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Review:

The Implacable Urge to Defame: Cartoon Jews in the American Press, 1877–1935, Matthew Baigell

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REVIEWS

The Implacable Urge to Defame: Cartoon Jews in the American Press, 1877–1935, Matthew Baigell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017), ISBN 978-0-8156-3496-6, pp. xv + 213, \$60.00.

In preparing *The Implacable Urge to Defame* Matthew Baigell has done substantial groundwork for serious further research on visual representations, positive and negative, of Jews in American periodicals in the last third of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries, and he has gathered and presented a lot of material worthy of serious interpretation and conceptualization. Baigell's own discussion is breezy and sympathetic – “scholarly in intent but personal in delivery” (p. 17). He has quite a hand for occasional catchy phrases. Many of the cartoonists, he explains, “basically wrote prejudice porn” (p. 20), or as he nicely puts it: “However one parses the place of the Rothschild family in international finance, fault will be found, and Jews will be blamed” (p. 47). He also acknowledges the measure of ambivalence that characterized many non-Jews' attitudes towards Jews, pointing, for instance, to “an ambivalent sense of grudging respect that did not paper over the deep-seated hatred” (p. 57), or emphasizing that as far as the emergence of modern political antisemitism is concerned, “the membrane separating the earlier and later criticisms . . . was very permeable” (p. 92). Yet ambivalence ultimately tends to translate into confusion as Baigell's account proceeds, and this book most certainly does not save the best for last.

The first chapter is by far the best, given that in it Baigell sticks closely to the material. Yet even here there are occasionally problems with the mechanics of the discussion. One of the recurrent tropes Baigell identifies, for instance, is the suggestion that Jews regularly burned down their own enterprises to defraud the insurance (which, I would add, all other things being even and given how small and unsuccessful many of these businesses were, on many an occasion may have been entirely true, though this practice was obviously no preserve of the Jews). He introduces five cartoons to illustrate the treatment of this theme. Of these, two were published in February 1894, two in May 1900, and one in December 1900. Since Baigell does not demonstrate how representative these cartoons are, it is hard to avoid the suspicion, given the dates, that these cartoons, rather

than reflecting a continuous theme, responded to two specific events in early 1894 and the spring of 1900. Maybe this suspicion is unfounded, but it would surely have been Baigell's task to clarify the matter.

Some of Baigell's interpretations of the cartoons he discusses are also simplistic or indeed rather questionable. The most obvious case in point is his treatment of Joseph Keppler's "The Chosen People", published in *Puck* on 8 December 1880 (illustration p. 28). By no means the first cartoon to deal with this issue, it referred back to two widely publicized and discussed incidents in 1877 and 1879, when Jews were refused admission by Henry Hilton to the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs and by Austin Corbin to his Coney Island hotel, respectively. It shows a stereotypically unattractive Jewish pedlar selling, or claiming to sell, what Baigell calls "good Christian values . . . sobriety, industry, patriotism, poetry, literature, and prosperity, among other things". Among those other things are also statesmanship and music. He is being given the boot from three sides: by Hilton on the left and by Corbin on the right (the names are written on the soles of their boots) – and from behind, on Baigell's understanding, by Hilton's "janitor, a German named Bismarck – an insulting reference to Otto von Bismarck (1816–98), chancellor of the German Empire from 1871 to 1890" (p. 27).

Now, it is true that the Bismarck in the cartoon is wearing a sash with the word janitor on it, but he is also holding a staff with the head of Kaiser Wilhelm I on the top and in the background behind him (though this is faint in the reproduction Baigell has reproduced in the book) there is a large hotel called Hotel Berlin. Given that the journal was published both in the USA and in Imperial Germany, Keppler's point was presumably that Jews were being rejected both in the US and in Germany. In the German edition the caption reads not "The Chosen People" but "The Newest Anti-Jewish Incitement" (*Die neueste Judenhetze*). The *Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, the heated debate about the proper status of Jews in Imperial German society, unleashed by Heinrich von Treitschke the previous year, reached one of its highpoints in late November 1880 in the form of a widely publicized and discussed debate in the Prussian Diet on a petition it had received from antisemitic activists. Keppler's cartoon was highly topical, then, even though it misrepresented the position of Bismarck who, for all the anti-Jewish prejudices he no doubt shared, neither sympathized with the antisemitic activists nor ever seriously contemplated the possibility of state-driven legal measures to roll back the Jews' formal emancipation. One might wonder whether Keppler wanted to draw attention to the fact that in Germany the state was (supposedly) taking care of the matter while

in the US it was left to individual hoteliers to put the Jews in their place. That he meant to portray Bismarck as Hilton's (rather than Wilhelm I's) janitor, however, seems improbable in the extreme. Perhaps it was not least a certain parochialism that tripped Baigell up at this point.

In the subsequent chapters the empirical and conceptual are more closely entangled and the result is not a pretty picture. Baigell has taken the "everything I have ever read about antisemitism and could possibly throw in the round" approach. To characterize his conceptual thoughts as eclectic would grossly exaggerate their consistency. They are, moreover, old-fashioned and disembodied in the extreme. We are told, for instance, that Henri (or, as Baigell would have it, Henry) Bergson's *Laughter*, first published in 1900, in an act of phenomenal prescience, "echoed" Freud's thoughts in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905 (p. 75). Occasionally, the confusion that ensues reigns not only between different parts of his account but also within them. In one case, for instance, Baigell first quotes an anti-Jewish polemicist's insistence that "the eastern European Jew" was even "despised by his fellow-religionists of the better class", but then explains, only four lines later, that that same polemicist "viewed Jews as an undifferentiated mass" (p. 124).

And then there is the simply nonsensical. Take the claim that Marx, in "On the Jewish Question" (1843/44), "completely associated Jews with capitalism". When writing "On the Jewish Question", Marx had no concept of capitalism. Baigell does go on to clarify what he really means: "for Marx, Judaism is a synonym for the powerful instinct of acquisition". This "instinct", he explains, "is a state of mind not necessarily limited to Jews, but it is central to their being. Whatever else is part of his argument, he reduced Judaism to a lowercase descriptive adjective of acquisitive tendencies rather than understanding it as an uppercase noun designating the religion and culture of a certain people." Indeed, it "had spread to Christians, and they, too, needed to be emancipated from their financially acquisitive instincts" (pp. 169–70). One might wonder how Judaism could ever be an adjective but, perhaps unwittingly, Baigell is closer to the truth than might meet the eye. The German concept *Judentum* covers the three meanings Judaism, Jewry, and Jewishness, making life quite complicated for scholars not intimately familiar with the German language. And Baigell is entirely right: in "On the Jewish Question", Marx was interested in Jewishness or rather, to be more precise, those qualities generally associated with Jewishness, which, contrary to Baigell's claim, Marx did not assume to be "central to their [the Jews'] being", at least no more so than he assumed them to be central to society in general. Had Marx, as

Baigell wants him to, really equated those qualities with the Jews' religion and culture, he would indeed have been an outright antisemite. To be sure, the measure of ambivalence that Marx still exhibits in "On the Jewish Question" is deeply troubling in its own right but misinterpretations of the kind Baigell offers – "as many times as I have read this essay" – misidentify and thus detract from the seriousness of the actual problem.

Ultimately, Baigell vacillates between two sets of, at the least, mutually attenuating paradigms. Firstly, he cannot make up his mind whether antisemitism springs from projection or has "real" empirical causes. Secondly, he suggests at some junctures "that Jews were considered the quintessential Other, the most unlike and unlikeable among the Others, whose values and goals differed from those of the majority culture" (p. 4), yet elsewhere without a second thought lumps them in with all the other "Others". None too surprisingly, both problems are particularly evident in the conclusion, where he jumps straight from a cringe-inspiringly simplistic misreading of Sartre's contention that the antisemite creates "the Jew" to the following statement:

Closer to home and in a different key, opposition to Jews as well as to Italians, Slavs, and East Asians increased radically as a result of the huge numbers of immigrants who arrived in the United States in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. So many foreigners legally invading the country, challenging Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony, polluting the American gene pool, taking advantage of American business practices, contributing to urbanization and industrialization, destroying rural values, fomenting radical discord. But as has often been pointed out, the number of new arrivals exacerbated a nativism that had existed as early as the turn of the nineteenth century and reached an initial high point in the 1850s with the Know Nothing movement in reaction to the high numbers of Irish and German immigrants and then another high point during the 1920s and 1930s.

Here it is hard to know where clumsy paraphrasing and de facto apology begin and end. This is not a book, then, that one could recommend for its conceptualization and systematic evaluation of the material it presents – but plenty of interesting material it does indeed present.

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