
H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 233

Bruno Chaouat, *Is Theory Good for the Jews?: French Thought and the Challenge of the New Antisemitism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. xxvi + 281 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. £75.00. (hb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8-3346; £90.00. (eb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8121-2.

Review by Brett Ashley Kaplan, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Bruno Chaouat's *Is Theory Good for the Jews?* is well-written, well-researched, and deeply felt. Chaouat is an established scholar and Professor at the University of Minnesota whose work is at the intersection of French literature and thought and Holocaust and Jewish Studies. Thus, while I completely disagree with his central arguments, I laud him for a serious scholarly contribution to the debates around antisemitism in France today.

Finding that "French thought" has been taken over by deconstruction and its legacies, Chaouat argues that "the Jew" has symbolically morphed from a figure of wandering, rootlessness, and diaspora to, conversely, one that is problematically too rooted due to a supposed connection with Israel. Thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Judith Butler, Michael Rothberg, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-François Lyotard, and a host of others are to blame, in Chaouat's account, for a rise in antisemitic discourse.

Theory, then, in Chaouat's view, is definitely bad for the Jews. He reaches this conclusion by claiming that antisemitism is on the rise in France but that because of the multicultural aims of theorists, coupled with many contemporary theoretical thinkers' opposition to certain aspects of Israeli governmental choices, Islamophobia has taken over as the concern at the expense of a clear-eyed view of antisemitism. Theory, then, according to this logic, exacerbates antisemitism by refusing to fully recognize it.

There are many problems with this argument. First, the very idea of "French thought" (which Chaouat does explain fully) does not take into account the plasticity of said thought. What if it is the case that "French thought" could contain many contradictions? What if parts of Heidegger's thought (and here of course French theory owes a huge amount to German thinkers such as Heidegger) can be fruitfully incorporated into French thought and the fascist part can be exported? What if "French thought" is malleable and complex enough to contain these contradictory forces? Second, I do not take it as a given that a focus on Islamophobia precludes a focus on antisemitism. Indeed, in many instances they are analyzed together. Finally, while some theorists are Jewish and some are not, and while earlier claims regarding the "Jewishness" of deconstruction may have been overblown, theory in general overlaps in so many ways with aspects of Jewish philosophy and history and biography that it seems highly counterintuitive to claim that theory is somehow antisemitic. Much of what theory does so powerfully and effectively is to uncover and thus help to dissolve the very mechanisms that are the conditions of possibility for hatreds like antisemitism.

Chaouat argues that scholars such as Judith Butler are "blinded" (p. 25) by their anti-Zionism and that they "resort to distortion of history and to a betrayal of the most basic principles of hermeneutics to justify

their belief in the political and intellectual superiority of Diasporic Judaism (hypostatized as ethical) over Zionism (construed as particularistic, imperialistic, and fascist)" (p. 26).^[1]

Chaouat's characterization of "anti-Zionists" as construing Israel as "fascist" flattens what are often very thoughtful and deeply felt discussions of Israeli politics. Butler, especially, is very careful in *Parting Ways* and other texts precisely to not simply discount all of Israel or to term it "fascist" as Chaouat claims here. In discussing Hannah Arendt's reading of fascism, for example, Butler notes in *Parting Ways*, "this is certainly *not* to say that Zionism is Nazism. She [i.e., Arendt] would have refused such an equation, and we should, too."^[2] Butler also situates herself *vis-à-vis* both the history of the Holocaust and Jewishness. In an article in *Ha'aretz* she first explains that many of her relatives did not survive the Holocaust, and then she discusses the bind she often finds herself in in ways that illuminate the problematic at work here: "I would also say that what became really hard for me is that if one wanted to criticize Israeli state violence—precisely because as a Jew one is under obligation to criticize excessive state violence and state racism—then one is in a bind, because one is told that one is either self-hating as a Jew or engaging anti-Semitism. And yet for me, it comes out of a certain Jewish value of social justice. So how can I fulfill my obligation as a Jew to speak out against an injustice when, in speaking out against Israeli state and military injustice, I am accused of not being a good enough Jew or of being a self-hating Jew? This is the bind of my current situation."^[3]

This bind and Butler's presentation of it clarifies the way in which many of us on the left are catalyzed to take a stand and protest, speak up, call our senators repeatedly—whatever actions we choose precisely because of an alliance with Jewish values around social justice.^[4] That this protesting and speaking out includes decrying violence of the Israeli state simply means that we are keeping hold of an ethical center rather than choosing to exempt this particular form of violence *because* it is perpetrated by a Jewish state. By mis-characterizing those who critique certain aspects of Israeli policy as declaring flatly that Israel is fascist, Chaouat denies the avowed complexity of many of these thinkers' positions and ultimately misrepresents their views. There are post-Zionists as well as anti-Zionists, there are people on the left (like me) who believe that the state of Israel should exist but with a two-state solution and with equal representation. Chaouat chooses to clump together disparate stances in order to forward his arguments against theory and thus does not take fully into account the complexities of these stances.^[5]

As well as criticizing "anti-Zionists" (and I use quotation marks here because not everyone he lumps together using this term would agree to be thusly characterized), Chaouat quarrels with multidirectional thinking. While recognizing the scholarly merits of Michael Rothberg's important and highly influential book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Chaouat disagrees with Rothberg's main claims.^[6] Chaouat's principle argument is that Rothberg's text is "utopian" (p. 124) because it fails to take into account "Islamic antisemitism" (p. 125). Chaouat finds that, "the multidirectional hypothesis runs the risk of becoming one more self-serving theory, destined to be used by literary scholars seeking ready-made hermeneutical formulae and the moral high ground" (p. 130). He refers many times to theory's supposed claiming of the moral high ground, and I am unsure exactly what he means by this. To me, multidirectional memory seems to unseat any high ground by looking at how the Holocaust has already been engaged as a touchstone by many different groups experiencing trauma. In other words, Rothberg uses the concept of multidirectional memory to name phenomena that already exist. There is a lot of "moral high ground" in making the Holocaust the sacralized event of the last century; by looking at how different traumas resonate with each other, it would seem that the moral high ground disappears into the ground of open discussion. Also, if it is the case that Rothberg chooses not to focus on "Islamic antisemitism" I suspect this has less to do with obliviousness (as Chaouat would have it) as it does with a strong desire to not replicate oft-repeated and sometimes specious claims that border on or are outright Islamophobic. Chaouat goes so far as to claim that Rothberg "gives legitimacy to Islamic terrorism" (p. 139). There is simply no evidence in *Multidirectional Memory* or in anything else Rothberg has written to support this claim. Chaouat further contends that, "multidirectional memory scholars perpetuate the Vichy syndrome—a pathological, hysterical way of conflating historical events and

compressing them to the most extreme” (p. 139). I suppose it is open to interpretation whether one chooses to read a calm, measured, and deeply thought-through book such as Rothberg’s as “hysterical.” I do not interpret it that way at all. And far from “compressing” historical events, throughout *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg carefully unpacks each historical event and keeps all events distinct. Chaouat’s argument seems to say that noticing resonances or making comparisons is akin to conflation. It isn’t. When carefully done, and Rothberg is among the most prudent and careful of scholars, noticing resonances and drawing out cross-cultural comparisons enriches and enlivens the readings of all events. In other words, it un-compresses them, allows them to expand and be discovered.

Chaouat further claims that the “multidirectional hypothesis” has, “to an extent eclipsed the event”—i.e., eclipsed the Holocaust. Rothberg is very clear throughout *Multidirectional Memory* that the whole “competitive” hypothesis is what in fact eclipses traumatic events and that seeing them in terms of their multidirectional effects on each other is what allows for a more just approach to memory—rather than a zero-sum approach: “Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private.”[7] In other words, when Chaouat wants to press the fact that looking at traumas next to each other eclipses them he falls into the very zero-sum logic away from which multidirectional thinking steers.

Throughout, Chaouat has a tendency to make bold statements without support. For example, he discredits as “intellectually worthless” any analogy between French Jews and Muslims: “As a matter of fact, the politics of the French Republic towards Muslims is one of integration and de-differentiation (hence in France the ban on the *burqua* in public spaces and the ban on the headscarf in schools), while Nazi and more generally antisemitic state policies consisted in stressing difference (marking) and excluding Jews from the national community” (p. 52). Rather than a pleasant form of integration, I view the ban on the headscarf in schools as a form of discrimination against Muslims that disallows religious freedom of expression. In making his assertion, Chaouat does not provide any evidence to support the claim that the ban is a positive form of integration or assimilation. Indeed, many scholars, such as Maud Mandel, have found that, while there are no simple analogies, Jews and Muslims in France have often found “a common experience of displacement...[and] similar pressures to assimilate while also often feeling rejected by the nation seeking to integrate them.”[8] As Joan Wallach Scott argues in *The Politics of the Veil*, “the veil became a screen onto which were projected images of strangeness and fantasies of danger.”[9] By insisting that the ban is a means of integrating Muslims into the wider French culture, Chaouat turns a blind eye to a whole host of discriminations in France. Indeed, it is paradoxical that a scholar who is so concerned with antisemitism refuses to see Islamophobia even in some of its more blatant forms.

During several moments, Chaouat anticipates the critiques he expects to receive and either tries to head them off at the pass or to imagine what they will sound like. He has an imaginary interlocutor declare of the title of the book: “What a bold, selfish, and parochial question for the title of an academic book!” (p. xxi). Or, again, “The reader may notice that my tone may at times sound biting.... Those whom I criticize may accuse me of having misread them, not of having slandered them” (p. 26). And, indeed, the tone is sometimes “biting.” To wit: “That was a treat! Reading, deconstructing, disseminating meaning and splitting hairs—that was so Jewish, even rabbinic, or so we were told” (p. xviii). This auguring of reviews and the self-described biting tone are evidence of the deep emotional pull of his subject. Antisemitism is necessarily deeply emotional and needs to be fought from every conceivable angle so this level of attachment makes perfect sense.

Chaouat’s book would have been in press or out by the time Trump was elected (or rather, won the presidency without a majority), so Chaouat will not have been able to take into account the moving texts written by some of the same people he critiques for being “blind” to antisemitism. Many of these essays decry the antisemitism that a scary number of Trump’s white supremacist supporters espouse. If these thinkers were oblivious to or actively suppressing antisemitism, they would not have made these

arguments.[10] Antisemitism is, indeed, real, on the rise, and a profoundly caustic part of our political and emotional landscapes. But we need to look far to the right of theory and contemporary leftist theorists to find the causes of its horrible growth.

NOTES

[1] See Chaouat's 2013 critique of Butler in *Le Monde*: <http://laphilosophie.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/03/13/debat-judith-butler-ou-levinas-trahi/> (accessed August 27, 2017); her response appeared a few days later: <http://laphilosophie.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/03/21/levinas-trahi-la-reponse-de-judith-butler/> (accessed August 27, 2017).

[2] Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 121.

[3] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/judith-butler-as-a-jew-i-was-taught-it-was-ethically-imperative-to-speak-up-1.266243> (accessed August 17, 2017).

[4] For more on Butler's position see <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/ray-filar/willing-impossible-interview-with-judith-butler> (accessed August 27, 2017).

[5] Chaouat discusses Butler's *Parting Ways* and other texts (pp. 206-222).

[6] In the interest of full honesty, I should note before proceeding that Michael was my colleague and friend here at UIUC for seventeen years so I am unlikely to take an "objective" view. But I would make the same argument if I had never met him.

[7] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

[8] Maud S. Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 1.

[9] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 19.

[10] For some examples, see *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (Jewish Voice for Peace/Haymarket Books, 2017); <https://www.massreview.org/node/707> (accessed August 27, 2017); and <http://publici.ucimc.org/trump-and-the-resurgence-of-antisemitism/> (accessed August 27, 2017).

Brett Ashley Kaplan
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
bakaplan@illinois.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

