

REVIEW ARTICLE

Antisemitism in the anarchist tradition

Siegbert Wolf / Jürgen Mümken (eds), *'Antisemit, das geht nicht unter Menschen'. Anarchistische Positionen zu Antisemitismus, Zionismus und Israel. Band 2: Von der Staatsgründung bis heute*

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Frédéric Krier, *Sozialismus für Kleinbürger: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – Wegbereiter des Dritten Reiches.*

Köln: Böhlau, 2009; 450pp; ISBN 9783412202866

Three important books have recently picked up on the topic of antisemitism in the anarchist movement past and present. One of them is Frédéric Krier's *Socialism for the Petty Bourgeois: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – Precursor of the Third Reich*. Published in 2009, the book is a rich resource for everyone interested in the French thinker, the reception of his thought by the far right and the ignorance of the latter by his usual adherents, the anarchists. Though the first part of the title alludes to Karl Marx's critique of Proudhon's defence of private property, Krier's historical study must not be mistaken for a rehashing of socialist rivalry. Instead of summarising the book's many interesting theses in detail – for instance, that Proudhon was a nineteenth century version of the Christian gnostic Marcion – I will focus on one of its core claims: the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish sentiment in Proudhon's thought. The book first unfolds a detailed account of 'Proudhon's reception in the "Third Reich"' (pp16-178), and second, a scrutiny of 'Anti-Theism, Judaism and Christianity' in Proudhon's own thought (pp179-282). The third section is a genea-

logical search for the ‘missing link’ (pp283-390) between Proudhon’s approach to economic questions and National Socialist ideology – specifically, the link between the French thinker’s highly moralising critique of ‘interest’ and the Nazi party’s antisemitic call for the ‘breaking of interest slavery’ as laid out in its twenty-five-point Program of 1920.

Writing in the 1940s, prominent Critical Theorists such as Franz Neumann and Paul Massing had already designated Proudhon a ‘harbinger of fascism’ (J. Salwyn Shapiro). It is from these authors’ claims that Krier sets out to investigate the legacy of Proudhon. Neumann and Massing were among the first after Marx to point out Proudhon’s fixation on the sphere of circulation when criticising the workings of capitalism, and that he lacked an understanding that exploitation happens through the generation of surplus value in the sphere of production. Failing to acknowledge the co-dependence of the two spheres can result in a primitive dualism of ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ capital, which oftentimes figures in antisemitic attacks on capitalism. ‘In singling out predatory capital’, Neumann observes in his 1942 classic *Behemoth*, ‘National Socialism treads in the footsteps of Proudhon, who, in his *Idée Générale de la Révolution au 19e Siècle*, demanded the liquidation of the Banque de France and its transformation into an institution of “public utility” together with a lowering of interest to one-half or one-fourth of 1 per cent’ (cited in Krier, p6).

Turning directly to Proudhon’s oeuvre, Krier makes clear that the French thinker’s seemingly occasional hostile remarks agglomerate into a fully-fledged antisemitic worldview, undergirding everything from his critique of authority to his eventual embrace of patriotism. Consequently, the notion of ‘the Jew’ is omnipresent, as Krier meticulously documents with an admirable exposition of original French quotations from Proudhon’s texts (pp179-233). Spanning from his earliest articles to his late books, Proudhon refers to ‘Jews’, ‘Jewish’ and ‘Judaism’ with such frequency that he may well be diagnosed with ‘a lethal obsession’ (Robert S. Wistrich), culminating in a notebook entry, which Proudhon added on December 26, 1847: ‘The Jew is the enemy of humankind. This race must be sent back to Asia or be exterminated. By steel or by fire or by expulsion the Jew must disappear’. While this passage has become well known since the publication of the *Carnets* in the 1960s, Krier’s research proves that the bulk of Proudhon’s anti-Jewish statements is not found in the posthumously published material, but in the books published during his lifetime. Thus, Krier rightly seems puzzled by the fact that the call for genocide did catch even Proudhon-experts by surprise, considering that most all elements central to antisemitism could have been detected from early on, as they are:

- feelings of alleged Christian superiority and Jewish inferiority, e.g. in *Essai de grammaire générale* (1837) or 'Le Miserere, ou la pénitence d'un roi' (1845);
- classic tenets of anti-Judaism, such as blaming 'the Jews' for the crucifixion of Jesus, e.g. in the contributions to the *Encyclopédie catholique* (1839-40) and in *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (1858);
- the association of Jews with money, speculation and exploitation, e.g. in *Qu'est-ce que la propriété ? Premier Mémoire* (1840), *Résumé de la question sociale. Banque d'échange* (1848) and *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* (1853);
- the propagation of conspiracies and paranoia: Jews are said to control the press and to act as the secret masters of world politics, regardless of whether the state is ruled democratically or by a monarch, e.g. in a letter to Mathey (January 1862) and in *Résumé de la question sociale. Banque d'échange* (1848);
- a *völkisch*, racist and xenophobic notion of citizenship, in which Jews are vilified as parasitic, homeless people who can never be citizens of France, will always remain 'foreigners', and are inherently incapable of creative acts, e.g. in *Césarisme et christianisme* (1883) and in the *Carnets* (1960-1973);
- a belief in Jews as inventors of constitutions, as protectors of political authority and as instigators of 'moral decline' in modern society: homosexuality, idolatry and adultery, e.g. in *Les confessions d'un révolutionnaire* (1851) and in *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (1858).

This non-exhaustive list reveals a redemptive dimension of Proudhon's hostility towards Jews. As an anarchist, he aims at the liberation of humanity from the principle of authority. If, however, all authority appears to him as being under secret Jewish control, his desire for deathly purges should not be trivialised as 'flaws' or 'personal bigotries' (Iain McKay, *Property is Theft!* 2011, p35f.). Neither does it seem appropriate to ignore them completely (cf. George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. A Biography*, 1987).

Proudhon's case illustrates the need for a thorough investigation of anarchism's 'dark side', which is only just beginning (cf. Erik Eiglad, 'Anti-Zionism and the Anarchist Tradition', in Alvin H. Rosenfeld (ed), *Deciphering the New Antisemitism*, pp120-38). Such research will have to start with the scarce primary and secondary sources available. Scholars will be glad – Eiglad's references testify as much – to draw on the material from a new two-volume anthology dedicated to presenting *Anarchist Positions on Antisemitism, Zionism and Israel*, edited and extensively annotated by Jürgen Mümken and Siegbert Wolf. The chronologically ordered volumes both bear a programmatic epigraph from Gustav Landauer: 'One can be a "Zionist", for it says nothing against the character of the other, but speaks only for one's own;

antisemite, that is not acceptable among humans'. Taking their cue from this statement, both editors, arguably writing from a perspective critical of the German Left, want to stimulate an overdue debate on the relationship of the anarchist tradition and antisemitism. The anthology includes a variety of historical sources from the 1890s until today and groups them into themes such as 'Anarchism and Judaism', 'Anarchism, National Socialism and World War Two', and 'Anarchism and the Kibbutz'. Whoever worries that the disparity of themes diverts the focus away from antisemitism in circles of the radical left, however, is proven right at times. Then again, this anthology aims at widening horizons and does not claim to dispense with the need for more systematic inquiry. Most importantly, the anthology's readers will encounter a selection of reprints and may find themselves impressed by the number of activists who have battled antisemitism from the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906) onwards. Among them are Bernard Lazare, Gustav Landauer, Milly Witkop, Rudolf Rocker, Peter Kropotkin, Erich Mühsam, Hans Kohn, Alexander Shapiro, Martin Buber, Augustin Souchy, Willi Paul, Heiner Koechlin, Sam Dolgoff, Joseph Luden, José Ribas, Hans and Syma Popper, Micha Michaelis, and Giora Manor. Conveying all the insights and bibliographical information provided by the two editors' introductions as well as several scholarly essays by Werner Portman, Mina Graur and Rudolf de Jong is beyond the scope of this review.

Mümken and Wolf's anthology and Krier's tome are pioneering contributions to the study of antisemitism and anarchism. Scholars can now more easily undertake, for example, in-depth case studies of other antisemites in the movement. Perhaps even more urgently needed, in my opinion, is a close analysis of those elements in anarchist theory that exhibit a distressing overlap with antisemitic tenets. Among these are Manichean oppositions such as the 'good', 'organic' or 'natural' community vs the 'bad', 'artificial' or 'abstract' society. Such dichotomies all too easily develop into a vulgar and wholesale hatred of modernity, which, in turn, is central to antisemitism. Moreover, any crude anti-capitalism, focusing on alleged exploiters instead of the process of labour exploitation itself, should raise suspicion. While attacking 'bosses' or 'bankers' may satisfy some people's desire of chipping away at an unjust social order, such personified attacks open a gateway to the antisemitic imaginary. If anarchists truly aspire to a society without discrimination, confronting all forms of hatred against 'Jews' should rank high on their agenda, regardless of whether such hatred disguises itself in a religious, social, cultural, economic, or anti-Zionist fashion.

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