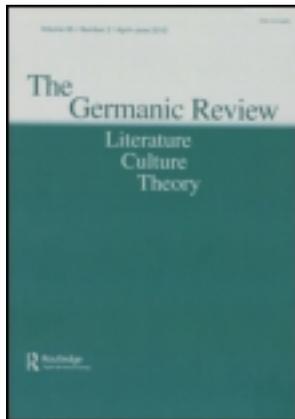


This article was downloaded by: [University College London]

On: 30 August 2013, At: 11:43

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vger20>

### Allegories of Destruction: "Woman" and "the Jew" in Otto Weininger's Sex and Character

Christine Achinger<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Warwick

Published online: 10 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Christine Achinger (2013) Allegories of Destruction: "Woman" and "the Jew" in Otto Weininger's Sex and Character, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 88:2, 121-149, DOI: [10.1080/00168890.2013.784120](https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2013.784120)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2013.784120>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Versions of published Taylor & Francis and Routledge Open articles and Taylor & Francis and Routledge Open Select articles posted to institutional or subject repositories or any other third-party website are without warranty from Taylor & Francis of any kind, either expressed or implied, including, but not limited to, warranties of merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, or non-infringement. Any opinions and views expressed in this article are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor & Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# Allegories of Destruction: “Woman” and “the Jew” in Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*

---

Christine Achinger

This article investigates the constructions of masculinity, femininity, and Jewishness and their interrelation in Otto Weininger’s widely discussed book *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*, 1903). Departing from previous scholarship, I argue that not only the commonalities between Weininger’s images of “Woman” and “the Jew,” but also their hitherto largely ignored differences, are crucial for an understanding of Weininger’s views and their relation to his historical context. Reading Weininger through the lens of Critical Theory suggests viewing “the Woman” and “the Jew” as outward projections of different, but related contradictions within the constitution of the modern subject itself. More specifically, “Woman” comes to embody the threat to the (masculine) bourgeois individual emanating from its own embodied existence, from “nature” and libidinal impulses. “The Jew,” on the other hand, comes to stand for historical developments of modern society that make themselves more keenly felt towards the end of the nineteenth century and threaten to undermine the very forms of individuality and independence that had previously been produced by this society. Such a reading of *Geschlecht und Charakter* not only can help illuminate the crisis of the bourgeois individual at the turn of the twentieth century, but also could contribute to ongoing discussions on why modern society, although based on seemingly universalist conceptions of subjectivity, continues to produce difference and exclusion along the lines of gender and race.

**Keywords:** antisemitism, bourgeois individual, capitalism/modernity, gender, misogyny, Viennese Modernism, Otto Weininger

---

© Christine Achinger

I would like to thank the participants of the University of Chicago Social Theory Workshop for their valuable comments.

The compulsively projecting self can project only its own unhappiness—from the very basis of which it is cut off by reason of its lack of reflective thought. The products of false projection, the stereotypes of thought and reality, are therefore the products of evil. For the ego which sinks into the meaningless abyss of itself, objects become allegories of destruction which contain the meaning of its own downfall.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Viennese Modernism has attracted much scholarly and public interest in recent decades, in part because some of the most enduring works of art, literature, and philosophy produced in Vienna around the turn of the last century question key concepts of liberalism and Enlightenment—such as the notions of progress, of the coherent and rational subject, and of a stable and unproblematic relationship between subject and world in which language is nothing but a neutral and transparent mediator—in ways that seem to prefigure contemporary debates.<sup>2</sup> Engaging the work of Otto Weininger (1880–1903), one of the most widely discussed authors of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, can help illuminate this sense of a “crisis of the subject” and its relationship to the world that informed so much of Vienna’s cultural production and debate at the time. It could contribute to an understanding of the crisis of pre-World War I Central European society by elucidating the rent character of bourgeois masculine self-understanding. Weininger’s main work, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*), published in 1903, is a grandiose attempt to explain the modern world on the basis of the putative opposition between male and female principles, and the struggle between the Aryan and the Jewish mind. The dramatic suicide of the author at the age of only twenty-three, shortly after publication of the book, let sales figures soar and contributed to the widespread contemporary image of Weininger as a tragic young genius. This suicide and the anti-Semitic character of the book also ensured that Weininger, who had been born into a Jewish family, has been discussed as a particularly dramatic example of “Jewish self-hatred” to this day.<sup>3</sup> The spectacular success of *Sex and Character*, which was acclaimed

<sup>1</sup>Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, original publication 1947, trans. John Cumming (London, New York: Verso, 1997), 192.

<sup>2</sup>Cf., e.g., Jacques Le Rider’s remarks on the relationship of Viennese Modernism and postmodernity in *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 27ff.

<sup>3</sup>As an early example, see, e.g., Theodor Lessing, *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1930); see also more recently John M. Hoberman, “Otto Weininger and the Critique of Jewish Masculinity,” *Jews & Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, ed. Nancy A. Harrowitz and Barbara Hyams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 141–53; Sander Gilman, “Karl Kraus’s Oscar Wilde,” in *Vienna 1900: from Altenberg to Wittgenstein*, ed. Edward Timms and Ritchie Robertson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 12–14; on Modernism and “Jewish self-hatred” in general, Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 194–200; Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Ritchie Robertson, *The Jewish Question in German Literature, 1749–1939: Emancipation and Its Discontents*

by influential writers and cultural figures and widely praised as providing a solution to some of the most important riddles of human existence,<sup>4</sup> seems to justify Hans Mayer's view of the book as revealing "traumatic states of mind of the bourgeois strata in Central Europe."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it can be read as highlighting some of the fundamental tensions within a liberal bourgeois society in crisis. Weininger was a fanatical individualist who helped to prepare the ground for *völkisch* thought; he was a thoroughly modern critic of modernity who, yet, propagated irrational misogyny and anti-Semitism out of a deep fear of everything irrational. This essay will suggest that these tensions reveal the hidden connections between ways of thinking we often imagine as neatly separated.

Weininger's misogynist and anti-Semitic obsessions overlap, as others have noted. Jacques Le Rider, Sander Gilman, Hans Mayer, Chandak Sengoopta, and others have provided illuminating comments on these connections and their manifestation in the figure of the "effeminate Jew" in Weininger's work and in *fin-de-siècle* culture more generally.<sup>6</sup> Without any doubt, Weininger's book is a crucial example for resonances and interrelations between constructions of gender and race in nineteenth and twentieth century discourse. A feature that has hitherto gone virtually unnoticed, however, is the fact that, despite these commonalities, Weininger also explicitly opposes "the woman" and "the Jew" in important and illuminating ways. As the following pages will aim to show, Weininger was not just defending the "male," rational, bounded subject against the threat arising from sexual urges associated with "woman," but also against a threat to the autonomous subject emanating from modern society itself, associated in Weininger's work particularly clearly with the "Jewish mind." As I will argue, alongside other approaches in the tradition of Critical Theory, aspects of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provide a particularly useful starting point to illuminate this perception of a double threat from nature and from society and its social and historical origins. At the same time, however, Weininger's text—as a particularly elaborate

---

(Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 287ff.; Hans Dieter Hellige, "Generationskonflikt, Selbsthaß und die Entstehung antikapitalistischer Positionen im Judentum. Der Einfluß des Antisemitismus auf das Sozialverhalten jüdischer Kaufmanns- und Unternehmersöhne im Deutschen Kaiserreich und in der K.u.K.-Monarchie," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 5, no. 4 (1979).

<sup>4</sup>See Gisela Brude-Firna, "A Scientific Image of Woman? The Influence of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* on the German Novel," in Harrowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 171–82; Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2; Nancy A. Harrowitz and Barbara Hyams, "A Critical Introduction to the History of Weininger Reception," in Harrowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 7–9; Alan Janik, "How Did Weininger Influence Wittgenstein?" in Harrowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 61–71; Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 19f., 312f.; Jacques Le Rider, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Viennese Identity Crisis," Timms and Robertson, *Vienna 1900*, 5; George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 215; Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 209.

<sup>5</sup>Hans Mayer, *Außenseiter* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 121.

<sup>6</sup>Cf., e.g., Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 62; Sander Gilman, "Otto Weininger and Sigmund Freud," in Harrowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 103–20; Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity*, 167 and *Der Fall Otto Weininger* (Wien: Löcker, 1985); Mayer, *Außenseiter*.

example for a specifically modern form of anti-Semitism—also throws into relief some of the ambiguities and problematic assumptions of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s approach.

## II

Weininger subtitled his book “Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung” (“An investigation of principles”), and it is indeed a grandiose attempt to trace every aspect of human life back to ontological dualisms—chiefly to the polarity of male and female principles and toward the end of the book, the opposition of “the Aryan” and “the Jew” as well. Weininger’s description of his rationale is one of several fascinating passages in which the text almost seems to become self-aware of its own underlying motives and projective mechanisms:

The self-assertion of the mind over the innumerable similarities and differences that make reality so confusing has been compared to the struggle for life among all beings. We *fend off* the world through our concepts. Slowly and gradually we bring the world under the control of our concepts, just as we first restrain a madman’s whole body in a rough and ready fashion in order at least to impose some limits on his ability to be a danger, and only restrain his individual limbs once we feel comparatively safe.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, then, this is a book written in self-defense against an overwhelming threat.<sup>8</sup> The urgency of Weininger’s concerns is mirrored in his apodictic style and in the typography of his text, in which whole passages are set in italics or, if further emphasis is required, jump out at the reader in bold face or even in capital letters. Weininger’s “evidence” is dubious to say the least—a wild collection of scientific and pseudo-scientific theories, quotations from philosophy and literature, proverbs, common prejudices, and simply arbitrary claims. The arguments are at times inconsistent and circular, and the work expresses startlingly anti-Semitic and misogynist convictions. Yet, this text is quite obviously written by an extremely intelligent and impressively well-read young author who constructs his absurd philosophical edifice with surprising confidence, eloquence, and imagination and does not shrink back from following the implications of his obsessions to their grim conclusion: the complete renunciation of sexuality and hence the abolition of humankind (309–12).

The keen sense of crisis and the at times apocalyptic mode that pervade Weininger’s book clearly resonate with the work of other Viennese writers and thinkers at the time. Contemporaries like Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann or Andrian shared many of the general concerns that inform Weininger’s book, though their responses were, on the whole, quite different. Among these concerns are a preoccupation with the structure of the

---

<sup>7</sup>Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, trans. Ladislaus Löb, ed. Daniel Steuer with Laura Marcus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 9; hereafter parenthetically cited.

<sup>8</sup>The intensity of Weininger’s fears and the fact that he, at least in the last year of his life, seems to have been haunted by a variety of psychological troubles, are also indicated in his friend Emil Lucka’s otherwise largely hagiographical *Otto Weininger: Sein Werk und seine Persönlichkeit* (Wien, Leipzig, 1905), 143, 147.

self and with the role of libidinal drives and other impulses originating in unknown regions of the psyche; a sense that the connections between subject and world, and with them our conceptual tools and our language itself, have become problematic; the perception that social change is driven by dynamic forces beyond rational control; the fear that the development of a mass society endangers emphatic individuality and that processes of alienation threaten to empty human existence of meaning; a concern with the role and fate of artistic and intellectual creativity, authenticity, and originality; and, in general, a pervasive sense of crisis, of a gradual and unstoppable disintegration of what used to give life structure and meaning.<sup>9</sup> Whereas many of his literary and artistic contemporaries explored and at times even seemed to celebrate the demise of the sovereign subject of Enlightenment thinking, Weininger tried to shore up that subject against its disintegration. As announced in the opening passages of his book, he did so by “fending off” those threatening changes “through his concepts,” by presenting them as resulting from the influences of the female principle and the Jewish mind, and hence as external, contingent phenomena that could ultimately be overcome. He attempted to salvage the self-controlled, bounded, rational subject in a hypertrophied form, in the guise of the male, Aryan “genius.” Weininger’s general concerns, his framework of understanding, and the “solutions” he offers illuminate fault lines within the constitution of the bourgeois individual which became pronounced with the crisis of the late nineteenth century.

The historical and social context for these challenges to nineteenth-century liberalism and its conceptions of the individual and of masculine identity has been the object of lively scholarly debate over the last decades. *Fin-de-siècle* Viennese culture and its relation to the course of capitalist modernization in the Habsburg Empire and its capital has been a particularly fruitful terrain for explorations of the interconnections between social and historical developments and aesthetic form. These debates cannot be rehearsed in detail here, but most scholars agree that the perception of a “crisis of modernity” that pervades much, though certainly not all, of Viennese culture cannot be seen completely independently from processes of social and economic modernization in the decades between 1860 and 1900 that, even though somewhat later than in most other European metropolises, profoundly transformed Vienna socially, culturally, and economically.<sup>10</sup>

In the last decades of the century, industrialization drew a large number of migrants to the capital, and Vienna’s population grew from around 700,000 in 1860 to around 1.7 million in 1900, creating a large underclass, often living in wretched conditions.<sup>11</sup> Social tensions were exacerbated by the multilingual and multiethnic character of this immigrant population.<sup>12</sup> Particularly noteworthy was the growth of Jewish migration from all over the

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Hinrich C. Seeba, “Hofmannsthal and Wiener Moderne. The Cultural Context,” *A Companion to the Works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. Thomas A. Kovach (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), 25–44; Hildegard Kernmayer, Andrea Fruhwirth, Volker Munz, Carlos Watzka, “Sinnes-Wandel? Die Moderne und die Krise der Wahrnehmung,” *Kultur, Identität, Differenz: Wien und Zentraleuropa in der Moderne*, ed. Moritz Csáky, Astrid Kury, Ulrich Tragatschnig (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2004), 101–128; Dagmar Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2007), 25–28, 111–68; Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 9ff.

<sup>10</sup>Le Rider, *Modernity*, 17f.; Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 20.

<sup>11</sup>Le Rider, *Modernity*, 20; Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 21.

<sup>12</sup>Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 34; Le Rider, *Modernity*, 22.

Empire to the capital.<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century, 8.7% of the Viennese population were Jewish, with a much higher concentration in the center of town.<sup>14</sup>

Accelerating industrialization also promoted the growth of the liberal bourgeoisie during the 1860s. After the establishment of the Dual Monarchy in 1867, the *Deutschliberale Partei* gained a majority in the lower house of the Reichsrat in 1867 and formed the government. The same year, Austria's Jews were emancipated. The economic developments of the period opened up unprecedented possibilities for the emerging Jewish middle class. Economic success secured admittance to Vienna's bourgeois social strata and the appropriation of German-Austrian culture seemed to promise social respectability and inclusion. The verve with which Austrian Jews embraced *Bildung* is impressive. Around the turn of the century, one third of all university students and more than half the faculty of the medical school were Jewish;<sup>15</sup> Jews swelled the ranks of theatergoers and concert audiences, were well represented among Vienna's writers and journalists, and made up a considerable part of the cultural elite.<sup>16</sup>

The position of the liberal bourgeoisie remained fragile, however. The imperial bureaucracy and the nobility were strong, and in the largely agrarian Empire, the social basis for an industrial and merchant bourgeoisie remained relatively weak and largely restricted to the urban centers. It was only Austria's electoral system, which restricted the franchise to the wealthiest 6% of the population, that kept liberalism in government until 1879.<sup>17</sup> The crash of the Vienna stock exchange in 1873 and the ensuing Long Depression profoundly undermined the trust in economic and social progress. A sense of being at the mercy of a social and economic system that seemed opaque and impossible to control, yet had the power to destroy the livelihood of millions, was widespread. Its impact can hardly be overestimated.<sup>18</sup>

The rapid growth of the working class added the fear of a potentially rebellious underclass to bourgeois anxieties about economic developments.<sup>19</sup> New mass parties—the emerging Social Democratic Workers' Party, and later the populist anti-Semitic parties, most notably Karl Lueger's *Christsoziale Partei*—began to supersede the old bourgeois-liberal parties. Christian anti-Semitism had always been strong in Austria. Now, Jewish success became resented by the older professional strata. Moreover, the new anti-Semitic parties

<sup>13</sup>While Vienna's population multiplied by a factor of roughly 2.4 between 1860 and 1900, the Jewish population grew by a factor of almost 24, from 6,200 in 1860 to 72,600 in 1880 and 147,000 in 1900.

<sup>14</sup>Seeba, "Hofmannsthal and Wiener Moderne," 36f.; see also Steven Beller, "How Modern Were Vienna's Jews? Preconditions of 'Vienna 1900' in the World-View of Viennese Jewry, 1860–90," *Austrian Studies* 16 (2008), 24.

<sup>15</sup>Seeba, "Hofmannsthal and Wiener Moderne," 37; Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 40.

<sup>16</sup>Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33–70; Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 16.

<sup>17</sup>Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, 5; Robert S. Wistrich, *Laboratory for World Destruction: Germans and Jews in Central Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 63; Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 15.

<sup>18</sup>According to Seeba ("Hofmannsthal and Wiener Moderne," 32), this profound experience of insecurity and incalculability even undermined "the notion of continuity [ . . . ] as much as the concept of identity based on it; for the *Ich* of yesterday can no longer be trusted to be the same today and tomorrow."

<sup>19</sup>Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 21; Le Rider, *Modernity*, 20.

could capitalize on the experience of the economic crash and depression and the attendant widespread feelings of insecurity and of being helpless in the face of inscrutable powers.<sup>20</sup> These feelings were particularly strong among those parts of the population most threatened by economic and social modernization, such as artisans and shopkeepers. The experience of an often destructive socio-economic dynamic without recognizable center or control lent superficial plausibility to the idea that those who most clearly seemed to profit from the process of modernization—the Jews—must be the ones secretly pulling the strings behind the scenes. This new, political anti-Semitism was further fuelled by the escalating national conflicts in the Empire, which increasingly defined nations along ethnic lines and turned the Jewish minorities into outsiders of the nations they were living among.<sup>21</sup> The beginnings of a women's movement in Austria added to this explosive mix and provoked anxieties that far surpassed its actual power and influence.<sup>22</sup>

The connection between these social, economic, and political developments and Viennese cultural production around the turn of the century has been at the center of lively scholarly debate. In his seminal book on *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (1980), Carl E. Schorske had argued that Viennese Modernism's apparent aestheticism, preoccupation with the self, and retreat from the world of politics should be understood as a reaction of the sons of the educated bourgeoisie to the failure of their fathers' rationalist liberal project and to the rise of irrationalist populist parties.<sup>23</sup> This thesis, which has served as a paradigm for subsequent research, has also been challenged from various angles, both with reference to the portrayal of Austrian liberalism as unequivocally championing rational, universalist Enlightenment values,<sup>24</sup> and as regards the picture of a liberal

---

<sup>20</sup>Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Antisemitism in Germany and Austria* (London: Peter Halban, 1988), 138–140; Marcel Stoetzler, *The State, the Nation, and the Jews: Liberalism and the Antisemitism Dispute in Bismarck's Germany* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 79, 270f.; Reinhard Rürup, *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur 'Judenfrage' der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987), 109–19; Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 9.

<sup>21</sup>Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 33ff., 60ff.

<sup>22</sup>Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 31–36; Le Rider, *Modernity*, 178. It seems to me that the emergence of this movement and its very restrained demands does not in itself sufficiently explain the strength and emotionality of the antifeminist response, however. One could argue that a perception of femininity as threat must have been one of the conditions rather than a consequence of this reaction.

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., Carl E. Schorske, "Politics and the Psyche in Fin De Siècle Vienna: Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal," *The American Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (July 1, 1961): 930–46; *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, 116–80.

<sup>24</sup>John Boyer, and later Pieter Judson, for example, argue that Austrian liberalism was by no means as wedded to Enlightenment principles of universalism and rationality as Schorske suggests, but secured its political position through a class-based particularism that was Germanocentric in outlook (John W. Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna: Origins of the Christian Social Movement, 1848–1897* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 26, 37; Pieter Judson, "Rethinking the Liberal Legacy," *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, ed. Steven Beller [New York: Berghahn, 2001], 56–79; see also Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 71f.). Moreover, Judson ("Rethinking," 63–71) points out that the invocation of rationality that might be seen as a basis for liberalism's association with an idea of universal emancipation was used as a criterion to exclude women, the underclass, and Slavic peoples from full

bourgeoisie who largely retreated from politics into apolitical forms of cultural production and consumption and whose general mood was marked by unease, gloominess, and resignation.<sup>25</sup>

Steven Beller has argued, however, that, while Schorske's thesis might be too general to capture the mood of the liberal Viennese bourgeoisie as a whole towards the end of the century, his emphasis on growing feelings of resignation and foreboding has much more plausibility for the Jews among them. "Schorske's Vienna," Beller claims, "is identical with 'Schnitzler's Vienna,' the world of anxiety-ridden Jewish individuals whose lives have been cast adrift by the failure of liberalism to produce the enlightened society promised by the ideology of emancipation."<sup>26</sup> This sense of threat was exacerbated, according to Robert Wistrich, by the fact that, for decades, many Austrian Jews had regarded "the transition [...] from the ghetto to wealth, status, culture and social acceptance" as "primarily mediated through the gateway of cosmopolitan *Deutschtum*."<sup>27</sup> This exacerbated anti-Jewish hostilities by making Jews appear as agents of Germanization, trapping them in a problematic role during a period of escalating national conflicts.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the very *Deutschtum* that had once seemed a route to full social acceptance and integration turned against its most idealistic supporters during the 1880s. An illiberal *Volksdeutschtum* imported from Berlin, seen until then as the cradle of *Aufklärung*, now demanded the exclusion of Jews from German fraternities, clubs, and societies, and from political activity.<sup>29</sup> In this situation, Beller maintains, it was notably the sons of the liberal Jewish bourgeoisie who grew up during the Long Depression, the generation from Schnitzler to Weininger, who grew disillusioned with the values and life plans of their fathers.<sup>30</sup> As Hans Dieter Hellige argued,

---

rights as citizens. For a nuanced investigation of the complex connections between liberalism and "anti-liberal" movements at the time, focusing on Prague culture and society around the beginning of the twentieth century, see also Scott Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup>John W. Boyer, "Review of *Fin de siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* by Carl E. Schorske," *The Journal of Modern History* 52, no. 4 (Dec., 1980): 725–30; James Shedel, "Fin-de-Siècle or Jahrhundertwende: The Question of an Austrian Sonderweg," *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, 80–104; Scott Spector, "Marginalizations: Politics and Culture beyond *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*," in Beller, *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, 132–53.

<sup>26</sup>Steven Beller, "Introduction," in Beller, *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, 19; see also Beller, *Vienna and the Jews*, 243f.

<sup>27</sup>Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 60.

<sup>28</sup>Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 33.

<sup>29</sup>Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 35. The difficulty of responding to growing anti-Semitism was further exacerbated by the diversity of Vienna's Jewish population, which also gave further support to anti-Semitic perceptions. While the visibility of assimilated and economically successful Jewish families fostered the idea that Jews were the winners of modernization, culturally and religiously more traditional immigrants fleeing persecution in Russia or Galicia, who were often poor, served as a permanent reminder of the "strangeness" and "foreignness" of Jews (cf. Marsha S. Rozenblit, "The Jews of Germany and Austria: A Comparative Perspective," *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century: From Franz Joseph to Waldheim*, ed. Robert S. Wistrich [New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992], 7ff.; Lorenz, *Wiener Moderne*, 20f.; Wistrich, *Laboratory*, 38).

<sup>30</sup>Beller, "Introduction," in Beller, *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, 9; Beller, *Vienna and the Jews*, 243f.

this disillusionment, in combination with the growth of a form of modern anti-Semitism that held the Jews responsible for the ills of modern capitalism, provoked a distancing from Jewish identity—in some cases a form of Jewish self-hatred—and a turn against capitalist modernity;<sup>31</sup> a description that would also seem to fit Weininger's case.

The peculiar concern with masculine identity and with the danger and allure of female sexuality that characterized much of Viennese culture in the *Fin-de-Siècle* likewise become visible in Weininger's text as symptoms of a more general crisis of liberal values and conceptions of the individual. In this way, *Geschlecht und Charakter* offers an intriguing example of the interrelation of anti-Semitism and misogyny, in their parallels as well as their differences and complementarities. I will argue that both can be seen as different, but related, outward projections of immanent contradictions within the constitution of the bourgeois subject itself that became increasingly palpable towards the end of the nineteenth century.

### III

These immanent contradictions are expressed on multiple levels in Weininger's text. Contributing to its internal tensions is that its two main parts—described by Weininger as “biological and psychological” and “psychological and philosophical” (5)—are separated by a marked rupture in his approach to his topic and to science in general.<sup>32</sup> In the first, much shorter part of the book, Weininger writes as a follower of empirical psychology. The second and main part, however, is written from an explicitly anti-positivist perspective, tackling the “most elevated and ultimate questions” (5) and proudly venturing into metaphysics. While in the first part, Weininger seems to have little problem with the idea of a self that is a composite in multiple ways, in the second, he strictly opposes Mach's dictum that “the self cannot be saved”<sup>33</sup> (124ff., 134), which became emblematic for the crisis of Enlightenment conceptions of the individual at the turn of the century. From one part of the book to the other, Weininger transforms himself from a modernist skeptic of the idea of a coherent self, detached from the realm of biology and physiology, to its staunch defender. It seems that some of the cultural conflicts characterizing Viennese Modernism are internal to Weininger's book itself.

The tensions between the two parts of the book are also reflected in Weininger's treatment of gender.<sup>34</sup> In the first part, he develops an intriguing critique of dichotomous conceptions of gender difference, a fairly widely discussed topic at the time. Weininger maintains that “*consistent* sexual differences between *all* men on the one hand and *all*

<sup>31</sup>Hellige, “Generationskonflikt,” 476. Hellige identifies four general reactions among members of this generation: a turn to art and literature, as exemplified in much of Viennese Modernism, an orientation towards a conservative anti-modernity, frequently connected to German nationalism, a Left critique of capitalist society, and Zionism (“Generationskonflikt,” 480).

<sup>32</sup>Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 17.

<sup>33</sup>Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältniss des Physischen zum Psychischen*, 4th ed. (Jena: G. Fischer, 1903), 20.

<sup>34</sup>Harrowitz and Hyams, “Critical Introduction,” 3; Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 45f., 50.

women on the other”<sup>35</sup> cannot be demonstrated (11). Instead, he argues, every human being has both male and female traits in different proportions: “*Between Man and Woman there are innumerable gradations*” (13). Weininger tries to account for these gradations, expressed in “intermediate sexual forms,” by introducing the concepts of the “*ideal Man M*” and the “*ideal Woman W*” (13) that can be imagined “like two substances apportioned to<sup>36</sup> the living individuals in different proportions” (14).

In later parts of the book, however, the notion of “W” becomes “genuine Woman” (60); Weininger begins identifying what he had considered mere components of every human being, M and W, with empirical men and women. Those features in actual, living women that are incompatible with his conception of W increasingly appear as aberrations rather than as an obvious consequence of the bisexuality of all human beings that he initially presented. Throughout most of the second part of his book, Weininger largely adheres to a dualist model of gender, governed by strict polarity.

### M, THE “IDEAL MAN”

Weininger’s Man is a remarkable hybrid of the Leibnizean monad, the romantic genius, and the Kantian subject, components that are not easily reconciled. The attraction of the Kantian idea of the subject for Weininger seems to lie in its formalized and abstract nature. The notion of an “intelligible subject,” a complex cognitive apparatus different from the “empirical subject,” the real, embodied human being, allows Weininger to imagine a self that is virtually independent of the outside world and its own physical existence. He emphasizes that the faculty of reason rules supreme for Kant, who denies, for example, the possibility of grounding morality in emotions such as pity, which would be heteronomous influences. Instead, the “categorical imperative,” according to Weininger, grounds ethics in logic alone. Kant’s “intelligible subject” is thus independent in its existence and decisions not only from society and the external world in general, but also from emotions. Weininger takes these rationalist and solipsist tendencies in Kantian ethics to their extreme:<sup>37</sup>

Truthfulness, purity, fidelity, sincerity toward oneself; that is the only conceivable ethic. [...] Logic and ethics are fundamentally one and the same thing—duty to oneself. [...] Ethics demands that the intelligible self *act* freely, unadulterated by the impurities of the empirical self. (139)

<sup>35</sup>Translation amended.

<sup>36</sup>Translation amended.

<sup>37</sup>Even though Weininger spotted these tendencies quite correctly, his reading of Kant is on the whole largely flawed. Contrary to Weininger’s interpretation, the categorical imperative, for example, could be understood to require considerations of social practicality and desirability. More strikingly, the core concern of Kant’s first Critique, of limiting the use of reason to its proper realm instead of trying to make it the fundament of unwarranted metaphysical claims, is turned on its head in *Geschlecht und Charakter*.

Notable here are the complete self-centeredness and self-reliance of this “self,” the denial of the relevance of any kind of “non-I”—be it other humans or impulses rooted in an individual’s embodied existence—as well as the reduction of life to logic and the obsession with purity. Because nothing of relevance exists outside of the Weiningerian subject, it becomes boundless:

[W]e now understand this *Critique of Practical Reason*. The human being is *alone* in the universe, in eternal, tremendous *loneliness*. He has no purpose outside himself, nothing else to live for [. . .]: all human society has vanished, all *social* ethic has sunk, far beneath him; he is alone, *alone*. But now for the first time he is *one* and *all*. (141)

The quasi-Nietzschean grandiosity of this passage, however, already indicates the other side of Weininger’s “ideal man”: the sober, formal, abstract subject of Kant is conjoined to the “genius,” a key concept in Weininger’s text that denotes both a person and a “*quality*” that “*reveals itself as a higher kind of masculinity*” (98). The “genius” is a kind of cognitive *Übermensch* who needs neither God nor his fellow beings to determine his actions: “There are very few—they are the men of genius—whose lives are devoid of any *heteronomy*” (140). The genius is a cognitively omnipotent figure; his thinking is completely clear, free from any distortions of emotion (88f., 98), and because “[*t*]he more sharply defined, the more fully formed, a complex of perceptions is, the easier it is to reproduce” (101), the genius, whose concepts and perceptions are the most articulate, has something like perfect memory (101f.). He can understand everything because he “*has the whole world in him*” (148).<sup>38</sup> But the genius is not only unaffected by the outside world. He even transcends history and time, and does so in a threefold manner: he “is not created by the time that needs him” because he produces history instead of being produced by it; he “is granted immortality on earth through his works”; and his memory “*is a total victory over time.*” In short, “*the genius is the truly timeless human being*” (119).

This combination of the abstract, formalist Enlightenment idea of the rational subject and the “genius,” which ultimately belongs to a largely anti-rationalist tradition critical of these notions (despite, as we shall see, Weininger’s attempts to rid his genius of all Dionysian features),<sup>39</sup> creates deep tensions in his thought. Even so, the combination has a certain emotional logic. What unites both the Kantian subject and the genius in Weininger’s eyes are autonomy and absolute self-reliance. Where nothing beyond the limits of the subject is of relevance, the step from “being alone,” like the Kantian subject, to “being all” (141), like the

<sup>38</sup>In her illuminating analysis, Christine Battersby describes Weininger’s genius as an androgynous figure because he possesses the whole universe, and hence the female, in himself (*Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* [Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989], 113; similarly Le Rider, *Modernity*, 2, 91). This might mean to give Weininger’s claim too much credit, though, given that otherwise all qualities of the genius explicitly place him at the other extreme of woman.

<sup>39</sup>In fact, Weininger’s views, even though echoing central motifs in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, could not be further from the anti-metaphysical and anti-Cartesian thrust of Nietzsche’s thought and his critique of moral philosophy, as shall be discussed in more detail later.

genius, is a small one. The victory over time and decay, along with independence from the social and natural worlds, are the key features of Weininger's Man: "*Form and timelessness, or individuation and duration*, are the two analytical factors that initially create, and provide the foundation for, value" (118). Everything mortal or transitory, everything unformed or not fully individuated is worth nothing. All empirical men partake in this quality of the genius to different degrees. Although there are no perfect geniuses, "at least *no male* being is entirely without genius" (102). The "*desire for timelessness*", however, as "*a will to value* [ . . . ] is utterly lacking in individual women" (118).

#### W, THE "IDEAL WOMAN"

W, woman, is fashioned as a point-for-point negation of M. Firstly, the "true woman" does not think in clear concepts, but only in "henids," in vague impressions which do not have the distinctiveness of concepts and in which thought and feeling are fused. "In W, 'thinking' and 'feeling' are one, undivided, for man they can be separated" (88). Secondly, Woman is not an individual, but a "dividuum," a mere composite. Man "contains a core of being which admits no dissection. W is an aggregate, and hence dissociable and fissionable" (185). Thirdly, she is anything but autonomous; she does not even have clear boundaries to the outside world:

Women by nature are boundless [ . . . ]. [T]hey are never *separated* by anything real either from nature or from human beings. This fusion is an eminently *sexual* one [ . . . ]. Here we have another proof of the absence of the sharp line which always separates two personalities. (171f.)

This opposition of sexuality and individuality is central for Weininger's views.

Woman not only has no clearly delineated personal identity, but also lacks identity through time because she has no memory. Woman is without what Kant calls "transcendental apperception," that which unifies different impressions in a continuous consciousness and is a necessary condition for self-awareness. W is therefore unable to relate different contents of consciousness to each other and, hence, is incapable of making judgments (127–30). Because W has no logical capacity—following Weininger's Kantian reasoning that links ethics to logic—she is constitutionally amoral (130–32). She cannot determine her actions according to a moral law originating in her own self. Therefore, she has no truly free will, but is entirely heteronomously determined. Because "*[a]bsolute Woman has no self*" (161), she also lacks a soul (161f.). Without logic, ethics and soul, without being a "monad," she can obviously never be a genius (98, 162ff.). In short: "*A female genius, then, is a contradiction in terms*, for we saw that genius was nothing but an intensified, fully developed, higher, universally conscious kind of masculinity" (163). The unabashed circularity of this observation is characteristic of much of Weininger's reasoning. Many of his supposedly empirical arguments are unwitting attempts to disguise as observation what really is a definition—the identification of W, the ideal woman, as anti-genius and anti-subject.

W is thus eminently dangerous, the destructive, dissolving, disintegrating principle undermining autonomy, reason, logic, and morality. These characteristics are rooted in the

fact that femininity is “universal sexuality” (236). Having sex is woman’s strongest impulse, which is nothing but “a *special instance* of her deepest interest [...] that there should be as much sexual intercourse as possible, no matter by whom, where, and when” (234). Therefore, all women are, first of all, matchmakers, and are either prostitutes or mothers—the first mainly interested in the act itself, the second in the product (234).

According to Weininger, chastity is an “exclusively *male* ideal” (236). That, in common perception and popular culture, the male interest in sex often seems to be stronger can be explained, according to Weininger, by “the *ontological falseness of Woman*” (239). Because women have no I, no soul, no character, they are perfectly malleable. Therefore they tend not only to behave according to the male ideal of chastity, but also to follow the male regard for truthfulness, religiosity, and so on, without even realizing that this is not their own wish and is strictly against the female nature. Therefore, as Weininger maintains in a daring turn, the apparent “*truthfulness*” of Woman “has been uncovered as the *falseness peculiar to her*” (247), a double lie, so to speak. This illustrates the claustrophobic nature of much of Weininger’s thought, which is systematically closed off against contradicting experience. Not only are non-genius traits in a man necessarily mere expressions of the “woman in him,” but if, conversely, a woman does not behave in accordance with Weininger’s image of femininity, he no longer even needs to concede (as he did in his opening chapters) that this is due to the fact that women can have strong proportions of M in them. The more a woman shows *male* behavior, the more this proves how strongly influenced she is by man and therefore how weak her personality and how malleable and *female* she is.

In one of the concluding chapters of the book, meant to deal with the philosophical and metaphysical implications of his findings, Weininger turns to the question of “the nature of woman and her purpose in the universe” (230). The relation of man to woman is that of “something” to “nothing” (258), “subject to object,” “form” to “matter” (263). And because matter, and therefore woman, “is absolutely unindividualised, that which can assume any form but has no definite and permanent qualities of its own” (263), “*Woman is nothing*” (264). In these chapters, Weininger’s efforts to maintain at least the tone of a scholarly argument finally falter; his elucidations are increasingly accompanied by a crescendo of unrestrained misogyny, variations on the idea that women want to be passive, to be used, subjugated, humiliated, and maltreated (263, 305).<sup>40</sup>

Weininger’s fears and aggressions are clearly focused on female sexuality, or rather: woman *as* sexuality. It is woman who is to blame if man remains a slave to his body and its impulses; she pulls him down to her level. And for Weininger, sexuality is a deadly threat; “sexual intercourse [...] is related to murder” (223). Woman thus is a danger to the “true man’s” very existence; she is associated with “a movement from the highest life towards the earthly life, [...] a will to nothingness, negation as such, evil in itself. The anti-moral is [...] the desire to turn form into formlessness and into matter, the desire to destroy” (269). She always acts in accordance with “the idea that goes furthest in obliterating the *boundaries*

<sup>40</sup>Weininger nevertheless pleads that men should not grant women these wishes (306) and even opts for “equal rights,” though this does not include the right to vote, since “*even in them the idea of humanity* [...] must be *honored*, however small its last remnant might be” (306). For the sake of these “remnants,” women have to be treated according to Kantian ethics.

of the individuals by *mixing them all together*” (261). The fear of woman is thus “the deepest fear in Man; [ . . . ] the fear of meaninglessness, the fear of the tempting abyss of nothingness” (268).

## THE JEW

Similar motifs also appear in Weininger’s chapter on “Das Judentum” (“Judaism”). *Geschlecht und Charakter* has therefore been invoked as an important example of the ways stereotypes of race and gender are interrelated and, more specifically, for the image of the “effeminate Jew.”<sup>41</sup> I would like to argue, however, that the differences between “W” and “the Jew” that Weininger explicitly emphasizes are as important for an understanding of these constructions as are their parallels.

Reminiscent of his discussion of Woman, Weininger begins by emphasizing that he is talking about “Judaism” as a “*psychic constitution, which is a possibility for all human beings and which has only found its most magnificent realization in historical Judaism*” (274), but then slips into writing almost exclusively about historical Jewry—a slippage that is facilitated by the fact that the word “Judentum” in German can refer to Judaism, Jewishness, or Jewry.

The analogies between Jews and women are, according to Weininger, astonishing. Like woman, “*the Jew is the blurrer of boundaries κατ’ ἐξοχήν [par excellence]*” (281). The Jew therefore “is the opposite pole of the aristocrat. The principle of any aristocratism is the strictest *observation* of all *boundaries* between human beings” (281). The Jew, like woman, has a strong interest in sex; he is “always more lecherous, more lustful, than the Aryan man, although [ . . . ] he is less sexually potent and certainly less capable of any *great lust* than the latter” (281). Both women and Jews only live in the collective, not as individuals (280); and neither possesses soul, personality, dignity (278ff.), or a “*desire for immortality*” (283).

But Weininger nevertheless explicitly discards the possibility “to attribute to the Jew a larger share of femininity than to the Aryan, and ultimately to assume that even the most masculine Jew has a Platonic *μέθεξις* [methexis] in Woman. This view would be erroneous” (276). Despite its many parallels with the female character, the Jewish character is *sui generis*, and therefore, Weininger insists, “it is essential to establish the agreements and divergences between them as accurately as possible” (276). These differences are, first of all, structural. Women are *fundamentally* different, despite all remarks on bisexuality in the first chapters; men and women are perfectly separate. “*The most superior woman is still infinitely inferior to the most inferior man*” (272), and “*a woman can never become a man*” (162). Between Jews and Aryans, however, there is a continuum, and transition is possible: “a Jew who would have overcome, a Jew who would have become a Christian, would have every right to be

<sup>41</sup>George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 69f.; George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 17; Le Rider, *Modernity*, 167; Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger*, 62.

taken by the Aryan for an individual and no longer be judged as a member of a race that he has long since transcended through his moral efforts" (282).<sup>42</sup>

A further point where "Judaism and femininity *diverge* in a decisive manner" is that "[t]he Jew's lack of being and his ability to become everything are different from woman's" (289). Whereas woman, lacking any personality of her own, is simply malleable, and "Woman is matter, which *passively* assumes any form", the Jew is active, his behavior manifests "a certain *aggressiveness*." He preserves, but hides his true identity, "actively adapts [. . .] to any environment and any race, like a parasite that changes and assumes a completely different appearance with any given host, [. . .] even though it always remains the same" (289).

The third fundamental difference between the two is that "the Jew has an *eminently conceptual* disposition, which Woman *totally lacks*" (290). The Jew's mental activity, however, is not a creative one, unlike that of the Aryan. Instead, he is a critic, a skeptic. "*The Jew is the human being without belief*" (290)—and in this, "[t]he essentially Jewish character is most profoundly revealed" (290). It is here, finally, that Weininger sees "*the essential difference between the Jew and the Woman*" (290). Whereas Woman "believes in others, in her man, in her child, in 'love'" (290),<sup>43</sup> the Jew "*believes in nothing, either within himself or outside himself,*" and contrary to Woman, he "puts down no roots in others," as is also evident in his preference for mobile capital (290). In short: "The *spirit of modernity is Jewish*" (299).

At the end of this chapter, Weininger also characterizes his time as "not only the most Jewish, but also the most effeminate" (299). In other chapters of the book, however, this link between modernity and femininity remains general: Weininger claims that his time is effeminate because it is obsessed with sexuality, a time without genius. The Jewishness of modernity and the modernity of the Jew are much more intrinsically and specifically related: "The 'agility' of the Jewish mind, their lack of any deeply-rooted and original *convictions*" predisposes Jews to both journalism and business (289). The Jew is associated with the perceived transformation of any intrinsic worth into mere value: "Because he believes in nothing, he takes refuge in material things, and that alone is the origin of his avarice: it is here that he seeks a reality [. . .]—that is why the only value he actually recognizes is the money he 'earns'" (294). But the Jew is not only a capitalist; as the "*blurrer of boundaries*" (281), he is also the opposite: "the Jew is the born communist" (281).

The Jew's intelligence and "*lack of depth*" (285) are also the reason for his affinity to modern science and its "mechanistic and materialistic worldview" (284), and the Jews are the main proponents of Darwinism, of a more scientific approach in medicine (284f.),

<sup>42</sup>One obvious biographical factor potentially motivating this distinction is Weininger's own situation as the son of Jewish parents who, according to this conception, could still rise into the most valuable group of people, non-Jewish men, as Gudrun Hentges ("Der [Einzel-]Fall Otto Weininger?" in *Antisemitismus: Geschichte—Interessenstruktur—Aktualität*, ed. Gudrun Hentges, Guy Kempfert and Reinhard Kühnl [Berlin: Distel, 1996], 100f.) suggests.

<sup>43</sup>This passage is also notable for being the only one where supposed female particularities, where familial bonds, where love (even with the ironizing quotation marks) are referred to in a faintly positive way. Whereas the obverse of the disdain of woman—the idealization of the mother, of the virgin, of "nature"—is otherwise completely absent in Weininger's text, it does become feebly apparent here, where Woman is opposed to the abstract, rootless "Jew."

and of “the *economic* conception of human history, which deletes the role of the spirit in the development of humankind most completely” (284). Their attitude to the world is one of instrumental rationality and intervention; “the *brazen treatment* of those things that the Aryan, in the depth of his soul, has always perceived as *destiny* was first introduced into the natural sciences by the Jews” (285). In short,

Judaism [. . .] is that movement in science which regards science above all as a *means to the end* of ruling out anything transcendent. The Aryan perceives the striving to understand and deduce *everything* as a devaluation of the world, because he feels that it is precisely the unfathomable that gives existence its value. (284)<sup>44</sup>

It should be noted that in terms of how “Jewishness” should be defined, Weininger differs from the more clearly racist and *völkische* forms of anti-Semitism that emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century. He categorically refuses to accept any definition of Judaism as “either a race or a nation” (274, cf. 276) and repudiates any glorification of the collective. On the contrary, any valuation of the group—the “race” or the family “as a biological [. . .] unit”—over the individual is, for Weininger, a “Jewish” characteristic (280).<sup>45</sup> As regards the content of the anti-Jewish stereotype, however, Weininger’s characterization of “the Jew” is paradigmatic for the kind of modern anti-Semitism that gained particular strength during the last decades of the century. This holds in particular for the identification of Jews with what were widely felt to be the abstract and corrosive features of modernity—inauthenticity, materialism, constant change, destructive critique instead of creativity, artificiality instead of authenticity, the transformation of ends into means, meaning into value, the dissolution of boundaries, the promotion of both capitalism and communism; in short, Jews were associated with everything that is threatening because it is subversive, invisible, and hard to grasp, with general decomposition.

#### IV

Weininger’s dogged ambition to provide an explanation of the modern world as a whole through a doubly polarizing model throws into relief the structure and function of his misogynist and anti-Semitic fantasies and their relation to the social and historical experience of his time.

<sup>44</sup>Translation amended. In particular, the German version of the last sentence, which talks about the “Entwertung der Welt,” is reminiscent of Max Weber’s formulation of the “Entzauberung der Welt,” the “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills [London: Routledge, 1970], 155), that is so central to Weber’s description of the modern experience and is prefigured in his *Protestantische Ethik*, first published 1904/05, almost at the same time as *Geschlecht und Charakter*.

<sup>45</sup>There is considerable tension, however, between Weininger’s attempt to define Judaism as a psychological disposition and references to Jews which are clearly based on biological categories of descent (cf. 273).

## NATURE AS THREAT

It is noteworthy, first of all, that Weininger's M bears all the characteristics of ideas of the Enlightenment subject that are still current in nineteenth-century thought: internal homogeneity, clear subject boundaries, directed by reason and logic, possessing self-awareness and self-control, continuous memory and free will, guided by moral principles. W, on the other hand, is simply M's opposite: she is an amorphous aggregate, fused with the people around her and intent on dissolving subject boundaries by means of her corroding sexuality. In her, thinking and feeling are one; her memory is fragmentary and involuntary. She lacks self-reflexivity and self-control, is determined by her drives, and is incapable of moral sensibilities. Worst of all, these qualities threaten to undermine the hard-won boundedness, stability, and self-control of the male subject. This relationship of M and W strongly suggests a Freudian reading, in which M represents the conscious regions of the subject. The female principle is associated with those regions of the self that escape self-awareness and threaten the boundaries, autonomy, and stability of the subject, that is, the impulses of the Id that are suppressed and denied.<sup>46</sup>

Such a reading of *Geschlecht und Charakter* as a transformation of an unresolved Oedipal drama into metaphysics could certainly throw light on important features of the relationship of M and W and contribute to an explanation of why W appears as such a danger to the bounded male subject. It cannot, however, account for the importance of the figure of the Jew, who bears characteristics that go beyond a threat linked to sexuality,<sup>47</sup> nor does it explain why Weininger's concerns were so widely shared at the time. An approach that integrates Freud's account of the constitution of the modern subject into a more general social theory of modernity and offers a useful starting point for an understanding of the constitution of M and his "others" can be found in Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment)*. Horkheimer and Adorno combine a reflection on the way in which the modern individual is shaped by the collective domination of nature with an analysis of the fate of individuality in modern, capitalist society. Their description of the bourgeois subject as dependent on nature as well as society, yet threatened by both, provides a fruitful point of departure for thinking about the underlying structure of Weininger's thought.

Whereas for Kant—and for Weininger—the subject is a logical necessity of thought and an ontological, eternal structure, for Horkheimer and Adorno, it is historically produced: "Even the ego, the synthetic unit of apperception, the instance which Kant calls the highest

<sup>46</sup>Freud's discussion of the "oceanic feeling" in the opening section of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (Civilization and its Discontents)*, trans. David McLintock [London: Penguin, 2002]), for example, is illuminating as regards the connection between femininity and the absence or weakening of external and internal Ego boundaries in the initial one-ness with the mother as well as in adult sexuality. On the links between the "Id" and Weininger's W, see also Le Rider, *Der Fall Otto Weininger*, 170, who does not, however, link these affinities to a process of projection.

<sup>47</sup>Sander Gilman, e.g., following Freud, emphasizes the fear of castration relating to Jewish circumcision in his discussion of Weininger in his "Otto Weininger and Sigmund Freud," in Harrowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 103–20. This focus cannot account for more prominent concerns in Weininger, though, such as the Jew's character as agent of abstraction and disintegration and of the ills of modernity more generally.

point, on which the possibility of the logical form of all knowledge necessarily depends, is in fact the product of, as well as the condition for, material existence.”<sup>48</sup> The process of “Enlightenment,” the growing domination of nature, and the cognitive and psychological development engendered by this process, is described as an aporetic one: The less humans are subject to external nature, the more they are enslaved by the mechanisms of self-discipline and the suppression of what Horkheimer and Adorno call “nature in the subject”,<sup>49</sup> those impulses and desires—notably the libidinal ones—that seem to threaten self-control and the rule of reason. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the subject is thus at the same time a precondition for liberation and itself a form of impersonal domination.

The process of subject formation as a process of the formation of mechanisms of self-control and suppression is a painful one, and its success is always threatened, its product unstable:

Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and virile nature of man, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood. The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it. [. . .] The dread of losing the self and of abrogating together with the self the barrier between oneself and other life, the fear of death and destruction, is intimately associated with a promise of happiness which threatened civilization in every moment.<sup>50</sup>

This mortal fear of the dissolution of subject boundaries also seems to pervade *Geschlecht und Charakter*, as does the sense that the preservation of bounded masculinity requires unrelenting, constantly renewed effort.<sup>51</sup> The outward boundaries as well as the inward ones, separating the conscious Ego from the powerful Id, constantly have to be guarded; the fear of losing control, yielding to temptation, of relapsing into nature, is the price to be paid for the self-preservation of the subject.

Horkheimer and Adorno also describe the projection of this fear and hatred onto women. Women are identified with both outward and inward nature; they are socially transformed into supposedly “natural” beings. As objects of sexual desire, they are blamed for causing it. This is the figure of the seductress whom we encounter in *Geschlecht und Charakter*, the femme fatale who threatens the boundaries of the (male) subject, bringing evil into the world.

---

<sup>48</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 87; see also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London, New York: Routledge, 1973), 211–99; Hans-Jürgen Krahl, *Erfahrung des Bewußtseins: Kommentare zu Hegels Einleitung der Phänomenologie des Geistes und Exkurse zur materialistischen Erkenntnistheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Materialis, 1979), 23.

<sup>49</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 40.

<sup>50</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 33.

<sup>51</sup>On the latter aspect see also Le Rider, *Modernity*, 91–93.

Woman as an alleged natural being is a product of history, which denaturalizes her. But the desperate will to destroy everything that embodies the allurements of nature, the attraction of the physiological, biological, national, and social underdog, shows that Christianity's attempt has failed. [...] Wholly to expunge the odious overpowering longing to return to a state of nature is the cruelty produced by an abortive civilization: barbarism, the other face of culture.<sup>52</sup>

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a notoriously problematic work and is not free of internal tensions and contradictions. Notably, the book is ambivalent regarding the question of whether the dark and destructive sides of "Enlightenment" and the formation of the modern subject should be seen as originating with the first attempts to impose human will on the natural world, or if their origins are more historically specific, rooted in the particular forms of social mediation in bourgeois society. The tensions and ambiguities between these two strands of argument cannot be discussed in sufficient detail in the present context. It is the latter strand, focusing on the determinate social formation that structures the collective domination of the physical world, the ideas of nature it produces and the forms of subjectivity it requires,<sup>53</sup> that I would like to follow here. According to this analysis, the apparent opposition between nature and culture is itself socially produced, as is the concept of nature as mere matter that emerges in the developing natural sciences in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: "After the objective order of nature has been disposed of as prejudice and myth, nature remains only as a material mass."<sup>54</sup> Following this description, Weininger's W is associated not just with "nature within the subject," with the threatening drives of the Id, but she also bears the features of external nature. Not nature in the emphatic, romantic sense however, which is already a reaction against its degradation, but nature as it appears in capitalist society, as mere substance without form, as the passive and malleable object of cognitive as well as practical human activity.

#### SOCIETY AS THREAT

Within the framework of Critical Theory, not only the concept of nature, but also the modern subject is socially produced. The rational and self-conscious subject that is master of its body and impulses—characteristics associated by Weininger in particular with the Kantian subject—constantly has to be defended against the threats of nature and sexuality, associated by Weininger with W. But danger also looms from an entirely different direction: society itself seems to undermine emphatic individuality, the inner-directed, autonomous subject whose decisions and creations are authentic expressions of a unique, constant, and consistent

<sup>52</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 111; translation amended.

<sup>53</sup>This route has been pursued even further in Adorno's later work, notably his *Negative Dialectics*.

<sup>54</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 99; see also 89f.; translation amended. Cf. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 175ff.

personality—features pushed to their extreme in Weininger’s idea of the “genius.” It is this threat that seems closely associated, in Weininger, with the figure of the Jew.<sup>55</sup>

In his portrayal of Jews as agents of a historically novel kind of dissolution and decay, Weininger rearticulates key tropes of a modern anti-Semitism that reaches back to the early nineteenth century and had attained particular strength in its last decades.<sup>56</sup> Weininger’s problem is not simply that he sees Jews as too economically influential. Judaism, for him, represents phenomena that reach deeper than the mere power of money, namely the fact that everything of “worth” is turned into mere value or utility, every end into a means, any true meaning is driven from the world (283ff., 299). Whereas Woman is all emotion, body, and matter, threatening the rule of rationality, the problem with the Jew is not a lack, but an excess, of rationality. He represents instrumental reason, abstraction, conceptual thought without substance, without creativity, without belief (278–85, 290–95). In this respect, Weininger’s criticism of the Jew recapitulates motifs of a romantic criticism of Enlightenment. The Jew is associated with surface rather than depth and the dominance of shifting social roles over unchanging and “authentic” character. “The Jew” thus stands for disintegration, abstraction, and disenchantment on a much deeper level than that conveyed by the common epithet of “Jewish bankers and rentiers” or the dislike of journalists.<sup>57</sup>

The social developments associated with the Jews in *Geschlecht und Charakter* ultimately threaten the autonomous, unique individual, Weininger’s M. This crisis of the individual can be more adequately understood in social and historical terms, as rooted in a tension intrinsic to capitalist modernity that has been the focus of a critical tradition that reaches from Hegel through Marx to Horkheimer and Adorno and beyond. Already Hegel diagnosed in his *Ästhetik* the growing tensions resulting from the fact that the formally free modern subject<sup>58</sup> is confronted by a legal and political order which “in the external world

---

<sup>55</sup>In their discussion of the links between anti-Semitism and misogyny, Horkheimer and Adorno focus more strongly on the association of both women *and* Jews with nature, an aspect that also plays a central role in Jacques Le Rider’s discussion of the topic (*Modernity*, 174). This approach only captures some of the features of the Jew in Weininger and in modern anti-Semitism more generally, but cannot account for the more dominant association with modernity and abstraction.

<sup>56</sup>See, e.g., Reinhard Rürup, *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur ‘Judenfrage’ der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987); Detlev Claussen, *Die Grenzen der Aufklärung*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), 51–83; Mosse, *Crisis*, 7, 13, 92, 126–45; Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism,” *New German Critique* 19 (1980): 97–115; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 41ff.; Klaus Holz, *Nationaler Antisemitismus: Wissenssoziologie einer Weltanschauung* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 165–247; Tomas Haurý, *Antisemitismus von links: Kommunistische Ideologie, Nationalismus und Antizionismus in der frühen DDR* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002), 25–122; Pulzer, *Rise of Political Antisemitism*.

<sup>57</sup>An analysis of anti-Semitism as chiefly an association of the Jews with the sphere of circulation as it can be found, e.g., in Horkheimer’s “Die Juden und Europa,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8, no. 1–2 (1939): 115–37, or even in parts of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, would therefore seem to fall short of its object.

<sup>58</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 209; see also 54.

[...] exists as an inflexible necessity.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, due to the division of labor and the highly mediated character of production in bourgeois society, “every individual, losing its independence, is tied down in an endless series of dependences on others.”<sup>60</sup> It remains opaque to the individuals that the world that confronts them in this way as alien, immovable, and overpowering is actually the product of their own practice. In other words, while freedom understood as the abolition of *personal* relations of power and dependency that characterized feudalism is certainly greater in bourgeois society, freedom in terms of being able to understand and to determine the conditions of one’s own life has not grown accordingly.

Marx later saw the reason for this apparent paradox more specifically in the fact that transparent relations of personal domination have been replaced by the opaque social forms of the commodity and capital; modern society is a world of “[p]ersonal independence based upon dependence *mediated by things*.”<sup>61</sup> Hence, social relations and forms of domination in capitalism do not appear transparently social. In capitalism, human beings are not so much dominated by a “ruling class” as by their own social practice, constituted in alienated form and confronting them as a system of abstract compulsions. The economic process is not directed towards a definite end, the satisfaction of specific needs, but is driven by the necessities of capital, the self-valorization of value. Capitalist society is thus characterized by an impersonal dynamic, a directional movement without an end point, that entails ongoing, far-reaching transformations of the material and social world,<sup>62</sup> an experience that became particularly keenly felt in Central Europe during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Not only are freedom and independence of the bourgeois individual restricted externally by the very society that has produced it, but the supposedly authentic personality who brings forth his creations from the depths of his own particular authentic being is also hollowed out from within.<sup>63</sup> This had been observed by Hegel early on as well. In bourgeois society,

the individual man, in order to preserve his individuality, must frequently make himself a means to others, must subserve their limited aims, and must likewise reduce others to mere means in order to satisfy his own interests. Therefore the individual as it appears in this world of prose and everyday is not active out of the entirety of his own self and his resources, and he is intelligible not from himself, but from something else.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 182.

<sup>60</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 260; see also 261.

<sup>61</sup>Karl Marx, “Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 95.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), 165; Theodor W. Adorno, “Individuum und Organisation,” *Kritik: Kleine Schriften zur Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 67–86; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 102; Derek Sayer, *Modernity and Capitalism: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), 3; Postone, *Time, Labor*, 307–14.

<sup>63</sup>See also Sayer, *Modernity and Capitalism*, 61.

<sup>64</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 149.

The particular identity of human beings, that which makes them special and unique, resides in people's particular history, in their relationships and direct interactions with others. Yet these are declared "private affairs" in a society based on the abstract equality of market participants, one in which social relations have become relations mediated by things. The more individualized the bourgeois subject becomes and the more hermetic its outward boundaries, the emptier is that which these boundaries enclose.<sup>65</sup> Reason and individuation become related in complex ways: In the public sphere, individuation increasingly becomes that of identical monads; individuation as uniqueness, "personality," appears as private, as the Other of Reason. They are however, conjoined historically; the movement towards absolute individuality is at the same time a movement towards absolute generality. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer: "The self that is wholly comprehended by civilization resolves itself in an element of the inhumanity which from the beginning civilization has aspired to evade. The primordial fear of losing one's own name is realized."<sup>66</sup>

The tensions that Hegel had already sensed and Marx attempted to theorize became increasingly pronounced with the extensive and intensive development of industrial capitalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Against this background, Weininger's apotheosis of the "Christian" or "Aryan" and his criticism of the Jewish mindset could be seen as responses to the increasingly acute threat bourgeois society itself started to represent to the autonomous, rational, and self-controlled bourgeois subject that earlier had been established as an ideal.<sup>67</sup> Hegel's perceptive comments suggest that the tensions that became so keenly felt in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna represented a deepening of fault lines within the (masculine) bourgeois subject itself and its relationship to the world, whose beginnings go back further than what is often described as the "crisis of modernity"; they originate in the social forms of capitalist modernity itself. While Weininger's modernist contemporaries explore and depict how the world of the nineteenth century and, with it, the bourgeois subject, are coming apart,<sup>68</sup> Weininger tries to defend them by projecting the immanent contradictions of the bourgeois subject outwards onto "the woman" and "the Jew." He turns what can be analyzed as different aspects of an immanent social contradiction into a conflict between fundamentally opposed essential "types," one of which must be overcome if humanity is to prevail:

Humankind once more has the choice between Judaism and Christianity, between business and culture, between Woman and Man, between the species and

<sup>65</sup>See also Adorno, "Individuum," 78ff.; cf. Postone, *Time, Labor*, 158ff.; Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity*, 87.

<sup>66</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 30f.; translation amended.

<sup>67</sup>This process and its relation to a variety of modernist responses is lucidly analyzed in Richard Sheppard, "The Problematics of European Modernism," *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*, ed. Steve Giles (London: Routledge, 1993), 6–31; see also the "Afterword: Avant-garde, Modernism, Modernity" by Steve Giles in the same volume, 171–86.

<sup>68</sup>Hofmannsthal himself for example, in "Vom dichterischen Dasein," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1980), 85–87, links his aestheticist outlook explicitly to the social developments described above, referring to the same themes and experiences we also encounter in *Geschlecht und Charakter*.

the personality, between worthlessness and worth, between the earthly life and the higher life, between nothingness and the deity. These are the two poles: there is no third realm. (300)<sup>69</sup>

Anti-Semitism as a projective phenomenon, rooted, at least partially, in specific features of modern society itself, has also been explored by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Their analysis is rich and groundbreaking, yet the concluding chapter of the book, the “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” is both complex and problematic. It does not offer a coherent theory of modern anti-Semitism, but presents what Martin Jay has described as a “decentered constellation of factors.”<sup>70</sup> “Elements” discusses theological, psychological, and social sources of anti-Semitism, democratic and fascist variants, the origins of anti-Semitism in capitalist society as well as in the rise of Christianity, or even the beginning of civilization itself. As in other parts of the book, the relationship of historically specific models of explanation to those that refer to transhistorical, quasi-anthropological features of human existence is a central issue.<sup>71</sup> At its strongest, the chapter illuminates the complex interplay between different historical and explanatory layers (psychological, theological, epistemological and social). Sometimes, however, the “Elements” seem to be in danger of presenting an account that is so fundamentally anthropological in nature that it is not always easy to see in what way it relates specifically to the history and situation of Jews.<sup>72</sup>

The “Elements” are hence not easily discussed in a summative way. The chapter offers some very illuminating approaches, however, that could throw light on the anti-Semitism in *Sex and Character* and its relation to misogyny. As mentioned, among these are the attention given to the history of the social domination of nature as well as to an analysis of the fate of individuality in modern, capitalist society, which helps to make sense of the

<sup>69</sup>Translation amended.

<sup>70</sup>Martin Jay, “The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory’s Analysis of Anti-Semitism,” *New German Critique* 19 (1980): 137–49; here 144. On some of the tensions within the “Elements of anti-Semitism” see also Anson Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed? The Place of Anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *New German Critique* 81 (2000): 49–64, in particular 60ff. For an illuminating close reading of central parts of the “Elements,” see Marcel Stoetzler, “Liberal society, Emancipation and Anti-Semitism,” in *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future: Critical Theory*, ed. Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi (Rome: John Cabot University Press, 2009), 145–60.

<sup>71</sup>The subsumption of the particular under general concepts that is so closely associated with the hatred against those who represent an element of the incommensurable difference, for example, is at times explained through the cognitive necessities of the domination of nature in general and said to be “as old as civilization” (*Dialectic*, 187), but at other times, it is associated with the specificity of social mediation in capitalism (*Dialectic*, 201ff.), and in particular with the cognitive effects of abstract labor as the dominant form of human practice (*Dialectic*, 207f.).

<sup>72</sup>Anson Rabinbach, for example, notes with reference to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s claim that, in anti-Semitism, the “aboriginal” desire to return to the “mimetic practice of sacrifice finds its ultimate fulfillment” (*Dialectic*, 186): “It is ultimately not clear whether this version of primal anti-Semitism can usefully distinguish modern racism, Christian Jew-hatred (ancient or primordial), anti-Judaism, or whether—in the end—it has anything to do with the Jews at all.” (Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?”, 61)

double structure of the threat to Weininger's M, the bourgeois individual, by "woman" and "the Jew." Pertinent is also the description of anti-Semitic perceptions of Jews as the objects as well as the subjects of the domination of nature. On the one hand, according to "Elements," Jews, like women, are associated with impulses and desires that had to be suppressed in the process of civilization and subject formation and therefore become objects of renewed suppression.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, Jews are hated as the pioneers of a process of modernity that necessitates such self-privation and produces misery amidst the possibility of plenty.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Jews are seen as agents of abstraction, starting with the *Bilderverbot* [prohibition of images].<sup>75</sup> This account seems to resonate with the contradictory position of the Jew in *Sex and Character*: On the one hand, Weininger associates him, like W, with the lure of sexuality and the dissolution of hard-won subject boundaries, a danger against which the independence of M, the bourgeois subject, continually has to be defended. Yet on the other hand, he associates the Jew with the process of modernity that threatens to dissolve the unique, independent and authentic individual from the other direction, as it were, that of society.

Towards the end of the chapter, the 'Elements' also develop a conception of the bourgeois individual as both having been historically constituted and, yet, now historically undermined, which would be able to shed further light on the predicament of Weininger's M. "The individual", a "complex dynamic system of the conscious and unconscious, the id, ego, and super-ego"—that is, the Freudian subject that, according to the reading developed above, could be seen as the historical reality behind Weininger's M and his struggle with W—"arose as a dynamic cell of economic activity. Emancipated from the tutelage of earlier stages of economic development, it looked after itself."<sup>76</sup> However, Adorno and Horkheimer then describe modern society as revoking the form of self-directed individuality it had produced in the age of liberalism. "As industrial society progresses [ . . . ], the notion which justified the whole system, that of man as a person, a bearer of reason, is destroyed."<sup>77</sup> This development, it could be argued, underlies the fears that become visible in Weininger's description of the process of modernity associated with the Jew.

---

<sup>73</sup>"Everything which gives occasion for such repetition, however unhappy it may be in itself—Ahasver or Mignon, alien things which are reminders of the promised land, or beauty which recalls sex, or the proscribed animal which is reminiscent of promiscuity—draws upon itself that destructive lust of civilized men who could never fulfil the process of civilization." (*Dialectic*, 172). A similar example is Horkheimer's and Adorno's description of the Jew as associated with forms of abandonment and mimicry that are socially taboo; cf. pp. 179–82.

<sup>74</sup>According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Jews were the "colonisers of progress" (*Dialectic*, 175). Because they have been legally "imprisoned" in the sphere of circulation (mistranslated as "they had been active in it"; *Dialectic*, 174), they are wrongly blamed for the injustices of the capitalist system as a whole, since "[t]he responsibility of the sphere of circulation for exploitation is a socially necessary appearance" (*Dialectic*, 174).

<sup>75</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 174.

<sup>76</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 203; translation amended.

<sup>77</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 205.

Even where Horkheimer and Adorno focus more specifically on the characteristics of modern society, however, their critique of the “concealment of domination in production”<sup>78</sup> is tied to a concept of domination that oscillates between describing the subjectless social domination of people by their own alienated practice, and a personalizing view of domination by the “new rulers,”<sup>79</sup> the “rackets,” and so forth.<sup>80</sup> Despite the fundamental shifts in their perspective on anti-Semitism since the 1930s, in this respect, the argument at times still seems to echo their earlier views, such as Horkheimer’s in “Die Juden und Europa,” of anti-Semitism as a means to another end. In part, the argument therefore remains within a conceptual framework that regards ideology in capitalist society as instrumental, as conscious manipulation following rational aims. Although there are moments in the text that hint at a possible mediation of the more anthropological and the more historically-determinate strands of the argument, that mediation is not always fully effected. In the “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” there is a tendency to either delegate the explanation of irrationality to psychological and anthropological factors which often appear as transhistorical, or to locate the irrationality of modern anti-Semitism more specifically in the character of the National Socialist regime. The seminal beginnings of a theory of socially generated irrationality in capitalism presented in the “Elements” are not fully developed.

A systematic exploration of the links between anti-Semitism and abstract forms of social domination in capitalism that is able to add to our understanding of core features of Weininger’s thought has also been offered by Moishe Postone in “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism” (1980). Postone’s analysis emerges from the same theoretical tradition, but focuses more strongly on Marx’s critical theory in a way that is critical of traditional Marxism. This approach implicitly elaborates on important ideas of the “Elements,” such as the “concealment of domination in production,” or the centrality of a concept of abstract labor for an understanding of forms of thought in capitalist society. It illuminates with particular clarity the nature and origin of the association of the Jews with forms of domination and unfreedom specific to capitalist modernity. Based on Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, Postone describes how, in capitalist society, social mediation does not appear as such, but is expressed by an opposition between a concrete sphere of use-value, concrete labor, and production, on the one hand, and a sphere of abstract constraints and imperatives, on the other, neither of which appears socially constituted. The concrete dimension appears “natural,” whereas the abstract value dimension is perceived as extrinsic to the social world. The roots of these forms of abstract domination in collective social practice remain invisible. They can therefore easily be understood in agentive, even conspiratorial, terms, as is indicated by a range of personalizing critiques of capitalist modernity (with reference to the freemasons, for example, or the “speculators”). This sort of personalization of capitalism’s form of domination and historical dynamic attained particular social force and historical consistency in the form of modern anti-Semitism.

This account further illuminates key features of Weininger’s image of the Jew, in particular of the association with abstraction, instrumental rationality, and the fundamentally

<sup>78</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 173.

<sup>79</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 173.

<sup>80</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 170.

disintegrative dynamic of modernity. It also allows us to apprehend more specifically the ways in which Weininger's anti-Semitism actually differs from the *völkische* tradition<sup>81</sup> with which he has often been associated.<sup>82</sup> According to Postone, viewing capitalist modernity in terms of the socially constituted opposition of concrete and abstract allows one to understand romantic variants of "anti-capitalism" as forms of thought in which the concrete dimension is perceived to be non-capitalist. In its *völkische* variants, for example, the concrete tends to be romanticized as concrete, artisanal labor, the *Volk* and "nature," while Italian Futurism and its Fascist heirs celebrate the "concrete" dimensions of modernity itself, for example industrial production and the power of the machine.

What sets Weininger apart from his *völkische* contemporaries is that he rejects any such idealization of the concrete and "natural." In Weininger's world, there is no romanticized *Volk* or race, no refuge in an unspoiled form of community and no certainty to be had from the eternal laws of the blood and the continuities of descent. He shares Nietzsche's aristocratic rebellion against mass society, scientism, and metaphysical deracination.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Dionysos, for Weininger, would be associated with the terrors of femininity. Weininger's "genius" is hyper-moral rather than amoral, logical rather than instinctual, represents ratio instead of will, and is obsessed with boundaries rather than reveling in their dissolution.

For similar reasons, there is nothing ambivalent about Weininger's image of femininity. For Weininger, Woman does not represent nature as the "Other" of modernity in any positive sense. She is neither associated with sexuality as a raw and untamed life force that could break open the suffocating grip of bourgeois conventions like Wedekind's *Lulu*, nor is she fashioned according to late eighteenth and nineteenth century images of bourgeois femininity that arose from the gendered separation between the domestic sphere and the public world of work and politics—images of woman as caring, nurturing, sensitive, innocent, endowed with a fine aesthetic sensibility, and associated with all that is beautiful and harmonious, and thus representing a possible counterbalance to the cutthroat world of work and business.<sup>84</sup> She is only whore, not Madonna, and even the image of the mother is almost entirely devoid of any association with positive values like nurture and care. Femininity is associated with nature—not with nature as a romantic counter-principle to a destructive social world, however, but with nature as blind process, as unformed matter, as the churning of capital naturalized.

<sup>81</sup>See, e.g., Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 27–70, 97–180; Mosse, *Crisis*; Stefan Breuer, *Die Völkischen in Deutschland: Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008).

<sup>82</sup>Le Rider, *Modernity*, 165f.

<sup>83</sup>For an instructive historical contextualization of Nietzsche's concept of the genius that makes those parallels clearly apparent, cf. Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik, 1750–1945*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), 129ff.

<sup>84</sup>See Ute Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte: Zwischen bürgerlicher Verbesserung und Neuer Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 18, 33–51; Karin Hausen, "Die Polarisierung der Geschlechtscharaktere. Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben," *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas*, ed. Werner Conze (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 363–93.

There is, thus, nothing “unspoiled” in the outside world for Weininger that could serve as a haven from, or counter-principle to, the ravages of modernity. Unlike the liberals, he does not have recourse to the universal, critical dimension of abstract reason against the barbarism of the concrete; unlike the romantics, he does not turn to the concrete against the inhuman depredations of the abstract. Rather, Weininger rejects both, reified as the Jew and the Woman.<sup>85</sup> The only space not yet conquered and formed by a society that he detests is internal, the only thing that is not subject either to the universal reign of instrumental reason or the siren song of irrationality, is the strong individual, the genius, imagined as the last bastion of the particular and authentic. It is this that makes Weininger’s text particularly interesting for an analysis of the dialectic of Enlightenment. He is not a romantic anti-liberal, nor a reactionary critic of modernity in the name of some glorified past.<sup>86</sup> Rather, his work is a desperate reaction to the antinomies of capitalist modernity itself. Unable to imagine anything beyond them, Weininger has recourse to a vanishing point. In his attempt to purge the Aryan male of the Jew and the Woman, he tries to save the bourgeois subject from bourgeois society and its own embodied existence. *Geschlecht und Charakter* thus reveals hyper-rationalism and irrationalism as two sides of the same coin.

## V

The reading developed in the preceding pages would suggest that the antagonists in Weininger’s world theatre, M and W, the Aryan and the Jew, could be seen as externalized personifications of immanent contradictions of bourgeois society and the bourgeois subject itself. And indeed, Weininger himself describes this mechanism of projection in one of those moments of astonishing clear-sightedness scattered throughout the book, where the text suddenly becomes self-reflexive: “[H]ate projects our own bad qualities on our fellow-humans [. . .]. When we hate we delude ourselves into believing that we are being threatened by somebody else, and we pretend that we are purity itself under attack” (220; similarly 275). In the opposition of M and W, the “Aryan” and the “Jew,” these supposedly “bad qualities” are not individual, but general. The double threat of Jewishness and femininity can be understood as revealing the underlying fragility of the bourgeois subject. Empirical, living subjects have always been deficient in both respects: because the subject

---

<sup>85</sup>In fact, it is only this double opposition—W as the counter-pole of the disembodied, formalist Kantian subject; the chameleon-like “Jew,” an agent of abstraction, as the counter-image of the radically unique, authentic “genius”—that helps force these radically different conceptions of the subject, pertaining to different phases of modernity, together. On the shift from a universalist eighteenth century conception of the individual to a particularistic one in the nineteenth century, see also Georg Simmel’s illuminating observations in *Grundfragen der Soziologie (Individuum und Gesellschaft)* (Berlin, Leipzig: Göschen, 1917), 71–103.

<sup>86</sup>For examples of this dominant view, see Daniel Steuer’s otherwise illuminating introduction, “A Book That Won’t Go Away: Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*,” in Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, xi–xlv; Le Rider, *Modernity*, 165. An opposing view is presented—though in a way that seems to downplay the destructiveness of Weininger’s positions—by Steven Beller in “Otto Weininger as Liberal,” in Harowitz and Hyams, *Jews & Gender*, 91–101.

can never completely overcome its embodied existence, its libidinous impulses and irrational wishes, its fundamental dependency on others, it is always not yet really what it ought to be according to the nineteenth century ideal of the masculine subject. And because this subject is constituted by a society that practically revokes the freedom and autonomy that it produces in abstract form, by a society that tends to level out the “individualities” of the individuals and thus is both midwife and gravedigger at the same time, the subject is unstable from the very moment of its emergence. This instability becomes more and more keenly felt toward the turn of the century.

Understanding “the woman” and “the Jew” as projections would also throw new light on the slippages in Weininger’s book from “W” as a component in every human being to “women,” and from “Jewishness” as a psychological disposition anybody can have to varying degrees to “the Jews” as an empirical social group. Rather than being mere imprecisions and conceptual inconsistencies, these rhetorical movements become visible as “performative” features; they enact the real content of the text: making the internal external, the social essential, projecting *universal* features within every modern subject onto a *particular* “Other.” This would also throw light on the typographical idiosyncrasies of the text and the overuse of italics and bold face. They mirror the urgency of the feelings that are being expressed and the intensity of Weininger’s anxieties. Precisely because what is to be banished is a necessary component of modern subject constitution that can never fully be made to disappear, it is all the more dangerous; the enemy within has to be exorcised over and over again.

Seen in this light, Weininger’s example could also illuminate certain features of the difficulty of Jewish identity formation at the turn of the century. If anti-Semitism, as in *Geschlecht und Charakter*, is a projective hatred against aspects of modern society and against socially constituted features of the modern subject itself, externalized in “the Jew,” then some aspects of Jewish “self-hatred” at the time, seen as an internalization of such anti-Semitic projections, could perhaps tentatively be described as a displaced expression of the self-hatred of the bourgeois individual and, as such, an expression of disillusionment and despair. As long as dislike of Jews was directed against supposedly “insufficiently modern” Jewish particularity, becoming more “general,” assimilating, entering into “modernity” could, for many Jews, appear as a route of escape. As soon as “Jewishness” is associated with the general, with modernity itself, however, this route is closed; overcoming Jewish particularity through assimilation, through becoming a bourgeois individual, now, paradoxically means becoming more “Jewish” in the eye of the anti-Semite. Some forms of Jewish “self-hatred” at the turn of the last century might thus in part be seen as a despairing response to such a “no-exit” situation.

On a more general level, using Weininger as a case study might contribute to a fuller understanding of the relationship of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and modernity. In focusing not just on the commonalities of “the woman” and “the Jew,” but also on their differences, such a reading goes beyond the idea that constructions of race and gender can simply be described through the unhistorical binary of “self” and “other.” Instead, these *different* “others” articulate different dimensions of historically specific, and changing, social experiences. Such a reading could contribute to the ongoing debates on the fault lines of modernity, on

why contemporary society, although based on seemingly universalist conceptions of subjectivity, has kept producing stereotyped ideas of racial and gender differences.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, the reading suggested above would also move beyond those intersectional approaches that investigate the mediation of constructions of race, class, gender, and so forth, but treat them as independent phenomena with largely unrelated origins. The example of *Geschlecht und Charakter* would suggest that, despite their differences in content and function, specific forms of anti-Semitism and misogyny may be seen as originating in different dimensions of the same mode of subject constitution. Weininger's example illustrates, therefore, that a critical theory of society can contribute to an understanding of constructions of gender and race beyond mere considerations of economic rationality and exploitation on the one hand, and an understanding of constitution as purely discursive on the other.

*University of Warwick*

---

<sup>87</sup>Dichotomous models of gender hierarchy obviously existed before the modern period. But the reading tentatively suggested above might help throw light on the changes these dichotomies have undergone with the rise of bourgeois society, changes towards a more rigid and fundamental polarity along the lines of the division of body and mind, matter and form (see also Claudia Honegger, *Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen und das Weib 1750–1850* [München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996], 1–9). This reading would suggest that these polarities not only persisted because they had been there before, but because they were, and are, produced and reproduced by a social practice that seems to be, at first sight, gender-neutral.