

Decolonizing Anti-Semitism Studies: Manuela Consonni and Vivian Liska (eds.), *Sartre, Jews, and the Other: Rethinking Antisemitism, Race, and Gender*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020. XII, 292 pages, EUR 55.95, ISBN 978-3-11-059743-1

Elad Lapidot

University of Lille

elad.lapidot@univ-lille.fr

In their Introduction, Manuela Consonni and Vivian Liska mention two main reasons for assembling an impressive interdisciplinary and international panel of 17 scholars to reflect on Jean-Paul Sartre's book/essay, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, "Reflections on the Jewish Question", written in 1944, published in 1946, and translated into English in 1948 as *Anti-Semite and Jew*. The first reason is to pay tribute to the book as one of the first publications by a European author after the Holocaust to categorically denounce anti-Semitism. As Renée Poznanski shows in her chapter, Emmanuel Mounier and Sartre were the only intellectuals who "broke the silence" that prevailed in France immediately after WWII concerning the fate of the Jews.

The second, more specific reason is that in publically denouncing anti-Semitism, Sartre's intervention was not purely negative, not merely anti-anti-Semitic, but also offered a positive, *constructive* perspective: namely, Consonni and Liska write, on how to "conceptualize Jewish existence in a new way" (1). It is Sartre's new way of countering anti-Semitism by re-conceptualizing Jewish existence that stands at the center of this volume. The basic argument of *Sartre, Jews, and the Other* is that Sartre's novel strategy of dealing with the Jewish Question has offered and in fact become a foundational paradigm in dealing with the question of otherness in contemporary theory. It is this paradigm that still today, almost eight decades after its initial formulation, would facilitate the enterprise suggested in the volume's subtitle: "Rethinking Antisemitism, Race, and Gender".

The volume convincingly demonstrates the editors' claim by revealing the wide, direct and indirect, reception of Sartre's essay. With respect to race, Jonathan Judaken tells us how "Sartre's existentialist multi-directional anti-racism remains a model for confronting the global racisms of the present. Beginning with *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre laid out a set of theorems that remain powerful to thinking about Judeophobia and Negrophobia and Islamophobia today" (129). Leonardo Senkman portrays the reception of Sartre's book in Argentina and Brazil, where the first Portuguese edition of 1949 was entitled *Reflexões sobre o racismo* ("Reflections on Racism") and included both "Reflections on the Jewish Question" and "Black Orpheus," Sartre's famous 1948 introduction to a

poetry anthology edited by Léopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese poet, politician and theoretician of *Négritude*.

The influence of the Sartrean reflections on anti-Semitism in the context of postcolonial thought, famously facilitated by authors such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, is attested in Ethan Katz's chapter on the use made of the revalorized trope of the persecuted "Jew" by both sides in the French-Algerian War; in Nina Fischer's chapter on Aboriginal Australians; in Revital Madar's contribution on apartheid in South Africa; and in Thomas C. Connolly's juxtaposition of Sartre's *Black Orpheus* and the figure of Jacob as a *pied-noir* Orpheus in the work of the Algerian poet Jean Sénac. Perspectives on Sartre's reception within feminist thought—mediated not least through Simone de Beauvoir's work—are provided by Vinzia Fiorino's chapter on the Italian feminist thinker Carla Lonzi and by Yael Feldman on Beauvoir's legacy within Israeli gender discourse.

What, however, is this "new way to conceptualize Jewish existence," which according to the volume's editors would turn Sartre's response to anti-Semitism into a foundational text of anti-racist, feminist and postcolonial theories? The introduction provides no clear answer, suggests no formulation of Sartre's conceptual innovation. Rather, by making reference to this conceptual innovation, the editors raise it as the seminal question, positing it as the central concern of this volume, a hermeneutic key which enables us, I suggest, to read the different contributions not only as a rich collection of discrete studies, but as a conversation, or, better yet, as a debate, a profound *machloykes* pertaining to the epistemological and political foundations of contemporary theory, articulated through the exegetical question of how to read Sartre.

To get a basic sense of this foundational debate, it is instructive to look at the (somewhat underplayed) reflection that takes place in the volume with respect to its own *Sitz im Leben*. This collective publication goes back to a conference held in Jerusalem in 2016, commemorating 70 years since the first publication of Sartre's essay. The essay's special relationship to Israel—"a country born from the abjection of antisemitism" (271), as Eva Illouz ambivalently states—is evident. It is in Israel, notes Eli Schonfeld, writing on Menahem Brinker's Hebrew translation, that Sartre's essay found its "true audience" (35). Yet, besides Yael Feldman's chapter on Israeli feminist literature, and Revital Madar's text on South African apartheid which briefly refers to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is only Eva Illouz who directly, albeit parenthetically, applies Sartre's Reflections on anti-Semitism to contemporary Israeli culture. In a series of bracketed comments, she draws an analogy between the anti-Semitic prejudice denounced by Sartre and racist trends in the Jewish Nation-State: "In Israel, the claim that Arabs or Mizrahim are undeveloped and primitive is viewed as an 'opinion,' heard in many respectable homes" (272). She even points to a certain kind of Israeli anti-Judaism: "how tragic that hatred for the universalist and cosmopolitan Jew is most palpable today in Israel, where such Jews are viewed as traitors to the nation, much like in Sartre's time in France" (273). Illouz reads Sartre's essay as a defense of universalism against all forms of othering, both external and internal, both racist and identitarian.

In contrast, Manuela Consonni suggests in her chapter a different reading. She does not speak specifically of Israel, but of the “nation-state.” Like Illouz, she too denounces “the current exaltation of an aggressive nationalism, sometimes peppered with colonial accents” and the “racist and exclusive political culture” (169). However, she also deploys a series of thinkers—Levinas, Arendt, Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Cassirer—to claim that the basic problem in the nation-state, which makes it prone to anti-Semitism and racism, is neither identity politics nor the cultivation of difference, but on the contrary the politics of unity, the culture of non-difference, the totalizing effect of universalism. In other words, racism may arise not only from identitarian, *völkisch*, Germanic nationalism, but just as much from the universal, rational, liberal, French concept of the nation. This, for Consonni, is Sartre’s main lesson. For her, “the most important aspect of [his] essay” is not Sartre’s criticism against the anti-Semite, but his criticism against what he calls “the Democrat,” who, similarly to Illouz, fights anti-Semitism by fighting difference. What Consonni reads in Sartre’s essay that has turned it into the seminal text for contemporary theories of race, gender and postcolonialism—so I interpret her as saying—is its insight into the paradoxical correlation between universalism (as opposing difference) and racism (as opposing the different), or, in the Jewish case, between assimilating emancipation and anti-Semitism.

The tension between these two master readings of Sartre’s intervention—Illouz vs. Consonni—can be further articulated by staging a broader debate between the various contributions in the volume regarding Sartre’s basic thesis. We can summarize this debate as a hermeneutical dispute between two ways of reading Sartre’s most famous statement in this essay, his *Mishnah*: “the anti-Semite makes the Jew.” The two different readings or accentuations of this statement—both of them legitimized by the ambivalence of Sartre’s text—deploy it as countering, as refuting two different theses on the nature of anti-Semitism—and of Judaism.

The first reading, the “Democratic” (to use Sartre’s terminology) or liberal one, emphasizes that “*the anti-Semite makes the Jew.*” In other words, there *is* objectively no Jew. Jewishness or “Jewish” is not something that exists as an objective reality; it exists only as a projection of anti-Semitic stereotypes. The sin of anti-Semitism—as a paradigm for all forms of racism and othering—would consist precisely in imagining such collectivities. On this liberal reading, anti-Semitism is, as Frédéric Worms writes, the “existential crime” against the individual liberty of self-definition: “the antisemite creates the ‘situation’ where the Jew can, in fact, not devise for him or herself the way her or she ‘wants’ to be or not to be Jewish” (29).

Consequently, the correct, “authentic” reaction to the anti-Semitic projection, which Sartre describes in his essay through the portrait of the “Authentic Jew,” would consist on the “Democratic” reading in categorically rejecting anti-Semitic generalizations, “getting rid” of stereotypes, as Vinzia Fiorino writes, and reasserting “each person in his/her uniqueness” (198), reclaiming, so Eva Illouz, the individual’s “vertiginous freedom” (278). The “inauthentic” reaction to anti-Semitism, the “Inauthentic Jew” which is the object of Sartre’s criticism next to the anti-Semite, would be, for the liberal reading, the reactive pendant to anti-Semitism, which counters anti-Semitism with an anti-Semitic

weapon: the assertion of collective identity. Read this way, the significance of Sartre's essay for contemporary theories of race, gender and postcolonialism is, as Illouz points out, that it features a general "warning against minority identities developed under the gaze of the powerful others who hate us" (276); it is an argument against—Jewish, Feminine, Black, Arab, Mizrahi, Gay—"pride."

Pushed further, the liberal reading, whereby anti-Semitism sins in asserting collective identity beyond individual choice, ultimately condemns, as analogous to anti-Semitism, any form of collective *self*-identification based on categories that surpass individual choice, such as traditional Judaism. As Dror Yinon problematizes things, Sartre's critique of the anti-Semite's inauthentic undermining of individual freedom of choice could hypothetically be equally applied to traditional observant Jews, a fact that for Yinon undermines the moral stance of Sartre's position. This solidarity between critique of anti-Semitism and a critique of Judaism, which Yinon raises as a hypothesis, is explicitly asserted in Eva Illouz's reading, which extends Sartre's criticism of the anti-Semite to a criticism of "rabbinic Judaism" and "ultra-Orthodox" Jews, for whom "Jewishness is an essence" (275). Illouz's reading perfectly conforms with Sartre's own claim that "*the anti-Semite makes the Jew*," Judaism itself being nothing more than an "abstract historical community" (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, 66–67), i.e. a non-being which, together with anti-Semitism, is destined to disappear in Sartre's Marxist eschatology of a future classless society.

This Democratic (reading of) Sartre, which denies any positive specificity of traditional Jewish culture and condemns any attempt to critically or favorably assert such specificity as anti-Semitic or Jewish racism respectively, calls for the kind of critique featured in this volume by Eli Schonfeld. Schonfeld presents and elaborates Menahem Brinker's refutation of Sartre's reduction of Jewishness to anti-Semitic projection. He indicates that historical, rabbinic Jewish culture is neither "abstract" nor a mere reflection of anti-Judaism, but arises from positive "meanings," from a "metaphysical-religious conception of the world" (40), which is specific not because it is identitarian or essentialist or particularistic, but because it is *different* from dominant Western metaphysics and political theology.

Sartre's assertion that "*the anti-Semite makes the Jew*" does not therefore apply, Schonfeld argues, to "the real Jews, [to] the Jew who remains (Jewish)," and here he quotes Steven Schwarzschild: "the more Jewish a Jew is the less is he concerned with antisemitism" (42). This thesis is corroborated in this volume by Leonardo Senkman's testimony to the reception of Sartre's essay among Jews in Argentina: "one feature of the native secular generation of Jews that enthusiastically read the *Reflections* was their lack of Jewish culture and education. In sharp contrast, religious Jews or those who acquired knowledge of Jewish tradition, culture, and history ... challenged Sartre's notions of the Jew as a simple creation of the look of others" (179).

But why did assimilated, secular, dejudaized, non-Jewish Jews in Argentina, France and elsewhere so "enthusiastically" embraced Sartre's essay? Was it because, as the Democratic reading suggests, Sartre was refuting any objective existence of Jewishness beyond anti-Semitic fantasy—"the anti-Semite makes the Jew"?

It seems to me that the main thrust of Consonni and Liska's volume lies in providing an alternative answer as well, based on an alternative reading of Sartre's essay. This reading accentuates not how Sartre dismisses any concept of Jewishness as racist stereotype, which any liberal theory does, but how Sartre's specifically *existential* analysis also suggests how to "conceptualize Jewish existence in a new way." In a nutshell, against the Democratic intonation that "*the anti-Semite makes the Jew*," the counter-reading emphasizes that Sartre's essay also shows how "the anti-Semite *makes the Jew*." If the Democrat understands from Sartre that Jewishness is an anti-Semitic projection and concludes that it should be therefore categorically dismissed together with anti-Semitism itself, this volume reminds us that Sartre's essay—perhaps in its "most important aspect" (Consonni)—also *criticizes* the Democratic reaction to anti-Semitism. Its critique consists in realizing that the anti-Semitic projection does not remain in the anti-Semitic mind, but constitutes a social, cultural, political reality, generates an actual individual and collective consciousness of oppressed Jewish existence, which is as existentially real as any other social consciousness and which cannot be condemned. On the contrary, this new consciousness of oppression becomes a new site of politics.

The volume's authors who are sensitive to this reading are in dispute amongst themselves and with Sartre as to the exact mechanism by which anti-Semitism generates an actual form of Jewish being. Some, like Joëlle Zask, Vinzia Fiorino and Manuela Consonni, read Sartre as applying a Hegelian model of master-slave dialectics, which they all criticize as being too reciprocal, as presupposing fundamental identity and as excluding all possibility of recognizing real difference, that is, to adopt the term suggested by Zask, all possibility of "acknowledging" real Jewish otherness. Dror Yinon, in contrast, disputes that Sartre is using in this context the model of master-slave recognition. Against the Democratic reading, whereby the authentic reaction to the anti-Semitic projection of Jewishness, like all authenticity for Sartre, would consist also for the Jew in *rejecting* an imposed Jewishness and reclaiming free individuality, Yinon points out that in the *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre in fact formulates a new notion of authenticity, not individual but collective. Even if Jewishness is "a bogus idea invented by the anti-Semite," Yinon notes the essay's basic ambiguity: the authentic Jew "must not avoid his identification" as a Jew (16).

This is the main point for explaining the special significance that this volume acknowledges in Sartre's reflections on the Jewish Question for contemporary theories of racism, postcolonialism and feminism. Hate, animosity, antagonism, and discrimination are real social structures that *generate* real social subjects. Fighting hate must not ignore this reality, lest it become a new form of suppression, a new kind of hate. The command to acknowledge the unique subjectivity of the suppressed, the subaltern, especially in constellations of deep-seated, structural, historical discrimination, as under colonialism, whiteness or phallocentrism, is constitutive of the emancipatory operation asserted by de-colonialism, critical race studies and many feminist and gender theories, *against* classic liberal universalism, which responds to discrimination by denying difference.

Vinzia Fiorino shows in her chapter how postcolonial theory is divided on the exact meaning of the emancipation that this operation envisions for the acknowledged

subaltern. Frantz Fanon, like Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, sought the ultimate liberation of the suppressed—the colonized, the black, the Jew—from imposed otherness. In contrast, in “Black Orpheus” Sartre instead supported Léopold Senghor’s *Négritude*, which in the face of white racism sought not to deny but to cultivate unique black culture. Similarly, Fiorino shows how the Italian feminist Carla Lonzi did not seek, in countering discrimination against women, to undo or socio-politically neutralize gender difference. On the contrary, Lonzi called us to acknowledge and cultivate what she termed the “clitoral woman” (whose pleasure, in contrast to the “vaginal” woman, is not conditioned on procreation), as a positively different feminine subjectivity, constituting “another way of thinking and acting in the world” (201).

Consequently, the second, counter- or post-liberal reading or elaboration of Sartre’s essay, in its more radical version, identifies an emancipatory power in the very labor of difference, of otherness. This emancipation does not aspire to the universal abolishment of difference, but on the contrary, to liberation from the universalist suppression of difference. To put it bluntly, on this reading of Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, the more powerful oppressor of the Jew is not the anti-Semite but the Democrat. Even more provocatively, one may say that anti-Semitism, as well as racism, anti-feminism and other kinds of othering, which arise within liberal universalism and cosmopolitanism, socially function—regardless of individual motivations of racial and xenophobic hate—as resistance to cultural assimilation and so hold a potential for a restitution of difference, so to speak, for emancipation from assimilation.

We can identify at least one concrete instance of this idea in the Jewish context if we follow Bruno Chaouat’s chapter in examining Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophical analysis of anti-Semitism. As Chaouat shows, in 1934 Levinas took a—I use the terms of Sartre’s essay—“democratic” position, and reproached anti-Semitic “Hitlerism” for asserting collective ethnic traits beyond individual choice, in violation of Western, i.e. Jewish-Greek, principles of personal freedom. In contrast, in 1947 Levinas criticized this democratic position itself (which he read in Sartre: “*the anti-Semite makes the Jew*”) as—as per Chaouat’s insight—Gnostic severance between individual conscience and the world, and against it asserted Judaism as a metaphysics that is enacted “in time,” namely as historical culture, beyond the fleeting presence of mere individual decisions. I note that Levinas provocatively concluded his essay of 1947—“Being Jewish”—by suggesting, accordingly, that racist anti-Semitism, inasmuch as it offends individual self-determination, nonetheless has (in the mode of hate) a correct sense of Judaism’s trans-individual dimension—“a taste for the sacred” (*Being Jewish*, 210).

Levinas will later proceed to explicitly articulate the consequences of this thought. In 1982, for instance, in his preface to the French translation of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, after critically discussing conversion and assimilation, the “dejudaization” to which emancipation gave rise, he pointed at “all the unforeseeable and unforeseen dimensions that the very desperation brought about by National Socialist persecution opened up within Israel’s ancient faith.” (TN 143) The anti-Semitic gaze—incarnated in the politics of persecution—did not only exterminate, but also held a power of renewal, of liberation from the assimilatory effacement of the distinctive Jewish culture.

I would argue that this is precisely the empowering potential of Sartre's post-universalist observation that "the anti-Semite *makes* the Jew." Acknowledging the social, political, cultural reality of the newly made Jewish subjectivity allows us to reinstitute the historical meaning of a distinguished Jewish "way of thinking and acting in the world" (Fiorino), it opens up the possibility of the reJudaization of the non-Jewish Jew. The important historicity of this process, namely the crucial reference of Jewish renewal to concrete forms of historical Jewish culture, is underlined by Vivian Liska's contribution, which warns against ahistorical metaphorization of the reinstated "Jewish" that runs the risk of being appropriated by the Democrat herself, such as in Alain Badiou's declaration—"le juif c'est moi." One would do well to heed also Eva Illouz's concern regarding the exact meaning that Jewish restoration might have and the danger it runs in concrete political situations, paradigmatically that of the Jewish Nation-State, of using difference for reinforcing oppression.

Beyond the Jewish, Consonni and Liska's volume suggests that a similar analysis—restitution of otherness by othering —, with similar theoretical and political challenges, may be more broadly applied within contemporary theories of race, gender and post-colonialism, which thus mark new horizons and directions in the study of anti-Semitism.