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Jews, Intellectuals, and the Dreyfus Affair


The new cultural history that has been on the ascent during the last decade emphasizes not so much what happened and to whom (political history), nor even why and how it happened (social history), but what its meaning was at the time and subsequently. Notwithstanding the vast historiography on the Dreyfus affair, these three books offer new insights—not necessarily through rearguing the facts of the case or reviewing the economic, social, or political dimensions of the era, but rather through an examination of its cultural history. The cultural history undertaken in these volumes discusses different questions than have previously been posed: What defines French identity and how was this contested in the fin de siècle? How did French Jews negotiate their double allegiance to their francise and their judaisme? What were the different political, social, and cultural currents that influenced individual intellectual choices, and how did the outcome of the Dreyfus affair shape subsequent movements? What were the epistemological rubrics that forged how intellectuals determined the "truth" of the unfolding saga? How was the Dreyfus affair perceived in national contexts beyond France? What was the larger social discourse within which the events themselves were debated, and to what extent was the same discourse shared by both sides? And finally, was the Dreyfus affair a foil for the French to negotiate their entrance into modernity?

At their best, through examining the politics of culture and the culture of politics reciprocally, the three books under review provide illuminating responses to these questions. They thereby contribute to a more multifaceted and ultimately more profound appreciation of why the Dreyfus affair continues to haunt the French and Jewish imagination as the lieux de mémoire that served as a dress rehearsal for the 20th century and at the same time defined the agenda of a new modern intellectual consciousness.

Venita Datta, associate professor of French at Wellesley College, has written an outstanding first book. She discusses the emergence of the French intellectual both as "a symbol of a modern, democratic, and secular society" (p. 1) and in terms of the struggle to create that society during the Third Republic. While many studies treat the Dreyfus affair as the point of departure that shaped the modern French intellectual.

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Datta focuses on the literary avant-garde to elucidate the processes that enabled intellectuals self-consciously to establish themselves as the mediators for the meaning of French modernity.

The major contribution of Datta’s book is that in historicizing the genesis of the French intellectual, she carefully interrogates the polemical oppositions that crystallized in the midst of the Dreyfus affair and that are often reenacted in the work of historians: republican versus monarchist; secular versus religious; progressive versus reactionary; truth versus ideology; the military and the Church’s desire for an organic, hierarchical, aristocratic, Catholic, and traditional social order, as opposed to the Third Republic’s recasting of the democratic ideas and ideals of the French Revolution.

Datta makes this contribution on methodological grounds by skillfully negotiating two approaches to the intellectual culture she historicizes; in so doing, she makes a significant contribution to both. In drawing upon the historical sociology of the intellectual in works such as Regis Debray’s _Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France_ (1979) and Christophe Charle’s _Naisances des “intellectuels”_ (1990), Datta questions the sometimes stark oppositions that characterize conclusions about the groups that confronted one another in the course of the affair: the “battle between the university and French literature,” between the Left Bank and the Right Bank, the provinces and Paris, the scholarship versus the inheritors” and between “the literary avant-garde vs the literary establishment . . . the newer disciplines vs older disciplines, the younger generation vs the older generation” (p. 6). She shows that emphasizing these bifurcations “neglects the diversity within each group as well as the common beliefs—or at the very least—common vocabulary shared by both sides” (pp. 183–184). Datta’s questioning of these dichotomies comes from her training as a historian of French culture and is based on her widespread quotations from the literature and political commentaries of intellectuals, rather than stressing the antinomies between Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, she elucidates their shared discourse and sociocultural framework.

In her first two chapters, Datta writes the collective intellectual biography of the “generation of 1890,” showing that the avant-garde intellectuals of the Left and Right were formed by the same institutions and experiences and shared many ideas in common. They converged in opposition to the political and literary establishment, in their need to negotiate the vicissitudes of the new literary marketplace, and in their scorn for the bourgeoisie. These writers met another in the centralized intellectual milieu of Paris by attending the same schools, often as only as their elite hôtes (Henry IV, Louis-le-Grand, Condorcet), or later in the republican universities (Sorbonne) or at the École Normale Supérieure. They met in cafés, through family retinues, or through the various literary journals to which they contributed.

Datta maintains that “the young men of 1890 were France’s first republican generation as well as the children of the defeat, the first generation to come of age in a Europe no longer dominated by France” (p. 42), and that their shared generational experience was expressed using a similar cultural syntax. The crisis of French cultural identity created by the Franco-Prussian war, France’s specific route through the second industrial revolution, the rise of mass democracy, the growth of cities, and the success of France’s new “state Jews” (those who became visible markers of the changes wrought by modernity) was put into relief when French intellectuals reflected on
themselves in opposition to Germany. They were preoccupied with their own demographic decline, which they perceived as a symptom of French decadence, and they shared an organicist and medical discourse in describing their degeneration. They were obsessed with these social questions and with defending the body politic.

Datta's subsequent chapters reveal what will seem to some a surprising convergence between the nationalist discourse of republicans and that of the Right as they waged a polemic over la nation and la patrie. Both those who became Dreyfusards and those who became anti-Dreyfusards were elitist: they defended heroism and male codes of honor, used romantic metaphors, and converged in the extent to which Jewish difference was ultimately excluded from their conceptions of the nation. Datta draws on the work of Robert Nye, George Moore, Edward Bernson, and Karen Orren on nationalism and sexuality. She examines the cult of heroism shared by both sides and emphasizes that each celebrated the masculine ideals of action, self-control, sacrifice, and discipline, and that while the vocabulary and ideals regarding the hero were the same, "a real war" for the Dreyfusards "was one who obeyed his conscience, even if it meant defying authority." (p. 151).

Thus, what was significant to the Dreyfusards was moral courage, while "the shedding of blood seemed to be of primordial importance" to anti-Dreyfusards. These two visions of the hero, synecdochically represented by "the sword or the pen," corresponded to differences in their ideas of the essence of France: "The physical bond forged between anti-Dreyfusard heroes and the nation distinguished them from their Dreyfusard counterparts, who viewed the nation less as a physical entity than as an idea" (p. 150). In her discussion of Individualism and Solidarity, Datta traces the history of these fluid terms, showing that Dreyfusards such as Emile Durkheim and Jean Jacoby, and anti-Dreyfusards such as Maurice Barrè and Ferdinand Brunetière, shared an affinity for organicist discourse and were critical of the notion that any kind of abstract "individual" etched prior to society. Where they ultimately differed was on the issue of whether France should be open or exclusive with respect to foreigners and foreign influence.

Datta's central chapter, "The Jew as Intellectual and the Intellectual as Jew," discloses both the strengths and the shortcomings of her book. She makes an important contribution by linking the emergence of the French intellectual to the "Jewish Question" and explicating how both were "inextricably linked to the issue of national identity not only because the Republic and the integration of Jews in it were seen as alien to a French, Catholic tradition by antisemites, but also because assimilated Jewish intellectuals themselves helped to propagate the republican Revolutionary vision of national identity" (p. 116). Datta argues that increasing anti-Semitism in France from the 1880s was linked to the rise of "state intellectuals," that is, university professors—including some Jews—who were a symbol of a modern, democratic society. "For Jews," Datta notes, "the modernist intellectual was a way to escape their marginality: for neo-traditionalists, this figure was a symbol of a new order which threatened to marginalize them" (p. 87).

In examining "the Jew as intellectual" through the writings of Durkheim, Bernard Lazare, Léon Blum, and Julius Benda, she shows how these "assimilated Jews" as-
sociated themselves with the new, universalist model as a means of reconciling their Jewish heritage with the values associated with the modern intellectual. Data examines the "inherent contradictions" between this Jewish identification and the republican model of assimilation and explores how the positions of these Jewish intellectuals had "discursive parallels with certain antisemitic formulations" (p. 87). However, these insights are limited by the methodological approach of the book as a whole, since Datta's wide-ranging analysis ultimately depends upon calling from texts. This approach does not permit close reading and exploration of the subtleties that are afforded by the consideration of each figure she assesses individually, to see how each fits into the wider cultural context.

The shortcomings of Datta's analysis are made evident in the differences between her depiction of Durkheim as the model of the state intellectual and Ivan Strenski's exploration of Durkheim's Jewishness in Durkheim and the Jews of France. Specifically discussing the Jewish intellectuals associated with La Revue blanche, Datta suggests that they were both attracted to and repelled by the ambitions of Judaism. They faced the dilemma of all secular Jews of reclaiming the cultural aspects of their heritage while rejecting its religious character. On the one hand, they drew strength from an abstract, intellectual vision of Judaism in harmony with their universal, republican beliefs. Yet as intellectualists and modernists, they were repulsed by Judaism's religious practices and rites, which they viewed as backward and even barbaric. (p. 144)

Strenski, professor of religious studies at the University of California, Riverside, and the author of three previous books on theories of myth and religion, provides a more nuanced understanding of secular or assimilated Jews in the fin de siècle. Although his interpretation of Durkheim's judaïsme is a polemic against any notion of "essential Jewishness" (and the essential Jewishness of Durkheim's thought in particular), he uses this notion as a wedge to engage in an historical examination of the "argumentative context" in which Durkheim's understanding of religion must be considered. Essentialists contend that Durkheim was "guided by some sense of original and essential ethnic and religious Jewish roots" (p. 6). Against this position, Strenski makes the important methodological and historical point that there is no essential idea of Judaism behind history and that essentialism is tautological. Hypostatizing Judaism and Jewishness into an ideal construct or type, rather than as essential Jewishness, Strenski argues that Jewishness is something learned, negotiatable, and practiced. He prefers to speak of "routes taken" rather than roots that determine identity, and he examines the construction of Jewishness within the social circumstances of individuals. His book is primarily an exploration of the French Jewish interlocutors who shaped the Durkheimian understanding of religion.

While not elegantly written, Strenski's book is clearly structured. Each chapter is animated by Strenski's search for the Jewishness and Judaism of real Jews in Durkheim's time. Thus, the book focuses as much on some members of the group of scholars around Durkheim as on Durkheim himself. Strenski begins with a consideration of the sociological nature of Durkheimian thought, rejecting the notion that sociology was a "Jewish science" or a "Jewish sect" that derived from essential Jewish qual-
eries—whether familial, tribal, or collectivist. He contends that the Paris Jewry of Durkheim’s acquaintance was not particularly disposed to collectivism. Rather, Strenski argues, Durkheim’s societism was part of the rise of French and Jewish nationalism and emerged in response to the antisemitism that would crystalize in the Dreyfus affair. Clearly not intended for the uninitiated, this book offers no discussion of the development of Durkheim’s societism and its major concepts, nor how they changed through time, nor what the differences are within the Durkheimian équipe. It merely presents the Durkheimians’ relations with other Jewish intellectuals who favored a societist conception of religion and discusses how Durkheim was influenced by solidarity, socialism, French progressive thought, and German social thought. Strenski’s discussion of the wider contextual influences on Durkheim is certainly enriched by Datta and other French cultural historians’ more probing examination of these currents.

As delineated by Strenski, the Durkheimians’ views can be seen as part of a wider fin de siècle discussion among Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish modernists on the question of whether all religion was symbolic and founded upon the basis of social relations. “Modernists or liberals, whether religious or secular, Gentile, Jewish, or Durkheimian, generally stood for certain closely related fundamentals,” he writes: “the primacy of science, the belief in social evolution and the possibilities of progressive reform, opposition to religious literalism and ritualism, the adoption of symbolist modes of interpreting religious doctrines and scriptures, and the development of nontheistic, impersonal conceptions of the focus of religious life” (pp. 61–62). To establish this position, Strenski elucidates some of the major exponents of religious modernism, helping to rescue from relative obscurity those who contributed to this position within the Jewish community, in particular Joseph Salvador, James Darmesteter, Louis-Germain Lévy, and (discussed at greater length) the better known Salomon Reinach. Strenski’s exposition of these Jewish reformers confirms Datta’s conclusions about Jewish modernists, even with respect to Durkheim.

However, Strenski’s interesting chapter on “How Durkheim Read the Talmud” gives pause to Datta’s broader conclusions. According to Strenski, the Durkheimians were influenced by the talmudic scholar Israel Lévi and consequently rejected the modernist Jewish critique of talmudic and rabbinic Judaism, celebrating ritualism instead as the key to understanding religion. Strenski also outlines the “historical and ideological bonds linking Durkheimian scholarship and the approach to Judaism practiced by the French heirs to the Wissenschaft des Judentums” (p. 90), thus making it clear that Durkheimians also opposed a similar criticism of Judaism on the part of political antisemites such as Edouard Drumont and scholarly antisemites such as Paul de Lagarde and Julius Wellhausen. The links that Strenski establishes between the leading Jewish scholars of his time and the Durkheimians’ understanding of religion are continued in the final chapter, which documents the influence of the work of Sylvain Lévi, a Jewish scholar of Indian civilization, on Marcel Mauss (Durkheim’s nephew and close colleague). According to Strenski, “the Durkheimians’ societist conception of religion as a concrete ‘thing,’ their ritualism, and their positive and palpable idea of the sacred all point to origins in Lévi’s idolology and thus in his specific concerns about the integrity of Judaism” (p. 131). Strenski’s analysis of Durkheim’s Jewishness confirms some of Datta’s general conclusions but reveals the greater com-
plethora of his relationships to the Jewish community and to the group of avant-garde Jewish scholars who reformed the Durkheimians’ work.

If Datta’s work explicates the broad strokes of the cultural context and Sniadki’s analysis of Durkheim’s Jevolusje highlights the importance of understanding in more detailed fashion each of the major characters in the era of Dreyfus, then Les intellectuels face à l’affaire Dreyfus alors et aujourd’hui offers a tableau of many of these individuals and tracks the heritage of the Dreyfus affair from its own time to ours. The book, an outcome of a conference held in 1994 at Rab-Blan University, brings together mainly French and Israeli scholars.

The first part of this collection discusses perceptions of the Dreyfus affair in its own time by the French; some Jewish reactions to the events, and analyses of the affair outside France. Articles on the last topic, which until recently received scant historiographic attention, include a muddled assessment of the influence of French antisemitism on German antisemitism by Walter Zwi Bielschach; Leenid Poizman’s examination of public opinion in Russia; an engaging article by Rat-Ehni Zucker on the response of African American intellectuals to the affair; and a piece by Shaul Schurzik on how the Dreyfus affair was depicted in the Arab press.

Several other articles in the first section offer perceptive interpretations of one or more of the affair’s important participants. Robert Winirsch’s edition is once again evident in his portrayal of “Three Dreyfusard Heroes: Lazare, Zola and Clemenceau.” Unlike Datta, who historicizes the very historicizing of the key protagonists in the affair, Winirsch recasts these figures as historical examples. Lazare is seen as a “contemporary Jewish oracle. . . .” drawing the strength for national emancipation from that knowledge” (p. xi). Zola, who, as Wistrich shows, was often depicted at the time as a sec-ularized Christ, sacrificed his personal ambition to the name of his ideals; whereas Clémenceau represented the struggle to achieve equality before the law.

Antin Pajès offers an acute discussion of Zola’s response to the “Jewish Question” in which he identifies five stages in Zola’s evolving confrontation with antisemitism. Missing in this piece, however, is a critical appraisal of the justificatory role of Zola’s universalist humanism and its advocacy of a policy of assimilation that ultimately excluded differences—and in particular, Jewish difference. Danielle Delmaire presents a careful, balanced assessment of the role of French Catholic intellectuals, arguing persuasively against the idea that the French Catholic clergy (and French Catholics generally) were monolithically anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfusard.

Jacques Kornberg’s essay tackles the Zionist myth—constructed, he argues, by Theodor Herzl himself—that the Dreyfus trial marked the moment of Herzl’s awakening from assimilationist slumber. According to Kornberg, Herzl understood the power of myth and symbol in the rising mass politics of the fin de siècle and understood, moreover, the eminently practical power of juxtaposing the origins of the Zionist movement with the Dreyfus affair. As Pjellé Cohen Albert and Michel Marrus have both shown, France was the modern symbolic site of emanicipation, hence, widespread anti-Semitism in the heart of liberal Europe stretched the illusions of those who believed in the emancipationist social contract.

In the second part of Les intellectuels face à l’affaire Dreyfus, focusing on the 20th century, the Dreyfus affair is discussed as a lie de mémoire. Several articles assess
The effects of the affair on the Right and on the Left. David Obua's fine article, for instance, delineates how Dreyfus 'was a crossroad for [Georges] Sorel,' who "had always been seeking a vital spirit that would survive French and European civilization" (p. 264). In the course of the affair, Sorel came to find this spirit a nationalist rather than within his spiritualized Marxist myth of a general strike. Richard Grifffths examines the Right's distinction between intelligence (which they prized), and the intellectuals' alleged perversion of what was unique about French intelligence. This distinction is then correlated with Maurice Barrès' relativist epistemology and its relation to his political stance.

In an essay by Ilan Greilhammer, Barrès' epistemological perspective is shown to contrast sharply with a pronounced theme of Léon Blum's Souvenirs de l'affaire (1935), wherein Blum contended that the Dreyfusards held to a naïve and positivist conception of truth that they believed would eventually open the eyes of the anti-Dreyfusards. Greilhammer also demonstrates that, while the Dreyfus affair marked an ideological turning point in Blum's life in that he stopped following Barrès, turning instead to Jaurès, the two men continued to have an amicable personal relationship, as evidenced in their correspondence.

This essay is followed by an assessment of the Dreyfus affair in the literature of Proust-offered by Juliette Haishte, with Evelyne Meron contributing a parallel piece on Martin du Gar's Jean Barrès. Georges Ysa Sarfati examines how the affair is presented in French dictionaries and encyclopedias. Roselyne Koron, for her part, surveys a wide range of recent texts that exploit the affair as an "obligatory reference" for a diversity of situations that are understood, in one way or another, as analogous. Exploring the limits of association, Koron shows how the Dreyfus affair is posited as the paradigm for all political affairs, especially "Franco-French" conflicts and, more generally, as a matrix for certain "essential aspects of modernity" (p. 280).

The final section of the book consists of two essays detailing the principles of civic engagement that underpin the intellectuals' intervention at the time of the Dreyfus affair, the first by Ory Haurij and the second by Louis Bodin—the latter one of the first scholars to historicize the role of the intellectual in France.

Indeed, the differences between Bodin's pioneering work, Les intellectuels, published in 1964, and Datta's more recent work clearly evidence the historiographic evolution of the past four decades in assessing the interrelations of Jews, intellectuals, and the Dreyfus affair. Taken together, these three books present a complex tableau of the cultural context of the Dreyfusard era, with engaging portraits of some of its most renowned personalities. The reader is thereby invited to participate in uncovering the archaeology of meaning that constitutes the Dreyfus affair even as these works contribute another layer of significance.

JONATHAN KUZDAN
University of Mempis