

Book Reviews

Fascination with the Persecutor: George L. Mosse and the Catastrophe of Modern Man. By *Emilio Gentile*. Translated by *John Tedeschi* and *Anne Tedeschi*. George L. Mosse Series in the History of European Culture, Sexuality, and Ideas. Edited by *Steven E. Aschheim, Skye Doney, Mary Louise Roberts, and David J. Sorkin*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021. Pp. xxii+242. \$39.95.

George L. Mosse (1918–99), a foremost scholar of European cultural history in the second half of the twentieth century, was born into a highly acculturated and affluent Jewish family in Berlin. His father published a daily newspaper, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and oversaw a world-wide advertising business. In his teens George (then Gerhard) fled to Britain as a refugee from Hitler's Germany. He attended a Quaker boarding school in Yorkshire and began studying at Cambridge. On a holiday visit to see his parents, who were then in the United States, George was stranded when World War II broke out. He made his way to Haverford College, which accepted him on the spot, finished his BA, and pursued his PhD at Harvard in premodern British history. After 1945 he taught at Iowa, then the University of Wisconsin. Encouraged by his respective home departments, the focus of his teaching moved toward continental European and German history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Beginning in the 1970s Mosse had a recurrent half-yearly appointment at Jerusalem's Hebrew University and he enjoyed visiting posts at the Sorbonne, the universities of Munich, Amsterdam, Cambridge, and Cape Town, and several stays at Cornell. He served as the inaugural senior scholar-in-residence upon the founding of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 1994–95, an acknowledgment of his preeminence as a historian of antisemitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust.

Many would argue that George Mosse, as far back as his Iowa City days, had no equal as a university lecturer. He also profoundly influenced the trajectory of European cultural history through his scholarship, stressing the significance of popular culture and perceptions through myths and symbols. One of Mosse's central concerns was to fathom how fascism and especially Nazism came into being. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the degree to which his ideas have guided the study of nationalism, generally, and the rise and practices of Mussolini's fascism and National Socialism, in particular, have fluctuated. But overall his reputation has flourished, and an engagement with his work, internationally, shows no sign of abating over twenty years since his death. Emilio Gentile (b. 1946), a distinguished historian in his own right at Rome's Sapienza University, knew George Mosse well. Gentile is famous for his notion of the "sacralization of politics" and sees Mosse as a "precursor" to his own work. Gentile read Mosse closely, learned from him, and occasionally argued with him—which Mosse probably relished more than he let on.

Gentile's English-language book, *Fascination with the Persecutor: George L. Mosse and the Catastrophe of Modern Man* is a stellar contribution to history's history, illuminating and excavating the evolution of writings and reception of his friend and colleague. It is a revised and expanded version of a book that appeared in Italian in 2007. There is no doubt that Mosse shared insights with Gentile that were unique to their friendship and stimulated by their dialogue. Furthermore, Gentile has made excellent use of Mosse's papers

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available in Madison and elsewhere. The brief foreword of *Fascination with the Persecutor*, by another friend and colleague of both Mosse and Gentile, the historian of Spanish fascism, Stanley G. Payne, is a gem. Payne's brief remarks and Gentile's monograph explore, in large measure, the complicated relationship between George Mosse's life and his scholarship. The book succeeds, admirably, in complementing the biographical and intellectual history approaches of Karel Plessini and Donatello Aramini, especially by explaining the progression of Mosse's subjects of inquiry and his means of interrogating the questions that arose.

George Mosse never made a secret of being a Jew, which was so much a part of his life story. But his identity as a gay man was, understandably, not expressed publicly until he was well entrenched in his career. All of these studies recognize that Mosse's life as an "outsider," his own term, catalyzed and molded his scholarship. As is demonstrated in Gentile's account, contrary to the myth that one can excel at teaching only by sacrificing scholarship, Mosse proved that teaching at all levels can be informed and energized by intensive research and writing—as well as the winds of change.

While Gentile's explanation and explication of Mosse's writing is compelling, perhaps he underestimates how much their relationship was concentrated on his own fixation on "the persecutor" in the form of Italian fascism and its German imitators that developed its own gruesome characteristics. It would have been interesting, for instance, to have an "afterword," perhaps on identity construction and deviance, from Sander Gilman. Mosse said, emphatically, that he learned a great deal from Sander, whose concerns ranged well beyond antisemitism and fascism, as well as from Madison colleagues such as (French literary scholar) Elaine Marx and the foundational women's historian, Gerda Lerner. He also was effusive about his indebtedness to his PhD students, such as Andy Rabinbach, Steve Aschheim, and Judy Doneson, and those he knew as undergraduates, particularly David Sorkin. Although he was not her principal doctoral supervisor, Mosse engaged and championed the work of Joan Scott.

George Mosse was truly curious, intrigued by the choices made by men and women in societies generally, why they thought and acted as they did, and what led them to believe in causes from the altruistic to the grotesquely inhumane. What did it mean to be a "real" man or woman? What did they consider "respectable"? Mosse was driven by the European catastrophe, but he also cared passionately about what went on in the minds of students, and everyday life in the suburbs of Milwaukee and the rural Midwest—not only Europe in the throes of crisis, and Italy and Germany in light of fascism. He was endlessly fascinated by culture and humankind, and even animals. Once when his dog and cat were romping in his snowy yard, he turned to me and said, in all seriousness: "Do you think they have a consciousness of death?"

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The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind. By *Jan Lucassen*.
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021. Pp. xviii+524. \$35.00

Jan Lucassen explores the evolution of work from its earliest beginnings, starting with how early humans emerged from the shadows of our Neanderthal cousins to the challenges of working from home because of COVID. The volume uses a broad definition of work to include "all human pursuits apart from free time or leisure" (3).