

Quotation marks and

Stanley Mitchell strips the quotation marks from Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew', an International conference held recently in London

I hesitated for a long time before deciding to attend this conference, first because I have a horror of all-Jewish assemblies (I write as a Jew), second because the agenda smacked of intellectual narcissism – why did the Jew have to be in quotation marks? There was also a more serious reason. The preliminary list of titles and speakers spelled postmodernism and identity politics, which have helped to gut the socialist tradition. The final list was more balanced and, as a kind of anchorage, I asked *Jewish Socialist* whether I could review the conference.

There was no Jewish exclusiveness, instead amiable academics and a sprinkling of lay people, including an elderly gentleman soon to be puzzled, bewildered and angry. Old friends and acquaintances were there, and not everyone was Jewish. James Young, an American, who gave the keynote address on 'Jewish Memory in a Postmodern Age', was a Jewish convert, as was Grizelda Pollock, a Professor of Art History from Leeds.

The quotation marks round Jew mesmerised the conference. It registered some kind of identity crisis. What did it mean to be a Jew today in the Western world? – for only the Western world was addressed. Not even Israel was mentioned. If there was a crisis, it was well contained within the urbane, academic atmosphere, which was breached only once or twice.

The conference was dominated by two themes: allo-Semitism and memory. The term 'allo-Semitism', introduced by Zygmunt Bauman, scholar of the holocaust and postmodernity meant treating the Jews as other or different, as a people who wouldn't fit in.

This was a category, Bauman argued, which applied to the Jews ever since the diaspora. It didn't necessarily imply hatred of the Jews (antisemitism), it might indeed include philosemitism (love of the Jews). But the Jew remained irredeemably 'other'. Or rather neither one thing or another, 'out of place in every place' remarked Bauman, quoting Frederic Raphael. The Jew, in Bauman's words, was 'ambivalence incarnate', whether in pre-modern, modern or post-modern times.

But, in the postmodern age, as Geoff Bennington informed us in his paper on 'Lyotard and the jews', this ambivalence was the lot of all marginal people, who in this sense had become if not

Jews then 'jews'. Lyotard uses the lower case, as well as quotation marks, in order to indicate this wider category. In May 1968 they shouted: 'We are all German Jews' in solidarity with Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Lyotard, a postmodernist, means something different: we are all

homeless, without fixed identity, like the ancient Hebrews in the desert.

The Jew, then, or rather 'the jew', has become the primal figure for postmodernism. Judaism owes its present efflorescence in part to this disorientated and desperate aspect of post-Holocaust thinking. In effect, the Wandering Jew (or Eternal Jew, as the Germans call him) has been brought back to serve as a model for all the marginals of our time. Which is curious and ironic when the postmodernists insist so much on difference and the deconstruction of myth.

Geoff Bennington and Max Silverman both discoursed on quotation marks, lower cases and upper cases. Following earlier psychoanalytic discussions, I was moved to ask whether a Freudian slip was involved, whereby lower and upper case represented lower and upper class, in other words the class struggle, which had been suppressed during the proceedings. Bennington was furious. All academic niceties vanished. 'No, no, no,' he declared, 'that's all over!' and drew from his pocket a piece of paper, which he must have brought to the conference in anticipation of such a question. He read: 'The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism', adding 'Karl Marx' and sat down.

I assume this was meant to put paid to the class struggle. While I respect Marx's analysis of class, I imagine he would be the last person to suggest class conflict, either in theory or practice, would not have occurred without him. Yet here was Bennington trying to dispose of the entire history of class struggle and therefore socialism with a single quotation from an early work of Marx, written before he had embraced socialism or formulated a theory of class struggle.

Marx does not write about Jews as a class in *On the Jewish Question*, from which Bennington quoted the final sentence. He treats the Jews as a commercial people whom the Christians had used as their practical alibi, while they got on with their otherworldly religion. The article was written in support of Jewish political emancipation, but Marx looked beyond this to a general human emancipation in which the Jews would lose their economic basis. He welcomed those Jews who were taking part in this larger struggle. The subtext of Bennington's reply was to suggest that Marx was an antisemite, if not a fascist, an easy thing to do if you conjure with quotations as deftly as you do with quotation marks.

There is, of course, an extensive literature on whether Marx was an antisemite or not and some of his outbursts particularly in regard to Lassalle are inexcusable. His mixed feelings at the time of *On the Jewish Question* are summed up in a letter to a friend in which he tells him that he has been approached by the 'head of the Israelites' in Cologne to draft a petition to the Diet on behalf of the Jews. The young Marx comments that, whatever his distaste for the Jewish religion, he will do so. The Jews were never at the centre of Marx's attention and marginal to his

the Jewish question

socialism. But while he poured scorn on Jewish bankers in Europe, he had a sympathetic word for the plight of poor Jews in Jerusalem.

Bennington was followed by Adrian Rifkin who agreed both with Bennington's methodology and my appeal to class struggle, referring to the comparative state of the rich and poor graves in the Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that politics had not entered the conference before my intervention at the final panel. Tony Kushner had given a fine analysis of racism and anti-racism in postwar Britain. And James Young had warned that any new history of the Jews would have to dispense with the received image of Jews as victims. Now it must include the Jew as oppressor – of the Palestinians. Which brings me to the second main theme of the conference – memory.

This was another point where academic politeness was breached. One elderly participant rose repeatedly, introducing himself as a survivor of the Holocaust who had more right to be on the platform than the present incumbents. No doubt he was a nuisance. But David Cesarani's response indicated something about the conference. While first-hand accounts would always be of interest, Cesarani conceded, this was not the place for them – here it was memory as such which was under scrutiny.

James Young, speaking on postmodern memory, warned that we could no longer rely on notions of objectivity and tradition. He wasn't simply saying that memory was selective – we all know that, and the way in which transmissions of the past depend on the transmitters, oppressors or oppressed, invaders or defenders. But if you deny any kind of narrative or structure in history, as the postmoderns do, what are you left with? It is one thing to be told by Bryan Cheyette that Primo Levi was sceptical about his own memories of Auschwitz, another to be informed by James Young that a collective Jewish memory had given way to a 'collected' one as in a museum.

One is tempted to ask: 'Who is the curator and who pays them?' (Which is why Jake Rosen's article on the Washington Holocaust museum, in *Jewish Socialist* 31, was so important, because he asks: "Whose memory, whose myth – that of the victim or that of the resistor?") To dissolve the historical reality of the Holocaust into the imponderables of memory leaves no barrier to David Irving's fascist revisionism, which simply denies the Holocaust.

But there was a left-wing or anarchist post-modernism, too. James Young entertained us with an account of new conceptual art forms practised by 'memory guerillas' in Germany. In Saarbrücken, for example, the artist Jochen Gerz organised schoolchildren to remove cobblestones from the town square at night, engrave on them the names of concentration camps and the numbers of inmates from Saarbrücken and then return them to the square face down. The public learned of this, but signs were invisible. An intangible

memory had taken the place of the usual physical monument. The effect was haunting enough for the square to be officially renamed the 'Square of the Invisible Monument'. The monument was now securely lodged in the public's mind rather than in the centre of town.

I cannot do justice here to the multifariousness of the conference, which lasted two days and an evening, but one other new term might be of interest alongside allo-Semitism. This was 'hibernojudaism', which turned out to be the 'Judaism' of Joyce and Beckett, Irish 'jews' in the Lyotardian sense, exiles who were philosemitic. But the paper in question by Steve Connor was mainly concerned with feet in the work of the two writers and flat feet in particular.

By the end of the nineteenth century anti-Semitism had turned from the economic Jew (as in Marx) to the biological, racial and sexual deformities of the Jew. Flat feet was one of them and it appears that Joyce and Beckett were obsessed with feet, flat or otherwise. So much for 'hibernojudaism', not a serious contender with allo-Semitism. But other papers on late 19th and early 20th century antisemitism were extremely illuminating, in particular Ritchie Robertson's 'The Feminised Jew: Nietzsche, Harden, Weininger'. Here the whole Jewish body is under attack – for being sensual in the case of the woman, lecherous in the case of the male.

The male is under particular censure from these male critics of whom Weininger was a Jewish convert to Christianity. Jewish man is accused of emasculation, characterised by pliancy and adaptability, excelling at mimicry in place of creativity, lacking in backbone, in other words more like a woman. According to the paper of an absent speaker, Daniel Boyarin, Freud fell victim to this anti-Semitism. Worried by homoerotic feelings towards his father and his colleague Fliess, Freud in the milieu of antisemitic Vienna at the turn of the century adjusted the Oedipus Complex to a heterosexual model, making the son want to kill his father rather than be the object of his desire. Which means Freudian psychoanalysis rests on a concession to anti-Semitism.

I left the conference as Bryan Cheyette, one of the organisers, summed up. Having counted 250 heads in the audience, he concluded there must be at least 250 definitions of 'the jew'. What need of postmodernism, when there was the Talmud? I felt as if I had been in an academic synagogue for three days celebrating a High Holiday, a mixture of Yom Kippur and Purim, of mourning and clowning. Outside, the quotation marks evaporated into the rain.