

Idealism in Ashes

Michael Mack

**German Idealism and the Jew:
The Inner Anti-Semitism of
Philosophy and German Jewish
Responses**

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Students of modern Judaism have long acknowledged the significant impact of German philosophy on the development of modern Jewish self-understanding. Throughout the nineteenth century, German Jews bent on modernization argued that the negative attitude towards Judaism reflected in the writings of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel was based on a misunderstanding of the true essence of Judaism. At the same time, Kant's description of religion as moral and rational provided the intellectual framework for the theology of the Reformers. One might go as far as to assert that the liberal tradition in nineteenth-century

German Judaism tried to show that it was more Kantian than Kant, an effort that culminated in the philosophical theology of Hermann Cohen, who articulated Judaism as a "religion of reason" and proposed the fundamental compatibility of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*.

Even the post-liberal trend in Jewish thinking could not escape the shadow of Kant, as the famous debate between Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig over the nature of Jewish law, or halacha, demonstrates. For even while defending the centrality of halacha to Jewish life, Rosenzweig felt the need to respond to Kant's critique of it. According to Kant, Jewish law is heteronomous, meaning that it originates from a source outside the individual's self-legislating will. And since for Kant all morality is such self-legislation, halacha is not moral. Moreover, for Kant true religion is at bottom indistinguishable from morality, and therefore the adherence to halacha is, for the Kantian, a false form of religion. Rosenzweig rebutted these Kantian accusations by stressing

how halacha is actually not at all heteronomous, but rather a subjective “response” to revelation, which provides the “landscape” of Judaism. Even Rosenzweig’s “return” could not ignore Kant’s shadow.

And not only Kant. Hegel, too, posed a challenge to the possibility of a modern Judaism. Hegel maintained that Judaism posited an absolute separation between spirit and world, God and man; it was a one-sided religion of sublimity, representing a necessary but incomplete stage in the development towards the absolute religion, Christianity, which apprehends the unity of God and man in Christ. With the advent of Christianity, Judaism’s world-historical mission had run its course. Judaism was now an anachronism, Jewish religiosity an attachment to an outmoded form of consciousness. Despite this view that Judaism had been overcome in history, Hegel insisted that the Jews—as human beings—ought to be granted civil rights in the modern constitutional state. Hegel’s philosophy spurred the early practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* not only to clarify the historical record, but also to illuminate the ongoing Jewish contribution to world history, and thereby to prove the indispensability of Judaism for the modern age. Moreover, Jewish speculative idealists such as Solomon Formstecher,

Samuel Hirsch, and Nachman Krochmal drew upon the language of Idealism to promote Judaism as the perennial “religion of the spirit,” in contradistinction to the pretenses of Christianity.

More recently, some scholars have begun to question the influence of modern philosophy on Judaism and to assert the fundamental Jewish difference from Western modernity. Others, such as Nathan Rotenstreich and Yirmiyahu Yovel, have scoured the texts of Kant and Hegel in order to detail their problematic treatment of Judaism and the Jews. These two scholarly tendencies meet in Michael Mack’s challenging new study, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses*, a slim but dense volume which is sure to delight and provoke in equal measure.

Mack’s central claim is that modern anti-Semitism is rooted in, and indelibly inscribed into, the discourse of the Enlightenment, its flattening out of traditional forms of community, and its cosmopolitan pretensions. In the discourse of German Idealism, Judaism and the Jews

represent this earthly remainder of incompleteness, or imperfection... [and] embody all that which hinders the construction of a

perfect body politic in the here and now. They come to symbolize the worldly which resists an immanent and imminent transformation into the other-worldly. The consequence of this starting point is the view that the anti-modern, anti-Enlightenment anti-Semitism that emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century and culminated in Nazism was not a counter-modern movement, a rejection of Enlightenment values, but rather represents the full working out of tendencies already developed by Kant.

The first part of Mack's book retraces the trajectory of modern anti-Semitic discourse by focusing on the image of Judaism and the Jew in Kant, Hegel, and Richard Wagner. Due to the radical nature of his thesis, Mack does not simply rehearse the treatment of Judaism and the Jews in these figures, but tries to show that, although brief and sometimes ambivalent, the discussions of Jews and Judaism in Kant and Hegel have had significant impact on the development of the so-called "Jewish question" and the tragic fate of European Jewry. For Mack, the treatment of Judaism in Kant and Hegel is not an accidental element of their work, one which may be simply attributed to the prejudices of the time and the weakness of the authors. The anti-Jewish assertions are not mere flaws in reasoning, regrettable but also easily dismissed,

but are understood to lie at the very core of their respective philosophical and political projects.

In Mack's view, these thinkers regarded Judaism as the opposite of, and hence a danger to, the social and political program of Idealism, which aimed to realize a humanity free from empirical, material conditions. Judaism was therefore not simply a theoretical alternative but rather posed a direct threat to the realization of the "heaven on earth" that would be the Idealist "body politic." The danger is not only the abstraction "Judaism" but also real-life Jews, who are deemed irrational, impure, materialist, heteronomous. As they stubbornly strive to achieve happiness and fulfillment *in the world*, they represent the greatest danger to the approaching regime of freedom. In the unfolding of his argument, Mack tackles a number of issues missed by previous accounts of the problem—such as Kant's ambivalence regarding capitalism and Hegel's speculative account of Jewish dietary laws—to show how an anxiety about Judaism infects the entire galaxy of Idealism.

There appears to be a certain amount of confusion or wavering, however, in Mack's account of the Jewish "threat." For in the introduction, Mack states that "Even though Kant and Hegel gave a rather prejudicial account of Jewishness (in

which the Jews embody the body as materialism and therefore heteronomy), they did not perceive Jews as a threat. Wagner differed.” In the chapter on Kant, however, Mack writes that “Kant targeted the Jews as the embodiment of the heteronomous. As a manifestation of heteronomy, the Jew was not only the opposite of the Christian, who was defined in terms of autonomous reason. Moreover, he also represented the stranger in a Kantian civil society, whose very laws presupposed an autonomous state of indetermination by objects of empirical reality.” The Jew was imagined as “the Oriental other,” unable to “make the transition to modernity”; as non-moderns, Kant

depicts them as corrupting the body politic.... In his account of the body politic, Kant fantasized about the Jews as figures of corruption. In socio-historical terms, Kant here unconsciously voiced his anxiety about capitalism’s ‘descent’ into materialism.

This negative portrait of Judaism discloses, Mack asserts, the persistence of Christianity in a modern “pseudo-theological” discourse (i.e., a secularized and politicized Christian theology), and his book traces how Kant and Hegel utilized and transformed pre-modern Christian theological ideas, such as Paul’s

opposition of the spirit to the letter, and the Jewish refusal to accept Christ, in order to develop their respective critiques of Judaism. Modern anti-Semitism, therefore, is not a response to Enlightenment, nor is it severed from pre-modern Christian anti-Judaism. German Idealism—now seen as harboring an essentially irrational anti-Semitic fantasy—is disclosed by Mack as the missing link between Christian theology and modern Jew hatred. According to Mack, modern reason was infected by the unreason of anti-Semitism. And the pathogen was endowed with the dignity of science.

As any revisionist account should, Mack’s treatment of the history of German Idealism poses a welcome challenge to the conventional histories; sometimes, however, he takes his point too far. In particular, his argument regarding the centrality of the anti-Semitic discourse and the immutability of Jewishness in Kant raises a host of questions, ultimately undermining his central thesis.

First, the account of Judaism is neither central to the development of Kant’s critical philosophy nor an obsessive element within it. In the entire corpus of Kant’s work, Jews and Judaism are discussed in only a few passages. To be sure, Kant’s remarks are often hostile and ill-informed.

Kant's most sustained discussion of Judaism emerges in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* from his anxiety regarding Christianity's historical links with Judaism. This is the key to Kant's understanding, and critique, of Judaism. Kant wanted to distinguish Christianity as a moral faith from a Judaism which he regarded as fundamentally statutory. He did not deny that there were moral elements to be found in the Jewish religion. He even conceded—in a somewhat unintelligible argument—that these moral elements may have been appended to Judaism in its original form. But these moral elements are not to be confused with Judaism as such, that is, with statutory faith. Mack acknowledges that the polemical intent of Kant's argument was to sever the historical connection of Christianity and Judaism, to show how the Jewish origins of Christianity are religiously (and philosophically) insignificant. But the primary issue for Kant was to undercut Judaism's problematic relationship to the historical phenomenon of Christianity. Christianity arose in a Jewish milieu, but it is based on a completely distinct religious principle.

Kant's conception of Judaism as a statutory and political faith begs the question of whether it could be "reformed" into a rational, ethical faith. The central thrust of *Religion* is to assist the purification of the historical

Protestant churches into a rational, ethical faith by distinguishing between natural and historical, ethical and non-ethical elements. But if Christianity could be purified in this way, could not Judaism as well?

The problem, as we have seen, is that Kant understood Judaism and Christianity as different in *kind*. While Christianity was fundamentally an ethical religion, Judaism was not. Therefore, while Christianity needed only to be purged of its non-religious elements, it would be impossible to do so with regard to Judaism. If Judaism as such was fundamentally statutory, to rid oneself of statutes would logically entail the end of Judaism. Once the statutory element was eliminated, what would be left would not be "Judaism" but "pure moral religion," rational and historically unconditioned.

But Kant did propose a solution to the problem of Judaism; or rather, he endorsed a proposal that had already been put forward. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant suggested that:

Without dreaming of a conversion of all Jews (to Christianity in the sense of a *messianic* faith), we can consider it possible even in their case if, as now is happening, purified religious concepts awaken among them and throw off the garb of the ancient cult, which serves no purpose and even suppresses any true religious attitude.... So we can consider the

proposal of Ben David, a highly intelligent Jew, to adopt publicly the religion of *Jesus* (presumably with its vehicle, the *Gospel*), a most fortunate one. Moreover it is the only plan which, if carried out, would leave the Jews a distinctive faith and yet quickly call attention to them as an educated and civilized people who are ready for all the rights of citizenship and whose faith could also be sanctioned by the government. If this were to happen, the Jews would have to be left free, in their interpretation of the Scriptures (the Tora and the Gospels), to distinguish the way in which Jesus spoke as a Jew to Jews from the way he spoke as a moral teacher to human beings in general.

What Kant endorsed was a kind of Jewish denomination of the universal faith. Kant did not maintain that Jews had to convert to Christianity *in toto*. Rather, he tried to describe how Jews could retain a “distinctive faith,” that is, could become Jews without Judaism. This overcoming of their statutory faith would prove that the Jews are “an educated and civilized people who are ready for all the rights of citizenship.” Moreover, this overcoming is part of Kant’s own eschatological vision of the eventual overcoming of *all* divisions of faith.

However offensive such suggestions may appear, they are a far cry from endorsing the notion of an immutable Jewishness. Disregarding

Kant’s expressed desire for a mass Jewish conversion to Kantian religion, Mack contends that Kant regarded Jewishness as immutable and the Jews as constitutionally unable to integrate into the Idealist body politic. Mack contends that Kant maintained the “immutability” of Jewish character, a character which was fundamentally materialistic and oriented towards “the goods of the world,” a stance which “disinherited the Jews of the complex ethical systems and narrations developed in the Hebrew Bible.”

The Jews are therefore excluded from Kant’s vision of modernity, regardless of the suggestion proffered in *The Conflict*. But the national character and traits of the Jewish nation—“the Jewish essence”—result from its commitment to its God. According to Mack, “Kant grounded the immutability of the Jews in their religion,” in the bond between the people and their God.

Mack appeals to Kant’s description of Jews in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as a foreign presence (“Palestinians who live amongst us” and “a nation of cheaters”) in order to deepen the claim of Kant’s fundamentally anti-Semitic stance. But it remains unclear in Mack’s account just why their religion entails immutability of character, a claim which contradicts Kant’s moral

theory—which is held to be universal—as well as his respect for such Jews as Lazarus Ben David, Marcus Herz, and Moses Mendelssohn.

Indeed, there is something about Mack's account that induces a sense of intellectual claustrophobia. By focusing so closely on his chosen texts to provide the link between past anti-Judaism and emerging anti-Semitism, Mack discounts the social and political forces at work, forces easily contaminated by the rhetoric of Idealism.

It is as if Mack, with a magnifying glass, ignores the whole world around these thinkers so as to augment the flecks of anti-Semitism in Kant and Hegel. But it would have been more to the point, and clearer to the naked eye, if he had focused more on why anti-Semitism was to form the core of the paranoid ideologies of the latter part of the nineteenth century. In other words, Mack ought to have been more attentive to the far more important question of the connection between the Idealist worry about Judaism and the racist fantasy that the Jews were taking over the world.

If the specter of Kant haunts the first part of *German Idealism and the Jew*, the second part turns on the figure of Kant's Jewish contemporary Moses Mendelssohn, who represented just one of a number of German

Jewish responses to the paradigm of Idealism and its anti-Semitic attitude. Rather than considering the ways in which Idealism had been incorporated by Jewish thinkers who tried to counter Kant's slander of heteronomy and prove that Judaism was Idealism—the received history of modern Jewish thought—Mack instead focuses on its dissenters, discontents, and cultural despisers. By doing so, Mack produces a colorful panorama of Jewish reaction against “the hegemony of an Idealist paradigm in the political and intellectual culture of Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

Mack's analysis of the German Jewish resistance to the program of Idealism follows from a distinction he draws between “counterhistory” and “counternarrative.” Following the historian Amos Funkenstein, Mack regards counterhistories as polemical devices deployed to “adapt the history of their own culture to the ideational content developed by that of the majority.” A counterhistory accepts the attitudes of the dominant group and tries to show that it finds its origin in his own culture. The theologians of Jewish Reform, men such as Abraham Geiger and Ludwig Philippson, who accepted the Idealist paradigm and attempted to inscribe Judaism upon it, strove to secure Judaism's place

in the modern world by showing its fundamental compatibility with contemporary philosophical and theological streams, and by agreeing with Kant on the nature of religion and showing how he had merely misunderstood the nature of Judaism.

Mack, however, is concerned with the concept of “counternarrative.” While a counterhistory is an essentially apologetic venture, a counternarrative rejects the claims of the adversarial culture and takes pride in its difference. Mack’s counternarrators include Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin. For Mack, these men are the spiritual resisters of Idealism and the authentic voices of modern Jewishness. But are they?

Mack argues that these thinkers strive for the revalorization of those very (“irrational,” “materialist”) elements in Judaism which Idealism had disparaged. Mack investigates a number of these philosophical tendencies which not only take the anti-Jewish prejudices of Kant and Hegel to task, but also call into question the value of their ethical and political theories. These short chapters are full of valuable material showing how Jews revolted against the pretenses of Idealism. But, with the possible exceptions of Rosenzweig, who tried to pave a road back to tradition, and Mendelssohn, who never fully left

it, they did so without insisting on a return to the Jewish religion itself.

Consequently, a deep difficulty haunts Mack’s project. Rosenzweig’s religious existentialism and his celebration of the empirical world, Freud’s description of the disunity of consciousness, and Benjamin’s marriage of Marxist dialectics with religious tropes are all perceived by Mack to be assertions of some fundamental “Jewishness,” and a crucial counternarrative to the anti-Jewish Idealism explored in the first part of the book. But aside from their social origin and vague appeals to their “materialism,” what is peculiarly “Judaic” in these responses is left ambiguous.

“The Judaic” stands as the resistance to the hegemony of Idealism, and as such it is a concept which lacks any positive valence of its own. The vague notion of “the Judaic” here is burdened with too much, and the reader wishes Mack had focused more sharply and developed further this concept, since it does so much work for his argument. It is not clear why Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and Benjamin’s profane revolutionary messianism amount to “Judaism,” nor is it clear how they amount to essentially Jewish solutions to the aporias of modernity or the persistence of anti-Semitism.

Mack concludes his book by asserting that these German Jewish thinkers “anticipated a post-modern

sensibility,” which might “prove fruitful for future social theory and practice.” It is ironic that after so keenly diagnosing the germ of unreason in the thought of the German Idealists, Mack would conclude by summoning us to submit to our currently

faddish obfuscation, the latest school of unreason.

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