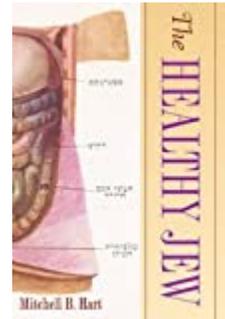




Mitchell Bryan Hart. *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 264 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87718-3.



Reviewed by Eric Ehrenreich (Independent Scholar [Washington, D.C.]

Published on H-German (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Jews as Paragons of Health

By now a substantial scholarship examines the long-standing notion that Jews are in some way “unhealthy.”[1] Scholars have focused special attention on the prevalence of this idea in the industrialized West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] In this era, the idea’s proponents asserted it in the context of an exponentially growing knowledge about anthropology, biology, and genetics. In his new, tightly argued book, Mitchell Bryan Hart shows that a substantially different interpretation of the relationship between Jews and health co-existed. As Hart states in his introduction, “the thrust of the discourse explored here is that the Jews were civilized thousands of years ago; *they* helped to civilize Europe; and they could be of assistance again if Christians would only follow the Jewish model of preventative medicine” (emphasis in original, p. 4). Hart demonstrates that during this period, such ideas were posited throughout the industrialized West: in Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States. He also shows that both Jews and non-Jews promoted them.

In chapter 1, Hart demonstrates the endorsement of

the concept that Jews were important in the transmission of Greek medicine to the Latin West. Chapter 2 shows that important figures argued Moses was the ancient equivalent of the modern health officer: he had encouraged contemporary hygienic and eugenic practices through the Mosaic laws. Chapter 3 discusses how Anglo-American medical literature often promoted the Bible as a sanitary code. The fourth chapter concentrates on the claim that biblical law mirrored, and preceded, contemporary Social Darwinist and eugenic ideas. In chapter 5, Hart uses writings on “tuberculosis” as a “case study” to further illustrate his points. Finally, chapter 6 discusses the presentation of Jewish ritual law as a model for Christian health.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hart’s work is his discussion of the motivations for the proponents of these ideas. He notes that for many Jewish advocates, at least one impetus was apologetic: “When the medical texts considered here represented Mosaic and Rabbinic law as the ancient equivalent of modern Western medicine, they posited an essential sort of identity be-

tween the Jews and the West” (p. 13). Similarly, the “discourse on eugenics and hygiene allowed elites to demonstrate both that Jews and Judaism anticipated the modern state’s central interests when it came to questions of its population’s quality” (p. 117). Indeed, Hart shows that some important contemporary Jewish thinkers, such as Italian physician and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, embraced “racial scientific” ideas in an attempt to undermine racial antisemitism by arguing for the high “racial value” of Jews. Such ideas sought to portray Jews as a mainstream, “healthful” component of western civilization from antiquity to the present. But other impulses also lay behind Jewish use of this discourse. The notion of high Jewish skill in the field of medicine (and elsewhere) also buttressed the growing movement of Jewish nationalism, while, in the nineteenth century, Jewish physicians in central Europe used the discourse to shore up their position against the more entrenched power of the rabbinate. But what of the motivations of Gentile advocates? Hart shows that some, mainly doctors, used religion to shore up support for scientific ideas, while others, mainly religious leaders, used science to shore up support for religious dogma.

Although Hart’s work is otherwise excellent, readers will notice a lack of broader historical analysis to put the ideology he demonstrates into context. In his introduction, for example, Hart raises the question of the grounds on which “historians identify one period as more or less ‘anti-Semitic’ than another when evidence for a variety of ideas and images about Jews can be found to be circulating at the same time” (p. 21). Indeed, in his discussion of the promotion of the Bible as a sanitary code in the United States and Great Britain, Hart states that “there is no sure way to determine how many people at the time glanced at or read these articles, and, if they did, what if anything they took away from them.... Yet the same could very well be said about the articles published by nativists and anti-Semites” (p. 81). Such a statement is not convincing. While Hart is right that no absolute certainty on these questions can be achieved, greater certainty surely can. One could, for instance, examine how many articles were published in each genre and how widely these articles were circulated. Such information would at the least give us a better idea of the relative influence of these two discursive streams. To be fair, Hart notes that in the United States, racist eugenic and nationalist ideas won out by 1924, as demonstrated by the passage of restrictive immigration legislation. He also concludes that the narratives of the healthy Jew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries more likely ev-

idenced the continuing feeling of unease among western Jews in their societies rather than a growing confidence about their place in that society (p. 191). But, as a general matter, “problematizing” a prevailing historiographical discourse is helpful only to the degree to which one can show that it needs to be problematized.

Moreover, like many present-day scholars, Hart is imprecise with his use of the words “race” and “blood.” He repeatedly uses the terms without defining them, sometimes in quoting primary sources, but at other times within his own text. Such practice implies a clear meaning to these conceptions, whether one talks about “racial health,” the “Jewish race,” “Jewish blood,” or any other variations of the terms that appear in his book. Hart’s own evidence demonstrates, however, that this is not the case. For example, Hart quotes anthropologist Maurice Fishberg’s assessment that Jews are more resistant to tuberculosis because of their longer urban history: according to the contemporary theory, early exposure killed those who were not resistant and those who survived passed on their ability to resist to their progeny. Hart contrasts this view with that of social scientist Arthur Ruppin, who “accepted the idea that a relative Jewish immunity to TB could be explained by race as well as history and environment” (p. 163). Since Fishberg attributes Jewish resistance to biology, it is hard to see how Hart is distinguishing this from Ruppin’s “racial explanation.”

While Hart’s work clearly demonstrates the existence of a counter-discourse to the idea of the “diseased Jew,” he does little to analyze the reliability of the discourse *in situ*. While neither a flaw in his methodology nor analysis within the limited scope of his goals, it would nevertheless have been very interesting had he attempted, at least in passing, to assess the degree to which such perspectives were potentially good-faith analyses based on available information at the time, or rather misinterpretations of the evidence allegedly relied upon. For example, Hart quotes an eminent Jewish scholar who claimed in 1940 that the Talmud contains a fundamental notion of pathology that was later independently confirmed by modern investigators (p. 85). Would someone analyzing the claim at the time have had reason to be convinced? The same goes for the claim of a rabbi that in traditional Judaism “intermarriage between blonds or between dark-complexioned people was not countenanced” (p. 139). Was the rabbi presenting a valid representation of traditional Judaism, or twisting the texts to support his argument? Likewise, how much contemporary evidence supported the “idea that two thousand years of city dwelling had strengthened the Jews physically or biolog-

ically,” which “was a mainstay of social scientific narratives of the time” (p. 130), or the large body of work that claimed Jews were more resistant to tuberculosis than non-Jews?

All criticism aside, Hart’s work is interesting and well written, and it provides valuable new insights into the position of Jews in western societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also raises, but leaves open, many fascinating, unanswered questions that Hart and other scholars will hopefully address in the future.

Notes

[1]. Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991) is perhaps the seminal work on this subject. See, also, Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Shelly Z. Reuter, “The Genuine Jewish Type: Racial Ideology and Anti-Immigrationism in Early Medical Writing about Tay-Sachs Disease,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31 (2006): 291-323.

[2]. For a fascinating look at a contemporary work illustrating this phenomenon, see Jack Zipes, *The Operated Jew: Two Tales of Anti-Semitism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Eric Ehrenreich. Review of Hart, Mitchell Bryan, *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15516>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.