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On: 23 August 2007
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Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



East European Jewish Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713720502>

REVIEW ARTICLE

Online Publication Date: 01 August 2007

To cite this Article: Fischer, Lars (2007) 'REVIEW ARTICLE', East European Jewish Affairs, 37:2, 249 - 255

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/13501670701430610

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501670701430610>

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Dan Cohn-Sherbok. *The Paradox of Anti-Semitism.* Continuum, London 2006. xiv + 242 pp., ISBN 0-826-48896-X

Hyam Maccoby. *Antisemitism and Modernity. Innovation and Continuity.* Routledge, London 2006. xiv + 191 pp., ISBN 0-415-31173-X

Serious scholars of Antisemitism are invariably confronted with two fundamental conceptual issues. The better known of the two concerns the relationship between modern (political) Antisemitism as it emerged in the last decades of the 19th century, on the one hand, and more traditional forms of anti-Jewish sentiment and practice, on the other. Long gone are the days when those insisting on the specificity of modern Antisemitism assumed it had simply supplanted all other forms of enmity towards Jews. Even so, the more traditional forms of anti-Jewish animosity now have to compete on the ideological market established by modernity too, and one therefore has to wonder just how traditional they still are. The aggressive Antisemitism so integral to contemporary Islamicist and Jihadic ideology provides us with a particularly dramatic and urgent case in point.

The second, rather more intricate, conceptual issue is one that even serious scholars in the field occasionally lose sight of. Does a kernel of truth inhere in Antisemitic perceptions or are they based on projections on which Jews ultimately have no influence? Of course, certain aspects of some Jews' lives may seem to coincide with some Antisemitic stereotypes. But is the relationship between reality and stereotype of a coincidental or a causal nature? Put simply: does it make any difference to the Antisemites, and is it of any significance to the way in which Antisemitism functions, whether their claims and contentions about Jews are true (in the sense that they could be empirically verified)? Modern political Antisemitism has been particularly obsessed with the notion that emancipation would render the Jews indistinguishable as Jews and thus invisible. It was precisely this that made them so dangerous because it would allow them to go unnoticed as they proceeded to subvert society from within. Not only does this line of argument patently not claim to be based on contentions that are empirically verifiable, it overtly dismisses empirical verifiability as a legitimate criterion. The danger lies precisely in that which, by definition, cannot be empirically verified. Here, then, is a real and intensely frustrating paradox. Antisemitism functions independently of what real Jews actually do or do not get up to. It has (had) a profound impact on Jewish history yet itself lies beyond Jewry's influence. Among those for whom Jewish history ought always to be the account of Jewish agency in history, adherence to the kernel-of-truth approach presumably reflects an attempt (albeit a profoundly misguided one) to put Jewish agency back into the history of Antisemitism.

Yet this is not the paradox that interests Cohn-Sherbok, nor does his book as much as hint at the existence of either of these two fundamental issues. Although he seems to reserve the term "anti-semitism" for the period after the emergence of Christianity, he offers

a seamless account of the enmity Jewry has faced through the ages that begins before the exodus from Egypt. On the other hand, he is clearly an adherent of the kernel-of-truth approach to Antisemitism. Take his contention that “the practice of usury intensified anti-Semitism especially by those who were unable to pay back loans” (158). The paradox that Cohn-Sherbok claims to have identified hinges on the notion that “Jews need enemies in order to survive” (209) and that “without anti-semitism, we may be doomed to extinction” (xiv). The “modern Jews have failed to grasp [...] the positive benefits of anti-Jewish hostility” (xiii). Yet “what is missing in contemporary society is Jew-hatred” (1) and thus, “in the absence of Jew-hatred, Judaism is undergoing a slow death” (216).

Now, who would dispute that Jews throughout history have shown a remarkable degree of resilience and determination in the face of adversity? Yet Cohn-Sherbok’s claim goes much further. To his mind, adversity is in fact the immediate cause of Jewry’s staying power. For him the redaction of the Mishnah and the compilation of both the Yerushalmi and Bavli, for instance, are “the direct result of the Roman onslaught against Judaism and the Jewish nation” (11, 149). “Jew-hatred” thus “brought about a revival of Jewish existence and intensified dedication to the Jewish heritage” (149). Similarly, “the establishment of the State of Israel was the direct result of centuries of Jew-hatred” (182) and “without anti-semitism, the State of Israel would not exist—this is *the* paradox of Jewish history” (190, my emphasis).

It has to be said, though, that for the most part the book itself in fact undercuts these radical claims. It consists primarily of yet another potted history of Judaism. If an undergraduate submitted something of this kind, one would commend her for her diligence but add some very stern remarks clarifying that she is now studying at university level where critical thinking lies at the heart of all our endeavours. The book’s apparatus offers 65 footnotes, of which 33 refer to books either written or compiled by Cohn-Sherbok himself. Repeatedly no references are given at all even for accounts including substantial quotations from primary sources (167–68, 209). One can only assume that this book is not intended as a serious contribution to scholarly debate.

What distinguishes this potted history of Judaism from others are its occasional, often perfunctory asides designed to bear out the overarching thesis of the book. Yet, for the most part, they fall well short of the contentious claims made in the introduction and conclusion. The book’s focus is supposedly on “the creative capacity of the Jewish people to survive and prosper *through* adversity” (213, my emphasis). The contention that “Jews throughout Europe flourished under oppression” (162) apparently argues in the same direction. Yet this formulation would seem to be interchangeable with the notion that “Jewish life flourished *despite* oppressive conditions” (164, my emphasis). Indeed, “despite” emerges as the term Cohn-Sherbok uses most frequently to describe the nexus between “the creative capacity of the Jewish people to survive and prosper” and the adversity it encountered (12, 20, 35, 41, 141, 151, 158, 173, 196, 223)—along with analogous formulations such as “nonetheless,” “yet,” “although,” etc. (132, 140, 149, 155, 157, 174). Needless to say, all this firmly establishes adversity as the occasion for Jewish resilience but in no way makes it the immediate cause of “the creative capacity of the Jewish people to survive and prosper.”

Now, Cohn-Sherbok neither claims that Jewry nor even that Judaism in all its manifestations is “undergoing a slow death.” When he discusses the “disintegration of the Jewish way of life” throughout the first part of the book, he could just as well have referred simply to its diversification. Here is an example for the way in which he tends to progress from a specific observation to an increasingly fallacious generalization: Those Jews, he begins,

who have distanced themselves from both traditional belief and practice illustrate the ways in which contemporary Jewry is radically different from Jews in the past. No longer is the community united by a common set of beliefs and practices in the face of a hostile world. Instead, modern Jews have assimilated and integrated into the societies in which they live, thereby losing *any* sense of religious and cultural heritage. (111, my emphasis)

Clearly, then, there is still plenty of Jewish and Judaic “creative capacity [...] to survive and prosper” around, with or without adversity. It just so happens that virtually all of it fails to pass muster with Cohn-Sherbok.

Nor is Cohn-Sherbok’s account entirely oblivious to the fact that Antisemitism is by no means the only variable in the equation. “Without anti-semitism,” he explains at one point, “Jews may not be able to withstand the pressures of the modern world” (5). Elsewhere he concedes that it is “under the impact of modern science and contemporary secular trends” that “the monolithic system of Jewish belief and practice has undergone a process of dissolution” (113–14). One can only infer that the Judaism and Jewish identity whose integrity Cohn-Sherbok sees so neatly protected by Antisemitism is one that, instead of thriving on the confrontation with modernity and its challenges (as so much of contemporary Jewish life does), can survive only by ignoring and negating them. Would the demise of this hermetic vision of Jewish persistence really be too high a price to pay for a world genuinely free of Antisemitism?

Unfortunately, contrary to Cohn-Sherbok’s claim, this world neither exists nor is it likely to materialize any time soon. In fact, developments in recent years suggest exactly the opposite. Long-standing Western susceptibilities to, and traditions of, anti-Jewish stereotyping are in the process of forming an increasingly potent and lethal cocktail with Islamicist Antisemitism (itself arguably more of an import from the ideological arsenal of Western modernity than in any way an organic outgrowth of Islamic tradition) and thus acquiring a new lease of life. It is this dramatic and deeply worrying development that apparently informed Hyam Maccoby’s decision to compile his last, posthumously published book, *Antisemitism and Modernity*.

For obvious reasons, manuscripts that are more or less finished when an author dies almost invariably present a considerable challenge, since the author can no longer respond to the various queries and suggestions that arise on the path to publication. That Maccoby had finished *Antisemitism and Modernity* shortly before his death in May 2004 was mentioned in his obituaries and is confirmed by his widow in a short addendum to the book’s preface. But then, there is “finished” in the sense of being convinced that one has put all the requisite pieces in place and now merely needs to go over everything with a fine toothcomb to give it the requisite stringency and polish, and there is “finished” in the sense of actually having gone through that process and given the text that polish. *Antisemitism and Modernity* may have been finished in the former sense but certainly not in the latter and the decision to publish it as it stands has done Maccoby no favours. It seems inconceivable that this book should really be by the same author as, say, Maccoby’s brilliant “The Greatness of Gershom Scholem.” Indeed, *Antisemitism and Modernity* itself contains a fairly substantial amount of “material adapted from articles originally presented” (xiv) elsewhere, for the most part in fact even before Maccoby’s scholarly career proper commenced when he joined Leo Baeck College in 1975. The discrepancy between the sophistication and subtlety of these earlier texts and the clumsy and occasionally intemperate nature of the more recent sections that now seek to frame them is startling and disconcerting. It seems regrettable that those

responsible for the publication of this book did not opt for a more radical approach in producing a final version that would genuinely have done Maccoby justice.

Maccoby had long been an outspoken proponent of the continuity thesis and formulated a particularly far-reaching challenge to the assumption of a fundamental distinction between modern Antisemitism and more traditional forms of anti-Jewish sentiment and practice. It is this challenge that is at the heart of *Antisemitism and Modernity*. Put simply, there are now three dimensions to Maccoby's version of the continuity thesis: the essentially obsolete, the entirely reasonable, and the highly idiosyncratic. I will discuss them in this order.

Maccoby generally overstates not only the extent to which even radical proponents of the modernity thesis deny elements of continuity between modern Antisemitism and other forms or sources of anti-Jewish sentiment and practice. He also exaggerates the degree to which the modernity or discontinuity paradigm actually holds sway over the debate in its entirety. Here he is fighting windmills at best. Even emphatic "modernists" now appreciate that modern Antisemitism did not simply supplant more traditional forms of anti-Jewish sentiment and practice, let alone from one moment to the next. Instead they assume that these more traditional forms underwent a process of adaptation, transformation, and integration into the ideological frame of reference created by modernity. The exact relationship of continuity and discontinuity in this process is often hard to determine and controversy frequently concerns not the issue of how much continuity is or is not in the proverbial glass but the question of whether the glass is consequently half full or half empty. Many of Maccoby's observations regarding the ways in which supposedly secular thought about "the Jews" unwittingly appropriated anti-Jewish stereotypes and imagery that are Christian in origin are well made and perfectly plausible, and there is no reason why "modernists" should find them in any way contentious.

What does make Maccoby's argument highly problematic is its teleological nature and his vehement insistence that the element of discontinuity is a mere surface phenomenon so that the thrust of modern Antisemitism is in fact identical to that of medieval Christian anti-Judaism; it has merely taken on a modern disguise. He assumes a "protean ability of anti-semitism to change its outward form without changing its inward essence" (xi). "The solution" to Antisemitism, therefore, "lies not in the combating of secondary rationalizations" of the type that modern Antisemitism hinges on, "but in the analysis of the real cause of the hatred, the medieval Christian demonizing myth about the Jews and its roots in early Christianity" (50). Consequently, medieval Christian anti-Judaism, for Maccoby, is "the root cause of the Holocaust" (49). He considers it "by far the most essential cause of the Holocaust" (163), and Christianity, to his mind, has to be seen as "the instigator of anti-semitism and the Holocaust" (164). As Maccoby sees it, "the obvious relationship of modern anti-semitism to its predecessor, Christian antisemitism, is a taboo topic" (161) and it is his determination to break this (alleged) taboo that presumably explains the occasionally rather intemperate nature of his account.

The problem here is that no "modernist" would dream of denying that Christian anti-Judaism, medieval or otherwise, forms a crucial backdrop to the evolution of modern Antisemitism. It would be quite impossible to explain why and how the Jews could provide a suitable foil for the projection of the stereotypes that are at the heart of modern Antisemitism, were it not for a long-standing tradition of anti-Jewish sentiments and practices. To the extent that modern Antisemitism tapped into this tradition, it obviously had to negotiate perceptions that were inevitably Christian in origin. Yet in this respect it is, of

course, no different from emerging secular thought in general. What distinguishes modern secular societies from pre-modern religious societies is surely the shift from a state of affairs in which all sources of legitimacy and value judgements are ultimately religious in nature to a state of affairs in which consensual notions of social and political legitimacy need to seem plausible to believers and non-believers alike. Consequently, any recourse to precedent or tradition, to existing perceptions and imagery in the evolution of secular thought cannot but draw on elements that are religious in origin. This process of transmission and appropriation in and of itself is therefore hardly remarkable. The interesting question is not whether but how it transpires, with how much self-awareness and critical acumen and to what extent traditional perceptions are genuinely transformed in the process.

In short, for our purposes here the crucial question is whether the elements of continuity between traditional Christian anti-Judaism and various shades of modern Antisemitism that nobody would dream of denying really do allow for the conclusion that there has been no change in the "inward essence" of prevalent anti-Jewish sentiment and practice. To what extent are analogies between the perceptions and imagery that characterize modern Antisemitism and medieval anti-Judaism really more than metaphorical? For example, there are surely only so many ways of offering a vivid and damning characterization of one's archenemies or stark antagonisms of any kind. Are not all such characterizations likely to bear some structural resemblance to the way in which the medieval church portrayed Satan? Does this really imply that all such characterizations are unwittingly influenced and driven in a substantive manner by the specific dynamics of the medieval church's perception of Satan? Is it really plausible to imply such a nexus, say, by making the (in any case rather stiff) claim that to the Bolsheviks "the Jews represented the forces of Satan" (28)?

Maccoby's argument is an arch-functional one and he ultimately ends up achieving the exact opposite of what he presumably set out to do: instead of establishing incontrovertible culpability for the evolution of Antisemitism that he thinks led inexorably to the Shoah, we are left with a crime without intentional perpetrators. It is medieval Christian anti-Judaism that compels modern Antisemites to act as they do, but they do not know it. "It is characteristic of modern antisemitism not to be aware of this motivation" (141). Maccoby's point here is not that Antisemites hate Jews for reasons that in fact have nothing to do with real-existing Jewry. His claim is that the modern Antisemites' own assumptions as to what it is they hold against "the Jews" are in fact mistaken. It is not just the Antisemites of all shades (including Hitler and the National Socialists) who know not what they do, though. In Maccoby's scheme of things, Christianity's own motives are in fact ultimately more subconscious than conscious too and, what is more, its responsibility as the "instigator of antisemitism and the Holocaust" persists not only where modernity unwittingly perpetuates religiously grounded standards but even where it radically departs from them.

It is commonplace that much Christian unease vis-à-vis Judaism is born of the need to assert the Christian claim to be the true continuation of Judaism. This is not just a matter that concerns the historical track record of Christian dealings with Judaism and Jewry. It is a vexing enough question whether there can ever be a Christological concept of the new covenant that is genuinely void of a kernel of Antisemitism. On both scores, many Christians have yet to face up to the magnitude of the challenge. But all this is not in fact what is at the heart of Maccoby's argument. For Maccoby, Christian Antisemitism is fuelled by "a deeply buried hatred of the Father-God himself, who in Christian theory ... demands the eternal torture of all mankind, unless he is bought off with the blood of his Son" (106). "The Jew," in

other words, is “identified with the angry Christian Father-God who cruelly condemns all mankind to eternal torture” (86). It has not been Christianity’s sense of its own identity, in other words, that has compelled it to turn on Judaism but a form of self-loathing that it could not admit to itself and instead projected onto Judaism.

At the same time, Maccoby makes much of the double-edged nature of the Augustinian notion that continued Jewish existence was part of God’s redemptive scheme because the squalor and depravity of the Jews’ existence demonstrated the consequences of their stubborn refusal to accept the Christian message and thus, by extension, the validity of the new covenant. “This attitude of partial toleration was a kind of protection to the Jews even during the worst persecution of later years” (18), Maccoby states; but he then goes on to suggest that this “relative tolerance ... in a way ... only served to make” Christian loathing “more and more acute as time passed by.” Why? Because “Jews were the only heretics who were allowed to live at all” and it was “their continued existence under a stigma” that eventually produced “a demonic image in the minds of ordinary people” that would not have evolved in this way had Judaism simply been eradicated early on (37–38). Consequently, and now comes the mind-boggling twist, “it was the determination of Christianity to preserve the Jews from annihilation, because of their importance in the Christian myth, that, in a way, prepared the Holocaust in a post-Christian society” (147). Indeed,

the Christian doctrine of Original Sin set up the Jews as a target to be sniped at but never destroyed; then the collapse of the doctrine of Original Sin put the Jews into deadly danger, for the target remained though the safeguards had disappeared. The result was the Holocaust. (123)

Even if so stark a portrayal of this nexus were plausible, the implication would surely be that the abandonment of Christianity has played at the very least an equally important role in facilitating the Shoah as the (disguised) continuity of some of its anti-Judaic traditions.

To avoid any misunderstanding, it is clearly not contemporary Christianity that Maccoby held responsible for the fact that “the obvious relationship of modern antisemitism to its predecessor, Christian antisemitism,” is supposedly “a taboo topic” (161). After all, in the West at least, out of sheer self-interest rather than concern regarding Jewish/non-Jewish relations, Christians today are fairly likely to have critically confronted and abandoned “the angry Christian Father-God who cruelly condemns all mankind to eternal torture” (86). They are also likely to be rather more willing to confront their own denominations’ historical track record vis-à-vis Judaism and the Jews critically than the more vexing issue of the structural anti-Judaism inherent in Christian supersessionism. Maccoby’s focus, in short, is on those aspects contemporary Christians need telling about least while the issue that remains the thorniest, while featuring prominently in his highly idiosyncratic portrayal of the origins of Pauline Christianity, barely features in the later stages of his account. The real target of his ire lies elsewhere. He identifies as “one of the aims of this book” the examination of “the strange fusion that has taken place between antisemitism and advanced concepts of liberty,” a phenomenon that, “for someone of left-wing orientation, such as myself ... is a painful failure of left-wing history” (153). This focus also explains the urgency of his forthright concluding remarks about left-wing indulgence of, and complicity with, Islamicist Antisemitism.

The amount of confusion this book will sow in the heads of students does not bear thinking about. It totally disregards all recent scholarship in the field (including such standard works as Adam Sutcliffe’s *Judaism and Enlightenment*), and the one section I can judge based on detailed expertise, that on Karl Marx, is cringe-inspiringly off the mark. The volume

has been very poorly edited. Some sections would seem to be based on lecture notes, as indicated by the remark “as we saw in a previous lecture” (69), which ought surely to have been removed. On two occasions cross references are made to the wrong chapters. The penultimate section on “Muslim Antisemitism” claims that the category “Semitic” encompasses Jews and *Muslims* before explaining that Antisemitism has only ever targeted Jews and has therefore repeatedly been perfectly capable of attracting “non-Jewish Muslims” (148). None of this invalidates the earlier pieces assembled in the third section of the book, especially the two extremely intriguing essays on Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. They speak for themselves and the fairly perfunctory attempts to incorporate them into the overall argument of the book have done them no harm. As a whole, though, this book is not a helpful contribution and can only detract from Maccoby’s reputation and undermine the credibility of his position in the debate on Antisemitism and modernity.

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