

SIGMUND FREUD'S RACIAL THEORY OF JEWISHNESS

Eliza Slavet

Since the Holocaust it has been difficult to employ a “racial” definition of Jewishness without sounding perverse or even anti-Semitic. And yet, within Jewish communities and families—both observant and secular, both conservative and liberal—there is often an almost obsessive desire to know whether a person is Jewish. The definition of “Jewishness” in these cases is almost always purely “genealogical” in that the question is not whether a person feels, thinks, acts, or looks Jewish, but whether such suggestive signs are evidence of the “real thing”—the fact that the person has a Jewish parent (or even a grandparent), the fact that the person *really* is Jewish. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear (Jewish and non-Jewish) people say that someone is “half-Jewish” or a “quarter Jewish” or even a “mixed breed,” even as they are fully aware of the racial (and possibly racist) logic of such descriptions. For better and often for worse, the concept of race is a historical reality whose influence reaches far beyond the color line.

My current manuscript, provisionally entitled *Racial Fever: Psychoanalysis and the Jewish Question*, is an attempt to explore race as a concept beyond the realm of physical variation and to consider

racial thinking without reducing it to racism. These days Sigmund Freud’s work is more often read in the context of philosophy and literary theory than

alongside the scientific authors with whom he was deeply engaged.

While I focus on the latter context, my own work was initially inspired by Jacques Derrida’s book, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996), in which he explores the “compulsive, repetitive, and



Sigmund Freud, 1856-1939. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

nostalgic desire for the archive,” the “irrepressible desire to return to the origin.” Archive fever is often accompanied by what I am calling “racial fever”: the irrepressible desire of individuals and communities to define themselves and others through genealogy, to discover (and sometimes invent) ancestral memories that seem to

explain the tensions and compulsions of the present, and (in turn) to see these narratives as indisputable history and palpable facts “on the ground.” This fever is felt *in* and *on* the body, even as it is invisible, undefinable and ultimately indecipherable. Sometimes it seems to take the form of a sickness, at other times it is a fervor, an intense craving, or a zealous enthusiasm. Now and then, it seems to lie dormant, biding its time.

The idea of racial fever emerges directly out of psychoanalysis.

Throughout his life, Freud explored the ways in which

individuals’ lives seem ruled by their pasts, tracing patients’ physical symptoms to psychical traumas and identifying their compulsions to repeat as the result of memories of a distant past. In his earliest work, Freud rejected his teachers’ overemphasis on heredity by proposing that his patients suffered not from familial degeneracy but from “reminiscences.” He initially resisted the idea that an individual’s memories reached farther back than childhood. Along the way, however, he realized that there were certain conflicts and patterns which were inexorable; individuals seemed to be burdened with memories not only of their earliest lives, but

of the effects “produced on the endlessly *long chain of our ancestors*.” Yet it was not until his final book that Freud specified what he meant by “our” ancestors and explicitly explored the Jewish question.

Written during the last five years of his life, Freud’s *Moses and*

Monotheism (1939) has long been regarded as an autobiographical curiosity which, while shedding light on his feelings about his own Jewishness, potentially compromises some of the more convincing aspects of psychoanalysis. In addition to being a bizarre reworking of the biblical story of Moses, this book draws upon dubious and seemingly outmoded theories of race and heredity. However, *Moses and Monotheism* is a serious work in which Freud proposes a theory of Jewishness—what it *is*, how it is transmitted, and how it continues to survive. Rather than an aberration, Freud’s last book is the culmination of a lifetime spent investigating the relationships between memory and its rivals: heredity, history, and fiction. By proposing that certain events in the distant past were so traumatic that their memories were inherited by successive generations, Freud eventually integrated the two realms—the biological, permanent, and racial on the one hand, and the psychic, experiential, and cultural on the other. In *Moses and Monotheism* he theorized that Jewishness is constituted by the inheritance of a specific archaic memory which Jewish people are inexorably compelled to transmit to future generations, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is for this reason that I consider Freud’s theory of Jewishness to be a racial theory of memory.

Freud was well aware that his reconstruction of the origins of the Jewish people was bound to offend—not only scholars of ancient history, religion, and biology, but laypeople (whether Jewish or non-Jewish). For many readers, Freud’s

proposal that Moses was not an Israelite but rather an Egyptian was the most shocking, for (as Freud acknowledges) it seemed to “deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of their sons.” Yet contrary to what most readers have assumed, by insisting on the Egyptianness of Moses, Freud did not disavow his

was not misguided or outdated Lamarckism, but rather a reasoned and creative response to the political and scientific debates of his day.

What is perhaps most radical about Freud’s theory of Jewishness is not its racialism, but the humanism inherent in his peculiar reconstruction of the historical

origins of the Jewish people. To make a long and complicated story short, according to Freud, Moses was an Egyptian man who chose a “rowdy band of Semites” as his people upon whom he imposed an abstract

monotheism based on an Egyptian sun-god cult. Finding the Mosaic tradition too difficult, the Semites killed this Moses and apparently forgot all about the episode. While Moses’ tradition remained “half-extinguished” for many centuries, it eventually “triumphed” (and survived by being biologically transmitted from one generation to the next). By making the “choice” of the Semites a human rather than divine matter, Freud seems to suggest that humans may also be able to overcome those differences which seem to set peoples apart.

Yet this hopeful humanism is tempered by his recognition of man’s limitations. According to Freud, what made the Jews Jewish was not only Moses’ choice or his tradition, but rather the Semites’ violent murder of him. In proposing that the memory-traces of these events were biologically inherited, Freud illuminates the ways in which history is often experienced as a matter beyond human intervention; the Jews remained Jewish not because of history, but because of the naturalization and internalization of history in the

THOUGH FREUD USES TEXTS, TRADITIONS, AND RITUALS AS THE BASIS OF HIS RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE, HE ULTIMATELY CONCLUDES THAT SUCH FORMS OF “DIRECT COMMUNICATION” ARE NOT ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN THE DEEP POWER AND PERSISTENCE OF THE MOSAIC TRADITION.

own Jewishness or the Jewishness of his “institution” (that is, psychoanalysis). Instead, he subtly questioned the self-evident character of such definitions. Even in the biblical narrative, Moses was an Israelite only by virtue of his genealogy; after he was weaned he was brought back to Pharaoh’s daughter and “he became her son” (Exodus 2:10). Thus, while he might be genealogically Jewish, he was “culturally” Egyptian.

Though Freud uses texts, traditions, and rituals as the basis of his reconstruction of the origins of the Jewish people, he ultimately concludes that such forms of “direct communication” are not enough to explain the deep power and persistence of the Mosaic tradition. Instead, he proposes that the memory-traces of Moses—and the Mosaic tradition itself—have been biologically transmitted from one generation to the next. Like a number of other Jewish scientists of the early twentieth century, Freud draws from various contemporary theories of evolution and heredity and insists that acquired characteristics are heritable. This

body. Where Freud's *Moses* has been seen as an attempt to cure the Jewish people (if not also Western Civilization) of their collective neurosis, it is far more representative of his skepticism about the potential for such change.

Freud's skepticism is not entirely pessimistic. Throughout his life, he argued that the return of the repressed is inevitable, and in his final book, he extended this idea to suggest that despite all reforms, repudiations, and repressions, Jewish people will remain Jewish and Judaism will survive. As shocking as this may sound, however, such a guarantee of the future is not necessarily hopeful, for it also suggests that the "fixity of identity"—racial fever and the violence which is so often legitimated by it—is inescapable. While the most decisive event in

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Jewish history (according to Freud) was the Semites' murder of Moses, the inheritance of these memory-traces persistently compels individuals to try to make sense of this history. The discomfort—and strength—of Freud's theory of Jewishness is the notion that when the repressed *returns*, we cannot predetermine whether the return will be for better or for worse. We can, however, take historical and

human actions to anticipate and work through these returns and to sustain the more "noble and precious" elements in the future.

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