

Essay Review

A Triumph of Identity Politics

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Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, race, and gender*, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. xvi, 277, illus., £19.95, \$24.95 (0-691-03245-9).

Sander L. Gilman, *The case of Sigmund Freud: medicine and identity at the fin de siècle*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. xvi, 298, illus., £26.50 (0-8018-4535-1).

Until not so long ago, the received liberal view of the history of biology and the social sciences was that social Darwinist and racist theories had been given the kiss of death by their association with the eugenic policies of the Nazis. A revulsion from biological determinism and any analogies between the biological and social came to dominate the post Second World War liberal consensus; psychoanalysis was a vital part of this anti-racist synthesis, since it offered a universal psychology that could bridge the gap between social theory and the somatic substrate of its indeterminate (and non-biological) instinct theory. In the 1970s, and more strongly in the 1980s, a number of seemingly unrelated movements put the anti-racist and anti-biologizing presuppositions into question. With sociobiology, speculative applications of biological models to social institutions once again became permissible and “scientific”. With the rise of identity politics, racial, religious and gender affiliations once again became the primary categories for social and historical analysis, this time by those whom

the shibboleths of liberal universalism had attempted to protect from the damaging effects of racial prejudice masquerading as knowledge.

Gilman’s books represent the triumph of identity politics over these liberal shibboleths in the history of medicine and psychoanalysis. His working assumption is: no scientist can ever forget, repress or do away with “his” racial identity. When this is coupled with the disease model of cultural infection (so akin to the fashionable culturalist-historicist premises), according to which all inhabitants of a medical culture inhabit the same cultural universe, and are infected by the same assumptions, its application to Freud yields the following: “one of the definitions of the Jew that [Freud] would have internalized was a racial one, and it was a definition that, whether he consciously sought it or not, shaped the argument of psychoanalysis” (FRG3). To secure this argument, Gilman asserts that “the debate about race taints all other views of the social reality of the period” (Case 175).

Anti-Semitism in Freud’s milieu

In these two overlapping books, Gilman argues with insistence and a wealth of detail that Freud worked in a milieu that was not only politically anti-semitic and discriminatory against Jews, but also that the sciences of which he was a practitioner were themselves saturated with the discourse of race and the pathologization of Jewishness. Gilman argues that Freud created psychoanalysis as a reaction formation to this medical and scientific environment saturated with racism. Using a

methodology that is culturalist and psychoanalytic at the same time, Gilman takes up a number of themes, some of them seemingly minor—the meaning of circumcision and its relation to disease and to conversion from one religion to another, the epidemiology of mental illness, the relation between homosexuality and race, cancer and Jewishness, the gaze of the Jew, penises and noses, the flatfootedness of the Jews, incest and criminality amongst the Jews. According to Gilman, psychoanalysis is a displaced answer to the accusations of difference and pathology of those “racist” sciences which preoccupy themselves with these themes. “The idea of the Jew in the science that formed Freud and other Jewish physicians at the turn of the century is present in the images, metaphors, and deep structures of his own theory” (FRG42).

Freud, race and gender tries to argue a series of parallels: between the Jew and the woman, between the Jew and the pervert, between the Jew and the hysteric, between the Jew and the homosexual. With each of these parallels, Gilman attempts to demonstrate that crucial features of Freud’s theories are covertly modelled on, and thus mirror, debates concerning the nature of the Jew (as pervert, woman, homosexual, etc.). Gilman is sometimes ingenious and interesting; often bizarre and implausible; nearly always instructive, since his work is based on extremely wide reading in little known sources; and almost never convincing. At times, indeed, one feels that Gilman is engaged in a sequence of ingenious historical reveries, rather than arguments, on somewhat eccentric themes—in *The case of Sigmund Freud*, on the relation between penises and noses, conversion and interbreeding, and flat feet. In both books, he demonstrates an uncanny knack for quoting a striking passage that has no connection with the argument under consideration,

An Absence of Evidence

Gilman has written extensively on this period of German medicine and, as in his

previous work, these books are remarkable for their wealth of scholarship, both amongst primary sources and in contemporary historical and medical writings. Yet the arguments of the two books face a fundamental problem: the lack of evidence in Freud’s own writings to indicate that Jewishness was a major element in the development of psychoanalytic theory. Gilman has a number of strategies to overcome this problem. At times, he argues that the very *absence* of this evidence speaks volumes; indeed absence speaks louder than texts. At other times, he assumes that Freud *must have been* responding to his racist environment, because he was culturally a part of it, and that therefore the absence of evidence demonstrates Freud’s *repression* of this theme. If the theme of race is repressed, it must, in accordance with Freudian theory, return somewhere, and Gilman knows where: “The rhetoric of race was excised from Freud’s scientific writing and appeared only in his construction of gender” (FRG37). The denigration of the Jews that Freud implicitly denies returns in his explicit denigration of women: “Freud’s discussion of the nature of the female body, the distinction between male Aryan and male Jew [i.e. circumcision] is repressed, to be inscribed on the body of the [castrated] woman” (FRG40). In other parts of his argument, Gilman sees psychoanalysis as a system having been hollowed out or mirroring the anti-semitic discourse of its environment: the topics of the Jewish body and psyche “are countered in the rhetoric of psychoanalysis through the construction of specific concepts of gender onto which the anxiety about the Jew’s body and mind (and, directly, Freud’s own body and mind) are displaced” (FRG11). Another of Gilman’s unconventional methodological rules is the following: if Freud cited a book on a particular topic, or sometimes solely if he owned a particular book, then the contents of the whole book can be assumed to be implicit in his writing or his references.

Let me give an example of Gilman’s analysis. Numerous medical writers of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries posited that male Jews were often born circumcised. In the late nineteenth century, such a view was bolstered by the widely accepted Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics. Freud was, like most contemporary biologists, a firm believer in the Lamarckian mechanism, and, as is well known, in the 1910s applied it to the universal history of mankind, with his view that the castration complex was inherited as a psychic disposition. Gilman implies on a number of occasions that being a Lamarckian on inherited characteristics necessarily evoked and brought with it the “debate about the inheritability of the sign of circumcision” (FRG188). Of course if this were true for Freud, it would equally be true for Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel. In addition, as a student, Freud’s first scientific research of 1877 was an evolutionary study of the hidden gonads of the eel. Gilman weaves this material together to advance a number of theses; one of these is that Freud, like other writers of the time, believed in the existence of congenital circumcision, of the “hidden, but omnipresent, sign of circumcision” (FRG74). There is no textual evidence for this view, and it is only by ingenious juxtaposition of texts from different hands at different times that Gilman gives the impression that there is.

Or take Gilman’s discussion of “the gaze of the Jew”. We find the following sentence in both *Freud, race and gender* (p. 74) and in *The case of Sigmund Freud* (p. 44): “At the turn of the century, Sigmund Freud read this view of the ‘vivacity of the eye’ as a sign of the ‘remarkable persistence’ of Jewish physiognomy.” The fact that Freud is the subject of the active verb in this sentence, together with the inverted commas, gives the impression that he is the author of the remarks about the vivacity of the eye and the Jewish physiognomy; however, if one wonders if Freud actually said these things, and turns to the footnotes (which are, intriguingly, slightly different in the two books), we find that the author is, on both occasions, one Carl Heinrich Stratz, in his book *Was sind Juden?*; Stratz was never once cited by Freud.

Jewishness versus the Universal

Thinking himself to have shown that the discourse of racial medicine and biology is the fundamental backdrop to the development of psychoanalysis, Gilman takes the next step in his argument: Freud advanced key elements of psychoanalysis—such as its theory of sexual development and the Oedipus complex—as universal generalizations precisely in order to deny their local derivation from the problem of the Jew. Thus the universality of the Oedipus complex is “one male Jew’s answer to the charge of incest or inbreeding lodged against the Jews” (Case 198) at the end of the nineteenth century. Historians and critics of analysis have often attempted to restrict its universalist claims by showing how it is rooted (and by implication, only applicable) in the foetid atmosphere of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Now Gilman gives this culturalist thesis a new twist, the racial twist: “it is the sexuality of the Jew that is mirrored and distorted within the Oedipus complex” (Case 207).

Gilman certainly does at times recognize “Freud’s resistance to the power of race” (FRG48); but he is committed to seeing this resistance as superficial. His commitment goes so far as to be able to fly confidently in the face of the absence of evidence, an absence that he himself recognizes: “The question of the originality and creativity of the Jew, especially the Jewish scientist, was central to [Freud’s and Wilhelm Fliess’s] exchange, but it was unspoken of in their letters” (FRG79).

The most appropriate verdict, then, on these two magnificently erudite books comes from Gilman’s own pen: “Freud commented on none of this. He wanted to move the argument about the madness of the Jews away from the question of race and to universalize it” (FRG100). We must infer, reluctantly, that Gilman’s books prove the exact opposite of their explicit theses, precisely because Gilman’s attempts to link his materials together are so unconvincing. As an exposé of the wealth of medico-racist material concerning the Jews at the end of the nineteenth century, these are fine studies. But unwittingly, Gilman has thereby made it even

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more palpable that Freud did indeed succeed in giving a universal account of creativity, madness and disease, did indeed, as Gilman recognizes, “translate biology into psychology” (FRG198). By quite rightly insisting that historians examine its ubiquitous presence, Gilman paradoxically makes it clear how *little* of the surrounding ambience of

racial science and anti-semitism actually affected or made its way into psychoanalysis—a non-racial science that is implicitly anti-racist. Gilman’s books read to me like courageous if failed experiments; but as the philosophers of science tell us, failures are as salutary as successes for the progress of knowledge.