

Book Review: *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* by Alan E. Steinweis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Over the past years many scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish, German and non-German have undertaken the study and elaboration of how the Nazi “Final Solution” of the Jewish Question encompassed all the different sectors of German society and economy. The Nazi regime’s mobilization of corporate resources and capital, both German and foreign (IBM and the Ford Motor Company being two notable examples) in its project of the elimination of European Jewry has been extensively documented. Alain Steinweis’s unique contribution to the study of the Holocaust is the documentation and explanation of the role of universities, scholarly institutes and individual scholars and professors who responded to Adolf Hitler’s call for an “Antisemitism of Reason.”

Steinweis specifically studies the role of academic or scholarly antisemitism that was created and formalized around the Nazi’s goal of separating, excluding and ultimately providing the rationale for the removal of Jews from German society and territory. In Hitler’s view, the German elite needed to ground its ideology in an “Antisemitism of Reason”, one which based on an objective and studied understanding of how Jews were an incompatible and dangerous racial minority in Germany. Hitler opposed this rational antisemitism to the “popular” antisemitism driven by envy and crude prejudice that animated many ordinary Germans in the 1920s and 1930s. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Hitlerian insistence on a “rational” theorization of the Jewish question would lay the groundwork for the “rationalization” of the concentrationary system.

As Steinweis ably documents, scholars from fields as diverse as physical anthropology, sociology, linguistics, criminology, economics and religious studies took up the task set before them by the Nazi regime and contributed to the progressive racialization and pathologization of “the Jew”. Nazi Jewish Studies encompassed various aspects of Jewish physiology (Jewish racial roots and deficiencies), Jewish economic activity (disproportionate involvement in money-lending, prostitution and white-collar crimes) and Jewish theology (malicious attitudes toward non-Jews and intermarriage) to “prove” that Jews were a distinct and threatening racial group that had to be expurgated from the German body politic.

Beyond the mere documentation of the details of particular scholars’ works, Steinweis is careful to unearth the deep foundations of scholarly antisemitism. Far from being a phenomenon that can exclusively be confined to the Nazi period, much of the scholarship was already being undertaken in the 1920s and early 1930s and in the case of the theological and religious scholarship in particular, relied on centuries old Christian supersessionism as well as popular stereotypes about Jewish greed and hatred toward non-Jews. Just as scholarly antisemitism predated the rise of National Socialism, Steinweis also points out that the influence of the scholars involved in Nazi Jewish Studies goes beyond the end of the Third Reich in 1945. His disturbing conclusion is that many scholars whose research legitimated the ultimate exclusion, expulsion and extermination of Europe’s Jews, such as the economist Peter-Heinz Seraphim, were often rehabilitated by the post-war Federal Republic in administrative and sometimes academic positions despite their collusion with National Socialism.

After having read Steinweis's well researched and documented findings, one must consider his statement: "We must continue to ask how and why scholarship, the very existence of which is (or should be) predicated on the search for enlightenment and truth, was produced in the service of an ideology of exclusion and domination."<sup>1</sup> Much of the scholarship produced by postcolonial thinkers, from Frantz Fanon's denunciation of the racist and colonialist theories and practices of European psychiatry in *Peau noire, masques blancs* to Edward Said's work on *Orientalism* and its discursive centrality in European colonial imagination and exploitation, has extensively demonstrated that where non-European peoples are concerned "the search for enlightenment and truth" has always coexisted with and often been employed in the "service of an ideology of exclusion and domination."

European academic discourses have perennially been constructed in and around power and hegemony, and that much of "scholarly" research on the non-European world served precisely to facilitate the imperialist and colonialist projects of European governments. The culpability of colonialist and later Nazi scholarship also spans the whole of the university, from the humanities to the sciences. Honestly engaging this history does not negate Steinweis' belief about what the fundamental orientation of scholarly activity should be. Rather, a de-romanticization of academe is necessary to understand that scholars work with fundamentally ambivalent discourses that can be mobilized to legitimize or resist injustice.

The harrowing conclusions drawn by Holocaust theologian Richard Rubenstein in his classic book, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* are useful to revisit in this context. Rubenstein persuasively demonstrates throughout this short and stunning work that "we are more likely to understand the Holocaust if we regard it as the expression of the some of the most profound tendencies of Western civilization in the twentieth century" (21). Rubenstein insists that the Final Solution depended on a rational bureaucracy and the "rationalization" of human beings as racial units to be carried out. Could we not, after having read Steinweis' indicting conclusions, examine Nazi antisemitism in an analogous way? Could we not also say that Nazi Jewish Studies, along with its total mobilization of scholarly inquiry for pernicious public policy, mirrors some of the most profound tendencies in the Western scholarly tradition, including the persistent denigration and vilification of Jews and Judaism and non-European peoples in general?

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Steinweis, *Studying the Jew* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 4.