

The Jewish RACE?

FRENCH-JEWISH RACIAL IDENTITY AND THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

Lisa Moses Leff

Given our current repugnance for calling Jews a “race,” it may be surprising to learn that Jews themselves, in France at least, adopted this terminology to define themselves in the mid-nineteenth century. When they did, they weren’t merely borrowing terms from their enemies, as scholars once believed. On the contrary, a generation before anti-Semites began to use racial language to define Jews as unwelcome strangers in the nation, prominent French-Jewish writers had already begun to use this terminology to quite different ends. As we shall see, exploring the circumstances under which they first adopted this new language to express their sense of self provides a particularly good vantage point from which to understand key issues in both Jewish and French history.

Although it is somewhat difficult to

identify exactly when French Jews began to refer to themselves as a race for the first time, such language had clearly arrived by mid-century. To get a sense of how this terminology was used at the time, one need but look at some key works focusing on Jewish history marketed to the educated French-Jewish reading public in the 1860s by Gustave d’Eichthal, Hippolyte Rodrigues, Joseph Salvador, and

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Maurice (Moses) Hess, who, though German, made his home in Paris and regularly contributed to French-Jewish periodicals. The books put forth similar arguments: the Jews are an ancient race that has

retained its vitality through the centuries, and its religion, conserved through endogamous practices, offers moral lessons particularly relevant for the nineteenth century. Somewhat in tension with their emphasis on Jewish distinctiveness was their claim that the message of Judaism was universal, since it was the parent of Christianity and Islam, and its mission still today was to bring, as Hess put it, “humanitarian religion” back to the whole world.

These works were reviewed, celebrated and summarized in the French-Jewish press, where journalists were already describing Jews as a biologically defined people whose religion was essentially a set of lessons relevant for the contemporary world. And in the spirit of these works, the Paris-based Alliance Israelite Universelle awarded a prize in 1862 to Alfred Legoyt for his statistical study demonstrating the “vitality” of the “Jewish race” in Europe, a work that again emphasized both Jewish distinctiveness in

physiological terms and the universalism of the teachings of Judaism. These are but a few examples of a widespread phenomenon: in the mid-nineteenth

century, race discourse was generally used by assimilated Jews in France who were seeking to articulate both their indelible uniqueness and their essential connectedness to all humanity simultaneously.

Where did this language come from, and why were these Jews, all educated in secular institutions, embracing it at this particular moment? As it was used by other French writers at the time, race-talk provided a useful model of national integration in which various groups could come together without abandoning their particular beliefs. The origins of this conceptual framework lay among French historians in the 1820s. First theorized by the brothers Augustin and Amadée Thierry and adapted by François Guizot, “race” was seen as the analytic key to history. Change in human societies, the Thierrys had argued, took place because of conflicts between migrating and warring racial groups, each of whom brought with them distinct forms of culture and politics. For Amadée Thierry, for example, much of French history was a history of conflict between the Franks and the Gauls, two races distinct from one another in temperament, appearance, and morality. While this theory could be used to justify racial violence, most nineteenth-century French historians saw their own era as one of racial harmony. As Guizot asserted, the Revolution in France had finally brought an end to the long-standing struggle between the nation’s races by establishing a legal and institutional framework that mediated between them. This way

of thinking would certainly have appealed to the assimilating elite of nineteenth-century French Jews, who themselves nourished the utopian hope that the Revolution (once fully completed, of course) would bring about an era of Jewish political, social, economic, and even spiritual well-being by allowing Jews to reconnect to the world around them.

But by the time the mainstream Jewish press adopted it in the middle of the century, race-thinking was about more than just the right of distinctive groups like themselves to exist in peace within a nation. In



Portrait of Ernest Renan. Reprinted from William Francis Barry, *Ernest Renan* (New York: Scribner, 1905), frontispiece.

the 1830s and 1840s, this discourse was reshaped by the utopian socialist Saint-Simonians who were as interested in the international as the national arena. As the left-wing historians Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet used it, racial discourse became the backbone of what Jacob Talmon described as “the romantic phase” of political messianism in

which the fulfillment of nationalist dreams would lead to world redemption. These influential writers saw races as poised at a new moment in history—a final moment of racial fusion, a final end to the cycle of conquest and submission. They saw the nationalist movements emerging across Europe as racial yearnings finally taking political form. For Michelet, the French Revolution was a model for what was to come on a global scale: democratic institutions would form to mediate between the world’s races. Similarly, Quinet argued that like the Catholic Church before it, contemporary France’s mission in the world was to make “an alliance between the human races,” by spreading its morality and its science. By the time Jewish writers adapted it in the early 1860s, race theory in mainstream public discourse was thus embraced by thinkers committed to democratic movements on a global scale.

Following these romantic nationalists, French-Jewish writers used racial language to situate their identities in a context beyond the purely national. As conceived by these assimilated writers, the special mission of the Jews in the nineteenth-century world was most certainly internationalist. The most striking examples of this come

from the writings of Jews involved in the Saint-Simonian movement of the 1820s and 1830s, which would so shape racial thinking in France. Léon Halévy, for example, argued in 1828 that through their inherited knowledge of international banking and commerce, Jews would know how to bring peace and prosperity to the whole world. Similarly, in a

series of unpublished works from the 1830s, Gustave d'Eichthal argued that since the Jewish racial nature combined Eastern and Western elements, then Judaism, as the law of that universal people, could serve as a model for the administration of justice in a modern international order. Versions of such claims became commonplace in the mid-nineteenth-century Jewish press as well. Jews' uniqueness and their particular utility in the nineteenth century were centered on the fact of the unity Jews displayed in their dispersion.

Yet in spite of this apparent enthusiasm for racial terminology, French-Jewish writers also seemed somewhat nervous about its potential uses, even before the rise of racial anti-Semitism. Such worry is clearly present in *Archives Israélites* editor Isidore Cahen's ambivalent response to Ernest Renan's scholarly work on ancient Israel and the historical Jesus in 1862. Although Cahen clearly liked the fact that Renan had characterized Jesus as embodying the characteristics and teachings of the Jewish race, he voiced real concern over the underlying anti-Jewish tone of the scholar's work, and especially, his explicit insistence that the Jewish people's vitality was a thing of the past. Confronting Renan's idea that history should be seen as a progressive rejection of Judaism by the Aryan race in an

April 1862 article, Cahen attacked the work's most basic theoretical foundation in race theory:

We protest Mr. Renan's assertion that the advancement of human society is tied to its rupture from the Jewish idea . . . [W]e don't like these absolute formulas, that claim that one religion or another has the monopoly on one idea or another, excluding one religion from the benefits of the other; we regret this doctrine of races, that instead of basing human society on an exchange of services and merits, is always paving the way for proscriptions.

While most Jewish writers—including Cahen himself—would continue to use the language of race to describe the Jewish people, such early protests can help us to achieve a more refined understanding of how and why they were adopting the language. When such terminology was useful for asserting minority rights, including the right to cultural or religious difference, race-language was used because of its powerful democratic message. But where such language became a warrant for exclusion, Jewish writers would vehemently reject it. Indeed, looking closely at how Jewish leaders responded to racial anti-Semitism when it emerged in the

1880s and 1890s, it appears that it was not race-language itself, but its exclusionary *use* that Jewish leaders found so objectionable. Even as they came to use it, then, the French articulated a critique of racial discourse. In seeing its dual nature even as they came to embrace it, Jewish writers were perhaps more aware than others in their world that race-language could be used to wildly divergent ends.

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