Sanhedrin he was convening might usher in the end of the world, he got this information from his uncle Cardinal Fesch.

In the last analysis, philo-semitism and anti-semitism share an excessive concern with the Jews. This is the result at once of the Jewish biblical tradition and its appropriation by the Christians. When Jews are no more central in one's vision than Finns or Laotians then anti-semitism will have disappeared. Not til then.

August 24, 2004

Sam W. Bloom & Ilana Y. Zinguer
sambloom@research.haifa.ac.il

Alyssa Sepinwall argues that the volume, *L'antisémitisme éclairé. Inclusion et exclusion depuis l'Epoque des Lumières jusqu'à l'affaire Dreyfus / Inclusion and Exclusion: Perspectives on Jews from the Enlightenment to the Dreyfus Affair*, is in need of a synthetic introduction that would mention and tie together the various essays as well as underline their affinities and differences. To everyone's benefit, she has done this in her recent review. That the volume lends itself so well to such an exposition, we believe, justifies why the editors felt that such a traditional introduction, often forced in the context of articles originating from colloquia, was indeed unnecessary. While brief, our short avant-propos explains why we chose Pierre Birnbaum's magisterial article, based on his opening plenary talk that treats the phenomenon of French antisemitism as opposed to its foreign, and primarily German, counterparts. While there is a brief mention of what is perceived as a recent upsurge of antisemitism in France, Birnbaum's article resists what seems to be the current hysteria resulting from antisemitic incidents occurring in France. As Simcha Epstein, from the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, one of the co-sponsors of our colloquium, has recently shown, the inordinate concern with violence directed towards French Jews is, at the very least, overwrought. [1] One might question the wisdom of citing sample reports of the Conseil représentatif des institutions juives en France, which lists a variety of instances where formal complaints were filed against those wielding antisemitic insults and threats, the most prominent among them being "sale juif." [2] Quite comparable to the antisémitisme à la française that Birnbaum describes around the Dreyfus Affair, these complaints are indicative of a wave of hostility that is far from being of a fatal nature, unchecked by the French government. Though, one does get the opposite impression from both the American and Israeli mainstream press.

All too unfortunately, our pronouncement that antisemitism in France and elsewhere usually is due to extraneous circumstances (economic, political, etc.) is borne out by the recent attacks against Jewish citizens and symbols in France. If post-1948 history is to be our guide, it hardly seems arbitrary to attribute violence against French Jews to the prolonged impasse between Palestinians and Israelis. (A group calling itself Ansar Al-Jihad al-Islamiya, Partisans of the Holy Islamic War, claimed responsibility for the burning of a Jewish center in the 11th arrondissement just this past weekend.) To this extent, we would argue that an "enlightened antisemitism," also reflects the organizers and editors' efforts to flesh out an understanding of the various manifestations and origins of the phenomenon. Norman Ravitch's recent contribution to the list unintentionally shows that religious and cross-cultural animosities are not so simply easily resolved through solutions such as a sincerely forgiving conversion to Christianity. Otherwise, we might just as simplistically explain away anti-Israeli and Jewish demonstrations in Indonesia.

[1] "'The Highest Wave of Antisemitism in France since 1945'-is it so?" in the Annual Report of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, October 2001.

[2] See: <http://www.crif.org/index02.php?id=3015&menu=&type=tout>

August 26, 2004

Norman Ravitch
ravitchn@bellsouth.net

Sam Bloom's intervention in the matter of the Sepinwall review is curious and unclear in intent. Perhaps he is just justifying his own involvement in the volume in question. I was rather startled to have him state that the "sale juif" epithet was "far from being of a fatal nature." One of the first things done by the first post-Popular Front government was to eliminate any penalties for ethnic/racial slurs. It is obvious that allowing these slurs is the first step towards allowing much more.

He is right however in believing that American and Israeli commentary on anti-Jewish events in France is unreliable. The hostility to France since the beginning of the Iraq war has been a daily theme on rightist talk radio in the USA. There have been boycotts of French goods, notably started by that defender of Truth, God, and Justice Bill O'Reilly. I confess that since the boycott I have become addicted to drinking Grey Goose Vodka (Citron) and therefore my expenditure of French goods (wine, cheese, etc.) has magnified considerably. If the French would cut the cost of their products a bit they would probably make more money in the American market, as we effete snobs consume more Brie, Cognac, and all the rest. Even in matters of consumerism I can understand anti-French feeling. I once knew a nun whose family name was Hennessy. She liked to say there were two branches of that Hiberno-French family, those who made the cognac and those who drank it. Her family was unfortunately from the side that only drank it.

August 27, 2004

Alyssa Sepinwall
sepinwal@csusm.edu

I am glad to see that my review has raised discussion about the many interesting issues contained in Sam W. Bloom and Ilana Zinguer's collection *L'antisémitisme éclairé/Inclusion and Exclusion*. As I noted at the end of the review, I do believe that more informed analysis of the current situation in France is necessary, and that one must resist both overstating the degree of antisemitism there and dismissing it out of hand. I thank the editors and contributors again for their essays, and am glad that Sam Bloom found my review to tie together usefully a number of themes in the collection.

August 27, 2004

David Slavin
dhslavi@emory.edu

Apropos Alyssa Sepinwall's comment, you can find my report on several articles from Israeli newspapers about contemporary anti-semitism in France published on H-France 26 July 04; as for Ravitch's query about where French anti-semitism comes from, many of us are investigating the North Africa connection, not just the fact that 400,000 Jews lived there by 1945, but also that anti-semitism was so intense among the European settlers before the Dreyfus affair, during the 1930s and at various times since. Jews competed with "white" settlers economically and politically esp. in Algeria where the Jews were French citizens. From my perspective the most fruitful direction for research into why French anti-semitism was full blown in the 19th century is to pursue connections between the TWO "anti-semitisms" of anti-arabo-berberism and anti-judaism in French social thought, world view and political practice. Edward Said suggested this connection in "Orientalism Reconsidered" _Race & Class_ (Fall 1985) and specifically pointed to Renan as a place to start the inquiry.

August 30, 2004

Norman Ravitch
ravitchn@bellsouth.net

I agree with David Slavin about the importance of anti-semitism among the Algerian settlers. In fact I am sure the Cremieux Decree made things much worse since it was seen, with some justification, as a Third Republic politicians' pandering to the Jews in order to get more votes for themselves from the now Jewish citizens of Algeria.

But, the settlers do not account for the anti-semitism of the French metropole, at least not before the 1960's. The settlers were in any case not ethnically French: they were Spanish and Italian largely.

August 31, 2004

Philippe Poirrier
ppoirrie@club-internet.fr

Bonjour,

« La France est-elle antisémite ? ». C'est à cette question d'actualité que répond notamment le nouveau livre de Michel Winock :

Michel Winock, La France et les juifs, de 1789 à nos jours, paris, Seuil, 2004, 432 p.

August 31, 2004

Paul T Werner
paul.werner@nyu.edu

I've noticed a curious omission in this thread - perhaps someone on this list can enlighten me.

Briefly: I have seen no mention of antisémitisme d'état. Yet the most consistent tradition in the history of Jews in France (not necessarily of French Jews) is succeeding governments (from Jacobin to Gaullist) using resident Jewish populations as political pawns. The parallels with colonialism (internal and external) are striking, notably the temptation to exploit inner divisions and play off one group against the other: French Jews against immigrant Jews, Arab against Jew, Zionists against the Left, and so forth. Though I don't dispute the good intentions of the present, it seems as if the chicken are coming home to roost.