
Paul Reitter’s *On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred*  
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Be it a “heartbreak kid” or a whining Woody Allen character, the concept of Jewish self-hate has continued to perplex and elude readers. Recall Kurt Lewin (1941), or Sander L. Gilman’s major treatise (1986) on the subject, and we learn more than we care to know about the underlying social, philosophical, and conceptual analyses. Gilman’s book focused on “how Jews see the dominant society seeing them and how they project their anxiety about this manner of being seen onto other Jews as a means of externalizing their own status anxiety” (Gilman 11), just as Lewin noted on distinctions of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Ostjuden from their more sophisticated Western European counterparts. Adding insult to injury are the British anti-Zionist writers who argue that Israeli critics should not be considered self-hating Jews, e.g., Lerman (2008).

In the earlier works, we learned who was a Jew hating-Jew, but we still did not understand why it occurred. Enter Paul Reitter, professor of German at Ohio State University, who sets out to explain why the concept deserves further inquiry (Part 1). He then goes on in Part 2 to focus on a new name in the field, viz., Austrian journalist Anton Kuh, who coined the term *Jewish self-hate* in 1921. Kuh and Hanover physician Theodor Lessing, as Reitter notes in Part 3, in *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (1930) offer “affirmative and even redemptive Ur-meanings” (Reitter 122)—for example, Lessing’s underscoring of the productive values of Jewish self-abnegation and
worldly alienation: “He [Lessing] refers to the Jew’s ‘creative self-hatred’ and their ‘self-hatred of genius,’ genius being something the Jews are incapable of in Lessing’s other writings on them” (117).

So, even at this point in history, we still do not have a clear understanding of why some Jews hate things Jewish. This is not the author’s fault—it is a scant literature, with not much written on the subject in the last fifty years. The reason for this is because, as Volkov (2006) suggests, Jewish self-hate rarely occurs. When one researcher administered a standard test of antisemitism to Jewish subjects, no Jews endorsed antisemitic themes (Baum 2010). The few studies that found slight statistical support for antisemitic ideas among Jews found themes of authoritarianism, parental rejection (Sarnoff 1951), and “distrust of others and a less than adequate sense of security” (Demarkovsky 1978, 58). To date, no one has offered comparative self-hates of other groups to Jews—e.g., Catholics who hate Catholicism, Hindus who are critical of Hinduism, and other examples of self-hate.

Jews who held contempt for Israel were not necessarily antisemitic, either. Gilman initially suggested that anti-Zionism was related to antisemitism, but the findings of the research studies are not consistent. Anti-Zionism may be statistically correlated with an increase in antisemitism (Baum 2009; Cohen, Jussim, Harber, and Bhasin 2009) but the correlations are at best moderate and far from the ideal 1:1. Other studies find no relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, as Mick Finlay (2005) and the British hard left suggest. Though not a Jewish population per se, Wilhelm Kempf (2012) found subjects who held anti-Zionism views wanted peace and were not antisemitic. Suffice it to say that the two concepts of antisemitism and anti-Zionism may not at times be necessarily related.

Reitter’s On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred is well written and accomplishes what it set out to do—it offers an improved conceptual analysis and clarification surrounding the term “Jewish self-hate.” The reader is provided with new material. Reitter weaves an interesting narrative that enriches the history of Jewish self-hate literature. But if the reader is searching for the answer of why some Jews hate all things Jewish, it is fair to say that they will not find it in this book—and the mystery continues.

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