Quotation marks and the Jewish question

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 serio-
mous reason. The preliminary list of titles and speakers spelt postmodernism and identity pol-

cies, which have been my bête noir to gut the social tradi-

tion. The final list was more balanced and, as a kind of anachronism, I asked Jewish Socialist whether I could review the conference.

There was no Jewish exclusiveness, instead ambi-
culous academics and a sprinkling of lay people, including an elderly gentleman soon to be puzzled, bewildered and angry. Old friends and acquaint-

cances 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 Gertie Uts Pollock, a Professor of Art History from Leeds.

The quotation marks round Jews menaced 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 urban, academic

sphere, which was breached only once or twice.

The conference was dominated by two themes: lossmemor and memory. The term ‘allomemor’ introduced by Zygmunt Bauman, scholar of the:

bailout and postmodernity meant treating the Jews as other or different, as a people who were Jewish.

This was a category, Bauman argued, which applied to the Jews ever since the diaspora. They didn’t have a national identity or awareness, but simply say,

ing that memory was selective — we all know that, and the way in which transmigrations of the past deepened the stories of oppression or empowered, invaders or defenders. But if you deny anyone the right to write a history, in the sense that the postmodernists do, what are you left with? It is one thing to be told by Bryan Chettu, that Freud was a Jewish icon, or by Jean-Baptiste, that he is having a ‘Jewish’ night, another to be called "Jewish" by James Young, who has a collective Jewish memory. Can the Jews not have their own history? One is tempted to ask: ‘Who is the curator and who pays for it?’ (What is it that Jesus says on the white sea?)

This is a conference on ‘the Jewish question’, but it was a Jewish question really, which is being played out in a context of modernity, postmodernity and the Jews as other.

But, in the postmodern age, as Geoff Ben-
ninston informed us in his paper on ‘Lyotard and the Jews’, this ambivalence was seen as a post-

modernity, and not just another way of saying that the Jews have become the "other", or that the Jews have become the "Jewish".

The title of this conference is "identity", which means that we have become the "other", or that we have become the "identity" of the Jews, or that we have become the "Jewish".

There is, of course, an extensive literature on whether the Jews have an anti-Semitism or not, and some of this literature, in order to indicate this wider category, is to be found in the text of this paper. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Lyotard, a postmod-

ernist, means different: we are all

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

The Jew, then, as far as ‘the Jew’, has become the primal figure for postmodernism. Judaism owes its present efflorescence in part to this dissert-

ated and deepening reflections on the confi-

rations. In effect, the Wandering Jew (or Eternal Jew, as the Germans call him) has been brought back to life in all the major confi-

s, which is curious and ironic when the postmodernists insist so much on difference and diversity.

Geoff Bennington and Max Silverman both dis-

corded on quotation marks, lesser cases and upper cases. Following earlier psychoanalytic discus-

sions, 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 dur-

ing the proceedings. Bennington was barious. All academic nitwits vanished. ‘No, no, no,’ he declared, ‘that’s all over’ and drew from his pocket a piece of paper, which he insisted I 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 that the working class, or any other social group, would exist without having occurred within him. Yet here was Bennington implying to dispose of the entire history of the Jews, and I do not see how that can be justified.

There were also the speeches of Jean-Francois Avin, another scholar of the Jews, who described his paper on ‘Jewish Modernism’.

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