

Manuela Consonni and Vivian Liska, eds., *Sartre, Jews, and the Other: Rethinking Antisemitism, Race and Gender* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 292.

by *Brian Klug*

This collection of seventeen essays constitutes Volume one of *The Vidal Sassoon Studies in Antisemitism, Racism, and Prejudice*, published on behalf of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem. (What is slightly confusing is that Volume two was published the previous year.) Although not stated explicitly, the volume appears to have its origins in a symposium on Sartre’s Anti-Semite and Jew, which the Centre sponsored in January 2016. Whatever its origins, the result is a volume that makes a significant contribution to the literature on Sartre and on the intersection between antisemitism, race and gender. The essays are rich in content and broad in scope.

Both the Foreword by Martina Weisz and the Introduction by the two editors emphasize the significance of Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la Question Juive* when it was first published in Paris in 1946. (The book appeared in English with the title *Anti-Semite and Jew* two years later.) The editors point out that *Réflexions* “was one of the first philosophical engagements with the Holocaust” (p. 1). As such (and this is a theme about Sartre’s philosophical work in general that runs through many of the essays), it was also a political engagement. Philosophy, for Sartre, was not a retreat from the human world but, on the contrary, an engagement with it. Weisz observes that Sartre’s “was one of the few voices that dared to speak about antisemitism at a time when French national interest imposed a pact of silence regarding Jewish issues” (pp. v-vi). As Renée Poznanski remarks at the close of her chapter, many French Jews felt “relief” when the book was published: “Sartre simply broke the silence” (p. 87).

The “deep impact” of *Réflexions* (quoting Weisz) extended far beyond the borders of France, “to the Americas, Africa and the Middle East” (p. vi), as several of the essays testify. Its influence crossed disciplinary boundaries as well as

geographical borders, which, again, is reflected in this collection. Furthermore, Sartre's *Réflexions* is a seminal text for thinking about any form of Othering, and it has left a profound mark in both postcolonial studies and feminist theory. Hence the volume's subtitle: *Rethinking Antisemitism, Race and Gender*. "Rethinking," for most of the authors, also means bringing in Sartre's later writings on "*la Question Juive*." Thus, taken as a whole, this volume looks at Sartre's political thought in the round.

But it is not an uncritical look; far from it. This volume of essays pays tribute to Sartre not only by acknowledging his philosophical insights but also by taking issue with his blindspots. This, of course, continues a long tradition that began shortly after *Réflexions* was published, when Levinas's essay *Etre Juif* appeared in the journal *Confluences*. At the time, as Bruno Chouat explains in his essay on Levinas' reading of Sartre, Levinas was a little-known figure, dwarfed by Sartre, but the critique he gave of Sartre's text became a template for critics, not least Jewish critics, who took issue with what they saw as Sartre's reduction of Jewish identity to the fantasy that haunts the antisemitic imagination. Chaouat suggests that "the Jew as invented by the gaze of the anti-Semite—in opposition to Jewish identity as a concrete, particular situation—constitutes the prevailing interpretation of Sartre's book throughout the history of its reception in France" (p. 93). Arguably, this has been the prevailing interpretation everywhere. It continues to be a focus of debate, as several other essays in this collection illustrate.

A second bone of contention, one that did not emerge until much later, was over Zionism and the Israel-Arab conflict. In his essay "Sartre's Multidirectional Anti-Racism," Jonathan Judaken explores the complexities of this controversy, not so much for its own sake but in order to illuminate Sartre's opposition to colonialism and racism. This is consistent with what I take to be a primary ambition of the volume, indicated in the title, which is to bring Sartre's thinking on Jews and the Other into clearer focus. The other Other who enters the frame is (to borrow De Beauvoir's phrase) "the second sex." The connections between the Othering of Jews, Blacks and women—always with an eye to Sartre—are made in different essays in a variety of contexts. In Yael Feldman's essay "Women, Blacks, Jews: Overcoming Otherness," the context is Israel. Her closing words refer to "the

existentialist trio: Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon” (p. 268). This echoes what Weisz says in the Foreword: she mentions “the hermeneutic field created by the confluence of Sartre’s, De Beauvoir’s, and Fanon’s works” (p. vii). She adds: it has “remained mostly unexplored” (p. vii). This existentialist trio recurs in one essay after another in the pages of this collection, which thus begins to explore what has mostly been unexplored. This, I take it, is another primary ambition of the book.

Given this ambition, and bearing in mind the trickiness of the terrain that the book seeks to explore, it would be handy to have certain aids for the reader, which, unfortunately, are absent or incomplete. First, the Table of Contents consists simply of a list of chapter titles (with authors’ names). It would help to group the chapters into sections (and to number them). The editors’ Introduction helpfully gives a thumbnail sketch of each essay in turn, and a careful reading suggests a rough structure for the contents. But I emphasize “suggests” and “rough,” and I hesitate to extrapolate, in case I divide the pie wrongly. Second, there is an index of names (which, weirdly, appears in duplicate) but not of subjects. With a book of this kind, a subject index would be especially useful, enabling a reader to track an idea or topic across different chapters. Third, while nine of the 17 chapters include a bibliography, six do not; there is no apparent reason for this inconsistency.

None of these defects (which hopefully will be rectified in a second edition) detract from the quality of the essays. This collection will be an invaluable resource for scholars of Sartre and students of Othering. The final essay, “Indeterminate Jews” by Eva Illouz, gives the book a sting in the tail. Adapted from her keynote lecture to the 2016 Jerusalem symposium, it is less an essay and more an afterword in which Illouz captures the spirit of the volume as a whole. In a sense, she performs what the book discusses: she takes the task of “rethinking” to her lived experience. She speaks about her own society (Israeli) and her own people (Jewish) with a voice inflected by Sartre. Her satirical comments about “Jewish pride” as inauthentic (in the Sartrean sense of the word), aimed at remarks made by Tzipi Hotovely (Israel’s ambassador to the UK) and Jonathan Sacks (the late UK Chief Rabbi), might not be everyone’s cup of tea (they are mine), but they will be sure to wake up the reader at the back of the room. Looking back to an earlier era, the closing section of her

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essay puts the question: “Zionism as Existentialism?” On this electrifying note the book ends. It is the perfect coda.

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