Productive or pejorative?

The term ‘Jewish self-hatred’ was originally intended to have positive connotations

JEWISH SELF-hatred or anti-Zionism? A delegate of Natorei Karta (center) waves a Palestinian flag at a rally in solidarity with Hezbollah and Palestinian factions for a ‘Global March to Jerusalem’ to mark Land Day near Beaufort Castle in Arnoun village in southern Lebanon in March. (Reuters)

W here does constructive criticism leave off and Jewish self-hatred begin?” historian Lawrence Baron once asked.

Self-hating Jews, he answered, step over the line when they accept stereotypes of Jews generated by others as valid—and single out Jews to exemplify disturbing tendencies in society at large.

In On The Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred, a small book with large ambition, Paul Reitter, a professor of languages and literature at Ohio State University, seeks to complicate the concept. The term “Jewish self-hatred,” he points out, did not appear until the end of World War I. Coined by Anton Kuh, a Viennese-Jewish journalist, in 1921, it was popularized by Theodor Lessing, a German-Jewish philosopher, in 1930. In sharp contrast to the historians who preceded him, Reitter argues that Kuh and Lessing consciously deployed the concept to change the discourse about Jews, calling attention to “the positive, even redemptive meanings that went along with it.”

Brooding over the term “Jewish anti-Semitism,” which had been polemically by “mockers,” and convinced that in the face of German nationalism Jewish assimilation was misguided, Reitter indicates that Kuh searched for a phrase “to describe a salutary (if rough) self-censuring that would help Jews uncover and live up to their ethical essence.” Convinced as well that the Diaspora had prepared Jews to lead the way to world brotherhood, Kuh hoped that “the special self-prosecuting Jewish perspective” would give way to a revolution-inspiring self-consciousness. Like Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy, Reitter suggests, Kuh might have met accusations that he was a self-hating Jew with the rejoinder: “Maybe that’s the best kind.”

Raised by his (abusive) parents to view his Jewish heritage as repellent, Lessing was an anguished young man. “Am I myself not the fruit of a people and circumstances I hate and want to wipe out?” he asked. “Am I not damaged, lowly, ill-bred, ruined?” And yet, according to Reitter, Lessing, like Kuh, used “self-hatred” as part of an “affirmative message.” The poison, which had alienated Jews from their peers and blocked fulfilled lives, he emphasized, could in the end become a cure. Although Kuh promised to take readers “deep into the deep” in Jewish Self-Hatred, Reitter regards it as an “upbeat” self-help book with “redemptive connotations,” in which Jews are exhorted to love themselves, live up to their potential and their destiny.

Convinced that Jews were especially vulnerable to accepting the characterizations of their tormentors, Lessing made the case that they could turn self-blame into an epiphenomenon—and a source of healing instruction not only for themselves but for everyone. As the organism that has survived an epidemic “currently running wild among younger people,” Lessing, a medical doctor, concluded, the Jewish people could show the world how to manage the alienation of “conveyor belt” industrial capitalism and the ghettoizing of two-thirds of the population.

On The Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred is a substantive and sophisticated work. As he presses his thesis, however, Reitter at times appears to be dancing on the head of a pin. After all, neither Kuh nor Lessing was a consistent or systematic thinker.

“By attacking all sides,” Reitter acknowledges, Kuh, who was a prolific writer and a great showman, “offered something for everyone.” With good reason, one critic dismissed his claims as a heap of “Kuhmist” (in German, Kuh means cow and Mist is dung).

And Lessing, who had an addiction to overstatement (“the proletariat in all countries,” he wrote, “is nothing other than a single Jewry”) embraced anti-Semitic utterances as “clear indisputable facts” and struggled, often unsuccessfully, to reconcile his Zionism (“the final tragic accomplishment of a people whose tragic fate is preordained”) with a rejection of nationalism and an embrace of “international values.”

Especially important, it seems to me, is Reitter’s acknowledgment, in a footnote, that he is not implying that Jewish self-hatred “has anything like univocally positive connotations” in Lessing’s book. After taking pains to distinguish between Lessing’s observation that Jewish self-hatred includes such “bleak processes” as “self-torturing” and his assertion that it differs from “self-contempt,” Reitter does concede that at times Lessing uses the phrase in ways not all that different from the pejorative “labels he had long been using.”

Words matter, whether or not, as Kuh suggested, “terminology is the root of all unhappiness.” These days, as the Arab-Israeli conflict rages on, Jewish self-hatred is used as an epithet, hurled, often indiscriminately, at political opponents. It may or may not stand for “a very big problem” but it certainly is not associated, at least not among reasonable and decent people, with “a world-saving solution.”

But Reitter’s examination of the genealogy of the phrase (and the concept) makes one wonder, just a bit, whether cultivating any kind of hatred can set forces in motion to make a person more productive, compassionate and loving.

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