



Céline Kaiser, Marie-Luise Wünsche. *Die "jüdische Nervosität" und andere Leiden an der Zivilisation: Konstruktionen des Kollektiven und Konzepte individueller Krankheit im psychiatrischen Diskurs um 1900.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2003. 258 S. EUR 37.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-506-72369-7.

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On the Use and Abuse of Metaphors

The idea that Jews suffered disproportionately from various mental or physical defects, or were particularly likely to exhibit the symptoms of nervous degeneration, resonated strongly among (both Jewish and non-Jewish) doctors, scientists and cultural critics in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe. Such conceptions reflected and in turn helped intensify the increasingly racialized antisemitism that was becoming a political and social force in Germany and Austria-Hungary at the fin-de-siècle. Yet, many of those who blamed Jews' allegedly acute predisposition to illness on historical and environmental conditions called for Jewish regeneration through Zionism or domestic programs of physical culture to reverse what they saw as the lingering consequences of ghetto life, distance from the land or indeed the hypermodernity of European Jews' existence.

For some time now scholars have been aware of these ideas and discourses, and since Sander Gilman's pathbreaking study of the Jewish body, historians have explored the medical construction of Jews and Jewish pathology from a variety of angles and approaches.[1] Simultaneously, a substantial body of historical work on nerves and nervousness in German-speaking Europe has emerged, including Joachim Radkau's extensive study of the "nervous era" in Germany between Bismarck and Hitler, and most recently, Andreas Killen's book on nerves, shock and German urban modernity.[2] To be sure, these two bodies of literature have overlapped and cross-fertilized each other, but the scholarly world is still

waiting for a cultural and medical-historical study in their interstices, a full treatment of the history of "Jewish nervousness" in modern Central Europe.

From its title, one might assume that this 2003 anthology had filled this historiographical lacuna. However, this book is not actually about Jewish nervousness. In fact, it is not about "the Jews" at all. The topic of Jewish nervousness, after a fleeting discussion in the book's brief introduction, quickly disappears, and is only taken up in a significant way in one of the thirteen essays that follow. The preface points out that the conference upon which this volume is based featured lectures by Radkau and Hebrew University historian Moshe Zimmerman—both of whose titles suggest that they did foreground the problem of Jewish nervousness—but the editors note that these two papers could not be published in the volume. Ordinarily, one could easily overlook a poorly chosen or misleading title, but this volume's flip-pant, exploitative misuse of "Jewish nervousness" represents more than a case of false advertising. A book ostensibly about a metaphor needs to use metaphors—especially those that have had catastrophic (and ongoing) historical consequences—in a more careful and responsible way.

The actual content of this book hews much more closely to the volume's more prosaic subtitle. The subtitle's conjunction might be the most important word. That is, the volume is literally divided into these two parts:

“Constructions of the Collective” and “Conceptions of Individual Illness” (by which the editors mean psychosomatic medicine and theorizations of the relationship between mind and body). The two parts are quite distinct thematically and temporally, and they are scarcely in dialogue with each other, which gives the impression of two books somewhat randomly sharing one binding. Ultimately, this volume actually offers a series of meditations on psychiatric and psychoanalytic metaphors of the individual and the collective followed by several largely biographical essays on individual doctors, with particular attention to Viktor von Weizsäcker and Ernst Simmel, and their theories of illness and healing. As with most anthologies, the quality of the essays is uneven. Unfortunately, many read like unedited versions of conference papers, thinly referenced and, above all, lacking any social, cultural or professional historical context. In fact, several take upon themselves the task of familiarizing the reader with allegedly neglected figures from the history of medicine, even as they overlook the sizable secondary literature that already exists on these figures.

The volume suffers from additional structural particularities: for example, part 1 (on the whole, the far more compelling half and the part more concerned with *Zivilisationskrankheiten*) somewhat randomly stops in its tracks and presents, first an essay by Barbara Schellewald on conceptual artist Susan Hiller’s work “From the Freud Museum” (1991-96) and then switches to English for a (sloppily edited) transcription of a question and answer session the artist held one evening in Bonn. Toward the end of the session, Hiller presents the theorization of culture that presumably animated her work: “My general notion of culture is that it is a sort of social air we breath. Culture is the chairs, the gestures, the speech, the music. That’s culture. It is what it is” (p. 129). What’s this doing here? Here we’ve wandered quite far not only from the nervousness of the Jews, but even from constructions of the collective. While Hiller’s Freud project—as evoked by Schellewald in the preceding essay—does in fact seem to address the nature of cultural heredity, constructions of the West and archaeology as both science of and metaphor for the unconscious, one wishes her work had been left to speak for itself and shielded from the platitudinous utterances of its creator.

Independent of the book’s framing, many individual chapters provide suggestive and thought-provoking perspectives on psychiatric and cultural history and on the interconnections between the two. For example, in the first essay, historian of medicine Volker Roelcke offers a clear and concise discussion of psychiatric ideas of race

and culture around the turn of the century. Like his important 1999 study, Roelcke’s essay has the virtue of context: he grounds changes in psychiatric thinking in social and also professional context and shows how racializing the nervous health of Jews and colonial subjects was part of a psychiatric tendency to pathologize groups on the margins of society.[3] This practice, which served to enhance the role and status of the psychiatric profession, illustrates the saturation of medical ideas and diagnoses with regnant bourgeois norms.

Noteworthy also is Walter Bruchhausen’s contribution, which is the only essay in the volume that foregrounds colonial medicine and anthropology. Bruchhausen explores notions of Africans’ “otherness” in German science and suggestively argues that Africa and Africans served as screens for the projection of European ambivalence about their own civilization and its impact on mental and nervous health. Bruchhausen’s essay would have been even more valuable if he had engaged with the growing historical literature on science and the German colonial project in Africa.

Two other essays in the first part of the book also deserve particular mention. Laura Otis elegantly moves back and forth between medical-historical and literary sources in her treatment of the metaphor of organic memory around the turn of the century. This was, as contemporaries such as Moritz Lazarus observed, a powerful and potentially dangerous trope. Indeed, the idea that memory is hereditary, that it is collected and carried somatically through the generations—an idea extrapolated from the Lamarckian mechanism of the inheritance of acquired characteristics—found expression in the literary undertakings of Émile Zola and Thomas Mann and informed Freud’s and also Jung’s attempts to understand the individual unconscious as shaped by family, group and nation. Otis’s essay represents perhaps the fullest realization of the potential within this book’s actual topic; that is, it foregrounds the problem of relating the individual to the larger collectivities that surround it in space and time—as faced by turn-of-the-century thinkers—and fleshes out the resonance of a particular *Denkweise* across fields and national boundaries.

Cäline Kaiser’s essay intersects with Otis’s chapter in interesting ways and foregrounds the idea of Jewish nervousness and debates about civilization and nerves around 1900. Her contribution turns on a contrast between Freud and Georges Wulfing, a French doctor who studied nervousness among Algerian Jews and believed he had found evidence of a preternatural Jewish neurasthenia.

thenia in the Hebrew Bible, which he then invoked in his clinical encounters with nervously disturbed Jewish patients. Unlike in Freud's anthropological-historical speculations, Wulfing assumed no *Urszene*, no originating traumatic moment in the history of a people and viewed Jewish neurasthenia as an immutable characteristic of the Jewish nation.

The essays in this book's second section do not rise to the level of theoretical sophistication offered by Otis; nor do they provide the historical richness and precision exemplified by Roelcke's essay. (They also turn away from the period around 1900 and focus above all on the late 1920s through the 1940s, the key phase in the history of organized psychosomatic medicine.) The opening essay by Ulrich Schultz-Venrath contrasts the ideas and careers of Ernst Simmel and Viktor von Weizsäcker and ends with a sober and thoughtful examination of the latter's association with the medical crimes of the Nazi period and the long-term consequences of Nazism for the history and historiography of psychosomatic medicine. Regrettably, the following two essays, on Simmel and von Weizsäcker respectively, do not engage with the important issues raised by Schultz-Venrath, and while Marie-Luise Wünsch does nicely explicate Simmel's theory of antisemitism in terms of his larger intellectual trajectory, Rainer-M.E. Jacobi does little more than celebrate von Weizsäcker's philosophically grounded conceptualizations of illness, narrative and death without discussing the surrounding political context.

The remaining chapters are devoted to Felix Deutsch, Georg Groddeck and Richard Koch and concentrate on their theorizations of psychosomatic medicine, their usages of and departures from Freud's occasional and cautious writings on somatic illness, and finally, their invo-

cations of Christian theology and magic in their writings on the therapeutic encounter. While these essays offer interesting insights and approaches, they push the volume ever further away from its alleged topic and hence might have been better served had they been published elsewhere.

Nervousness and the maladies of civilization were powerful and highly contested metaphors that were invoked and instrumentalized by a variety of commentators at key moments in German and European history. For examples of these metaphors and their serious scientific and cultural consequences one could turn to late nineteenth-century notions of degeneration and Jewish fitness; Kaiser Wilhelm's call for a "war of nerves" in 1914 and the many writers who embraced the coming war as a cure for Germany's alleged nervous crisis; or even debates about sex, gender and hygiene in the 1920s. Unfortunately, *The Nervousness of the Jews* deals with neither these types of topics nor the many scholars who have studied them.

Notes

[1]. Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[2]. Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich: Hanser, 2000); Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[3]. Volker Roelcke, *Krankheit und Kulturkritik. Psychiatrische Gesellschaftsdeutungen im bürgerlichen Zeitalter, 1790-1914* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1999).

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