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Éric Marty, *Radical French Thought and the Return of the "Jewish Question."* Translated by Alan Astro. Foreword by Bruno Chaouat. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xi + 126 pp. Notes and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-253-01672-0; \$28.00 U.S. (pb.). ISBN 978-0-253-01678-2.

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Marty's short book is certainly no "introduction" to contemporary French theorists' views on anti-Semitism, as the back cover promises. This is no primer for the uninitiated. Instead, we are treated to five essays previously published in French, carefully translated by Alan Astro. The first is a brilliant, long, nuanced interpretation of Jean Genet's writings on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that makes up nearly half the book. It is followed by four shorter, polemical interventions, several of which were included in Marty's *Une querelle avec Alain Badiou, philosophe*.^[1] In Marty's crosshairs in these chapters is Alain Badiou and other kindred spirits who have resuscitated St. Paul in the name of a universalism they set against Jewish and other "communitarian" particularisms. Ripped apart as well is Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*, which is damned alongside Gilles Deleuze's *pièces de circonstance* on Israel/Palestine.

Bruno Chaouat's foreword expertly introduces readers to Marty and summarizes his main points. Marty is a literary critic and novelist, "the author of sixteen well-regarded books, critical editions, and innumerable essays" (p. xi). Marty's mother's milk, Chaouat explains, was structuralist and post-structuralist theory imbibed from the sources in Paris in the 1970s. For Marty, post-structuralism was, in part, an intellectual response to "World War II, fascism, collaboration with the Nazi regime, and the unassimilable event of the Holocaust" (p. xii). Marty's fidelity to this set of concerns has been betrayed by the figures who have risen following Derrida's death in 2004 as France's new generation of radical intellectuals. The leitmotif of the book is the radical intellectuals misuse of "synonymy": the ways in which "Badiou and others have been using the name 'Jew' as an equivalent for 'worker,' 'immigrant,' or 'Palestinian,' thus dissolving the singularity and the exceptionality of the name in an abstract universalism—a universalism that subsumes each particular in the name of the struggle against oppression, in the name of the revolution" (p. xviii). Jews and Israel are thus repeatedly shorn from history, Marty objects, and then twisted to new onto-theological and political ends. This is an exercise in what Marty terms "metaphysical antisemitism," which is coupled to a new anti-racism. This is because the words "Jew" and "Israel" "have emerged as synonyms of 'racist' and 'exclusion'" (p. xxi).

The stakes of Marty's book are consequently far bigger than the ideas of a small group of thinkers on the left bank of the Seine. What hangs in the balance is how we think about the French entanglement with the Mediterranean Middle East. The discussions in *Radical French Thought* are rarified. But Marty is asking us to evaluate the terms of global militancy, including militant jihadism, alongside the movement to boycott Israel, precariously poised against the teetering triangle of Jews and Muslims and the legacy of what Gary Wilder has termed "the French imperial nation-state."^[2] For all that, the book is uneven, with a dense, long opening chapter and four shorter essays that are often just as hostile and one-sided as the works they critique.

The best chapter of the volume is the essay on Genet. This is a close, careful reading by an excellent exegete invested in exploring a complicated metaphysical and ontological puzzle. This is evident in the title of the chapter, "Jean Genet's Anxiety in the Face of The Good." The Good, Marty shows, is embodied by Jews for Genet. Marty's leaping off point is Jean-Paul Sartre's existential biography, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, which traced Genet's self-construction as a thief, homosexual, and writer driven by the inversion of what are taken as moral norms. By the 1970s, this aligned Genet with those Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth," especially the Black Panthers and the Palestinians.^[3] Marty's focal point is Genet's writings in the wake of the infamous massacres at Sabra and Shatila in September 1982. These took place in the midst of the Lebanese Civil Wars when a Christian Phalangist militia murdered hundreds of men, women and children, ostensibly with the complicity of the Israeli military.

Appreciative of his literary genius, Marty carefully parcels Genet's semiotics, disclosing his underlying claims within a universe concocted by the theatre of the absurd, where words don't fix to things in any usual sense. "Israel," for example, has to be understood in its metaphysical sense (p. 27), not just as another political entity. To get at what Marty means by this you have to follow the rapid-fire switches in his cultural references, which veer from Homer to Rimbaud, from Nietzsche to Bataille, from Proust to Gide. If you are not familiar with each touchstone, following Marty's arguments is difficult, even cumbersome. He brings his case to a climax in these lines: "Sabra and Shatila achieve their status as event of events, as pure exception, insofar as they tell us little about the suffering and horrors undergone by the victims but are deeply tied up with the Jewish question where since time immemorial anxiety in the face of the Good confronts the dread of Evil. In this sense, Sabra and Shatila are a metaphysical event on which the scapegoat scenario [as understood by René Girard] confers a universalism writ large, which could not fail to appeal to a global audience" (p. 36).

"Sabra and Shatila" have become shorthand for Israel's dark side, a shibboleth that quickly names Israel's sins, embodied by the proper noun "Sharon." But in the most luminous passages of the book, Marty shows that this shortcut turns Sabra and Shatila into a kind of black hole that swallows all other memories of this complicated past. It erases a whole series of other massacres that were part of the Civil Wars in Lebanon, which began in 1975. One event that is forgotten, for example, is that three years *after* the Israeli's left Beirut, five hundred Palestinian civilians were massacred in the same Sabra and Shatila camps. This time, the Shiites of the Lebanese Amal militia perpetrated the acts of savagery. "[T]heir destructiveness and criminality had no reason to envy the deeds of September 1982," writes Marty (p. 32).

Sabra and Shatila function as a scapegoat, Marty maintains, because this allows the repression of Arab fratricide. This is abetted because of the Israeli response to Sabra and Shatila, since it resulted in more than three hundred thousand protestors assembling in Tel Aviv to express, vociferously, their disgust at what had transpired in the name of the Jewish state. These Israelis, who condemned the Israeli military and Sharon, Marty evocatively suggests, posed the ethical question asked by Cain: are we not our enemy's keeper? (Marty's metaphysical interpretations involve a number of references to Biblical stories). Genet's accounts of Sabra and Shatila are symptomatic of how blame was foisted on Israel alone, repressing the complicated circumstances that surrounded Sabra and Shatila, positioning Palestinians as modern martyrs to the cause of liberation. The book is worth it just for this essay alone.

But subsequent chapters are too embroiled in present intellectual quarrels about Israel/Palestine and the memory of the Shoah to offer the same depth as Marty's chapter on Genet. Indeed, they often sink into ad hominem name-calling. For example, here is Marty on Badiou—today, the most widely translated French philosopher: "Manic depressives can be highly intelligent, and Badiou's histrionics remain commensurate with his wide-ranging and deep intellect, his erudition, and his brio" (p. 72). Badiou is dismissed as a "Tartuffe" and a "Svengali" (p. 61) and a "philosopher-villain," (p. 75) who goes "off the deep end" as a result of his "wild revolutionary ideations" that "keep him from having to undergo electroconvulsive therapy" (p. 72).

In Badiou's response, "The Word 'Jew' and the Sycophant," he chides Marty just as vehemently: "The practice of singling out great philosophers for public condemnation by specialists of lies, ignorance and insane mediocrity has a long history. The pair of Socrates and the petty characters who accused him of corrupting the youth, Anytos and Meletos, is inaugural. The technical name for these professional accusers is 'sycophant.'" Badiou accuses Marty of being "an incompetent and lazy academic" who bites "the hams of Althusser, Genet, Agamben" and others.[4]

Marty's riposte to Badiou was enflamed by Badiou's sometimes outrageously provocative claims around the *Uses of the Word "Jew,"* originally published as *Circumstances 3*, and included in English as part of his aptly titled volume of political interventions, *Polemics*. Badiou should be taken to task for his outlandish claims: that thanks to the Nazis, the signifier 'Jew' today confers a sacred identity that forecloses critique of Israel; that Israel as a Jewish state has a racist identity; that the Holocaust is what justifies "the colonial state of Israel;" and that Jewish universalism has always sought to break with Jewish communitarianism—Badiou here famously valorizes those "non-Jewish Jews" Trotsky's biographer, Isaac Deutscher, embraced.[5]

Marty slings a set of facile claims to contravene Badiou's defamation of Israel: "When Israel was able to make peace with an Arab partner, it withdrew from land" (p. 56); or "Israeli occupation of Sinai, Gaza, the Golan, and the West Bank was always in fact provisional; in the last two cases it remains so" (this may be true, but we are now nearly fifty years into that provisional occupation); or the claim that Israel is the only cosmopolitan, multicultural polity in the region with "an even greater presence of modern democracy than in France" that extends "the same" political rights to Bedouin, Druze, and Palestinian (both Christian and Muslim) citizens as it does to Jews (p. 57).

A serious confrontation with the claims of Badiou and those who parrot his position, however, demands going beyond polemics. It entails a careful reading, which Badiou's response to Marty makes plain he has not done. For example, Marty insists that the first of Badiou's "theses or opinions" is that "[t]he supposed return of antisemitism simply reflects greater sensitivity to the issue" (p. 53). But Badiou is clear that he is *not* downplaying the new Judeophobia. Hear him out: "I shall return to the issue of the birth of a new type of anti-Semitism, one articulated on conflicts in the Middle East and the presence, in France, of large minorities of workers of African extraction and of Muslim persuasion. For now, suffice it to say that the existence of this type of anti-Semitism is not in doubt, and that the zeal with which some deny its existence—generally in the name of supporting the Palestinians or the working-class minorities in France—is extremely harmful. That being the case, it doesn't seem to me that the data, which are freely available, are such that they justify raising a full alert, although it should be clear that, on such questions, the imperative of vigilance admits of no interruption." [6]

Badiou's position is fiercely consistent: "all forms of racist consciousness alike call for the same egalitarian and universalist reaction." [7] He refuses to recognize in Palestinian assertions of ethno-nationalism what he refuses in Israeli assertions: "there should be a legitimate distrust of everything Arab.... [E]very declamatory introduction of communitarian predicates in the ideological, political or state field, whether criminalizing or sanctifying, leads to the worst." [8] In the spirit of St. Paul, his solution calls for a completely secular and democratic state shared by all groups in the region that recognizes "neither Arab nor Jew". This will undoubtedly demand a regional Mandela." [9]

Badiou's goal as Socratic gadfly is also to appropriate the word 'Jew' (he says "liberate" it) from those he currently believes monopolize its use. He lumps them together in a distasteful acronym: the "triplet Shoah-Israel-Tradition, or SIT, as the only acceptable content of the word 'Jew.'" [10] This leads to some of his unacceptable formulations such as, "Ought 'Palestinian' become the new name of the true Jews?" thereby legitimating "the major call to denounce the anti-Semitism of the State of Israel." This was penned in his article titled, "Israel: the Country in the World where there are the Fewest Jews," published in June 1982 during the assault on Lebanon. [11] Badiou, like St. Paul before him, confers on himself the right to decide

whom to name “the true Jews.”

These formulations about new Jews and true Jews are wholly congruent with the Pauline tradition that Badiou also wants to appropriate and the source of what Marty terms “metaphysical antisemitism.” Marty wrestles with this tradition in his third chapter, “Saint Paul among the Moderns.” Like Jean-François Lyotard in *Un trait d'union (The Hyphen)* [12], Marty seeks to highlight the problematic aspects of Christian supersession and by extension Badiouean universalism, which demand the purification of all Judaic elements. To this end, he marshals Claude Lévi-Strauss, who in a famous lecture in 1971 at UNESCO, “Race and Culture,” pointed out that universalism often entails identification with “the Same, the center, totality, world unification” (p. 84). He builds on this with Horkheimer and Adorno, who in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* pointed to how this identification is conjoined to domination, rather than emancipation. And he elaborates an alternative via Lacan, Barthes and Levinas, ending with a riff on Jean-Claude Milner’s *Le Juif de savoir*, where “Milner rejects the Western monopoly on the universal and reclaims it for Jewish thought, offering the idea of a difficult universal that stands in opposition to the easy universal of post-Pauline thought” (p. 92). The idea of a “difficult universal” echoes Levinas’ notion of “difficult freedom,” which he identified with Judaism, in opposition to the totalizing tendencies of the Western tradition.

Marty’s ire is again on display in his chapters on Giorgio Agamben’s *State of Exception* and on Deleuze that end the book. Agamben is taken to task for using “rudimentary, massive analogies”: comparing the 680 Taliban prisoners at Guantánamo bay to Nazi *Lager* inmates or the fingerprinting of foreign visitors by U.S. immigration to tattooing those arriving at Auschwitz. States Marty, “Agamben shows beyond the shadow of a doubt his incomprehension of Auschwitz” (p. 101). He is derided for his “sham genealogy,” which draws easy parallels between the state of exception in absolutist monarchies, in totalitarian states, and in modern democracies. “It is clear that Agamben employs outrageous statements that convince no one, not even himself,” writes Marty. Why does Agamben do this? “His sole concern is to fit his ideas into the radical analytical grid that seems to have become indispensable to a European intellectual wishing to gain influence” (p. 105). Two grotesque blind spots characterize these radical intellectuals, according to Marty: they have not appreciated the historical failures of communism or the centrality of the Jewish question as it reverberated through the twentieth century.

But since Marty’s essays are polemical, we also get his hyperbole: “The specter of worldwide class struggle that the existence of the Soviet Union infused with excitement for those obsessed with revolution has been replaced by struggles for rights of all sorts. None of these has profound historical meaning, and all serve as decoys deflecting attention from the ever growing appeal possessed by the sole truly global purveyor of terror: radical Islam, for which all kinds of excuses are made, especially whenever Israel is concerned” (p. 109).

So *none* of the movements to extend rights has profound meaning: gay rights, women’s rights, the rights of the *sans papiers*, the rights of those seeking asylum, worker’s rights? And only radical Islam is a global purveyor of terror? So drone attacks are written out of the conversation? These are the options we have to choose: support the revolution wherever it may be or focus solely on the threat of radical Islam. Seriously?

To bisect the world like this in the form of polemics is key to the problems raised by Marty’s book. But his own polemics recapitulate and reiterate precisely the discourse he wants to analyze and ought to deconstruct: that surrounding Israel/Palestine, Jews and Arabs, militancy and our response to it. These passages indicate the limits of this work, which too often veer from erudite and thoughtful readings to his own polemics around the Jewish Question and Israel. If these issues are ever going to rest, Jews and Israel have got to stop becoming wedge issues.

Marty’s last chapter pits Foucault against Deleuze. In 1976, Foucault categorically rejected the new

dogma legally enconced at the United Nations that Zionism is a form of racism. And in his course at the Collège de France, published as *Society Must Be Defended*, “Foucault claimed that starting with the Middle Ages, Hebraic discourse displaced, reformed, and undermined the dominant model of sovereignty, the Indo-European model of the functioning of power. It did so through proposing a ‘counterhistory’ of ‘servitudes and exiles’ that offered the possibility of a prophetic break with the past, which became an arm in the hands of the wretched and the rebellious” (p. 113). This is Marty’s position as well. Sign me up too. Deleuze, on the other hand, is dismissed by the title of his articles alone, “The Indians of Palestine” or “The Grandeur of Yasser Arafat.”

A more finely grained analysis of Deleuze is warranted, however, since there is much in his work that directly echoes what Marty lauds about Foucault’s celebration of the Hebraic. One just needs to reference the themes that he explored with Guattari when they celebrated the “nomadic” and “minoritarian” in several works in the 1970s. Deleuze’s failure, for Marty, is that he is another case of those radical intellectuals who repeat a succession of synonyms, which have dogged Jews throughout the western tradition and do so now under the name of Israel. Thus concludes Marty: “That [synonymy] is the inexhaustible source antisemitism has always drawn upon and will continue to do so. To contradict it is a duty” (p. 121).

Marty is surely right to call out Genet, Badiou, Agamben, and Deleuze for what we might term their radical chic—brandishing their political props with grandiloquent gestures about Israel and drawing analogies to the Nazis and to Vichy when it suits their political ends. These analogies often render banal the extreme circumstances of the Nazi era. Playing the Hitler card through hyperbolic analogies generally means you can’t win the argument on its merits. But Marty’s own retorts in the shorter essays in this book often just throw fuel on the fire rather than engage in the patient and difficult task of dismantling the discourse and critiquing the institutions that perpetuate the problem. Polemics, which are the discourse of war, are one of those problems.

NOTES

[1] Éric Marty, *Une querelle avec Alain Badiou, philosophe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

[2] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

[4] Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, translated and introduced by Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 234.

[5] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 162. See Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and other Essays* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.)

[6] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 158.

[7] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 159.

[8] Badiou, *Polemics*, pp. 160-161.

[9] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 164.

[10] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 231.

[11] Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 170.

[12] J-F Lyotard, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanity Books, 1999).

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