



**Sandrine Sanos.** *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. xi + 369 pages. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7457-4.



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## Fascism, Racism, Colonialism, and Antisemitism

Before I turn to my review of Sandrine Sanos's work, I wish to declare my own shortcomings and interests as a reviewer. I am not a specialist of twentieth-century France, and I cannot presume to speak to the historical and historiographical context of Sanos's book. However, like Sanos, I seek to consider the ways that antisemitism can illuminate aspects of French history, as well as the insights that we can gain from literary analysis in historical context. It is from this perspective that I read Sanos's work, and in this sense that my own comments should be understood.

Sanos sets out with an admirable aim. She wants to bring together historical and disciplinary approaches, to map the gaps that, according to her, still bedevil the history of the far right in interwar France, despite the heavy academic traffic in this field. She promises to consider literary and political writings together, to revisit and rethink the nature of interwar French fascism. She argues that literature served a distinctly political purpose—as a form of resolution to a perceived political crisis. In turn, an analysis of this literature, as well as journalism, allows

us to better understand fascist anxieties and visions for France.

Of particular significance is Sanos's focus on antisemitism and colonial racism, and the ways in which, as she puts it, the two forces were *âimbricated*, rather than *parallelâ* (p. 8). However, this is not a book about antisemitism. Rather, Sanos's aim is to consider the antisemitism of far-right interwar French journalists, as one part of their attempts to express their hopes and anxieties through literature. Sanos's approach is illuminating, in this sense: she places the antisemitism of the interwar far right in historical context. When we understand the role that the fantasized Jew played for her protagonists, we understand them better, but we are also offered new perspectives on historical understandings of antisemitism that sweeping works focusing uniquely on the same phenomenon simply cannot provide.

Sanos focuses on a select group of figures, concerned with *âthe* dissolution of the boundaries of the nation, the status of the male self, and the future of French culture

and civilizationâ (p. 9). Her book tells the story of the far rightâs obsession with manliness and the nation. In face of modernity, abjection, and degradation, how could the boundaries of normative masculinity, and their link to a virile, strong France, be defined? These anxieties, Sanos tells us, were expressed in terms of gender, sexuality, race-categories that all became fixed on a fantasized Jew-and politics. Not only, therefore, was the Jew homosexual, feminized, rapacious, and black, but also communist. The Jew âembodied a perverse sexual threat to the nationâ (p. 221). She seeks to elucidate, in their writings, âthe inseparable relationship between aesthetics and politics, culture and ideology, that obsessed so many 1930s writers and critics,â and which, she argues, âhas yet to be fully historicizedâ (p. 119).

Sanosâs book takes the reader through an exploration of the personalities that make up her Young New Right (these include figures such as Thierry Maulnier, Robert Brasillach, and Jean-Pierre Maxence), their place in a longer story of far-right politics in France, and their own obsessions. Her final three chapters focus increasingly on the meaning in the writings of figures such as Maurice Blanchot, Louis-Ferdinand CÃ©line, and Robert Brasillach. The figure of the Jew becomes ever more prominent in these chapters, as Sanos teases out the place of these writers, their relationship to the first half of her book, and the meanings behind their writings.

In chapter 1, Sanos explores and contextualizes âThe Crisis of the Selfâ that young far-right intellectuals saw as characteristic of the 1930s. She sets out how they drew on categories of civilization, race, gender, and sexuality to express their sense of dislocation in a time that they perceived as a crisis, and how they brought together aesthetics and politics in their enunciation of a far-right ideology. Crisis was evident everywhere: in literature, art, politics, and culture. The generation that followed the Great War felt only emptiness. How, then, to recover and reformulate the self? For Sanosâs far-right intellectuals, this necessitated overcoming âfragmentation, narcissism, and devianceâ (p. 26). Only a properly authoritarian state could ensure that the self would be properly regulated, in step with the nation. In this way, their idea of the self came together with their gendered understanding of the nation, and the proper social order. Moreover, since crisis was evident in culture, it was necessary, if not urgent, for Sanosâs young far-right critics to engage in the cultural sphere. They had to define literature. After all, the novel, too, was in crisis. This concern of the relationship between the self, culture, and the nation, and âits privileged expression, literature, infused their vision

of their political role and intellectualsâ (p. 40).

In her second chapter, Sanos explores the genealogy of the far right, or the idea of these right-wing intellectuals as a generation, as she puts it, âof refusal, dissidence, and oppositional politicsâ (p. 43). Sanos seeks to consider these young far-right intellectuals as a group, in order to understand what it was about their time that bound them together. In part, this was friendship and collegiality. She also considers their antecedents. The difference between their new discourse and the old, according to Sanos, lay most particularly in their refusal to be labeled fascist, and the place they gave to antisemitism in their nationalist ideology. What characterized them was their bringing together of the literary and political.

Chapter 3 is an exploration of the obsessions of the Young New Right, particularly abjection, decadence, and degradation: features that they saw as striking at the heart of the nation and of French civilization. Blum, and Jews more generally, were âboth symptom and originâ of this phenomenon (p. 93). Indeed, the figure of LÃ©on Blum became âthe repository of everything that these far-right intellectuals felt tainted byâ (p. 133). Sanos argues that the literature has tended to downplay the role that antisemitism played in the creation of an extreme right-wing vision of nationhood by the Young New Right. She wants to suggest that volume is not necessarily a reflection of intensity, and that although anti-semitic references did not occur frequently in the press of the Young New Right, nevertheless, their worldview cannot be fully understood without making space for their antisemitism. Here, Sanos nods to a link between anti-semitism and broader racism, whereby France achieved its greatness, in part, through colonialism, and âmastery over ânativesââ (p. 77). In the eyes of the Young New Right, France had not only lost control of its colonial populations, it had also been colonized, internally. Sanos explores the central role of the Jewish socialist LÃ©on Blum, who came to power with his left-wing Popular Front coalition in 1936 (a moment seen as a crisis of the nation for the Young New Right). The abjection that the Young New Right so feared and abhorred came to be located within the fantasized person of Blum, and it in this sense, she argues, that we must understand that anti-semitism was central to their understandings of self, nation, and civilization.

The focus of Sanosâs fourth chapter is the literary critic Maurice Blanchot. For Sanos, the complicated nature of Blanchotâs own trajectory âspeaks to the complex and paradoxical nature of the 1930sâ (p. 119). How,

in particular, might we incorporate his far-right journalism with his literary works, still influential? Sanos wants to excavate the moment in which Blanchot's writings were produced, and in this way, historicize them. This complexity is brought to light, in particular, with regard to the nature of Blanchot's writings on and relationships with Jews. He was a lifelong friend of Emmanuel Lévinas, and helped to hide his wife and daughter in 1941. He saved another Jewish friend—the journalist Paul Lévy—from arrest in 1940. While commentators have generally downplayed Blanchot's antisemitism with the argument that a literal counting of the number of mentions of the word "Jew" in his work yields scant returns, Sanos argues, instead, that we must consider context. In the far-right press of the 1930s, an attack on Léon Blum or Julien Benda was "charged" with meaning (p. 124). Jewishness in Blanchot's work, she argues, stood in for the otherness of all those who were seen to place the sanctity of the nation's borders under threat. Thus Jews threatened France's very status in Europe. This issue was particularly acute where it concerned language, the cornerstone of French civilization, which was distorted and made a travesty by intellectuals such as Julien Benda, thus threatening French culture. The Jew also represented "the fraught relationship between the self and the nation," an obsession in Blanchot's writing (p. 124). Thus, for example, Blum was painted as a feminized figure, lacking the virility of the idealized French citizen.

In chapter 5, Sanos turns to the Paris doctor Louis-Ferdinand Destouches, or Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Again, she sets out to integrate his antisemitic pamphlets of the 1930s with his celebrated postwar literary works. For Céline, both race and gender formed the foundations of Frenchness. Like his fellow far-right writers, he sought the restoration of a French masculinity that modernity had brought to crisis. In other ways, Céline was unique. His racial antisemitism, whereby the experience of race, both without and within France, led to a realization of the Jew's power, constituted "a new idiom" (p. 163). The Jew and the Negro were one—"Negroid Jews"—and this Jewishness had invaded the metropole, causing dissolution and degradation. The Jew's imputed blackness served to emphasize a difference that was intrinsically racial, locked in the body. Sanos argues that these themes, of French degradation, and a racialized view of the world, are clear across all of Céline's work.

Céline differed from other Young New Right critics in this way. Whereas all agreed on the nation's abjection, most far-right writers understood racial contamination as being sequestered in the colonies, allowing the metropole to remain pure. Céline tore the veil (p. 191), and brought this contamination into the heart of France through the figure of the racialized Jew.

Sanos's reading of fascism, racism, and antisemitism together continues through her final chapter, on the fascist newspaper *Je suis partout* (I am everywhere). She privileges the paper's main contributors, such as Robert Brasillach, and Lucien Rebatet, and seeks, again, to place them, their writings, and *Je suis partout*, in historical context. "Their conception of French citizenship," she tells us, "could be defined only through the reaffirmation of a masculine, bounded, and antisemitic individual, who should be infused with an innate sense of the nation's history and civilization" (p. 197).

There is an evident progression in Sanos's work. However, readings of the kind that she is offering here can tend to become repetitive. This presents both a great reward and a great challenge to the writer. Two forces compete in Sanos's book. One is the narrative that drives her discussion. The other is the repetition of themes that by the end, does tend to become rhythmic. At times, I also found myself wishing for greater contextual detail, both with regard to the period under discussion, and the figures on whom she focused. This, for me, would have given Sanos's work greater balance between historical and literary approaches.

These quibbles aside, however, Sanos's important achievement is to bring together the forces of racist colonialism and antisemitism, and to read them together. Sanos shows us that in 1930s France, anxieties about the nation, fantasized as under threat by colonizing Blum-like Jews, echoed idealizations of a great France, defined by its colonies, peopled by properly subservient and obedient natives. That their journalism ignored the fact that the French colonies increasingly became spaces of contention during the 1930s, only serves to underscore the desires of far-right writers. Robert Brasillach, tried and executed after the war, explained in 1938 that "whether you want or not, France rules over seventy millions of white, yellow, black, Muslim, converted, fetishistic, civilized, barbarian men who do not have a single idea in common, except one: they do not like the Jews" (p. 235).

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